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A Reading of Distance in the Kantian Sublime

Kant's text comes to be read from the vantage-point of footnotes and examples, its voice-overs. The discourse of *The Critique of Judgement* or, more precisely, "The Analytic of the Beautiful" is, in fact, instituted by a footnote which by being anchored to the title rather than the text comes before its letter. And as Jacques Derrida says this gloss "touches on a difficulty so decisive that one cannot see why it does not constitute the principal text of which it forms the ground bass, that is, the unwritten or underwritten space"¹.

It is adversaria, sundries written on the side, as if on the edges: citations and examples or observations reduced to the lower ranks of the text that augment a dossier of (the discourse of) the sublime, and form its back-bone.

The derivation of the example as of the thing taken out is always exotic. It enters the text as an expatriate, removed from its native space, and an envoy sent from afar. The example comes as one of many: its function is to represent which is the business of an ambassador, the one that arrives from the other territory to body it forth. The foreign service entails attachment: the example develops a relationship of contiguity with the thesis/statement whose truth it is to assert, whose legitimacy it is to corroborate. Apart from its existence of a typical instance the example signifies an object or action which should/should not be copied or followed; its vocation is twofold since it accommodates imitation as well as intimidation, both being the directions of pedagogy.

The code of the exemplary conduct, the protocol, furthermore specifies the didactic nature of the undertaking: the example is in the main to illustrate, that is explain a point. The pedagogy of the example is, however, mis-leading. In the

¹ J. Derrida, *Parergon. The Truth in Painting*, trans. G. Bennington and I. McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 70.

vicinity of the example one must be on the guard as it tends to take a wayward course walking out on the argument, steering clear of what it was to demonstrate. Even Kant, the philosopher always vigilant of mystagogues, falls prey of the deceptive teaching of the instance, takes a false step induced by its impostor guidance.

The examples picked by Kant to illuminate the concept of the sublime always come as visible imports carried from abroad of other texts or commonplaces/hearsay. Their secondhandness does not fail to label itself with a tag of "as it is said" introducing the example of St. Peter's in Rome or "what Savary reports" that announces the case of the Pyramids. Some other examples are voices of Burke and Addison, taken and alchemized, as if following the Burkean concept of distance and modification as imperative for the sublime². *The Critique of Judgement* speaks in multi-far-ious tones, tongues and genders, in a modulating pitch of argument and the low-key of footnotes. Its polyphony, is set by Kant who has to know the score of the tonal montage³.

The mechanism of the passages with the Pyramid and St. Peter's inserts evinces one of many a priori somersaults turned in/turned by the work: when the philosophical argument serves to illustrate the examples and bear witness to their accuracy. Kant's theory of apprehension and comprehension offers then an explanation of Savary's remark that

in order to get the full emotional effect of the size of the Pyramids 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 upon the aesthetic judgement of the Subject. In the former, however, it takes the eye some time to complete the apprehension from the base to the summit; but in the interval the first tiers always in part disappear before the imagination has taken in the last, and so the comprehension is never complete⁴.

The sublime introduces the Analytic of the Distance: the distance between the cognitive faculties, the I and the Pyramids, the comprehension and its completion, the thesis and the example, the example and the text, the text and the land, the genre and the space (The example comes from Savary's book which is *Letters from Egypt*, and the letter, by definition, is always a genre of distance).

² E. Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 36:

When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful, as we every day experience.

³ Cf. J. Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy", in *Oxford Literary Review* 6.2 (1984), trans. J. P. Leavey, Jr. pp. 3—37.

⁴ I. Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.C. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), §26, pp. 99—100. All the quotations will come from this edition and will be marked by the initial CJ and appropriate § and page number.

The distance spellbinds the discourse: the discourse of/on the sublime turns the discourse of/on distance, whose code is the code of spacing.

The full emotional effect calls for a regulation/discipline of distance, the distance is subject to negotiation, some middle ground which could bind apprehension and comprehension, make them enter into an alliance, move at the same pace, has to be found. ("In apprehension a manifold of sensible intuitions is run through and held, together, whereas in comprehension past sensible intuitions are held in memory alongside current ones, thus enabling the mind to grasp whole series of perceptions."⁵) The quoted stipulation of "neither too far nor too near" as mandatory to obtain "the full emotional effect" becomes unexpectedly controverted by what was designed to be its illustration. Being on overly distant terms with the object disqualifies or precludes any aesthetic judgement: too great remove abridges the apprehension which occurs as if at one go and in an incompetent manner leading to "no effect". "To see an object distinctly and to perceive its bounds is one and the same thing"⁶: the excessive distance frustrates the idea of infinity by reducing the magnitude to contours, translates it into outlines, clarity and consequently littleness: a clear idea is "another name for a little idea"⁷.

The proximity of the Pyramids engages the eye in a study of vastness, scrutinized piecemeal. The close-up makes the apprehension fall out of step with the comprehension whose incongruity secures the desired collapse of the imagination. The tour of contemplation turns a journey of oblivion in progress of which "the parts first apprehended begin to disappear from the imagination as this advances to the apprehension of yet others" (CJ, §26, 99). To view the Pyramids from a close perspective is to watch them purblind, that is sand-blind. The onward course obliterates, blots out, the previous view; the space of the apprehension/comprehension is the sabulous space of a desert, whose landscape complements the Pyramids, the infinite surface susceptible to erasure, however only partial, and covering over, like Freud's Mystic Writing Pad which offers "an ever-ready receptive surface and permanent traces of the inscriptions that have been made on it"⁸, like Rousseau's brain:

... my brain became as sand
Where the first wave had more than half erased
The track of deer on desert Labrador,
Whilst the fierce wolf from which they fled amazed
Leaves his sight visibly upon the shore...⁹

⁵ P. Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 96.

⁶ E. Burke, *A Philosophical...*, p. 58.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ S. Freud, "A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'", in *The Pelican Freud Library*, vol. 11, trans. J. Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 431.

⁹ P. B. Shelley, *The Triumph of Life*, ll. 404–408.

"The comprehension is never complete" as the viewer cannot cope with the excessive nearness, cannot take in a whole, his imagination is sand-stormed, overpowered, as incapable of embracing a totality. Imagination not commensurate with the reason's concept of the object as a totum defers the accomplishment which remains forever far-off. The crisis of imagination evokes the presence of the sublime. The comprehension is built on sand.

Distance in the Kantian sublime is always a distance between man and stone. It is a distance which establishes and regulates a relationship between the body of man and the body of stone. Of stone which is introduced in the form of the pyramids and then punningly multiplied in the example of the Church of Saint Peter in Rome. (The Church, itself of stone, is named after the one who is the Rock).

The distance which mediates between man and stone inaugurates a petrifying relationship/a relationship of petrification as the visitor touring the places of stone is astonished, petrified, turned to stone. "One would almost say *meduse*"¹⁰ as petrification is the business of Medusa, one of the Gorgons. The masks of the Gorgons were worn by priestesses to the triple goddess of the Moon in order to intimidate and divert the profane from penetrating the divine mysteries. Thus the mask of the Gorgon serves to hold aloof, keep at a distance; its monstrous grimace is that of an official admonition like the lapidary/lapidarian words of Isis, words which evoke eternity and are inscribed on the Temple thus obstructing entrance to another stone structure. "Perhaps, remarks Kant in a footnote, there has never been a more sublime utterance, or a thought more sublimely expressed, than the well known inscription upon the Temple of Isis (Mother of Nature). 'I am that is, and that ever shall be, and no mortal hath raised the veil from my face.'" (CJ, §49). It is precisely the moment of lifting, unveiling, revealing that Kant is concerned or rather disconcerted about: we must not disclose, discover as that would afford a vision, a seeing, and that must be avoided. We must not see, we must a-vert our eyes to elude being turned to stone in the face of Isis, the returning figure of Kant's writings, the figure which functions as a premonition, a forebodying of the eternal. We must keep in mind the lecture on or reading of eternity Kant advances in *Das Ende aller Dinge* where eternity is qualified in terms customarily associated with stones: time, mutability, transitoriness, all which pertains to the phenomenal world, the whole nature is paralysed, petrified, literally, turned to stone.

To approach the suprasensible notion of eternity we perform a detour through that which is perceptible by the senses, a detour which takes us through a landscape of stone, landscape furnished with monumental executions in stone: the pyramids, St. Peter's Church, the writing of Isis. It is a landscape of hewn stone, polluted by the tool of man, and thus chiselled against the letter

¹⁰ J. Derrida, *Parergon...*, p. 142.

of the law which, *ex post facto*, Kant enforces when he postulates: “we must not point to the sublime in works of art (e.g. buildings, columns and the like) where a human end determines the form as well as the magnitude ... but in rude nature” (CJ, §26, 100). Kant provides an example only to contradict himself, almost in the same breath, and yet, there is a delay: he displays the man-sculptured stone before imposing restrictions on it, as if suspending the law, deflecting it, putting it in parentheses (as he does with buildings, columns and the like).

Let us delay our journey for a while and pose a question about the metanarrative which warrants Kant’s obsession with stone imagery. What is it that Kant seems to remind us of by way of highlighting, privileging, elevating the stone? Why does his high-handed gesture always appear to demonstrate, the monumental, the monumental which puts in mind: which reminds, but also monitors, admonishes, the monumental which demonstrates the monstrous? The monumental connotes threat and coercion, it seems to overpower our senses as it intimates the monstrous which, according to Kant, qualifies an object which by its size annihilates and reduces to nothing the end which constitutes its concept. The monument Kant erects cripples our senses, mutilates our bodies, brings them to a standstill, to the double stillness of Atropos, who arrests the tropic movement of the body as well as of language, imposing the motionless and silence of death. The monument in Kant’s writing comes as a funerary monument. The stone is a monition of death, of death to come and of death which has already taken place. The sublime negotiates the distance between man and stone as the distance between man and death.

We should not forget, however, that the space of the sublime is imaginary, fictional as we ourselves project the sublime into nature: our experience of pain and danger is merely hypothetical. According to Kant:

We may look upon an object as fearful, and yet not be afraid of it, if, that is, our estimate takes the form of our simply *picturing* to ourselves the case of our wishing to offer some resistance to it, and recognizing that all such resistance would be quite futile.

(CJ, §28)

To illustrate his point Kant once again evokes the stony landscape:

Towering rocks, menacing rugged cliffs ... make our power of resistance of trifling moment *in comparison* with their might. But, provided our own position is secure, their aspect is all the more attractive for its fearfulness.

(CJ, §28)

The provision made in the name of safety seemingly concerns itself with the body, its totality and inviolability. The body must remain distant. Distance here is defined in terms of security and shelter, which seems to entrench and isolate the body in a far more radical manner than Burke does when he

postulates that "danger or pain" should not "press too nearly"¹¹. Burke's stipulation against nearness becoming too oppressive locates the body at the indeterminate distance delineated by the ambiguity of "too"; whereas Kant removes the perceiving subject first away from nature without him and then still farther away from nature within him into the seclusion of his own mind. This double retreat results in man being a refugee from nature within and without him to the extent that he may actually risk exposing his body to danger (one must remember the prominence Kant gives to the, as he claims, ennobling state of war). Thus the body becomes entangled in the intricacies of distancing as now distance between the body and the rock is adjusted by the tension of the conditional "as if" which de-shelters or un-shelters the body and opens it onto the moment of the dangerous.

It is already obvious that our detour will be impeded, halted, maybe even rendered impassable by the imagination besieged with stone. The stone soon becomes an insurmountable obstacle, a stumbling block, a difficulty for imagination which, in its interminable progress, is unable to meet the demand to grasp absolute totality, the demand imposed on it by reason. Imagination is unequal to the task of presenting the infinite in the finite. The faculty of representation refuses to make present, it frustrates the logocentric desire for unmediated presence. Instead, it presents its own limits, bounds, its own deficiency as it recoils when, to quote J. Addison, "after a few faint efforts, imagination is immediately at a stand, and finds herself swallowed up in the immensity of the void that surrounds it"¹².

Addison, while narrating the scene of imagination being overwhelmed, incapacitated, rendered powerless, makes use of very powerful images. The scene is dramatically staged against a backdrop long ago appropriated by the imagery of the sublime which privileges the abyss as presentation of the sublime. It seems ineluctable that the discourse on the sublime should already be implicated in the sublime, should lack the necessary detachment, disinterestedness, and hence should be referred to as the discourse of the sublime, discourse which itself speaks the language of the void, chasm and abyss, discourse which puts itself *en abyme*.

The Kantian problematic of the abyss, which derives from the unbridgeable gap between faculties, between the faculty to conceive and the faculty to present, questions the symbolic relation between the concept and the image. As the imagination fails to present any object which would correspond with a concept, the image and the concept or, in other words, the signifier and the signified, are "doomed" to stay apart from one another. Their state of being apart conditions a special kind of distance between them, distance enmeshes¹

¹¹ E. Burke, *A Philosophical...*, p. 36.

¹² J. Addison, *Critical Essays from "The Spectator"*, Essay No. 420.

in the complexities of parts and departures. To understand the relationship between the symbolic order and distance, let us take recourse to the early history of symbol.

For the Greeks, the *symbolon* was a piece of pottery or earthenware that was broken in two prior to someone's (usually a warrior's) voyage. One of the pieces remained at the site of departure while the other was carried by the traveller and "voyaged" with him. Upon his return, the traveller's piece of pottery served as a sign of recognition and as proof of his identity when it was rejoined with its matching complement. The word symbol referred to each of the pieces as well as to the act of putting the two pieces together: Gr. *symbollo* = to put together¹³.

The moment of putting together, the moment of accord, of identity never arrives as in the aesthetic of the sublime there is no relation of analogy or resemblance between the image and the concept. The sublime, which is not contained in a finite form nor in the infinite idea, is brought about at the moment of rupture, at the moment of incommensurability which, to borrow an architectural metaphor used by Freud to describe a style of writing, is "colossal and pyramidal"¹⁴.

The sublime dramatizes the bounds of one's capacities as its presence perforce makes one aware of the inadequacy of imagination. This frustrating knowledge becomes a cautionary reminder that "the world as infinite totality"¹⁵ lies not within the I's ken. The experience of the sublime extends to the subject the trauma of deficiency and noncompletion. "The sublime in one of its aspects is ... this chastening, humiliating power, which decentres the subject into an awesome awareness of its finitude, its own petty position in the universe, just as the experience of beauty shores it up"¹⁶. In the latter the compatibility of mind and reality is validated as the faculties of cognition (imagination and understanding) are united in a harmonious accord while the sublime generates roughness and turmoil which dislodge the imagination, throw it out of joint, call it into question.

The condition of the beautiful is a mode of repletion which spells completeness. Its topos is a sealed space of closure, a space of motherly protection. In the presence of the beautiful the faculties concur and their harmony brings about complacency, peace of mind. Beauty is a peace-keeping force. Peacetime is to be distrusted as the season in which there hold sway "the spirit of commerce, ignoble greed, cowardice and effeminacy". Peace is a state

¹³ E. Rashkin, "Tools for a new Psychoanalytic", in *Diacritics*, winter 1988, p. 47.

¹⁴ S. Freud, "The Interpretation of Dreams", in *The Penguin Freud Library*, vol. 4, trans. J. Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 403.

¹⁵ T. Eagleton, "The Kantian Imaginary", in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 89.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 90.

of having a home, a dwelling place, as well as of things being at home. Economy, as an ability to run a household, also pertains to the feminine province of the domestic. Peace marks then the decline of the masculine and so does the beautiful.

The distinction between the beautiful and the sublime articulates itself as the divergence between the feminine and the masculine, as well as between peace and warfare. The military aspect of the sublime makes its appearance in Burke's *Inquiry*... where he registers the noise of artillery in unison with the excessively loud, one might say thundering, voices of Nature whose alarmingly dense volume can disconcert, untune, the imagination. Also Kant brings together Nature and war as danger zones conducive to the experience of the dynamical sublime.

War itself, provided it is conducted with order and a sacred respect for the rights of civilians, has something sublime about it, and gives nations that carry it on in such a manner a stamp of mind only the more sublime the more dangers to which they are exposed ...

(CJ, §28, 112—113)

Soldiery and warfare challenge the I's feelings, themselves proclaiming a state of war between the faculties, the state favourable to the sublime. As Eagleton remarks the sublime is the province of the martial and the masculine, which fields become curiously yoked in the name of Savary, the author of *Letters from Egypt* whose book, among other things, inspired Napoleon's military campaign in Egypt and in which another Savary, a French general, took part¹⁷.

The presence of the sublime proves critical for the imagination, it brings a breach of its peace, rendering it destitute/out of place and engaging it in a tug-of-war with reason. The condition of warfare is that of estrangement; to go to war is to abandon home. The strategic value of every crisis proves, in the long run, beneficial: the collapse of imagination is imperative for the sublime to take place as only the moment of its failure can validate the out-distancing power of reason, the recognition of which can, in turn, lead to an armistice and a homecoming.

¹⁷ A footnote to the Polish edition of *The Critique* acts subversively since its underpage dealings attribute the comment on the Pyramids to the general and thus cancel the distance between the two Savarys. The footnote does not comply with the glossary code whose ranks it breaks by failing to be a signature tune of *academic* discourse.