

*OBSERVATIONS ON THE FEELING  
OF THE BEAUTIFUL AND  
SUBLIME*



## SECTION ONE

### *Of the Distinct Objects of the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*

THE VARIOUS FEELINGS OF ENJOYMENT or of displeasure rest not so much upon the nature of the external things that arouse them as upon each person's own disposition to be moved by these to pleasure or pain. This accounts for the joy of some people over things that cause aversion in others, or the amorous passion so often a puzzle to everybody, or the lively antipathy one person feels toward something that to another is quite indifferent. The field of observation of these peculiarities of human nature extends very wide, and still conceals a rich source for discoveries that are just as pleasurable as they are instructive. For the present I shall cast my gaze upon only a few places that seem particularly exceptional in this area, and even upon these more with the eye of an observer than of a philosopher.

Because a person finds himself happy only so far as he gratifies an inclination, the feeling that makes him capable of enjoying great pleasures, without needing exceptional talents to do so, is certainly no trifle. Stout persons, whose favorite authors are their cooks and whose works of fine taste are in their cellars, will thrive on vulgar obscenities and on a coarse jest with just as lively a delight as that

upon which persons of noble sensitivity pride themselves. An indolent man who loves having books read aloud to him because it is so pleasant to fall asleep that way, the merchant to whom all pleasures are trifling except those a clever man enjoys when he calculates his profits, one who loves the opposite sex only so far as he counts it among things to enjoy, the lover of the hunt, whether he hunt flies like Domitian<sup>1</sup> or ferocious beasts like A. . . ,—all these have a feeling that makes them capable of enjoying pleasures after their own fashion, without presuming to envy others or even being able so much as to conceive of other pleasures. But to that kind of feeling, which can take place without any thought whatever, I shall here pay no attention. There is still another feeling of a more delicate sort, so described either because one can enjoy it longer without satiation and exhaustion; or because it presupposes a sensitivity of the soul, so to speak, which makes the soul fitted for virtuous impulses; or because it indicates talents and intellectual excellences. It is this feeling of which I wish to consider one aspect. I shall moreover exclude from it that inclination that is fixed upon high intellectual insights, and the thrill that was possible to a Kepler, who, as Bayle reports,<sup>2</sup> would not have sold one of his discoveries for a principedom. The latter sensation is quite too delicate to belong in the present sketch, which will concern only the sensuous feeling of which also more ordinary souls are capable.

Finer feeling, which we now wish to consider, is chiefly of two kinds: the feeling of the *sublime* and that of the *beautiful*. The stirring of each is pleasant, but in

different ways. The sight of a mountain whose snow-covered peak rises above the clouds, the description of a raging storm, or Milton's portrayal of the infernal kingdom,<sup>3</sup> arouse enjoyment but with horror; on the other hand, the sight of flower-strewn meadows, valleys with winding brooks and covered with grazing flocks, the description of Elysium,<sup>4</sup> or Homer's portrayal of the girdle of Venus,<sup>5</sup> also occasion a pleasant sensation but one that is joyous and smiling. In order that the former impression could occur to us in due strength, we must have a *feeling of the sublime*, and, in order to enjoy the latter well, a *feeling of the beautiful*. Tall oaks and lonely shadows in a sacred grove are sublime; flower beds, low hedges and trees trimmed in figures are beautiful. Night is sublime, day is beautiful. Temperaments that possess a feeling for the sublime are drawn gradually, by the quiet stillness of a summer evening as the shimmering light of the stars breaks through the brown shadows of night and the lonely moon rises into view, into high feelings of friendship, of disdain for the world, of eternity. The shining day stimulates busy fervor and a feeling of gaiety. The sublime *moves*, the beautiful *charms*. The mien of a man who is undergoing the full feeling of the sublime is earnest, sometimes rigid and astonished. On the other hand the lively sensation of the beautiful proclaims itself through shining cheerfulness in the eyes, through smiling features, and often through audible mirth. The sublime is in turn of different kinds. Its feeling is sometimes accompanied with a certain dread, or melancholy; in some cases merely with quiet wonder; and

in still others with a beauty completely pervading a sublime plan. The first I shall call the *terrifying sublime*, the second the *noble*, and the third the *splendid*. Deep loneliness is sublime, but in a way that stirs terror.\* Hence great far-reaching solitudes, like the colossal Komul Desert in Tartary, have always given us occasion for peopling them with fearsome spirits, goblins, and ghouls.

The sublime must always be great; the beautiful can also be small. The sublime must be simple; the beautiful can be adorned and ornamented. A great height is just as sublime as a great depth, except that the latter is ac-

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\* I should like to give just one example of the noble awe that the description of complete loneliness can inspire, and I draw for that purpose upon some passages from "Carazan's Dream" in the *Bremen Magazine*, volume IV, page 539. In proportion as his riches increased, this wealthy miser had closed off his heart from compassion and love toward all others. Meantime, as the love of man grew cold in him, the diligence of his prayer and his religious observances increased. After this confession, he goes on to recount the following: "One evening, as by my lamp I drew up my accounts and calculated my profits, sleep overpowered me. In this state I saw the Angel of Death come over me like a whirlwind. He struck me before I could plead to be spared his terrible stroke. I was petrified, as I perceived that my destiny throughout eternity was cast, and that to all the good I had done nothing could be added, and from all the evil I had committed, not a thing could be taken away. I was led before the throne of him who dwells in the third heaven. The glory that flamed before me spoke to me thus: 'Carazan, your service of God is rejected. You have closed your heart to the love of man, and have clutched your treasures with an iron grip. You have lived only for yourself, and therefore you shall also live the future in eternity alone and removed from all communion with the whole of Creation.' At this instant I was swept away by an

accompanied with the sensation of shuddering, the former with one of wonder. Hence the latter feeling can be the terrifying sublime, and the former the noble. The sight of an Egyptian pyramid, as Hasselquist<sup>6</sup> reports, moves one far more than one can imagine from all the descriptions; but its design is simple and noble. St. Peter's in Rome is splendid; because on its frame, which is large and simple, beauty is so distributed, for example, gold, mosaic work, and so on, that the feeling of the sublime still strikes through with the greatest effect; hence the object is called splendid. An arsenal must be noble and simple, a residence castle splendid, and a pleasure palace beautiful and ornamented.

A long duration is sublime. If it is of time past, then

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unseen power, and driven through the shining edifice of Creation. I soon left countless worlds behind me. As I neared the outermost end of nature, I saw the shadows of the boundless void sink down into the abyss before me. A fearful kingdom of eternal silence, loneliness, and darkness! Unutterable horror overtook me at this sight. I gradually lost sight of the last star, and finally the last glimmering ray of light was extinguished in outer darkness! The mortal terrors of despair increased with every moment, just as every moment increased my distance from the last inhabited world. I reflected with unbearable anguish that if ten thousand times a thousand years more should have carried me along beyond the bounds of all the universe I would still always be looking ahead into the infinite abyss of darkness, without help or hope of any return—. In this bewilderment I thrust out my hands with such force toward the objects of reality that I awoke. And now I have been taught to esteem mankind; for in that terrifying solitude I would have preferred even the least of those whom in the pride of my fortune I had turned from my door to all the treasures of Golconda—"

it is noble. If it is projected into an incalculable future, then it has something of the fearsome in it. A building of the remotest antiquity is venerable. Haller's description of the coming eternity<sup>7</sup> stimulates a mild horror, and of the past, transfixed wonder.



## SECTION TWO

### *Of the Attributes of the Beautiful and Sublime in Man in General*

UNDERSTANDING IS SUBLIME, wit is beautiful. Courage is sublime and great, artfulness is little but beautiful. Caution, said Cromwell, is a burgomaster's virtue. Veracity and honesty are simple and noble; jest and pleasant flattery are delicate and beautiful. Graciousness is the beauty of virtue. Unselfish zeal to serve is noble; refinement (*politesse*) and courtesy are beautiful. Sublime attributes stimulate esteem, but beautiful ones, love. People in whom especially the feeling for the beautiful rises seek their sincere, steadfast, and earnest friends only in need, but choose jesting, agreeable, and courteous companions for company. There is many a person whom one esteems much too highly to be able to love him. He inspires admiration, but is too far above us for us to dare approach him with the familiarity of love.

Those in whom both feelings join will find that the emotion of the sublime is stronger than that of the beautiful, but that unless the latter alternates with or accompanies it, it tires and cannot be so long enjoyed.\* The

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\* The sensations of the sublime exert the powers of the soul more strongly, and therefore tire sooner. One will be able to read a pastoral poem longer at a time than Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and

lively feelings to which the conversation in a select company occasionally rises must dissolve intermittently in cheerful jest, and laughing delights should make a beautiful contrast with the moved, earnest expression, allowing both kinds of feelings to alternate freely. Friendship has mainly the character of the sublime, but love between the sexes, that of the beautiful. Yet tenderness and deep esteem give the latter a certain dignity and sublimity; on the other hand, gay jest and familiarity heighten the hue of the beautiful in this emotion. *Tragedy* is distinguished from *comedy*, according to my view, chiefly in that in the first the feeling for the sublime is stirred, and in the second, that for the beautiful. In the first are portrayed magnanimous sacrifices for another's welfare, bold resolution in peril, and proven loyalty. There love is sad, fond, and full of respect; the misfortune of others stirs feelings of sympathy in the breast of the spectator and causes his generous heart to beat for the distress of others. He is gently moved, and feels the dignity of his own nature. On the other hand, comedy sets forth delicate intrigues, prodigious entanglements, and wits who know how to extricate themselves, fools who let themselves be shown up, jests and amusing characters. Here love is not sorrowful; it is pleasurable and familiar. Yet just as in other

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La Bruyère longer than Young. It seems to me to be especially a fault of the latter, as a moral poet, that he too uniformly maintains a sublime tone; for the strength of the impression can be renewed only through interspersing gentler passages. In the beautiful, nothing tires more than laborious craftsmanship which betrays itself there. The effort to charm is experienced as painful and toilsome.

cases, the noble in this also can be united to a certain degree with the beautiful.

Even depravities and moral failings often bear, for all that, some features of the sublime or beautiful, at least so far as they appear to our sensory feeling without being tested by reason. The anger of someone fearsome is sublime, like Achilles' wrath in the *Iliad*. In general, a hero of Homer's is the terrifying sublime; one of Vergil's, on the other hand, is noble. Open bold revenge, following a great offense, bears something of the great about it; and as unlawful as it may be, nevertheless its telling moves one with both horror and gratification. When Shah Nadir was set upon at night in his tent by some conspirators, as Hanway<sup>1</sup> reports, after he had already received some wounds and was defending himself in despair, he cried out, "Mercy! I will pardon you all!" One among them answered, as he raised his saber on high, "You have shown no mercy, and you deserve none." Resolute audacity in a rogue is of the greatest danger, but it moves in the telling, and even if he is dragged to a disgraceful death he nevertheless ennoble it to some extent by going to it defiantly and with disdain. On the other side, a scheme contrived deceitfully, even when it is bent on some piece of knavery, has something about it which is delicate, and is laughed at. The amorous inclination (*coquetterie*) in a delicate sense, that is, an endeavor to fascinate and charm, in an otherwise decorous person is perhaps reprehensible but still beautiful, and usually is set above the respectable, earnest bearing.

The figure of persons who please by their outward