Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant

The possibility of juxtaposing ideology and critical philosophy, which is the persistent burden of contemporary thought, is pointed out, as a mere historical fact, by Michel Foucault in Les Mots et les choses. At the same time that French ideologues such as Destutt de Tracy are trying to map out the entire field of human ideas and representations, Kant undertakes the critical project of a transcendental philosophy which, says Foucault, marks “the retreat of cognition and of knowledge out of the space of representation.”¹ Foucault’s ensuing historical diagnosis, in which ideology appears as a belated manifestation of the classical spirit and Kant as the onset of modernity, interests us less than the interplay between the three notions: ideology, critical philosophy, and transcendental philosophy. The first term of this triad, “ideology,” is the most difficult to control and one may hope that the interrelationship with the two others might be of some assistance.

A possible starting point can be found in the introduction to the third Critique in a difficult but important differentiation between transcendental and metaphysical principles. Kant writes as follows: “A transcendental principle is one by means

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of which is represented, a priori, the universal condition under which alone things can be objects of our cognition. On the other hand, a principle is called metaphysical if it represents the a priori condition under which alone objects, whose concept must be given empirically, can a priori be further determined. Thus the principle of the cognition of bodies as substances and as changeable substances is transcendental if thereby it is asserted that their changes must have a cause; it is metaphysical if it asserts that their changes must have an external cause. For in the former case bodies need only be thought by means of ontological predicates (pure concepts of understanding), e.g., as substance, in order to permit the a priori cognition of the proposition; but in the latter case, the empirical concept of a body (as a movable thing in space) must lie at the base of the proposition, although once this basis has been laid down it can be seen completely a priori that the other predicate (motion by external causes) belongs to the body.\textsuperscript{2}

The difference between transcendental and metaphysical concepts that concerns us is that the latter imply an empirical moment that necessarily remains external to the concept, whereas the former remain entirely interconceptual. Metaphysical principles lead to the identification and definition, to the knowledge, of a natural principle that is not itself a concept; transcendental principles lead to the definition of a conceptual principle of possible existence. Metaphysical principles state why and how things occur; to say that bodies move because of gravity is to reach a conclusion in the realm of metaphysics. Transcendental principles state the conditions that make occurrence possible at all: the first condition for bodies to be able to change is that such a thing as bodies and motion exist or occur. The condition of existence of bodies is called substance; to state that substance is the cause of the motion of bodies (as Kant does in the passage quoted) is to examine critically the possibility of their existence. Metaphysical principles, on the other hand, take the existence of their object for granted as empirical fact. They contain knowledge of the world, but this knowledge is precritical. Transcendental principles contain no knowledge of the world or anything else, except for the knowledge that metaphysical principles that take them for their object are themselves in need of critical analysis, since they take for granted an objectivity that, for the transcendental principles, is not a priori available. Thus the objects of transcendental principles are always critical judgments that take metaphysical knowledge for their target. Transcendental philosophy is always the critical philosophy of metaphysics.

\textsuperscript{2} Immanuel Kant, \textit{Kritik der Urteilskraft}, vol. 10 of \textit{Werkausgabe}, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), p. 90. Subsequent references to this work cite two page numbers. The first refers to this edition; the second reference (here pp. 17–18) is to the English translation (\textit{Critique of Judgment}, trans. J. H. Bernard [New York: Hafner Press, 1951]). I have occasionally made slight changes in the English version. References to other works by Kant are from the same Suhrkamp \textit{Werkausgabe}; the translations are my own.
Ideologies, to the extent that they necessarily contain empirical moments and are directed toward what lies outside the realm of pure concepts, are on the side of metaphysics rather than critical philosophy. The conditions and modalities of their occurrence are determined by critical analyses to which they have no access. The object of these analyses, on the other hand, can only be ideologies. Ideological and critical thought are interdependent and any attempt to separate them collapses ideology into mere error and critical thought into idealism. The possibility of maintaining the causal link between them is the controlling principle of rigorous philosophical discourse: philosophies that succumb to ideology lose their epistemological sense, whereas philosophies that try to by-pass or repress ideology lose all critical thrust and risk being repossessed by what they foreclose.

The Kant passage establishes two other points. By speaking of a causal link between ideology and transcendental philosophy, one is reminded of the prominence of causality in Kant’s example, the focus on the internal or external cause of the motion of bodies. The example of bodies in motion is indeed more than a mere example that could be replaced by any other; it is another version or definition of transcendental cognition. If critical philosophy and metaphysics (including ideologies) are causally linked to each other, their relationship is similar to the relationship, made explicit in the example, between bodies and their transformations or motions. Critical philosophy and ideology then become each other’s motion: if an ideology is considered to be a stable entity (body, corpus, or canon), the critical discourse it generates will be that of a transcendental motion, of a motion whose cause resides, so to speak, within itself, within the substance of its own being. And if the critical system is considered stable in its principles, the corresponding ideology will acquire a mobility caused by a principle that lies outside itself; this principle, within the confines of the system thus constituted, can only be the principle of constitution, the architectonics of the transcendental system that functions as the cause of the ideological motions. In both cases, it is the transcendental system, as substance or as structure, that determines the ideology and not the reverse. The question then becomes how the substance or the structure of a transcendental discourse can be determined. To try to answer this question from the inside of the Kantian text is the tentative purpose of this still-introductory and expository paper.

The second point to be gained from the same passage has to do with the aesthetic. Immediately after distinguishing between transcendental and metaphysical principles, Kant goes on to distinguish between “the pure concept of objects of possible subjective cognition [der reine Begriff von Gegenständen des möglichen Erfahrungserkenntnisses überhaupt]” and “the principle of practical purposiveness which must be thought as the idea of the determination of a free will”; the distinction is a correlate of the prior more general distinction between transcendental and metaphysical principles. The distinction directly alludes to the division between pure and practical reason and corresponds to the major division in the
corpus of Kant’s works. One sees again how the third Critique corresponds to the necessity of establishing the causal link between critical philosophy and ideology, between a purely conceptual and an empirically determined discourse. Hence the need for a phenomenalized, empirically manifest principle of cognition on whose existence the possibility of such an articulation depends. This phenomenalized principle is what Kant calls the aesthetic. The investment in the aesthetic is therefore considerable, since the possibility of philosophy itself, as the articulation of a transcendental with a metaphysical discourse, depends on it. And the place in the third Critique where this articulation occurs is the section on the sublime; in the section on the beautiful, the articulation is said to be between understanding (Verstand) and judgment. In both cases, one meets with great difficulties but the motives for this are perhaps easier to perceive in the case of the sublime, possibly because reason is explicitly involved.

The complexity and possible incongruity of the notion of the sublime, a topic that no eighteenth-century treatise of aesthetics is ever allowed to ignore, makes the section of the third Critique that deals with it one of the most difficult and unresolved passages in the entire corpus of Kant’s works. Whereas, in the section on the beautiful, the difficulties at least convey the illusion of being controlled, the same can hardly be said of the sublime. It is possible to formulate with some clarity what the project, the burden, of the section might be, and equally possible to understand what is at stake in its accomplishment. But it remains very difficult to decide whether or not the enterprise fails or succeeds. The complication is noticeable from the very start, in the introduction that distinguishes between the beautiful and the sublime. From the point of view of the main theme of the third Critique, the problem of teleological judgment or of purposiveness without purpose, the consideration of the sublime seems almost superfluous. “The concept of the sublime,” says Kant, “is not nearly so important or rich in consequences as the concept of the beautiful and, in general, it displays nothing purposive in nature itself. . . .” “The idea of the sublime thus separates from that of a purposiveness of nature and this makes the theory of the sublime a mere appendix [einen bloßen Anhang] to the aesthetic judging of that purposiveness . . .” (p. 167; 84). After that modest beginning, however, it turns out that this outer appendage is in fact of crucial importance, because, instead of informing us, like the beautiful, about the teleology of nature, it informs us about the teleology of our own faculties, more specifically about the relationship between imagination and reason. It follows, in accordance with what was said before, that whereas the beautiful is a metaphysical and ideological principle, the sublime aspires to being a transcendental one, with all that this entails.

Contrary to the beautiful, which at least appears to be all of a piece, the sublime is shot through with dialectical complication. It is, in some respects, infinitely attractive but, at the same time, thoroughly repellant; it gives a peculiar kind of
pleasure (*Lust*), yet it is also consistently painful; in less subjective, more structural terms, it is equally baffling: it knows of no limits or borders, yet it has to appear as a determined totality; in a philosophical sense, it is something of a monster, or, rather, a ghost: it is not a property of nature (there are no such things as sublime objects in nature) but a purely inward experience of consciousness (*Gemütsbestimmung*), yet Kant insists, time and again, that this noumenal entity has to be phenomenally represented (*dargestellt*); this is indeed an integral part, the crux, in fact, of the analytics of the sublime.

The question becomes whether the dialectical incompatibilities will find, in the concept of the sublime, a possibility of resolution. A first symptom that this may not simply and unambiguously be the case appears in an additional complication that makes the schema of the sublime distinct from that of the beautiful. One can grant that it is methodologically as legitimate to evaluate the impact on us of the sublime, as pleasure or as pain, in terms of quantity instead of, as is the case with the beautiful, in terms of quality. But, if this is indeed the case, why then can the analytics of the sublime not be closed off with the section on the mathematical sublime, centered on quantity and on number? Why the need for another section, nonexistent in the area of the beautiful, which Kant calls the *dynamic* sublime, and of which it will be difficult to say whether it still belongs to the order of quantity or of quality? Kant gives *some* explanation of why this is needed, but this explanation raises more questions than it answers (section 24). The sublime produces an emotional, agitated response in the beholder; this response can be referred back to the needs of knowledge (in the mathematical sublime) as well as to the needs of desire (*Begehrensvermögen*) (in the dynamic sublime). In the realm of aesthetic judgment, both have to be considered regardless of purpose or interest, a requirement that can conceivably be met in the realm of knowledge but that is much less easy to fulfill in the realm of desire, all the more since it is clearly understood that this desire has to be considered in itself, as subjective manifestation, and not as an objectified knowledge of desire. And indeed, when we reach the section on the dynamic sublime, we find something quite different from desire. The need for the additional subdivision, as well as the transition from the one to the other (from mathematical quantity to the dynamic), is by no means easy to account for and will demand an avowedly speculative effort of interpretation, of which it is not certain that it will succeed.

The antinomies at play in the mathematical sublime are clearly defined and so are the reasons of their relevance for aesthetic judgment. The mathematical sublime starts out from the concept of number. Its burden is that of calculus, as one would expect in a philosopher whose master’s thesis dealt with Leibniz: it is the burden of realizing that finite and infinite entities are not susceptible of comparison and cannot both be inscribed within a common system of knowledge. As calculus the proposition is self-evident and, in the infinitesimal realm of number, “the power of number,” says Kant, “reaches infinity” (p. 173; 89), it creates no
difficulties: the infinitely large (or, for that matter, the infinitely small) can be conceptualized by means of number. But such a conceptualization is entirely devoid of phenomenal equivalences; in terms of the faculties, it is, strictly speaking, unimaginable. This is not, however, how the sublime has been defined. The sublime is not mere quantity or number, still less the notion of quantity as such (*Quantum*). Quantity thus conceived, and expressed by number, is always a relative concept that refers back to a conventional unity of measurement; pure number is neither large nor small, and the infinitely large is also the infinitely small: the telescope and the microscope, as instruments of measurement, are the same instrument. The sublime, however, is not “the large” but “the largest”; it is that “compared to which everything else is small.” As such, it can never be accessible to the senses. But it is not pure number either, for there is no such thing as a “greatest” in the realm of number. It belongs to a different order of experience, closer to extension than to number. It is, in Kant’s words, “absolute magnitude” (*die Größe*—or better, as in the beginning of the section, *das Größte schlechthin*), as far as consciousness can grasp it in an intuition (*so weit das Gemüt sie in einer Anschauung fassen kann*) (p. 173; 90). This phenomenalization cannot stem from number, only from extension. The sentence is another version of the original statement that the sublime is to be borderless (*unbegrenzt*) yet a totality: number is without limit, but extension implies the possibility of a determined totalization, of a contour. The mathematical sublime has to articulate number with extension and it faces a classical problem of natural philosophy. The fact that it is a recurrent philosophical theme does not make it any easier to solve, nor does it allow one to overlook the intricacies of the arguments by which the solution is attempted just because the burden of argument turns out to be familiar.

Kant tries to articulate number with extension by way of two demonstrations, the first epistemological, the second in terms of pleasure and pain. Neither of these arguments is truly conclusive. On the level of understanding, the infinity of number can be conceived as a purely logical progression, which is not in need of any spatial concretization. But, on the level of reason, this “comprehensio logica” is no longer sufficient. Another mode of understanding called “comprehensio aesthetica” is needed, which requires constant totalization or condensation in a single intuition; even the infinite “must be thought as entirely given, according to its totality” (p. 177; 93). But since the infinite is not comparable to any finite magnitude, the articulation cannot occur. It does not, in fact, ever occur and it is the failure of the articulation that becomes the distinguishing characteristic of the sublime: it transposes or elevates the natural to the level of the supernatural, perception to imagination, understanding to reason. This transposition, however, never allows for the condition of totality that is constitutive of the sublime, and it can therefore not supersede the failure by becoming, as in a dialectic, the knowledge of this failure. The sublime cannot be defined as the failure of the sublime, for this failure deprives it of its identifying principle. Neither could one say that, at
this point, the sublime fulfills itself as desire for what it fails to be, since what it desires—totality—is not other than itself.

The same pattern returns with regard to pleasure and pain. It is clear that what the sublime achieves is not the task required by its own position (articulation of number and extension by ways of the infinite). What it achieves is the awareness of another faculty besides understanding and reason, namely, the imagination. Out of the pain of the failure to constitute the sublime by making the infinite apparent (anschaulich) is born the pleasure of the imagination, which discovers, in this very failure, the congruity of its law (which is a law of failure) with the law of our own suprasensory being. Its failure to connect with the sensory would also elevate it above it. This law does not reside in nature but defines man in opposition to nature; it is only by an act of what Kant calls “subreption” (p. 180; 96) that this law is fallaciously attributed to nature. But is not this subreption a mirror image of another, previous subreption by which the sublime subreptitiously posits itself by claiming to exist by dint of the impossibility of its own existence? The transcendental judgment that is to decide on the possibility of existence of the sublime (as the spatial articulation of the infinite) functions metaphorically, or ideologically, when it subreptitiously defines itself in terms of its other, namely, of extension and totality. If space lies outside the sublime and remains there, and if space is nevertheless a necessary condition (or cause) for the sublime to come into being, then the principle of the sublime is a metaphysical principle that mistakes itself for a transcendental one. If imagination, the faculty of the sublime, comes into being at the expense of the totalizing power of the mind, how can it then, as the text requires, be in contrastive harmony (p. 182; 97) with the faculty of reason, which delimits the contour of this totality? What the imagination undoes is the very labor of reason, and such a relationship cannot without difficulty be said to unite both of them, imagination and reason, in a common task or law of being. Kant’s definition of aesthetic judgment as what represents the subjective play of the faculties (imagination and reason) as “harmonious through their very contrast” remains, at this point, quite obscure. Which accounts, perhaps, in part for the fact that a further elaboration is needed in which the relationship between the same two powers of the mind will be somewhat less enigmatically represented; this can occur, however, only after moving from the mathematical to the dynamic sublime.

The difficulty can be summarized in a shift in terminology that occurs later in the text but that directly alludes to the difficulties we already encounter in the mathematical sublime. In section 29, in the general remark upon the exposition of the aesthetic judgment, appears the most concise but also the most suggestive definition of the sublime as “an object (of nature) the representation [Vorstellung] of which determines consciousness [Gemüt] to think the unattainability of nature as a sensory representation [Darstellung] of ideas” (p. 193; 108; emphasis mine). The key word, for our present purpose, in this quotation in which every word is
rich in innumerable questions, is the word *denken* in the phrase “die Unerreichbarkeit der Natur als Darstellung zu *denken*.” A few lines later, Kant speaks of the necessity “to *think* nature itself in its totality, as the sensory representation of something that lies beyond the senses, without being able to accomplish this representation *objectively* [die Natur selbst in ihrer Totalität, als Darstellung von etwas Übersinnlichem, zu *denken, ohne diese Darstellung objektiv zu Stande bringen zu können*]” (p. 194; 108; emphasis Kant’s). Still a few lines later, the word *denken* is singled out and contrasted with knowing: “die Natur als Darstellung derselben [i.e., die Idee des Übersinnlichen] nicht *erkennen*, sondern nur *denken* können...” How are we to understand the verb “to think” in these formulations, in distinction from knowing? The way of knowledge, of *Erkenntnis*, has not been able to establish the existence of the sublime as an intelligible concept. This may be possible only by ways of *denken* rather than *erkennen*. What would be an instance of such thinking that differs from knowing? Was heißt *denken*?

Still in the mathematical sublime, in section 26, next to the epistemology and the eudaemony of the sublime, appears another description of how an infinite quantity can become a sensory intuition in the imagination, or how, in other words, the infinity of number can be articulated with the totality of extension (p. 173; 89). This description, which is formal rather than philosophical, is a great deal easier to follow than the subsequent arguments. In order to make the sublime appear in space we need, says Kant, two acts of the imagination: apprehension (*apprehensio*) and comprehension or summation (*comprehensio aesthetica*), Auffassung and Zusammenfassung (p. 173; 90). Apprehension proceeds successively, as a syntagmatic, consecutive motion along an axis, and it can proceed ad infinitum without difficulty. Comprehension, however, which is a paradigmatic totalization of the apprehended trajectory, grows increasingly difficult as the space covered by apprehension grows larger. The model reminds one of a simple phenomenology of reading, in which one has to make constant syntheses to comprehend the successive unfolding of the text: the eye moves horizontally in succession whereas the mind has to combine vertically the cumulative understanding of what has been apprehended. The comprehension will soon reach a point at which it is saturated and will no longer be able to take in additional apprehensions: it cannot progress beyond a certain magnitude which marks the limit of the imagination. This ability of the imagination to achieve syntheses is a boon to the understanding, which is hardly conceivable without it, but this gain is countered by a corresponding loss. The comprehension discovers its own limitation, beyond which it cannot reach. “[The imagination] loses as much on the one side as it gains on the other” (p. 174; 90). As the paradigmatic simultaneity substitutes for the syntagmatic succession, an economy of loss and gain is put in place which functions with predictable efficacy, though only within certain well-defined limits. The exchange from part to whole generates wholes that turn out to be only parts. Kant gives the example of the Egyptologist Savary, who observed that, in order to
perceive the magnitude of the pyramids, one could be neither too far away nor too close. One is reminded of Pascal: “Bornés en tout genre, cet état qui tient le milieu entre deux extrêmes, se trouve en toutes nos puissances. Nos sens n’aperçoivent rien d’extrême, trop de bruit nous assourdît, trop de lumière éblouit, trop de distance et trop de proximité empêche la vue. Trop de longueur et trop de brièveté de discours l’obscurcit, trop de vérité nous étonne...” 3 It is not surprising that, from considerations on vision and, in general, on perception, Pascal moves to the order of discourse, for the model that is being suggested is no longer, properly speaking, philosophical, but linguistic. It describes not a faculty of the mind, be it as consciousness or as cognition, but a potentiality inherent in language. For such a system of substitution, set up along a paradigmatic and a syntagmatic axis, generating partial totalizations within an economy of profit and loss, is a very familiar model indeed—which also explains why the passage seems so easy to grasp in comparison with what precedes and follows. It is the model of discourse as a tropological system. The desired articulation of the sublime takes place, with suitable reservations and restrictions, within such a purely formal system. It follows, however, that it is conceivable only within the limits of such a system, that is, as pure discourse rather than as a faculty of the mind. When the sublime is translated back, so to speak, from language into cognition, from formal description into philosophical argument, it loses all inherent coherence and dissolves in the aporias of intellectual and sensory appearance. It is also established that, even within the confines of language, the sublime can occur only as a single and particular point of view, a privileged place that avoids both excessive comprehension and excessive apprehension, and that this place is only formally, and not transcendently, determined. The sublime cannot be grounded as a philosophical (transcendental or metaphysical) principle, but only as a linguistic principle. Consequently, the section on the mathematical sublime cannot be closed off in a satisfactory manner and another chapter on the dynamics of the sublime is needed.

According to the principles of the quadrivium, the further extension of the system number-extension should have been motion, and we could have expected a kinetic rather than a dynamic sublime. But the kinetics of the sublime are treated at once, and somewhat surprisingly, as a question of power: the first word of section 28 (p. 184; 99) (on the dynamics of the sublime) is Macht, soon followed by violence (Gewalt) and by the assertion that violence is the only means by which to overcome the resistance of one force to another. A classical way to have moved from number to motion would have been by way of a kinetics of physical bodies, a study, as, for example, in Kepler, of the motion of heavenly bodies in function of gravity as acceleration. Gravity can also be considered a force or a power, next to being a motion—as in Wordsworth’s line: “no motion has she now, no force”—

and the passage from a kinesis to a dynamics of the sublime could be treated in terms of mathematical and physical concepts. Kant does not pursue this line of thought and at once introduces the notion of might in a quasi-empirical sense of assault, battle, and fright. The relationship between the natural and the aesthetic sublime is treated as a scene of combat in which the faculties of the mind somehow have to overpower the forces of nature.

The necessity of extending the model of the mathematical sublime, the system of number-extension, to the model of the dynamic sublime as the system number-motion, as well as the interpretation of motion as empirical power, is not accounted for in philosophical terms in the analytics of the sublime, nor can it, especially in its latter aspect (the empiricization of force into violence and battle), be explained by purely historical reasons. The only way to account for it is as an extension of the linguistic model beyond its definition as a system of tropes. Tropes account for the occurrence of the sublime but, as we saw, in such a restrictive and partial way that the system could not be expected to remain quiescent within its narrow boundaries. From the pseudocognition of tropes, language has to expand to the activity of performance, something of which language has been known to be capable well before Austin reminded us of it. The transition from the mathematical to the dynamic sublime, a transition for which the justification is conspicuously lacking in the text (section 28 begins most abruptly with the word “Power” [Macht]), marks the saturation of the tropological field as language frees itself of its constraints and discovers within itself a power no longer dependent on the restrictions of cognition. Hence the introduction, at this point in the text, of the concept of morality, but on the level of practical rather than pure reason. The articulation between pure and practical reason, the raison d’être of the third Critique, occurs in the widening definition of language as a performative as well as a tropological system. The Critique of Judgment therefore has, at its center, a deep, perhaps fatal, break or discontinuity. It depends on a linguistic structure (language as a performative as well as a cognitive system) that is not itself accessible to the powers of transcendental philosophy. Nor is it accessible, one should hasten to add, to the powers of metaphysics or of ideology, which are themselves precritical stages of knowledge. Our question, then, becomes whether and where this disruption, this disarticulation, becomes apparent in the text, at a moment when the aporia of the sublime is no longer stated, as was the case in the mathematical sublime and in the ensuing general definitions of the concept, as an explicit paradox, but as the apparently tranquil, because entirely unreflected, juxtaposition of incompatibles. Such a moment occurs in the general remark or recapitulation (section 29) that concludes the analytics of the sublime.

The chapter on the dynamics of the sublime appears as another version of the difficulties encountered in the mathematical sublime rather than as their further development, let alone their solution. Except for the introduction of the moral
dimension, hard to account for in epistemological or aesthetic terms, this chapter differs most from the preceding inquiry by concentrating on affect rather than on reason (as in the mathematical sublime) or on understanding (as in the analytics of the beautiful). The preeminence of the faculty of the imagination is maintained, as is the question of its relationship to reason, but this dialectic of reason and imagination is now mediated by affects, moods and feelings, rather than by rational principles. The change results in a restatement and refinement rather than in a transformation of the principle of the sublime. The admirably concise and previously quoted definition given at the beginning of the “General Remarks” benefits from the references to mood and to affectivity but does not differ in substance from similar developments that occurred in the preceding paragraphs. Nor is it, for all its controlled concentration, in essence less obscure than the previous formulations.

The chapter also contains, somewhat abruptly, a reminder that, in a transcendental aesthetic of judgment, objects in nature susceptible of producing sublime effects have to be considered in a radically nonteleological manner, completely detached from any purpose or interest that the mind may find in them. Kant adds that he had previously reminded the reader of this necessity, but it is not clear to what passage he alludes. He is rather restating a general principle that underlies the entire enterprise and that was first formulated, with all desirable clarity, at the onset of the analytics of the beautiful under the modality of quality (p. 116; 38). This time, however, Kant relates the principle of disinterestedness specifically to objects in nature and takes for his example two landscapes: “If, then, we call the sight of the starry heaven sublime, we must not place at the foundation of judgment concepts of worlds inhabited by rational beings and regard the bright points, with which we see the space above us filled, as their suns moving in circles purposely fixed with reference to them; but we must regard it, just as we see it [wie man ihn sieht], as a distant, all-embracing vault [ein weites Gewölbe]. Only under such a representation can we range that sublimity that a pure aesthetic judgment ascribes to this object. And in the same way, if we are to call the sight of the ocean sublime, we must not think of it as we ordinarily do, as implying all kinds of knowledge (that are not contained in immediate intuition). For example, we sometimes think of the ocean as a vast kingdom of aquatic creatures, or as the great source of those vapors that fill the air with clouds for the benefit of the land, or again as an element that, though dividing continents from each other, yet promotes the greatest communication between them; all these produce merely teleological judgments. To find the ocean nevertheless sublime we must regard it as poets do [wie die Dichter es tun], merely by what the eye reveals [was der Augenschein zeigt]—if it is at rest, as a clear mirror of water only bounded by the heavens; if it is stormy, as an abyss threatening to overwhelm everything” (p. 196; 110-11).

The passage is remarkable in many respects, including its apparent anticipation
of many such passages soon to be found in the works of romantic poets and already present, in many cases, in their eighteenth-century predecessors. But it is just as necessary to distinguish it from these symbolic landscapes as to point out the similarities. The predominant perception, in the Kant passage, is that of the heavens and the ocean as an architectonic construct. The heavens are a vault that covers the totality of earthy space as a roof covers a house. Space, in Kant as in Aristotle, is a house in which we dwell more or less safely, or more or less poetically, on this earth. This is also how the sea is perceived or how, according to Kant, poets perceive it: its horizontal expanse is like a floor bounded by the horizon, by the walls of heaven as they close off and delimit the building.

Who, one may wonder, are the poets who thus perceive the world in an architectonic rather than in a teleological way and how can the architectonic then be said to be opposed to the teleological? How are we to understand the term Augenschein in relation to the other allusions to sensory appearance that abound in the attempts to define or to describe the sublime? It is easier to say what the passage excludes and how it differs from others than to say what it is, but this may well be in accordance with Kant’s insistence (pp. 195-96; 109) on the primarily negative mode of the imagination. Certainly, in our tradition, the first poet we think of as having similar intuitions is Wordsworth, who, in the nest-robbed episode in The Prelude, evoked the experience of dizziness and absolute fright in the amazing lines: “The sky was not a sky / Of earth, and with what motion moved the clouds!” Here, too, the sky is originally conceived as a roof or vault that shelters us, by anchoring us in the world, standing on a horizontal plane, under the sky, reassuringly stabilized by the weight of our own gravity. But, if the sky suddenly separates from the earth and is no longer, in Wordsworth’s terms, a sky of earth, we lose all feeling of stability and start to fall, so to speak, skyward, away from gravity.

Kant’s passage is not like this because the sky does not appear in it as associated in any way with shelter. It is not the construct under which, in Heidegger’s terms, we can dwell (wohnen). In a lesser-known passage from the Logic Kant speaks of “a wild man who, from a distance, sees a house of which he does not know the use. He certainly observes the same object as does another, who knows it to be definitely built and arranged to serve as a dwelling for human beings. Yet in formal terms this knowledge of the selfsame object differs in both cases. For the first it is mere intuition [bloße Anschauung], for the other both intuition and concept.”4 The poet who sees the heavens as a vault is clearly like the savage, and unlike Wordsworth. He does not see prior to dwelling, but merely sees. He does not see in order to shelter himself, for there is no suggestion made that he could in any way be threatened, not even by the storm—since it is pointed out that he

remains safely on the shore. The link between seeing and dwelling, *sehen* and *wohnen*, is teleological and therefore absent in pure aesthetic vision.

Or, still in association with Wordsworth, one thinks of the famous passage from “Tintern Abbey”:

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And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man: . . .
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The sublimity of the round ocean, horizon-bound as a vast dome, is especially reminiscent of the Kant passage. But the two invocations of sublime nature soon diverge. Wordsworth’s sublime is an instance of the constant exchange between mind and nature, of the chiasmic transfer of properties between the sensory and the intellectual world that characterizes his figural diction, here explicitly thematized in the “motion and spirit that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thoughts / And rolls through all things.” No mind is involved in the Kantian vision of ocean and heaven. To the extent that any mind, that any judgment, intervenes, it is in error—for it is not the case that heaven is a vault or that the horizon bounds the ocean like the walls of a building. That is how things are to the eye, in the redundancy of their appearance to the eye and not to the mind, as in the redundant word *Augenschein*, to be understood in opposition to Hegel’s *Ideen­schein*, or sensory appearance of the idea; *Augenschein*, in which the eye, tautologically, is named twice, as eye itself and as what appears to the eye.

Kant’s architectonic world is not a metamorphosis of a fluid world into the solidity of stone, nor is his building a trope or a symbol that substitutes for the actual entities. Heaven and ocean as building are a priori, previous to any understanding, to any exchange or anthropomorphism which will allow Wordsworth to address, in book 5 of *The Prelude*, the “speaking face” of nature. There is no room for address in Kant’s flat, third-person world. Kant’s vision can therefore hardly be called literal, which would imply its possible figuralization or symbolization by an act of judgment. The only word that comes to mind is that of a *material* vision, but how this materiality is then to be understood in linguistic terms is not, as yet, clearly intelligible.

Not being part of trope or figuration, the purely aesthetic vision of the natural world is in no way solar. It is not the sudden discovery of a true world as an unveiling, as the a-letheia of Heidegger’s *Lichtung*. It is not a solar world and we are explicitly told that we are not to think of the stars as “suns moving in circles.” Nor are we to think of them as the constellation that survives at the apocalyptic end of Mallarmé’s *Coup de Dés*. The “mirror” of the sea surface is a mirror without
depth, least of all the mirror in which the constellation would be reflected. In this
mode of seeing, the eye is its own agent and not the specular echo of the sun. The
sea is called a mirror, not because it is supposed to reflect anything, but to stress a
flatness devoid of any suggestion of depth. In the same way and to the same extent
that this vision is purely material, devoid of any reflexive or intellectual complica-
tion, it is also purely formal, devoid of any semantic depth and reducible to
the formal mathematization or geometrization of pure optics. The critique of the
aesthetic ends up, in Kant, in a formal materialism that runs counter to all values
and characteristics associated with aesthetic experience, including the aesthetic
experience of the beautiful and of the sublime as described by Kant and Hegel
themselves. The tradition of their interpretation, as it appears from near contem-
poraries such as Schiller on, has seen only this one, figural, and, if you will,
“romantic” aspect of their theories of the imagination, and has entirely overlooked
what we call the material aspect. Neither has it understood the place and the func-
tion of formalization in this intricate process.

The vision of heaven and world entirely devoid of teleological interference,
held up here as a purely sublime and aesthetic vision, stands in direct contradic-
tion to all preceding definitions and analyses of the sublime given in section 24 on
until this point in section 29. Still, in the condensed definition that appears in the
same chapter the stress falls on the sublime as a concrete representation of ideas
(Darstellung von Ideen). As in the Wordsworth passage from “Tintern Abbey,”
the articulation of physical motion with the movements of the affects and of prac-
tical moral judgment has to encompass natural and intellectual elements under
one single unifying principle, such as the sublime. And there has been so much
emphasis, from the start, on the fact that the sublime does not reside in the natural
object but in the mind of man (Gemütsbestimmungen) that the burden of the
argument, much rather than emphasizing the purely inward, noumenal nature of
the sublime, becomes the need to account for the fact that it nevertheless occurs as
an outward, phenomenal manifestation. Can this in any way be reconciled with
the radical materiality of sublime vision suddenly introduced, as if it were an
afterthought, at this point in the argument? How is one to reconcile the concrete
representation of ideas with pure ocular vision, Darstellung von Ideen with
Augenschein?

The analytics of the sublime (like those of the beautiful) are consistently stated
in terms of a theory of the faculties combined, in the dynamics of the sublime,
with a theory of moral affect. “A feeling for the sublime in nature cannot well be
thought without combining therewith a mood of consciousness which is akin to
the moral” (p. 194; 109; emphasis mine). In the case of the beautiful, this moral
component was also present, though in a much more subdued form. It manifested
itself as the autonomy of aesthetic pleasure with regard to sensuous pleasure, a
form of freedom and thus, in Kant’s system, where morality is always linked to
liberty, at least potentially a form of moral judgment. But in the case of the sub-
lime, the tie with morality is much more explicit, for morality is involved, not as play, but as law-directed labor (gesetzliches Geschäft). The only restriction that keeps the sublime from passing entirely into the camp of morality is that the faculty involved in it is not reason, or at least not an unmediated manifestation of reason, but that the sublime is represented by the imagination itself, as a tool of reason. In the laborious, businesslike world of morality, even the free and playful imagination becomes an instrument of work. Its task, its labor, is precisely to translate the abstractions of reason back into the phenomenal world of appearances and images whose presence is retained in the very word imagination, Bild in the German Einbildungskraft.

Why this incarnation of the idea has to occur is accounted for in various ways. It is, first of all, a quasi-theological necessity that follows necessarily from our fallen condition. The need for aesthetic judgment and activity, although it defines man, is the expression of a shortcoming, of a curse rather than of an excess of power and inventiveness. There would be no need for it “if we were creatures of pure intellect or even capable of displacing ourselves mentally in such a condition” (p. 197; 111). The same inherent inferiority of the aesthetic (or, more precisely, of the aesthetic as symptomatic of an inherent shortcoming in us) becomes visible with regard to moral judgment. Morality and the aesthetic are both disinterested, but this disinterestedness becomes necessarily polluted in aesthetic representation: the persuasion that, by means of their very disinterestedness, moral and aesthetic judgments are capable of achieving is necessarily linked, in the case of the aesthetic, with positively valorized sensory experiences. The moral lesson of the aesthetic has to be conveyed by seductive means which, as we know, can reach far enough to make it necessary to read “Kant avec Sade” rather than the reverse. Instead of purely intellectual beauty, we can only produce the beauty of the imagination. How this occurs is the object of a crucial and difficult paragraph (p. 195; 109) in which the articulation of the imagination with reason, the assumedly “harmonious” relationship between reason and imagination wishfully promised at an earlier stage, is described in detail.

The passage introduces what a few pages later will be defined as a modulation between two moods or affects, the passage from shocked surprise (Verwunderung) to tranquil admiration (Bewunderung). The initial effect of the sublime, of a sudden encounter with colossal natural entities such as cataracts, abysses, and towering mountains, is one of shock or, says Kant, astonishment that borders on terror (Verwunderung, die an Schreck grenzt). By a play, a trick of the imagination, this terror is transformed into a feeling of tranquil superiority, the admiration one expresses for something or for someone one can afford to admire peacefully, because one’s own superiority is not really in question. The better one thinks of him, the better one has to think of oneself. How enviable a peace of mind thus achieved in the recognition of another’s worth as confirmation of one’s own! Moral nobil-
ity is the best ego booster available—though Kant is not so blind as not to know of its cost in hidden terror.

He had not always held that the serenity of admiration, the tranquillity of spent emotion, is the highest of qualities. In the early, precritical essay on the sublime and the beautiful from 1764,5 he had stated in peremptory fashion that the humor of the phlegmatic had to be rejected out of hand as having not the slightest possible relationship with beauty or sublimity, in any form or shape. It was said to be utterly devoid of any interest whatsoever. Its equivalent in terms of national stereotypes is that of the Dutch, described as a phlegmatized kind of German interested only in the dreariest of commercial and moneymaking activities. I have never felt more grateful for the fifty or so kilometers that separate the Flemish city of Antwerp from the Dutch city of Rotterdam. Considerations on feminine languor and passivity, unfavorably contrasted with male energy, make for equally difficult reading in the early Kant essay. By the time of the Critique of Judgment, however, things have changed a great deal. “For (which seems strange) the absence of affection (apatheia, phlegma in significatu bono) in a mind that follows consistently its unalterable ground rules, is sublime, and in a far more outstanding way, because it is backed by the satisfaction of pure reason” (p. 199; 113). The tranquillity thus achieved receives the predicate of nobility, or a morally elevated state of mind that will then subreptitiously be transferred to objects and things such as “a building, a garment, literary style, bodily presence, etc.” How is it, then, that the imagination can achieve the nobility of such loss of pathos, of such a serenity?

It does so by an essentially negative way, which corresponds philosophically to the elevation of the imagination from a metaphysical (and, hence, ideological) to a transcendental (and, hence, critical) principle. As long as the faculty of the imagination is considered empirically—and one is reminded that, in the late Kant, the presence of this empirical moment characterizes the metaphysical dimensions of the mind—it is free and playful, closer to what then in English is called “fancy” rather than what is called “imagination.” By sacrificing, by giving up this freedom, in a first negative moment of shocked, but pleasurable surprise, the imagination allies itself with reason. Why this is so is not at once clear; in affective terms, it takes on the form of a reconquered mastery, a reconquered superiority over a nature of which the direct threat is overcome. The free, empirical reaction of the imagination, when confronted with the power and might of nature, is to indulge, to enjoy the terror of this very magnitude. Taming this delectable, because imaginary, terror—the assumption always being that the person is not directly threatened, or at the very least separated from the immediate threat by a reflexive moment—and preferring to it the tranquil satisfaction of superiority, is to submit

the imagination to the power of reason. For the faculty that establishes the superiority of the mind over nature is reason and reason alone; the imagination’s security depends on the actual, empirical physical attraction and, when this situation is threatening, it swings toward terror and toward a feeling of free submission to nature. Since, however, in the experience of the sublime, the imagination achieves tranquillity, it submits to reason, achieves the highest degree of freedom by freely sacrificing its natural freedom to the higher freedom of reason. “Thereby,” says Kant, “it achieves a gain in power that is larger than what it sacrifices” (p. 195; 109). The loss of empirical freedom means the gain in critical freedom that characterizes rational and transcendental principles. Imagination substitutes for reason at the cost of its empirical nature and, by this anti- or unnatural act, it conquers nature.

This complicated and somewhat devious scenario accomplishes the aim of the sublime. The imagination overcomes suffering, becomes apathetic, and sheds the pain of natural shock. It reconciles pleasure with pain and in so doing it articulates, as mediator, the movement of the affects with the legal, codified, formalized, and stable order of reason. Imagination is not nature (for, in its tranquillity, it determines itself as larger and mightier than nature), but, unlike reason, it remains in contact with nature. It is not idealized to the point of becoming pure reason, for it has no knowledge of its actual predicament or of its actual strategies and remains pure affect rather than cognition. It becomes adequate (angemessen) to reason on the basis of its inadequacy (Unangemessenheit) to this same reason in its relation to nature. “In elevating this reflection of the aesthetic judgment to the point where it becomes adequate to reason [zur Angemessenheit mit der Vernunft], without, however, reaching a definite concept of reason, the object is nevertheless represented, despite the objective inadequacy of the imagination, even in its greatest extension, to reason [Unangemessenheit der Einbildungskraft . . . für die Vernunft] as subjectively purposive” (pp. 195–96; 109–10)—and thus, we may add, as pertaining both to reason and to practical judgment.

However complex this final formulation may sound, it is clarified and made persuasive by the road that leads up to it and that is by no means unfamiliar. Even as uninspired a paraphrase as the one I have given should reveal that we are hardly dealing with a tight analytical argument (as was the case, for example, in the distinction between transcendental and metaphysical principles from which we started out). What we have here is less authoritative but a great deal more accessible. For one thing, instead of being an argument, it is a story, a dramatized scene of the mind in action. The faculties of reason and of imagination are personified, or anthropomorphized, like the five squabbling faculties hilariously staged by Diderot in the Lettre sur les sourds et les muets,6 and the relationship between

them is stated in delusively interpersonal terms. What could it possibly mean, in analytical terms, that the imagination sacrifices itself, like Antigone or Iphigenia—for one can only imagine this shrewd and admirable imagination as the feminine heroine of a tragedy—for the sake of reason? And what is the status of all this heroism and cunning which allows it to reach apathia, to overcome pathos, by ways of the very pathos of sacrifice? How can faculties, themselves a heuristic hypothesis devoid of any reality—for only people who have read too much eighteenth-century psychology and philosophy might end up believing that they have an imagination or a reason, the same way they have blue eyes or a big nose—how can faculties be said to act, or even to act freely, as if they were conscious and complete human beings? We are clearly not dealing with mental categories but with tropes, and the story Kant tells us is an allegorical tale. Nor are the contents of this tale at all unusual. It is the story of an exchange, of a negotiation in which powers are lost and gained in an economy of sacrifice and recuperation. It is also a story of opposite forces, nature and reason, the imagination and nature, tranquillity and shock, adequacy (Angemessenheit) and inadequacy, that separate, fight, and then unite in a more or less stable state of harmony, achieving syntheses and totalizations that were missing at the beginning of the action. Such personified scenes of consciousness are easily identified: they are not actually descriptions of mental functions but descriptions of tropological transformations. They are not governed by the laws of the mind but by the laws of figural language. For the second time in this text (the first time being in the interplay between apprehension and comprehension in the mathematical sublime) we have come upon a passage that, under the guise of being a philosophical argument, is in fact determined by linguistic structures that are not within the author’s control. What makes this intrusion of linguistic tropes particularly remarkable is that it occurs in close proximity, almost in juxtaposition to the passage on the material architectonics of vision, in the poetic evocation of heaven and ocean, with which it is entirely incompatible.

For we are now confronted with two completely different notions of the architectonic—a concept that appears under that name in Kant’s own text. The architectonic vision of nature as a building is, in Kant, as we saw, entirely material, emphatically not tropological, entirely distinct from the substitutions and exchanges between faculties or between mind and nature that make up the Wordsworthian or the romantic sublime. But the architectonic is also at times defined by Kant, though not in the third Critique, in entirely different terms, much closer to the allegory of the faculties and the tale of recovered tranquillity we have just been reading, much closer as well to the edle Einfalt and stille Größe of Winckelmann’s neoclassicism. Near the end of the Critique of Pure Reason, a chapter entitled “The Architectonics of Pure Reason” defines the architectonic as the organic unity of systems, “the unity of miscellaneous cognitions brought together under one idea” and greatly favored, by Kant, over what he calls the
“rhapsody” of mere speculation devoid of *esprit de système*. That this unity is conceived in organic terms is apparent from the recurring metaphor of the body, as a totality of various limbs and parts (*Glieder*, meaning members in all the senses of the word, as well as, in the compound *Gliedermann*, the puppet of Kleist’s Marionettentheater). “The whole,” says Kant, “is articulated [*articulatio—gegliedert*] and not just piled on top of [*gehäuft*] each other; it can grow from the inside out but not from the outside in. It grows like an animal body, not by the addition of new limbs [*Glieder*] but, without changing the proportions, by making each individual member stronger and more efficient for its own purpose.”7 One will want to know what becomes of this Aristotelian, zoomorphic architectonic when it is being considered, in the third *Critique*’s passage on heaven and ocean, in a nonteleological, aesthetic perspective. For one thing, it does not imply a collapse of the architectonic in the rhapsodic, a disintegration of the building; sea and heaven, as the poets see them, are more than ever buildings. But it is no longer at all certain that they are still articulated (*gegliedert*). After lingering briefly over the aesthetic vision of the heavens and the seas, Kant turns for a moment to the human body: “The like is to be said of the sublime and the beautiful in the human body. We must not regard as the determining grounds of our judgment the concepts of the purposes which all our limbs serve [*wozu alle seine Gliedmaßen da sind*] and we must not allow this unity of purpose to influence our aesthetic judgment (for then it would no longer be pure) . . .” (p. 197; 111). We must, in short, consider our limbs, hands, toes, breasts, or what Montaigne so cheerfully referred to as “Monsieur ma partie,” in themselves, severed from the organic unity of the body, the way the poets look at the oceans severed from their geographical place on earth. We must, in other words, disarticulate, mutilate the body in a way that is much closer to Kleist than to Winckelmann, though close enough to the violent end that happened to befall both of them. We must consider our limbs the way the primitive man considered the house, entirely severed from any purpose or use. From the phenomenality of the aesthetic (which is always based on an adequacy of the mind to its physical object, based on what is referred to, in the definition of the sublime, as the concrete representation of ideas—*Darstellung der Ideen*) we have moved to the pure materiality of *Augenschein*, of aesthetic vision. From the organic, still asserted as architectonic principle in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, to the phenomenological, the rational cognition of incarnate ideas, which the best part of the Kant interpretation in the nineteenth and twentieth century will single out, we have reached, in the final analysis, a materialism that, in the tradition of the reception of the third *Critique*, is seldom or never perceived. To appreciate the full impact of this conclusion one must remember that the entire project of the third *Critique*, the full investment in the aesthetic, was to achieve the articulation

that would guarantee the architectonic unity of the system. If the architectonic then appears, very near the end of the analytics of the aesthetic, at the conclusion of the section on the sublime, as the material disarticulation not only of nature but of the body, then this moment marks the undoing of the aesthetic as a valid category. The critical power of a transcendental philosophy undoes the very project of such a philosophy leaving us, certainly not with an ideology—for transcendental and ideological (metaphysical) principles are part of the same system—but with a materialism that Kant’s posterity has not yet begun to face up to. This happens not out of a lack of philosophical energy or rational power, but as a result of the very strength and consistency of this power.

What, finally, will be the equivalence of this moment in the order of language? Whenever the disruption asserted itself, in the passage in the non-teleological vision of nature and of the body and also, less openly but not less effectively, in the unexplained necessity of supplementing the consideration of the mathematical sublime with a consideration of the dynamic sublime, in the blank between section 27 and section 28 (as we refer to a blank between stanzas 1 and 2 of the Lucy poem “A slumber did my spirit seal . . .” or between parts 1 and 2 of the Boy of Winander poem), whenever, then, the articulation is threatened by its undoing, we encountered a passage (the section on apprehension, the section on the sacrifice of the imagination) that could be identified as a shift from a tropological to a different mode of language. In the case of the dynamic sublime, one could speak of a shift from trope to performance. In this case, the non-teleological apprehension of nature, a somewhat different pattern emerges. To the dismemberment of the body corresponds a dismemberment of language, as meaning-producing tropes are replaced by the fragmentation of sentences and propositions into discrete words, or the fragmentation of words into syllables or finally letters. In Kleist’s text, one would isolate the dissemination of the word Fall and its compounds throughout as such a moment when the aesthetic dance turned into an aesthetic trap, as by the addition of one single mute letter which makes Fall (fall) into Falle (trap).\(^8\) No such artful moments seem to occur, at first sight, in Kant. But just try to translate one single somewhat complex sentence of Kant, or just consider what the efforts of entirely competent translators have produced, and you will soon notice how decisively determining the play of the letter and of the syllable, the way of saying (Art des Sagens) as opposed to what is being said (das Gesagte)—to quote Walter Benjamin—is in this most unconscious of stylists. Is not the persuasiveness of the entire passage on the recovery of the imagination’s tranquillity after the shock of sublime surprise based, not so much on the little play acted out by the senses, but on the proximity between the German words for surprise and admiration, Verwunderung and Bewunderung? And are we not made to assent to the more

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than paradoxical but truly aporetic incompatibility between the failure of the imagination to grasp magnitude with what becomes, in the experience of the sublime, the success of this same imagination as an agent of reason, are we not made to assent to this because of a constant, and finally bewildering alternation of the two terms, Angemessenheit and Unangemessenheit, to the point where one can no longer tell them apart? The bottom line, in Kant as well as in Hegel, is the prosaic materiality of the letter and no degree of obfuscation or ideology can transform this materiality into the phenomenal cognition of aesthetic judgment.