

Objective Aesthetic Experiences

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One recurring philosophical problem about aesthetics and ethics concerns the connections between art works and the world. And one of the many questions that may arise in this connection is the following: are all aesthetic experiences of artistic work exclusively subjective experiences? In this paper I try to offer several considerations in support of the view that aesthetic experiences of what I have called elsewhere the “negative sublime” are not exclusively subjective; they are partly objective in a strong sense. In what sense?

Some aesthetic experiences of the negative sublime may include aspects that derive from elements in artistic works that embody strongly independent features of the actual world, including values. These aspects I will be calling “negative aesthetic values”. My concluding suggestion will be that apprehending some of these aspects today may be required for rightly leading one’s life.

The Hot Bone-House

Consider a beautiful passage from the conclusion of the Noble laureates Seamus Heaney’s 1999 English translation of the *Beowulf* poem from the Old English or Anglo-Saxon (London, 1999). This Nordic epic, we are credibly told, “is about the monstrous, defeating it, being exhausted by it and then having to live on; physically and psychologically exposed, in that exhausted aftermath” (from book jacket). *Beowulf*, after returning from two overwhelming and increasingly difficult struggles with the monstrous to liberate his Danish neighbours, and after reigning as their king for many years over his southern Swedish people, the Geats, *Beowulf* succeeds, but only after immensely demanding efforts, in defeating the monstrous a final time.

This time, however, the unthinkable powerful monstrous has arisen not from without, but from within the depths of his own peoples thousand-year history and his own brief life. And in this time the monstrous wounds *Beowulf* mortally. His grieving people burn his bod—his “bone-house,” the poet calls it—on a funeral pyre. And a woman cries out horrific premonitions of the unthinkable sufferings now awaiting her and her people in the absence of their heroic defender. The passage runs:

On a height [the great people] kindled the hugest of all
funeral fires; fumes of woodsmoke
billowed darkly up, the blaze roared
and drowned out their weeping, wind died down
and flames wrought havoc in the hot bone-house,
burning it to the core. They were disconsolate
and wailed aloud for their lord’s decease.

A great woman too sang out in grief,
with her hair bound up she unburdened herself
of her worst fears, a wild litany
of nightmares and lament: her nation invaded,
enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,
slavery and abasement. Heaven swallowed the smoke.

(11. 3143–55)

Now, much would need to be said about a climactic passage were we to come eventually to some not unsatisfactory understanding of its sense and significance. And here we are merely touching on what Heaney has called “a work of the greatest imaginative vitality, a masterpiece where the structuring of the tale is as elaborate as the beautiful contrivances of its language. Its narrative elements may belong to a previous age but as a work of art it lives in its own continuous present, equal to our knowledge of reality in the present time” (p. ix).

Nonetheless, even without the extraordinary scholarly resources that thorough understanding requires, some may read such works with appreciation. They read slowly, and reread slowly, the familiar details of men’s fiery burials and women’s dark lamentations. They bring to such details both what they perceive in the poem’s language and their own histories at the end of this bloodiest of centuries, And, at some level of appreciation, they may find themselves attending not just to the specific, to the body as a “bone-house,” but, as Aristotle would have it, to the universal, to the struggling and the dying and the grieving and the wild apprehendings. In other words, some readers in times like ours cannot overlook in this poem the fire’s flames, wreaking “havoc... burning [the body] to the core.” They cannot leave unnoticed today, the smoke “billow[ing] darkly up,” nor can they today forget the “bodies in piles.” And today they cannot refuse to leave unthought the fact, the utterly bare emptiness of the fact, that “heaven swallowed the smoke.” They cannot; they may not.

Appreciating Literary Art works

So reading works like *Beowulf* may sometimes lead some readers today to genuine aesthetic experiences of a special kind. To say what kind we need a story. Here is one such story, not of course the only story and one in which parts may prove false. but one I think is still helpful. Generally, we may agree that our aesthetic appreciations of some works of art, especially of literary works of art, fill out concretely what these works necessarily leave undetermined. In particular, we might say that such filling out or “completion” or “concretization” of the physical artistic work is the transformation of that artistic work into one kind of intentional object we sometimes call an “art work.” Our appreciation of this art work in an aesthetic experience specifies the art work as intentional object into an artwork of an individuated aesthetic object.

Now, the construction of any specific aesthetic object very often comes about exclusively as a function of our merely subjective associations with features of the antecedently completed or concretized art work. That is, sometimes we fill out cognitively

the artistic work, a material object such as the text of a poem like *Beowulf*, thus making of the artistic work a completed art work—and in our imaginative interactions with the completed art work, an aesthetic object. At other times, however, just when we allow our cognitive interactions with the artistic work to be mainly guided and constrained in the construction of the concretized art work by both the artistic work's objective material features as well as by our own objective historical experiences, the resulting art work is strongly determined by these independent objective features. When, in turn, we go on to have an aesthetic appreciation of such an art work in our imaginative interactions with the completed art work in the construction of related aesthetic objects, some central aspects of these aesthetic objects reflect objective marks of those strongly determined independent objective features of both the artistic work and the concretized art work.

So some strongly independent features of the artistic work, independent, that is, of both our thinking and our speaking about it, can constrain and control the concretization of certain objective features in the completion of the art work. Further, they can reinforce those objective features in the subject's subsequent construction of certain aspects of the relevant aesthetic objects that the subject constitutes in aesthetic experience.

The Negative Sublime

In some such cases, these imaginative interactions can lead to the appearance of what I have argued elsewhere is a "negative sublime." The negative sublime may be taken here as being an inexorable and endlessly repeated moment of having to strive and having to fail to articulate rationally the unthinkable magnitudes of innocent suffering—the extent of it (the immensities of the grieving woman's premonitions), and the unthinkable magnitudes of overwhelming evil—the power of it (the immensity of the monstrous overwhelming even the heroic).

This idea of a negative sublime unfolds from Kant's talk in the *Critique of Judgement* of both a dynamic and a mathematical sublime. Kant, of course, was speaking of the sublime in the context of nature and not of art. Moreover, Kant himself nowhere speaks about a negative sublime. In 1790, Kant leaves aside both his 1760's precritical distinction of the sublime into the noble, the splendid, and the terrifying, and his 1780's talk in his ethical writings of only the moral being sublime in favour of a distinction between the mathematical and the dynamical sublime. But this late discussion has remained seriously problematic.

Still, Kant's discussions of just those mental situations when experiences of pleasure and displeasure succeed each other incessantly, like the short-circuiting of the optic nerve when we look at Op-Art paintings, and when reason continues vainly to try to overstep the limits of understanding, like attempting to pass a border crossing in Kosovo, are challenging. Even more challenging is Kant's central claim that just this combination of the elements of the sublime must provoke in the reflective subject the realization of what Kant calls mysteriously the "supersensible" character of the mind itself. These Kantian speculations are difficult. But I think they are pertinent for better understanding the structure of certain aesthetic experiences like our appreciations of the *Beowulf* poet's literary representations of the overwhelming magnitudes of both suffering and evil.

Perhaps I may now summarize these initial remarks about artistic works, their

concretizations as art works, and their constructions as aesthetic objects as follows. When appreciating some artistic literary works today, some readers may come to experience, through their individual concretization of the objective features of these artistic works in the contexts of their own objective historical experiences at the beginning of this new century, a negative sublime, a realization of the supersensible character of mind in the ineluctable and necessarily ever-frustrated attempts to understand what reason can neither apprehend nor ignore—the overwhelming extent of suffering and evil in times like ours. But such a story is, as I have already indicated, not without problems. One serious problem is the story's including what seems to be an obscurely subjective aspect only of a fuller aesthetic experience. I would put this problem in the form of a question: What exactly might be said to generate this experience of a negative sublime, not, as Kant would have it, just on the side of the reader, but from the side of the aesthetic object that the reader has constituted? I turn now to consider this question, but only after beginning, again concretely, with another passage from *Beowulf*.

“Doomed” and “Mysterious”

Before the Geats of southern Sweden had consigned Beowulf's body to the pyre, a messenger had brought them news of Beowulf's final struggle with the monstrous and of Beowulf's victory in his defeat, his fated but mysterious death. The messenger, like the grieving women later, had also foretold future wars now that the heroic king was dead and his people left defenseless. In the following passage the messenger ends his speech with a sober tribute to Beowulf; then the *Beowulf* poet himself interjects a brief comment:

“We must hurry now
to take a last look at the king
and launch him, lord and lavisher of rings,
on the funeral road. His royal pyre
will melt no small amount of gold:
heaped there in a hoard, it was bought at heavy cost,
and that pile of rings he paid for at the end
with his own life will go up with the flame,
be furl'd in fire: treasure no follower
will wear in his memory, nor lovely woman
link and attach as a torque around her neck—
but often, repeatedly, in the path of exile
now that their leader's laugh is silenced,
dawn—cold to the touch will be taken down
and waved on high: the swept harp
darkly over the doomed will have news,
tidings for the eagle of how he hooked and ate,
how he and the wolf made short work of the dead.”

Famous for his deeds
a warrior may be, but it remains a mystery

where his life will end, when he may no longer
dwell in the mead hall among his own.
So it was with Beowulf, when he faced the cruelty
and cunning of the mound-guard. He himself was ignorant
of how his departure from the world would happen.”

(11.2977-27; 3062-75)

Let me sketch one only of the salient features of this important passage. This feature I would propose as an instance of the kind of objective constraints an artistic work and its concretized art work may exercise over the usual exclusively subjective construction of a related aesthetic object. The feature I wish to highlight is the objective semantic opposition between two expressions in the material text. This is the feature that can set up in the minds of certain readers a semantic indeterminacy of conflicting sense and significance of the two expressions in the text.

Recall two of the lines above from the messenger's speech—"the eagle winging darkly over the doomed"—and one from the poet's interjection — "it remains a mystery where [a warrior's] life will end." Then focus briefly on the contrasted expression, "doomed" and "mystery." The first expression, "doomed," is linked with difficult matter, with fate, fatality, and destiny. All these dark matters are an integral part of the poem's strongly pagan, non-Christian cultural background. Thus as readers, we are to understand that those whom this nordic culture most esteems as having embodied and fulfilled its most basic culture ideals are warriors—they are, clearly, "warrior-heroes." Their deeds are destined; their deeds are liberating and enriching; and their deaths are "doomed." The culture is a tragic culture and some of its most representative works, such as but not only the *Beowulf* poem, are tragic works of high literary art.

The second expression, "mystery," is also linked with difficult matters, with election, providence, and redemption. And all these dark matters are also an integral part of the poem's cultural background, but of its partly Christian and not just pagan background. Thus as readers, we are also to understand that those whom this culture most esteems are indeed warriors—but they are also, obscurely, "warrior-saints." Their deeds are providential; their deeds are redemptive and vicarious; and their deaths are "mysterious." The culture is not just a tragic culture and works like the *Beowulf* poem are not just tragic works of high literary art.

Now, as I have indicated, appreciating such works in an aesthetic experience may involve no more than constructing an aesthetic object of our appreciation on no other grounds than subjective associations only. In this sense, the resultant aesthetic object itself is exclusively a subjective phenomenon. But an aesthetic object may also include certain aspects strongly linked to objective elements and hence be not exclusively a subjective phenomenon. For aesthetic appreciation may also involve allowing the construction of an aesthetic object to proceed partly in conformity with certain objective constraints present in the art work.

Here, we may say that an aesthetic appreciation of this complex passage from the

Beowulf poem may result from the construction of an aesthetic object that is more than merely subjective. For such a construction may build into the aesthetic object features that correspond to and/or cohere with definite and determinate objective features of the artistic work. That is, features of the aesthetic object may reflect the fact that objective linguistic structures of the poem—its diction, its syntax, and its semantics—turn a round not a single but a twofold discourse, both non-Christian and Christian, whose continuing pragmatic oppositions generate bearers of a deep pathos in the aesthetic experience itself.

When, as here, some may come to have an aesthetic experience that is partly objective in this sense, then the pathos of that experience may be understood as arising from certain aspects of the aesthetic object, aspects that I propose to call “negative aesthetic value.” However, to grasp the sense I wish to give this expression, this English barbarism, we need several distinctions.

Negative Aesthetic Values

The complex expression, “negative aesthetic value,” may refer to several quite different situations or states of affairs: First, the expression may designate an instance of a particular *negative*, as opposed to positive, artistic value. Thus this first distinction turns on the opposition between positive and negative. The general idea is that some features of the artistic work, in this case the text, may be viewed or regarded as either good or positive features (the text is complete), or as bad or negative features (the text is, let’s say in OE kennings, “mouse-munched”), independently of any subsequent evaluation one might make of these features.

But the experience “negative aesthetic value” may also designate an instance of a particular negative *aesthetic* rather than artistic value. Thus this second distinction turns on the opposition not between positive and negative, but between artistic and aesthetic value. Although one may draw such a distinction in many ways, we can satisfy our present purposes by taking this distinction as holding between the material work itself, the “artistic work” (here the text of the *Beowulf* poem), and the concretization of the artistic work, the “artwork,” (here a reader’s intentional object of the material work). The value at issue here is the intrinsic value of the reader’s intentional object, and not the intrinsic value of the material work.

What about the third term in the polyvalent expression, “negative aesthetic *value*?” Now philosophers continue to have persistent difficulties with winning argued consensus in defining something so general as what the word “value” may or may designate. Here, three remarks should suffice: First, we may agree that there appear to be many different kinds of value: physical values, intellectual values, moral values, artistic and aesthetic values, to name but a few. These value kinds moreover appear to be ranged in hierarchies of importance. And, third, artistic and aesthetic values appear to be centrally related to whatever we may affirm or deny about the bearers of positive and negative qualities of works of art and the intentional objects art appreciators may make of them. In this context let us then say that the word “value” designates just what the bearers of negative aesthetic features present in the aesthetic objects some art appreciators construct in strong conformity

and coherence with their intentional concretizations of material artistic works.

With at least these distinctions on hand, I want now to stipulate what we may understand when we use the richly ambiguous expression “negative aesthetic value” in connection with experiences of a negative sublime. Let such an expression designate just what is presented to the mind of an appreciator by objectively constituted bearers of negatively charged aspects of specific aesthetic objects. In such cases, the appreciator neither makes negative judgements about aesthetic values nor entertains negative feelings about aesthetic values, but comes to have negative beliefs about not just aesthetic but about moral matters as well, beliefs about what one can neither know nor even think, for example, beliefs that the immensities of both the magnitudes of suffering and the magnitudes of the evils that cause suffering cannot be thought. That is, what gives rise to experiences of the negative sublime are features of the aesthetic object—negative aesthetic values—some merely subjective and some genuinely objective in the sense of those constructed according to constraints imposed by objective features of the intentional concretization and the artistic object. Such negative aesthetic values may generate beliefs about what, at least on Kantian grounds, we may only hope for—not just the existence of a self or the immortality of the soul or the existence of God, but the rational capacities to think enough.

I want to summarize now these remarks about the negative sublime and negative aesthetic values as follows. Some readers, I have been saying, may come to have an aesthetic experience of literary works of art like *Beowulf* and so many others, an experience that sometimes is not exclusively subjective but objective as well. They do so when they allow their imaginative construction of aesthetic objects to be strongly guided by certain objective features of the concretized artistic work itself. When the negative aesthetic values within such aesthetic experiences give rise to an experience of a negative sublime, then such an experience cannot be characterized as being exclusively subjective. Indeed, the apparently and merely subjective pathos of such aesthetic experience may point unmistakably, in times like ours, to what can only be the deep and actual pathos of things.

A Nothing that is a Something

Let us, return a last time to the *Beowulf* poem. Beowulf died. Perhaps we may say that Beowulf died in a final battle with the monstrous? Earlier, the poet presented the battle with the related guises, one male and the other, its mother, female, the second even more overwhelming than the first. Each time the monstrous assailed Beowulf in the country of his Danish neighborhood. Each time Beowulf prevailed. But now the poet figures the monstrous in the guise of something neither male nor female but of something preternatural, of something arising perhaps from Beowulf’s own warrior, kingly, and heroic self.

The monstrous now challenges Beowulf in the guise of the mythical “fire-dragon,” a fiery serpent, an all-consuming fire, a reddish void. And although Beowulf overcomes the monstrous one last time, this time the monstrous, at once fatally and mysteriously, destroys its own destroyer. In destroying Beowulf, the monstrous succeeds in consigning the dead hero’s own people, unlike the Danes, defenselessly to their harrowing premonitions

and their echoing lamentations.

But what exactly is this monstrous thing, this all-consuming fire, this reddish void, this immensely imagined nothingness that seems to be an actual something? Here is a last passage where the *Beowulf* poet mythically describes the monstrous in the preternatural strangeness of its overwhelming power, destructiveness, and death-dealings.

Beowulf the king
had indeed met with a marvelous death.
But what they saw first was far stranger:
the serpent on the ground, gruesome and vile,
lying facing him. The fire-dragon
was scaresomely burnt, scorched all colours.
From head to tail, his entire length
was fifty feet. He had shimmered forth
on the night air once, then winged back
down to his den; but death owned him now,
he would never enter his earth-gallery again.
Beside him stood pitchers and piled-up dishes,
silent flacons, precious swords
eaten through with rust, ranged as they had been
while they waited their thousand winters underground.
That huge cache, gold inherited
From an ancient race, was under a spell—
which meant no one was ever permitted
to enter the ring-hall unless God Himself,
mankind's keeper, True King of Triumphs,
allowed some person pleasing to him—
and in His eyes worthy—to open the hoard.
What came about brought to nothing
the hopes of the one who had wrongly hidden
riches under the rock face. First the dragon slew
that man among men, who in turn made fierce amends
and settled the feud. (ll. 3036–62)

Art, Negation, and Life

Now, in the light of our various experiences with work like this, I have been suggesting that rightly appreciating some artistic works today, may involve apprehending certain abstract features of aesthetic objects. These features I have called, barbarously, "negative aesthetic values." When rightly apprehended, they may provoke experiences of a negative sublime. And such experiences may be more than exclusively subjective. Just because they may be guided and constrained by independent features of the material artistic works that generate their intentional concretizations and guide their aesthetic constructions, such experiences of a negative sublime can also be genuinely objective. So much for a

suggestion.

However, I would also like to offer one further thought for discussion, a sunrise about art, negation, and life in the form of three queries. Could living rightly sometimes require appreciating negative aesthetic values? That is, could it be the case that part of what rightly living our lives entails today may sometimes require rightly apprehending just those specific features of certain aesthetic objects that I have been calling here “negative aesthetic values”? And could failing to appreciate negative aesthetic values sometimes entail failing to live rightly? That is, could it also be the case that without such apprehensions in our ongoing imaginative interactions with some works of art, we can only remain ever unable to catch up into our lives, as we ought to, at least some of our own times’ still unbearable burdens—the unthinkable sufferings and the unthinkable evils?

You might well reply, of course, that just these aesthetic apprehensions are hopelessly inconsequential. “In their subjective yet—even granted—partly objective aspects,” you might say, “such reveries are ever wispily receding into indeterminable futures of persons and peoples, may be dark apprehendings of a kind of nothing, if you insist, but then again may be no more than the dark insubstantial stuff of ordinary nightmares, or the dark side effect of diminishing neurotransmitters in the synaptic clefts, or the dark swirlings only of night and fog.” Of “night and fog,” I would then repeat, of “Nacht and Nebel.” And I would have to return to my hunch and ask again: Could living rightly today require not just aesthetically appreciating but cognitively apprehending what even objective aesthetic experiences of a negative sublime can never warrant but only intimate? That is, could it be the case that what we can apprehend even if only darkly, like *Beowulf* darkly apprehending the monstrous in its endless guises, is finally not a nothing at all, not a fiery phantasmagoria of any fairy-tale dragon, not a mythical monster, not any psychic artifact of a hormonal imbalance or of a spiritual self-deception, but a something? Could we be apprehending in some aesthetic experiences of a negative sublime the definite, determined, and overwhelming actuality of something truly monstrous, of an objective and still unthinkable evil?

But all this may be just a bit much; on this view, *Beowulf* seems to be about a lot, a whole lot.

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