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From the Sublime to the Political:
Some Historical Notes

Gary Shapiro

The beautiful and the sublime? Rilke, at the beginning of an exemplary modernist poem, suggests that the contrast may be superficial:

Denn das Schöne ist nichts
als des Schrecklichen Anfang, den wir noch grade ertragen
und wir bewundern es so, weil es gelassen verschmählt,
uns zu zerstören. Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich.

[Because beauty’s nothing
but the start of terror we can hardly bear,
and we adore it because of the serene scorn
it could kill us with. Every angel’s terrifying.]\(^1\)

These lines suggest that the idea of the beautiful as a self-sufficient aesthetic experience in which we achieve a synthesis of motion and rest, desire and contemplation, is an illusion. The illusion is destined to give way to a more genuine experience of terror when we confront the pure and cold poetic consciousness which is represented by Rilke’s angels. As such it is typical of a strain of modernist poetics and aesthetics which exalts the sublime at the expense of the beautiful.

Let me document my suggestion that modernist poetics tends to give a privileged position to what has traditionally been known as the sublime by adducing two examples from rather disparate traditions. Martin Heidegger’s ontological poetics can reasonably be viewed as a renewal of the aesthetics of the sublime—although Heidegger never uses the term sublime, so far as I know—and is explicitly hostile to the limitations of aesthetics, conceived as an autonomous study of a certain kind of experience. Harold Bloom does recur to the Romantic terminology of sublimity in his attempt to construct a poetics which will focus on the Freudian and Nietzschean themes of power and repression. Heidegger is interested in the Ur-sprung of the work of art, that is, the original leap or thrust by means of which it opens up a new sense of the world; this is experienced as shock or displacement and as a threat to what is so far established. Such displacement, combined with Heidegger’s concern with death, which occupies a central
place in his hermeneutics, is sufficient to demonstrate the parallels between his poetics and the classical theory of the sublime. Heidegger’s basic revision of the classical theory is his historicizing of it so that the sublime is not simply the monstrous, novel, or shocking but is construed as the appearance of such qualities in a new epoch which is sent to us by Being. In a commentary on some lines of Hölderlin ("...poetically man dwells..."), Heidegger discusses the problem of measure and the measureless, a theme which occurs in accounts of the sublime. In Hölderlin’s lines, says Heidegger, God is the measure for man and yet God is unknown. But how can that which is unknown serve as a measure? Poet and thinker seem to agree that God is known by appearing "as the one who remains unknown," just as Kant describes the search for measure inspired by the mathematically infinite as leading to an awareness of the moral self, whose law of duty provokes a sense of awe (Achtung) but which is mysteriously unknowable to each of us, despite it being our own deepest nature. Hölderlin had suggested that God was "manifest like the sky." Here one thinks of Kant’s "starry skies above and the moral law within." The measure, Heidegger continues, "consists in the way in which the god who remains unknown, is revealed as such by the sky. God’s appearance through the sky consists in a disclosing that lets us see what conceals itself, but lets us see it not by seeking to wrest what is concealed out of its concealedness but only by guarding the concealed in its self-concealment. Thus the unknown god appears as the unknown by way of the sky’s manifestness."2

It is worth noting that, despite the formal similarities linking the Kantian and Heideggerian versions of the sublime, the latter has a more pronounced sense of the wholly other. At the end of the Kantian movement of the sublime is the moral self which is at least our own foundation, even if it is not transparent to us. In Holderlin's poem and in the later Heidegger the ground of the sublime is God or Being, conceived not on the lines of Spinoza's rational deus sive natura, but as the unknowable source of our historical destiny.

Another variation on the sublime, this time beginning from a psychologically oriented hermeneutic, is the work of Harold Bloom. Bloom sees the sublime not as a category of ontology, but of the poet's experience and work. Each aspiring poet experiences a virtual threat to his own existence (a real threat to his life as a poet) in the work of a great precursor. Like the mathematical and dynamical sublime of Kantian theory, the work of the earlier "strong" poet seems infinite and unsurpassable, offering the newcomer the opportunity of becoming a mere imitator. In response to this threat, a few aspirants find their poetic vocations through the experience of what Bloom
calls the Counter-Sublime: that is, they assert a new and more powerful poetic vision which includes and comprehends the poetry of their strong precursor. Bloom's Counter-Sublime corresponds to what Kant calls the sublime itself, since for Kant the initial threat is not sublime, but it is the occasion of the sublime. Bloom, however, offers a psychological account of the objectification (or reification) of the sublime as daemonization. The poet becomes daemonic to the extent that he wrestles with his great precursor. Such an access of energy and the sense of mastery tend to spill over into the thematic concerns of his poetry, so that there is "an intrusion of the numinous" and of "the idea of the Holy."³

The sense that Bloom is providing a psychoanalytic version of the ontology of the Heideggerian sublime is intensified by his citation of Rilke and the applicability of his account to Hölderlin. In Rilke "the revisionary ratio of daemonization was stronger than in any other poet of our century";⁴ like Shelley, he "compels us to see him in the company of angels, the daemonic partners of his quest for totality."⁵ This suggests a more precise reading of the lines from the Duino Elegies cited earlier. "Beauty's nothing / but the start of terror we can hardly bear" becomes intelligible, on Bloom's reading, when it is realized that Rilke's "we" is that of the poets rather than of a generalized human group. Sometimes he has surreptitiously used the "we" to designate the singular "I" of his own poetic voice. The "I" is ostensibly doubtful of his own powers: "And if I cried, who'd listen to me in those angelic / orders?" Crying out in one's own voice would be making poetry by oneself. The Elegies then turn out to be elegies for the poetic power or temptation rather than for some more generalized conception of human life. The poet alternately fears and laments the loss of poetic power:

And we: spectators, always, everywhere,
looking at everything and never from!
It floods us. We arrange it. It decays.
We arrange it again and we decay.

("Eighth Elegy")

The poetics of Heidegger and Bloom make little explicit reference to the political as such. The existential thinker has ontologized the sublime, and the American critic has translated it into essentially psychological categories which derive from Nietzsche and Freud. Nevertheless, there are clearly political dimensions in each of these poetics of the sublime. This emerges in Heidegger in the analysis of poetry and history. The original act of institution or establishment,
the *Ur-sprung* by which a novel work of art opens up a world, is said to be of the same general type by which a state or a people acquires a historical identity: "Whenever art happens—that is, whenever there is a beginning—a thrust enters history, history either begins or starts over again. History means here not a sequence in time of events of whatever sort, however important. History is the transporting of a people into its appointed task as entrance into that people's endowment."\(^6\) Heidegger's notorious connection with the Nazis shows that an exclusive poetics of the sublime can lend itself all too easily to irrationalist, fascist politics. Despite Heidegger's eventual repudiation of the Nazis, however, even his later thinking represents another dangerous turn of his historical poetics. Heidegger has nothing to say about poetry in any language after the time of Stefan George, Rilke, and Trakl. This silence seems to derive from his historical analysis of the present as the age of technology. As early as 1936 Heidegger had described the truth of the Nazi movement as its resistance to the impersonal technological world represented by both the United States and the Soviet Union. By the 1950s he came to believe that the entire world was under the domination of technology, and that literary criticism, among other disciplines, had, with its philosophical methods and scientific pretensions, come to be a part of a global technological complex. Presumably he thought that authentic art was not possible within such a world. Yet Heidegger awaited a new sending (*Geschick*) of Being, which would, if it occurred, be an external deliverance. So just as an aesthetics of the historical sublime can authorize a commitment to a political movement promising a radical break with the past, so it can, in its ontological version, legitimize a quietism which patiently awaits a salvation which can come only from an impersonal destiny. (Here there is an instructive parallel in the work of Walter Benjamin, whose thought oscillated between a messianic, Cabbalistic pole in which a degraded world awaits divine salvation, and an activist Marxism which finds that salvation instantiated in the Soviet Union and the communism of the 1930s.)

Bloom's psychological version of the sublime would seem at first to be devoid of political ramifications. In fact, like some other developments of Nietzschean and Freudian themes, it is an individualistic withdrawal from the political sphere. Yet as with so many forms of methodological individualism, Bloom's model of individual activity is one which reflects prevailing social norms within a given culture. We can begin to analyze these introjected social norms by noting the historical limits that Bloom himself draws around his project. Working mainly with English and American poetry, he finds Shakespeare (and presumably all earlier poets) to be outside the range of
his analysis. The tradition which he is concerned with, then, is that from Ben Jonson and Milton to the present. The pattern of that tradition is one in which there is an unrelenting pressure on the aspiring poet to create his own poetic capital by overcoming the achievements of his precursors. Competition and individual success become the presiding values of poetry as they do in civil society. Nevertheless, there seem to be limits to poetic expansion and innovation, which lead eventually to diminishing returns and to increased anxiety as to whether one's new product is sufficiently new to arouse interest. In such a situation one major form of entrepreneurship which still remains open is that of criticism, where the possibilities have not been similarly depleted. Accordingly, Bloom's claim that criticism can embody the same values and exhibit the same dynamic as poetry can be viewed as the opening of a new economic frontier. Bloom's own work may exhibit an anxiety toward the influence of Northrop Frye, but his position within poetic criticism would still be more like that of the Romantics than like that of their contemporary poetic epigones.

In contrast to such theories of the sublime, the beautiful also makes its appearance in modern poetics in the form of a criticism which emphasizes the coherence, autonomy, and organic unity of the poem. The American New Criticism was a consistent effort to read all poetry in terms of such criteria. The New Criticism has often been accused of taking a fundamentally conservative social stance insofar as it identifies the qualities of the good society and the good poem; nostalgia for an organic past is then seen as the motive behind the valorization of the organic poem. Today there is a widely held impression that only criticism oriented toward the sublime is really interesting, regardless of its political tendency. One can then be led to a reluctant acceptance of the poetics of sublimity, despite reservations about the moral and political context of the critical theories which invoke this aesthetic mode. It seems to me that such views take an overly one-sided perspective on the resources of the aesthetic and poetic tradition, especially of that tradition in German aesthetics which extends from Kant to Marx and to a number of schools of Marxist aesthetics. Let me turn, then, to a reconstruction of a somewhat neglected dimension of that tradition.

Kant's analysis of the beautiful and sublime is a summa and critique of the ideal of taste which was at the center of aesthetic thinking in the eighteenth century. The first part of the Critique of Judgment, it is arguable, could stand on its own, apart from the analysis of teleology in nature which follows it. If so it could be called the "Critique of Taste." "Taste" sounds rather dated now, at the end of a century of
artistic experimentation which has apparently overthrown all the norms and expectations associated with the cultivated gentleman of the eighteenth century, who was the ultimate subject of taste. The beautiful and the sublime are, in their eighteenth-century versions, two complementary poles of the life of taste. We should speak of the life or activity of taste here because the beautiful and the sublime embody two necessary dimensions of the classical bourgeois conception of the moral and social life. Such a political economy, Jacques Derrida has claimed, “is implicated in every discourse on art and on the beautiful.” The outlines of this political economy are already evident in Burke, who correlates the idea of the beautiful with the passion of love and the sociable tendency, while connecting that of the sublime with the desire or instinct of self-preservation. The beautiful is appealing in itself, reminding us of the tender and social passions which attract us to others; it is also the subject matter of aesthetic sociability, becoming the ground for that mutual pleasure in the beautiful which forms a large part of the life of taste. In the experience of the sublime, on the other hand, a virtual or imaginary threat throws us back upon our own resources; reminded of our vulnerability, we withdraw temporarily from communication, in a pattern of action which is analogous to that of preserving the self when we are endangered. Kant’s treatment of the beautiful and sublime takes these same themes to be essential but grounds them in a priori faculties of human nature rather than in the empirical experience of Burke and the English philosophical tradition. Kant continuously stresses that aesthetic judgments must be universally communicable, suggesting even at times that aesthetic pleasure is the consequence rather than the ground of such communicability, as in this crucial passage of the Critique of Judgment: “It is the universal capacity for being communicated incident to the mental state in the given representation which, as the subjective condition of the judgment of taste, must be fundamental, with the pleasure in the object as its consequent.”

In a recent analysis of this topic, Paul Guyer has argued that the claim which would make communicability constitutive of the aesthetic judgment, rather than its sign and consequence, is a survival in Kant’s later thought of his precritical aesthetics. Guyer reconstructs Kant’s thought here by suggesting that in his mature aesthetic theory communicability is not the origin of aesthetic pleasure but its goal. Yet even this interpretation of Kant’s thought places his analysis of the beautiful within the framework of a political economy of taste. Kant’s stress on the universal communicability of pleasure in the beautiful is an aspect of the ethical universalism and cosmopolitanism charac-
teristic of his thought. In contrast to the mainstream of English theories of taste which were then prevalent, Kant does not regard taste as the special possession of a social elite; English theories tended to regard taste as an aristocratic faculty, present in only a few and dependent, generally, upon both proper birth and education. While Kant agrees that taste is not actually universal, he insists both that it is potentially so and that this potentiality is presupposed in the aesthetic judgment itself. Whereas the English based their account of taste on an empirical observation which suggested that only a small segment of society could indeed have the appropriate experiences and share them with others, Kant's belief that one can, a priori, suppose a common set of cognitive faculties in all men leads to a universalistic theory of beauty and sublimity. From the standpoint of political economy both Burke and Kant are acknowledging the role of exchange, communication, and social intercourse in the life of taste; one limits such communication to the relatively closed communities revealed by actual observation, while the other attempts to disclose the universal principle underlying the communication. The other side of the communication and exchange through which civil society is constituted, however, is the possibility of withdrawing from it. Burke follows Hobbes in claiming that self-preservation will always be a valid reason and an effective cause of withdrawal. In Kant's analysis of the sublime, Burke’s self-preservation is replaced by the awareness of our transcendent freedom and moral vocation, another move from the empirical to the a priori level. There is, then, a far-reaching analogy between the dual structure of communication and the possibility of withdrawal which constitute society, conceived on the model of eighteenth-century political economy, and the communication of our pleasure in the beautiful and the isolating awareness of the transcendent in our experience of the sublime.

It has been argued by Georg Lukács that the rise of aesthetics in eighteenth-century England and Germany is tied to the need of the middle class either to form an ideal which would fortify its precarious position (in England) or which would provide it with an alternative to revolution within a repressive, nonfeudal context (in Germany). These are important considerations, although Lukács's account seems skewed in a number of respects, such as in its failure to recognize a strongly aristocratic strain within English aesthetics. What I want to emphasize in this analysis, however, is not such global connections between aesthetic doctrines and social movements; rather, I want to suggest that we can learn something about the political ramifications of aesthetic thought by noting structural parallels between the categories of aesthetic and social discourse.
Consider the language in which Kant somewhat tentatively describes the ideal conversation which would be conducted by men of taste. When we call an object beautiful, Kant says, "we believe ourselves to be speaking with a universal voice, and lay claim to the concurrence of every one, whereas no private sensation would be decisive except for the observer alone and his liking. Here, now, we may perceive that nothing is postulated in the judgement of taste but such a universal voice in respect of delight that is not mediated by concepts.... The judgement of taste itself does not postulate the agreement of every one.... it only imputes this agreement to every one...."12 Here Kant postulates something analogous to what Jürgen Habermas has called an ideal speech community, in which there is a free and full discussion of the matter at hand and agreement that differences are to be settled by appeal to universally accepted principles and methods of inquiry. To make an aesthetic judgment is virtually to become a member of such a community, believing that one can rely on the universal voice of one's fellow speakers. Sometimes Kant seems to have in mind such an ideal speech situation, even when he is apparently speaking of actual speech. Consider his claim that "as regards the agreeable every one concedes that his judgement, which he bases on a private feeling, and in which he declares that an object pleases him, is restricted merely to himself personally."13 Does everyone actually make such a concession? In fact Kant means that they would do so if the question were properly presented and explained. But the further query arises as to how much must be built into the ground rules of such a situation in order to guarantee the desired result. Here Kant's discussion of some actual speech which touches on matters of taste is illuminating. The question of just what such a discursive situation would be like is complicated by the fact that, on Kant's analysis of taste, there can be no rules to which any of the speakers can appeal to validate their claims. Moreover, the question arises as to whether such a discussion would itself be strictly rational or if it could consist in part of aesthetic experiences. On the first alternative the model community of taste would seem to suffer even more intensely from the abstraction which many have objected to in John Rawls's analogous recasting of social contract theory. That is, just as Rawls supposes that we can arrive at the principles of justice by supposing what procedures would seem fair "behind the veil of ignorance" where we are ignorant of our own specific social situation and assets, so Kant (on this interpretation) would ask us to choose those principles of taste which would emerge in an aesthetic discussion in which none of us knew his or her actual pleasures, aesthetic or otherwise—that is, behind a veil of aesthetic ignorance. One model
for the second alternative is found in Kant's analysis of the ingredients of good dinner-party conversation, which ought to include stories (narrative) and wit as well as narrowly rational speech. It is worth noting that Habermas’s ideal speech situation includes only the last of these. Despite the fact that Kant’s guests testified to the cosmopolitan charm of his dinner parties, there are obvious limits to this possible model. It is a historically and culturally limited practice; even at its best the temporary community and good cheer tends to obscure real differences of power among the participants which are likely to influence the outcome of any discussion of matters of taste.

Kant left the question of the relative significance of the beautiful and the sublime to his contemporaries and successors. Schiller is among the most important of these because he was forced to supplement his own aesthetics of the beautiful, as it was expressed in the *Letters on Aesthetic Education*, with a consideration of the sublime. Although beauty presents us with a harmony of reason and sense, “beauty alone could never teach us that our destination is to act as pure intelligence. . . . In the presence of the sublime, on the contrary, reason and the sensuous are not in harmony, and it is precisely this contradiction between the two which makes the charm of the sublime—its irresistible action on our minds.” Schiller, however, criticized the Kantian limitation of the sublime to experiences of the natural world, arguing that art was able to keep the monstrous and horrifying at a distance so that we might not be overpowered by our actual fear or by a practical exigency to which we must attend. Kant himself had said rather briefly and schematically that “even the presentation of the sublime, so far as it belongs to fine art, may be brought into union with beauty in a tragedy in verse, a didactic poem or an oratorio, and in this combination fine art is even more artistic.”

For Schiller tragedy was the clearest artistic presentation of the sublime; both theoretically and in the writing of his own tragedies, he added a historical dimension to the concept of the tragic sublime. Schiller speaks simultaneously as philosopher, historian, and tragic poet when he says: “Away then with that false theory which supposes falsely a harmony binding the doing of good with a happy life. Let evil destiny show its face. Our safety is not in blindness but in facing our dangers. What can do so better than familiarity with the splendid and terrible evolution of events, or than pictures showing man in conflict with chance; evil triumphant, security deceived—pictures shown us throughout history, and placed before us by tragedy?”

In a recent essay Hayden White has called for a return to Schiller’s sense of the historical sublime as a necessary condition for a radical and imaginative vision of political and historical possibilities. The con-
nections between poetry and politics in German Romanticism do testify to a considerable extent to the plausibility of White's suggestion. Enthusiasm for the French Revolution and Napoleon, such as one finds in Hölderlin and the young Hegel, was spurred and enhanced by Schiller's tragic poetry and his sense of the sublimity of history. But it seems to me that White's insight into the fundamental choice for the historian between an aesthetic of the beautiful or of the sublime is marred by a misreading of the relations, or dialectic, between these two possibilities in the German intellectual tradition from Hegel to Marx and beyond. White sees that an exclusive aesthetics of the beautiful will tend to make the historian construe the past as orderly and complete, leading to the introduction of ordering principles such as evolution and organic unity. A reading of history along these lines will in turn tend to lead to a conservative politics, as White argues:

Although Hegel took up the question of the sublime, both explicitly in his *Aesthetics* and implicitly in the *Philosophy of History*, he subordinated it to the notion of the beautiful in the former and to the notion of the rational in the latter. It was this demotion of the sublime in favor of the beautiful that constituted the heritage from German idealism to both radical and conservative thought about the kind of utopian existence mankind could justifiably envisage as the ideal aim or goal of any putatively progressive historical process. . . . It is the aesthetics of the beautiful which, as Thomas Weiskel suggests, undercuts the radical impulse of this tradition. This undercutting may account in part for the weak psychological appeal of "the beautiful life" as a project to be realized in political struggles and, more importantly, for the apparent incapacity of political regimes founded on Marxist principles to sustain their professed programs for the radical transformation of society in anything but the most banal ways.18

I agree with White that the use made of the German aesthetic tradition in Marxist political regimes has tended, at best, to the banal; one could establish this not only by looking at the dreary work of socialist realism but even in the post-1930 writings of Georg Lukács, who was the most representative and influential heir of German idealism within the world of those regimes. Yet I want to propose another sketch of the history and dialectic of the beautiful and sublime within that tradition and some of its heirs which will show that the tendencies represented by the Kantian-Schillerian sublime did not disappear with the emergence of the Hegelian system and so may be reappropriated more directly than White's account suggests.

The most systematic and influential system of aesthetics to follow Kant's *Critique* is that contained in Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*. Hegel held that reason not only aimed at comprehending the totality but
that, in grasping the dialectical nature of reality, it succeeded at this task. He defined the beautiful as the sensuous appearance or shining (Scheinen) of the Idea, thinking of art as approximating the conceptual grasp of the whole which was completed in philosophy. Since Hegel thought of the understanding as a prosaic application of rules to examples, and also rejected the idea of an unknowable, he did not divide the philosophy of art along the Kantian dichotomy of the understanding (beauty) and the reason (sublimity). There is only one realm of the artistic or aesthetic; it is governed by reason, and Hegel calls it the beautiful or the Ideal. But the terminology calls for a gloss. Schiller, as Dieter Henrich has pointed out, uses “the Ideal” to designate the unity of the beautiful and the sublime, and Hegel acknowledges an important debt to Schiller’s aesthetics; so we must be cautious in supposing that Hegel has simply thrown out the sublime. Within the beautiful, however, Hegel discerns three basic modes of relation between the Idea and its sensuous manifestation, or between content and form. These correspond generally to phases in the historical development of art. In the first or symbolic mode, the Idea is conceived vaguely or abstractly and is imperfectly embodied; in the classical mode there is a harmonious interplay of sensuous form and conceptual content, exemplified by Greek sculpture; in the final or Romantic mode the Idea or conceptual content is too spiritual for any adequate embodiment in sensuous materials, including poetic images. For Hegel the sublime is a variety of the symbolic; typified by the Psalms of the Jewish Bible, it consists in a sense of the overwhelming contrast between the finite—man and the powers of the world—and the genuine infinity of God. The God of the sublime is not yet known or revealed as he will be in Greek or Christian art; he is thought of as a limiting concept, known only as that which stands in perpetual contrast with the finite. Hegel consistently suggests in a number of places that Kant’s entire philosophy rests on a similar dualistic assumption. Hegel’s apparent response to the Burkean and Kantian sublime, then, was to relegate it to a preliminary or primitive phase of art by giving it a historical nature. As we will soon see, however, the historicizing of the sublime can also be used in precisely the opposite direction in order to devalue the beautiful.

From a deeper point of view, however, Hegel’s conception of art is a synthesis of the concepts of beauty and sublimity. Art must have some immediate sensuous appeal (beauty), but it must also display the radical freedom of the human spirit (sublimity). Because the Idea can manifest itself to the senses, beauty and sublimity can be combined in the Ideal. The same pattern is repeated on a different level in Hegel’s theory of the poetic genres. The epic world is one of self-
contained beauty; the lyric testifies to the sublime freedom of the poetic voice over its material; while the drama combines these aspects by showing a world composed of both freedom and order. Hegel's combination of the beautiful and the sublime in art conceived as a form of spiritual self-knowledge carries with it a social meaning. To understand art is to see the rationality of its history, and this is to become a member of that community which has come to see that philosophy (including aesthetics) is not simply the love of wisdom but the actual possession and practice of scientific knowledge. The melancholy aspect of this transformation is Hegel's claim that "art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains a thing of the past" and that its transcendent status in beautiful eras like classical Greece and the late Middle Ages has been replaced by the science of art.20 The Hegelian art historian is a man of knowledge, in contrast to the eighteenth-century man of taste. While Kant had implicitly criticized the aristocratic views of the English, according to which birth and breeding are prerequisites for the exercise of taste, he retained the gentlemanly disdain which those views have for anything which would introduce definite reasons and knowledge into the understanding of beauty. Neither aristocratic status nor a presumed moral sensitivity are sufficient, on Hegel's view, to give us a proper understanding of art. To have reached such an understanding, which is potentially available to all, is to have consciously taken one's place as a member of the Hegelian community of absolute knowledge—the group that Hegel designates with the word we. Membership in that group is potentially universal, and Hegel believed that this potential would become actualized as the modern world came increasingly to embody its distinctive principle that "all are free" (in contrast to the "one" or "some" who are free in the Oriental and Greco-Roman worlds). Hegelian knowledge, including the knowledge of the meaning of art and its history, is itself one of the important means of human liberation. Whereas the potential universality of the community of taste in which Kant believes still rests upon our inability to give definitive grounds for our aesthetic judgments, the Hegelian finds that such universality is achieved by a scientific understanding of the actual history of art, which exhibits at the same time our spiritual and political history. The model is no longer the appeal by the connoisseur to an ineffable je ne sais quoi but the orderly exposition of the art historian to his class (of which Hegel's lectures give us perhaps the first example).

Hegel connects this quest for intelligibility with his account of sublimity in his discussion of tragedy and comedy. Although Hegel has often been called a pan-tragic thinker and much has been said about
Hegel's "theory of tragedy," it is significant that the two systematic discussions of the poetic genres in his works end with an analysis of comedy which suggests that it is the more comprehensive of the two forms. Moreover, Hegel seems to agree with Schiller, in opposition to Kant, that comedy is also the more sublime of the two forms. In his essay "On Naive and Sentimental Poetry" Schiller had argued that this difference has to do with tragedy's reliance on established legends or history for its subject matter and comedy's need for invention:

The tragic poet is supported by his theme, the comic poet on the other hand must rise to his aesthetic height through his own person. The first may make a leap for which, however, not much is required; the other must remain himself, he must therefore already be there and be at home there where the first cannot attain without a startling leap. And it is precisely in this way that the beautiful character is distinguished from the sublime. In the first, all the dimensions are already contained, flowing unconstrainedly and effortlessly by its nature and it is, according to its capacity, an infinitude at every point in its path; the other can elevate and exert itself to any dimension, by the power of its will it can tear itself out of any state of limitation. The latter is, then, only intermittently and with effort free, the former with facility and always.21

This could perhaps be summarized by saying that although the content of tragedy is more sublime than that of comedy, comedy's form is more sublime insofar as it requires and exhibits a greater aesthetic freedom on the part of the poet. Hegel develops the point in his discussion of Greek Kunstreligion in the Phenomenology. That discussion should be read in the light of the "tyranny of Greece over Germany" which is obvious in Schiller, Hegel, Goethe, and many other writers of the time. In analyzing the recognized paradigm of artistic development by means of his own dialectical principles, Hegel is making a statement about the resources of art in general. The intelligibility of the Greek and Romantic project of a religion of art depends, Hegel claims, on recognizing that it tends toward the spiritual elevation of comedy, in which the audience of the work of art discover their own freedom by finding a virtual identity with the intense freedom of the comic poet. In contrast, Hegel describes tragedy as a mode in which that freedom is relatively obscured: in its plot by the domination of fate; in characterization by the actors' assumption of the masks or disguises of legendary heroes presumed to be greatly superior to the men of today; and in the radical of presentation by the somewhat mysterious role of the poet himself, who stands somewhere behind or outside his production. In the spirit of Schiller, then, Hegel can declare unreservedly that Antigone is the
most beautiful of all works of art, either ancient or modern; but he also speaks of the unparalleled spiritual elevation, or sublime character, of Aristophanic and Shakespearean comedy.

The sublime freedom of comedy consists in the realization that we have the same freedom to shape our social and political lives which the comic poet has as a creator. Hegel's description of the comic state of mind is quite similar to Kant's account of the return to the true self which is provoked by the sublime in nature: "What this self-consciousness beholds is that whatever assumes the form of essentiality over against it, is instead dissolved in it—in its thinking, its existence, and its action—and is at its mercy. It is the return of everything universal into the certainty of itself which, in consequence, is this complete loss of fear and of essential being on the part of all that is alien."\(^{22}\)

There is a fairly direct line which leads from Hegel's apotheosis of comedy to Marx's poetics. The line is complicated by the fact that two philosophers of the Hegelian school, at least one of whom Marx studied carefully, devoted great efforts to clarifying the relations of the beautiful, the sublime, and the comic. F. T. Vischer and Karl Rosenkranz both argued in effect, as does Hayden White, that Hegel had unduly restricted the sphere of the aesthetic by limiting it to the beautiful. Vischer's early work On the Sublime and the Comic set the pattern for his later massive and encyclopedic Aesthetik, which was one of the most influential works of German aesthetics in the second half of the century. Vischer's argument was that Hegel had unduly restricted the artistic and aesthetic by considering them only in terms of the beautiful. He implicitly claimed to out-Hegel Hegel by finding the beautiful to be only the first or immediate moment of the aesthetic. The second is the sublime, understood as the negation of the beautiful and susceptible of fine discriminations into various forms. The final, reconciling moment is the comic, conceived as combining the immediate appeal of the beautiful with the disparity and conflict typical of the sublime. Rosenkranz's Aesthetics of the Ugly employs a similar structure, although he thinks of the ugly as the more inclusive negative aesthetic concept.\(^{23}\)

Marx's own aesthetics is expressed in the form of a number of comments scattered about in his discussions of many subjects. This makes it difficult to assess in its entirety, and the problem is complicated by the fact that so many writers have claimed to speak in Marx's name. Yet while Marx does say, in the 1844 Manuscripts, that "man also creates according to the laws of beauty," we ought not to suppose on these grounds that he adhered to a one-sided aesthetics of the beautiful. Rather than making one more attempt to synthesize Marx's
many fragments on art and the aesthetic, it is possible, in the spirit of Hayden White’s analysis in *Metahistory*, to investigate the poetics implicit in Marx’s own writings. When we do so we see that the comic mode plays a role analogous to that which it is given in the theories of Schiller, Hegel, and some of Hegel’s students. Marx begins one of his most extended historical narratives of his own times, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, with an allusion to Hegel, tragedy, and comedy: “Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add, the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.” The dominant images of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* are drawn from the comic theater, the farce, and the carnival. This parodic theme is pervasive in Marx’s writings, arising from his early adoption of the Hegelian view that “the final phase of a world-historical form is its comedy.” To see history as a comedy is, as Marx says in the second paragraph of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, to realize that “men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.”

Comic self-awareness is connected, as in Schiller, with the sense of previous history as a powerful and irrational force. The comic consciousness that we do make our own history within such limitations is a more precise and articulate version of Schiller’s comic sublime. Marx, then, does not adopt an uncritical aesthetics of the beautiful but announces that “the social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future.” That is, it is only through the purgation of the comic sublime that men can proceed to the point of genuine historical action. As early as 1843, in his *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, after explaining his view that each world-historical epoch ends in comedy, Marx asks: “Why should history proceed in this way? So that mankind shall separate itself gladly from its past.” The comic sublime, like Schiller’s contemplation of the tragedy of history, requires a radical break with the presumed continuity of purpose which conservatives evoke in their defense of established politics. The ideal of universal communicability is abandoned as the differences between conservative and radical views of the same historical events are emphasized. Louis Napoleon is not a heroic agent but a farcical clown, and his attempt to wear the heroic costume of his uncle is a travesty of the way in which the French Revolution of 1789 took on the trappings of Roman republican virtue. Of the many thinkers who have attempted to develop
a Marxist poetics, it is Mikhail Bakhtin who is closest to Marx’s vision of the comic sublime. Bakhtin’s attempt in his book on Rabelais is precisely to show how the conventional aesthetics of beauty has blinded most literary critics to the liberating possibilities of the carnivalesque. As Bakhtin understands it, the carnival enacts just the sort of reversal which Marx narrates in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. Marx in fact enlarged on the genre in *Herr Vogt*, a long sequel to the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, in which Rabelaisian techniques and allusions are employed in order to deflate the lies and pretensions of a German propagandist for Louis Napoleon.

Marx’s original plan was to call this work *Da-Da Vogt*, Da-Da being the Algerian translator of Louis Napoleon, in order to suggest that Vogt was a mere ventriloquist’s dummy. But Marx, like the Dadaists of the twentieth century, may also have been attracted by the childish and nonsensical sound of the phrase, since he wanted to suggest, as they did, that there was something senseless and chaotic in established or official reality. Marx reluctantly gave in to the more sober Engels, who had urged him to give his book a more intelligible title, but not until he had said that “the fact that Da-Da will puzzle the philistine pleases me and fits well into my system of mockery and contempt.”

I am suggesting that Marx is to be taken seriously when he speaks of a system of mockery and contempt and that we can find the theoretical origins of that system in the aesthetics of the sublime and its literary exemplars in Rabelais, Shakespeare’s Falstaff, and the other carnivalesque figures which people *Herr Vogt*.

Marx’s extensive notes on the aesthetics of F. T. Vischer, made just a year or two before the composition of *Herr Vogt*, show him taking an explicit interest in Vischer’s account of the sublime. Vischer’s discussion of the measureless seems to have helped Marx to formulate the economic categories of *Capital* and other later writings. Capital has a tendency toward a continuous and monstrous development in which every boundary of measure is left behind. Like the Kantian mathematical sublime, capital can expand indefinitely as an objective and threatening presence. But the true or deeper movement of the sublime is provided by the demonstration, carried out at the beginning of *Capital*, that money and the fetishism of commodities are human constructions which can be modified or displaced by other human acts.

Marxist aesthetics after Marx can hardly be considered as an integral theory; White’s suggestion that Marxism is committed to an aesthetics of the beautiful is true only of one tendency within the many schools of Marxist aesthetics. Lukács is doubtless the most interesting and significant thinker who fits White’s description. Al-
though Lukács’s earlier writings were exemplary explorations of tragic and existential themes, his mature aesthetics of the 1930s and later is oriented toward a classical conception of beauty. As Fredric Jameson has shown, that concern expresses itself through a concentration on narrative forms which is governed by Hegel’s analysis of the epic as presenting an integrated world. The epic world is structured by “natural” relations between man and nature, man and other men, and man and his products; it may include tragic conflict, but as “an answer without a question” it has no room for the forms of alienation which Marx and Lukács thought of as characterizing modern life. Lukács’s later discussions of European realism of the nineteenth century are explorations of the deformation of the epic ideal under capitalism and of the promise of its revival. For Lukács it was important both to envision the entire literary tradition as moving toward or falling away from this goal and to construct a history of aesthetics in which Hegel and Marx emerge as theorists of the beautiful rather than the sublime. Especially revealing is Lukács’s long essay on Marx’s notes on Vischer. While noting that Vischer appealed to Marx because he made an attempt to comprehend the realistic art of the nineteenth century, Lukács fails to observe that Marx also developed and was stimulated by Vischer’s attempt to restore the element of the sublime. Similarly, insofar as he invokes the authority of Hegel, Lukács construes his aesthetics in terms of the opposition between ancient and modern narrative rather than recognizing the development toward comic freedom which Hegel always sees as the dissolution (Aufführung) or elimination of art. Through this systematic repression of Hegelian comedy and Marxist Dadaism, Lukács denies himself the theoretical and critical concepts which would have allowed him to see the liberating power of modernism.

Walter Benjamin and T. W. Adorno attempted to keep faith with the spirit of early Lukács while often engaged in conflict with the beautified Hegelianism of later Lukács. This leads to an emphasis on the sublime in their work which has often led their critics to regard them as tragic and pessimistic thinkers. To put the matter briefly in a formula which will soon be unpacked, we can say that Benjamin’s fundamental tendency is to think the sublime, although he occasionally makes a desperate grasp for the beautiful, while Adorno sees the beautiful as of the first importance for the arts but that he is obsessively conscious of our distance from that beauty and that the articulation of that distance makes him into a practical critic of the sublime. This formula is meant to aid in understanding how it is, as a recent commentator on the Frankfurt school has said, that “the work of each is the only corrective for that of the other,” and that they are
(to use Adorno’s language now) “torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up.”

Benjamin’s early book on the seventeenth-century Trauerspiel is notable for its renewal of the critical concept of allegory. To see Trauerspiel as allegory is to recognize a significant artistic mode which does not aim at a harmony in the realm of beautiful appearance but which is structured by the discontinuity of allegorical vehicle and its ultimate referent. This sense of gaps, discontinuities, and tensions is perhaps the most impressive single aspect of Benjamin’s criticism. It is stated quite clearly in his analysis of translation. As a translator of Baudelaire and Proust, Benjamin came to see that he, and all translators, were faced with the fundamental choice between creating a self-sufficient poem or text in their own language or of letting the strangeness, specificity, and haecceity of the work to be translated shine through the words of one’s own language, even if the latter could not be an integral work of art. The goal of this juxtaposition is the pursuit of what Benjamin calls a “pure language.” In translation, he says, “the great motif of integrating many tongues into one true language is at work. . . . If there is such a thing as a language of truth, the tensionless and even silent depository of the ultimate truth which all thought strives for, then this language of truth is—the true language. And this very language, whose divination and description is the only perfection a philosopher can hope for, is concealed in concentrated fashion in translations.” For Benjamin, then, it is important that a translation not produce the illusion of beauty but that it serve as a means of provoking the awareness of an infinite and probably impossible task (note the hypothetical “if there is a language of truth . . . ”). In other words, translation must, by the shock arising from the confrontation of two incongruous languages, produce an awareness of that unattainable linguistic totality which lies beyond all finite languages.

The pattern exhibited in Benjamin’s thought of the linguistic sublime is paradigmatic for his general approach to art and history. Perhaps all of these aspects of his work can be traced to a kind of gnostic thinking according to which history is a panorama of the fallen and degraded which is occasionally illuminated by traces of a fuller and more human life. It then becomes the task of the critic, as of the translator, to awaken these traces in order to provoke some consciousness of that which lies beyond them and to which they testify. In the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” we read that “[t]he past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that
preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply. Historical materialists are aware of that.  

The historical sublime in Benjamin represents something of a return from Hegel to Schiller. "The historical materialist must abandon the epic element in history . . . [he] explodes the epoch out of its reified 'historical continuity,' and thereby lifts life out of this epoch, and the work out of the life work." Materialism is a break with the contemplative idealism which tends to see history as rounded and complete, as in Hegel's view of the classical epic.

Adorno's conceptions of beauty and sublimity can be found in his reading of the Odyssey. Schiller, in his essay "On the Sublime," had already presented the story as a conflict of the beautiful and the sublime: "The beauty displayed by the figure of the goddess Calypso enchanted the brave son of Ulysses, and by the power of her charms she long held him captive on her island. For a long time he believed he was worshipping an immortal divinity, yet he lay only in the arms of lust—but suddenly a sublime impression overcame him in the guise of Mentor: he recollected his higher mission, cast himself into the waves, and was free." Making allowances for the fact that Schiller is following Fenelon's Adventures of Telemachus rather than the Homeric Odyssey, it is worth noting that Adorno's interpretation of the story expresses precisely the opposite evaluation. While Schiller (in a Kantian spirit) praises the sublime state of mind which allows the man enthralled by Calypso to take his leave, Adorno reads the story as an allegory of the unhappy sacrifice of beauty that must be performed by the man of reason and duty. The beauty of the mythical world which Odysseus leaves behind is not only the promise of happiness but its seal and confirmation. The sublime character who abandons happiness and beauty is, on his view, the first example of the prudent, patriarchal, and enlightened character who values rational calculation and the domination of nature more highly than he does instinctual satisfaction. Adorno's reading is also markedly different from the Hegelian view of the epic world (adopted also by Lukács) as exhibiting a fundamental unity of man and nature, passion and spirit. While Schiller was able to protect his view of Homer's naiveté by considering the later "sentimental" version of the story by Fenelon, Adorno sees the hero as "a prototype of the bourgeois individual." He reads back into Homer those characteristics of the isolated hero which Hegel and Lukács saw as features of post-epic narrative: "Odysseus, too, is the self who always restrains himself and forgets his life, who saves his life and yet recalls it only as wandering." The encounter with the Sirens is paradigmatic: through
his cunning Odysseus is able to hear their beautiful song, but this requires not only his domination of his crew, but also, since he is bound, the sacrifice of a natural connection between music and erotic activity.

Most of Adorno's discussions of the arts have to do with the modern era, in which taste is no longer a viable concept. Authentic art is possible now only in the mode of the sublime, testifying to the radical degradation of the world and to the loss of a real community of artist and audience. Adorno agrees with Benjamin that in a world of fragmentation and destruction art can indirectly point the way to something quite different only through the integrity of its form and its refusal to compromise with prevailing ideology. Yet the essay on Odysseus reveals a genuine nostalgia for the beautiful which has a quite different orientation than Benjamin's messianic expectations. Adorno must, like Odysseus, exact a heavy price from himself in order to enjoy such nostalgic happiness and beauty even in vicarious fashion; he condemns himself to the labor of the negative, that is, of delineating the many forms of the grotesque and terrible sublime presented by culture after Auschwitz. Even the Homeric Greeks are no longer the normal and happy children which they still were for Marx.

Other variations on the priority of the beautiful or sublime appear in the various thinkers of the Frankfurt school. Herbert Marcuse's fundamental debt to Schiller, specifically to the Schiller of the *Letters on Aesthetic Education*, is apparent in his many attempts to show that beauty is the promise of happiness. The younger thinkers of the school, such as Habermas and Apel, have differentiated themselves from their elders by a systematic repression of the aesthetic for the sake of articulating the constitutive features of rational community and discourse. Lacking an aesthetics of their own, their vision of social change has neither the tragic nor comic dimensions so prominent in Marx's rhetoric. The projected growth of rational community in their works, then, takes on much of the flavor of liberal theories of the late nineteenth century, which also tended to lack poetic vision. A significant irony is to be found in Karl-Otto Apel's attempt to remedy the lack of an aesthetics in his version of critical theory through an enthusiasm for the philosophy of Charles Peirce. While it is true that Peirce has a hierarchical concept of the normative sciences in which logic depends on ethics and ethics on aesthetics, Peirce's aesthetics is itself a very generalized and diluted version of Schiller's conception of beauty which again, like Marcuse's adaptation, tends to omit the dimension of the sublime. How much richer are the resources of the German tradition of philosophical aesthetics which
Apel might have adapted more directly rather than through Peirce's interesting but attenuated reconstruction.

It was the task of the eighteenth century to articulate the duality of the beautiful and the sublime as a way of comprehending the alternatives of the aesthetic life, and of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to develop the consequences of taking one or the other of these alternatives to have a special priority. Throughout such discussions there is generally some significant affinity with the social and the political, which has been eclipsed in much of the aesthetic thought and literary theory of the twentieth century. An emphasis on formal structure, for example, although perhaps ultimately deriving from a Kantian conception of the beautiful, will tend to ignore Kant's own emphasis on universal communicability (and therefore universal community) as the goal of the contemplation of form. Kant's early Observations on the Feelings of the Beautiful and Sublime is a very revealing work in this context. Although slight in strictly conceptual content, the essay shows a refreshing tendency to take aesthetic categories as simultaneously moral and social. Thus it is not only literary works and landscapes, but also passions, individual and national characters, the division of the sexes, and virtuous dispositions of different sorts which are classified as beautiful or sublime. The lesson to be learned is neither that we adopt Kant's quaint if suggestive classifications (Italy is beautiful, England is sublime) nor that we learn to do the same thing more accurately. Rather, we might use such an approach as the antidote to those currents in contemporary aesthetic theory and practice which deliberately seek to repress the moral and political aspects of the artistic. No doubt there is a lesson to be learned from the fact that the tradition of the beautiful and the sublime has survived most obviously in some of the branches of Marxist aesthetics and criticism. We might also note (contrary to White's thesis again) that the Marxist tradition, like the eighteenth century, has kept alive the idea that the very tension between the beautiful and the sublime is fruitful and need not be reduced to an absolute priority of one or the other.

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NOTES

1 The translation from the Duino Elegies is from Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus, tr. A. Poulin, Jr. (Boston, 1977). In regard to poetics in particular, see Kari Elise Lokke, "The Role of Sublimity in the Development of Modernist Aesthetics," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 40 (Summer 1982), 421–29.
5 Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence, p. 104.
6 Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought, p. 77.
12 Kant, Critique of Judgement, par. 8.
13 Kant, Critique of Judgement, par. 7.
16 Kant, Critique of Judgement, par. 52.
23 Friedrich T. Vischer, Über das Erhabene und Komische (Stuttgart, 1857).
26 Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire, p. 103.
27 Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire, p. 106.
28 Marx, Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right,' p. 134.
29 Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, tr. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, 1968); see in particular Bakhtin's critical review, in his introductory chapter, of the attempts of later critics and aestheticians to understand the comic-grotesque.


