

AESTHETICS

LECTURES ON FINE ART

BY

G. W. F. HEGEL



Translated by T. M. Knox



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SYMBOLISM OF THE SUBLIME

The unenigmatic clarity of the spirit which shapes itself out of its own resources in a way adequate to itself is the aim of symbolic art, but it can only be reached if in the first place the meaning comes into consciousness on its own account, separated from the entire world of appearance. For in the immediately intuited unity of the two [meaning and shape] lay the absence of art in the case of the ancient Persis; the contradiction between the separation of the two and what was nevertheless demanded, i.e. their immediate linkage, produced the fantastic symbolism of the Indians; while even in Egypt knowledge of the inner life and the absolute meaning was still not free, still not released from the world of appearance, and this provided the reason for the riddles and the obscurity of Egyptian symbolism.

Now the first decisive purification of the absolute [meaning] and its express separation from the sensuous present, i.e. from the empirical individuality of external things, is to be sought in the *sublime*. Sublimity lifts the Absolute above every immediate existent and therefore brings about the liberation which, though abstract at first, is at least the foundation of the spirit. For although the meaning thus elevated is not yet apprehended as concrete spirit, it is nevertheless regarded as the inner life, self-existent and reposing on itself, which by its very nature is incapable of finding its true expression in finite phenomena.

Kant has distinguished the sublime from the beautiful in a very interesting way, and his detailed discussion of this in the first part of the *Critique of Judgment* from § 20 onwards¹ still always retains its interest despite all prolixity and the premisses reduction of all categories to something subjective, to the powers of mind, imagination, reason, etc. In its general principle, this reduction must be recognized as correct to this extent, that sublimity—as Kant says himself—is not contained in anything in nature but only in our

¹ Kant's distinction is made in § 23. Thereafter he goes on to deal with the sublime in detail.

minds, in so far as we become conscious of our superiority to the nature within us and therefore to nature without. In this sense Kant's view is that 'the sublime, in the strict sense of the word, cannot be contained in any sensuous form but concerns only Ideas of Reason which, although no adequate representation of them is possible, may be aroused and called to our mind precisely by this inadequacy which does admit of sensuous representation' (*Critique of Judgment*, 1799, p. 77 [§ 23]). The sublime in general is the attempt to express the infinite, without finding in the sphere of phenomena an object which proves adequate for this representation. Precisely because the infinite is set apart from the entire complex of objectivity as explicitly an invisible meaning devoid of shape and is made inner, it remains, in accordance with its infinity, unutterable and sublime above any expression through the finite.

Now the first content which the meaning gains here is this, that in contrast to the totality of appearance it is the inherently substantial *unity* which itself, as a pure thought, can be apprehended only by pure thought. Therefore this substance is now no longer able to have its configuration in something external, and thus far the strictly symbolical character vanishes. But if this inherent unity is to be brought before our vision, this is only possible if, as substance, it is also grasped as the creative power of all things, in which it therefore has its revelation and appearance and to which it thus has a positive relation. But at the same time this essentially expresses the fact of substance's elevation above individual phenomena as such, and above their totality, with the logical result that the positive relation is transposed into the negative one in which the substance is purified from everything apparent and particular and therefore from what fades away in it and is inadequate to it.

This outward shaping which is itself annihilated in turn by what it reveals, so that the revelation of the content is at the same time a supersession of the revelation, is the sublime. This, therefore, differing from Kant, we need not place in the pure subjectivity of the mind and its Ideas of Reason; on the contrary, we must grasp it as grounded in the one absolute substance *qua* the content which is to be represented.

The classification of the art-form of the sublime is likewise derived from the above-indicated double relationship of substance, as meaning, to the phenomenal world.