



Sublime Reverberations: Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* and Kant's Aesthetics

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Abstract: This study delves into the intricate interplay between the aesthetics of the sublime as envisioned by Immanuel Kant and the creative genius of Percy Bysshe Shelley as exemplified in his poetic masterpiece, *Ode to the West Wind*. Kant's sublime philosophy, expounded in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790) highlights the sublime as an aesthetic experience evoking awe, wonder, and transcendence in response to nature's grandeur. Shelley's poem serves as a captivating canvas in which the resonance and alignment between Kant's conceptual framework and the poetic expression of the sublime is explored and analyzed. The study reveals that the poem *Ode to the West Wind* seamlessly harmonizes with Kant's sublime: the mathematical and dynamical aspects, the pivotal role of the imagination, and the interplay between the beautiful and the sublime. Furthermore, the poem's exploration of change, renewal, and transformation, resonates with the revolutionary sublime. Within the cultural and political context of the Romantic era marked by societal upheaval and transformation, Shelley's thematic exploration finds a profound connection to the revolutionary spirit of the age.

Keywords: Sublime, Kant, Shelley, *Ode to the West Wind*

1. Introduction

This paper bridges the realms of philosophy and art, reaffirming the enduring significance of the sublime, and the power of creative expression to transcend the ordinary, kindle the human spirit, and offer glimpses of the extraordinary. Shelley and Kant, poets and philosophers, though separated by time and discipline, unite in the sublime, reminding us of the boundless potential of human thought and the ever-inspiring connection between philosophy and literature. A large number of critics have focused on the sublime in Shelley's poetry, their focus being "Mount Blanc" for obvious reasons. This paper deviates from the popular relation of sublime and Mount Blanc and aims to bring out the elements of sublime in *Ode to the West Wind*.

The Romantic age had an inquisitive spirit that delved into the intellectual and artistic exploration of the anthropocentric experiences. The exploration is marked by a fascination with natural world, a radical questioning of traditional institutions, a rejection of orthodox mindset, and a deep engagement with complexities of human emotions and experience. Percy Bysshe Shelley's Ode to the West is masterpiece that showcases enduring allure of nature's sublime power and its resonance with Immanuel Kant's aesthetic philosophy of the sublime. Kant's theories, as expounded in his Critique of Judgement outlines the sublime as an aesthetic experience characterized by the profound sense of awe, wonder and transcendence experienced in the presence of the vast, the overwhelming, and the uncontrollable. Shelley's poem offers an interesting read to explore how the Romantic poet engages with Kant's idea of sublime with in the context of his own revolutionary and artistic ideas.

This study explores the interconnections between Shelley's Ode to the West Wind and Kant's sublime aesthetics, analyzing how the poem both substantiates and illustrates the core tenets of Kant's philosophical framework. Through an exploration of the poem's thematic elements, imagery and the emotional responses it invokes, this paper discusses the ways in which Shelley's work captures and uses the essence of sublime as conceptualized by Kant. By discussing this alignment between the Romantic poetry and Enlightenment Philosophy¹, this study attempts to highlight the reverberations of Kant's sublime in literary and artistic expressions and how Shelley's work serves a compelling example of this reverberation.

Theoretical Underpinnings:

The study briefly overview Kant's aesthetic of sublime, providing the theoretical framework for the current study. The papers then engages in an in-depth analysis of Shelley's poem, paying close attention to how Shelley portrays the power of nature, and describe the ineffable and overwhelming aspect of West Wind, the sense of transcendence it poses and the emotion responses it evokes. This in-depth analysis will present an interesting juxtaposition of Shelley's artistic idea and Kant's theoretical conceptualization of sublime and will establish Ode to the West Wind as a compelling and vivid exemplum of the sublime.

This study however moves above beyond the literary analysis. It also endeavors to unravel and the profound connections between philosophy and arts, where a poet's pen can articulate the sublime in same breath as a philosopher's pen dissects it. In doing so, the enduring power of both poetry and philosophy is reaffirmed to awaken the human spirit from the mundane and glimpse the extraordinary.

1.2 Research Questions

This paper seeks to answer the following questions;

1. What specific imagery and symbolism in Ode to the West Wind evoke the powerful and awe-inspiring qualities associated with the sublime, as defined by Kant?
2. To what extent does the poem's exploration of themes like change, renewal, and transformation correspond to the revolutionary sublime, and how does it relate to the cultural and political context of the Romantic era?

¹ It was a European intellectual movement that peaked in 17th and 18th wherein the concepts regarding God, reason, nature and humanity were knit into an outlook of life that gained wide popularity in West and instigated intellectual, political, social and philosophical responses. The Enlightenment movement was driven by the prioritization of reason by virtue of which humans can make sense of universe and improve their own condition.

2. Discussion

Kant distinguishes between the sublime and beautiful as while beauty resides in the form of an object, the sublimity is exhumed even from a formless object. The beauty of an object stems from its finite proportions and its purposiveness, the sublimity is generated from the infinite, limitless dimensions that resist judgement and defy rationale. While beauty garners understanding, the sublime evades it. According to Kant, the sublime rises above all the potential empirical standards. The vastness and the infinity of the sublime produce an effect of awe, wonder, and insignificance when an attempt is made to understand it or grasp it. Beauty suits the human mind for its natural inclination to logic, reason, rationale gets justified in the appreciating the finite and proportionate contours of beauty. However, the sublime illicit what Kant called an "outrage of imagination". The effect of sublime is a subjective experience. The infinity and limitlessness that the sublime enfolds cannot be reduced to one single idea, concept or facet. Kant chronicles in one of his passages: "Prominent, overhanging, menacing cliffs, towering storm clouds from which come lightning flashes and thunderclaps as they roll by, volcanoes in their destructive violence, hurricanes leaving devastation in their trail, the boundless, raging ocean, a lofty waterfall on some mighty river, all render our capacity to resist insignificantly small in comparison to their power". In the poetry of Wordsworth, the sublime is portrayed as:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a 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:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things (Wordsworth, 1798, lines 22-31)

Rosthein (1997) quotes, Johann Georg Sulzer, a Swiss mathematician and philosopher, that the sublime "works on us with hammer-blows; it seizes us and irresistibly overwhelms us". It is the "highest thing that there is in art" (Rosthein, 1997, p.560). The sublime, it would seem, has a double motion with regard to the observing mind. It relies upon reason - and confounds it. Burke in his *Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (Burke, 1757) convincingly extrapolates the concept of sublime and juxtaposes it with the idea of beautiful. Regarding Sublime he says, "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of sublime" (Burke, 1757, p.310). He further postulates,

Sublime objects are vast in their dimensions beautiful ones comparatively small; beauty should be smooth, and polished; the great, rugged and negligent; beauty should shun the right line yet deviate from it insensibly; the great in many cases loves the right line, and when it deviates, it often makes a strong deviation; beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy; beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, and even massive. They are indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure (Burke, 1757, p.311).

The beauty then is a pleasing aesthetic experience, whereas, sublime is an overwhelming aesthetic

experience, that tends upon diminishing its spectator, bringing out his insignificance. Burk's ideas of sublime are closely linked to Kant's conceptualization of Sublime. Kant in his Critique of Judgment succinctly describes:

The beautiful in nature is connected with the form of the object, which consists in having definite boundaries. The sublime, on the other hand, is to be found in a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it boundlessness is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought you (Kant, 1790, p.390).

He further says "We call that sublime which is absolutely great" (Kant, 1790, p.392). Kant is of the opinion that sublime stimulates an acute sense of diminishing scale and insignificant existence in its spectator

The sublime is not to be sought in the things of nature, but only in our ideas. The sublime is that in comparison with which everything else is small. The sublime is that, the mere ability to think which shows a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of sense (Kant, 1790, p.393).

In the sublime, a delicate relationship between order and chaos is solicited, and the mind is stimulated to ponder over how one gives birth to another. Sublime presents a paradigm for understanding the world and one's existence in relation to a grand scheme of the world and acquiring the cognizance of the overall patterns working in nature. If we take a look at how the sublime is traditionally described, it is not fondness or emotion that is invoked, but the opposite. Kant argues that while the beautiful is related to the form of an object, the sublime may even exist in a formless object. The beautiful object seems purposive and final while sublime is indeterminate. There is a finesse of certainty in beautiful; whereas, an awe of uncertainty in sublime. Beautiful denotes what is possible; sublime demonstrates the vistas of impossible. Beautiful demands to be judge; the sublime resists judgment. Beauty illicit understanding; the sublime defies it. Keeping in view the influence of Burke on the 18th and 19th century, and his systematic study of aesthetic approaches, all Romantics are influenced by Burke in one way or the other; Shelley was no exception.

Percy Bysshe Shelley's worldview deeply stemmed from his atheism, profoundly shaping his view of nature as an immensely potent yet indifferent force. Absent a benevolent deity to impose order, Shelley inhabited a universe filled with formidable, often tumultuous elements. While he admired nature's beauty, it didn't imply care or compassion. Similar to Pascal, who, while stargazing, confessed fear of the silence in infinite spaces, Shelley too confronted the awe-inspiring, even intimidating aspect of the natural world.

Shelley while highlighting the glory and aesthetic majesty of the nature on one hand, cautions man not to equate with peace or tranquillity, on the other. He brings to fore both its destructive and regenerative powers. Shelley's perspective on the West Wind portrays it as a majestic, turbulent, and inevitably deadly force, possessing the ability to subdue while resisting any attempt at subjugation. While Shelley acknowledges the West Wind's aesthetic splendour, he does not shy away from highlighting its potential for destruction. Even though the wind itself remains invisible, its influence is profoundly palpable. In Shelley's ode, the West Wind becomes a conduit for invoking the aesthetics of the sublime, a concept closely related to Kant and Edmund Burke's definition, which links the sublime to elements that incite or symbolize terror, vastness, obscurity, power, and beauty. In this poetic work, Shelley addresses the wind as an imposing, all-encompassing presence that is both fearsome and awe-inspiring. Despite the fear it may evoke, the poet also derives a sense of joy from its immense power.

The comparison between the dread felt by the leaves being driven by the West Wind and the terror experienced by ghosts in the presence of an exorcist vividly illustrates the fear associated with the power of the West Wind.

Moreover, it introduces an element of obscurity, reminiscent of the supernatural, to the poem. This sudden reference to the supernatural, following the poem's opening, resembles the swift and mysterious gestures of a wand employed by enchanters for their magical practices. Shelley effectively achieves his objective by infusing the supernatural into the overall enchantment of the poem.

Phrases such as "dark wintry bed" and "like a corpse within its grave" further intensify the sense of terror, in line with the characteristics of the sublime as outlined by Burke. Such carefully chosen language, evoking a feeling of fear, is scattered throughout the poem. For instance, in the second stanza, there is a mention of "black rain and fire and hail bursting," and we find old palaces and towers trembling when they sense the presence of the West Wind.

The dread experienced by the vegetation submerged in the ocean due to the West Wind is vividly depicted as follows:

The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear
The sapless foliage of the ocean, know
Thy voice, and suddenly grow gray with fear,
And tremble and despoil themselves: O hear! (Shelley, 1975, lines 39-43)

In the poem's second stanza, Shelley asserts that the source of these fierce storms is the West Wind. He accomplishes this by crafting a disquieting image of the skies, rendered dark and cloudy, thus invoking a sense of mystery and obscurity. Once more, he introduces a supernatural element by referencing the mythological figure of the Maenad; the unruly tresses of the Maenad are likened to the turbulent and chaotic storms ushered in by the West Wind. This allusion to the formidable mythological figure of the Maenad is a deliberate tactic employed by the poet to maintain an overarching atmosphere of fear and terror.

The concept of vastness is a crucial element in understanding the aesthetics of the sublime. Shelley goes a step further by extending the dimensions of vastness to encompass not just height, depth, and width, but also dimensionlessness itself. The West Wind is presented as sublime because it transcends the constraints of dimensions; it exists beyond measure. Its vastness lies in its invisibility, an immeasurable quality. It is simultaneously nowhere and everywhere, omnipresent, and its impact extends uniformly to the lands, skies, and waters. No one can escape its all-encompassing presence.

Shelley reinforces the effect of vastness through his careful choice of language in the second and third stanzas of the poem. The West Wind not only reaches the skies but also possesses the power to stir the tangled branches of both "heaven and ocean," giving rise to "angels of rain and lightning." This reference to both "heaven and ocean" signifies the influence of vastness, further emphasizing the immense and all-encompassing nature of the West Wind.

Thou on whose stream, mid the steep sky's commotion,
Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed,
Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean,
Angels of rain and lightning (Shelley, 1975, lines.15-18)

In Shelley's poem, the deliberate choice of diction, particularly in the third stanza, underscores the sense of vastness. Phrases such as "Blue Mediterranean," "Atlantic," "Ocean," and "sky" are carefully woven into the text, each contributing to the enhancement of the impression of vastness and, by extension, the sublime. Shelley utilizes the sea, represented by the blue surface amidst the atmospheric chaos, to invoke the vastness inherent in the sublime. He continues to describe the scale of the storm through the line, "the dim verge horizon to the zenith's height" (line 23), illustrating that the storm's darkness envelops the entire expanse from the sea's surface to the highest point of the skies. Both the darkness and the vastness, as conveyed through the scale of the storm, serve to amplify the aesthetics of the sublime. Edmund Burke defines vastness in terms of different dimensions, with the boundless vastness of the ocean, when beheld, invoking the sublime, often accompanied by an "overwhelming terror" that, according to Burke, embodies the quintessence of the sublime (Burke, 1757, p.314).

Power, another crucial facet of the sublime, is prominently exemplified by the West Wind. The West Wind possesses immense might and authority, compelling lands, skies, and waters to yield to its force. It extends its dominion even over the heavens, shaking the boughs to bring about rain and lightning. Shelley, when addressing the West Wind, employs language that mirrors its potency and influence. This wind has the capability to both annihilate and sustain, functioning as a "wild spirit" (line 14) that extends its reach to every corner of the world. The wild and fierce nature of the West Wind is of particular importance to Shelley, evident in his repeated use of "wild" to describe it, notably in the opening line of the poem where the West Wind is characterized as:

"O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being," (Shelley, 1975, line, 1)

In the second last line of the same stanza, once again the wildness of west wind is stressed upon:

"Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere," (Shelley, 1975, line, 14)

Edmund Burke, in his "Enquiry," alludes to the act of gazing down into a deep valley, looking up at the pinnacle of a towering structure, or beholding the vast expanse of the ocean as experiences that lead one to contemplate the Sublime. When confronted with an immense space, the human mind is confronted with the realization of its own finite existence. The Sublime, as Burke argues, emerges when individuals, while "attending" to the "infinite divisibility of matter," perceive their own "diminishing scale of existence" (Burke, 1757, p.129). Consequently, the Sublime overwhelms the faculties of the mind and the senses, provoking feelings of insignificance in those who directly encounter it.

Shelley, too, is reminded that he longs for the might, splendour, and grandeur of the West Wind. He acknowledges that time has tempered his spirit, which once resembled the spirit of the West Wind. Shelley implores the West Wind to bestow upon him some of its strength and power so that he may disseminate his words and thoughts throughout the world:

"Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is (Shelley, 1975, line, 57)".

The West Wind serves as a reminder of his own existence, one that lacks the capacity to achieve his cherished aspirations. His anguish becomes almost tangible in the final two stanzas of the poem, which have drawn substantial criticism from scholars. Critics rightfully point out the discord in the poet's thoughts. On one hand, he aspires to bring about change and usher in a golden age; yet, on the other hand, he pleads with the West Wind to

carry him like a dead leaf or raise him like a wave. A mind that must depend on external forces is evidently not potent enough to challenge the entrenched world governed by centuries-old customs and orthodox mindset.

During the early Romantic era, poets like Coleridge and Wordsworth viewed the sublime as a deeply spiritual encounter. They believed that when people experienced the sublime in nature, it led to a profound connection with the divine. The divine was a fundamental aspect of their understanding of the sublime's transformative potential. Weiskel, a scholar, argued that the sublime necessitated a "god-term" or a divine presence for a complete appreciation of how early Romantics perceived the creation of the sublime (14). This perspective provides a unique lens through which to examine Shelley's concept of the sublime in his work *Mont Blanc*.

Shelley effectively demonstrates in *Mont Blanc* that the sublime can be encountered without a direct reference to the divine, challenging the notion that divinity is a prerequisite for the full impact of the sublime. While Shelley's "*Mont Blanc*" undeniably invokes the sublime as understood by the early Romantics, it swiftly establishes its distinctive character while remaining equally sublime. In this poem, nature itself represents the epitome of power and possesses boundless knowledge of the infinite. Shelley suggests that through nature, one can experience the sublime and achieve reconciliation with the eternal universe of existence.

3. Conclusion

In the interplay of poetic brilliance and philosophical insight, Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* emerges as a compelling testament to the enduring relevance and resonance of Immanuel Kant's aesthetics of the sublime. As we embarked on this exploration, we ventured into the realms of nature, imagination, and the ever-shifting tapestry of human emotions, seeking to unravel the intricate tapestry woven by Shelley as he danced through the gusts of the West Wind. The poem, with its vivid portrayal of the elemental forces and their effects on the natural world, beckons us to engage with Kant's concept of the sublime—an aesthetic experience that inspires awe, wonder, and transcendence. The poem aligns with Kant's notions, encapsulating both the mathematical and dynamical sublime. It mirrors the mathematical sublime as the speaker measures the West Wind's influence and the dynamical sublime as he grapples with the force's overwhelming power. At the heart of this exploration lies the role of the imagination, an aspect vital to Kant's sublime, acting as the bridge between the human mind and the vastness of nature. In *Ode to the West Wind*, the imagination takes flight, transforming the wind into a living, dynamic force, much like Kant's conceptualization. Shelley deftly juxtaposes the serene beauty of the wind's effects with its overwhelming power, reminding us that the sublime often coexists with the beautiful, just as Kant envisioned.

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