

TOWARD AN ONTOLOGICAL AESTHETICS: AN INQUIRY INTO THE AESTHETIC MODES OF THE SUBLIME IN BURKE AND WONDER IN HEIDEGGER

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Abstract

Martin Heidegger moves toward an ontological aesthetics with the analysis of the concept of wonder as *Dasein's* mode of authentic existence where *Dasein* dwells in the house of Being by aesthetic modes of thinking, thanking and dwelling. He departs from Edmund Burke's aesthetic concept of astonishment, which is the highest mode of the sublime and is an internal response to an external impact which can cause terror. With Heidegger's ontological aesthetics man is not terrified at terror from any outside object which manifests power as in Burke's concept of the sublime, but he wonders at the reality which evokes thinking and he responds to Being by corresponding thinking, thanking, and thereby dwelling and attuning to the tune of Being. With ontological aesthetics of wonder, the aesthetic categories of re-collective thinking, poetic responding and dwelling in the house of Being replaces the categories of reverence, respect and astonishment in the concept of the sublime in Burke.

The focus of this paper is to inquire into the aesthetic modes of the sublime in the philosophy of Edmund Burke (1729-1797) and the aesthetic modes of wonder in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger (1889 -1976). For Burke, astonishment, which is the highest aesthetic mode of the sublime, is the internal response to that external impact which can cause terror. Heidegger departs from Burke at this point and develops the sublime to a higher level of experience found in the concept of wonder. He makes the analysis of wonder as *Dasein's* mode of authentic existence where *Dasein* dwells in the house of Being. Wonder opens up what is wondrous in it: the whole as the whole, the whole as beings and beings as the whole. What dynamic process might the mind undergo to arrive at these moments of sublime experience in Burke and Heidegger? How does Heidegger make a move towards an ontological aesthetics in the analysis

of wonder? Continuing the aesthetic modes of astonishment, which is the highest mode of the sublime in Burke, Heidegger moves forward to ontological aesthetics with the analysis of the concept of wonder where thinking, thanking and dwelling are aesthetic modes.

The earliest mentioned case of the sublime is in the treatise of Loginus, *On the Sublime*, where he makes a great defense of the innocent or noble sublime (59). He describes it as boldness and grandeur of thought. Burke addresses the sublime in his *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*:

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 analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling (39).

The most important aspects to be drawn from Burke's writings on the sublime are terror and the manifestation of power, which induce what he terms, "Astonishment," causing the mind to overrun with horror, as all of its operations are suspended. Unable to rationalize on the object with which one is confronted, the subject is momentarily left in a state of intellectual perplexity:

The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case, the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence on that object which employs it (Burke 57).

In Burke's account, the experience of the sublime is aroused by the response to external objects and conditions. The sublime is caused by a relation between external impact and internal response. It is the consequence of our responses to terror produced by external objects encountered, such as the ocean, darkness, obscurity, or the vastness of heights and depths. Terror is the secret heart and ruling principle of the sublime (Des Pres 35). "Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, sublime too, whether this causes of terror be endued with greatness of dimension or not; for it impossible to look on anything as trifling or contemptible, that may be dangerous" (Burke 102). So anything that creates a horrifying effect on the mind is the object of the sublime. The powerful objects of the actual world count for Burke as the causes of the sublime.¹

The sublime is the manifestation of power. "I know nothing sublime which is not some modification of power" (Burke 64). Under the title "power" Burke includes not only uncontrollable natural forces such as storms, violent seas, earthquakes, and hurricanes but also political power. Anything powerful before which the mind feels powerless is the cause of the sublime. A relationship between some powerful external object and a powerless mind is highlighted in the concept of the sublime. In order for anything to be considered sublime, it must either contain extreme power or some modification of power, not only over the will, but also the power and capability to inflict pain and death. Burke includes greatness of magnitude and dimension, magnificence and infinity as alternative sources of the sublime. Terror would certainly be awakened if one were to look down hundreds of feet from atop a towering precipice. Besides the magnitude and greatness of dimension, he also speaks of extremes of littleness as sources of the sublime. Thus, when probing the depths of the microscopic world, we are amazed as well, and marvel at the intricate activity of microorganisms, which demonstrate, to our amazement, the extraordinary powers of organization. Magnificence is produced for Burke by

objects, which are splendid in themselves. Infinity also stimulates a pleasurable horror because the concept is beyond our grasp (Magrini 5).

The external objects which manifest a certain sort of power really produce terror which is actually the cause of the sublime experience. Terror is the key element in the concept of the sublime for Burke. "Terror is the passion which always produces delight where it does not press to close" (46). Burke establishes that terror necessarily to provoke the sublime. The sublime is the result of the mind's encounter with terror produced by external objects which manifest power. Burke also identifies a strong connection between terror and physical pain, and sometimes he equates pain with terror since of all the emotions pain is by far the strongest. In Burke's empirical treatment of the sublime, terror means a collapse of the human image as when the eyes are dragged inward and the human voice is forced out in short shrieks.

A man who suffers under violent bodily pain; I say a man in great pain has his own teeth set, his eyebrows are violently contracted, his forehead is wrinkled, his eyes are dragged inward, and rolled with great vehemence, his hair stands on end, voice is forced out in short shrieks and groans, the whole fabric totters. Fear or terror, which is an apprehension of pain or death, exhibits exactly the same effects (Burke 46).

The contrast is between the horrifying situation of terror and physical pain where the human image is destroyed with delight or any other positive emotion. The delight produced by the encounter with the terror is supported by the saving grace of aesthetic distance:

whether fine or gross, of a dangerous and troublesome encumbrance, they are capable of producing delight; not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror; which as it belongs to self preservation is one of the strongest of all the emotions. Its object is the sublime (Burke 57).

When experiencing the sublime in the encounter with terror, the mind sees its own possible self destruction: At the same time, self preservation is guaranteed. Self preservation in the face of terror is the strongest emotion the mind can entertain, and this emotion produces sublime moments (Des Pres 139). In comparison with the beautiful which causes pleasure, Burke says that sublime causes pain. Yet there is, of course, a sort of pleasure involved in the sublime. The sublime experience evoked by terror is painful; however, the treat remains at a distance giving the cognitive and emotional space necessary for the sublime. If the terror is too close, one has the painful experience of disorientation. Delight is used to name this sort of pleasure shadowed by human fragility. The raging, turbulent ocean, with all its might, can destroy a ship and take hundreds of lives in an instant. Yet, at a distance, perhaps through modification, we may find ourselves at the same time attracted and horrified by this breathtaking display of power (Burke 106). Peculiar passions associated with this delight are astonishment, reverence and respect (White 511).

The aesthetic modes of the sublime in Burke vary in degree. The highest degree of the aesthetic mode of the sublime is astonishment. All other effects like admiration, reverence and respect are inferior and lower in degree. "Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence, and respect." Instead of the noble reverence, generated by a well devised literary passage,ⁱⁱ the sublime for Burke is achieved in the form of "Astonishment," which is the power of terror exciting the notion of pain, danger, and ultimately death. The sublime creates an overwhelming astonishment. At this state the mind is so entirely filled with the object that it cannot entertain any other objects. Martin Heidegger departs from Burke at this point and develops the concept of wonder.

Heidegger's attempt to de-structure the history of ontology, forgotten after the Greek thinkers, brings forth the aesthetic categories of curiosity and wonder. Burke's understanding of the category of the sublime is reflected in Heidegger's concept of curiosity. The Greek concept of wonder from which philosophy and poetry arise is degenerated to the level of curiosity. The concept of wonder is to be understood in contrast with the concept of curiosity.

Curiosity, for Heidegger, "takes care to see not in order to understand what it sees, that is, to a being toward it, but only in order to see. It seeks novelty only to leap from it again to another novelty. The care of seeing is not concerned with the comprehending and knowing of being in the truth, but with possibilities of abandoning itself to the world" (*Being and Time* 161). Curiosity is that which results from the confrontation of outside objects, and it is related to the senses and more empirical. Looking for novelty is essentially related to curiosity. In curiosity, the mind is taken up by objects but only for a moment. The mind is not able to stay. Curiosity is characterized by "not-staying."

Curiosity is characterized by a specific *not-staying* with what is nearest. Consequently, it also does not seek the leisure of reflective staying, but rather restlessness and excitement for the continual novelty and changing encounters. In *not-staying*, curiosity makes sure of the constant possibility of distraction. Curiosity has nothing to do with the contemplation that wonders at the beings, *thaumazein*, it has no interest in wondering to the point of not understanding. Rather, it makes sure of knowing, but just in order to have known. The two factors constitutive for curiosity, *not-staying* in the surrounding world taken care of and distraction by new possibilities, are the basis of the third characteristic of this phenomenon, which we call *never dwelling anywhere*. Curiosity is everywhere and nowhere (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 161).

Curiosity has no interest in wondering. The mind, once taken up by an object, moves to another in search of novelty. As a result, it cannot stay anywhere. The *Dasein* does not dwell. Thinking requires dwelling; one no longer thinks, but moves from thing to thing refusing to dwell, refusing to allow beings as beings to displace one into wonder. Astonishment, amazement and admiration are seen as different forms of curiosity or modes of curiosity.

Heidegger mentions that admiration, amazement and astonishment are three different forms or modes of curiosity, and that they are often false conceptions of wonder. Amazement is explained as a certain inability to explain an ignorance of the reason (*Basic Questions* 137). Those things which we cannot explain seem to be wondrous and object of amazement as for example magic tricks. Once it can be explained; it is no longer an object of amazement and no more wondrous. Once the amazement is gone, it gets boring and "boredom is the greatest enemy of amazement." (Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts* 136)

Admiration is another feeling of awe that one has for an action or for a person with whom one is greatly impressed. For Heidegger, one who allows himself to be admired is of a lower rank since he subordinates himself to the perspective of the admirer. Admiration embodies a kind of self affirmation. In this case, the admired is dependent on the admirer for its admiration in order to be considered "wondrous." This form of curiosity may not last long since the admiration may not last long. Admiration is lower in degree when compared to astonishment.

Astonishment is a feeling considered sublime when one can neither comprehend nor admire an object of astonishment, and the subject is in an inactive state. All motions are suspended. Though astonishment is similar to amazement and admiration, it is distinct from

them. As in the case of amazement, there is a sense of inexplicability. It is an experience of something awesome and not understandable. Though all motions are suspended, it “is imbued with the awareness of being excluded from what exist in the awesome”(Heidegger, *Basic Questions* 43). Astonishment is produced by an encounter with an object which is extraordinary and powerful to create such an experience of sublime as we have seen in Burke's concept of the sublime. “Even here the astonishment is still in every case an encounter with and a being struck by a determinate individual object of awe”(Heidegger, *Basic Questions* 143) All the forms of curiosity are traditionally understood as wonder. These stand out, with exceptional character and are unexpected and exciting. Wonder according to Heidegger is different from amazement, admiration and astonishment (Stone 213).

In curiosity, there is something extraordinary stands out as an object of astonishment. To a lesser degree amazement, as in Burke, something extraordinary stands out as an object of terror in the concept of the sublime. In wonder, according to Heidegger the difference between the ordinary and extra ordinary breaks down and is seen as two sides of same coin. In wonder what is usual and ordinary becomes the unusual and the extraordinary. What is most usual becomes the most unusual in the experience of wonder (Stone 214).

The extraordinary is in the every ordinary beings that they are being. Seeing beings as being is wonder in Heidegger. It is an attunement to beings as being. In this attunement, there is no question of overcoming or avoiding the wonder. In wonder, we see the beings as a whole and whole as beings.ⁱⁱⁱ

wonder now opens up what alone is wondrous in it: namely the whole as the whole, the whole as beings, beings as a whole, that they are and what they are, beings as beings *ens qua ens, to onhe on* the opening of a free space ... in which beings come into play as such, namely as the beings they are, in the play of their being (Heidegger, *Basic Questions* 146).

Wonder opens up a space in which the beings reveal their being. Wonder is an experience of attunement to the tune of being. It focuses on the totality of beings and asks the question of being. In wonder, questions concerning the being are asked. It thinks philosophically.^{iv}

With the analysis of wonder and its modes, Heidegger moves towards an ontological form of aesthetics. Heidegger tries to understand the concept of wonder in the background of the early Greek understanding of *Dasein*. In curiosity, *Dasein* undergoes a feeling of exclusion from the object of astonishment and a feeling of alienation and suffering. *Dasein* is understood as uncanny violence placing him among the beings as a whole (*phusis*) and *Dasein's* response to *phusis* (*techne*). *Dasein* is found as suffering among the *phusis* and *poesis*. In this disposition of suffering, *Dasein* raises the question of being. The basic disposition of wonder compels us to a pure acknowledgement of the unusualness of the usual (Wood 5).

Wonder is the mood or disposition of *Dasein* whereby he responds to the call of Being. In the mood of wonder, being evokes thinking. Thinking is the aesthetic mode of *Dasein* before the call of being. The mood of wonder creates not the traditional metaphysical representational thinking.^v Science, by its very nature, is not concerned with the authentic thinking of Being. Its thinking is more of a calculative thinking which is far removed from the thinking evoked by Being.^{vi} But the authentic thinking is a call that belongs to Being and a response that listens to Being. “We never come to thoughts. They come to us”(Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 6). Thinking is not an activity of man that he performs at his will; rather, it belongs to being.

Man is able to think because he is enabled to think. “From this favoring Being enables thinking. The former makes the latter possible. Being is the enabling-favoring the may be. As the element, Being is the quiet power of favoring-enabling, that is, of the possible” (Heidegger, *Basic Writings* 196). What evokes thinking is being as withdrawing. The withdrawal is a drawing of one towards Being. Since Being evokes thinking in man poetically, it appeals to heart not to reason. It never evokes the question why but evokes the mood wonder: the greatest of all wonder, that something is: “The Splendor of the Simple.” (Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 7). Only profound thinkers and lofty poets see the mystery of the presence, the splendor of the simple. A calculable thinking will not enable man to experience this unique poetic appeal in the day-to-day happenings where being presence itself (Puthenpurackal 146).

Being evokes things in its fourfold – earth, sky, mortals and divinities. Being “presenceing” the gathering of the fourfold into a thing (Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 174) In the unity of the fourfold, the “worlding” of the world takes place and this “worlding” process invokes thinking. Man, in response to the primordial giving of being, responds to it by corresponding. Giving becomes complete only in receiving. To correspond to the call of Being means to be determined by Being, to attune oneself to the tune of being, to echo the voice of being. To thank for the gift of being by thinking since thanking is thinking. “Thinking is supreme thanking. As we give thought to what is most thought provoking, we give thanks” (Heidegger, *What is called Thinking* 146). Thanking to the giving of being is the attuning to the tune of Being. As being and thinking belong together giving and thanking belong to each other. The thanking man wonders at all that is. Such a mode of aesthetics springs from someone who resolutely accepts all that he is – his radical finitude. Man’s privileged relationship to Being is experienced by his thanking, thinking that shepherds, houses, and listens to Being. The aesthetic mode of thinking and thanking springs from the aesthetic category of wonder. This thinking is a re-collective thinking – recollecting the gifts of Being. It is a devotional thinking. Thinking that is thanking which is the highest aesthetic mode at the experience of wonder. The expressions of devotion, piety, reverence and prayer are lower level aesthetic response to the wonder (Puthenpurackal 152-154).

Heidegger with his concept of dwelling in the house of being by responding to the call of being by thinking and thanking at the experience of wonder is primordial than building and is a move towards an ontological aesthetics. With Heidegger’s ontological aesthetics man is not terrified at terror from any outside object which manifests power as in Burke’s concept of the sublime, but he wonders at the reality which evokes thinking and he responds to Being by corresponding thinking, thanking, and thereby dwelling. Heidegger moves towards more of a positive experience at the “presencing” of Being to the realm of proposing an ontological aesthetics, where *Dasein* re-collectively thinks and poetically responds. The thought-provoking experience of wonder at the presence of reality is above any aesthetic experience of sublime at the confrontation of any external force manifesting power and causing astonishment as in Burke’s concept of the sublime. With ontological aesthetics of wonder, the aesthetic categories of re-collective thinking, poetic responding and dwelling in the house of Being replaces the categories of reverence, respect and astonishment of the sublime.

Notes

- ⁱ Burke's position is against the Kantian idealist position where Kant proceeds to a level of abstraction. The sublime is found in a formless object in so far as we present *unboundedness*. Object of nature which causes the sublime are vast beyond comprehension either in extension or in power, see Kant 98.
- ⁱⁱ In Longinus' version of noble sublime the soul is elevated and uplifted before the such literary pieces. "sublimity is the echo of a great soul." Greatness of soul was the central source of the sublime in literary art, and its chief effect on the reader was spiritual transport – a sense of being uplifted, of being carried beyond oneself as if one shared in or had indeed become sublime," See Longinus, "On Sublime," in *Criticism*, 59.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ludwig Wittgenstein uses the term the "mystical" in more or less same sense. "It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists," "Feeling the world as a limited whole - it is this that is mystical", "There are indeed things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical"(Tractatus 49). "Aesthetically, the miracle is that the world exists. That what exists does exist" (Notebooks 6). It is an experience of amaze and astonishment; it is a feeling of wonder. In *Tractatus* this experience that the world exists is called mystical and in notebooks it is called a marvel. The experience of world as bounded whole is mystical experience. To regard world as whole totality of facts transcends the individual facts and it cannot be expressed in propositions.
- ^{iv} The Greek thought that philosophy is born out of this wonder. Since man lost this experience and wonder is degraded to curiosity modern man fails to philosophize and to make poetry, "The sense of wonder is the mark of the philosopher. Philosophy indeed has no other origin," see Plato *Theaetetus* 155d 2. qtd. in **Stone 205**.
- ^v Heidegger criticizes the western metaphysical thinking where thinking is nothing but representation, and being is considered as an idea or statement or locus of truth. Thinking is dominated by logic, see *Introduction to Metaphysics* 178.
- ^{vi} Technological man of the modern times is motivated with economic profit. The whole earth has become world market in which everything including man is turned into a commodity of calculated market value, see Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 135.

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