

## CHAPTER 1



# Fear and Freedom

## The Legacies of the Sublime

When Immanuel Kant included the “Analytic of the Sublime” in his 1790 *Critique of Judgment*, he stood in a tradition of aesthetic speculation reaching back over a century. The sublime had been a staple of philosophy and criticism ever since Boileau’s 1674 translation of Longinus. The category was discussed by authors from Addison, Burke, and Kames to Herder and Mendelssohn. It had been brought to bear on topics from art to ethics, history, and theology, and along the way it articulated much about how eighteenth-century subjects thought, felt, and understood themselves. Yet in the period after the third *Critique*, the sublime lost its ubiquitous place. By the middle and late nineteenth century, it became rare as an explicit topic of discussion. This remained the case until the closing decades of the twentieth century, when the category was resurrected by postmodern theorists with literary critics and, more recently, analytic philosophers following them. With this, the sublime has once again become a mainstay of scholarly rumination, the subject of copious debate about its nature and relevance to the experience of modern life.

This view of the sublime’s uneven history, its career encompassing ubiquity, dissolution and a long dormant period as well as a sudden and seemingly unbidden return to prominence, leaves some important questions unanswered. Did the sublime really disappear without trace in the early nineteenth century? If so, why was it taken up again so readily in the late twentieth? If the postmoderns did not pull the sublime from oblivion, or invent a new one from whole cloth, what was its status in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? In fact the view of the sublime as a phenomenon relevant only to two isolated historical moments, while it is an important starting point, is incomplete. It masks a deeper story of how talk about this idea has come to

define modern culture in profound ways. Appreciating this involves considering the sublime not only as part of the eighteenth-century or postmodern zeitgeist, but as a category which shaped the debates and influenced the imaginations of those throughout the intervening period. The legacy of the eighteenth-century sublime is a pervasive way of thinking about the modern subject in philosophy and literature and it is in the ostensible gap of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that this more deeply felt influence shows itself.

### The Romantic Threshold

Scholarship about the fate of the sublime in the nineteenth century has recently tended towards a fuller view of its influence. The key issue is the sublime's strangely ambivalent relationship to romanticism. The great majority of the major texts on the sublime were written well before the close of the eighteenth century: Addison's writings in the *Spectator* (1712–1714), Burke's *Enquiry* (1759), and Kames's *Elements of Criticism* (1765) are examples (Ashfield and de Bolla). High romantic authors such as Wordsworth and Coleridge do indeed write on the sublime, but they tend not to give the term quite the prominence it has for, say, Burke. Yet for all this, the sublime is largely held to be a crucial concept for understanding the culture of romanticism. Critical works such as Thomas Weiskel's *The Romantic Sublime* and Frances Ferguson's *Solitude and the Sublime* successfully apply the concept to romantic texts. These studies follow Samuel Monk's influential study *The Sublime*, which advances the thesis that the eighteenth-century sublime was a crucial element in the large-scale cultural shift from the Augustan to the romantic. In all, there appears to be something of a paradoxical relationship between the sublime and romantic culture. This is summed up by James Kirwan in his *Sublimity*: “[t]he period that saw the sublime fading from aesthetics also saw the appearance of those very works that we are now most likely to think of as illustrative of the sublime” (Kirwan 126). There seems to be a mismatch between the sublime's importance in the cultural climate, which is held to increase as romanticism develops, and its presence as a subject of explicit discussion, which at the same time wanes. The sublime as a culturally inflected construct clearly undergoes change in the transition from the mid-eighteenth century to the romantic period; it is no longer the favored category of critics and aestheticians that it once was. Yet it is far from clear that this change is a simple decline.

Kirwan considers the lack of theorizing about the sublime and its

increasing cultural prominence to be in fact aspects of the same process. For him, the early nineteenth century sees the sublime shift between discourses. He talks about an “inverse ratio between the interest of aesthetics and the interest of taste with regard to the sublime,” which leads him to conclude that “the ‘decline’ of the sublime in the nineteenth century is, then, a phenomenon confined entirely to the discipline of aesthetics” (Kirwan 127; 128). Yet even localized within the province of aesthetics, things are not so simple as a decline. There is instead an inclusion of what had been called the sublime into broader categories such that it is no longer treated as a separate and clearly delineated entity. Other categories, such as beauty, art, or imagination, take on aspects of the sublime’s role and are inevitably altered in the process. Thus “as the significance of the aesthetic (or more usually Art) per se becomes equivalent to one notion of the significance of the sublime, so the sublime slips into a minor role” (126). The changes of the early nineteenth century, on this view, see the presence of the sublime become more implicit but also more wide-ranging.

Peter de Bolla’s work on the sublime can usefully flesh out the processes which Kirwan identifies. In *The Discourse of the Sublime*, de Bolla distinguishes ways in which categories can be located in their discursive context. They can take the form either of what he calls a discourse on something or a discourse of something. A discourse on something is “to be taken as a discrete discourse, a discourse which is to be read in a highly specific way, within a very well defined context” (de Bolla 9). Such discourses are marked out by their explicit commitments and positioning; they are “discourses which say ‘read me like this’” (10). There is also a discourse of something, which “does not [. . .] demand that it be read as a discrete discourse on something” (10). A discourse of something is instead characterized by its wide distribution, that it is “made up of a number of discrete discourses” (10). Thus the discourse of politics, for example, will be located “in a wide range of discursive situations—this is clear from our own sense of the political” (10). To put it in de Bolla’s terms, then, what the early nineteenth century witnesses is a marked shrinking of the discourse on the sublime, a decline in the amount of texts which are explicitly and self-consciously part of a definite practice of inquiry into the sublime. It does not follow from this, though, that the discourse of the sublime likewise shrinks. In fact, given the processes that Kirwan identifies, with the sublime becoming more ubiquitous in culture outside of aesthetics and being absorbed into other aesthetic categories, it seems that the sublime became even more present. The discourse of the sublime grows as the discourse on the

sublime shrinks. This view is extremely useful in allowing the sublime to be studied across time. De Bolla identifies the political economy of the 1840s as a legacy of the sublime even though his focus is tightly on the period of the Seven Years' War—something taken up in the next chapter. This view, moreover, is implicit in the several recent studies which locate the sublime in various particular discursive contexts throughout the nineteenth century, such as Vybarr Creggan-Reid's study of the discourse on time, Ann Colley's of travel writing, and Stephen Hancock's of the domestic novel.

Whilst this book is similarly interested in the post-romantic developments of the sublime, it hews somewhat closer to de Bolla's work than that of Creggan-Reid, Colley, or Hancock.<sup>1</sup> Unlike these authors, I do not restrict my analysis to one specific and discrete discourse. This is because, like de Bolla's, this book attempts to give an account of the sublime's relevance to a particular tradition of subjectivity and, as de Bolla notes, "categories such as the subject are more likely to be stretched across a vast array of discrete discourses rather than inhering within any one," so the areas in which these preoccupations interact with subjectivity occur in a great range of texts (de Bolla 8). De Bolla's project is to show the role of the sublime in producing "the autonomous subject, a conceptualization of human subjectivity based on the self-determination of the subject and the uniqueness of every individual" (8). He does this by showing how structural features of discourses lead to specific ways of conceiving the subject. In particular, he argues that the discourses on the national debt and the sublime led to "a conceptualization of the subject as the excess or overplus of discourse itself; as the remainder, that which cannot be appropriated or included within the present discursive network of control" (6). That is, the subject is underdetermined by legislating discourses, and this means it can be understood as self-determining. This book's account takes after this thesis. It, too, seeks to show how the sublime associates an excess with the subject's potential independence.

### Kant and the Sublime Tradition

One particular philosophical articulation of this structure has an unmatched influence. This articulation appears at the very threshold of romanticism and makes a powerful intervention in the discourse on the sublime just as it was starting this process of diffusion. Because of this, it profoundly shaped the development of the sublime into the nineteenth century and beyond. This account is that given in Kant's

*Critique of Judgment*. In the *Critique's* "Analytic of the Sublime," Kant inaugurates a way of staging the sublime so that it connotes human autonomy with reference to nature. This reworking of the sublime tradition was so useful in articulating important parts of the post-Kantian intellectual climate that it became very widely influential. In Kant's account, the subject is confronted with an object which presents itself as a threat to either the subject's physical being or its cognitive processes. Contemplating this object causes an ambivalent response. This ambivalence is then taken to speak of an underdetermination of the subject by the object, since the threatening object should naturally determine only a negative response. The excess represented by the positive element of the ambivalent feeling reveals the subject's capacity to judge things outside of what nature determines. This structure bears a similarity to the generation of autonomous subjectivity that de Bolla finds in mid-century British discourse of the sublime. De Bolla's "discursive network of control" instead becomes, in the context of Kant's moral philosophy, the heteronomy of the subject's natural being. The "Analytic" can thus be placed in the context of the broader sublime tradition and can be read as a complex encounter between that tradition and the themes of Kantian philosophy.

As the description above suggests, central to Kant's account of the sublime is its status as an ambivalent feeling. The sublime is for him a "negative pleasure," and he states that "the object is taken up as sublime with a pleasure that is possible only by means of a displeasure" (CJ 129; 143). In this, Kant is squarely in the sublime tradition. Affective ambivalence was a commonplace of commentary on the sublime. There is some suggestion of it in Longinus's rhetorical treatise where the effects of the sublime are distinguished from the "merely persuasive and pleasant" (Longinus 143). The theme was picked up and given prominence in the eighteenth century by John Dennis. In his 1704 *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry*, Dennis claims that "enthusiastic terror contributes extremely to the sublime" (Ashfield and de Bolla 37). In describing his crossing of the Alps, he dwells upon the ambivalence of the experience: "The sense of all this produc'd different motions in me, viz. a delightful Horrour, a terrible Joy, and at the same time, that I was infinitely pleas'd, I trembled" (Dennis 1943; 380). The conceptual chiasmus of "a delightful Horrour, a terrible Joy" emphasizes that the feeling is intensely ambivalent. The eighteenth-century author on the sublime who gives most prominence to the theme is Burke, who develops his theory of pain and pleasure as independent of one another in order to account for the sublime's unique ambivalent relationship to them (Burke 30–31).

Kant is just as forthright as Burke on the sublime's ambivalent affect. As with Burke's theory, Kant's dynamic sublime is impossible without a feeling of fear. He says "that which we strive to resist is an evil, and, if we find our capacity to be no match for it, an object of fear" (CJ 144). Thus "nature can count as a power, thus as dynamically sublime, only insofar as it is considered an object of fear" (144). The dynamic sublime object, then, is, one which, if we were compelled to try to resist it, we would stand no chance, even being destroyed in the attempt, and is therefore an object that naturally and appropriately evokes fear. The mathematical sublime identifies a different but analogous species of natural negative reaction. Mathematically sublime objects make us fear not for our physical wellbeing but for our cognitive abilities. Kant describes this kind of sublime as "a feeling of displeasure from the inadequacy of the imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude for the estimation by means of reason" (141). The usual role of the imagination in estimating magnitude is thwarted by the sublime object. Displeasure thus comes from a threat to cognitive processes important for navigating objects around us. Kant therefore falls in line with the tradition that takes a negative component to the affect as essential to the sublime. For him, the sublime is occasioned only by those objects which can pose a threat to our ways of interacting with the world either physically or mentally.

For Kant, the negative aspect of the sublime feeling is eminently explicable. If this were all there was to it there would be little to say; it is trivial to assert that threatening objects tend to cause a negative reaction. It is because the experience is ambivalent, not just negative, that the sublime is interesting. The positive aspect of the sublime is what indicates an excess over and above the obvious ways in which natural objects determine our reactions. The discussion of the mathematical sublime goes on to say that it is also "a pleasure that is thereby aroused at the same time from the correspondence of this very judgment of the inadequacy of the greatest sensible faculty in comparison with ideas of reason" (CJ 141). Where an object's size causes us displeasure from the inadequacy of our imagination, there is also a pleasure derived from the exercise of our reason. Drawing together mathematical and dynamic, Kant asserts that the sublime discloses factors over and above the logic of nature:

For just as we found our own limitation in the immeasurability of nature and the insufficiency of our capacity to adopt a standard proportionate to the aesthetic estimation of the magnitude of its domain, but nevertheless found in our own faculty of reason another,

nonsensical standard which has that very infinity under itself as a unit against which everything in nature is small, and thus found in our own mind a superiority over nature itself even in its immeasurability: likewise the irresistibility of its power certainly makes us, considered as rational beings, recognise our physical powerlessness, but at the same time it reveals a capacity for judging ourselves as independent of it and a superiority over nature on which is grounded a self-preservation of quite another kind than that which can be threatened and endangered by nature outside us, whereby the humanity in our person remains undemeaned even though the human being must submit to that dominion. (CJ 145)

The objects of the sublime expose “the insufficiency of our capacity” and “our physical powerlessness,” but the experience of the sublime reveals also an excess on the part of the subject. The positive aspects of the sublime experience are those which are not determined by natural factors, such that we find “a unit against which everything in nature is small,” and “a self-preservation of quite another kind than that which can be threatened and endangered by nature.” In both cases, the positive aspect of the sublime ambivalence shows “a superiority over nature,” a foundation for the self-determination of the subject.

### Moral Heroism

The emphasis on autonomy gives away that this interpretation of sublime ambivalence has its roots in Kant’s ethical theory. For Kant, the sublime is very close to ethics: “In fact a feeling for the sublime in nature cannot even be conceived without connecting it to a disposition of the mind which is similar to the moral disposition” (CJ 151). This linking of the sublime with ethics is another way in which Kant revises commonplaces of the sublime tradition with reference to his own preoccupations. The discussion of the sublime as having a close relation to the ethical has a long history. De Bolla, for example, notes that “[i]t is often remarked that eighteenth-century theories of the sublime began in ethics” (de Bolla 32). He says of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson that “if either writer can be said to be interested in aesthetics *per se*, that interest is clearly tempered by their profoundly ethical standpoints” (32). The investigation into the aesthetic in general, and the sublime in particular, was for these writers occasioned by the enquiry into the moral feeling, so it is not surprising that the sublime was held by them to be ethically elevating. For Thomas Reid, later in the century, the contemplation of grand

objects “inspires magnanimity and a contempt of what is mean” (Reid 494). More broadly, the sublime is in important instances held to help produce a virtuous character. This is the case for Burke’s theory. Burke does not associate the sublime with magnanimity; indeed, his sublime is ultimately self-interested, arising as it does from the instinct for self-preservation (Burke 36). Nonetheless, as Tom Furniss and Terry Eagleton point out, Burke’s theory also serves to valorize the figure of the virtuous bourgeois laborer (Furniss 2; Eagleton 56). Burke’s sublime is, as Eagleton puts it, the “rich man’s labour,” and is recommended as an important inoculation against the corrupting idleness to which the beautiful can dispose us (56). There is, therefore, a widespread tendency to link the feeling for the sublime to the cultivation of some virtue, however conceived.

The way in which Kant does this is strongly influenced by a related but usually distinct sublime thread. This thread is the heroic sublime. It, too, links particular aspects of character to the feeling of the sublime, but these aspects reside on the objective side rather than the subjective. That is, certain heroic characters come to be presented as objects which themselves inspire a sublime feeling. The powerful and courageous heroes of antiquity and myth are frequently cited. Interest in such characters stretches back to Longinus, who dwells upon how Homer “is accustomed to enter into the greatness of his heroes,” and points to the passing of Ajax, Achilles, and Patroclus as evidence in his judgment that *The Odyssey* is only an inferior epilogue to the *Iliad* (Longinus 152–53). This interest continued into the eighteenth century, with James Beattie pointing to Milton’s Satan, as well as Achilles and Alexander, to exemplify sublime characters (Beattie 370). John Baillie, too, speaks of the “affections unexceptionably sublime, as heroism, or desire of conquest, as in an Alexander or a Caesar” (Baillie 20). Given the nature of these characters, of course, the heroic sublime could sit somewhat uncomfortably with the moral sublime; the taste for characters known for their cruelty could be difficult to reconcile with a sublime that was held to be morally edifying (Kirwan 47).

Nevertheless, there is an element of the heroic sublime in Kant’s theory. His reference to the sublimity of lawfully conducted war hints at some influence by this theme:

Even war, if it is conducted with order and reverence for the rights of civilians, has something sublime about it, and at the same time makes the mentality of the people who conduct it in this way all the more sublime, the more dangers it has been exposed to and before which it has been able to assert its courage. (CJ 146)



Kant here rather unsuccessfully tries to avoid the moral qualms raised by stipulating respect for the “rights of civilians” (146). However, more interesting in this passage is that the discussion of war also touches upon the moral sublime. The sublimity found in war, as Kant here claims, can also foster a positive virtue. It is an opportunity to be courageous. This is significant because the overcoming of inclination, of which courage is a paradigm example, is essential to Kant’s conception of the moral agent. Famously, for Kant moral worth is present only in autonomous action—that is, in action that is done out of respect for the demands of rational duty. Any actions to which the agent is inclined are considered heteronomous and so lack this worth. The most vivid depiction of this conception of moral agency can be found in *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. One of Kant’s examples concerns a man who is not disposed to benevolence:

[I]f nature had put little sympathy in the heart of this or that man; if (in other respects an honest man) he is by temperament cold and indifferent to the sufferings of others, perhaps because he himself is provided with the special gift of patience and endurance toward his own sufferings, and presupposes the same in every other and even requires it: if nature had not properly fashioned such a man (who would in truth not be its worst product) for a philanthropist, would he not still find within himself a source from which to give himself a far higher worth than what a mere good-natured temperament might have? By all means! It is just then that the worth of character comes out, which is moral and incomparably the highest, namely that he is beneficent not from inclination but from duty. (PP 54)

It is in acting independently of inclination that worth of character is found. Moreover, inclination is here identified with nature; it is nature which has put little sympathy in the heart of the man, and has endowed him with his unusual patience and strength. The man’s moral worth comes from his overcoming of nature in his constitution and his inclinations. This view can be contrasted with, say, an Aristotelian or virtue ethical approach, in which the inclinations themselves are to be aligned with ethical norms. Instead, the demands of morality entail a heroic conflict with nature in its guise as inclination.

In the experience of the dynamic sublime, Kant’s subject imagines itself as a moral hero like that described in the *Groundwork*. For an object to be dynamically sublime it must be fearful and, for Kant, judging an object to be fearful involves considering it hypothetically as a threat to us:

We can, however, consider an object as fearful without being afraid of it, if, namely, we judge it in such a way that we merely think of the case in which we might wish to resist it and think that in that case all resistance would be completely futile. (*CJ* 144)

Thus, even if we are not directly afraid of something, not afflicted by any immediate inclination away from it, we nonetheless think of a situation in which we would be afraid. Confronted by an object which we could not resist, we would have the strongest possible natural inclination against it. Thus nature, in the form of physical power and in the related form of our inclination to fear that power, would seem impossible to overcome. Yet even as we judge the fearful object to be overwhelming, we find a way in which we could freely resist it. This is argued in the discussion of dynamically sublime objects. These objects

make our capacity to resist into an insignificant trifle in comparison with their power. But the sight of them only becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, as long as we find ourselves in safety, and we gladly call these objects sublime because they elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level, and allow us to discover within ourselves a capacity for resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to measure ourselves against the apparent all-powerfulness of nature. (144)

Kant reiterates the point, claiming that nature is judged to be sublime

because it calls forth our power (which is not part of nature) to regard those things about which we are concerned (goods, health and life) as trivial, and hence to regard its power (to which we are, to be sure, subjected in regard to these things) as not the sort of dominion over ourselves and our authority to which we would bow if it came down to our highest principles and their affirmation or abandonment. (*CJ* 145)

Thus, these objects, which would otherwise be both irresistible and the cause for terrible fear, become sublime when we regard them from a position of security. This is because they cause us to present a case in which we could, like the moral hero of Kant's early ethics, overcome the very strongest of our natural inclinations. We show courage equal to any hero of antiquity in these cases, as we imagine ourselves heedless of our very lives in the exercise of freedom. Kant has united

a moral sense of the sublime, one which discloses us our potential to be moral agents, with a heroic sublime which is inspired by great and courageous feats of will.

So Kant's particular staging of the sublime emerges out of a complex interaction between aspects of the sublime tradition, all guided by the preoccupation with autonomy which dominates his ethics. This means that, despite the many links between Kant's theory and the eighteenth-century tradition of the sublime, the Kantian staging is quite distinctive. Emily Brady sums it up when she states that Kant's theory "stands out from those of his predecessors and contemporaries for its strong metaphysical component," which "links the sublime as a form of aesthetic experience with the sense of freedom possessed by moral beings" (Brady 47). Yet to stop there would understate what is remarkable about the "Analytic." This is because it not only stands out from other theories of the sublime, it also fits somewhat awkwardly even within the *Critique of Judgment* itself. The third *Critique*, according to Kant, was an endeavor to expound in the concept of judgement "the mediating concept between the concepts of nature and the concept of freedom" (CJ 81). The importance of this, as Paul Guyer suggests, is that, whilst Kant does not abandon his view of the "unlimited freedom of the noumenal agent," he qualifies his attitude to how this freedom should express itself (Guyer *Experience of Freedom* 37). Freedom should be expressed within the sensuous world of nature, rather than only occurring in opposition to it:

What is added is the idea that a feeling engendered by aesthetic response can represent this metaphysical claim to us through our imagination, and that it is apparently quite important that the basis of morality receive such a sensible representation. (37)

This is part of what Guyer calls a "profound ripening in Kant's conception of morality which took place in the last decade of his creativity" (31). In this ripening, Kant came to the view that inclination and moral action are not necessarily opposed, and that the former may aid the latter. The example discussed above from the *Groundwork* can be contrasted with one from *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. Here Kant describes someone who possesses a "joyous heart" in following duty. A "slavish determination of mind," Kant here says, "can never obtain without a hidden *hatred* of the law, and the joyous heart in following its duty (not complacency in the *acknowledgment* of it) is a sign of the genuineness of virtuous disposition" (Kant in

Guyer *Experience of Freedom* 32). There is no longer here any interest in resisting inclination with gritted teeth. The view put forward is instead that, as Guyer says,

the nature of one's feelings is not simply to be taken as a given, to be ignored by the free will and overridden when necessary, but that feelings, as part of one's natural being, should and can be modified to help perfect the harmony between one's natural and rational being. (Guyer *Experience of Freedom* 32)

This is the ethical context in which the *Critique of Judgment* should be interpreted. Indeed, the third *Critique's* talk of mediation between nature and freedom does suggest that it aims to bring natural inclination and moral autonomy into harmony. As Guyer suggests, in the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant "has certainly gone beyond the heroic view of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, on which the free will simply ignores the facts of nature" (46). The "Analytic of the Sublime" is part of this project. It explains a way in which natural objects can induce awareness in the subject of its freedom. Moreover, since this is an aesthetic pleasure, if a mixed one, then a taste for the sublime feeling can be allied to moral action.

Nevertheless, it is striking that the "Analytic of the Sublime" appeals to the previous, heroic view of moral freedom in order to induce this awareness. Unlike the beautiful, the sublime does not foster harmony between the natural and rational being; rather it depends on staging a conflict between them in which reason triumphs. The sublime comes from realizing the free will's ability to overrule even the strongest natural inclinations. The point is not that the *Critique of Judgment* is incoherent. The sublime, of course, does not rely on the actual exercise of such a drastic act of freedom; the subject is merely caused to contemplate it. Nevertheless, this is a significant difference of emphasis between the "Analytic of the Sublime" and the rest of the third *Critique*. Kant's sublime is an idea oddly set apart, drawing its logic and force from earlier iterations of Kant's ethics and from the sublime tradition rather than fitting seamlessly into his later work.

### Staging Freedom

Given that Kant's sublime has to some extent a valency of its own even in the text in which it first appears, it is unsurprising that it took on an independent life outside of his philosophy. His striking and

distinctive approach to the sublime, and its emphasis on the revelation of freedom, was by no means peripheral to the reception of Kant's aesthetics. This can best be seen in the writings of his contemporary and disciple, Friedrich Schiller. Schiller was an important figure in the reception of Kant, and Kant's aesthetics in particular, serving as a route to Kantian ideas for many teutonophiles. Germaine de Staël's account of Kant's sublime, for instance, was mediated by Schiller (Kirwan 69). Thomas Carlyle, who is treated in the next chapter, had likely only limited familiarity with Kant, but he was far more familiar with Schiller (Ashton 92). Schiller's popularity is significant because he took up and expanded Kant's sublime. Frederick Beiser points out how Schiller's sublime begins from "perfectly Kantian premises," which view the sublime as opposing sensible nature to rational freedom (Beiser, *Schiller* 260). Schiller's essay "Concerning the Sublime" is framed at the outset by the issue of human free will. He begins by stating that "[t]he will is what distinguishes the human race," and then, "[a]ll other things must; the human being is the entity that wills" (Schiller 70). Schiller is, if anything, more explicit than Kant is about the connection between ambivalent affect and moral autonomy. He says that the "feeling of the sublime is a mixed feeling," one that combines "*being in anguish* (at its peak this expresses itself as a shudder) and being happy (something that can escalate to a kind of ecstasy)" (74). Crucially, he states that "[t]his synthesis of two contradictory sensations in a single feeling establishes our moral self-sufficiency in an irrefutable manner" (74). Schiller's account of the sublime here states succinctly that it is the ambivalence, the complexity of the sublime feeling that "establishes" our independence.

Besides being more explicit about it, Schiller also broadens the implications of this logic. This occurs in his discussion of the Laocoön sculpture in his essay "On the Pathetic." Here Schiller takes as his starting point the famous facial expression of Laocoön upon being attacked by serpents. Schiller describes the expression as one which demonstrates Laocoön's suffering and turmoil, but which nonetheless does not show him crying out in pain or panic. Schiller interprets the sculpture according to a variation on the Kantian sublime. The following comment is crucial:

Whenever the vipers would have taken hold of him, it would have moved and shaken us. The fact, however, that it occurs precisely at that moment when he deserves our respect as a father, the fact that his demise is represented as the immediate result of fulfilling

his paternal duty, as the consequence of the tender concern for his children— this ignites our participation to the utmost. It is now as though he freely chooses to surrender himself to the disaster and his death becomes an action of his will. (Schiller 59)

Schiller emphasizes the troubling negative affect, both for Laocoön and for the “moved and shaken” viewer. However, the emphasis is on the vindication of Laocoön’s will. He has chosen to perform his paternal duty even at the cost of his life. He thus demonstrates that the serpents are, as Kant would have it, “not the sort of dominion over ourselves and our authority to which we would bow if it came down to our highest principles and their affirmation or abandonment” (CJ 145). Guyer lays out the consequences of this, saying that Schiller transforms “Kant’s analysis of the dynamical sublime into an account of the depiction of freedom in the highest forms of art” (Guyer *Modern Aesthetics* 476). Where in Kant’s sublime observing natural power ultimately reveals our moral freedom, “in Schiller’s account of tragedy it is the will and action of the depicted character that reveal the power of *his* moral being, and perhaps by implication of our own as well” (476). In this way, the Kantian sublime began to develop and transform after the third *Critique*. Schiller maintains Kant’s structure of the sublime and its central emphasis on the independence of the subject, but he expands the definition and possibilities of Kant’s sublime. For one thing, Schiller applies it to a work of art, whereas Kant insists the sublime is only a response to natural objects. Relatedly, Schiller has a less traditional sense of what can be a sublime object. The serpents that threaten Laocoön are quite different from the ocean storms and starry skies that Kant cites. Both of these developments are consequences of the most important shift represented by Schiller’s reinterpretation. This is that he opens the sublime up to being a staging of human freedom. Rather than its being found only in a very specific variety of aesthetic experience that an individual might encounter, the logic of the Kantian sublime can exist within a work of art. The sublime thus becomes a way art can express, and interrogate, human self-determination. Schiller’s enthusiastic adoption and revision of the Kantian logic of the sublime reveals that crux in its history when it transformed from being primarily a discrete and self-conscious discourse to being a broadly influential implicit one.

This is the sublime that the next generation of post-Kantian thinkers took up. It is prominent in the thought both of Hegel and Schopenhauer. Hegel’s aesthetics have a lesser role for the sublime than do those

of Kant or Schiller but, as the next chapter discusses, the influence of the Kantian staging of the sublime is visible in the life or death struggle of the “Lordship and Bondage” section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Schopenhauer’s sublime, discussed in the fourth chapter, is largely a development of Kant’s. These philosophers were of course themselves immensely influential as figures in the modern development of thought about the self. Charles Taylor talks of the importance of Kant and his followers on this count. He says of Kantian autonomy that it

has been a powerful, it is not overstated to say revolutionary, force in modern civilization. It seems to offer a prospect of pure self-activity, where my action is determined not by the merely given, the facts of nature (including inner nature), but ultimately by my own agency as a formulator of rational law. This is the point of origin of the stream of modern thought, developing through Fichte, Hegel and Marx, which refuses to accept the merely “positive”, what history, or tradition, or nature offers as a guide to value or action, and insists on an autonomous generation of the forms we live by. (Taylor 364)

The figures here mentioned, of course, have great philosophical differences between them. But they, as well as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and even Freud, not to mention the literary writers who engaged with their work, all participated in the endeavor of working through a modern subjectivity characterized by self-determination. Among those who followed in this current, then, the sublime was on hand to provide a way of dramatizing and giving shape to their various conceptions of this modern self.

As the breadth of this tradition suggests, the uses of the sublime made by these authors will differ in various ways. Perhaps the biggest axis of difference concerns whether the sublime’s staging of the human against nature is given an individual or a collective significance. That is, whether the emphasis is put on the individual’s experience of their own freedom or whether it is humanity as a whole’s relationship with the natural world that is focused upon. This ambiguity emerged early in the post-Kantian tradition. It is something which Matt Ffytche picks up on in the course of discussing Fichte. He points out that Taylor’s locution of “autonomous generation of the forms we live by” raises the question

does this mean we as individuals, or we collectively, as humankind?  
To what degree are the forms of our ethical life necessarily shared?  
If the aspiration of this radical autonomy is “ultimately to a total

liberation,” is this of the self or of society? [. . .] “self-defining subjectivity’ appears to suggest a creative individualism; but Taylor also observes that the modern shift to a self-defining subject was bound up with a sense of control over the world—“at first intellectual and then technological”—which seems to imply, at root, collective and social phenomena. (Ffytche 43)

This ambivalence is a real one and is visible in the various uses to which the sublime was put. There are those which engage this collective, social emphasis and those which stay in the realm of the private and individual, although of course the distinction is by no means always clear cut. The former is represented in Carlyle’s and Marx’s and Engels’s concern with social and economic development, and also in the way the sublime tradition interacts with post-Darwinian ways of thinking about humanity’s place in nature, as exemplified by Huxley and Wells. The latter tendency is found in the emphases of Schopenhauer and Freud on the deep problems of living an individual life as a human being entangled within nature.

### Subjects and Objects

While this introduction has largely been concerned with the philosophical provenance of this inheritance, it remains to stress that it is by no means strictly philosophical. The sublime in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was characterized precisely by its not being confined to philosophy and aesthetics, but by its presence across many discourses. Indeed, the sublime as I follow it exists inevitably at the threshold between philosophy on one side and literature on the other. This study therefore takes as its material both literary and theoretical texts brought together by common influence and concern. These texts generally present a representative of the sublime object and the subject of the experience. The precise depiction of each of these elements varies greatly. In the *Critique of Judgment*, of course, the object is represented by the traditional accoutrements of the natural sublime, starry skies and waterfalls. Whilst the pull of these eighteenth-century commonplaces remains and periodically resurfaces in altered form, as in Wells, or as a resource of metaphor, as in Conrad’s descriptions of the London streets, a greater variety of sublime objects come to the fore. These include Marx’s and Engels’s industrial landscape as manifestation of bourgeois power and the disturbing dreamscape featured in Joyce’s “Circe.”



The other side of the equation provides even more interesting variations of the basic structure. As different authors amend and appropriate the sublime subject, it becomes variously embodied and embroidered. It becomes linked with particular positively valued qualities or virtues, something seen in the technocratic bent and scientific thinking of Wells's "New Republicans," and also in the chivalric virtues of Conrad's Assistant Commissioner of Police in *The Secret Agent*. The subject will also often have a class position, as is of course the case for the class-conscious proletarian of *The Communist Manifesto*, and will also be gendered. Indeed, the gendering of the sublime as masculine is a particularly pervasive fact, explicit in Burke and implicit but, as Barbara Claire Freeman points out, still very present in Kant (Freeman 72). This gendering casts a long shadow over those articulations of sublime agency that are governed by this Kantian inheritance. The presentation of the sublime subject as male is ultimately subverted in Joyce's radically plural form of subjectivity.

These literary texts are discussed alongside non-literary works in order to contextualize and clarify the philosophical issues at stake. However, the literary texts do not stand as simple explanations or paraphrases of the ideas in the philosophical ones. The unfolding of this legacy is considerably more complicated than this. Given that the sublime stands at the intersection of aesthetics, philosophy, and literature, the distinctions between the discourses often becomes unstable. For example, the literary flourishes and narrative strategies that Freud uses turn out to be central to his attempt to theorize the uncanny. For their part, the literary texts do not simply embody the discursive ones, but provide critiques, modifications, or expansions of the theories. Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, for example, reflects much of Schopenhauer's aesthetic theory, but Conrad also in some ways goes further than Schopenhauer, with the novel's "ironic treatment" developing consequences only implicit in Schopenhauer's theory. Likewise, the sublime in Wells's early fiction works to expose the tensions in the utopian visions of his later nonfiction. This book, then, examines sites of dialogue between the literary and philosophical or theoretical texts in which the legacies of the sublime persist. The history it documents is of course not exhaustive; it focusses on one, albeit influential, strand of a complex cultural inheritance, and works of necessity by exemplification. Nevertheless, in the chapters that follow, my readings will endeavor to allow the subjects of the modern sublime to step forth, one after another, from their various backgrounds, and in doing so tell some part of the story of the sublime's profound legacy.