Sublimier Aspects: Interfaces between Literature, Aesthetics, and Theology

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“The mountains, darkened by twilight, assumed a sublimer aspect, while the tops of some of the highest Alps were yet illumined by the sun’s rays and formed a striking contrast to the shadowy obscurity of the world below.”

—Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest* (1791)
CHAPTER FOUR

KANT’S “SAFE PLACE”: SECURITY AND THE SACRED IN THE CONCEPT OF SUBLIME EXPERIENCE

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Jacques Derrida, in *The Truth in Painting*, notes how both Kant and Hegel regard Judaism “as the historical figure of the sublime irruption.” It is during his “General Comment on the Exposition of Aesthetic Reflective Judgments” in his *Critique of Judgment* that Kant touches briefly upon the second commandment from Exodus: “Perhaps the most sublime passage in the Jewish Law is the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven or on earth, or under the earth, etc.” This ban on representation has long contributed, consciously or not, to the critical discourses concerning the post-Shoah memorialization of the Jewish peoples; it is thus fitting that the systematically murdered ‘People of the Book’ are memorialized in Judenplatz, Vienna, by Rachel Whiteread’s *Holocaust Memorial*, that is, a cast of a library, with the pages of each book exposed to the elements, and the spines, or bindings, hidden inside. Elsewhere I have called this library a cast of the moral law, which is also a cast of the history of the catastrophe. Can what is most sublime be cast in such a way, even in the process of memorialization? Is the cast of the moral law a safe place, and a sacred place, for those visiting Judenplatz, where there is also the Jewish museum in Mirisch Haus, and the remains of the medieval synagogue? And how accurate is Kant’s contention concerning Jewish law as the exemplar of the sublime in the first place?

Kant’s striking inclusion of Exodus 20:4 in his *Critique of Judgment* is in part dependent upon the all-encompassing nature of the prohibition: ‘*לעלא* מָשָׂא לֶא לוֹ מַעֲמַק עַל הָאָרֶץ לָא חֵיוֹן מָשָׂא לֶא לָא חֵיוֹן מַעֲמַק עַל הָאָרֶץ*’ In Germany, Luther’s translation of the Bible had long expressed this comprehensiveness:
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Du sollst dir kein Bildnis noch irgend ein Gleichnis machen, weder des, das oben im Himmel, noch des, das unten auf Erden, oder des, das im Wasser unter der Erde ist.  

With Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig’s later re-translation of the Hebrew Bible into German, there is a marked shift from the comprehensiveness of the prohibition to what Leora Batnitzky calls “a limited ban”:

Nicht mache dir: Schnitzwerk noch irgend Gestalt des, was im Himmel ringsum, was auf Erden ringsum, was im Wasser ringsum der Erde ist.  

[Do not make any wood carvings or any figure whatsoever of that which is (all around) above in heaven, that which is (all around) below on earth, and that which is (all around) in the waters beneath the earth]

Is this “limited ban” somehow less sublime than that expressed via Luther’s translation? The question concerns the range of the aesthetic imagination and its turning away from the visual: not just idolatrous portraits, but also visually imagined analogies (in Luther’s translation).  

For Buber and Rosenzweig, the more specific command against “wood carvings or any figure” is not just qualitatively different, but also temporally different. As Batnitzky puts it, “The second commandment, according to Rosenzweig, bans the denial of God’s ever-new will.”  

In other words, Buber and Rosenzweig reveal the ban against the idolatry of a lasting image [where] images are dangerous for the same reason that they are vital. While they make new realities possible, they constantly run the risk of idolatrously denying the very source of their power: the ever-new will of God to move the world toward redemption.

The “lasting image” is also sensuous, manifesting a sensuousness which Kant is suspicious of in his account of the sublime, as is revealed further in his gendered perspective in the “General Comment on the Exposition of Aesthetic Reflective Judgments.” The ban on all images is for Kant a “masculine” ban on immersion in sensuous images, leading Klinger to derive a general principle concerning Kant and gender (and the differences concerning the beautiful and the sublime), through analysis of Kant’s Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime (1763) as well as the Third Critique:

The distinctive and decisive feature lies in Kant’s assertion that the sublime virtues are independent of a benevolent providence; they are not given by nature as a kind of instinct but result from human freedom and are an accomplishment of reason. This is the principle we have to keep in mind. Summarized very simply, it says: all that distinguishes man from nature, makes him independent of and sets him above nature, is of itself noble or sublime and hence enables man. This valuation involves a gender hierarchy: the female principle is identified as immersion in nature whereas it is a male prerogative to surmount nature’s confines and to attain the autonomous moral law.

There is a complex distancing at work here. A distance must be maintained between aesthetic judgments and reflective ones, so that “ideas of both theoretical and practical reason arise in us and save us” from the overwhelming nature that triggered the sublime in the first place. This distancing is also a necessity for the creation of safety and security in the sublime scene. In other words, the subject is overwhelmed at the scene of the sublime event, dislocated through “an intimation of noumenal reality,” yet ultimately recovered through the triumph of our rational over our sensible nature . . . [where] the pleasure felt in such triumph seems indistinguishable from pleasure taken in the good.

In this latter sense, then, the sublimity of the moral law directly correlates with a diminishment of God, whereas Buber and Rosenzweig’s “limited ban” allows for the resistance to vision as a way of maintaining pure monotheism. Michelson makes a parallel point concerning the recourse to the moral law, through examination of Kierkegaard’s “caricature” of Kant in his Fear and Trembling:

Kierkegaard is not simply engaging in empty caricature when he has his pseudonymous author . . . link the idea that the ‘ethical is the universal’ with the insight that ‘then . . . I actually have no duty to God.’ . . . Kierkegaard has thus traced out the implications of Kant’s own postulation process, concluding—not unconvincingly—that if something is a moral duty by virtue of being tracked back to the universal, then there is no truly robust sense in which I can be said to have a duty to God.

Is there any way in which Kant’s recourse to the sublime model of the second commandment is not to be reduced to that of the moral law qua human universal?

To answer in the affirmative is to bind the security of the sublime experience with that of the event of, or existential exposure to, the sacred, where Kant’s restrictive and reductive notion of experience is read instead.
Commentators have emphasized the Judaic sense of Benjamin’s 
Jetzeit. For example, Fritzman notes, “Now-Time is messianic . . . in a 
Jewish and not a Christian sense . . . the Messiah only remains Messiah 
by not arriving.” This restrictive notion of Jetzeit is understandable but 
inaccurate in the context of the sublime event as an experience of the 
sacred: the messianic as a temporal shift encompasses the “already” and 
the “not-yet,” as Saint Paul theorizes the eschatological tension. If the 
sublime event is a now time, however, the “flow” of time ceases during 
the experience, or, time flows into one point. Lyotard perceives this to be a 
temporal regress that is found in the mathematical sublime; Kant puts it 
thus:

comprehending a multiplicity in a unity (of intuition rather than of 
thought), and hence comprehending in one instant what is apprehended 
successively, is a regression that in turn cancels the condition of time in the 
imagination’s progression and makes simultaneity intuitable.

This annihilation of time directly works upon the language “of” the 
sublime, yet, here the sublime needs to be divided neatly (and simply for 
purposes of this argument) into two; sublime I (that of Kant and the 
eighteenth and possibly the nineteenth century theorists) and sublime II 
(that of postmodern and poststructuralist theorists). I suggest that the 
sublime event as the experiencing of the sacred demands a third sublime, 
whereby I and II are united in spirit (synpsychos).

Andrew Bowie notes:

Kant’s account of the ban on images as being a privileged instance of the 
sublime also relies on the perceived need to transcend sensuous 
particularity to reach higher ideas.

Kant’s exemplum or model “don’t” (the ban on images) becomes in 
postmodernism and poststructuralism the concept of the “can’t,” i.e., the 
un-presentable (the ban on images of God and the ban on transcendental 
signifieds). This conceptual shift from sublime I to sublime II is also a 
shift from language as cipher (in Karl Jasper’s sense of being open to 
transcendence), to language as signifier (in the sense of endless chains of 
signifiers). Some commentators go further than this latter position, 
suggesting that Derridean difference is the new sublime, although always 
bearing in mind that difference is not a negative theology. In either 
case—cipher or endless play of signifiers—a collapse “back” into 
“habitual perception” punctures the sublime event for mundane 
existence. As Thomas Weiskel says,
It is a peculiarity of philosophic inquiry, inherent in the matter itself, that it stands from the outset in a fully fledged 'contrapuntal' relationship to theology.24

Sublime III, then, does not automatically reject or efface the possibility of the sacred at work in the sublime. Derrida’s critique of the safe place of the sublime has been read as the explication of one more deconstructive undecidable—the parergon—in an entire array of these deconstructive tools, where

undecidable must be understood to refer not only to essential incompleteness and inconsistency, bearing in mind their distance from ambiguity, but also to indicate a level vaster than that which is encompassed by the opposition between what is decidable and undecidable.35

Undecidables are thus the medium of deconstruction, suspending binary logic, and permanently suspending or holding in abeyance the transcendental signified. However, it is impossible to represent or create an image of an infrastructure for long, because, as Gasché and others point out, they are inherently unstable and paradigmatic of "themselves": "they themselves become a paradigm of the law they represent."35 Derridean infrastructures, then, are models of "the law," the poststructuralist ban on decidables, or the construction of any system predicated upon a transcendental signified. The infrastructures are a sublime irritation in the Derridean text, "incommensurate" even with themselves, to paraphrase Bloom’s description of Yahweh.27 It makes sense, then, to say as Bernstein does that deconstruction is sublime:

What was the work of reading [Heidegger's] 'Origin' but the demonstration that Van Gogh’s shoes were sublime, neither within nor outside representation, but the continual passage from one to the other? Sublimity, the figure of what is without figure, is the figure of deconstruction.30

Bernstein adds a supplement to this notion, an "And yet...", which is one that notes Derrida’s attempt to "de-narrativize" the Kantian story of the sublime’s safe place in the latter’s Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View. Bernstein sutures this deconstructive manoeuvre to Derrida’s discussion of the end of play in the Third Critique, where Derrida notes,

The ‘pleasing-oneself-in’ of the sublime is purely or merely negative (nur negativ) to the extent that it suspends play and elevates to seriousness. In
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that measure it constitutes an occupation related to the moral law. 39

The de-narrativization of the deconstructive approach is, however, re-narrativized by Derrida's story concerning violence:

...the violence is here done by the imagination, not by reason. The imagination turns this violence against itself and conceals itself; gashes itself [souillée] and robs itself. This is the place where the notion of sacrifice operates thematically inside the third Critique—and we've been constantly on its tracks. 40

What precisely is this violence? And is it a sacrifice here, or a binding (akedah)? 41 The violence occurs in a moment, the moment that, as we have already seen, Benjamin calls Jetztzeit. There are different levels of violence:

Hence (since temporal succession is a condition of the inner sense and of an intuition) it is a subjective movement of the imagination by which it does violence to the inner sense, and this violence must be the more significant the larger the quantum that is the imagination comprehends in one intuition. 42

For Derrida, the sacrifice of the imagination leads to a gain, i.e., an exchange takes place, and this is the economy of the sublime law, or, to use Pluhar's translation, the sacrificial violence is "purposive for the whole vocation of the mind." 43 Derrida does not name the sacrifice, being interested in its general economy, but if it were to be named, then it would, arguably, be "akedah."

This shocking name appears not only to be not spoken in Derrida's passage on sacrifice, but it is also not pictured or dramatized; this should come as no surprise, since as noted above, deconstruction is sublime, and it is thus also exemplified by the second commandment. Derrida does say that "the notion of sacrifice operates thematically inside the third Critique," 44 but what he does not make clear is that this operation is not causal but symptomatic. 45 In fact, the safe place of the sublime can also be thought of as symptomatic: in the poststructuralist sense, it is symptomatic of the deconstructive dis-ease concerning the ciphers of transcendence and the binding of the sublime's security (reason) with that of the experience of the sacred. Sublime III is the unconditional disregarding of such disease and an acceptance of the ciphers of transcendence.

Derrida is not surprised by both Kant and Hegel regarding Judaism as the historical figure of the sublime irruption, the one, Kant, from the point of view of religion and morals, in the ban on iconic representation... the other, Hegel, in Hebraic poetry considered as the highest negative form of the sublime. 46

Returning to Whitbread's Holocaust Memorial conceived as a sublime cast of the moral law—a performative reproduction of the iconic ban, with its hidden book bindings and ghostly cast traces of absent books—we can now see that it is also a safe place, a secure binding where memorialisation is a complex interplay of the present and the absent, the presentable (the trace, the remnant) and the un-presentable (the Shoah). The foundering of reason, at Holocaust Memorial, thus re-codes the experience of the sublime, where the sacred powerfully and profoundly holds sway.

Notes
1. Derrida, The Truth in Painting, 134.
2. Kant, Critique of Judgment, 135.
3. As Jack Miles notes: "I use this Hebrew noun, which simply means 'catastrophe,' in preference to the more usual holocaust, a word that some find offensive because its original setting is in the Jewish religion itself. Shoah is the noun most commonly used in Israel to refer to the slaughter of the Jews of Europe during World War II." Miles, Christ, 117, fn.
5. "You shall make no portrait nor any analogy whatsoever, neither of that which is above in heaven nor that which is below on the earth, nor that which is in the waters beneath the earth." Quoted in Batmizky, "Rosenzweig's Aesthetic Theory and Jewish Unheimlichkeit," 95.
6. Ibid.
7. This is not to imply that Luther's own position on visual images is entirely in accord with the strict 'implications' of his translation. For example, in Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments (1525), Luther writes, "I have myself seen the iconoclasts read out of my German Bible. I know that they have it and read out of it, as one can easily determine from the words they use. Now there are a great many pictures in those books, both of God, the angels, men and animals, especially in the Revelation of John and in Moses and Joshua. So now we would kindly beg them to permit us to do what they themselves do. Pictures contained in these books we would paint on walls for the sake of remembrance and better understanding, since they do no more harm on walls than..."
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in books,” Luther, Against Heavenly Prophets, 133.

Batmizsky, 95.

Ibid.


12 Ibid.

13 Michelson, Kant and the Problem of God, 55.

14 Prager, “Kant in Caspar David Friedrich’s Frames,” 75.

15 Readings, Introducing Lyotard, 106.

16 Ibid.

17 Kant, 106.

18 Ibid.

19 Kant, Kritik der Urteilskraft, 94; “Hence what is to be called sublime is not the object, but the attunement that the intellect [gets] through a certain presentation that occupies reflective judgment.” Kant, Critique of Judgment, 106.

20 Badick, “Descartes’s Cogito, Kant’s Sublime, and Rembrandt’s Philosophers: Cultural Transmission as Occasion for Freedom,” 48, fn. 27.


23 Kant, 116.


25 Bowie, Aesthetics and Subjectivity, 38.


27 See Patrick Hutchings, “The Old and the New Sublimes: Do They Signify God?” See also Lane, Functions of the Derrida Archive, 85-86.


29 Ibid.

30 Ibid, 27.

31 Buber, Scripture and Translation, 14.

32 Hutchings, 62.

33 One of the most in-depth accounts is found in Henri de Vries, Philosophy and the Turn to Religion, see, also, the various essays in Caputo and Scanlon, eds., Augustine and Postmodernity. I am also thinking here of the post-theory understanding of the sacred and the sublime as modeled by Patrick Hutchings.

34 Pieper, The End of Time, 16; see Lane, Reading Walter Benjamin, 6.

35 Gasché, The Tain of the Mirror, 241.

36 Ibid, 243.


38 Bernstein, The Fate of Art, 171.

39 Derrida, 130.


41 The word “akedah” describes Genesis 22, the “binding” or “sacrifice” of Isaac. Edward Kessler notes that: “The story of Abraham’s attempted sacrifice of Isaac is one of the most well-known stories of the Bible. It has been an important passage for Judaism and Christianity from an early period. For Jews, from at least as early as the third century CE, the passage, known as the Akedah or Binding of Isaac, has been read on Rosh ha-Shana, the Jewish New Year. For Christians from around the same period, the story, commonly titled the Sacrifice of Isaac, is mentioned in the Eucharist prayers and read in the period leading up to Easter.” Kessler, Bound By The Bible, 5. Judah Goldin, in his introduction to possibly the most famous book on the akedah, Shalom Spiegel’s The Last Trial, makes some interesting comments concerning terminology: “consider the very word Akedah. This noun never occurs in Scripture; only seven times does some form of the verbal root 'akad (‘qad) occur in the Bible (as a passive participle six times), and all seven of these in Genesis, and six of the seven within only two chapters, 30 and 31, where the term refers to a characteristic of beasts in a flock. Only once does the verb in the active, conjugated form appear, wa-yaqad, ‘and he bound,’ and that is in our story of the Trial of Abraham and Isaac.” Goldin, Introduction to The Last Trial, xxiii.

42 Kant, 116.

43 Ibid.

44 Derrida, 131.

45 “The concept of God held by the Jews is less a cause than a symptom of their manner of comprehending and representing things.” Eric Auerbach, Mimicry, 8.

46 Derrida, 134.