

# The Nationality of Sublimity: Kant and Burke on the Intuition and Representation of Infinity

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There can be little question that both Kant's and Burke's theories of the sublime directly affected the way contemporaries saw and represented nature.<sup>1</sup> What has not been sufficiently emphasized, however, is the distinctive *nationality* of the sublime the extent to which Kant changed Burke's ideas from an identifiably German cultural perspective, and how German landscape painters inspired by Kant opened up radically new possibilities for the depiction of the sublime by executing canvases that explicitly (if not consciously) contradicted Burke's definition. My argument has three steps: in the first, I examine Kant's revision of Burke by comparing their ideas on what I see as the paradigm of the sublime, the intuition of infinity. In the second, I turn to the strong contrast in the (physical rather than mental) representations of infinity that result from their respective theories. Finally, I will suggest how the interaction of science with theories of landscape stimulated the unique depictions of the sublime that we find in German landscape painting c. 1800, depictions that are significantly different in appearance and conception from their British and French<sup>2</sup> counterparts. By putting Kant's theories in their cultural context, I seek to make the additional point that our everyday distinction between "theory" and "practice" needs to be rethought. Kant's *Critique of Judgement* is normally held to be "theoretical," to have little to do "practically" with the arts. Landscape painting is thought to have little to do with "theory." My claim, however, is that because Kant's theory of the sublime so informed German landscape painting, and because the

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visual nuances of these works can be seen to construct (and, because of the artists' familiarity with current debates about the sublime) even "argue" for new possibilities in the realm of sublimity, the division between theory and practice can be dissolved. The written and visual presentations of the sublime should not be considered in mutual isolation because of an unexamined idea of the boundaries between theory and practice.

### 1. Intuitions of Infinity

Kant acknowledges his debt to Burke during his discussion of the sublime in the *Critique of Judgement*<sup>3</sup> "Burke," he claims, "... deserves to be called the foremost author" concerning the "physiological... exposition of aesthetic Judgments" (CJ, 130). This praise, however, turns out to be rather backhanded, since Kant in the same breath condemns the approach to the sublime Burke had taken in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* of 1757 as "merely empirical" (CJ, 130). This is serious criticism indeed, because for Kant (though not for Burke) empirical data cannot command the universal assent requisite for a judgment of taste. Burke argues that the three "natural powers in man... the Senses; the Imagination; and the Judgment" (E,13) must be the same in all humanity because we must normally assume that physiology is constant. Following Locke, he posits sense data as fundamental, claims that "bodies present similar images to the whole species" (E,13), and concludes that the imagination and Judgment, since they are based on sense, are also universal. But Kant cannot find security in physiology: if aesthetic judgments are to be universally applicable then they must be grounded "upon some *a priori* principle" (CJ, 132). Kant of course is positing the necessity of the "transcendental examination" (CJ,132) that drives his critical philosophy

Kant's critical investigation of judgment yields one well known modification of Burke's notion of the sublime: where Burke finds that this quality can be predicated of objects themselves, Kant defines the sublime as a function of our own mind that results from the interplay of the "imagination" and "reason" under certain circumstances.

But I want to concentrate on a more subtle but perhaps more influential distinction, the presence of which is signalled by the specific timing of Kant's reference to Burke. Near the beginning of the "Analytic of the Sublime," Kant speaks of a "double mode of representing an Object as sublime" (CJ,94), either "mathematically" or "dynamically." His nod to Burke appears in the context of the dynamically sublime, and not by accident, since it is here that Kant's ideas are closest to Burke's. "Nature considered in an aesthetic judgement as might that has no dominion over us, is *dynamically sublime . . .*," says Kant. "If we are to estimate nature as dynamically sublime, it must be represented as a source of fear . . ." (CJ, 109) This movement or agitation of the mental faculties when fear or terror is sensed is fundamental to Burke's definition of the sublime: "whatever is qualified to cause terror, is a foundation capable of the sublime" (E 131). For both thinkers, fear must be genuinely felt yet aesthetically controlled for the sublime to obtain. Burke develops his entire theory around these ideas, but Kant envisions another alternative, the "mathematically sublime." His discussion of this type precedes and radically augments the possibilities of the sublime-as-fear model.

The sublime, Kant writes, "is the name given to what is *absolutely great*" (CJ, 64), great without comparison. The estimation of this greatness, and thus of the mathematically sublime, necessarily involves *measure*, but measure of a unique kind, since Kant claims that it employs no "principle of cognition" and is thus a "concept of judgement" rather than a function of either sense or reason (CJ, 95). The measurement of greatness is not logical, since it would then require comparison; it is aesthetic and is accomplished "by the eye" (CJ, 98). At this point in the argument it seems that the Kantian notion of reason has been left behind in the adjudication of the sublime. But the opposite proves to be the case: reason and aesthetic judgment interact harmoniously to produce both that feeling which we call the sublime and to discover the ultimately transcendent nature of humanity itself.

"The idea of the comprehension of any phenomenon whatever," we are told, ". . . is an idea imposed upon us by a law of reason, which recognizes no definite, universally valid and unchangeable measure *except the absolute whole*" (CJ, 105 Italics added). The aesthetic estimation of

magnitude that results in the feeling of the sublime, then, must present an intuition of the absolute as one unit. This is often impossible for the mind, of course, but through a typically Kantian use of paradox, we are led to see that it is this very striving and "failure" of the imagination that produces the feeling of the sublime itself and lets us glimpse the noumenon.

The feeling of the sublime is . . . at once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation by reason, and a simultaneously awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgement of the inadequacy of the greatest faculty of sense being in accord with ideas of reason. . . . Therefore the inner perception of the inadequacy of every standard of sense to serve for the rational estimation of magnitude is a coming into accord with reason's laws, and a displeasure that makes us alive to the feeling of the supersensible side of our being . . ." (CJ, 106).

The reference here to the concomitant pleasure and displeasure (pain) of the sublime is only superficially close to Burke. Kant's mathematical sublime relies on measurement, which, I would argue, implies a notion of perceptual clarity or distinctness and is thereby antithetical to Burke's idea of the sublime as the obscure and mysterious. For Burke, obscurity is requisite for terror, so, conversely, "when we know the full extent of any danger," he claims, "when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes" (E, 58 - 59). We can see from this that the essential difference between Kant and Burke turns ultimately on their respective intuitions of the infinite, which is the essence of the sublime for both men. Burke asserts, for example, that the idea of the infinite is "among the most affecting we have" (E.61), while Kant employs it as one of his (many) definitions of sublimity. (CJ 103). Where for Burke "to see an object distinctly, and to perceive its bounds, is one and the same thing [and] a clear idea is therefore another name for a small idea" (E.63), for Kant, measure and its attendant clarity can help us perceive the infinite and therefore lead us to the mathematically sublime. Kant acknowledges the potential impact of obscurity in his section on the dynamically sublime, but not before he has expanded the scope of Burke's theory. In

order to underline the potential this broadening of the category of the sublime had for artistic representation, I want at this point to examine Kant's own examples of the mathematically sublime. Both instances emphasize the perception of clarity in the estimation of magnitude and both are drawn from the realm of art.

Kant lays the groundwork for these examples by explaining that any calculation of size involves two mental procedures, apprehension and comprehension. Apprehension can proceed indefinitely and so presents no theoretical or practical difficulties. But comprehension runs into problems with duration and memory, since it must always strive for a totality or whole.

If the apprehension has reached a point beyond which the representations of sensuous intuition in the case of the parts first apprehended begin to disappear from the imagination as this advances to the apprehension of yet others, as much, then, is lost at one end as is gained at the other, and for comprehension we get a maximum which the imagination cannot exceed. (CJ, 99)

In other words, the balance has to be perfect; this can only happen in the perception of objects if we as observers station ourselves corporeally in just the right place. Kant's first example is based on experiences of the pyramids in Egypt related by "Savary," one of Napoleon's generals.

In order to get the full emotional effect of [their] size we must avoid coming too near just as much as remaining too far away. For in the latter case the representation of the apprehended parts (the tiers of stones) is *but obscure*, and produces no effect, . . . In the former, however, it takes the eye some time to complete the apprehension from the base to the summit; but in this interval the first tiers always in part disappear before the imagination has taken in the last, and so the comprehension is never complete. (CJ, 99-100. Italics added)

The feeling of the mathematically sublime is engendered by the imagination's attempt and pleasurable failure to estimate absolute greatness, to grasp the seeming infinitude of the pyramid's individual parts and overall extension. Kant also uses what he has been told of St. Peter's in Rome to emphasize this point. Here too the observer realizes "the inadequacy of

his imagination for presenting the idea of a whole within which that imagination attains its maximum, and, in its fruitless efforts to extend this limit, recoils upon itself, but in so doing succumbs to an emotional delight" (CJ, 100). The mind is presented in both cases with an intuition of the infinite through a process of (attempted) measurement. As Kant's examples show, this measurement requires a clarity of presentation that was anathema to Burke's conception of the sublime. Here too Kant inscribes the all-important human observer as the locus of judgment and sublimity.

Burke does offer a possible modification of his ideas on clarity and obscurity in two brief passages concerning what he calls the "artificial infinity." "Succession and *uniformity of parts*" (E, 74) define this type, he says, and from it "a species of greatness" (E, 139) (i. e. sublimity) can arise. The need for succession and uniformity here might seem to entail measurement and clarity as well, but the pejorative appellation "artificial" and Burke's own definitions and examples of the sublime, which invariably emphasize the generalness and suggestiveness that follow from obscurity, make it clear that Burke's interests do not include the specificity of Kant's mathematically sublime. "The images raised by poetry are always of [an] obscure kind," he says, "... and even in painting a judicious obscurity ... contributes to the effect of the picture" (E, 62). Indeed, as I will argue more fully below, characterizations of the sublime by Kant and Burke respectively follow what was a largely German emphasis on particularity in art versus the usual British preference for the "great" (and general) lines of the ideal. We find this contrast exemplified by two of the most important art theorists of the day, Reynolds and Goethe. As Reynolds put it in his third address to the London Royal Academy, "the whole beauty and grandure of ... art consists ... in being able to get above all singular forms, local customs, particularities, and details of every kind."<sup>5</sup> Goethe's scientific concerns cause him to invert the relation between universal and particular found in Reynolds' definition: "the artist," he says should "familiarize himself with inorganic matter, and with the ... operations of nature. . . ."

If we should form a true conception of art, we must descend to details, and to details of details."<sup>6</sup> This and similar statements by Goethe offer us a key to the uniqueness of Kant's mathematical sublime and to its representation in German landscape painting.

## II. Representations of Infinity

It is often said that Kant's third critique is not really about art but rather its *a priori* possibility in the faculty of judgment. While this is certainly true, we should not therefore assume that Kant's discussion of the pyramids and St. Peter's is meaningless or that his theory of the sublime was either uninformed about or uninfluential for contemporary art. The context of his references to art gives us both sides of this issue. We are shown first that the sublime may be *engendered* by aesthetic objects. On the other hand, Kant immediately recoils from his own (unusual) enthusiasm to warn that the sublime cannot (contra Burke) actually inhere in "works of art, e.g. buildings, statues and the like, where a human end determines the form" (CJ, 100), or even in natural objects that are "objectively purposive" or teleological. The one source he does allow here is "rude nature merely . . . involving magnitude" (CJ, 100), but this too is at best an occasion for the sublime, which in itself must always be ascribed to the aesthetically judging subject. But Kant has done nothing less than make it possible for us to consider art objects and those of nature *as if* they are sublime. Properly speaking, it is the effect of the mental representation given by intuition in the subject's mind that is sublime, but Kant demonstrates here that a physical representation--art--or nature itself can stimulate the process of apprehension and comprehension needed for sublimity to occur. My point is that contemporary German artists could easily have been inspired by Kant's notion of the mathematically sublime to create works that in their detail and clarity look very different from those British paintings that followed the Burkean model. Because of the applicability of Kant's theory to external nature, and because of the other specific examples he gives of the sublime--"mountain masses"; the "thempetuous ocean" (CJ, 104)--it should not be a surprise that it was in the genre of landscape painting that the Germans augmented the vocabulary of the sublime. To establish the differences between Kant's mathematically sublime and Burke's notion and to underline the effect these differences had on contemporary landscape painting, I will compare two representations of the sublime that are typical, both of the approaches habitually taken by their respective schools of landscape painting--German and British--and of the focus on the Kantian (mathematical) versus the Burkean sublime. The Tyrolean Joseph Anton Koch's *Schmadribachfall* of 1823 (original version, 1811)

(Fig. 1), and Turner's *Snow Storm: Hannibal and His Army Crossing the Alps*, 1812, (Fig.2) are conventionally cited and even classic examples of the landscape sublime that are nonetheless radically dissimilar in appearance and conception. Using one painting as a synecdoche for an entire national tradition forces me to overlook distinctions and exceptions to the trend I set out, but more importantly in this context, this approach allows us to see vividly a strong and unremarked contrast between theories and representations of the sublime, a contrast that would be buried in a cross section examination of landscape paintings.

The *Schmadribachfall* by Koch (Fig.1) can be seen as an incarnation of Kant's mathematical sublime. According to the artist, this landscape is "a true portrait after nature," and he is proud of the amount of visual detail presented.<sup>7</sup> Koch's claim comes from a detailed written description of the work that he supplied to a prospective buyer; his words capture the picture's most significant characteristic--and that which filiates it with Kant's mathematically sublime--the fact that each part of the surface is remarkably and equally visible. The scene, he writes,

presents a view in the Swiss Alps . . . . [A] magnificent wilderness with glacial cascades, [and] clouds--which in part veil the mountains--make up the background. In the middle you find an impenetrable forest of firs and other wild vegetation, and rock fragments intermixed with rushing water. The foreground is the depth of the valley . . . into which the water pictured above rushes.

But the traditional fore, middle, and background mentioned by Koch do not function in the usual way by leading the observer into the picture. Instead, the robust diagonal lines created by the riverbanks, the edges of the forest, and the cliffs in the upper center of the canvas form a zig-zag pattern that leads our gaze from bottom to top (or *vice versa*) in planimetric fashion, rather than moving into depth volumetrically, as the then conventional use of one-point and aerial perspective in the composition of landscape paintings would dictate. The supposedly distant mountain peaks are depicted in as much detail as the ducks in the immediate foreground, and as a result, some of Koch's contemporaries as well as more recent commentators have found his rendering of space confusing.<sup>8</sup> But the clarity and visibility of Koch's *Schmadribachfall* is the touchstone of a new, and thus potentially unintelligible, aesthetic of particularity. Like the figure in the foreground, we as observers of the painting view

nature's detail; once again, the aesthetically judging subject is central. And just as in Kant's lesson about the pyramids, we are able to see everything *and* at least attempt to see it whole. Our perception of Koch's landscape then mimics the ideal conditions that Kant prescribed for the experience of the mathematically sublime. Clarity ensures that no part is missed and that we can also try to comprehend the whole in one intuition. The amount of visual information captures the idea of infinity often associated with the magnitude of the Alps, yet this same plenitude leads to the pleasurable defeat of the imagination that in turn spawns the feeling of sublimity. In addition, the visual and rational control over infinity that ultimately arises from the experience of this picture--because Koch allows us to visualize the seemingly incomprehensible multiplicity of nature--at the very least parallels Kant's doctrine of the imagination and reason working in harmony to produce the sublime. For Kant, the imagination must strive to present an intuition of infinity as one unit. In Koch's *Schmadribachfall* it is as if the exact delineation of natural phenomena makes this possible by facilitating the progressive alternation of apprehension and comprehension. As in Kant, reason operates in Koch's picture by responding to the demand for measurement by making the elements of the picture clearly visible. Finally, the interpretation of Koch's painting in terms of Kant's theory is made even more compelling by the fact that the artist attended lectures on the critical philosophy given by his friend the critic Carl Ludwig Fernow at the Villa Malta in Rome in the winter of 1795.<sup>9</sup> As I will argue in the section of this paper, this intersection of ideas and individuals was no coincidence, since Fernow, Koch, and Kant were all part of a characteristically German attention to the exact details in nature and landscape painting that arose in large measure from the contemporary advent of the science of geology.<sup>10</sup>

Before turning to factors that I think help to explain the definition and pictorial representation of the mathematically sublime, however this type should be contrasted with the image of a very different sublime introduced earlier, one that trades on the darkness and obscurity favored by Burke, Turner's famous *Snow Storm: Hannibal and His Army Crossing the Alps* of 1812 (Fig. 2). As a recent critic puts it, "here indistinctness is the essence of the sublime," (Wilton. 72). The vortex of cloud engulfs Hannibal's troops, whose disarray and terror is barely seen even though it is daytime because the storm has obscured the sun. For Burke, darkness

"is terrible in its own nature," (E,144) and would have served here to heighten the sense of danger that precedes the experience of the sublime. Too much visible detail would spoil the effect, as many other British commentators contemporary with Turner also claimed. William Gilpin--one of the main theorists of the picturesque--wrote in 1791 that "many images owe their sublimity to their *indistinctness*; and frequently what we call sublime is the effect of that heat and fermentation, which ensues in the imagination from its ineffectual efforts to conceive some dark, obtuse idea beyond the grasp. Bring the same within the compass of its comprehension, and it may continue *great*; but it will cease to be *sublime*" (Wilton, 72). Obscurity was often associated with the seemingly infinite extension of mountain ranges. The Reverend Richard Warner, who published two travels through the Snowdonia region of Wales in the late 18th century, describes his descent down Mt. Snowdon in terms that also apply to Turner's *Hannibal*: "We . . . proceeded through the gloom, following the steps of our conductor, who walked immediately before us, as we literally could not see the distance of a dozen feet. The situation . . . produced an effect that was very sublime. Occasional gusts of wind . . . swept away the pitchy cloud . . . and discovered immediately below us . . . an immense descent of vacuity and horror . . ." (Wilton, 44).

By contrast, Koch's *Schmadribachfall* is totally visible; in its almost obsessive clarity it seems to invite measurement and thus to represent Kant's innovation over Burke--the mathematically sublime--while Turner's picture captures the notion of the dynamically sublime that the two thinkers had in common. I am not suggesting that representations of the sublime had to follow one or the other direction completely but rather that this somewhat polarized view allows us to see what comes down to a difference in national approaches to the sublime in landscape painting. Where almost without exception British artists will exploit the fear attendant upon indistinctness, German painters achieved the sublime by overwhelming the viewer with detail. These alternate tendencies inform all types of landscape depiction in both groups, not just that of the sublime. Until Constable, Britain's outstanding landscapists--Wilson, J. R. Cozens Gainsborough, and Turner in most of later his work<sup>11</sup>--stayed away from their detail in landscapes, at least partly because they sought to make landscape like Reynolds' vision of history painting, that is, to idealize it in accordance with Renaissance and Baroque models from

Italy. British artists saw this form of idealization as both different from and superior to what they decried as a German predilection unimportant detail. The Welsh landscape painter Thomas Jones, for example, upon visiting the studio of Philipp Hackert (a very successful German landscapist who was a slightly older contemporary of Koch) complained that he, "Like most German artists, stud[ies] more the *Minutiae* than the grand principles" of art. 12 This judgment has persisted in recent criticism, where for example, Hackert is compared unfavorably with J.R. Cozens by the editor of Jones' memoirs: "Cozens' style and manner are totally different from the dryness, pettiness and niggling detail which Hackert shows in his watercolors and the stilted elegance of his monochromes. Cozens aims at breadth and simplicity, while Hackert prided himself on the detail which he studied on the spot in his effort to reproduce faithfully the variety of nature, though he thereby confused his planes and obscured the larger lines of the landscape." 13 Another otherwise astute British commentator underlines the fact that opinion continues to be divided along national lines when he boasts that "Turner does not attempt, like a club bore, to recount endless little incidents in detail" (Wilton, 74). What is missed in these remarks is the fact that the German artists were responding to new ideas about their natural environment, not just painting detail out of ignorance. 14 Kant's mathematical sublime and its embodiment by Koch are both reactions to an increasingly scientific knowledge of the physical world, a knowledge that demanded precise delineation in a theory of the sublime and its depiction alike.

### III. Science, Landscape, and the Kantian Sublime

Most of those who study Kant's *Critique of Judgement* today focus on the first part of the book, the "Critique of Aesthetical Judgement," and its discussion of the beautiful and sublime while ignoring or at best puzzling over the very inclusion of the lengthy second part, the "Critique of the Teleological Judgement." The result is often a de-contextualized reading that can impair our interpretation of Kant's thoughts on aesthetics, since as one of Kant's more perceptive contemporary readers—Goethe—discovered, the two sections are interdependent. "Here I found my two most disparate interests juxtaposed", Goethe writes, "the results of both art and science were discussed, and aesthetic and teleological judgements were mutually clarified . . . . It pleased me that poetry and comparative natural science were closely related, subject to the same standard

of judgement.”<sup>15</sup> Kant’s critique of the faculty of judgement does indeed bring nature and art into proximity; all that divides them is the crucial but tenuous ascription of “purposiveness” to nature that Kant then applies by dividing the third critique into examinations of “aesthetical” and “teleological” judgment. And even though Kant explicitly states that aesthetic judgments of the beautiful and sublime must remain “pure” by excluding the notion of teleology, the very examples he employs show just how important purpose is to aesthetic determinations. He cannot quite exclude the possibility of human beauty, even though it “presupposes the concept of an end . . . [that] mars its purity” (CJ, 73). The same purity forces him to try to ban “works of art . . . where a human end determines the form as well as the magnitude” (CJ, 100). But since Kant’s caveat appears immediately after his enthusiastic description of the pyramids and St. Peter’s that I discussed earlier, the admonition to exclude art objects from the category of the sublime is like that of the trial judge who instructs a jury to ignore a particularly juicy piece of evidence just heard. Despite his distinction between “subjective” and “objective” purposiveness in art and nature respectively, these realms are united in the makeup of the judging subject who sees them both *as if* they are teleological. Kant’s idealism allows him to discuss art as sublime even though it strictly isn’t, and it grounds the possibility of scientific investigation by permitting the *use* of teleology—of design that underlies the assumption of continuity in nature that in turn is necessary for empirical science—’ by reflective judgement as a regulative conception for guiding our investigation” (CJ, 11, 24). Nature, Kant concludes, reveals teleology to us, which is in turn an organic principle “analogous to art.”

My own end in showing the affinity between Kant’s aesthetic and teleological judgments is to bring art and science together in relation to both the mathematically sublime and its representation by Koch. Like Goethe, Kant was an important philosopher of science, so we should not wonder if his interests in this sphere informed his ideas on aesthetics. He wrote and lectured on geography and related sciences, and it is clear from his reference to Benedict de Saussur (whose *voyages dans les Alpes*, 1779-96, Sought to embody geological information in both texts and pictures) during the discussion of the sublime in the *Critique of Judgement* that Kant understood the potential for interaction between art and science.<sup>16</sup> Both Kant and Koch were part of what a contemporary, the natural philosopher

Heinrik Steffens, identified as a foundational interest in geology that was "thoroughly German in origin."<sup>17</sup> In Kant's case, I would argue that the concern for the specifics of geographical/geological investigation found its outlet in his idea of the mathematically sublime, that transporting feeling that could result from the knowledge and presentation in imagination of nature's details. For his part, Koch witnessed a passion for the nascent and particularly German earth sciences by citing a work on geography, A. F. Buesching's *Neu Erdbeschreibung*, 1766-69, as one of his two favorite books (the other was the Bible).<sup>18</sup> More importantly, his *Schmadribachfall* depicts erosion caused by the falling water and glacier.<sup>19</sup> And there is further evidence that Koch articulated controversial theories about the earth in this landscape. The picture's detail allows us to see the clouds that hang near the mountain's summit. In his *Italian Journey* of 1786-88, Goethe offers an explanation for this phenomenon: "When we look at mountains . . . now shrouded in mists or wreathed in storm-tossed clouds . . . we attribute all these Phenomena to the atmosphere . . . But for a long time I have felt convinced that the most manifest atmospheric changes are due to [mountains'] imperceptible and secret influence."<sup>20</sup> Goethe's theory of a gravitational force that holds clouds around mountains adds another scientific dimension to Koch's painting. Though we cannot be sure that the artist knew of Goethe's theory, he often noted the interactions of mountains and atmosphere in his own travel records; on one occasion, he exclaimed over the great clarity of vision caused by a cool mountain zephyr.<sup>21</sup> I would claim further that the *transparency* of Koch's *Schmadribachfall* is a metaphor for a metaphysical visibility whereby these particulars operate as signs<sup>22</sup> of man's transcendental or noumenal essence in the way prescribed by Kant's theory of the sublime.

Goethe's words once again provide a new entrance to our understanding of both Kant's and Koch's interest in scientific detail and measurement. "Look not only for something behind the phenomena, "for these are themselves the theory."<sup>23</sup> The very visibility found in Koch's incarnation of the mathematically sublime leads us to a realization of our own supersensible nature. For Kant, "this idea of the supersensible . . . is awakened in us by an object the aesthetic estimating of which strains the imagination to its utmost, whether in respect to its extension (mathematical), or of its might over the mind (dynamical)" (CJ, 120). The

transcendent does ground phenomena and in this Platonic way stands "behind" them, but we *discover* the noumenal sphere in the sublime precisely by looking at, rather than past or through, nature's plenitude. Art, through the sublime, makes possible what should seem beyond human capacity, contact with the noumenon. The phenomenal world pictured by Koch is ultimately but a sign for its ontological antecedent, and is transparent in this way. But even more importantly, phenomena are transparent in the sense of initiating our vision of the noumena. We could say that "visibility" makes "vision" possible.

Kant discusses the relation of man and the noumenal in the experience of the sublime under the concept of morality. "Moral ideas" are requisite for the *control* of the terror that would otherwise exist when the reason—through its laws—allows sensibility to "look out beyond itself into the infinite, which is for it an abyss" (CJ, 115). He reiterates that "human nature" itself is the seat of the sublime and argues that the "practical" sphere revealed in the aesthetic experience has ultimate dominion over nature: the "sublime in external nature . . . is only represented as a might of the mind enabling it to overcome this or that hindrance to sensibility by means of moral principles" (CJ, 124). This is said in the context of the dynamically sublime, but the reference to overcoming hindrances to sensibility applies equally to the mathematical variety. Because he has arrived at this set of assertions through *a priori* reasoning, Kant holds that man's control and superiority is universal, where Burke's notion of the sublime turns on pain and fear, and is thus merely empirical and individual. As a conclusion, I want to show briefly how this final dimension of Kant's sublime is mirrored in contemporary German landscape paintings.

Our "moral" dominion over nature is implied by the observer in Koch's painting: he surveys and in this aesthetic sense controls the seemingly infinite plenitude of nature. Looking at Koch's picture, we can do the same. Koch's knowledge of science plays a role here too, since we are able to see the great—and ultimately transcendent or noumenal—themes of the earth's dynamism through the water cycle and erosion that Koch makes visible, or the contemporary scientific theories of mountain building pictured by this and other German landscape painting.<sup>24</sup> Kant's own example of the prospect of a stormy ocean "threatening to overwhelm

and engulf everything" (CJ, 122) brings another famous image of the sublime to mind, Caspar David Friedrich's *Sea of Ice* of 1823–24 (Fig 3). While we cannot know whether or not Friedrich used Kant's theories, the painting can be fruitfully re-interpreted in terms of the mathematically sublime.

For Kant the feeling of the sublime leads to the anthropomorphic idea of morality, yet in the context of the example just cited, he is still at pains to avoid teleological thinking in order to preserve the uniqueness of the aesthetic. Thus we cannot see the ocean's sublimity in terms of its (potential) harm to man. Friedrich's painting, I would claim, is both sublime and about man as the seat of this transcendental feeling, but it is not teleological. The picture is better interpreted as an *Erdlebenbild*, an "earth-life-picture," that relies on and embodies the geognostic theories of Friedrich's close friend and art pupil, Carl Gustav Carus.<sup>25</sup> The earth-life-picture was a new category invented by Carus to replace landscape painting with a new genre that was explicitly cognizant of geological science. What is most visible in Friedrich's picture is the unstoppable force of the ice flows that, like the rock strata<sup>26</sup> that they resemble, crush the ship and its cargo. The image has traditionally been called either *The Lost North Pole Expedition* or *The Lost Hope* (the ship has been called the "Hope")<sup>27</sup> titles that emphasize the allegory of human mortality. But the original title, *The Sea of Ice*, should focus our attention in the first instance on the natural phenomena themselves. The blocks of ice move slowly but relentlessly, destroying anything in their path. The reference to man's life and hopes is quite clear from the ship, now swallowed by the ice. Man and nature are in a sense antagonists, and we can understand why a pessimistic interpretation like the following is habitually given to the image:

The blocks of ice turned skyward are an expression of the divinity of nature, and the debris of the boat represents the vulnerability of man and his inevitable failure to attain godliness; the wrecked ship itself represents the end of the 'navagatio vitae' . . . The frozen wasteland is [also] an allusion to the paralysis that characterized German politics under the despotic administration of Metternich, and the ship is the coffin of liberty.<sup>28</sup>

without denying the viability of this reading, it is possible to refine and augment it in mathematical sublime and of the scientific awareness that

defines the earth-life-picture. The allusions to the earth's history presented in Friedrich's *Sea of Ice* proclaim a much extended timeframe in which to understand the relationship between man and nature. In this context, what we see is simply the ongoing cycle of life itself. Change is visible everywhere in what might at first seem to be a frozen and immobile landscape. Our individual lives are part of an eternal rhythm of disintegration and rebirth, just as water, for example, can be seen in its various states, from solid ice and melting snow in the foreground to the saturated mists and clouds in the distance. The sublimity of this canvas does not arise only from Burke's idea of fear, but also—and equally—from Kant's theory of the pleasure attendant upon the mind's aesthetical use of reason to control nature even in its apparently infinite power and extension.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The literature on this topic is vast. For the most complete discussion and bibliography, see Andrew Wilton, *Turner and the Sublime*, exh. cat., Yale Center for British Art and The Art Gallery of Ontario, 1980. Subsequent references to this work, abbreviated Wilton; are included in the text.
2. French landscapists concerned with the sublime by and large followed Burke, often as he was interpreted by Diderot. See Ian J. Lochhead, *The Spectator and the Landscape in the Art Criticism of Diderot and his Contemporaries* (Ann Arbor, 1982): 12-13. My focus in this paper is on the contrast between British and German theories and representations of the sublime.
3. I. Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford, 1928). References to this work, abbreviated CJ, will be included in the text.
4. Ed. by J.T. Boulton (Notre Dame, 1958). References to this work, abbreviated E, will be included in the text. Kant knew the German trans. published by Hartknock in 1773.
5. Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert Wark (New Haven, 1975): 44.

6. Goethe, "Introduction to the Propylaen," in *Goethe on Art*, ed., trans. by John Gage (Berkeley, 1980): 6, 14. The new and especially German attention to the particular is discussed by H. Dieackmann in "Aesthetic Theory and Criticism in the Enlightenment," in *Introduction to Modernity, A Symposium on Eighteenth Century Thought*, ed. R. Mollenauer (Austin, 1965, 65-105): 66.
7. This and the following passage are from a letter to Johann Peter von Langer, in O. R. v. Lutterotti, *Joseph Anton Koch 1768-1839*. (Berlin, 1940): 148, my trans.
8. See R. Zeitler, *Klassizismus und Utopia Figura 5*, (Stockholm, 1955): 178-79.
9. See C. L. Fernow, *Romische Studien*, (Zurich, 1806).
10. This is not to suggest that British artists were not interested in science, but that their concern tended to the atmosphere rather than to the earth, as witnessed by Luke Howard's famous cloud studies.
11. Wilton insists that Turner's indistinctness is actually a form of "realism," a way to capture a scene persuasively. (74) While I think this is right, the contrast with the typically German attention to visible detail still holds.
12. Jones, *Memoirs, The Walpole Society* (XXXII, 1946-48): 117.
13. A. P. Oppe, *Alexander and John Robert Cozens* (London, 1952): 142.
14. I have examined the art historical aspects of this point in greater detail in "The Taste [for phenomena: Mount Vesuvius and Transformations in Late 18th-Century European Landscape depiction," *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* (XLV, 1984, 131-44) and "The 'Only School' of Landscape Revisited: German Visions of Tivoli in the 18th Century," *IDEA* (IV, 1985, 133-46).
15. Goethe, "Influence of the New philosophy" (1817) in *Botanical Writings*, trans. Bertha Mueller (Honolulu, 1952): 230.
16. A great deal has been written on this general interdependence in recent years. See especially Barbara M. Stafford, *Voyage Into Substance: Art, Science, Nature and the Illustrated Travel Account, 1760-1830* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984) and the two special issues of the *Art Journal*, Summer and Fall, 1984.
17. Steffens, *Geognostische - geologische Aufsätze als Vorbereitung zu einer innern Naturgeschichte der Erde* (Hamburg, 1810): 147. My trans. Historians of science generally agree.
18. Lutterotti, *Koch*: 4.

19. I have discussed Koch's knowledge of geology in greater detail in "Revision and Exploration: German Landscape Theory and Depiction in the Late 18th Century" (Ph.D. thesis, London, 1982). More recently, and independently, Timothy Mitchell has discussed related issues in "Caspar David Friedrich's *Der Watzmann*: German Romantic Landscape Painting and Historical Geology," *The Art Bulletin* (LXVI, No.3, Sept. , 1984, 452-64).
20. Goethe, *Italian Journey*, trans. W.H. Auden and E. Meyer (Harmondsworth, 1970): 31-32.
21. See Thomas Musper, "Das Reissenskizzenbuch von Josef Anton Koch aus dem Jahre 1791" (*Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlung*, 1935, 167-93) 189.
22. For an excellent discussion of semiology in the German Enlightenment, see David E. Wellbery, *Lessing's LAOCOON: Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, England, 1984).
23. Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen*, No. 488, in *Goethes Werke* (Hamburger Ausgabe, 1960), Band 14. 432. My trans.
24. See notes 14 and 19.
25. I have argued this point in detail in "Revision and Exploration," and "The Taste for Phenomena." Corroboration comes from Mitchell's article, cited in note 19.
26. Friedrich's depiction of the ice was based—following Carus' suggestion—on specimens seen along the banks of the Elbe river near Dresden. The sediment that would have been mixed with this ice during spring breakup accounts for the fact that the blocks in Fig.3 look more like earth or rock than ice.
27. See W. Stechow, "Caspar David Friedrich und 'Der Griper'" *Festschrift für Herbert von Einem* (Berlin, 1965. 241-46).
28. *German Masters of the Nineteenth Century*, exh. cat. , (N.Y. and Toronto, 1981): 112.

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