

# On the Aesthetic and Non-aesthetic Forms of the Sublime in Schopenhauer's Theory of Tragedy

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## Introduction

The identification of tragedy with the sublime was in Schopenhauer's time a fairly recent phenomenon. Edmund Burke had called tragedy sublime in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* of 1757. Burke uses the term as an adjective for tragedy, but he does not appear to have identified tragedy solely with sublimity. In addressing the long-standing problem of why we as spectators of tragedy receive pleasure from the sight of others' misfortunes, he relies on both his explanation of the sublime, which rests on the principle of self-preservation, and on sympathy, which rests on the principle of "society". Since he associates those passions that are subsumed under the principle of society with the beautiful, tragedy would have to be regarded as belonging to both the sublime and the beautiful.

It was not until Immanuel Kant's *Betrachtungen über das Schöne und Erhabene* that tragedy became identified exclusively with the sublime. Reflecting on the emotional response that tragedy provokes in the audience, Kant wrote:

Das Trauerspiel unterscheidet sich meiner Meinung nach vom Lustspiele vornehmlich darin, daß dem ersteren das Gefühl vors *Erhabene*, im zweiten vor das *Schöne* gerührt wird. [...] das Unglück anderer bewegt in dem Busen des Zuschauers teilnehmende Empfindungen und läßt sein großmütig Herz vor fremde Not klopfen. Er wird sanft gerührt und fühlt die Würde seiner eigenen Natur.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note that Kant understands the sublime here as an aesthetic category that applies only to the spectator of tragedy. For one of the prerequisites of aesthetic sublimity is the personal safety of the subject. Only when the subject remained unharmed by the physically fearsome natural phenomenon – in this case, tragedy – could sublimity be experienced. Writing on the sublime in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* Kant posits this condition thus: "Aber ihr Anblick wird nur um desto anziehender, je furchtbarer er ist, wenn wir uns nur in Sicherheit befinden".<sup>2</sup> The reason is simple: in circumstances of real pain and danger our instinct for self-pre-

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<sup>1</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Frühschriften*, ed. by Georg Klaus, 2 vols (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1961), II, p. 215.

<sup>2</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, ed. by Karl Vorländer, 7th edn (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1990), p. 107.

servation would prohibit the state of contemplation conducive to the sublime response. For this reason Kant maintains that “wer sich fürchtet, kann über das Erhabene der Natur gar nicht urteilen, so wenig als der, welcher durch Neigung und Appetit eingenommen ist, über das Schöne”.<sup>3</sup>

The idea that sublimity only arises when the subject senses no genuine threat to his personal well-being can already be found in Burke. More than once in the *Enquiry* Burke stresses that sublimity presupposes that the subject only have “an idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstance”.<sup>4</sup> The feeling of delight that is characteristic of sublimity emerges only when pain remains mild or “modified as not to be actually noxious”.<sup>5</sup>

The concept of sublimity that we find in Burke, and especially in Kant, was suited to describe the mixed emotion of pain and pleasure experienced by the spectator of tragedy. As Schiller said in one of his essays on sublimity, pain and suffering in art are so modified as to remain within the bounds of aesthetics.<sup>6</sup> I believe that it is because the spectator himself remains unharmed when watching tragedy that Schopenhauer characterizes the effect of tragedy as analogous to the dynamical sublime in the second volume of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*. For I argue, contrary to Wolfgang Korfmacher, that Schopenhauer does indeed posit the personal safety of the perceiving subject when discussing dynamical sublimity. What leads Korfmacher to maintain that Schopenhauer parts company with his predecessors is a somewhat ambiguous comment that Schopenhauer wrote in 1815 in the margins of his copy of Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. In response to Kant’s assertion that safety is a precondition of sublime experience, Schopenhauer wrote:

Daß wir sicher seyn müssen ist nicht wahr. Auch im Augenblick der wirklichen Gefahr und des Untergangs kann unser Bewußtseyn zum Erhabenen emporsteigen. Dies stellt eben das Trauerspiel dar, welches übrigens auch zum Dynamischerhabnen gehört und dies im Zuschauer, obgleich er sicher ist, anregt.<sup>7</sup>

As I will show, however, Schopenhauer does not in fact part company with either Burke or Kant. His concept of the dynamical sublime retains safety as its condition. When he maintains that safety is no longer a condition of sublimity in the marginal note above, he is actually entertaining, I will argue, a non-aesthetic form of sublimity that was foreign to both Burke and Kant. Although Schopenhauer does not give this form a name, it could appropriately be called the “pathetic sublime”, using the adjective “pathetic” as derived from the Greek noun *pathos*, meaning

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 106.

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. by J. T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 52 (Book I, Section XIX).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 136 (Book IV, Section VII).

<sup>6</sup> See Friedrich Schiller, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Gerhard Fricke and Herbert G. Göpfert, 8th edn, 5 vols (München: Carl Hanser, 1989), V, p. 510.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *Handschriftlicher Nachlaß (=HN)*, ed. by Arthur Hübscher, 5 in 6 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Waldemar Kramer, 1966-1975) II, p. 289.

“suffering”. This term must not be confused with Schiller’s notion of *das Pathetisch-Erhabene*, which is restricted to the spectator’s aesthetic experience of tragedy. For in Schopenhauer this non-aesthetic experience of sublimity is used to describe not the spectator’s experience of tragedy, but the tragic protagonist’s. Commentators have continued to ignore this other form of the sublime in Schopenhauer. Failing to take cognizance of it has not only lead Korfmacher to misinterpret Schopenhauer’s response to Kant, it has also lead the Schopenhauer scholar John Atwell to falsely see a contradiction in Schopenhauer’s notion of “resignierte Erhebung” (“resigned exaltation”). In his article “Art as Liberation”, Atwell criticizes Schopenhauer’s attempt to include the element of resignation in his concept of sublimity when he applies the concept to tragedy in the supplementary volume of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*. Working solely with Schopenhauer’s explanation of the dynamical sublime, which involves only the contemplation of (Platonic) Ideas and not resignation, Atwell concludes that the concept of “resigned exaltation” is “self-contradictory”.<sup>8</sup> As I intend to show, however, there is in Schopenhauer a non-aesthetic form of sublimity, the pathetic, that does not entail the contemplation of Ideas, but does indeed include the element of resignation. Bringing this to light will resolve the problem which Atwell sees resulting from Schopenhauer’s attempt to compound his account of sublimity with that of tragedy.

The notion of the pathetic sublime does not emerge in Book Three of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, in which he lays down his aesthetic theory, but rather in those passages of Book Four where he discusses the two roads that lead to ultimate salvation from the pains of life. He there states that sublimity accompanies the state of resignation caused by severe suffering. With the hindsight we will have gained by looking at the sublime experience discussed in Book Four, we will return to the relevant sections of Book Three pertaining to tragedy. When we shine the searchlight of differentiation on these sections, it becomes apparent that Schopenhauer is in fact drawing on two disparate notions of sublimity. Which of these he has in mind in a particular passage depends on which of the two oscillating perspectives he has momentarily taken in his discourse: the perspective of the suffering hero or that of the spectator. In the first, the sublime will be the experiential state resulting from severe suffering; in the second, it will be an affective response brought about by the artistic representation of suffering. Keeping these two perspectives apart is the key to a more adequate account of the role sublimity plays in his theory of tragedy and allows for a better understanding of Schopenhauer’s curious comment in his copy of the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*.

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<sup>8</sup>John Atwell, “Art as Liberation”, in: *Schopenhauer, Philosophy and the Arts*, ed. by Dale Jacquette (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 81-106; here p. 102.

## Ordinary and Sublime Consciousness

Like Kant, Schopenhauer holds that the sublime is not a characteristic quality belonging to an object, but is instead an experiential state caused by a particular physical and psychological condition within the subject. Schopenhauer describes this condition as one of “Erhebung” and the feeling that accompanies this state as “das Erhabene” (the sublime).<sup>9</sup> “Erhebung” signifies an action that is best rendered as a “lifting up” or “elevating above” – Payne, the English translator of Schopenhauer, often renders it as “exaltation”. Schopenhauer uses the term to describe the particular state in which the subject of knowing, i.e., the intellect, rises above itself as mere subject of willing through an act of liberation. This rising above one’s will marks for Schopenhauer the distinction between ordinary consciousness and a higher, will-less mode of consciousness.

Ordinary consciousness is stamped for Schopenhauer by the determined a priori manner in which we apprehend phenomenal objects of appearance according to the principle of individuation (time and space) and the principle of sufficient reason (causality). Furthermore, ordinary consciousness is characterized by the dominance of the will over the intellect, or the subject of willing over the subject of knowing. The subjugation of the intellect to the will is grounded in the former’s proto-evolutionary origins. For the genesis of the intellect is, according to Schopenhauer, a mere consequence of an animalistic will’s striving for survival and procreation. As such, it is a secondary phenomenon, the mere outgrowth of an irrational Will.

Since the will is primarily interested in its own survival and in the fulfillment of its desires, the intellect is naturally influenced by the will’s needs and interests. This influence need not be exerted consciously – that the mistakes we inadvertently make while calculating our monetary funds are usually in our favor is, according to Schopenhauer, evidence of the unconscious workings of our wills. The knowledge which the intellect forms is therefore falsified on two accounts: first, by the a priori conditions of the mind (time, space and causality), which apply only to things as representations of consciousness and not to things as they are in themselves; and second, by the sectarian interests of an egocentric will. Thus as long as the intellect remains under the manipulative sovereignty of the will, objective knowledge is impossible. Under certain special circumstances, however, the intellect can free itself from servitude to the will. Such is the case in our aesthetic experiences of the beautiful and the sublime, when the intellect or the subject of knowing has become “pure” and our ordinary consciousness transformed into a will-less, and hence *disinterested* consciousness.

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<sup>9</sup>For the German I quote according to Arthur Schopenhauer, *Sämtliche Werke* (=SM), ed. by Wolfgang Frhr. von Löhneysen, 5 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986-89); here *SW* I, p. 287 (§ 39). English translations can be found in E. F. J. Payne’s *The World as Will and Representation* (=WWR), 2 vols (New York: Dover, 1966); here *WWR* I, p. 201.

Commentators on Schopenhauer's aesthetics often refer to this higher form of consciousness as aesthetic consciousness. Higher consciousness can also be attained, however, in certain non-aesthetic experiences as well. Hence Schopenhauer sometimes elects to use more general coinages for this consciousness. In his earlier manuscripts, for example, he calls it the "better" consciousness ("das bessere Bewußtsein"). Since the liberation of the subject of knowing from the subject of willing is also described as the intellect "elevating itself above the will" ("die Erhebung des Geistes über den Willen"), he also addresses the higher consciousness as exalted or "sublime" consciousness ("erhabenes Bewußtsein").

## The Dynamical Sublime

The dynamical sublime is experienced when, acknowledging nature's might and its ability to destroy us, we suddenly realize that the physically fearsome natural phenomenon before us is our own representation; in other words, that without a subject to perceive the phenomenal object, it could not properly be said to exist. This squares of course with Schopenhauer's claim that being (*esse*) is dependent on being perceived (*percipi*). As perceiving individuals we are the "bearer" ("Träger") of all representations. With this conception of the dreaded phenomenon our entire attitude towards it changes. Rather than believing ourselves to be dependent on its mercy, we come to realize that it is actually dependent on us. Without subjects perceiving the tornado in the streets, for example, the tornado could not properly be said to exist, and thus there would be nothing to fear. And so it is with all phenomena that we see as imposing a threat to our well-being, i.e., our bodies or wills. Whatever fear we may initially sense fades and, with the emerging awareness of the object's contingency on us, yields to a feeling of delight that accompanies the attainment of a higher form of consciousness. In relation to the knowing and the willing subject, the experience can be described as follows: the body, as objectification of a striving will, is checked by a force which threatens to destroy it. Two things can then happen: one, the subject of willing can command the body to turn its back on the threatening object and seek safety; or two, the subject of knowing can struggle to free itself from the subject of willing, whose main concern is that of self-preservation. It does so through the realization that it is the bearer of the representation. Since the will is usually stronger, we often take the first path, especially when the threat to the will becomes real or great. It is the second path, however, that leads to the sublime state of consciousness associated with the dynamical sublime, that is, to the elevation of ourselves as pure subjects of knowing over ourselves as subjects of willing. Because the will is predominantly concerned with its own personal safety and survival, the intellect's emancipation from the will does not come easily. Schopenhauer characterizes it therefore as a struggle. Echoing Burke's claim that difficulty is an attribute of sublimity, not

beauty, he then explains that it is this very struggle and the hostile relation between the subject and the object of perception that differentiates sublimity from beauty:

Was also das Gefühl des Erhabenen von dem des Schönen unterscheidet, ist dieses: beim Schönen hat das reine Erkennen ohne Kampf die Oberhand gewonnen, indem die Schönheit des Objekts, d.h. dessen die Erkenntnis seiner Idee erleichternde Beschaffenheit, den Willen und die seinem Dienste frönende Erkenntnis der Relationen ohne Widerstand und daher unmerklich aus dem Bewußtsein entfernte und dasselbe als reines Subjekt des Erkennens übrigließ, so daß selbst keine Erinnerung an den Willen nachbleibt. [...] Denn da dasselbe [das Erhabene] mit dem des Schönen in der Hauptbestimmung, dem reinen willensfreien Erkennen und der mit demselben notwendig eintretenden Erkenntnis der außer aller durch den Satz des Grundes bestimmten Relation stehenden Ideen eines ist und nur durch einen Zusatz, nämlich die Erhebung über das erkannte feindliche Verhältnis eben des kontemplierten Objekts zum Willen überhaupt sich vom Gefühl des Schönen unterscheidet; so entstehen, je nachdem dieser Zusatz stark, laut, dringend, nah oder nur schwach, fern, bloß angedeutet ist, mehrere Grade des Erhabenen, ja Übergänge des Schönen zum Erhabenen.<sup>10</sup>

Once liberated from egoistic knowing, we cease to perceive the object according to its relations with other things, in other words, according to the subjective forms of time, space and causality. We behold it now without reference to our individual wills; in other words, we behold it disinterestedly and objectively. For Schopenhauer this is synonymous with saying that we view the object aesthetically. When we do so, we no longer consider “das Wo, das Wann, das Warum und das Wozu an den Dingen [...]; sondern einzig und allein das *Was*”.<sup>11</sup> This “whatness” of an object is referred to by Schopenhauer as the object’s (Platonic) Idea. It is that which is common to all species of a particular genus, the archetype or ideal pattern.

Schopenhauer contends, like his predecessors Burke, Kant and Schiller, that the aesthetic experience of sublimity can only come about when the threat imposed by the object does not actually endanger the subject’s well-being. If the imposed threat from the sublime object is or becomes so great as to jeopardize the subject’s personal safety, the will’s instinct for self-preservation would cause him to simply turn his back and run for cover. What makes tragedy a suitable object of the sublime for the spectator is for Schopenhauer, as it was for Kant and Schiller, the fact that the spectator remains unharmed. The suffering presented on stage and the tragic catastrophe, which Schopenhauer mentions as the effective catalyst for the feeling of the dynamical sublime,<sup>12</sup> are enveloped by the veil of aesthetic illusion. It is for this reason that Kant associated tragedy with the sublime. And it is surely for the same reason that Schopenhauer posits tragedy’s identification with the aesthetic sublime in the second volume of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* when he writes

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<sup>10</sup>*SW* I, pp. 287-288; *WWR* I, p. 202 (§ 39).

<sup>11</sup>*SW* I, p. 257; *WWR* I, p. 178 (§ 34).

<sup>12</sup>*SW* II, p. 556; *WWR* II, p. 433 (Ch. 37).

that “die Wirkung des Trauerspiels [ist] analog der des dynamisch Erhabenen”.<sup>13</sup> In his *Nachlaß*, where he mentions tragedy as one of three possible objects capable of evoking the contemplative or aesthetic sublime, he clearly states that what gives rise to the dynamical sublime is the appearance or representation of suffering, as we see in the theatre, and not real suffering:

Gefühl des Erhabenen ist es, wenn der nämliche Zustand unsrer selbst allererst gewonnen ist durch ein Losreißen, Abwerfen, Befreien vom Willen, das notwendig war, indem der Gegenstand der Kontemplation durch seine Bedeutsamkeit günstig ist, zugleich dem Willen furchtbar ist: dies kann er hauptsächlich auf drei Arten seyn: 1) als *Erscheinung* des Leidens des Lebens, so das Trauerspiel [...].<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, commenting on the experience of the aesthetic sublime to the audience of his lecture on *Die Metaphysik des Schönen*, given in 1820 at the University of Berlin, Schopenhauer says: “weil man aber dennoch völlig sicher und unverletzt steht und die ganze Sache in der Perception vor sich geht; so stellt sich dann das Gefühl des Erhabenen im höchsten Grade ein”.<sup>15</sup> And again in his *Nachlaß* he writes that aesthetic consciousness dissipates with the apprehension of real danger: “darum geht bei wirklicher persönlicher Bedrängniß und Gefahr der Eindruck des erhabnen [sic] verloren und macht der Angst Platz, die die Kontemplation aufhebt, weil nun nicht mehr die bloße Idee des Willens sondern er selbst *in concreto* eingetreten ist: die Erhebung uns benommen ist”.<sup>16</sup>

Apart from the element of hostility which Schopenhauer uses to characterize the will's relationship to the sublime object, one of the essential hallmarks of his theory of aesthetic sublimity concerns the perceptual apprehension of an object's inherent Idea or form. This special way of viewing things is achieved when we take up a disinterested or aesthetic attitude towards an object. When watching tragedy with the aesthetic attitude, we as spectators come to understand what man is all about, that is, for Schopenhauer, that man is essentially egoistic, uncaring, jealous, wicked, etc., and that the search for enduring happiness or satisfaction in this life is, as the first part of *Faust* so clearly illustrates, hopeless. This world and human nature, which can only be regarded as the folly of an evil, dark force, were not created to promote human happiness. This insight, which well-wrought tragedy should direct us to, will eventually prompt us to renounce life as a whole by resigning our own individual will to live. I say “eventually”.

When apprehending an object aesthetically, we behold what that object essentially is apart from any spatial, temporal or causal relations, in other words, apart from those things that distort perception. This is not a reflective or conceptual apprehending or contemplating, but a perceptual one. The understanding, which is

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>*HN* I, p. 255 (emphasis added).

<sup>15</sup>A. Schopenhauer, *Die Metaphysik des Schönen*, ed. by Volker Spierling, 2nd edn (München and Zürich: Piper, 1988), p. 107. See also *SW* I, p. 288; *WWR* I, p. 202 (§ 39).

<sup>16</sup>*HN* I, p. 254.

the faculty of perception, simply perceives or contemplates non-conceptually the object before it, be this a tornado or man. In the case of the sublime this aesthetic attitude with which we view objects is achieved when the intellect has struggled to free itself from the will, which senses a threat to its well-being. The perceptual knowledge that we gain with this attitude is simply the Idea of a particular object, e.g., the Idea of a tornado. The Idea of man is, of course, more comprehensive. Any particular tragedy, however, reveals to us only some facets of man, not all. *Othello*, for example, shows us the nature of human wickedness in Iago and that of jealousy in Othello. Still this is not the same knowledge that the altruist or the ascetic saint reaches when he experiences the revelation upon lifting the veil of Maya, i.e., suspending the principle of individuation. The insight that the ascetic possesses is that the entire phenomenal world and everything in it is the manifestation of one evil Will that is the cause of all suffering. This insight of the ascetic prompts him to give up all instances of personal willing, which he sees as contributing to world suffering, and to embrace in its stead a state of complete resignation. The aesthetic contemplator of tragedy has not yet arrived at the profounder knowledge that all is Will and that Will is the cause of all pain and evil. Yet in his discussion of tragedy, Schopenhauer does at times speak as though complete resignation were a concomitant of sublimity. If it is his contention that tragedy belongs to the category of the dynamical sublime, which is only a state of aesthetic contemplation, then he cannot simultaneously claim that dynamical sublimity entails the element of resignation. A contradiction within his conception of aesthetic sublimity would ensue. According to John Atwell, however, this is precisely what Schopenhauer winds up arguing. At the end of his article "Art as Liberation", Atwell draws attention to the concept of "resigned exaltation" ("resignierte Erhebung") which Schopenhauer uses once in his brief discourse on tragedy in the second volume.<sup>17</sup> Atwell criticizes Schopenhauer's attempt to subsume tragedy under the rubric of sublimity thus: "It follows [...] that 'resigned exaltation' is self-contradictory: exaltation comes only with contemplation, and resignation goes beyond contemplation; the former may lead to but it does not join with resignation, hence there is only contemplative and not resigned exaltation".<sup>18</sup> In other words, there can only be aesthetic, contemplative sublimity, and no sublimity involving complete resignation.

Atwell is certainly right in pointing out that resignation is not an element of the dynamical sublime. And if this were Schopenhauer's true claim, he would have a problem. But as I argue, Schopenhauer does not entertain the notion of aesthetic sublimity when he thinks about sublimity accompanying a state of resignation. He instead entertains the idea of an altogether different form of sublimity, a non-aesthetic form, which does not involve the contemplation of an object's Idea, but does indeed entail a state of complete resignation. And this is what Atwell and other Schopenhauer commentators have failed to take cognizance of. Schopenhauer is

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<sup>17</sup>*SW* II, p. 559; *WWR* II, p. 435 (Ch. 37).

<sup>18</sup>Atwell, p. 102.



himself partly at fault for not clearly bringing this non-aesthetic form of sublimity to the attention of his readers by giving it a name. A close reading of passages from Book Four of his main work, however, sustains my argument that there is another form of the sublime in Schopenhauer and that this form is the key to an understanding of his theory of sublimity as it relates to tragedy.

Before we turn our attention to this other form of the sublime, it should be pointed out that Schopenhauer's concept of sublimity is, even without this form, more versatile than is usually acknowledged. By no means is sublimity restricted to the aesthetic realm in Schopenhauer. Even when treating the sublime in the aesthetic sections of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, he extends the concept of sublimity to the non-aesthetic domain of ethics. Directly after listing high mountains, the Egyptian pyramids, and ruins of ancient civilizations as objects which typically evoke a sublime feeling within us, he remarks:

Ja auch auf das Ethische läßt unsere Erklärung des Erhabenen sich übertragen, nämlich auf das, was man als den erhabenen Charakter bezeichnet. Auch dieser nämlich entspringt daraus, daß der Wille nicht erregt wird durch Gegenstände, welche allerdings geeignet wären, ihn zu erregen; sondern das Erkennen auch dabei die Oberhand behält. Ein solcher Charakter wird demnach die Menschen rein objektiv betrachten, nicht aber nach den Beziehungen, welche sie zu seinem Willen haben könnten: er wird z.B. ihre Fehler, sogar ihren Haß und ihre Ungerechtigkeit gegen ihn selbst bemerken, ohne dadurch seinerseits zum Haß erregt zu werden; er wird ihr Glück ansehen, ohne Neid zu empfinden. [...] Sein persönliches Glück oder Unglück wird ihn nicht stark affizieren, vielmehr wird er sein, wie Hamlet den Horatio beschreibt:

for thou hast been  
As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing;  
A man, that fortune's buffets and rewards  
Hast ta'en with equal thanks, etc.  
(Act 3, scene 2).

Denn er wird in seinem eigenen Lebenslauf and dessen Unfällen weniger sein individuelles als das Los der Menschheit überhaupt erblicken und demnach sich dabei mehr erkennend als leidend verhalten.<sup>19</sup>

The sublime character is the ascetic saint. What is interesting about the concept of sublimity as applied to ethics is that the concept no longer refers to the contemplation of aesthetic Ideas. Ethical sublimity is the state of consciousness that the ascetic attains when he has penetrated through the deceptive veil of Maya and has apprehended the fundamental unitary essence of the world. The feeling of sublimity concomitant with this consciousness is the result of the individual having liberated himself from the constraints of willing. Freed from the will's shackles the subject of

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<sup>19</sup>*SW I*, p. 293-294; *WWR I*, p. 206-207 (§ 39).

knowing sees the world for what it truly is. Again, there is no contemplation of aesthetic Ideas involved in ethical sublimity. Nor is there in a third form of sublimity present in Schopenhauer, which I call the “pathetic sublime”.

## The “Pathetic” Sublime

Ultimate salvation from the pains of life, Book Four of the first volume informs us, resides in the denial of all forms of egoistic willing. This denial is the direct consequence of the recognition that all is Will and that Will is the cause of all suffering. To achieve this state of self-denial is to achieve asceticism, which Schopenhauer characterises as the “*vorsätzliche Brechung des Willens durch Versagung des Angenehmen und Aufsuchen des Unangenehmen, die selbstgewählte büßende Lebensart und Selbstkasteiung zur anhaltenden Mortifikation des Willens*”.<sup>20</sup> Only in few, however, is the insight into metaphysical reality sufficient to ignite the renunciation of will. And of those who do turn their backs on life, only rare exceptions will maintain the strength to persevere in practising self-denial. For as Schopenhauer explains, “*die Schmeichelei des Augenblicks, die Lockung der Hoffnung und die sich immer wieder anbietende Befriedigung des Willens, d.i. der Lust, [ist] ein stetes Hindernis der Verneinung des Willens und eine stete Verführung zu erneuerter Bejahung desselben*”.<sup>21</sup> The promptings of desire offered in life are simply too many and too great for us to have much success in maintaining a state of resignation. Schopenhauer assures us, however, that there is an alternative path to the salvation from the sufferings of the will. This path, which is not deliberately chosen, is traversed when pain and suffering become so intense that they break the will’s desire to continue living. As a result, the sufferer’s inner state of willing yields to a state of resignation. Having now transcended the state of willing, the sufferer experiences the same feeling as the aesthetic contemplator, who for a moment has freed himself from the interests of his will and is able to perceive the object disinterestedly. Like the aesthetic contemplator, the sufferer, who no longer desires to live, elevates himself above the will and experiences sublimity:

Meistens muß daher durch das größte eigene Leiden der Wille gebrochen sein, ehe dessen Selbstverneinung eintritt. Dann sehn wir den Menschen, nachdem er durch alle Stufen der wachsenden Bedrängnis unter dem heftigsten Widerstreben zum Rande der Verzweiflung gebracht ist, plötzlich in sich gehn, sich und die Welt erkennen, sein ganzes Wesen ändern, sich über sich selbst und alles Leiden *erheben* und, wie durch dasselbe gereinigt und geheiligt, in unanfechtbarer Ruhe, Seligkeit und *Erhabenheit* willig allem entsagen, was er vorhin mit der größten Heftigkeit wollte, und den Tod freudig empfangen. Es ist der aus der läuternden Flamme des

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<sup>20</sup>SW I, p. 532; WWR I, p. 392 (§ 68).

<sup>21</sup>SW I, p. 533; WWR I, p. 392 (§ 68).

Leidens plötzlich hervortretende Silberblick der Verneinung des Willens zum Leben, d.h. der Erlösung.<sup>22</sup>

Schopenhauer's claim then is that through acute suffering the sufferer can elevate himself ("über sich selbst erheben") to a sublime state of mind ("Erhabenheit"). Emphasis needs to be accorded here to the fact that he here maintains that this particular form of sublime experience is accompanied by the "complete resignation" ("gänzliche Resignation") of the will.<sup>23</sup> Not all forms of sublimity or sublime states of consciousness are therefore opposed to the state of complete resignation, as commentators have believed. Now that we have discerned a form of sublimity in Schopenhauer that has its source in severe suffering and which is accompanied by immediate and complete resignation, we need to show that Schopenhauer relates this form to tragedy.

That the pathetic sublime cannot be experienced by the spectator of tragedy who sits comfortably and safely in the theatre box is obvious. Although he may suffer "sympathetically", as Schiller said, his suffering is not of the intensity that would lead to the breaking of his will to live. His is a purely aesthetic experience. The protagonist, on the other hand, does experience the purifying flame of suffering. This Schopenhauer makes explicitly clear in the same passage from Book Four quoted above, where he discusses the second path of salvation. He there continues his discussion of the sublime experience brought about by severe suffering by citing the story of Gretchen in Goethe's *Faust* as the paradigmatic example of the second path:

Von dieser durch großes Unglück und die Verzweiflung an aller Rettung herbeigeführten Verneinung des Willens hat uns eine deutliche und anschauliche Darstellung, wie mir sonst keine in der Poesie bekannt ist, der große Goethe in seinem unsterblichen Meisterwerk, dem *Faust*, gegeben an der Leidensgeschichte des Gretchens. Diese ist ein vollkommenes Musterbild des zweiten Weges, der zur Verneinung des Willens führt, nicht, wie der erste, durch die bloße Erkenntnis des Leidens einer ganzen Welt, das man sich freiwillig aneignet; sondern durch den selbstempfundenen, eigenen, überschwenglichen Schmerz. Zwar führen sehr viele Trauerspiele ihren gewaltig wollenden Helden zuletzt auf diesen Punkt der gänzlichen Resignation, wo dann gewöhnlich der Wille zum Leben und seine Erscheinung zugleich endigen: aber keine mir bekannte Darstellung bringt das Wesentliche jener Umwandlung so deutlich und rein von allem Nebenwerk vor die Augen wie die erwähnte im *Faust*.<sup>24</sup>

Complete resignation as Schopenhauer here insists is a direct, and not an indirect, consequence of severe suffering. As such, it constitutes an element of this particular form of sublime experience, which I have called the pathetic. It is this

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<sup>22</sup>*SW I*, p. 533; *WWR I*, pp. 392-393 (§ 68) (emphasis added).

<sup>23</sup>*SW I*, p. 534; *WWR I*, p. 393 (§ 68).

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

which distinguishes the pathetic sublime from the ethical and aesthetic sublime. Furthermore, it will be noted that the pathetic sublime arises in the absence of the contemplation of Ideas which constitute a hallmark of aesthetic experience. It would appear that the pathetic and aesthetic sublime actually stand in opposition to one another. This opposition may be underlined by the fact that, whereas the safety of the perceiver was cited as a precondition for the experience of the aesthetic sublime, in the pathetic sublime it is real suffering which makes the experience of the sublime possible.

Schopenhauer rather carelessly does not clearly distinguish the aesthetic, contemplative sublime from the pathetic, non-contemplative sublime when discussing tragedy. For in his account of tragedy he oscillates between the sublime effect of tragedy on the spectator and the sublime experience of the suffering protagonist. This oscillation between the two perspectives can be followed in the comment Schopenhauer wrote in the margins of his copy of Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft* in 1815. In response to Kant's assertion that safety is a precondition of sublime experience, Schopenhauer wrote: "Daß wir sicher seyn müssen ist nicht wahr. Auch im Augenblick der wirklichen Gefahr und des Untergangs kann unser Bewußtseyn zum Erhabenen emporsteigen. Dies stellt eben das Trauerspiel dar, welches übrigens auch zum Dynamischerhabenen gehört und dies im Zuschauer, obgleich er sicher ist, anregt".<sup>25</sup> This statement would indeed seem odd, if not contradictory, to anyone working solely with Schopenhauer's concept of the aesthetic sublime. For it would contradict his statements, quoted earlier, that the perceiver must in fact remain unharmed to experience aesthetic sublimity. It is not contradictory, however, when one realizes that Schopenhauer also works with a non-aesthetic form of sublimity, the pathetic. This is what tragedy *represents* ("darstellen") through the tragic protagonist, who is in the midst of real danger ("wirkliche Gefahr") and destruction ("Untergang"). But that which is *stimulated* ("anregt") in the unharmed spectator is the dynamical or aesthetic sublime.

Wolfgang Korfmacher cites Schopenhauer's marginal note to Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft* as an indication that Schopenhauer is at odds with Burke's and Kant's presupposition that the aesthetic contemplator of the sublime not actually be harmed by the physically fearsome natural phenomenon. Before quoting Schopenhauer's note, Korfmacher writes: "Dieser Gedanke, daß der Eindruck des Erhabenen entsteht, wenn das Subjekt seine Selbsterhaltung als gefährdet ansieht, diese Gefahr sich aber als bloß scheinbar herausstellt, findet sich erstmals bei Edmund Burke. Schopenhauer wird davon abweichen".<sup>26</sup> I have already shown, however, through previous quotations from Schopenhauer, that he does not in fact part company from Burke and Kant. For the feeling of the dynamical sublime to arise in the contemplative subject, he must have a sense of personal safety; otherwise the state of contemplation would be suspended for fear of his own well-being. Where this

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<sup>25</sup>HN II, p. 289.

<sup>26</sup>Wolfgang Korfmacher, *Ideen und Ideenerkenntnis in der ästhetischen Theorie Arthur Schopenhauer's* (Pfannenweiler: Centaurus-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1992), p. 37.

safety is no longer posited is in the other form of sublimity arising from sheer pain. Pain was, of course, a source of sublimity in Burke. But it was a mild pain: pain that was not “noxious”. In so far as Schopenhauer ascribes a form of sublimity to severe or noxious pain and suffering, he can be seen as introducing a new source of the sublime.

Bearing in mind both the distinction between the pathetic and the contemplative sublime and the two possible perspectives which an analysis of tragedy offers, i.e., that of the hero or spectator, we are now in a position to look at the sections in the third book of the first volume where Schopenhauer discusses tragedy. In the light of the hindsight gained from Book Four it now becomes clear that his explanation of what elevates the hero to sublime consciousness is not grounded in the realization that the causal events of his suffering are mere representations of his mind, the realization, in other words, that the world is dependent on him as the bearer of representations. Rather what lifts the hero to sublime consciousness is explained as the result of the excessive pain and suffering placed on his will. This suffering brings about the complete breaking of the will and with it the complete resignation which Schopenhauer saw so paradigmatically expressed in the figure of Gretchen in Goethe’s *Faust*. As he writes in his brief discourse on tragedy in Book Three:

Ein und derselbe Wille ist es, der in ihnen [den Figuren der Tragödie] allen lebt und erscheint, dessen Erscheinungen aber sich selbst bekämpfen und sich selbst zerfleischen. In diesem Individuo tritt er gewaltig, in jenem schwächer hervor, hier mehr, dort minder zur Besinnung gebracht und gemildert durch das Licht der Erkenntnis, bis endlich in einzelnen diese Erkenntnis, geläutert und gesteigert **durch das Leiden selbst**, den Punkt erreicht, wo die Erscheinung, der Schleier der Maja, sie nicht mehr täuscht, die Form der Erscheinung, das principium individuationis, von ihr durchschaut wird, der auf diesem beruhende Egoismus ebendamit er stirbt, wodurch nunmehr die vorhin so gewaltigen *Motive* ihre Macht verlieren und statt ihrer die vollkommene Erkenntnis des Wesens der Welt, als *Quietiv* des Willens wirkend, **die Resignation herbeiführt**, das Aufgeben nicht bloß des Lebens, sondern des ganzen Willens zum Leben selbst. So sehn wir im Trauerspiel zuletzt die Edelsten nach langem Kampf und Leiden den Zwecken, die sie bis dahin so heftig verfolgten, und allen den Genüssen des Lebens auf immer entsagen.<sup>27</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

Sublimity for Schopenhauer is not just an experiential state that tragedy produces in the spectator. It is also a concomitant of the resignation achieved by individuals experiencing severe suffering, such as those presented in well-wrought tragedy. What allows Schopenhauer to extend the concept of the sublime to such individuals is that, although through different means, they attain a liberation from

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<sup>27</sup>*SWI*, pp. 353-354; *WWR* I, p. 253 (§ 5 1) (bold mine).

the constraints of willing similar to that of the aesthetic contemplator. All forms of liberation from the will would therefore appear to provoke sublimity within the subject as long as the liberation does not come easily as with the beautiful, but is obtained, as Burke had already claimed, with a degree of difficulty. It thus becomes evident that the concept of sublimity we find in Schopenhauer is far more versatile than is conventionally recognized – it is used in connection with the aesthetic contemplator, the altruist, the ascetic, and with the individual whose will has been broken by severe suffering.