
I. SPECULATIVE HORIZONS

The Metaphysical Sublime and America's Best Idea

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Traditionally, the sublime is understood as part of the field of aesthetics. As part of the theory of beauty it functions as a contrasting term. What is beautiful differs from what is sublime. But does the sublime have a wider role in philosophical reasoning? Can the sublime be extended to metaphysics? If so, what kind of metaphysics can accommodate the sublime? Is there a way in which the sublime in a metaphysical sense can be initiated through the perception of nature? These are questions I wish to broach in the brief account that follows. So far as I can ascertain, the metaphysical sublime is a new subject. In contemporary thought the sublime has become a topic in postmodern rhetorics and politics, stemming from insights in Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*. One can encounter, for example, versions of the feminine sublime and the technological sublime. My aim is to return to classical, neoclassical, critical, and romantic views to see whether there is a fundamental connection between the sublime and the speculative. This is a large subject, and, as a first attempt, my remarks are intended as suggestive of the issues rather than definitive of them.

The Sublime and the Beautiful

The English word "sublime" preserves intact the meaning of its Latin root *sublimis*, which signifies high, raised, or lifted up; hence, that which is elevated, lofty. The locus in classical thought for the study of the sublime is the fragmentary treatise *Peri Hypsos*, ascribed to Cassius Longinus.

Longinus identifies the sublime with an excellence and distinction of language found in the genius of the greatest poets and prose writers: “for the effect of genius is not to persuade the audience but rather to transport them out of themselves”. Within a well-developed composition, Longinus holds, “a well-timed flash of sublimity shatters everything like a bolt of lightning and reveals the full power of the speaker at a single stroke”.¹ For Longinus the experience of the sublime is to be found in the mastery of rhetorical and literary style, the grandeur of thought it entails, and its effect on the psychology of the audience.

The locus in modern philosophy for the study of the sublime is the “Analytic of the Sublime” of the first part of Immanuel Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. Behind Kant’s critique of aesthetic judgment is Edmund Burke’s attack on the eighteenth-century neoclassical identification of both the sublime and the beautiful with aesthetic form in sculpture, painting, and literary works, as well as in architectural design. Burke contrasted the harmony and tranquility of the beautiful object with the fear and terror induced by such all-encompassing events in nature as storms and earthquakes that require a sublime response.² Kant transfers the beautiful and the sublime from the object to the power of judgment of the subject. The beautiful and the sublime rest not in the object itself but in human consciousness, specifically in the power of the reflective judgment (*reflektierende Urteilskraft*).

The reflective judgment does not determine its object under a rule, as does the determinate judgment (*bestimmende Urteilskraft*) of natural science. Instead, the reflective judgment captures the unique internal organization of the aesthetic particular, a feature that it shares with organic natural forms.³ On the Kantian aesthetic a work of art is a particular universal; it is a one-of-a-kind particular that carries a universal significance

¹ Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans. W. H. Fyfe, rev. Donald Russell, pub. with Aristotle’s *Poetics*. See Aristotle, vol. 23 (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1995), pp.163-65 (1.3-4).

² Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London, 1757).

³ By far the best explanation of the interconnection between the critique of aesthetic judgment and that of teleological judgment in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* is in Ernst Cassirer, *Kants Leben und Lehre*, ed. Tobias Berben, vol. 8 of *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Birgit Recki (Hamburg: Meiner, 2001), chap. 6.

- the meaning that the art work carries. The beautiful object can be encompassed by the subject's concept of it. Its form is finite and fully present to the knower. Judgments of beauty depend upon taste and the communicability of taste requires the condition of common sense (*sensus communis*). As Kant puts this: "everything runs up into the concept of taste as a critical faculty by which an object is estimated in reference to the free conformity to law of the imagination".⁴ The imagination has its own freedom to form the object but it does not produce irrationalities. One is reminded here of Horace's advice to the poet: "either follow tradition or invent what is self-consistent".⁵

On the Kantian view, beauty is the result of the subject's productive imagination acting in relation to the object as external to it. An intuition raised to a pitch of feeling so as to produce the sublime requires the subject to act even more in relation to itself, to its own subjectivity. As Kant states: "for the beautiful in nature we must seek a ground external to ourselves, but for the sublime one merely in ourselves and the attitude of mind that introduces sublimity into the representation of nature".⁶ Like Burke, Kant sees the disorderly processes of nature as the source of our experience of the sublime: "it is rather in its chaos, or in its wildest and most irregular disorder and desolation, provided it gives signs of magnitude and power, that nature chiefly excites the ideas of the sublime".⁷

Kant not only acknowledges the connection of the sublime to the lofty sense of fear and terror we may experience in confronting nature in its extreme, he also connects the sublime to a certain attainment of emotional delight induced by the imagination reaching its limits of formative power. In his analysis of the "mathematically sublime" Kant says: "*Sublime* is the name given to what is *absolutely great*".⁸ This sense of greatness is the sense of something comparable to itself alone. There is a striving by the imagination toward a progress ad

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964), pp.85-86.

⁵ Horace, *Ars poetica*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1978), 461 (119).

⁶ Kant, p.93.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.92.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.94.

infinitem and this striving is “the awakening of a feeling of a supersensible faculty within us”.⁹ Kant’s prime example of this absolutely great is not only our inability to grasp a series of magnitudes as it approaches infinity, it is what he understands that often seizes a visitor on first entering St. Peter’s Square in Rome. Kant says: “For here a feeling comes home to him of the inadequacy of his imagination for presenting the idea of a whole within which that imagination attains its maximum, and, in its fruitless efforts to extend this limit, recoils upon itself, but in so doing succumbs to an emotional delight”. Although Kant allows for this experience to involve delight, he also acknowledges that objects are monstrous when expanded beyond the powers of the imagination to form them as a whole. The colossal is such, or at least “borders on the relatively monstrous”.¹⁰

The Metaphysical Sublime

Kant’s approach to the sublime enacts a transition between the neoclassical view and the romantic that appears in its full form in G. W. F. Hegel’s *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* as part of his treatment of the symbolic form of art. Hegel points out that on Kant’s account of the sublime our experience of it cannot be contained in any sensuous form. Instead the sublime concerns Kant’s realm of the Ideas of Reason. Thus Hegel claims: “The sublime in general is the attempt to express the infinite, without finding in the sphere of phenomena an object which proves adequate for this representation”.¹¹ Hegel passes beyond the limitations of Kant’s placement of the sublime in the pure subjectivity of the mind in order to ground the sublime in the Absolute.

Along with philosophy, art and religion are forms of the absolute spirit (*Geist*). The Absolute is present symbolically in art that takes the form of the sublime. The meaning manifest in this form of art is religion. Hegel says: “If therefore symbolic art in general may already be called sacred art because it adopts the Divine as the content of its productions, the art of sublimity is *the* sacred art as such which can be called exclusively sacred because it gives honour to God alone”.¹² When the sublime enters art, art carries the meaning

⁹ Ibid., p.97.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.100.

¹¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 1:363.

¹² Ibid., 1:372-73.

of Being as the proper object of religion. The experience of the sublime shows man his finitude and at the same time it asserts the infinitude of God. Hegel says: “so far as man is concerned, there are bound up with sublimity at the same time the sense of man’s finitude and the insurmountable aloofness of God”.¹³ The Absolute is the objective ground of the experience of the sublime. The experience of the sublime is essentially noetic, for Hegel agrees with Kant that there can be no essential representation of the sublime. The sublime takes the mind into itself, but as an act of religious imagination it has not freed itself from the thought of *Vorstellen*, which is possible only in the philosophical apprehension of the Absolute.

Hegel’s conception of the Absolute is foreshadowed in Nicholas of Cusa’s connection of the Absolute Maximum and the infinite in the first book of his fifteenth-century work, *De Docta Ignorantia*. Although Cusanus does not develop directly a doctrine of the sublime, he provides a version of the Kantian mathematical sublime that shows its metaphysical implications. Cusanus claims that we can investigate the Absolute Maximum only symbolically, for we cannot think the Maximum directly and must remain in principle and in fact ignorant of it. To investigate this symbolically we must pass beyond simple likeness, and this may be accomplished by the use of mathematical signs.

Cusanus holds that: “since all mathematical are finite and otherwise could not even be imagined: if we want to use finite things as a way for ascending to the unqualifiedly Maximum, we must first consider finite mathematical figures together with their characteristics and relations”. In other words, finite mathematical figures necessarily imply the idea of an infinite. Thus, “Next, [we must] apply these relations, in a transformed way, to corresponding infinite mathematical figures”; this leads Cusanus to the figure of a straight line which is infinitely extendable (although we can represent it only finitely). Realizing this, “thirdly, [we must] thereafter in a still more transformed way, apply the relations of these infinite figures to the simple Infinite, which is

¹³ Ibid., 1:376. Hegel repeats this connection of the sublime and religion in his discussion of “*Die Religion der Erhabenheit*” in his *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, vol. 17 of *Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969), pp.50-96, and, as in his treatment of the sublime in art, he associates this form of religion especially with ancient Judaism.

altogether independent even of all figure”.¹⁴ Cusanus’s claim is that if there is a straight line it would be infinite and that all other linear figures could be produced from it. Thus he says: “if there were an infinite line, it would be a straight line, a triangle, a circle, and a sphere. And likewise if there were an infinite sphere, it would be a circle, a triangle, and a line. And the same thing must be said about an infinite triangle and an infinite circle.”¹⁵

Cusanus further claims that the Absolute Maximum and the Absolute Minimum coincide (*coincidentia oppositorum*). An infinite line is infinitely reducible as well as infinitely extendable. Cusanus’s discussion is undertaken to establish his theology of the infinity and oneness of the being of God. Cusanus not only offers in metaphysical terms a version of the mathematical sublime, he comes very close to Hegel’s conception of the “true infinity” (*wahre Unendlichkeit*).¹⁶ Cusanus understands the inherent problem of what Hegel opposes to the true infinity. Hegel terms this the “bad infinity” (*schlechte Unendlichkeit*), in which the finite and infinite remain opposites, the infinite being not more than that which is qualified by its difference from the finite. As Cusanus points out: “It is self-evident that there is no comparative relation of the infinite to the finite”.¹⁷ We could never arrive at an unqualified Maximum by asserting comparative degrees of greatness.

The true infinity is the master key to Hegel’s dialectical comprehension of the *Begriff* and to his conception of speculative philosophy. A convenient way to grasp the true infinite in formal terms is offered in Ernst Cassirer’s theory of the function, which he identifies with the essence of the Hegelian *Begriff*.¹⁸ The *Begriff* is a “concrete universal”

¹⁴ Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance: A Translation and an Appraisal of De Docta Ignorantia*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Arthur T. Banning Press, 1985), pp.62-63 (chap. 12).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.63.

¹⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969), pp.137-156.

¹⁷ Hopkins, *De Docta Ignorantia*, p.52.

¹⁸ Ernst Cassirer, *Substance and Function*, trans. William Curtis Swabey and Marie Collins Swabey (Chicago: Open Court, 1923), chap. 1; on Hegel’s *Begriff*, see 20. See also *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3 and *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), pt. 3, chap. 1, esp. pp.301-303.

that has its analogue in the *Funktionsbegriff* of symbolic or mathematical logic expressed as $\Phi(x)$ when Φ is understood as a rule for ordering a series represented by (x) , e.g., $x_1, x_2, x_3, x_4 \dots$ etc. The series can be extended indefinitely by the successive application of the rule but the rule of the series and the members of the series are different in logical kind. Neither can be dissolved into the other, yet each is meaningless apart from the bond between them. Apart from the series the rule of it has no meaning and the members of the series are members of nothing without their order determined by the rule. But the $\Phi(x)$ bond can be infinitely extended in all directions in the manner of the theory of types or of sets and subsets, since the Φ can itself be a member of another series of a different type and any or all members represented by (x) can stand to sub-series in principle as Φ or rules of these series. Like the Minimum and Maximum of Cusanus, the expansion and contraction of the functional concept coincide.

The true infinity is an actual infinite, not a *Jenseits* of the finite. In the true infinite, the infinite and the finite are held together in terms of themselves. The Hegelian Absolute stands to all that is non-absolute as $\Phi(x)$. This internal bond articulated in the true infinity is what I wish to call the *metaphysical sublime*. The metaphysical sublime is noetic, that is, apprehended only by the intellect. Although the true infinite is always at any moment of its realization determinate, because it is continually and dialectically constructed out of itself, its completeness is never apprehended as such. We are ultimately ignorant of its absoluteness. In this sense it is the absolutely great and is thus sublime. We always stand to it as in medias res. Although such sublimity is beyond representation in the sensuous, do we not require a connection to the sensuous in order to philosophize? For we philosophize in the world, not out of it. We are always at the point of the true infinity and at the same time not at it, because it is not an object in the sense that anything less than it is an object that can completely come before the knower.

America's Best Idea: The Natural Sublime

In 2009, the American Public Broadcasting System (PBS) presented a multi-part documentary film on "The National Parks: America's Best Idea", by the award-winning director and producer Ken Burns, in collaboration

with Dayton Duncan, the writer and producer.¹⁹ The subtitle has its source in a remark by Wallace Stegner, the writer and historian, who said that the national parks are “the best idea we’ve ever had”²⁰ The idea of the system of national parks was born in the United States nearly a century after its founding, and in the view of Dayton and Burns it is “as uniquely American as the Declaration of Independence and just as radical”.²¹

The continent of North America and the United States are not unique in the fact of having such examples of nature or in their preservation. There are natural wonders on all seven continents, and systems of national parks preserve them in many countries throughout the world. The national parks of the United States are America’s best idea in the sense that they embody the democratic ideal of setting aside great tracts of land, especially in the far Western states, often against prevailing economic interests, solely for preserving them as such for the enjoyment and well-being of all citizens and visitors. As one reads the history of the founding of the national parks, one is struck by the fact that they each come into being and develop by the sustained efforts at a few unique individuals who have the vision to realize the importance of the national parks as part of the American way of life. In each case, government had to be forced to take action on behalf of the intrinsic worth of these wonders. The national parks are a testament to the viability of the ideal of American individualism. They concretely represent a nation dedicated to be of the people, by the people, and for the people; they are a monument to the idea of the “new world”. This, I think, is the claim that Dayton and Burns wish to make.

I wish simply to take these natural wonders as my example of objects from which the mind may engage the sublime. I have some personal experience with similar natural wonders in other parts of the world, from the Jungfrau and Matterhorn in the Swiss Alps to Etna in Sicily to Ayers Rock

¹⁹ The printed volume that accompanied this series is Dayton Duncan, *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea; An Illustrated History* (New York: Knopf, 2009). Contemporary descriptions of the national parks are to be found in: *Guide to the National Parks of the United States*, 6th ed. (Washington, D. C.: National Geographic Society, 2009).

²⁰ Duncan, p.xxii.

²¹ Ibid.

in the Red Centre of Australia, but the natural wonders upon which I most immediately base these reflections are Carlsbad Caverns, Badlands, Death Valley, Grand Canyon, Grand Teton, Mesa Verde, Petrified Forest, Rocky Mountain, Wind Cave, and Yellowstone National Parks of the American West. My thoughts most immediately derive from my visits to these sights. They make the sublime not an abstract philosophical idea but an actuality that stands before the mind to incite its propensity to engage in metaphysics.

The national parks produce particular experiences of great beauty, but “sublime” is the one term used to describe them by the early naturalists who explored them and lobbied the government to reserve them. One of the most famous of these naturalists, John Muir, wrote: “One learns that the world, though made, is yet being made. That this is still the morning of creation. That mountains, long conceived, are now being born, brought to light by the glaciers, channels traced for rivers, basins hollowed for lakes... Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike.” He concludes: “This natural beauty-hunger is made manifest... in our magnificent National Parks - Nature’s sublime wonderlands.”²²

Muir’s claim is typical of writers and observers of the natural wonders contained in these parks: that these are not simply natural curiosities but places that, when perceived, immediately affect the soul and activate the human spirit. They provide occasions for grasping the absolutely great. The national parks are a garden of the sublime. J. B. Priestley, the English novelist and critic, writing for *Harper’s Magazine* about the wonders of the Grand Canyon and the Colorado River that made it, said that it was beyond any possible description: “but you feel when you are there that God gave the Colorado River its instructions. The thing is Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony in stone and magic light. I hear rumors of visitors who were disappointed. The same people will be disappointed at the Day of Judgment.”²³

In 1896, Thomas M. McKee (1854–1939) photographed the cliff dwelling known as Cliff Palace in Mesa Verde, Colorado. McKee, a photographer, lived in the cliff dwellings for a significant period of time. He

²² Ibid., p.i.

²³ Ibid., p.180.

wrote: “I shall describe the sensation that ran through me on beholding Cliff Palace... for a moment I was transfixed off this world of ours to another planet and stargazing with wide open eyes and listening, expecting to see fairies or people of another world appear, before I realized that what I saw was real... The wonderful new world that I saw and felt as if I had gone to a new abode for the living as well as the dead; such was my feeling when I first sighted the Cliff Palace.”²⁴ The cliff dwellings of Mesa Verde are a man-made sublimity, but they are so integrated into the natural landscape that it is difficult to apprehend where the civil and the natural divide.

Of the National Monument known as Devils Tower, in Wyoming near the South Dakota Badlands, Romanus Bear Stops, of the Cheyenne River Sioux tribe, claims: “The Tower is vital to the health of our nation and to our self-determination as a Tribe. Those who use the butte to pray become stronger. They gain sacred knowledge from the spirits that helps us preserve our Lakota culture and way of life. They become leaders. Without their knowledge and leadership, we cannot continue to determine our own destiny.”²⁵ The true name for the tower is *Mateo Tepee*, or Grizzly Bear Lodge, not Devils Tower. What inspired the imagination of the nations of the Great Plains concerning the tower was not its value as an aesthetic object but its sublime and sacred status as something beyond ordinary experience.

In 1871, the American Transcendentalist philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, on visiting Muir in Yosemite, described it as Muir’s “mountain tabernacle”.²⁶ The use of religious metaphors is common in reactions to the wonders of nature. Emerson told Americans: “Here we find Nature to be the circumstance which dwarfs every other circumstance, and judges like a god all men that come to her”.²⁷

Such remarks fit with Hegel’s “art of the sublime”, discussed previously, in which the aesthetic image takes on religious meaning that transcends it. The

²⁴ This quotation appears under McKee’s photograph of Cliff Palace, “A White Marble City”, on display at the Museum at Spruce Tree House in Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado.

²⁵ This statement by Romanus Bear Stops is posted at the Visitors Center, Devils Tower National Monument, South Dakota.

²⁶ Duncan, p.19.

²⁷ Ibid., p.11.

sublime reactions to the wonders of the national parks correspond more closely to Kant's example of St. Peter's Square than to the fear and terror of Burke's sublime induced by storms and earthquakes. This contrast suggests that there are two routes to the feeling of the sublime that converge; they do not result in two different sublimities. The visitor to the wonders of nature passes from the perception of the aesthetic harmony of nature to the lofty grasp of a whole that is more than can be fully felt or thought. Prompted by the chaotic and powerful actions of natural forces, the sublime takes the mind within itself to the sense of the infinite. But Kant is correct in his insistence that the ocean is not sublime as such.²⁸ The sublimity of anything in nature or in what is made originates in the subject, not the object, but it does not truly remain in the subject if the subject is capable of speculative philosophy.

Claude Lévi-Strauss claims that myth and music "are instruments for the obliteration of time".²⁹ Implicit in his claim is that myth and ritual fit with the sense of the sublime described by Longinus, for the myth transports the hearer out of time and into the sacred: the time beyond, the time of the origin. Music shares this characteristic; recall Priestley's comparison of the Grand Canyon with Beethoven's Ninth. The example of St. Peter's Square adds the possibility of architecture as sublime, which gives justification to Goethe's assertion that "architecture is frozen music".³⁰ The grandeur of the architectural can pass beyond the beautiful to the sense of the absolutely great. The Grand Canyon is a kind of architecture in reverse, receding ever farther into the earth rather than towering above it, in contrast to Mesa Verde. Wind Cave is like the labyrinth of Daedalus at Knossos. The Badlands of South Dakota are like the ruins of a great natural city.

If we consider the connection between the sublime and the Absolute, as

²⁸ Kant, p.92.

²⁹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology*, trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper, 1969), p.341.

³⁰ Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens* (Wiesbaden: Brockhaus, 1975). Eckermann's entry for March 23, 1829 begins: "'Ich habe unter meinen Papieren ein Blatt gefunden, sagte Goethe heute, wo ich die Baukunst eine erstarrte Musik nenne. Und wirklich, es hat etwas; die Stimmung, die von der Baukunst ausgeht, kommt dem Effekt der Musik nahe.'" (p.251)

discussed previously, we can also assert that metaphysics is a denial of time.³¹ If the sublime is our experience of the infinite then it takes us out of the temporal sequence of the finite. It offers us relief from what Mircea Eliade has called the “terror of history”, in which we find ourselves in a sequence of events that has no origin to which we can return nor *telos* toward which we can advance to grasp its ultimate meaning.³² The doctrine of historicism cuts itself off from the metaphysical sublime for, like intellectual history in general, it can offer us an understanding only of epochs in which certain truths are claimed which are replaced by subsequent truths. The feeling of the sublime is fundamental to human sanity, which requires relief from the ongoingness of finitude.

Speculative Philosophy

There is a fundamental connection between the sublime and wonder (*thauma*) as Aristotle speaks of it at the beginning of his *Metaphysics*: “For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize... And a man who is puzzled and wonders thinks himself ignorant, whence even the lover of myth is in a sense a lover of wisdom, for myth is composed of wonders.”³³ Philosophy and myth share *thauma* as a common point of departure which grows from an initial difficulty (*aporia*). This *aporia* is caused by our reasoning. As Aristotle writes in *Topics*: “An equality between contrary reasonings would seem to be a cause of perplexity”.³⁴ When we encounter such *aporiai* we are like someone who is tied up or chained, and “it is not possible to untie a knot which one does not know”.³⁵ The *aporia* can be surmounted, the reasoning untied from itself, only through an exploration of the various routes involved (*diaporia*). This way out of the perplexity assumes the features of a dialectical process of thought (*dialektikē*) in which the various routes are compared.

³¹ I have discussed this in an essay on “Myth and Metaphysics”, in Donald Phillip Verene, *Speculative Philosophy* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), pp.109-125.

³² Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

³³ Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols. (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 2:1554 (*Meta.* 982b).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:245 (*Top.* 145b).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:1572 (*Meta.* 995a).

This sense of wonder from which the love (*philia*) of wisdom begins is not identical with the sublime but it connects wonder with dialectic, and I wish to suggest that dialectic is the philosophical response to the apprehension of the sublime and that the experience of the sublime is the basis of speculation as the cast of mind necessary for a proper grasp of the Absolute or what is the really real (*to ontos on*). Dialectic for Aristotle is the logic of opinion and, as he says in the first sentence of *Rhetoric*, dialectic is the counterpart of rhetoric.³⁶ Wonder can be connected to Longinus's rhetorical sense of the sublime, for the audience's capacity of wonder is presupposed for the poet's or orator's words unexpectedly to produce the lofty moment that transcends the text.

Hegel abandons the Aristotelian conception of science as reasoning from first principles and turns the dialectic of opinion into a dialectic of reason. His beginning point for this transformation is the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in which each opinion of the status of the object is systematically opposed to its other in a progression of the forms of *Geist* to the ultimate moment of absolute *Geist*.³⁷ Because of the principle of *Aufhebung* Hegel's dialectic is progressive and is thus able to elicit the overall process of reason (*Vernunft*) that is submerged within opinion. This principle allows Hegel to pass beyond the ancient sense of dialectic as a form of thinking in which one view is simply contrasted with another in a back-and-forth movement. For Hegel the True is always the whole.

In his discussion of the relation of philosophy to religion in the introduction to his *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, Hegel comments on the relation of wonder to nature in a manner compatible with his conception of the sublime, as discussed earlier. Hegel writes: "only spirit [*Geist*] is aware of spirit, wonder is only the presentiment of spirit, wonder is the interruption of nature; spirit is above all the true wonder over and against the course of nature. Spirit itself is only this awareness itself."³⁸ Wonder is the antecedent or expectation of *Geist* that occurs when there is a

³⁶ Ibid., 2:2152 (*Rhet.* 1354a).

³⁷ On the rhetorical basis of Hegel's dialectic, see Donald Phillip Verene, *Hegel's Absolute: An Introduction to Reading the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Albany, N. Y.: State University of New York Press, 2007).

³⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. 18 of *Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971), p.93. My trans.

break (*Unterbrechung*) in the course of nature. *Geist* is reached by the reaction of wonder to a break in nature, but *Geist* is its own reality and is apprehended only when wonder is surmounted. The experience of the sublime is parallel to this characterization of wonder. If we connect the two we can see how the experience of the sublime brought on by the unexpected in nature becomes the basis of speculative philosophy.

The sublime as a feeling that contrasts with the feeling of beauty remains within the realm of aesthetics. But if the sublime is a form of or proper companion to wonder, the sublime connects us to *Geist*, that which is beyond nature and which is the self-relating of thought. *Geist* in all of its moments is implicitly the Absolute. The Absolute is the self-relation of *Geist*, which is the object of philosophy, the goal of the love of wisdom initiated by the feeling of wonder necessary to the act of reasoning. There is nothing in the mind that is not first in some sense in perception.

The experience of the sublime in relation to nature is what allows us to extend the Aristotelian sense of wonder as *aporia* to the Hegelian sense of the sublime as the experience of the absolutely great of the true infinite. The philosopher who has not the experience of the sublime, who has never confronted nature in such a manner, cannot become speculative. We can now make sense of Hegel's puzzling remark in the early fragment called "The Earliest System-Program of German Idealism", written ten years before the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Hegel states: "I am now convinced that the highest act of reason, that in which it embraces all ideas, is an aesthetic act and that truth and goodness are siblings only in beauty. The philosopher must possess just as much aesthetic power as the poet. Men without aesthetic sense are our literal-minded philosophers [*unsere Buchstabenphilosophen*]. The philosophy of spirit is an aesthetic philosophy."³⁹ Our literal-minded philosophers can produce critical and analytical philosophy but they are unable to produce speculative philosophy, at the essence of which is the

³⁹ See Donald Phillip Verene, Hegel's *Recollection: A Study of Images in the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Albany, N. Y.: State University of New York Press, 1985), p.25. My trans. There has been a question of the authorship of this fragment. I take the view as decisive that it is Hegel's, as presented by Otto Pöggeler, "Hegel der Verfasser des ältesten Systemprogramms des deutschen Idealismus", *Hegel-Studien, Beiheft 4* (1969): pp.17-32.

sublime. The feeling of wonder as joined to the sublime is the common bond of the poet and the speculative philosopher, for each has a path to ascertain the Absolute. In this same fragment Hegel calls poetry the “instructress of humanity” (*Leherin der Menschheit*) and calls for a “mythology of reason” (*Mythologie der Vernunft*).

On the Kantian theory of the aesthetic judgment the sublime can be ascribed to any object dependent on the subject’s apprehension of it. No object or phenomenon is in itself sublime. In Hegelian dialectic the subject and the object are constructed together, into which the Kantian thing-in-itself is dissolved. To the extent that the Absolute is in any moment of the dialectic, what I have called the sublime is to some extent present, and it is fully present in the grasp of the Absolute as such. But in the emergence of *Geist* from the experience of a break in Nature is the origination of the speculative spirit.

I have attempted to suggest in the foregoing that the aesthetic act has implicit in it its own transcendence in the sublime. Thus the metaphysical sublime begins in what Hegel calls the “art of the sublime” that transposes the aesthetic form into the religious, which is further transposed into the philosophic. It is only at the moment of the philosophic that *Geist* is attained as beyond nature, but this requires the experience of the interruption of nature. The sublimity of this experience allows us to overcome literal-mindedness and pursue what may be called the poetry of reason - the distinctive province of the speculative philosopher.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Portions of this essay were written on site in Mesa Verde and Yellowstone National Parks. I wish to thank the Charles Howard Candler Professorship endowment for stipend support of research travel to complete this essay by allowing me opportunity to confirm my conception of the natural sublime. I also wish to acknowledge the usefulness of the materials and records of Western travelers available in Seymour Library at Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois.