The Beautiful and Sublime

Immanuel Kant

Kant speculated on aesthetic theory in his 1764 work, Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime. *His views are strikingly similar to Burke's.*

Finer feeling, which we now wish to consider, is chiefly of two kinds: the feeling of the sublime and that of the *beautiful.* The stirring of each is pleasant, but in different ways. The sight of a mountain whose snow-covered peak rises above the clouds, the description of a raging storm, or Milton's portrayal of the infernal kingdom, arouse enjoyment but with horror; on the other hand, the sight of flower-strewn meadows, valleys with winding brooks and covered with grazing flocks, the description of Elysium, or Homer's portrayal of the girdle of Venus, also occasion a pleasant sensation but one that is joyous and smiling. In order that the former impression could occur to us in due strength, we must have a *feeling of the sublime*, and, in order to enjoy the latter well, a feeling of the *beautiful.* Tall oaks and lonely shadows in a sacred grove are sublime; flower beds, low hedges and trees trimmed in figures are beautiful. Night is sublime, day is beautiful. Temperaments that possess a feeling for the sublime are drawn gradually, by the quiet stillness of a summer evening as the shimmering light of the stars breaks through the brown shadows of night and the lonely moon rises into view, into high feelings of friendship, of disdain for the world, of eternity. The shining day stimulates busy fervor and a feeling of gaiety. The sublime *moves,* the beautiful *charms.* The mien of a man who is undergoing the full feeling of the sublime is earnest, sometimes rigid and astonished. On the other hand the lively sensation of the beautiful proclaims itself through shining cheerfulness in the eyes, through smiling features, and often through audible mirth. The sublime is in turn of different kinds. Its feeling is sometimes accompanied with a certain dread, or melancholy; in some cases merely with quiet wonder; and in still others with a beauty completely pervading a sublime plan. The first I shall call the *terrifying sublime,* the second the *noble,* and the third the *splendid.* Deep loneliness is sublime, but in a way that stirs terror. Hence great far-reaching solitudes, like the colossal Komul Desert in Tartary, have always given us occasion for peopling them with fearsome spirits, goblins, and ghouls.

The sublime must always be great; the beautiful can also be small. The sublime must be simple; the beautiful can be adorned and ornamented. A great height is just as sublime as a great depth, except that the latter is accompanied with the sensation of shuddering, the former with one of wonder. Hence the latter

feeling can be the terrifying sublime, and the former the noble. The sight of an Egyptian pyramid, as Hasselquist reports, moves one far more than one can imagine from all the descriptions; but its design is simple and noble. St. Peter's in Rome is splendid; because on its frame, which is large and simple, beauty is so distributed, for example, gold, mosaic work, and so on, that the feeling of the sublime still strikes through with the greatest effect; hence the object is called splendid. An arsenal must be noble and simple, a residence castle splendid, and a pleasure palace beautiful and ornamented.

A long duration is sublime. If it is of time past, then it is noble. If it is projected into an incalculable future, then it has something of the fearsome in it. A building of the remotest antiquity is venerable. Haller's description of the coming eternity stimulates a mild horror, and of the past, transfixed wonder....

In human nature, praiseworthy qualities never are found without concurrent variations that must run through endless shadings to the utmost imperfection. The quality of the *terrifying sublime,* if it is quite unnatural, is adventurous. Unnatural things, so far as the sublime is supposed in them, although little or none at all may actually be found, are *grotesque.* Whoever loves and believes the fantastic is a *visionary;* the inclination toward whims makes the *crank.* On the other side, if the noble is completely lacking the feeling of the beautiful degenerates, and one calls it *trifling.* A male person of this quality, if he is young, is named a *fop;* if he is of middle age, he is a *dandy.* Since the sublime is most necessary to the elderly, an *old dandy* is the most contemptible creature in nature, just as a young crank is the most offensive and intolerable. Jests and liveliness pertain to the feeling of the beautiful. Nevertheless, much understanding can fittingly shine through, and to that extent they can be more or less related to the sublime. He in whose sprightliness this admixture is not detectable *chatters.* He who perpetually chatters is *silly.* One easily notices that even clever persons occasionally chatter, and that not a little intellect is needed to call the understanding away from its post for a short time without anything going wrong thereby. He whose words or deeds neither entertain nor move one is *boring.* The bore, if he is nevertheless zealous to do both, is insipid. The insipid one, if he is conceited, is a fool.

I shall make this curious sketch of human frailties somewhat more understandable by examples; for he to whom Hogarth's engraving stylus is wanting must compensate by description for what the drawing lacks in expression. Bold acceptance of danger for our own, our country's, or our friends' rights is sublime. The crusades and ancient knighthood were adventurous; duels, a wretched remnant of the latter arising from a perverted concept of chivalry, are grotesque. Melancholy separation from the bustle of the world due to a legitimate weariness is noble. Solitary devotion by the ancient hermits was adventurous. Monasteries and such tombs, to confine the living saints, are grotesque. Subduing one's passions through principles is sublime. Castigation, vows, and other such monks' virtues are grotesque. Holy bones, holy wood, and all similar rubbish, the holy stool of the High Lama of Tibet not excluded, are grotesque. Of the works of wit and

fine feeling, the epic poems of Virgil and Klopstock fall into the noble, of Homer and Milton into the adventurous. The *Metamorphoses* of Ovid are grotesque; the fairy tales of French foolishness are the most miserable grotesqueries ever hatched. Anacreontic poems are generally very close to the trifling.

Works of understanding and ingenuity, so far as their objects also contain something for feeling, likewise take some part in the differences now being considered. Mathematical representation of the infinite magnitude of the universe, the meditations of metaphysics upon eternity, Providence, and the immortality of our souls contain a certain sublimity and dignity. On the other hand, philosophy is distorted by many empty subtleties, and the superficial appearance of profundity cannot prevent our regarding the four syllogistic figures as scholastic trifling.