

**THE PLACE OF THE SUBLIME:**

**TOWARD A POSTMODERN SUBLIME IN THE WAKE**

**OF KANT AND IN HONOR OF DUFRENNE**

Hence sublimity is contained not in any thing of nature, but only in our mind, insofar as we can become conscious of our superiority to nature within us, and thereby also to nature outside us (as far as it influences us).

-- Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*

The sublime would thus be... our feeling of alienation or being lost in the aesthetic object, the sacrifice of subjectivity to something toward which it transcends itself and which transcends it.

-- Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*

In its very disproportionateness, the sublime is still a human measure.

-- Jacques Derrida, "Why Peter Eisenman Writes Such Good Books"

Where is the sublime? How are we to locate it? What is it to locate something as apparently amorphous and ethereal as the sublime -- whose very name connotes vaporization? What does it mean to find a place, a proper place (if there is one), for the sublime? These are questions that Mikel Dufrenne might well have asked, and if he did not do so explicitly, they were close to his concerns in *Le Poétique* and in later writings on the poetic power of nature. In my presentation today, I shall render homage to the man to whom I owe so much by considering something he treated only passingly in the otherwise comprehensive corpus of his work.

Notice that I do not ask: What is the sublime? That question would move us somewhere else indeed. Not only would it involve us in a search for the elusive essence of sublimity, but it would force us to compare different theories of the sublime: those, say, of Longinus, Burke, and Kant. Instead of any such search or comparison, I want to consider the question of the locus of the sublime in terms borrowed from Kant, who (along with Alain) was the main inspiration for Dufrenne's occasional speculations on the sublime. It was doubtless Kant's insistence on the rooting of the sublime in the human subject that discouraged Dufrenne from undertaking his own independent exploration of the topic. It is as if Dufrenne thought that the sublime had been forever tainted by the transcendental turn and thus was better avoided altogether in the phenomenology and ontology of art -- unless it could be rethought as that which "arises when we renounce all feeling, all return to self, in order to exist in the object through the sublimation of subjectivity."<sup>1</sup> Here I shall take up Dufrenne's challenge to rethink Kant by embedding the latter's looming subjectivism in a more capacious problematic, that of its location in what I shall call "wildscapes." In this way, I shall try to think through the sublime on its own terms and in its own direction -- and in such a way

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<sup>1</sup> The most important allusions to the sublime are in Mikel Dufrenne, *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, tr. E. S. Casey et al (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), Pp. 61, 82, 162, 162n., 427; and his *Le poétique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), where on P. 172 Dufrenne acknowledges that the sublime can be said to "precede, if not condition, the experience of the Poetic." But insofar as this implies that Nature has to be conceived in its "savage immensity," Dufrenne concludes that "it is not on this route alone that we must orient the analysis of the poetic." (*Ibid.*) As he specifies on p. 194, "if one wants to specify the poetic as an aesthetic category," then it resides [rather] both in the generosity and benevolence of the sensible." For Dufrenne's most mature conception of Nature, see *L'inventaire des a priori: recherche de l'originnaire* (Paris: Bourgeois, 1981), Part Three, chapter four.

as to engender a specifically postmodern sense of sublimity. Thanks to Kant's often aporetic pronouncements, I shall concern myself with how the sublime figures in concrete landscapes -- how, more generally, it forms part of placescapes (of which wildscapes are a distinctive subset) in order to discern how there can be a sublime of such -scapes. Ultimately, it is a matter of locating the sublime through and in wild places (and only then through their representations in paintings and other art forms). Or more exactly, of locating the aesthetic power of the sublime through the elemental power of the non-simple emplacement it effects and requires.

## I

In *The Critique of Judgment* Kant presents us with a paradox of placement. On the one hand, what is sublime -- mathematically or dynamically so -- is indissociably linked with natural objects. Without (the experience of) these objects, we would not have the least inkling of sublimity. Even if they do not house the sublime in any straightforward way, they are indispensable for eliciting the sublime: "arousing" it and "prompting" it, as Kant puts it. They may not hold the sublime, but they do seem to present it. They certainly occasion it. On the other hand, the generation of the sublime occurs in us. The place of this generation is within. As Kant says expressly, "true sublimity must be sought only in the mind (im Gemüt) of the judging person, not in the natural object the judging of which prompts this mental attunement."<sup>2</sup> The sublime is a mental event, not a natural phenomenon. It is what happens **to us in us** insofar as we are solicited by a natural spectacle. Requisite as the spectacle is, it does not possess the sublime as a property or power of its own. As Kant adds, "all we are entitled to say is that the [natural object is suitable for exhibiting a sublimity that can be found **[angetroffen: encountered]** in the mind. For what is sublime, in the proper meaning of the term, cannot be contained in any sensible form."<sup>3</sup> This is why Kant denies outright that even the most tumultuous ocean can be called

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<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, tr. W. S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackette, 1987), p. 113.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99. The reference to "arousing" (**regemachen**) occurs at *ibid.*: the sublime "concerns only ideas of reason, which, though they cannot be exhibited adequately, are aroused and called to mind, by this very inadequacy, which can be exhibited in sensibility."

sublime: it is properly termed "horrible" (**grässlich**). "The sight of it," says Kant, "is horrible; and one must already have filled one's mind with all sorts of ideas if such an intuition is to attune it to a feeling that is itself sublime."<sup>4</sup> It is the feeling, not the natural scene, that is sublime.

Kant, then, appears to force us to a choice. Either the sublime is something in nature, or it is something in us. Although Kant is determined to locate the sublime in us, he acknowledges the power of the temptation to find it in nature. In fact, he succumbs to this temptation himself, given that his own prototypes of the sublime are almost invariably drawn from the natural world: "bold, overhanging and, as it were, threatening rocks, thunderclouds piling up in the sky and moving about accompanied by lightening and thunderclaps, volcanoes with all their destructive power, hurricanes with all the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean heaved up, the high waterfall of a mighty river, and so on."<sup>5</sup> These are, of course, examples of the dynamically sublime -- of nature in its sheer "might" (**Macht**) -- but for Kant the mathematically sublime, i.e., the absolutely large in "magnitude" (**Grösse**), is also most effectively presented in natural terms. Regarding the mathematically sublime, he maintains that "nature is sublime in those of its appearances whose intuition carries with it the idea of their infinity."<sup>6</sup> But Kant draws back from the virtually irresistible tendency to locate sublimity squarely in nature, for it is only by a mistaken maneuver that we come to believe that sublimity belongs properly to natural objects themselves. We attribute to nature the sublimity that belongs to ourselves by virtue of the "vocation" (**Bestimmung**) of our cognitive powers to rise to the challenge of those natural appearances that suggest spatial infinity or overpowering might.

What a later era would call "projection" -- in the wake of Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud -- Kant designates as "subreption," literally 'snatching-under' in an effort to disguise-as.<sup>7</sup> We disguise as belonging to the object, as "intuitable for us," what really belongs to the subject, the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 112. More completely: that magnitude of a natural object to which the imagination fruitlessly applies its entire ability to comprehend must lead the concept of nature to a supersensible substrate... a substrate that is large beyond any standard of sense" (ibid).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 144. The idea of "subreption" is first defined in the Inaugural Dissertation of 1770: "We may call fallacy of subreption (by analogy with the accepted meaning) the intellect's trick of slipping in a concept of sense as if it were the concept of an intellectual characteristic."

judging subject whose inner powers are engaged and excited by the prospect of great might or magnitude. The imagination in particular is called to present to itself, in a single comprehensive whole, what exceeds its power of representation. But this very inadequacy (and its consequent displeasure) only serves to remind the subject of the much greater power of its own ideas of reason, which demand an "absolute whole" that exceeds not just what imagination can produce but what the natural world can present. That this absolute totality is "impossible" -- impossible because no progression of images, no matter how numerous or richly laden, will ever attain it -- is beside the point. What is to the point is the striving to reach it in the very face of certain failure, the ability that entails inability, the purposive as confronted with the contrapurposive, and the "pleasure that is possible only by means of [the consequent] displeasure."<sup>8</sup>

No wonder we are "agitated" (bewegt) in the subreptive presence of the sublime.<sup>9</sup> Such agitation is emotional; it is a matter of being moved (from) without: "e-motion." But this without is not the without of a bare particular, of a self-subsistent thing. Only in the case of beauty do we justifiably "seek a basis [for judgment] outside ourselves," that is, in the formal purposiveness of nature or the work of art. In the case of the sublime, however, we look for a basis "within ourselves," yet precisely because we fail to find it, we become embroiled in an unremitting "conflict" (Widerstreit) between imagination and reason.<sup>10</sup> For no matter how striking appearances may be -- even if "shapeless mountain masses [are] piled on one another in wild disarray, with their pyramids of ice"<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "The proper unchangeable basic measure of nature is the absolute whole of nature... This basic measure, however, is a self-contradictory concept (because an absolute totality of an endless progression is impossible." (Ibid., p. 112). The analogy between such a totality and that at stake in the regulative use of reason in its dialectical employment -- as described in *The Critique of Pure Reason* -- is striking.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 115: "If a [thing] is excessive for the imagination (and the imagination id driven to [such excess] as it apprehends [the thing] in intuition, then [the thing] is, as it were, an abyss in which the imagination is afraid to lose itself."

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 100: "For the beautiful in nature we must seek a basis outside ourselves, but for the sublime a basis merely within ourselves and in the way of thinking that introduces sublimity into our presentation of nature." On the "conflict" as such, see *ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

-- they are judged as dynamically sublime only insofar as they engage us in the emotional turmoil of an endless struggle between the imaginative and the rational. The dynamics of physics has become psychodynamics as we enter into a losing game of catch-up between what reason demands and imagination can deliver.

Nevertheless, it is the world in its wildness -- "crude nature" as he calls it revealingly<sup>12</sup> -- that first agitates us by prompting the futile but irresistible attempt to imagine it as an absolute whole, leading us to try in vain to include its unboundedness within the bounds of sensibility. But what is the status of this wild world? Is it something purely "phenomenal" as it is officially held to be in the **Critique of Pure Reason**? Or is it something more than "mere appearance (*blosse Erscheinung*)," a source that is a genuine resource, something under or beyond appearance? When Kant says that "nature is sublime in those of its appearances whose intuition carries with it the idea of their infinity," he only makes the ambiguity patent: sublime in its appearances (i.e., a matter of sensibility and imagination), nature as sublime elicits the idea of an infinity (a matter of reason) whose proper province is the noumenal realm, that is, an overtly "supersensible substrate."<sup>13</sup> A considerable part of the power of the sublime, helping to account for its combined effect of attracting yet repelling us, is its very indeterminate locus on the cusp between the phenomenal and the noumenal, between which the sublime seems to oscillate. But this indeterminacy only makes us wonder whether the options at stake here are the only relevant ones. No more than the sublime is found merely in matter or in mind is it to be located in phenomena or in noumena. The exclusiveness of the binary choice operative in both instances cannot be taken for granted. Is there another way of conceiving the locus of the sublime that is at once less dichotomous and less likely to lead to the invocation of tendentious transcendental machinery?

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<sup>12</sup> On "crude nature" (rohen Natur), see *ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>13</sup> "Hence that magnitude of a natural object to which the imagination fruitlessly applies its entire ability to comprehend must lead the concept of nature to a supersensible substrate (which underlies both nature and our ability to think), a substrate that is large beyond any standard of sense and hence makes us judge as **sublime** not so much the object as the mental attunement in which we find ourselves when we estimate the object" (*ibid.*, p. 112; his italics).

Much as Heidegger opens "The Origin of the Work of Art" by asking where is the artwork ("**Wo aber ist das Kunstwerk**"), I started by asking: Where is the sublime? For Kant, its emplacement is complex. The place of the sublime certainly **seems** to be in the natural world -- at first blush, there and nowhere else. But appearances are as misleading as they are necessary, here as well as elsewhere in the world of transcendental topics. The apparent objectivity of the sublime is an illusion, fabricated by an act of unconscious subreption. The proper seat of the sublime is in the human subject -- there and not anywhere else. But this seat is not a secure foundation. By Kant's own admission, it is a place of continual and irresolvable conflict and finally an "abyss," an **Abgrund**. The seat is insecure; it is an unsettled, and unsettling, seat. If we are to begin to find a **Grund** for this **Abgrund**, we cannot confine the role of nature in the generation of the sublime to that of mere prompter of subjective psychodramas? Kant's own unabashed recourse to examples taken straight from experiences of wilderness (albeit as reported by others), and above all his own insistence that nature arouses and agitates us only when it "displays magnitude and might," point in quite another direction: that of acknowledging the natural world in its own force and circumstance, its own power. But in what does this power consist, and how is it (set forth) in place? What is the true place of the sublime?

The sublime needs to be located, or rather relocated. We need to re-place it somewhere other than (simply) in the subject. Does this mean to place it in the (natural) **object**? Certainly not. Not just because such placement would proceed by an illusory subreption but because, more importantly, to locate the sublime in an object is to suppose that it is a **property** of things, something attached to the object as an attribute is to a substance. This may be a plausible account of beauty, about which we speak "as if it were a property of things... [We say] the thing is beautiful."<sup>14</sup> The "horrible" may well be located in natural objects, but

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 56; his italics. Cf. also p. 54: the judging person "will talk about the beautiful as if beauty were a characteristic of the object." On p. 100 Kant remarks that "for the beautiful in nature we must seek a basis outside ourselves, but for the sublimar a basis merely within ourselves."

for Kant the location of the sublime is within: in a felt subjectivity.<sup>15</sup>

To demand that the sublime be located in the natural object, whether as an attribute or in some other way, is to presume that it can be **simply located** there: that it is **just there**, in that pinpointed locus, and nowhere else. I borrow the notion of "simple location" from Whitehead, who regards it as "the very foundation of the seventeenth century scheme of nature."<sup>16</sup> This scheme continues into the eighteenth century -- with the notable exceptions of Berkeley and Leibniz -- and it is still formative for Kant, as late as his 1786 treatise *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, where Kant maintains that "the place of every body is a point."<sup>17</sup> According to the doctrine of simple location, something (whether a color or shape, or the sublime) is simply where it is and not anywhere else: "it is just in this place and in no other."<sup>18</sup> It is in this pinpointed place without reference, even implicit reference, to any other place.

By locating the sublime inside the mind, Kant hints at a different kind of location. Not just because mind is non-physical but because "mind" (*das Gemüt*) is inherently complex, as the collective prefix "Ge-" indicates: it includes emotion as well as cogitation, heart as well as mind, imagination as well as memory, and (via the *sensus communis*) others as well as self. Being found there properly, the sublime cannot be a mere "property" (*Eigenschaft*) or "characteristic" (*Beschaffenheit*). It is immanent in the subject and not located at the surface of an object. Further, it is a function of a complex internal process, a psychical event, that in its inadequation to the demands of reason is self-divisive and finally abyssal. This hints at a different notion of location, a decidedly non-simple location (and all the less simple as it is the *infinity* of reason's

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 145. My italics. Ultimately, beauty resides somewhere BETWEEN the object and the beholder: we call something beautiful "only by virtue of what characteristic in which it adapts itself to the way we apprehend it."

<sup>16</sup> Alfred North Whitehead. *Science and the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929), p. 72.

<sup>17</sup> Kant. *First Metaphysical Principles of the Science of Nature*, chapter one: "First Metaphysical Principles of Phoronomy," second definition, first remark. It would be of interest (but beyond the scope of this paper) to compare Kant's discussions of "dynamics" in chapter two of this treatise with his later conception of the dynamical sublime.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 80. A more technical definition is this: "to say that a bit of matter has simple location means that, in expressing its spatio-temporal relations, it is adequate to state that it is where it is, in a definite finite region of space, and throughout a definite finite duration of time, apart from any essential reference of the relations of that bit of matter to other regions of space and to other duration of time."



domain, i.e., the supersensible, that is an abyss for imagination).<sup>19</sup> Yet it only hints at a variant view of location, and fails to deliver an alternative model.

The deeper difficulty resides in an unexamined presumption: namely, that the sublime (or anything else, for that matter) is located *either* in the judging subject **or** in the natural object. Either in Mind or in Nature. But (as we have also seen in the case of its phenomenal or noumenal location) the sublime itself contests any such exclusive choice -- any such forced option. To be located is not necessarily to be positioned in **one** of these two "places." Moreover, to be located in a sense fitting for the sublime calls for a sense of place that cannot be reduced to position -- thus to "site," as I prefer to call the sheer positioning of objects in homogeneous space.

If we are truly to find a place for the sublime, we must consider two things: first, a sense of place that exceeds location qua position; second, a model of emplacement as something other than single or exclusive (both of these being *univocal* in character) but also not indifferently anywhere or everywhere (this is to make emplacement entirely *equivocal*). How, then, to proceed?

### III

We proceed best by just looking around us. When we do, we "take in" (as Kant himself is wont to put it) not just objects, much less sensations, but entire scenes, landscapes of many sorts, and in particular cityscapes, skyscapes, seascapes, wildscapes. We can experience the sublime in each case: in New York or in the North Atlantic, in approaching storms and in desolate deserts, or for that matter in the vacant lot next door. The sublime, we might say, is not in us or in particular objects but *around us*: in what Heidegger calls "the aroundness of the environment."<sup>20</sup> To be in an environment or landscape is to be surrounded by a set of places, not to be confronted by just this place --

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<sup>19</sup> Reason "look[s] outward toward the infinite, which for sensibility is an abyss" (ibid.), p. 124; cf. also p. 115: what is "excessive for imagination" is "an abyss in which the imagination is afraid to lose itself."

<sup>20</sup> "The Aroundness of the Environment (*Das Umhafte der Umwelt*) and is the title of Chapter three of Division One of Being and Time, tr. J. Masquarrie & Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962), pp. 134 ff.

not just a co-positioning of sites.

If the sublime is (to be) placed in a landscape, it will thus be multiply placed. It is a matter of multiple location, of what Freud terms "multilocularity."<sup>21</sup> This is why we speak with equal facility of the sublime in landscape or of the sublime of landscape -- or, indeed, of the sublime through landscape. This is not just a matter of ambiguity, of merely indefinite location. Nor is it a question of serial location, as if these different places could be arranged in a strict sequence. On the contrary: if the sublime is multilocular, it is so all at once, as I know in a single comprehensive sweep of my glance when I take in what is arrayed around me. It is a matter, in short, of what Kant calls (in another context) "universal participation."<sup>22</sup> Such participation gives a new sense to Kant's notion of "comprehension," a term he himself restricted to inwardly generated presentations of imagination that are foredoomed to incompleteness.<sup>23</sup> But if comprehension can be defined without taking this skeptical and subjective turn, we are availed of an apposite description of what happens in the actual perception of the sublime. For we comprehend the sublime by participating in it: by realizing that, just as it is not simply **in me**, it is not entirely **outside me** either. To be placed in a sublime landscape is to be located in a region where I am myself a participant -- where I partake of the places by which I am surrounded.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, if we take the word "comprehend" apart, we arrive not

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<sup>21</sup> S. Freud, "Project for a Scientific Psychology," in *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth, 1954), I, 225.

<sup>22</sup> "Allgemeine Teilnehmung" : *ibid.* p. 158. Kant is here speaking of the universal participation at stake in the *sensus communis*, but the phrase can be construed to have a broader relevance.

<sup>23</sup> Kant contrasts bare "apprehension," which is capable of progressing to infinity in an open series of acts with "comprehension" (*comprehensio aesthetica*), for when the latter reaches its "basic measure (*Grundmass*) in the estimation of a given magnitude, i.e. its maximal unit of grasp, it "loses as much on the one side as it gains on the other" (*ibid.*), p. 108 and it must advance without being able to take in what lies on either side of its basic measure.

<sup>24</sup> We should also reconceive Kant's unwieldy definition of comprehension as aiming at "the aesthetically largest measure for an estimation of magnitude" (*ibid.*, p. 108). For in taking in a multilocular environment we also attempt to size it up by means of its most comprehensive unity, for example, by attending to the horizon encircling the scene; the horizon acts as the "basic measure" (*Grundmass*) for all that it encircles. Only if the sublime entails the completion of an infinite series, or the grasp of an absolute totality, does such environmental comprehension fail. Otherwise, such *comprehensio* succeeds admirably and spontaneously to take in the landscape that subtends a horizon, its many places, in short the whole placecape.

just at the idea of 'grasping-together' but, more particularly, at the notion of "prehension" -- which, for Whitehead, is the very basis for a view of the world (and of things in this world) as non-simply located. Either we grasp the world "separatively" or "prehensively."<sup>25</sup> In the first case, we fall prey to the atomization of the world into discrete objects (and subjects) and equally discrete positions, while in the second we **take it in**, participate in it, as one continuous (but heterogeneously qualified) whole. But the in into which we take it is no longer the interiority of transcendental subjectivity; it is the pre-hending openness of an aesthetically sensitive subject who is part of the aroundness of a multilocular environment -- and part as well (as Kant would be the first to insist) of a community of like-minded judges: another multilocular place, social in its very constitution.

What we thus comprehend is the sublime, located neither inside the estimating or emoting subject nor in estimated or emotionally moving objects but in the whole of a naturally given and culturally informed landscape of which the subject is an integral part. This landscape is a privileged place that is able to elicit an experience of the sublime, an **eminent domain** in short.

Not only is landscape in all of its forms (urban, aerial, oceanic, tellurian, etc.) privileged but there is a privileged form of this complex place when it comes to the sublime as conceived by Kant. I refer to wild-*scape*, a pre-eminent kind of place, a **primus inter pares**. Why is this so?

#### IV

The most direct answer is **power**: wilderness, wild places, exhibit the power of nature construed as "the overpowering." Kant's insistence on magnitude and might as the major forms of sublimity only carries forward Burke's strong statement that "I know of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power."<sup>26</sup> For both Burke and Kant, wilderness is the most perspicuous scene of sheer, stark power. But is the sublime,

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<sup>25</sup> "Things are separated by space, and are separated by time, but they are also together in space, and together in time, even if they be not contemporaneous. I will call these characters the 'separative' and the 'prehensive' characters of space-time" (*Science and the Modern World*, p. 80; his italics).

<sup>26</sup> Edmund Burke. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford; University Press, 1990), p. 54.

even in its wild appearances, merely a matter of power, itself a most characteristically modern, post-Baconian notion? Can we think it otherwise -- if not as **potestas**, then, as **potentia**, as something softer and more subtle? Or if we must think of it as power, then power of another sort than that which overwhelms us?

The best way to approach these difficult matters is to point to the close link between the sublime and place, as I have already begun to do in this paper.. The issue then becomes one of emplacement rather than empowerment, of immanence rather than transcendence: or rather, of transcendence in immanence: of **the sublime in place**. To regard wilderness as exemplary -- as Kant and his many Romantic legatees did -- would then mean heeding it as a domain of wild **places** and not just as a repository of chaotic and threatening **forces**. The wild world is sublime in the way it brings together a skein of places so thoroughly intertwined as to defy analysis into any given natural law or cultural artefact -- or even into any formal purposiveness such as beauty provides, much less into any determinate object in which it is held to be located.

In order to rethink the sublime in this direction, we need to remind ourselves that the very word "sub-lime" signifies to move up to the threshold: **sub**, "under" but also "up to," "toward"; **limen**, "door," "lintel," "threshold." The movement **up from under** is matched by a provisional closure from **on top**: "lintel" in turn means "a horizontal piece of timber, stone, etc., **placed over** a door, window, or other opening to discharge the superincumbent weight." (O.E.D.; my italics). The sublime is a matter of movement in place -- where "place" does not connote any strict limit or border but a boundary that receives movement even as it "discharges superincumbent weight."

To grasp the sublime as multiply emplaced in a wildscape, it is helpful to consider two of its distinctive traits: threshold and porosity.

(a) **threshold**. To be sublime is to be at the threshold, to be literally "subliminal," i.e., moving up to a pre-limin-ary limit. Instead of being an absolute limit, something maximally magnitudinous or mighty -- something fiercely colossal and thus vertical -- the limit proper to the sublime can be reconceived as minimal and horizontal and changing (just as a lintel is literally horizontal and changes in accordance with the load it bears). In the case of wilderness, the horizontal is the horizon: this is what the -scape of "wildscape" connotes. Here the **limen** changes in accordance with my moving body, enticing it into the larger perceptible surround. (The sublime also **halts** the body in breathless reception: as in Caspar David Friedrich's paintings of figures who, their backs to us, drink in the landscape before and around them.) Nor is this surround a simple,

single place; it is (in J.J. Gibson's word) a "layout" of places, a collocation (not just a co-location), that as a gathered group draws the receptive subject into its embrace, draws this subject out, draws it to a nearby limit that cannot be reached as such, thereby constituting a "limit situation," a **Grenzsituation** in Jaspers's term. The sublime limit, the limit as sublime, draws us out to take it in.

(b) **porosity**. By the same token, and thanks to the same threshold, what I encounter as sublime is a scene of open places. No place in the sublime is simply located. Every place is open to every other. Which is not to say that it just is every other: difference remains in openness. This must be the case if the sublime is truly a movement **across** or (still better) **through** places. To go across or through is to require a matrix of places open to each other and not closed in upon their own proper content -- as we find in Aristotle's a-poretic model of **topos** as "the innermost unmoving container of what is contained."<sup>27</sup> In sublimatic motion the emphasis is on what one moves toward, not from; around, not at out not in.<sup>28</sup> This is "free play" with a special twist: not an interplay of faculties or "powers" (**Vermögens**), but an osmotic play of interconnected places in the landscape, their co-constitution in a layout of more or less amicable relations. It is a matter of a **Spielraum** of places, not a **Streitraum** of contending forces.

The threshold of the sublime is resolutely **without** -- in the place-scape -- and not within the subject as the singular source of rational ideas. These ideas are cognitive thresholds toward which the judging subject strives. Like the horizon of a wildscape, the limit of a rational idea such as freedom, God, or the absolutely large, is never attained, never grasped. But the places of a sublime wildscape are attainable and available: thanks to their porosity, they are always already attained in ordinary perception. In this way, the hieratic Being of unbounded Ideas gives way to the fluid Becoming of a bounded landscape. The open is no longer located in the subject, deposited there as the abyss of its futile efforts to reach (or resist) overpowering magnitude or might. Nor is it found in the free facultative play of this subject. It is found in the Open of Place, the opening of the whole scene around us, beyond us, under us, yet always near us and finally part of us. Thus a double de-subjectification, a dual dis-enclosure, is at stake as the sublime moves outward into the land or

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<sup>27</sup> Aristotle, **Physics**, Book IV.

<sup>28</sup> Aristotle emphasizes the importance of the "in" (en) in the physics of place: cf. **Physics**, Book IV, chapter eight.

sea or sky.

To de-subjectify the sublime is to de-verticalize it. Only when the sublime is ensconced within the subject does this subject subject itself to the sublime as to something colossal: the extremity of one rejoins the extremity of the other. But if the sublime is not arrayed before the subject as an object of "amazement" (**Verwunderung**) it can disintegrate into the laid-out landscape and become part of its horizontality, an immanent transcendence there. In this way the sublime becomes part of the landscape's **dimensionality**. For if the sublime is indeed multilocular, it requires leeway in all directions: depth as well as height, horizontality as well as verticality, breadth and width and interstices of all kinds. For such dimensions make available the commonality of the places that make up a sublime scene, their accessibility to us as participants in them.

## V

This essay in homage to Mikel Dufrenne, starting from exposition and critique of the **Critique of Judgment**, has gone on to propose an alternative to the Kantian paradigm, in which the sublime is caught up in certain binary oppositions: subject and object, mind and nature, mathematical and dynamic, phenomenal and noumenal, not to mention empirical and transcendental, a priori and a posteriori: the list could continue indefinitely. These pairings purport to be exclusive as well as exhaustive in their conceptuality. Yet the sublime eludes such exclusion and exhaustion. This is already true of Kant's own model, which deconstructs its own oppositional formulation by employing such interstitial notions as Genius and **Gemüt** and **sensus communis**, or by the coupling of apprehension with comprehension, imagination with reason: neither pair can be fully analyzed in terms of straightforward binary oppositions but each lives out a dense dialectic.

But I have maintained that we need to do more than pit Kant against himself. We need to find a term that is not merely a member of another binary pair -- indeed, one that undermines binarism at its own game. In my view "place" is such a term. Never merely the other of time or space but equiprimordial with these latter, place resists pairing. It does so by its participative status: place is not external to me, part of **res extensa**. Place is part of me and I of it. It is a participant in my ongoing life and I in its. As participative in this twofold way, place

straddles the **limen** of the sublime, complicating any effort to simply locate sublimity on one side or the other of this porous threshold. There is no such thing as one place, or two places. Places proliferate on either side of any given threshold, including that of the sublime. If the sublime is indeed a threshold, then its place will not be simple or unitary: it will be multiply placed and itself place-productive. This is part of its very power: not just to excite and move us, but to engender ever new modes of emplacement.

To seek the sublime in this postKant, postmodern way is therefore not to disempower but to re-empower it. It is to read its power differently from what Burke and Kant saw in the sublime, converting its overpoweringness into an underpowering -- but still powerful -- position in contemporary life. To undermine the modern sublime in its colossal character is to rediscover it in the many places of its presentations and representations. "The sky [is] acutest at its vanishing."<sup>29</sup> A non-colossal, non-amazing sublimity vanishes before our eyes, or rather around them, dissipating into scene, the scape where it is multiply situated. The postmodern sublime dis-appears even as it appears, disappears in appearing.<sup>30</sup> Neither phenomenal nor noumenal, it oscillates on the lintel separating subject from thing, mind from nature, self from other. It resituates these oppositional terms in places that allow their tension to occur differently.

A postmodern sublimity evanesces in its very coalescence -- its coalescence in places. These places exhibit the sublime without containing or holding it, much less simply locating it. The sublime exceeds any one place and is immanent in the congeries of places that makes a landscape into a placescape. Such sublimity does not stand over places, commanding them from on high; it is not extended in (one) space but distended in (many) places. In a sublime landscape "all goes onward and outward...and nothing collapses,"<sup>31</sup> even if everything finally disappears as a determinate phenomenon. The sublime, as Freud said of sublimation, is "a way out."<sup>32</sup> It takes us out of the fixities and definites of the meta-

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<sup>29</sup> Wallace Stevens, "The Idea of Order at Key West."

<sup>30</sup> For this theme, see Irene Klaver, "Silent Wolves: The Howl of the Implicit," in D. Rothenberg, ed. *Wild Ideas* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp.117-133.

<sup>31</sup> Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself."

<sup>32</sup> The phrase "a way out" in the essay "On Narcissism," *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth, 1957), XIV, 94: "sublimation is a way out, a way by which those demands [of the ego] can be without

physics of presence -- of which simple location is one crucial expression. In other words, sublimity occurs by **expanding**. For Kant, the scope of reason exceeds not only sensibility and imagination but nature itself.<sup>33</sup> Here, however, one must wonder if it is not just the reverse: is it not nature that exceeds reason in its expansiveness (or, at least, rivals and rejoins it)? "Everything spatial expands,"<sup>34</sup> said Theodor Lipps. This is surely true of the natural world in its sublimity: it is this world, a wild place-world, that evaporates in its very vanishing and that disintegrates in its deliquescence.

But in the end it is not a matter of insisting on nature, not even wild nature, as the privileged place of the sublime. Inherent in the move to nature on the part of those **Naturphilosophen** such as Fichte and Schelling who were the immediate inheritors of the **Critique of Judgment** -- helpful as this move was in disburdening the human subject of impacted transcendental machinery -- we can envision a scenography of situations, a community of places in common, a pluralism of places themselves.<sup>35</sup> And if this is so, I shall have rendered fit homage to Mikel Dufrenne's invocation of Nature as the very source of the **a priori** (an invocation very much inspired by Schelling in particular), as well as the source of the sublime itself as (in Dufrenne's formulation cited as an epigram to this essay) that "toward which [subjectivity] transcends itself and which transcends it."

Kant asserts that the sublime "consists merely in a **relation**."<sup>36</sup> But this relation, I have been arguing, is not just that between the sensible and the supersensible (to which Kant attempts to confine his discussion), or imagination and reason, or subject and object, or immanent and transcendent. It is also a relation between places -- places to which human beings (and doubtless other sentient beings and non-sentient entities) are in turn related by virtue of inhabitation and perception and action. For all these beings, the place of the sublime is a being-in-

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involving repression.

<sup>33</sup> "For it is precisely nature's inadequacy to the ideas... that constitutes what both repels our sensibility and yet attracts us at the time." (Ibid., p. 124).

<sup>34</sup> "Alles Räumliche dehnt sich aus": cited by Rudolf Arnheim, **The Dynamics of Architectural Form** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 86.

<sup>35</sup> "It seems, then, that we must not regard a judgment of taste as **egoistic** rather, we must regard it necessarily as **pluralistic** by its inner nature, i.e., an account of itself rather than the examples that others give of their taste." (Ibid., p. 140; his italics).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 126; Cf. p. 136: "**Simplicity** (artless purposiveness) is, as it were, nature's style in the sublime" (his italics). It is to be noted that judgment for Kant is the epitome of relation: e.g., in its capacity to relate subject and predicate, content and object, etc.



-place among and between places: where "being-in-place" signifies our active participation in places (and they in us: the relation of "between" is two-way). These places include the place of the subject as well as the place of discrete objects, the places of social and political subjects in community, wild places as well as domesticated ones, built places and ones that are merely found, formally defined and informally experienced places. In all such places the sublime appears -- without being a "mere appearance." And this is so even if (or rather precisely if) the sublime is ultimately a phenomenon of Nature, for in these diverse places, the sublime is (in a formulation from **Le Poétique**) "the glory of appearing by which Nature is accomplished."<sup>37</sup> Let us say that the sublime exists through places by qualifying them: not as a quality but as a suffusive presence that is emplaced and empowered in them. It transcends subjectivity indeed, but it is immanent in the places in which it becomes manifest. Not located on any phenomenal surface nor in any noumenal thing in itself, it saturates entire places, from below, sideways, and in every other which way.

Looked at this way, the sublime becomes the aura of the post-modern place-world as encountered in its "mere being." As postmodern, it is elevated beyond the abyss of reason and the (in)comprehension of imagination without being an august Verticality or a crushing Colossus. Not being "super-elevated,"<sup>38</sup> not being sheerly transcendent, it is distended laterally, toward the horizon, spreading through the multiple emplacement of the near sphere. No longer mental, and certainly not strictly physical, it expands into the indefinite disappearance of its own de-limitation. This is truly (again in Dufrenne's own previously quoted words) "the sublimation of subjectivity."

The sublime in the glory of its appearing, in its sublimation in place, is a "palm at the end of the mind, beyond the last thought, rising in the bronze décor... The [place] stands on the edge of space."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *Le Poétique*, p. 172.

<sup>38</sup> The term "super-elevation" is Derrida's: "Erhaben, the sublime, is not only high, elevated, nor even very elevated. Very high, absolutely high, higher than any comparable height, more than comparative, a size not measurable in height, the sublime is *superelevation* beyond itself." ("Parergon," cit. supra, p. 122; his italics).

<sup>39</sup> Adapted from Wallace Stevens, "Of Mere Being."