

To Lia (and her cat), Paola, Julia, Gregor, Fabrice, Silvana, Gaetano,  
Teresa de España, Haruki from Japan, Linda (schon lang weg), friends in Berlin

**MODALITIES OF THE SUBLIME  
MODAL CATEGORIES BETWEEN REASON,  
UNDERSTANDING, AND SENSIBILITY**

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***Abstract***

Kant distingue il sublime in «matematico» e «dinamico»: il primo è esperito grazie alla sproporzione quantitativa tra l'osservatore e l'osservato, il secondo grazie alle forze smisurate dispiegate dalla natura. Fra le kantiane categorie «dinamiche» rientrano però anche i concetti modali; ora, esiste di fatto un sublime che si lascia pensare per mezzo di essi. Se ne può fare esperienza per vie puramente intellettuali (senza pregiudizio per eventuali operazioni artistiche volte a trasporre questa esperienza sul piano sensibile), leggendo taluni testi della tradizione filosofica – il *Parmenide* di Platone, la *Scienza della logica* di Hegel, il *Tractatus* di Wittgenstein – in cui necessità e possibilità giocano un ruolo ambivalente: mettere in scacco l'intelletto da un lato, elevarlo a una comprensione superiore dall'altro – alla ragione.

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Kant distingue le sublimes « mathématique » du sublime « dynamique » : on fait l'expérience du premier en vertu de la disproportion quantitative entre l'observateur et ce qui se passe devant (ou autour) de lui, alors que le deuxième se laisse expérimenter en présence de forces immenses déployées par la nature. Les concepts modaux, cependant, font eux aussi partie des catégories « dynamiques » kantiennes ; or, il existe en fait un sublime qui se laisse penser précisément par ceux-ci. On peut en faire l'expérience par des voies purement intellectuelles (sans préjudice pour des mises en œuvre artistiques visant à la transposer sur le plan de la sensibilité), notamment en lisant certains textes de la tradition philosophique – tels le *Parménide* de Platon, la *Science de la logique* de Hegel, le *Tractatus* de Wittgenstein – où nécessité et possibilité jouent un rôle ambivalent : mettre l'entendement en échec d'un côté, l'élever à une compréhension supérieure de l'autre – soit, à la raison.

Kant distinguishes between the «mathematical» and the «dynamical» Sublime: the former is experienced by the disproportion in size between the viewer and what is given to her sight, the latter by unlimited forces deployed by nature. However, Kant's «dynamical» categories include modal notions also; in facts, there exists a Sublime that is essentially marked by them, too. One can experience it by purely

intellectual means (without prejudice for any artistic attempt to transpose it into a visual or otherwise sensible field), namely by reading some philosophical texts – such as Plato's *Parmenides*, Hegel's *Science of Logic*, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* – where possibility and necessity play an ambivalent role: to checkmate understanding on the one hand, and to raise it to a superior comprehension on the other, namely to reason

Sublime is, according to Kant, what has the effect of intimidating the viewer inasmuch she is a sensible being, while at the same time elating her as an intelligible one. Kant divides the Sublime in Mathematical and Dynamical, according to the 'means' by which this effect is brought about: impressively big dimensions of what is offered to the sight or overwhelmingly huge forces at work, respectively. In the first case, the viewer directly feels her own smallness due to the fact that she cannot capture what she is confronted with in one comprehensive grasp of perception; in the second case, what is felt is rather one's own extreme weakness by contrast with the indomitable force of nature. In both cases, however, the feeling of one's own impotence and insignificance as a sensible being has the counter-effect of exalting one's own awareness of being an intelligible being, along with the pride and the hopes that this carries with it.

### *Dynamic Categories Claiming for Equality*

Thus, the Sublime deserves the label 'mathematical' when it is tied to dimensions, so to the categories of extensive quantity, 'dynamical' when tied to force, so to one category of relation (namely, causality). But: why should the dynamic Sublime be limited to the categories of relation only? May the modal categories not claim for an equal status?

If so, they must appeal to some experience that is both one of the Sublime and intimately marked by possibility and necessity – so intimately as to allow these categories to play a role in giving birth to the Sublime itself, and not merely – as Kant himself allows for – in accounting for judgments on its moral. So, let's ask ourselves whether one can experience anything which prompts her

to call it sublime, while the experience itself is shaped by modal categories.

Many of us did in fact experience a somehow sublime intimidation under the performance of necessity and possibility as they feature in some capital philosophical texts; first of all, in Plato's *Parmenides*. The reader, when facing its second part, is likely to feel overwhelmed by the force of necessity. At each hypothesis, we are led to explore one more possibility of thought, a way of the understanding (namely, to understand the One); however, we are baffled each time by an aporetic conclusion. By the force of necessity, namely of cogent arguing, each possibility turns into (an aporetic) impossibility; which is itself necessity, given the well-known interdefinability between possibility and necessity *via* negation. Necessity, therefore, is not only what directs each of our steps along the way, but is also what the conclusion of the entire dialogue (and of each hypothesis in it) is like – namely, a cogent impossibility.

Does this deserve the name of sublime? If so, it is for sure a piece of the wanted *modal* Sublime; I daresay it is in facts *sublime*, too. It is, however, a Sublime conveyed by an intellectual experience – one of performing a reasoning; better: of following one carrying us away – rather than by a sensible experience, as is the case with the Sublime Kant talks about. Is therefore the so conveyed Sublime *itself* intellectual? Does an *intellectual* Sublime as distinguished from the sensible one exist – or else do these predicates only pertain to the different ways to experience it? I tend to opt for the second answer, namely to talk of modal Sublime *tout court* and of an intellectual *experience* of it. However, if the modal Sublime turned out to be possibly known *only* by an intellectual experience, the above distinction would be likely to be idle. At any rate: if the modal Sublime we have so encountered is itself intellectual, it is also, and more profoundly, a piece of *rational* Sublime. The understanding (as a faculty of concepts and judgments) is the hero rather of the first part of the dialogue, where it is confronted with its own difficulties (cf. *Parmenides'* objections to Socrates' theory of ideas) in a quite straightforward way, namely, in its own way, properly. In the second part of the

dialogue, on the other hand, it is rather reason as a faculty of inferences aiming at a totality that plays the game. The totality aimed at is one of conditions and conclusions, up to a knowledge of nothing less than the One. Here conclusions are drawn from hypotheses which are, at the very least, incompatible with each other. The difficulty of composing them coherently, of thinking all of them in one, is the result of a coherent reasoning. Thereby, we experience both our possibility of cogently thinking and our cogent impossibility to conceive of the result. But we are nonetheless led to grasp that impossibility as our own, as a necessary result of our reasoning, of our capability to explore the possible (at each hypothesis); as a baffling one, and, though, attained by steps of ours, made while being aware of what we were doing. Thus, in one sense, we do understand our result.

This does ease – without erasing – the frustration we are experiencing. It is not, however, as sensible beings that we feel oppressed, but rather in our very intellectual performances. It is the intellectual rather than the sensible limitation that is overcome: the reader both feels trapped in untenable conclusions and rises above her own incapability to grasp them in their necessity since the intimate possibilities of her thinking. Thus, understanding stares at reason. Understanding is exalted by being shown how its own coherence can lead it beyond itself, although not *out* of its own impasse. Far before paraconsistent logic attempted to educate us to tolerate some contradictions, Plato offers us an experience of paraconsistency.

Whereas Socrates' theory of ideas was hit by Parmenides' objections, now the intellect dwells in its own impasse. Aporia is here ambivalent, just like Achilles' spear, which could both wound and heal. Many philosophers – Plotinus, Nicholas of Cusa, most of all Hegel – will subsequently take the rise of understanding to a superior comprehension through its own aporias very seriously. They will manage to make its dwelling within them into a step further – which is not, however, an exit toward a noncontradictory stay, for contradiction somehow does remain: *it* now dwells within the result. Hegel will call this reason – which now turns out to be a faculty for totality (as in Kant) that is also one for containing

(without killing) contradictions. *Aufhebung* is Hegel's specific manner to walk the pathway of aporia, to rise by means of the latter – with its necessity – to the dimension of intelligibility. Does each step of *Aufhebung* offer the opportunity to experience, in a further fashion, the modal Sublime?

### *Back to Sensibility*

Up to this point, the modal Sublime has been spanning between reason and understanding. And sensibility? Does it have no access to the extreme tip of the dynamical Sublime, namely the modal one? This is questionable: after all, many artists do strive to show us some unforeseen *possibilities* for perception – which are possibilities *for perception*, i.e. in the sensible domain. Do they lead further – in some cases at least – to the intelligible? This, however, would only result in an experience of the modal Sublime if the disclosure of the new possibility went along with an impossibility – a quite distressing one. To this effect, I just recall the final scene of Peter Weir's *The Truman Show*, when Truman touches with his hand... the (cardboard) horizon of his entire life. And opens it to step forth.

But let's step back to the door from where one can see new possibilities for perception while feeling constrained by an impossibility. Will one then look toward an intelligible realm, or better: through the intelligible dimension of the world? Now, intelligence itself *has* been construed in terms of an – unattainable, ever displacing – horizon strictly tied with the one of sensible experience (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty; cf. also Kant's *Was heißt: sich im Denken orientieren?*). Here, however, the question is whether the relation between sensibility and intelligence as dimensions of experience provides an access to the intelligible dimension of the world. If so, this would qualify as a sensible experience of the modal Sublime, provided it would take place by means of, or at least go along with, the experience of an impossibility of ours.

Here further investigation and excursion within the arts is needed. I only sketch some clues: it is question of an open path but somehow impossible to walk along – and though, it is open *to me*. It is some impossibility of my perception that I grasp, an impossibility pertaining to me as a sensible being; thereby, I become aware of it as an impossibility of mine, as the open door I am staying in and looking from. Toward an intelligible dimension of the world? I leave this issue open. However, thanks to the artist who showed me the (obstructed) way, the door to it is now open, to me.

Perhaps more; is it, just like the Door of the Law, open *for me*?

So, is there hope, much hope – for God, but not for us? If art is sublime, it is because it opens the door. In order to stay in it, then, there is no need for any guardian.

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#### Appendix. Qualifying a Quantum of Sublime A Midsummer Daydream

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*And at the instant he knew, he ceased to know*  
(Jack London)

When quantity is in play, it is typically, extensive quantity; however, there is still room for a Sublime tied to the effects of a seemingly infinite intensity. Recall that Duns Scot, in order to convey the idea of the *Summum Ens*, had recourse to the highest degree of a quality (namely, whiteness), i.e. to an infinite *intensive* quantity; could not the latter be sublime? Its power is likely to be so annihilating for our senses as to suggest a step beyond the very domain of sensibility; if the limit of a sensible intensity cannot be born by the sight, if the highest degree of, say, whiteness is blinding, it seems thereby to hint at the equally and even more unbearable highest degree of being – the one whereby even Moses could not look into... God's face. (According to Rilke, angels

themselves ought to be careful: «Gott sah mich an; er blendete...»).

Not to mention a whiteness that goes in the very opposite direction: think of *Moby Dick*...

## Appendix II. How to Make Intelligible a Sensible World

Prolegomena to Any Future Pictures at a Tractarian Exhibition

If the limit of a sensible intensity cannot be born by the sight, what exactly does it hints thereby at? Either at a realm beyond the sensible one – in a Kantian way; or else at the very limit of this realm, if we think the world as one, nothing lying beyond it, properly. This may pave the way to a rather Wittgensteinian approach to the Sublime. Here what is intelligible is not a second world, but rather the only world inasmuch as is comprehended as *one*, from within it, by virtue of its very showing itself – as one, and as existing. Which is what the first and the second hypothesis of *Parmenides* undertake to say.

The intelligibility of the world, then, consists in its showing itself; and symbols do also participate of just this kind of intelligibility, by playing a role in the self-showing of the world. Facts in the world consist of (sensible?) objects and can be said by means signs that are themselves complexes of such objects, while their form on the one hand, and on the other hand the unity and existence of the world can only show themselves; but sensible signs only become symbols (themselves facts) because they are related to the world, because they say and show something about it, thereby housing the self-monstration of the world itself.

Each sensible sign becomes a symbol by showing the way (it says that) things are, i.e. how the world is; *that* the world is, as one and once for all, shows itself throughout each sign becoming a symbol, by accompanying their showing how things are. To have a meaning (vs. merely existing as a sensible piece of ink on paper, or wave in the air) is just to say and show something of the world. By showing the form they share with the facts, they cooperate to the self-showing of the world, thereby acquiring, in turn, an

intelligible status. Here ‘intelligible’ means, without equivocality, both ‘meaningful’ and ‘intrinsically related to the intellect’, i.e. given essentially in intellectual terms – although of course symbols are always instantiated by sensible signs; as the world is itself one, intelligible and made out of sensible objects at the same time.

Kant also talks often in terms of a one-world conception of being (in the *Critique of Judgment*, in particular, see his frequent talk of a «noumenal substrate» of phenomena) such that the intelligible domain is conceived rather as an *order* of the world (the one allowing for a Kingdom of Ends) rather than as a second world. However, in Kant the relationship between this noumenal substrate and (its) phenomena remains unclear. In Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, on the other hand, this is exactly what is highlighted: the world is intelligible inasmuch as it shows itself while consisting of sensible (so Hintikka) objects to be said (named); symbols are intelligible facts saying (stating) facts by showing their own form and by means of objects (signs) which they do not name nor mention anyway, but rather put in use.

So, provided the mystical is omnipresent, namely ceaselessly, if tacitly, present at any token of speech; could it be experienced as *sublime*? Could the experience of it turn into one whereby it unfolds as, specifically, sublime? As a reader of the *Tractatus*, I dare answer simply yes. Sublime is, in fact, what a reader of the very words of Wittgenstein’s experiences, what the mystical experienced by reading the *Tractatus* is like. With its final gesture of throwing back the ladder used to climb up, it makes intelligence culminate along with the impotence of ordinary, intellectual symbols implemented in sensible signs to say. Thus, the Sublime can be experienced just by reading Wittgenstein’s lines, quite apart from any – if any – further *mise en scène* in a sensible domain. In facts, I do not know whether any artist has yet elicited some sort of intimidating and elating experience from the *Tractatus* as a ground-text but by means of a sensible material (say, in an exhibition) other than words printed in a book.

P. S. In order to convey a vague idea of what a transposition of the modal Sublime into a perceptual (say, visual) domain might be like, a poem by Octavio Paz may be of some help:

Paisaje

Los insectos atareados,  
los caballos color de sol,  
los burros color de nube,  
las nubes, rocas enormes que no pesan,  
los montes como cielos desplomados,  
la manada de árboles bebiendo en el arroyo,  
todos están ahí, dichosos en su estar,  
frente a nosotros que no estamos,  
comidos por la rabia, por el odio,  
por el amor comidos, por la muerte.

Landscape

Insects bustling,  
Sun-coloured horses,  
Cloud-coloured donkeys,  
Clouds, huge weightless rocks,  
Mountains like heavens tumbled down,  
A herd of trees drinking in the brook,  
They all stay there, happy in their staying,  
Before us who do not,  
Eaten by anger, by hate,  
By love eaten, by death.

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