



The Sublime and the Divine

CLAIRE SMITH

Beginning with Immanuel Kant’s theory of the sublime, Claire Smith charts a fascination with unutterable, numinous experience across diverse strains of Eastern and Western religious, philosophical, and literary writings, suggesting finally that the encounter with sublimity forms a core, universal feature of human experience. This essay was written for Aesthetics with Dr. Zachary Simpson.

IN HIS *Critique of Judgment*, Enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant explores the various mental faculties that, paired with experience of an object, give rise to enjoyment, emotion, sensation, imagination, and wonder. He notes the different kinds of aesthetic judgments—judgments of the agreeable, judgments of beauty, and judgments of the sublime. He elaborates on these with theories, regarding each type of judgment and what differentiates them. For Kant, the experience of the sublime is distinct from that of the beautiful. Both experiences presume a judgment of reflection, which Kant differentiates from judgments of sensation. Judgments of sensation, generally, give rise to feelings of pleasure and gratification, while judgments of reflection involve the “free play” of the imagination and understanding (or reason, as in the case of the sublime) (Kant 63, 98, 125).

But while both experiences of the sublime and the beautiful invoke this state of contemplation, the sublime involves a “supersensible” faculty, an experience of the subject’s attempt to comprehend the infinite (Kant 106). The experience of the sublime is evoked by scale or measure beyond comprehension (Kant 103, 105, 107). But even though it is included in Kant’s discussion of aesthetics, the sublime seems to have more in common with other supersensible experiences, such as accounts of mystic and religious experience. Kant attempts to describe and understand a human experience, one that is somehow simultaneously universal and wholly individual. And if not explicitly religious or spiritual, it is still profound and unutterable, an experience beyond measure and beyond the mundane. This quality of incommunicability connects various mystic and sublime experiences.

Kant argues that pure sublimity is found in experiences of nature (109). The subject is overwhelmed with a sense of the superiority of nature. For Kant, the very fact that nature has no purpose makes nature a purer form of the sublime (109). Kant distinguishes the sublime into two categories, the dynamic and the mathematical, which both give rise to feelings of awe and fear. However, there is significance in the similarities between these two experiences: a vastness, an immeasurable space, “beyond all comparison,” as Kant writes (107).

Rather than arguing that beauty or the sublime is found within the object itself, Kant argues that these are found within the subject. In section 28 he writes: “True sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging person, not in the natural object the judging of which prompts this mental attunement” (123). French philosopher Gaston Bachelard echoes this in the *Poetics of Space*, writing, “Im-mensity is within ourselves” (202). He writes of transcendence, mystery, peace, of sacred space. The ideas expressed in this chapter called “Intimate Immensity” complement Kant’s ideas on imagination, contemplation, the mind, and the sublime.

Bachelard also writes of experiences within nature, particularly those of forests. He cites mostly poets, such as Rilke and Baudelaire. As Kant emphasizes size, might, and magnitude, so does Bachelard speak of vastness, immensity, intensity, and infinity. He includes Milosz's expressions of ecstasy in solitude, in the vastness of night. Milosz writes of the eternal, of his "heart bursting into singing" to the universe as he ponders the sea, space, and stars (Bachelard 207).

In journalist Lezley Hazleton's *The First Muslim*, her account of the life of the prophet Muhammad, she describes Muhammad's first encounter with the angel Gabriel: Muhammad sought solitude and silence among the mountains. He was meditating within a cave. Her details in this section bear close resemblance to Kant's ideas on nature and the sublime. Kant writes of nature's might, even God's might, as manifested in storms, earthquakes, or turbulent seas (122, 123). Hazleton argues that it may be difficult for humans today to grasp what true awe and terror in nature is, what it feels like. We no longer know the terror of solitude amidst an earthquake, a thunderstorm in an open desert, or against an immeasurable ocean, Hazleton suggests.

Hazleton, in her descriptions of these mystic experiences, refers to German philosopher and theologian Rudolf Otto and his writings on the numinous, which is comparable to the sublime. The numinous is a term coined by Otto in his book *The Idea of the Holy*, which he uses to name and describe experiences that overwhelm the subject with awe and dread. In order to understand the numinous, one must experience it, he writes (7). This resembles accounts of lived mystic experience, which indicate that such experiences are incommunicable through language. Of course, there is always the attempt to communicate, as is shown in the writings of these mystics, theologians, philosophers, and others who have experienced.

These lived experiences are often found in the subject's communion with nature and complement Kant's theory on the sublime. One feels humbled against the height of a mountain and sobered by

the sea. In his *Letters from Italy*, Goethe writes repeatedly of landscapes, of a “magnificence . . . that comes into view as one descends,” which he also notes is “indescribable” (11). He writes of a lush landscape in which “one can believe again in a God” (5). Encounters with nature are encounters with the other, with some force or presence greater than oneself and beyond oneself. It is this acute awareness, this contemplation yet incomprehension, that leads to the subjective experience of the sublime.

In section 28 of his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant touches on the divine and its connection to the sublime. He has written on the sublime as arousing fear and dread within the subject, but here he colors this with nuance. Kant argues against a fear of God and claims instead that true admiration of the divine requires of the subject a state of “quiet contemplation” and free judgment (122). Kant also seems to open up his definition of the sublime, writing, “Whatever arouses this feeling in us, and this includes the *might* of nature that challenges our forces, is then (although improperly) called sublime” (123). (Kant is noting here that the sublime exists within the subject, and the object which arouses the feeling is not actually sublime.) The ambiguity of this phrase indicates that perhaps something other than nature can arouse such feelings. He finishes this thought with a claim that we can contemplate a “being who arouses deep respect in us” (123). This reverence and respect comes from our own mental faculties, our ability to make judgments freely and “without fear.” His thoughts here turn away from his focus on the terror found in nature, and turn instead, once again, to the processes within our own minds. In giving voice to Muhammad’s questions, Lesley Hazleton asks, “Was the voice of God within him, part of him?... Where did man end and God begin?” (102).

This notion that it is through our contemplation that we can experience God is also found in the writings of 12th-century Islamic polymath Ibn Tufayl, writer of the philosophical novel the *Hayy ibn Yaqdhan*. In this introduction, Ibn Tufayl cites various attempts to express ecstasy and the sublime, in which the subjects in these states

feel that truth and God exist within themselves (Ibn Tufayl 95). Ibn Tufayl's work is the tale of a boy growing up alone in nature, and through his contemplation and nature alone he develops intellect. He also experiences revelations, and in this world, the religious is compatible with the observable world. We see these themes arise repeatedly: the individual alone with nature, in a state of contemplation. And in this case, as in that of Muhammad, God entered the equation.

Ibn Tufayl also comments on states of "expansiveness," "divine ecstasies," and "a state of sublimity I had never known before." He writes that such an experience is beyond reason and beyond communication (95, 96). Again, this recalls Kant's sublime, which arises from the free play of the faculties of imagination and reason, yet is beyond reason. In his poem "Buoyancy," Sufi poet Rumi writes,

A mountain keeps an echo deep inside itself.
That's how I hold your voice.
.....
I saw you and became empty.
This emptiness, more beautiful than existence,
obliterates existence . . . (10-16)

Rumi's sentiment reflects writings by Saint Teresa of Avila, 16th-century Catholic nun and mystic. She writes of various states of prayer and of the "faculties of the soul" that are activated in such states. Teresa describes an "absolute death to all the things of this world and an enjoyment of God" (115). In this state, she writes, the faculties of the mind are unable to comprehend the process and experience they are undergoing. This experience is incomparable and calls to mind Kant's claims that in experiences of pure beauty and sublimity, the subject attempts to understand, to question, to reason, but is unable. Teresa writes of a "heavenly madness," an ecstasy paired with agony, as Hazleton writes of "a terrible awe," and "pan-

icked disorientation” of an experience which is “indescribably enigmatic” (Teresa 115; Hazleton 89, 90). These expressions echo Kant’s claims of the simultaneous feelings of both fear and awe in nature.

For some, the mind finds itself in contemplation and lands not on God, but on transcendence and meaning nonetheless. In his lyrical essay “The Desert,” French philosopher Albert Camus writes of his experiences within the various landscapes in the Mediterranean. He writes of cypress and olive trees, of stone, sky and sun. “But for my love and the wondrous cry of these stones,” he writes, “there was no meaning in anything. The world is beautiful, and outside it there is no salvation” (103). This experience recalls Kant’s criteria for the beautiful and the sublime: that there be no concepts, no purpose attached to these objects. Camus augments these criteria with the claim that there is no meaning in life or in the world. Yet he is stirred and overwhelmed by this landscape, or by his own intellectual and emotional response. He writes of landscapes whose beauty is “pure” and “unbearable”: “Plunged deep in beauty, the mind feeds off nothingness” (101). His language shifts as the intensity builds, and he writes, “this world annihilates me,” as he is “moving toward a wisdom where everything had already been overcome” (103). This sense of annihilation echoes Saint Teresa, though they were coming from vastly distinct worldviews. While Teresa attributes this feeling to God, Camus attributes it to the absurd.

I think this is precisely what is significant in Kant’s theory of the sublime. That this is a universally subjective experience, one felt by believers and nonbelievers alike. The experience arises within one’s own mind and soul, and we search in agitation and agony for reason and meaning yet find none. But the experience, the heightened emotion, is still there. Explanation of such experience has been attempted by numerous thinkers and theologians across time and space, and I think this attempt at expression, though impossible, brings us closer to understanding, closer to one another, and closer to the other, or the divine. ►►

▶▶ WORKS CITED

- BACHELARD, GASTON. *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by Maria Jolas, Penguin, 2014.
- CAMUS, ALBERT. *Lyrical and Critical Essays*. Edited by Philip Thody, translated by Ellen Conroy Kennedy, Vintage, 1970.
- GOETHE, JOHANN WOLFGANG VON. *Letters from Italy*. Translated by W. H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer, Penguin, 1995.
- HAZLETON, LESLEY. *The First Muslim: The Story of Muhammad*. Riverhead, 2013.
- IBN TUFAYL, MUHAMMAD IBN ‘ABD AL-MALIK. *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan: A Philosophical Tale*. Translated by Lenn E. Goodman, U of Chicago P, 2009.
- KANT, IMMANUEL. *Critique of Judgment: Including the First Introduction*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar, Hackett, 1987.
- OTTO, RUDOLF. *The Idea of the Holy*. 1932. Translated by John W. Harvey, Oxford UP, 1958.
- RUMI, JALAL AL-DIN. “Buoyancy.” *The Essential Rumi*, translated by Coleman Barks, Harper Collins, 1995, pp. 104-05.
- TERESA OF AVILA. “On the Four Stages of Prayer.” *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, edited by Bernard McGinn, Modern Library, 2006, pp. 110-17.