The Romantic Spirit in German Art 1790–1990

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The Sublime

Writing in 1970 the literary critic Ronald Taylor insisted that: 'In German culture one may ... legitimately talk of a Romantic tradition which has a central position in the unfolding of the modern German spiritual, intellectual and political life and in the constitution of the national German psyche.' Taylor added: 'It is a complex tradition, drawn from a complex pattern of historical impulses, the reality of whose existence is not disproven by difficulties of definition.'[1] Among the myriad complexities, the aesthetic and emotional engagement with the intangible, the unrepresentable and the unknowable is a recurring element in German painting after 1800 and one which can be identified as a central, even defining element in German painting, not only during the Romantic period but over the last two centuries. From the Alpine landscapes of the 1800s to the figurative painting of the *Junge Wilden* in the 1970s and 1980s, a recurring preoccupation in German painting has been the attempt to capture or portray on canvas ideas or visions that transcend our powers of imagination. Central to this tradition, both chronologically and emotionally, are the visionary images of German Expressionism, produced in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

The fears and pleasures of the unknown and the unimaginable point to the aesthetic concept of the sublime, a notion which itself defies accurate definition. The simplest characterization can be derived from the customary contrast of the sublime and the beautiful. While our delight in the beautiful stems from the recognition of a perceptible totality arranged according to the dictates of measure, proportion and harmony, our delight in the sublime derives from the absence of these very qualities.

In Joseph Anton Koch's painting of the *Schmadribach Falls* of 1811 (fig. 1) a tiny figure in the foreground takes a pot-shot at a duck, while towering in the distance above him are gargantuan waterfalls and Alpine peaks. The artist's delight in the disproportionate physical scale of man and nature, and the air of menace generated by the brooding masses of the mountains as they roll away into infinity link Koch's painting to the early Alpine views produced by Caspar Wolf in the 1770s, and to the *Sturm und Drang* enthusiasms of the same decade. High among these enthusiasms was the Ossian cult[2] which set the imagery of the wild and untamed nature to be found at the northern periphery of Europe against the measured delight of the Mediterranean south. Ossianism was closely linked to eighteenth-century British speculation on the sublime which was further developed by German aestheticians towards the end of the century. Symptomatic of this connection is the rhetorical question posed by Friedrich Schiller in an essay on the sublime written in the early 1790s: 'Who would not rather ... feast his eyes on Scotland's wild cataracts and misty mountains – Ossian's great realm of nature – than on the sour victory of patience over the most obstinate of the elements in the dead-straight Dutch countryside.'[3]

With Koch's painting and Schiller's observations in mind, one might turn to Joseph Addison's celebrated articles on 'The Pleasures of the Imagination' published in the *Spectator* in 1712. Differentiating between Greatness, Novelty, and Beauty as sources of aesthetic delight, Addision offers 'huge heaps of mountains, high rocks and precipices, or a wide expanse of water' as appropriate stimuli. Confronted with such natural phenomena, 'we are flung into a pleasing astonishment at such unbounded views, and feel a delightful stillness and amazement in the soul at the apprehension of them.'[4] Later in the century Edmund Burke added the emotion of terror to Addison's delight in limitless nature, prompting a taste for the morbid – for graveyards, ruins, and natural disasters – that provided early Romantic art with a rich vein of literary and pictorial motifs.[5] Apocalyptic expectations derived from medieval theology lay behind the supernatural terrors of the charnel-house and the graveyard. As Burke explained: 'Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*;

Fig.1 Joseph Anton Koch, *The Schmadribach Falls* 1811, Museum der Bildenden Künste, Leipzig

that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling .... When danger and pain press too nearly, they are incapable of any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience.'[6] Viewed from below, with our feet planted firmly by Koch in the green pastures, the icy Alps take on an aspect of fearsome delight that closer proximity would destroy.

Both Addison's joy in escaping the confines of daily life and Burke's *frisson* at contemplating objects and situations of fear from a safe distance represent very simple models of sublimity. Addison, however, did point the way forward in a subsequent article in which the pleasure of the sublime was ascribed to a dissonance between our powers of reason and of imagination. 'The understanding, indeed, opens an infinite space on every side of us, but the imagination, after a few faint efforts, is immediately at a stand, and finds herself swallowed up in the immensity of the void that surrounds it: Our reason can pursue a particle of matter through an infinite variety of divisions, but the fancy soon loses sight of it, and feels in itself a kind of chasm, that wants to be filled with matter of a more sensible bulk. We can neither widen, nor contract the faculty to the dimensions of either extreme. The object is too big for our capacity, when we would comprehend the circumference of the world, and dwindles into nothing, when we endeavour after the idea of an atom.'[7]

Developed by Immanuel Kant as the *Grenze der Einbildungskraft* (The Limit of our Powers of Imagination), this gap between the realms of reason and imagination has the potential to engender both fear and creativity. When confronted by the enormity or the minuteness of the object and the void of incomprehension, the observer experiences fear, which is then superseded by pleasure as new rational criteria are summoned to explain and contain that which had previously been beyond comprehension. In the process, the power of imagination is stretched and extended to encompass new conceptions of space and time, and the power of reason generates visions of the world that extend to the limits of fiction.

As Kant makes clear, the sublime exists not in the observed object itself but in the response of the observer. Nevertheless, certain phenomena are more likely to provoke sublime reactions than others, and Kant himself offers a list of likely candidates: 'Bold, overhanging, and, as it were, threatening rocks, thunderclouds piled up the vault of heaven, borne along with flashes and peals, volcanoes in all their violence of destruction, hurricanes leaving desolation in their track, the boundless ocean rising with rebellious force, the high waterfall of some mighty river, and the like, make our power of resistance of trifling moment in comparison with their might. But provided our position is secure, their aspect is all the more attractive for its fearfulness; and we readily call these objects sublime, because they raise the forces of the soul above the heights of the vulgar commonplace, and discover within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature.'[8] The sublime resides in our reaction to the abyss or the raging torrent and the attempt to master our fear through the redefinition of our rational perspectives. Aesthetic judgment is thus akin to moral

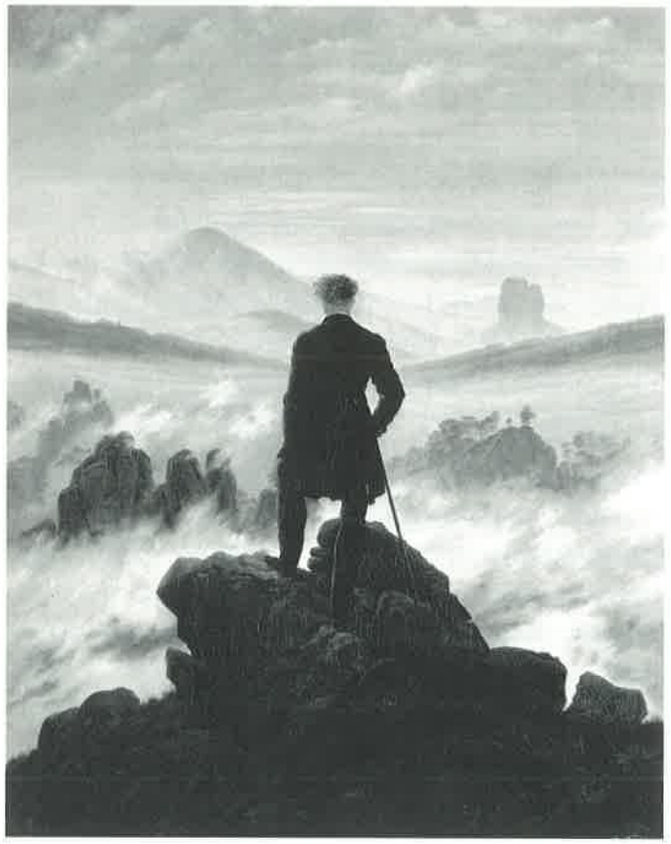

Fig.2 Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* c.1818, Hamburger Kunsthalle

judgment, and the chaos of creation given order by the intervention of free, rational man.

To the early Romantic mind nature in her most extreme manifestations offered moral and metaphysical insights into the human spirit. Creative engagement with the magnitude and power of natural phenomena offered the chance to link the individual soul and the universal spirit. The negative condition held equally true, and current theorizing on the sublime linked the disorder of the natural landscape with the uncertain anarchy of the world of morality. While both natural and moral chaos provoked an initial response of fear and distaste, both were susceptible to rational control, and fear could be superseded by the certainty of a transcendant order. Novalis makes this point perfectly in one of his *Blütenstaub* Fragments, written in 1798: 'Fantasy sets the coming world either in the heights or in the depths, or in metempsychosis to ourselves. We dream of journeys through the cosmos; but is the cosmos not in us? We do not know the depths of our soul. The secret path leads inwards. Eternity, with its worlds of past and future, exists either within ourselves or not at all.'[9] The sublime response to the chaos and menace of nature offers us a way out of the world of purely sensuous knowledge, and reveals the existence within us of an absolute moral capacity. This capacity exists independently of the world of natural phenomena, yet is triggered by the sublime response to the natural world. The negative or dialectical response to the real world of appearances makes possible a world of the spirit.

The landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich invite a reading in these terms. We can only speculate what the traveller is thinking when he looks across the fog-shrouded peaks in the painting created around 1818 (fig 2). Death, transcience and human mortality are often suggested by Friedrich's own observation: 'To live one day eternally, one must give oneself over many times to death.'[10] In his *catalogue raisonné* on Friedrich, Helmut Börsch-Supan notes that 'the observer of nature does not appear here submissively moved but in a thoughtful pose', adding that this is only understandable if the figure represents someone who is already dead.[11] Yet the logic of the sublime suggests a more positive reading, and one that works equally convincingly for comparable compositions by Friedrich, such as *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* of 1819 (fig. 3 and colour plate, p. 221). In confronting and overcoming the abyss of incomprehension, the observer gains a heightened understanding of human potential and of the power of human rationality to overcome the chaos of creation and the intractability of nature.

In these two examples we are concerned with what Kant dubbed the 'mathematical' sublime, which is concerned with the effect of physical size and magnitude on the imagination. The second Kantian variant is the 'dynamic sublime', which relates to the effect of power. In the pre-industrial world the two qualities often worked in unison. The Schmadribach Falls, for example, offer images of vastness both in scale and power. With the emergence of industrial production and urban concentration in the nineteenth century, however, the inventions of man rather than nature offered a new focus for sublime contemplation. As Paul Crowther has noted in his recent study of the Kantian sublime: 'The structures of capitalism and the conflicts it engenders provide immediate and inescapable images that overwhelm our perceptual or imaginative powers, yet make the scope

Fig.3 Caspar David Friedrich, *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* 1819, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Neue Meister

of rational comprehension or human artifice and contrivance all the more vivid.'[12] In the nineteenth century industrial production, the speed and power of steam technology and the burgeoning metropolis or industrial city stimulated the sensations of awe, terror and exaltation previously associated with such natural phenomena as cliffs, waterfalls and deserts. Carl Blechen's painting *Ravine near Amalfi*, painted in 1831 (fig. 4), offers a telling image of this realignment of sublime sentiment. With a steam hammer set above a roaring torrent, a symbol of mechanical power and danger is contrasted with the same forces in nature.

In the con[illegible]of Britain, Nicholas Tayl[illegible]ghts of the new century 't[illegible]l preacher; the ecstasy o[illegible]e scientific wonders of p[illegible]; the traveller's thrill i[illegible]mountains; the capitalist's [illegible]duction and hubbub of the market.'[13] The city of brick and stone, driven by the limitless technological power of steam and iron, with its vast and ever-expanding scale and its bru-