

EN HOMMAGE

à MIKEL DUFRENNE

Rendre hommage à Mikel Dufrenne est reconnaître l'importance d'un philosophe français qui marqua son temps de plusieurs façons. Né en 1910, donc juste avant la Première Guerre mondiale, Dufrenne fit de brillantes études au Lycée Henri IV (Alain fut son professeur) en ensuite à l'Ecole normale avant de passer l'agrégation où il fut reçu deuxième après avoir été premier à l'écrit. Mobilisé en 1939, il fut vite fait prisonnier et passa le reste de la guerre (de 1939 à 1945) dans le même camp que Ricoeur. Ils en profitèrent pour traduire Husserl et écrire une étude sur Jaspers. Après la captivité, Dufrenne fut d'abord connu comme co-auteur avec Ricoeur de ce livre. Le premier Français à se spécialiser dans le domaine de l'esthétique, Dufrenne s'est taillé sa propre réputation après la guerre grâce à une thèse d'Etat très remarquée: **Phénoménologie de l'expérience esthétique** (2 vols., PUF, 1953). Précédée en 1945 par la **Phénoménologie de la perception** de Merleau-Ponty, la thèse de Dufrenne fut la deuxième grande étude phénoménologique en français. Dufrenne, qui s'écarte de Husserl, y suit Sartre et Merleau-Ponty et comprend l'essence comme signification immanente dans et donnée avec le phénomène. Tout comme ses collègues français, il refuse l'idéalisme husserlien en s'efforçant de naturaliser le sujet transcendantal. Dans une série de livres ultérieurs, il développa sa conception esthétique très originale en proposant de reconceptualiser l'objet esthétique comme quasi sujet et en reformulant le concept d'a priori en prenant ses distances vis-à-vis de Kant. Bien qu'il reste proche de Merleau-Ponty, ses conceptions phénoménologiques furent influencées plus tard par Scheler et d'autres auteurs. Par contre, il n'a jamais été heideggerien. Très sensible aux autres, Dufrenne se tourna ensuite vers la politique en même temps qu'éclataient les événements de mai 68. Sa carrière universitaire se déroula en France à l'Université de Poitiers, puis à l'Université Paris X - Nanterre. Il fut souvent professeur invité aux Etats-Unis et au Canada avant de s'éteindre en 1995. Homme très gai, enseignant remarquable, il influença beaucoup d'élèves et autant d'amis, en fait tous ceux qui eurent le bonheur de le connaître, et qui se réunissent ici pour lui rendre hommage.

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**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."¹ 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

¹ 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'originare* (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."² 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."³ This is why Kant denies outright that even the most tumultuous ocean can be called

² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, tr. W. S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p. 113.

³ 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."⁴ 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 lightning 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."⁵ 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."⁶ 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.⁷ We disguise as belonging to the object, as "intuitable for us," what really belongs to the subject, the

⁴ Ibid., p. 99.

⁵ Ibid., p. 120.

⁶ 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).

⁷ 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."⁸

No wonder we are "agitated" (bewegt) in the subreptive presence of the sublime.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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"¹¹

⁸ "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.

⁹ 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."

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ *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 revealingly¹² -- 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."¹³ 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?

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

¹³ "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."¹⁴ The "horrible" may well be located in natural objects, but

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 56; his italics. Dcf. 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 sublime a basis merely within ourselves."