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Title: Foreword

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Citation style: Rachwał Tadeusz, Sławek Tadeusz. (1994). Foreword. W: T. Rachwał, T. Sławek (red.), ""The most sublime act" : essays on the sublime" (S. 7-10). Katowice : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego



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Foreword

Even if the story of the concept of the sublime is, as Marek Kulisz argues in one of the papers in this book, a story of a certain mistake or mistranslation of the Greek *peri hypsous* into its Latin equivalent, yet the sublime remains an intriguing notion penetrating the areas of both aesthetics and ethics. And the very fact of a possibly erroneous choice of name for a concept does not interfere with the concept's productivity; in this respect the sublime would provide another proof, after Heidegger's unconcealment of the interlingual distortions of *logos* forcefully confined to the place of 'reason', of the profound indebtedness of Western philosophy to the Babelian operation of (mis) translation. It is perhaps for this reason that this volume, from the very outset, falls short of any precise definition of the sublime. Rather, it (mis) translates this category into a number of discourses ranging from philosophical, via literary, to a cross-cultural look into the domains of art and arts.

It is this positioning of the sublime at the intersection of the philosophical and aesthetic (let us remember Blake's famous aphorism from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* according to which "The most sublime act is to set another before you") which early on activated in this concept various meaning generating protocols. Kant's two statements from his analysis of the dynamic of the sublime seem to be trail blazing: in the first one the philosopher bridges the gap between ontology (things which are 'there', a landscape) and aesthetics ("To call the ocean sublime we must regard it as poets do, merely by what the eye reveals — if it is at rest, as a clear mirror of water only bounded by heavens; if it is stormy, as an abyss threatening to overwhelm everything"), in the other he grafts ethical reflection upon the aesthetic ("A feeling for the sublime in nature cannot well be thought without combining therewith a mental disposition which is akin to the moral").

This volume begins with two essays on Kant and his presentation of the sublime as a spectacle of stone and distance, the dramatic highlight of which is a certain crucial blindness of the power to imagine, a paradox of geometrical imagination deprived of adequate geometric signs. Hence the oxymoronic paradox of “geometry of irregularity” implicit in the idea of the idea closure “announced by Kant’s blind imagination”, as Noel Gray puts it in his paper, by the imagination which closes its eyes, as it were, to boundlessness and infinity translating (or perhaps (mis) translating) them into the idea-infinity in which human reason can still grasp, and thus also regulate, all irregularities in a geometrical fashion — an idea now reverberating in Fractal geometry which claims to be the geometry of what we see and feel.

What is thus also at stake in the Kantian notion of the sublime is a certain petrification of the infinite and the irregular which inaugurates the distance between man and monumental nature, nature translated into a monument which we should not approach too close lest it should lose its monumentality and become a threat, the full emotional effect which, in Kant, always “calls for regulation/discipline of distance” (Liliana Barakońska, Małgorzata Nitka). Yet, rather than securely living in the domestic (orderly regulated) space of home of beauty (“beauty is a peace-keeping force”), Kant goes to war so as to avoid the effeminating effects of peace, and to prove the distancing power of reason in the face of the sublime/enemy. War is not quite sublime for Kant, it only has “something sublime about it” provided it “is conducted with order and a sacred respect for the rights of civilians”. It is exactly in homecoming from a war (between the faculties, for instance) that Kant’s philosophical strategy finds a security of position (both epistemological and ontological) thus averting his eyes from both the beautiful as “too orderly” and the sublime as “too dangerous” so as to himself “elude being turned to stone in the face of Isis, the returning figure of Kant’s writings”.

Herman Melville, as Jerzy Sobieraj argues in his essay on *Battle Pieces*, qualifies the war with somewhat similar hesitation. On the one hand it endorses the sublime by being a “terrible tragedy of our time” and, on the other hand, precisely due to the Kantian “lack of respect for the rights of civilians it becomes morally suspect and thus alienates itself from the moral disposition of the sublime”. It is this double qualification of “our times” as not only a “tragedy” but also as “the terrible” that puts the category of the sublime in question in Melville’s *Battle Pieces*.

What somehow negatively links the philosophy of Blake and Nietzsche with Kant (or Burke) is Blake’s and Nietzsche’s denial that the sublime and the beautiful are two distinct things or categories. For Blake, as Tadeusz Ślawek claims in his article, the sublime is not petrified in the solidity of some identity without the Other. Rather, the sublime is seen as the ability “to avoid formlessness” without consolidating into a form. This ability is realized in the

act of "sublime Labour", or hammering one's self, and not in the reproductive operation of memory. For Nietzsche, similarly, the problem of the sublime is the problem of its categorization in the classic formulations which are "too foreseeable and normative". Nietzsche's sublime is always excessive, more than itself, a rejection of all thought of self-identity achievable in the downward movement which he calls "descent towards visibility".

Claire Hobbs reads Blake and Walter Benjamin as collectors of "minute particulars", of proverbs or detachable quotations which are not so much repetitions of something else but reproductions which always already mean something else and whose use does not preserve the past but puts the past to use in the present. Dealing with particulars we thus always already deal with something else, with the "another" of Blake's "The most sublime act". Read as an act, or an action, the sublime in Blake and Benjamin subverts the action suspending and powerless (or even helpless) sublime feeling of Burke's or Kant's. By reinstating particularity "in an invincible concern for an other" both Blake and Benjamin also break with the transcendentalism of the sublime, its movement towards the formless whose aesthetization by the eighteenth-century theorists of the sublime was a step towards fascism's aesthetization of "the politics of privation".

The notion of collecting features prominently in Zbigniew Białas' reading of the sublime which is interpreted in a manner reversing, if not parodying, Kant's moralized concept of the sublime immensity. In Białas's paper the sublime, in a characteristically postmodernist turn, is a concept where the aesthetically excessive (e.g. accumulation of clichés) meets its ethical equivalent (the sublime as the excess of desire resulting in the erotic obsession).

Commodification of the sublime traceable in cinema is also one of the themes in Paul Coats' essay on sublimity and film where the sublime is defined, in Thomas Weiskel's words, as the Oedipal defence against the ambivalence of a "wish to be inundated and a simultaneous anxiety of annihilation". Further, central for Kant's theory the separation of the beautiful from the sublime marks the emergence of the male identity as independent from the mother's domination.

Kant's conflict, or war, of faculties and his writings on the sublime form a theoretical background of J-F. Lyotard's attempts at theorizing the post-modern. The sublime which, as "unpresentable", could not be an object of a reasonable philosophical investigation for Kant whose interests in nature were interests in the "totality of rules" (as he defined it), becomes the sphere which postmodernism attempts, however paradoxically, at putting in presentation itself. Tadeusz Rachwał's essay traces such postmodern attempts beginning with H. P. Lovecraft's "The Unnamable" (using Lovecraft's "misspelled" version of the word) as a somehow anachronistic expression of Lyotard's concern with the possibility that what is properly human might be inhabited by

the inhuman, and ending with Helene Cixous feminine voice as the voice approaching the sublime without positing it as a distinct category. Though, as she claims, her voice is a voice which has not sublimated, it is exactly in the refusal to being categorized that her "I will Yes" can "only go on and on, without ever inscribing or distinguishing the contours" in a writing without distance, the notion which motivated the theoreticians of the sublime such as Burke or Kant.

To speak about the sublime must also touch upon a discussion of the human perception and the inherent problem of the image transforming the reality of immediate consciousness into a visual and intellectual judgement. This relationship of 'being' and 'being represented' lying at the foundation of the sublime must attract semiotic analytical attention and, as Emanuel Prower's paper is trying to demonstrate, the Peircean notion of the First comes in handy when investigating the sublime as the metamorphosing power through which what is unsusceptible of mediation is rendered as interpretable (like Witkacy's "Pure Form", for instance, whose programmatic immediacy, as Marta Zając argues, makes it possible to relate it to the concept of the sublime).

Looking at the notion of the sublime in Langland's *Piers Plowman*, Andrzej Wicher argues that in the Middle Ages this notion was highly suspect on ethical rather than aesthetic grounds. The source of the suspicion was man's yearning for infinity and immortality whose manifestations could always be "of the devil's making". Hence the necessity of distinguishing between "the true sublime" and "the false sublime" which, on moral and religious grounds, is of vital importance as decisive about man's damnation or salvation. Langland's "metaphysical suspiciousness" reflected in *Piers Plowman* seems to result from his consistent attempts at unmasking the false sublime, at devising a reliable method of distinguishing between the true and the false sublime.

The theorization of the sublime on the aesthetic grounds in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries finds its reflection in the writings which become centered on the question of the landscape and a variety of literary and painterly conventions which worked towards the invention of vertiginous images of sublime power operating both within Gothic and Romantic traditions as well as in the practice of Thomas Cook's organized tourism. The focus on the sublime in Gothic fiction as well as its rigorous exclusion in modern detective fiction both spring, as David Jarrett claims in his paper, from explorations of the Romantic Sublime reinvigorated in the nineteenth century in the Victorian context of imperial expansionism.

It is with the task of approaching all these (and many more) issues (which as hinging on the threshold of the unrepresentable or the unnameable cannot be a subject of a presentation pure and simple) that we present this volume to the Reader.

Tadeusz Rachwał & Tadeusz Sławek