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# Landscape and the Metaphysical Imagination

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**ABSTRACT:** Aesthetic appreciation of landscape is by no means limited to the sensuous enjoyment of sights and sounds. It very often has a reflective, cognitive element as well. This sometimes incorporates scientific knowledge, e.g., geological or ecological; but it can also manifest what this article will call 'metaphysical imagination', which sees or seems to see in a landscape some indication, some disclosure of how the world ultimately is. The article explores and critically appraises this concept of metaphysical imagination, and some of the roles it can play in our aesthetic encounters.

**KEYWORDS:** Landscape, aesthetics, imagination, metaphysics, sublime

I.

What is it to appreciate a landscape aesthetically? As several recent writers have claimed, it may be an experience within which many layers can be distinguished. The purely sensory component – colours, shapes, sounds, tactile sensations, smells – seldom if ever exists on its own; for we know that area of blue to be the blue of the sky, that broken disc to be a reflection, in nearly still water, of the moon, that object by the dried up lake to be the skull of a sheep or goat. We conceptualise, we recognise, we add context, background, seek out formal relationships – reflectively (Levinson 1992). Furthermore, we may see not simply a large and very dark cloud, just above the horizon, but see it as an ominous harbinger of a severe storm, threatening the still bright but fragile scene in the middle distance. There we have expressive properties, and the thought of changes over time – even a kind of drama. One layer more: we may experience a polar scene of ice and snow as revealing something fundamental (and no doubt grim) about how things really, or ultimately, are: something concealed from us in more familiar, temperate, farmed countryside. Or, in sharpest contrast, we may experience a nature whose poignant beauty on some occasion seems to speak of a transcendent Source for which we lack words and clear concepts.

In these last two instances, we have what I want to call ‘metaphysical imagination’. We see the landscape *as* ominous, cosmically ominous, or as revealing-concealing a still greater beauty than its own. In a word, then, the many-levelled structure of aesthetic experience of nature can include great diversity of constituents: from the most particular – rocks, stones, leaves, clouds, shadows – to the most abstract and general ways we apprehend the world – the world as a whole.

In what follows, I shall try first of all to clarify and develop the central concept of metaphysical imagination and its place in aesthetic experience of nature; and secondly, to draw attention to a tendency among a number of philosophers today to underestimate the interest, importance and the diversity of the contributions of metaphysical imagination to the aesthetic experience of landscape. Next, we need to acknowledge that the opposite mistake can also be made, that of attributing excessive authority and revelatory power to metaphysical imagination; so thirdly, keeping, I hope, between these extremes of deficiency and excess, I shall try to explore the range of metaphysical imagining in relation to landscape appreciation. Last of all, we shall look briefly at a sample of difficult but fascinating cases, where it is hard to discern what *are* the metaphysical-imaginative components of a particular experience, and whether they are, or ever could be, articulated in coherent philosophical theory.

First, then, to fill out the concept of metaphysical imagination: I shall take it to be an element of interpretation that helps to determine the overall experience of a scene in nature. It will be construed as a ‘seeing as ...’ or ‘interpreting as ...’ that has metaphysical character, in the sense of relevance to the whole of experience and not only to what is experienced at the present moment. Metaphysical imagination connects with, looks to, the ‘spelled out’ systematic metaphysical theorising which is its support and ultimate justification. But also it is no less an element of the concrete present landscape-experience: it is fused with the sensory components, not a meditation aroused by these.

Of course the total experience may *prompt* meditation. In particular, it may prompt one to ask whether this ‘vision’ of nature can be argued for systematically, and ‘inhabited’ as one’s settled view of the world. Or, we ask, is it no more than one way that nature can, on occasion, present itself to us; but a fanciful, not a sustainable vision? Indeed the Coleridgean distinction between imagination and fancy can be put to use here, precisely to distinguish an instance of metaphysical imagination that connects with theory which is sustainable and which permits of coherent and convincing development, from the fugitive and (it may be) ultimately incoherent interpretation of ‘fancy’. That is to say, it looks as if we may value the sustainable, not only as the dependably enjoyable, but as having the best claim to be true.

We want our experience to be of *nature as it really is*, not merely to consist of agreeable sensory stimuli or reverie. It often does matter to us that nature actually presents itself with the features to which we are responding. When I

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mistake a massive cumulus cloud on the horizon for a distant, immense snowy mountain range, I feel an inner obligation to downgrade the experience which my misperception has momentarily evoked. That is not simply because the experience was fleeting and, once re-interpreted, can no longer be recovered. Many highly valued aesthetic experiences of nature are fleeting and unrepeatable, but are not on that account downgraded.

I seem to discern a relevant difference here between attitudes to art and to aesthetic appreciation of nature. In the case of art, we accept that the artist may see part of his task in a landscape-painting as the aesthetic assimilating of human artefacts, industrial objects like pipe-lines, or a power-station on an estuary, or a 'wind-farm' on a hill-top – drawing these into the world of his painting. Why is it quite different (for many people) with aesthetic appreciation of nature – revulsion at the slicing of a Down, let us say, by a motorway cutting? There may be more than one reason. It may be the intrusion of the manipulatory, the wilful, the commercial, into what one had hoped would be a meditative release from all instrumentality, or, in Schopenhauerian terms, from all will and willing. A small intrusion can be enough to evoke the dejected – if exaggerated – sense that *there is no escape from the technological*. But there may often be also another factor: that where technology threatens to modify or to dominate nature, we sense that we are so much the less likely to discern in that landscape the fundamental properties (whether comfortable, exhilarating or desolate) of *actual* nature, and that, here at least, we shall be frustrated in that cognitive, sometimes metaphysical, endeavour.

Of course, I acknowledge that not by any means all aesthetic enjoyment of nature has this 'realist', cognitivist orientation. The emphasis may fall much more heavily on 'immediacy', on the impact of sensory elements and their enjoyment; and that can be a splendid source of delight, though it is not my present topic.

## II.

Why should metaphysical imagination be under-acknowledged today? I suspect that some of the undervaluers may wish to keep their own account of aesthetic engagement with nature well free of the embarrassment of what they see as the paradigm case of metaphysics in landscape. I mean Wordsworthian romanticism, with its

...sense sublime

Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man: (*Tintern Abbey*)

Embarrassment, because this is taken to express a religious experience whose object is very indeterminate, whose description virtually fails of distinct reference, and which may lack adequate rational support. Also the experience alluded to may have only a fugitive and tenuous hold on the person who has it. (Diffey 1993: 59) But my response to that is not to urge an aesthetic experience of nature *free* of metaphysics, for that would be grossly self-impoverishing, but rather to encourage a recognition of its endless *variety*. What comes to replace a theistic or pantheist vision of nature may well itself have the status of metaphysics – naturalistic, materialistic, or whatever: and may have its own metaphysical-imaginative correlatives.

There are other strands to this underplaying of the role of metaphysical imagination. A person may indeed acknowledge a thought-component in aesthetic experience of nature; and may see that as seriously concerned with the disclosure of truth. Truth may be taken to lie – predominantly or exclusively – in the *scientific* understanding of nature; and in landscape-appreciation that will be the imagining of evolutionary, geological, meteorological... settings and bringings-about of the visible scene.<sup>1</sup> Now, I can only agree that these factors may be relevant and may enter and enhance appreciation: but I cannot agree that they have an authority such that they ought (in our contemporary climate of thought) to *supplant* other elements. For science does not *oust* metaphysics: the questions of metaphysics arise on and beyond the boundary of science. They may receive naturalistic answers, or speculative answers centring, for instance, on the ‘anthropic principle’, the ‘fine tuning’ of the universe which alone could have yielded the conditions for life and consciousness to emerge, or answers that bring out the incompleteness of all scientific explanation and the *nisus* towards a completion or fulfilment of the world’s processes in an Absolute or in God. Such metaphysical theorizing is not *in lieu* of science, but seeks to delineate the wider context in which science itself has its place.

I would argue against a one-sidedly science-dominated appreciation of nature on other grounds also. Science, rightly and necessarily, gives precedence to *objectivising* movements of mind; probes behind the human perspective with its phenomenal properties; abstracts from our emotion- and value-suffused, perceptually selective, view of the world, and works ultimately towards a mathematically quantifiable and imperceptible reality. In the course of that abstraction, most or all of the features of the world that are of human concern are eliminated. Yet the very pursuit of that scientific enterprise has dynamics that belong only within the human life-world, the world of perception and feeling, curiosity and striving to know, and vanish in the objective view. The *aesthetic* mode of experience, the development of which is a very different enterprise indeed from that of science, far from admitting a *nisus* to leave the subjective, human perceptual, evaluative and emotional experience, seeks to explore it and

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intensify it. And, crucially, the aesthetic experience of nature – notably of landscape – is a prime means of enriching, enhancing, increasing our powers of discrimination, as members of that life-world: a world which has as great a claim to reality as the objective world of the physicist. Some thought-elements concerning the geological past of the region we contemplate, some thought of the ecological unity of its plants and animals, may well enter and enhance our experience. But we are under no rational imperative to allow the scientific to displace the human perspective or to play down the centrality of that perspective to any experience that can be called aesthetic.

## III.

I turn now (and more briefly) to the dangers of the opposite extreme: the *over*-valuing of the metaphysical imagination, the exaggeration of its authority. The possibility of such over-valuing is easily established. Just as occasionally the images of our dreams may have a strongly and puzzlingly ‘revelatory’ quality to the dreamer, so too some experiences of landscape may seem peculiarly revealing about the nature of reality as a whole. A useful term for such a felt revelatory character is ‘noetic quality’ (used, in aesthetics, by Harold Osborne, for example). But it is a quality which, though phenomenologically vivid, cannot be allowed infallibility. It can attach to contradictory ‘revelations’. Idyllic, formally magnificent nature now seems to witness to a benign, intelligible source of its ordered beauty; but then desert- or wilderness-nature seems, no less strikingly, to proclaim its unconcern for any value.

Mary Warnock has discussed theories of imagination in its many forms and manifestations (Warnock 1992, ch.12). While not unaware of its limitations, she accepts an essentially Romantic conception of imagination and its products as ‘in some sense’ true. Imagination is ‘that by which, as far as we can, we see into the life of things’; or, it is ‘ability to see through objects ... to what lies behind them’. It is through the power of imagination that we have ‘intuition of the infinite and inexpressible significance of the ordinary world’.

These remarks, intriguing though they are, leave me uneasy, since they do seem to invite us to give metaphysical-religious imagination too much independent authority, and they carry a risk of losing from sight its ability to render equally vivid quite incompatible views of the world. If, for instance, the theistic metaphysical imagination is to be taken as true, may we not also require, as a condition of our confidence in it, a background of sound theistic metaphysical argument and theory? Can anything less than that justify the move from noetic quality to noesis in the full sense – a knowledge-claim about how the world ultimately is?

## IV.

I stand before a landscape in early summer. I see everywhere the fresh green of new leaves, the pink and white of blossom; there is bird-song, insect-life teeming, a warming sun and a scatter of innocent clouds. Resurgence, lushness, fecundity. My only thought-component (if it can be called that) is *'Enjoy this, here, now!'*

A friend standing beside me, contemplating the same landscape, modifies her experience with a differently-toned thought-component. *'Brilliant: but it is no more than a short interlude between the inertness of winter and the decay of autumn.'* It is easy to suppose this latter thought-component modulating and intensifying into a related and more clearly metaphysical-imaginative one. *'Brilliant indeed: but deceptive! Set this landscape in the wider context of space and of time, and the reality shows itself – life's resurgence as ephemeral and fragile: the wider cosmic context as one in which life cannot be sustained save in conditions of the utmost rarity.'* So a poignance – and a threatened, even doomed quality – is imparted to the present aesthetic experience of a landscape in early summer.

Suppose now that my own experience becomes increasingly metaphysical-imaginative. If spelled out, my (more optimistic) thought-component might amount to something like this: *'Here indeed is nature showing its real self – always, and fundamentally, fecund. Its wintry inertness is no more than quiescence – the condition for ever more resurgence. Even the vastnesses of circumambient space and its hugely dispersed occupants are the necessary and therefore benign conditions of the life we now enjoy and contemplate here in this landscape. Here and now these conditions are concretely and gloriously fulfilled.'* Of course, and once again, what I am thus 'spelling out' is ingredient in my experience, not as propositions of scientific cosmology or metaphysical theory, but as the 'posture of consciousness' (*Bewusstseinslage*), to which they condense. That is present and is a determinant of my total exultant experience (Cf. Findlay 1961).

I have taken the examples of fecundity, regeneration, vitality and their opposites, partly because they connect, illuminatingly, with an earlier opposition in the history of ideas – ideas philosophical and theological. Going back to the biblical sources: I am thinking of that strand in Christian thinking which posited a falling away not just of mankind but of nature more broadly from its first unspoiled state. After man's Fall, the entire world is inclement, hard to cultivate, inhospitable. There has been *cosmic* damage, *Cosmic* Fall. Even if it was agreed that in some way the visible world was an image of eternity, there could be deep division between those who declared it too deeply flawed to be properly enjoyed, and those in the same tradition who had no difficulty in seeing past the flaws – to the divine archetype.

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Clearly there is a spectrum here between two poles of aesthetic response to landscape. At the one pole, the subject is content with discerning expressive quality at an instant, and at the other, he applies the imaginative schema of a presupposed metaphysical theory, characterising the world on a huge spatial and temporal scale. Between them, we are seeing, lies a variety of intermediate possibilities. They may involve visions that *foreshadow* a later theoretical elaboration, perhaps furnishing its first vivid and germinal coming-to-consciousness. The packed plenum of plant and animal life (say, in a tropical rain-forest) may be taken as a fecundity to be rejoiced in, or (more in the spirit of J-P. Sartre than of G.M. Hopkins) as a display of suffocating, 'absurd', over-abundance. Or the mutual predatoriness of the species before us may seem to intimate what Hume's 'Philo' characterised as a 'blind nature, impregnated by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children' (Hume 1779). Imaginative foreshadowings of such cosmologies – theistic, absurdist, Dionysian – we can think of as expressions we read on the 'face of nature': expressions we can both aesthetically enjoy, and seek – as a different task – to decipher.

Now, cases like those we have just instanced involve the importing into aesthetic experience of metaphysical-imaginative components quite distinct from anything actually present in the scene itself. These were components ('accounts') derived, e.g., from the belief that man's disobedience brought about cosmic cataclysm. We could say that such an added metaphysical thought-component is *externally related* to whatever scene is being contemplated. In other cases, the metaphysical imaginative schema is better described as *internal* to the appreciative experience itself, since it is concerned, perhaps, with the relation between subject and object, the relation between appreciator and landscape, or it may be with some high-level significance that is read off particular *formal* features of the scene. Either we do not have an account (story, doctrine, theory) to import schematically into the experience, or the experience itself generates what may *become* an account.

A related distinction can be made immediately. The last set of examples focused on perception of *concrete* features of landscape – regeneration, fecundity, or desolation and decay. Other exercises of metaphysical imagination, in contrast, can have a much more *abstract* focus, and could be described as the instantiation in experience of what may be *formal* and certainly will be *fundamental* metaphysical notions.

For an example of what I have in mind, consider the sense of being 'one with nature'. That clearly does focus on the relationship itself, between appreciator and landscape appreciated. And from the point of view of the second distinction just made (i.e., concrete / abstract), oneness is or can be as good an example of an abstract metaphysical concept as one could wish! Recent discussions have acknowledged the importance of this theme, but have seldom (I think) done justice to it.



What, then, can it mean to be one with nature? Well, when we speak of oneness with nature we may simply be meditating on the numerous common properties that we share with the nature we contemplate: we are ourselves *in* the scene and bodily continuous with it. Its life is our own life: we breathe its air; we are warmed, sustained by a common sun.

A distinguishable, and more distinctively aesthetic, variant is the contemplating of perceptible analogies between our life and that of the scene before us: branching stem- and leaf-patterns and the branching of our blood-vessels; gentle rhythm of calm waves up the beach and the rhythm of calm breathing. Here, oneness with nature *is* the aesthetic enjoyment of such chiming, resonating, reconciling, rhyming forms: much more than an intellectual recognition of them.

An emotionally intense form of oneness with nature can centre upon a heightened sense of our limited life-span through the vivid realising of our integration with the continuum of living forms. The emotional quality may be of an enhanced acceptance and resignation – nature and the observer united in a single manifestation of life-and-inevitable-death.

Yet another way of being ‘one’ with nature is to experience a sense of *equilibrium*: a suspension of conflict with nature, of threat, even of causal engagement. Metaphysical imagination may see these occasions as, once more, poignant brief realisations of an equilibrium that cannot be read as a goal, a *telos*, of the world’s processes. Maybe it is seen as an equilibrium achieved *in spite of* the blind and non-rational powers that determine the way the world goes.

A still more intense realisation of the metaphysical-imaginative annexing of ‘oneness’ is the nature mystic’s, when it seems to him or her that the subject-object distinction is overcome, and the God-world distinction no less annulled. Oneness here can be the oneness of monistic metaphysics, or of pantheism – all is in God. So, for instance, Wordsworth wrote of the

...one interior life  
That lives in all things ...  
In which all beings live with God, themselves  
Are God, existing in the mighty Whole,  
As indistinguishable as the cloudless East  
At noon is from the cloudless West, when all  
The hemisphere is one cerulean blue. (Lines intended for *The Prelude*)

In this illustration of ‘oneness’ – with its several variants – I have been implicitly introducing yet a third distinction, of degrees of intensity, at the pole of which an experience *centres upon* the metaphysical-imaginative component, is dominated by it, as happens most thoroughly in the nature-mystical experiences. Although, obviously, each level of intensity may sustain an aesthetic experience of distinct and individual value to its subject, I suspect that (on occasion) some of the value attached to less explicitly mystical versions is derived from the *more* metaphysical-religious forms. There are cases in recent

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(and secular) literature, where it is difficult, otherwise, to account for the awed solemnity that clearly attaches, for the writer, to the experience he or she describes as unity with nature. Among these, there may well be a number in which the writer would not confidently assent to the underlying implied metaphysics of mysticism. This is an instance of a particularly perplexing and intriguing set of questions – questions about a person's 'entitlement', as it were, to aesthetic experiences of nature whose metaphysical-imaginative component rests on theoretical presuppositions which cannot perhaps be met.

My next example also illustrates that spectrum from less to greater centrality of metaphysical-imaginative components in aesthetic experience. It is also an example of what I called 'high-level significance' read into the *formal* features of a scene, where that contribution is potentially a thoroughly abstract metaphysical notion. Nevertheless, if the experience is to be aesthetic, it too must be anchored in the concrete, perceptually 'given'. (We could take this to illustrate a further kind of 'equilibrium'.)

In a book called *The Making of Landscape Photographs*, the author describes a scene and reproduces a photograph of it, a scene with bright yellow autumn larch trees in a valley with hills on both sides and in the misty far distance. The brightness of the yellow trees suggests that they are directly and vividly sun-lit: but the light in fact is 'flat and diffused'. The effect is '*full of two contradictory things: calm and excitement ... drama and ease*'. This 'must be the source of the pleasure' given by the scene (Waite 1992, p.91).

'Calm and excitement' – a paradoxical union. Tranquillity-with-vitality, unchanging form sustained by intense manifestation of energy: there are many variants. I think of Wordsworth on the 'stationary blasts of waterfalls', and of the 'tumult and peace' he saw in a single Alpine landscape (*The Prelude*, VI). I think of Ruskin on the part played in natural beauty by what he described as 'the connection of vitality with repose'. 'Repose,' he claimed, 'demands for its expression the implied capability of its opposite, Energy'. 'Repose proper, the *rest* of things in which there is *vitality* or capability of motion...', for example, a 'great rock come down a mountain side, ... now bedded immovably among the fern'. Its 'stability' is 'great in proportion' to the 'power and fearfulness of its motion' (Ruskin IV: 115). In my own view, the co-presence of these opposites, life and stillness, constitutes a fundamental, and too little recognised, key concept for aesthetic theory.

Again, we can place such cases on a spectrum from near-absorption in the concrete particularities of a scene (the motionless yet intensely alive individual tree branch) to awareness of the full metaphysical extrapolation to which the schema of 'calm and vital', 'intensely still and intensely alive' lends itself. At the extreme point, those near-opposites appear in some memorable accounts of metaphysical perfection: God as the being who is unmoved, all-sufficient, in eternal repose and who is yet at the same time *life* at its infinite intensity (Ruskin IV: 113ff). As a commentator on Aquinas put it: 'The divine stillness is the

immobility of perfection, not imperfection: of full activity, not inertia' (Gilby 1951: 89). Or looking back to the sixth-century Pseudo-Dionysius: 'In his eternal motion, God remains at rest'. (Dionysius 1920 ed.: 100ff, 106, 168) Our normal expectation is that increasing stillness means decreasing vitality, and that what enhances life will do so at the expense of tranquillity. But these are cases where both those highly valued modes of experience are in some measure simultaneously secured, and the thought of their complete, full conjunction in deity can be taken either as true of an *actual* God, or at the least as marking an *ideal focus*.<sup>2</sup> Which of these options we take to be the truth will, without doubt, make a real difference to the metaphysical-imaginative component available to us in relevant aesthetic experiences. And a third distinct possibility is that we cannot determine which is the case – whether the focus is actual or ideal.

#### V.

That thought again anticipates my final topic. It is by no means always obvious exactly what presuppositions are being hinted at by the metaphysical imagination: and sometimes hard to tell whether a presupposed metaphysical view, if elaborated, would be fully coherent. Yet again we may wonder whether the spectator is entitled in consistency to draw upon certain presuppositions that clearly are being imported, imaginatively, into his or her experience. We also have to distinguish two importantly different possibilities:

- (i) There are cases where a particular metaphysical-imaginative 'slant' can do its work of enhancing our total aesthetic experience of landscape – even though the systematic metaphysical or theological theory it presupposes (of which it is a 'schema') is not in fact rationally justifiable or fully coherent as an account of reality. As I have said, 'vitality-and-stillness' could be such a principle: signalling various approaches or approximations to an ideal, but an ideal that may be nowhere and never fully actualised.
- (ii) In a second group of cases, failure at the theoretical, metaphysical level does threaten to undermine the associated metaphysical-imaginative component. The confident invalidating of all cosmological argumentation from the world to God, and a view of a world/God relation as incoherent, would surely be incompatible with a vision of landscape as depending wholly, moment-to-moment, on a divine sustaining, an incessant checking of what otherwise would be its lapse into non-being.

On the other hand, the fact that there are good reasons for rejecting a dogmatic metaphysical scepticism leaves open the fascinating alternative possibility, namely that the aesthetic experience may keep alive some view of the world that the concepts of systematic metaphysical thought cannot precisely articulate, nor its arguments support. (The fact that we have no satisfactory account of the

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relation between body and mind may mean that we lack the necessary concepts to make it intelligible; but certainly does not compel us to deny our experience of both!) Similar alternatives confront us in seeking to interpret our experience of *awe*. If we acknowledge that awe is ‘dread mingled with veneration’, ‘reverential wonder’ (*OED*), do we have somehow to negate our experience of awe (or downgrade it from the domain of imagination to that of fancy), if our reflectively endorsed inventory of the world includes no objects in external nature fitting to venerate, though doubtless plenty to dread? Could the continuing experience of awe itself call in question that inventory, or would it merely display a vestigial and no longer appropriate religio-aesthetic response?

Nowhere are these kinds of uncertainty and ambiguity more dramatically displayed than in the extraordinary history of the concept of *sublimity*. Mention of ‘awe’ has brought us close to it.

The concept of sublimity was fashioned in response to a need – a need to name a memorable, powerful and perplexing experience (or range of experiences) of undoubted aesthetic value, yet not experiences of beauty as understood in neoclassical aesthetic theory. It combined, or fused, dread at the overwhelming energies of nature and the vastnesses of space and time with a solemn delight or exhilaration. Landscapes, notably, could evoke the experience – and Alpine travellers were among the first to struggle to describe it. The exhilaration was hard to account for, and was explained in very different ways, many of which involved an essentially metaphysical-imaginative component. Kant’s version balanced the fearful, imagination-boggling element with the thought of the subject’s own rational, free moral selfhood, distinct from (and incommensurable with) the mere spreadoutness and brute force of physical nature. In other versions, the dreadful was checked by the spectator’s awareness of his or her own – at least temporary – safety, or by the exhilarating realisation that we are able to take up a contemplative attitude to the menacing and the hostile. Other theorists again were even more speculatively buoyant, rejoicing in the capacity of the mind or soul to ‘be present’ (in some necessarily undefined sense!) to the remotest parts of the universe, or equating our perception of the cosmos with an interiorising of its vastnesses. Some of these materials continue to be reworked in our own day, though in ways often very remote from their first deployment – and even more remote from our present concern in this article (Monk 1935).<sup>3</sup>

It is reasonable, and tempting, to see the history of theories of the sublime as no more than a story of successive attempts to categorise, in different philosophical idioms, experiences of overlapping but not at all unified or converging kinds: moreover, the eventual popularity – even cult – of the sublime ensured that it was generalised and vulgarised. Nevertheless, the historian of the sublime, Samuel Monk, could speak of sublimity as a ‘rare’ experience, and I think myself that it is still seriously possible to look on a substantial set of recorded experiences of the sublime as having a phenomenological centre – approached but maybe never captured by aesthetic theorising in all its variety.

That would be to see the sublime as naming an elusive but momentous core experience (a close neighbour of Rudolf Otto's 'numinous' experience – as Otto acknowledged at one stage of his thinking), defying efforts to pin it down philosophically. All the accounts distort or 'hijack' the developing experience so as to make of it something other than it 'wants' to become: or they fail to 'tune' it in a way that seems authentic or faithful.

As critical philosophers, we may see ourselves as under an intellectual obligation to turn away from such experience, – it is strictly 'unavailable', since its history is no more than the history of failed attempts to make philosophical sense of it. Alternatively, we may judge ourselves obliged, rather, to remain open to the experience, and to see it as continuing to challenge us to make sense of its presuppositions – elusive as they are: we are obliged, that is, to be both open *and* critical.

In any case, it is not impossible to indicate in what respects a given theory *fails* to capture, or distorts, the central experience: critical reason is not wholly at a loss. We may criticise Burke, for example, for understanding sublimity too much in terms of fear – ordinary and untransmuted; or criticise Kant, for downgrading *nature's* contribution in favour of the onesided exalting of the rational subject-self. One or other of the rough approximations may suffice, for the susceptible, to evoke or trigger the experience, in vivid memory.

Undoubtedly, one way of making (partial) sense of it is theistic. The overwhelming magnitudes and energies defeat assimilation at the level of sensory stimulus and imaginative synthesis, but they are taken as 'pointing' to a yet greater Reality – something of whose mystery and splendour is glimpsed in the experience. The duality is essentially that of St Augustine's: '*et inhorresco et inardesco...*', 'I shudder to think how different I am from it; yet insofar as I am like it, I am aglow with its fire' (*Confessions*, XI, ch.9).

But of course we can make alternative, if again partial, sense of it on secular lines. It is only by way of sudden perceptual overloading that the resurgent, exhilarating moment can be evoked. We are aware not merely of sensory and conceptual *defeat*, but of the possibility of reading aesthetic – expressive – character in those very aspects of nature that display overwhelming energies and magnitudes, or mystery. And that is sufficient to exhilarate us. We are aware, too, in a solemnly enlivening way, of our own spiritual ascendancy in finding the resources to attempt that aesthetic assimilation of the daunting.

For a final, closely-related example of the crucial (and problematic) part metaphysical imagination can play in aesthetic experience of nature, consider the varying role of the thought of *infinity* in relation to the appreciation of a landscape.

An 'endlessly' receding, sunlit landscape, or a calm night-sky, may both readily suggest tranquil, benign continuations beyond nature as perceived – serene unbounded extrapolations. There have been writers, particularly among the Romantics, to whom the idea of infinity was a uniquely powerful source of

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good energy, life-enhancement. Wordsworth again: 'By the imagination the mere fact is ... connected with that infinity without which there is no poetry'.<sup>4</sup> In poetry '... it is *the imaginative* only, [viz,] *that which is conversant with or turns upon infinity*, that powerfully affects me'. And that occurs, notably, in 'passages where things are lost in each other, and limits vanish, and aspirations are raised'.<sup>5</sup> Although a poet of a very different metaphysical conviction, Leopardi, even while confessing that the idea of infinity 'shipwrecked' the mind, could yet find it '*dolce*' ('L'Infinito', in *Canti*). Hegel is lyrical: 'At the name of the infinite, the heart and the mind light up' (Hegel 1969 ed.).

But it is far from *dolce* in other contexts, and against other backgrounds of ideas. The thought and part-perception can be of a 'nightmare infinite', infinity as the never-completable, the demonically unreachable goal, the mockingly unfulfillable task. The difference in 'metaphysical pathos', in Lovejoy's phrase, between benign and nightmare infinities is indeed a function of the varying contribution to experience of metaphysical imagination; and there have been fascinating examples in literature of attempts to transform the malign versions of infinity – or, as Coleridge called them, following Cudworth, 'counterfeit infinity' – to the good infinity that exhilarates and energises (Cudworth 1673, II: 647f). In *The Ancient Mariner*, the demonic vision of a 'thousand thousand slimy things', an uncountable overabundance of an insupportably alien kind, is transmuted to that of a world which – water-snakes and all – could be the object of blessing and love.

In *Modern Painters*, Volume IV, Ruskin saw infinity as a clear and powerful symbol of deity, and not only in the seemingly boundless distance of landscapes, but even in the infinite gradation of nature's curved forms (Ruskin, IV: 83). One short passage cries out for a final comment, for it may bring home to us the subtle and variable interconnection between the perceptual component and the metaphysical thought-component in aesthetic appreciation of nature. Ruskin writes:

...the sky at night, though we may know it boundless, is dark; it is a studded vault, a roof that seems to shut us in and down; but the bright distance has no limit, we feel its infinity, as we rejoice in its purity of light (Ruskin IV, III, Sect I, Ch 5, p.81).

Objectively-scientifically speaking, we of course glimpse more distant regions by night than by day; but Ruskin is seeking the most aesthetically effective bonding between the sensorily given and the metaphysical – seeking not simply to 'know' but rather to 'feel' infinity.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Allen Carlson: 'Science is the paradigm of that which reveals objects for what they are ...' (Carlson 1993, ch. 10).

<sup>2</sup> One could argue that, when we extrapolate to the idea of deity, we do not, in thought,

reach a marvellous coincidence of opposites: we are left, rather, with an irreducible set of contradictions. Compare Sartre on the contradictoriness of God conceived as *l'en-soi-pour-soi* (Sartre 1943: 653).

<sup>3</sup> I discussed some of these historical and current questions about sublimity in 'The Concept of the Sublime: Has it any Relevance for Philosophy Today?': *Dialectics and Humanism*, XV(1-2), 1988, pp.137-155.

<sup>4</sup> Reported in Crabb Robinson's Diary (London: Macmillan, 1869).

<sup>5</sup> Letter to W.S.Landor, 21/1/1824; emphases mine. *Letters*, ed. E.de Selincourt, revised A.G.Hill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

<sup>6</sup> This essay was first given as a lecture at the First International Conference on Environmental Aesthetics, Koli, Finland, 1994.

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