

KIERKEGAARD,  
RELIGION AND THE  
NINETEENTH-CENTURY  
CRISIS OF CULTURE

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## CHAPTER I

### *The sublime, the city and the present age*

#### I

The concept of the sublime is, perhaps necessarily, elusive, a concept that resists incorporation into the domain of clear and distinct ideas, if 'concept' there is or can be at all in this case. What is sublime is what unsettles, what cannot settle or be settled: a realm of experiences, representations and ideas that is turbulent and unmanageable. Such a realm may be figured in the Alpine landscape that the eighteenth and early nineteenth century saw as the wreckage of an earlier creation, or in storm and battle, perennial paradigms of sublime experience. Equally, if paradoxically, the sublime resonates with the daily life-experience of the modern city-dweller. Indeed, it has been argued that there is an intrinsic connection between the rise of the modern city and the aesthetics of the sublime that developed in the latter part of the eighteenth century. For the city irreversibly redefined the individual's relation to the environment. This had to do not only with the way in which the new, expanding cities (beginning with London) overran their medieval walls, were reconstructed in an architecture that reflected the scale and style of imperial ambitions, and so overwhelmed the individual by virtue of their size (and magnitude, to anticipate, provided Kant with one of the foci of his discussion of the sublime). It also had to do with the simultaneous expansion and intensification of the individual's visual interaction with the urban environment, reflected in such diverse phenomena as the innovative art of window-dressing (together with the beginnings of modern advertising) and the multiplication of new visual and spatial experiences (magic lanterns, dioramas, stereoscopy, photography, etc.).

#### I

Martin Zerlang, the Danish critic who has done much to explore the connections between urbanity and sublimity, also draws attention in this connection to the diseases of urbanity first diagnosed in the nineteenth century: vertigo, agoraphobia, claustrophobia and neurasthenia. His description of neurasthenia as ‘a dysfunction in mental life characterized by an overstimulation of the senses and an underdeveloped capacity for motoric reaction, in other words a kind of blocked mental circulation’ could be read as an account of someone chronically overexposed to sublime experiences, someone paralysed by the sublime unmasterability of his environment.<sup>1</sup> If the neurasthenic cannot be regarded as normative, he is none the less symptomatic of the new stresses placed upon the individual consciousness as it seeks to make sense of its world. He is the man of the crowd stripped of his functional normality. The neurasthenic’s ‘blocked mental circulation’ manifests itself in the continuous destabilization and disorientation of representation resulting from urban culture’s characteristic drive to package experience as image, whilst the scale, complexity and speed of that culture continually militates against the process of reduction. If the public face of modern urban culture becomes (or aims at becoming) the continuous transformation of a complex and even discordant reality into the represented unity of the spectacle (the modern city, as Mumford said of its Hellenistic precursor, offering itself as ‘a container for spectacles’), this is only possible by virtue of the simultaneous suppression of whatever proves resistant to spectacularization. Neurasthenia, vertigo, agoraphobia and claustrophobia reveal the traumas of a spatially disorientated urban self having to sustain a representation of its environment that is sufficiently simple not to be overwhelming while, at the same time, experiencing the unrepresentable reality of the city in all its vast complexity. The tendency of the new urban culture of the nineteenth century towards an ever-accelerating banal and superficial over-simplification is thus matched by a counter-movement of the sublime, or, more precisely, a counter-movement of resistance and disruption that *may*

<sup>1</sup> M. Zerlang, *The City Spectacular of the Nineteenth Century*, Copenhagen, Center for Urbanitet og Æstetik, Arbejdsrapport 9, 1995, p. 9. See also M. Zerlang, ‘Aesthetics and the Emergence of the Modern City: On the Sublime and the Spectacular’, in R. Linnet (ed.), *Aesthetic Theory and Artistic Expression*, Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum, forthcoming.

indicate a stirring of the sublime – or may simply reflect the continuous displacement of the self in an environment that appears to be dominated by the ephemeral. How can one distinguish between these responses, between sublimity and bathos? Need one? Can one?

Such questions, I suggest, take us to the heart of Kierkegaard's critique of modernity, refining and extending his either/or of the aesthetic or the religious: how, in Kierkegaard's terms, to distinguish between the merely reactive protest of the Romantic rebel – or the contemporary art of shock for shock's sake – and the radical depth of Christian existence? The answer, as Kierkegaard develops it, is not the formulation of a theoretical apparatus that can be applied across the board. Kierkegaard, indeed, has his theoretical apparatus, but, as he might say, what matters is *how* to apply it. Theory is nothing unless actualized in the process of concrete judgement. Kierkegaard's answer, then (which, since it belongs to his time and place, cannot immediately be our answer), is the answer that gets worked out in the totality of his published and unpublished writings and that takes the form of a close reading of his contemporary culture – the culture of the early modern city – in all its detail. And it is precisely his eye for this detail that makes Kierkegaard so contemporary to us. Again: not what he sees, but *how* he sees – and how he renders what he sees as literature.

Reading Kierkegaard along the plane opened up by the intersection of theory and culture means no longer reading Kierkegaard in the role of philosopher, or as a theologian, or even as a figure of literature. Kierkegaard as critic of the age draws on and speaks of philosophy, theology and literature, but none of these provides an a priori limit on the way in which the age manifests itself in its own singular identity. The line of criticism can only be governed by the exigencies imposed by that identity itself, an identity that incorporates the whole lived world of urban culture, inclusive of its most popular and ephemeral forms no less than of its 'high art'. Yet, at the same time, the direction of the line is determined by the question that guides it. Why, then, have I formulated that question in terms of the sublime? If the sublime belongs to Kierkegaard's age as the age of the modern urban experience, do we have any reason to believe that Kierkegaard himself articulated his own critical

question as a question about the sublime? Isn't the evidence rather the other way? Aren't Kierkegaard's own aesthetics determinedly the aesthetics of beauty? Isn't the sublime singularly lacking from his whole literary output?<sup>2</sup> In any case, won't putting it like this immediately draw the discussion back into the sphere of abstract philosophizing and block our access to the plane of lived cultural experience? In view of these questions, shouldn't the reader nurture a suspicion that the sublime is being taken as a point of departure simply because of its currency in our own recent debates about philosophy and culture? Aren't we running the risk of imposing our questions and our theorizing of the sublime onto Kierkegaard's work?

Such questions cannot, of course, be completely answered in advance of the work of interpretation itself. The intuition guiding this study, however, is that the focus on the sublime is of especial value in relation to Kierkegaard's critique of culture because of the way in which it enables us to draw out the necessary interconnection between, on the one side, his philosophical and religious orientation and, on the other, his characteristic critique of the age. That is to say, it is precisely an appropriate awakening and mobilizing of the concept of the sublime that enables us to see why and how Kierkegaard's peculiar philosophical and religious perspectives got worked out as a critical reading of contemporary culture in the terms just set out. Furthermore, it also helps us to revisit the characteristically Kierkegaardian pairing of the aesthetic and the religious, and to redraw the relationship between them in such a way as to avoid both a simplistic conflation and a too zealous diremption. The resulting reconfiguration of the aesthetic and the religious will also serve to locate the crucial third term of Kierkegaardian thought, the ethical – although this will not become a theme in this book until the final chapter. The first step, however, is, starting at the theoretical end of the spectrum, to see what a Kierkegaardian concept of the sublime might look like.

<sup>2</sup> There are only two uses of *det Sublime* in the published work, and only one of these can be directly drawn into connection with contemporary discussions of the sublime. *Ophoietheden* and related adjectival forms occur frequently. However, its use is mostly such as to make it only problematically assimilable to the topic of 'the sublime' as discussed here.

II

Defining ‘the sublime’ could, of course, be the work of an extended philosophical essay in its own right. I shall not attempt such a definition. Whatever its merits or demerits I shall simply take as a starting-point the specific concept of the sublime propounded in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, a concept that therefore belongs to the general horizon of the intellectual world of Kierkegaard’s own time, despite the overlay of subsequent Romantic and Hegelian developments. Kierkegaard himself, as has been hinted, never explicitly discussed this concept. Nevertheless, one of Kierkegaard’s central concepts, the concept of anxiety, has important analogies to the concept of the sublime, which we shall now explore.<sup>3</sup>

The first point of analogy concerns the position of the concepts of the sublime and of anxiety in the overall architectonic structures of Kant’s critical philosophy and Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous authorship respectively.

Kant’s best-known discussion of the sublime is found in *The Critique of Judgement*, a critique that, Kant says, is needed in order to make sense of the relationship between the theoretical understanding and the practical or moral reason.<sup>4</sup> Without the mediating function of judgement, these two primary forms of reason would, in Kant’s view, become disconnected and we would be left with a kind of dualism that Kant (for all the jibes about ‘Kantian dualism’) finds unacceptable: a dualism that sets a world of knowable objects irrelevant to human strivings against a world of values undisciplined by the requirement of engaging with empirical reality. If the

<sup>3</sup> These connections are also noted in Jørgen Dehs, in ‘“Ikke Phantasien kunstrige Væven, men tankens Gysen”’: Kierkegaard og bruddet med idealismens æstetik’, *Slagmark*, No. 4, Spring 1985; also Jørgen Dehs, ‘Den tabte verden’, in P. E. Tøjner, J. Garff and J. Dehs (eds.), *Kierkegaards æstetik*, Copenhagen, Gyldendal, 1995, esp. pp. 149–56. They are also discussed in S. Agacinski, ‘We are not Sublime: Love and Sacrifice, Abraham and ourselves’, in Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain (eds.), *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1997. It is also striking that Lyotard’s discussion of Kant’s Analytic of the Sublime links anguish and sublimity at a number of points: cf. J.-F. Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1994, pp. 68, 75, 114, 150. Cf. also John Milbank, ‘The Sublime in Kierkegaard’, in P. Blond (ed.), *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology*, London and New York, Routledge, 1998, pp. 131–56.

<sup>4</sup> The discussion that follows refers to I. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, in *Werke*, Vol. v, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1968, especially I.ii, §§23–9.



sphere of judgement as a whole mediates between these two worlds, the concept of the sublime occupies a pivotal point within the structure of this mediation. Whereas, according to Kant, the beautiful must always express itself in a material form shaped out of the manifold of appearances (and is thereby limited to the same field of objects as the understanding, i.e., the form of reason that is concerned with knowledge of the empirical world), the sublime comes into play at the precise point where appearances resist or escape being formed into a single, beautiful representation. The reasons for this may be various. In the case of what Kant calls the mathematical sublime it may be because of a sense of absolute magnitude that stands outside any scale of comparison (*Die Grösse*). In the case of the dynamic sublime encountered in nature (and the sublime, in Kant's opinion, is only truly encountered in nature, not in art), it may be because we are unable to circumscribe a seascape or a view of the Alps in the compass of a single image – we can't 'take it all in'. Such experiences are not, however, merely chaotic. It is not that we make no sense of what we see, since, although we are unable to organize such sights into the unity of an adequate sensuous representation, our reason is none the less able to grasp them as single phenomena: 'Look at that fine view', we say, judging as one thing ('that view') what the eye cannot itself *see* as one.

If judgement in general and the aesthetic, as a part of judgement, are to link the spheres of sensuous representation (the world of appearances) and reason (the world of ideas), it is in the region of the sublime and not in experiences of beauty that the link is actually to be effected: for beauty, as we have seen, is constrained by the requirements of sensuous representation in a way that the sublime is not.

Features of this account closely parallel elements in the description of anxiety in Kierkegaard's thought. In *The Concept of Anxiety* itself, reference is repeatedly made to the way in which anxiety functions as a border-concept, the point of indifference, as it were, between the realms of nature and freedom, the state at which the subject is no longer 'mere' nature but not yet fully 'free' either.

In *The Concept of Anxiety* this is for the most part related to the disciplines that Kierkegaard calls psychology and dogmatics, but, as I have argued elsewhere, it can readily be activated in other

contexts – such as the relationship between the aesthetic and the religious, where the aesthetic is construed as involving an external and visible form of expression, whereas the religious has as its point of departure the principle of subjectivity, i.e., what human beings are in respect of their freedom, and which, as a matter of inwardness, can never be adequately expressed in an outward form.<sup>5</sup> The basic definition and the systematic role of the sublime and of anxiety in Kant and Kierkegaard therefore imply that each concept marks the problematizing of representation as such.

In the case of the sublime, Kant insists that we only improperly ascribe sublimity to the object, the storm or the mountain range, since it is only in relation to our reason and our freedom that they are experienced as sublime. When I judge a storm to be sublime, I am able to do so only because, with Pascal, I recognize that even if it should destroy me physically, there is that in me which is of another order than mere physical force and which enables me to confront even actual danger as ‘marvellous! sublime!’. The sublime is ‘the elevated’ (*Das Erhabene*) and true elevation is, for Kant, the elevation of human reason above the realm of objects, no matter how overwhelming in size, grandeur or danger.

It follows from this that whereas a beautiful landscape will be a landscape that perfectly expresses what belongs to the beautiful, a sublime landscape does not express sublimity in itself. The relation of the perceived landscape to its sublime character is oblique and indirect. Indeed, according to Kant, it is little more than the occasion for the sublime feelings aroused in the subject. The sublime is less in what we see than in what we bring to the seeing, although it may be precisely the seeing that makes us aware of what we bring.

Anxiety likewise calls representation into question. ‘Anxiety and nothing always correspond’, writes Kierkegaard in *The Concept of Anxiety* (CA, p. 96), and there can therefore be no adequate form in which anxiety can be ‘seen’ in its essence. Insofar as Kierkegaard’s writings about anxiety, in *The Concept of Anxiety* and elsewhere (for example, in his upbuilding writings or in aesthetic works such as ‘Quidam’s Diary’ in *Stages on Life’s Way*<sup>6</sup>), do provide what has been

<sup>5</sup> See G. Pattison, *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious*, London, SCM, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Again, this is something I have argued for in *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious*: see pp. 140–54.

called a phenomenology of anxiety,<sup>7</sup> this cannot be thought of as if it offered a direct representation. The phenomena in which anxiety makes itself known require interpretation if anxiety is to be seen in them since anxiety, like the sublime, is not a characteristic of any perceived object but essentially concerns the subject whose own capacity for freedom is the stake in anxiety.

Mediating between sense and spirit and marking a crisis in representation, Kantian sublimity and Kierkegaardian anxiety are also analogous with respect to the complex relation that each has to fear.

Kant argues that fear is a highly characteristic feature of sublime experiences. None the less, the fear that belongs to the sublime is not mere fright. If I am to experience a storm as sublime, I must allow myself to sense its fearful aspect, whilst simultaneously keeping the fear in check. This may have to do with my not being immediately threatened in my own person (I may be on dry land watching a storm several miles out at sea), or it may be because although I am myself exposed to physical danger, I sense myself to be above or beyond it in the moral sense of the superiority of personality to brute nature (as, perhaps, in the case of heroism in war, when the hero ignores or rises above the real and present danger: Kant does in fact cite war in these terms as providing an example of the sublime).

Anxiety too is a kind of fear, but again it is fear of a peculiar kind. Heidegger certainly interprets Kierkegaard correctly here when he says that anxiety, as opposed to fear in the everyday sense, has no object, or, if it does seize on an object, this is precisely a manifestation of the subject fleeing what is revealed in anxiety: its own capacity for freedom and its responsibility towards itself (what Kierkegaard calls 'grasping at finitude' (*CA*, p. 61, amended) to escape the vertigo of anxiety).<sup>8</sup> What the subject fears in anxiety is itself. However, although this can also be said of religious fear, there is a distinction between anxiety and religious fear in the full sense of the word. We may approach this distinction through Frater

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Arne Grøn, *Subjektivitet og Negativitet: Kierkegaard*, Copenhagen, Gyldendal, 1997, pp. 35ff.

<sup>8</sup> See M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen, Niemeyer, 1993, esp. pp. 184ff. (pagination as per 1st edition).

Taciturnus' discussion of aesthetic and religious fear in the closing section of *Stages on Life's Way*. Religious fear, he says, is to be distinguished from the kind of fear of which Aristotle speaks in discussing the nature of tragedy. The spectator of a tragedy fears for the hero, but the person gripped by religious fear fears for himself, fearing to be found in his sin, cut off from grace and excluded from the blessedness of the saints. Such fear motivates the religious person, through repentance, to resolve upon renewed obedience to God's will. Here, it would seem, fear has acquired an object. Yet this 'object' is actually the subject himself in his concern for an eternal happiness, so (given that anxiety is also orientated towards the subject) what distinguishes religious fear and anxiety? The answer to this question has to do with the status of anxiety as a border-concept in the sense already discussed. Anxiety as such stops short of making any religious resolutions. It is, as Kierkegaard puts it, the preceding state out of which either good or evil action can proceed, but it is not itself either. It is a state of suspense, in which action is present as possibility, not as fact. Its characteristic fear cannot therefore achieve a clearly defined focus: it has no 'object' as such.

Yet fear is not the only emotive element in the experience of sublimity. As an aesthetic concept the sublime must, according to Kant, be able to elicit a feeling of pleasure. If there is displeasure in the troubling awareness of our inability to find a form of representation adequate to an experience of the sublime and the consequent sense of a constraint placed upon our sense of freedom, there is none the less a more-than-compensatory pleasure in the ability of reason to grasp the experience as a unitary, sublime experience. Similarly, if there is displeasure in the threat posed by the 'object' of a sublime experience (the tumult of the storm or the onrush of the enemy forces), there is none the less a more-than-compensatory pleasure in the sense of moral elevation by which I understand myself as sublimely elevated above mere natural fear, as in 'the joy of battle'.

Anxiety, however, would seem entirely to preclude pleasure. What could be 'pleasurable' about anxiety? But, in an important formulation, Kierkegaard speaks of anxiety as '*a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy*' (CA, p. 42 – Kierkegaard's italics). Anxiety is not just a negative response, not just fear of freedom. Anxiety is also attracted, spellbound even, by what arouses it. It is

worth reflecting that 'sympathy' was a key term in Romantic aesthetics: the universal sympathy of animate life being understood as a condition of all artistic communication. We might also think of the imagery of the pietistic hymnody that Kierkegaard valued, imagery in which sorrow for sin and a 'sweet' longing for God melt together into an eroticized anxiety that, again, cannot perhaps be called 'pleasurable' in an everyday sense, but that in Kant's technical sense is nevertheless a kind of pleasure. Even when Kierkegaard portrays a character such as the *Quidam* of *Stages on Life's Way*, whose experience of anxiety is depicted as a kind of suffering, anxiety has a mesmerizing quality that entices its victim and makes him consent to his thralldom.

Mediating between nature and freedom, bringing representation into crisis and arousing a fear that does not preclude an antipathetic sympathy, the analogies between Kantian sublimity and Kierkegaardian anxiety go to the heart of each concept. Nevertheless, they would also seem to diverge significantly in other, no less important respects. This is particularly evident with regard to what lies on the far side of the sublime moment.

For Kant the sublime involves an anticipation of the infinite, rational, free activity of the moral subject. In fulfilling the freedom to which the sublime points, such a subject will understand himself as acting in accord with the final teleology of nature and history: acting rationally in a rational universe. Kant specifically and pointedly rejects the view that the religious attitude towards which the sublime points is one in which God is depicted as riding on the storm clouds of wrath and imposing His heteronomous will on His quivering human subjects. Instead, he says, religion should be grounded on the individual's tranquil sense of moral independence and elevation of mind, and it is to such religion that the sublime in fact directs us. The religious life that Kierkegaard envisages arising on the far side of anxiety would seem to be of a very different character. Fear and trembling are not just characteristics of the passage to religion; they are abiding characteristics of the religious life. However, it would be a caricature of Kierkegaard's position to say that he sought to promote fear in the manner of a hell-fire preacher. In a text such as *Purity of Heart* he is at pains to argue that the good must be done solely because it

is good and not in order to escape punishment or gain eternal life as some sort of extrinsic reward. Again and again he exposes a rewards-and-punishments kind of religiosity as, in his expression, 'double-mindedness'. The Kantian resonances have not been lost on commentators.<sup>9</sup>

There are complex interpretative issues here, but no matter how much we manage to close the gap between Kant and Kierkegaard there would seem to be an important and perhaps decisive difference. Even if it is unjust to accuse Kierkegaard of the kind of sado-masochistic understanding of religion that Kant so vehemently rejects, his conception of the religious life does have a dimension of passivity, and envisages the subject more as the recipient of grace than as a fully autonomous moral agent in a way to which Kant could scarcely have acceded. Although Kierkegaard, no less than Kant, insists that freedom is the goal of anxiety (*CA*, p. 91), his conception of freedom is never simply autonomous but belongs in a two-termed relationship in which God's view of my life has a kind of priority over my own view over myself and an inscrutability that I can never penetrate rationally. The freedom of faith, according to Kierkegaard, is not something I 'do': it is something I must wait upon, and acquire in patient submission to God's will, receiving it as a gift from the giver of every good and perfect gift. Even though this does not necessarily or immediately mean that such freedom is antipathetic to autonomy (we might think of it, as Tillich did, in terms of theonomy, i.e., an autonomy that is no longer sufficient unto itself but that is open to its divine depths<sup>10</sup>), there is a real point of distinction from the Kantian ideal in this area. Furthermore, if Kierkegaardian faith can be said to be essentially communicative, demanding and facilitating revelation, it would also seem to call for a kind of individuation that concentrates itself into what is singular, unique and essentially secret in the life of each individual. Faith therefore sets a limit both to autonomy and to the rational universality of Kant's practical reason.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. George Connell, *To be One Thing: Personal Unity in Kierkegaard's Thought*, Macon, GA, Mercer University Press, 1985; Ronald M. Green, *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt*, Albany, Suny Press, 1992; Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, especially Chapter 6.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, P. Tillich, *Perspectives on Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Theology*, London, SCM, 1967, especially Chapter 2, 'The Enlightenment and its Problems'.

If, then, we are to speak of Kierkegaardian anxiety as a kind of sublimity, we cannot simply transfer the Kantian concept into Kierkegaard's thought-world. The point is, rather, to expand the conception of anxiety as the boundary between the aesthetic and the religious in a manner that is essentially conformable to the shape of Kierkegaard's thought, although such an expansion is not specifically thematized by Kierkegaard himself. To be more specific: by speaking of anxiety as sublime, and by drawing the analogy with Kant, I seek to reconceive that boundary so that it is no longer merely privative but is expanded to enfold a Janus-like doubling by which the-religious-or-the-aesthetic is at the same time the-religious-and-the-aesthetic, enabling us to articulate a presence of the aesthetic in the religious and the religious in the aesthetic.

The fittingness of an aesthetic term such as the sublime in relation to Kierkegaard receives an indirect and even paradoxical testimony from Hegel. Although it is never safe to assume that Hegel's thought is adequately summarized in the kind of aphorisms excerpted from his texts by less than sympathetic critics (such as Kierkegaard himself!), the correspondence of inner and outer, or of appearance and idea, would seem to be a basic and non-negotiable aspiration of the system. If this is so, then we shall hardly expect Hegel to be enthusiastic about a concept such as the sublime that, in Hegel's own expression, involves the 'mutual non-correspondence' (*Sichnichtsprechen*) of these polarities. Moreover, when Hegel does get round to discussing the sublime in his lectures on aesthetics, it is almost exclusively in the context of the poetry of the Hebrew Bible. Given the awkward marginality of Hebrew religion in Hegel's overall view of history, this is itself a pointer to the difficulty he has with the concept.

The principle of the sublime, he says, is that of God's transcendence over the world, a transcendence by which the creature is reduced to 'evanescence and powerlessness' and God alone accounted just. As opposed to the realm of the beautiful and the world of symbolic art, the external form is little more than accidental with regard to that which is to be expressed in and through it. Whereas symbolic religious art, like that of India or Egypt, seeks an appropriate form in which to clothe its religious idea, sublime religious art is concerned only with meaning (*Bedeutung*), not form.

Following from the absolute transcendence of God, the world is de-divinized and experienced in its finitude. No longer the domain of demi-gods or spirits of innumerable kinds, it has become the stage of human history, 'finite, limited, neither self-sustaining nor self-supporting'.<sup>11</sup> The human being whose existence comes to expression in sublime psalmody is consequently one who keenly feels his finitude and the insuperable distance that separates him from God. He believes himself to be mortal, without worth and sinful.

If Kant spoke of 'pleasure' in connection with the intertwining of rational capacity and sensuous incapacity, there would seem to be little 'pleasure' in such sublime art. It would seem far more appropriate to speak of it as a form of unhappy consciousness. A life lived within these sublime categories demands of the individual a recognition of human finitude and separation from God, a confrontation with mortality, worthlessness and, in the last account, sin. Hegel, like Kant, understands this confrontation quite differently from Kierkegaard. None the less, by connecting the concept of the sublime with the spirit of the psalms he helps to fill in the picture of what might be involved in the aesthetic-*and*-religious concept of anxious sublimity. One aspect of what this mutual non-correspondence of inner and outer, appearance and idea, meaning and representation might mean is suggested by the well-known Kierkegaardian melancholy.<sup>12</sup>

The comparison with Kant and Hegel provides us with a first formulation of a Kierkegaardian concept of the sublime that might be called 'the anxious sublime' or 'anxious sublimity'. There are, though, further features to which we must be attentive if we are to understand the value of this concept in interpreting Kierkegaard. The first of these concerns the way in which the concept of time is illuminated by being brought into conjunction with the sublime.

<sup>11</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, in *Werke in Zwanzig Bände*, Vol. XIII, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1970, p. 480.

<sup>12</sup> Again Kant would scarcely have wanted to see anything sublime in melancholy, since he would regard melancholy as derogating from freedom rather than leading towards it. Yet Kierkegaard for his part would not have accepted Kant's view that melancholy is a kind of weakness. He would acknowledge that melancholy can be a cowardly evasion of the ethical, but he would also claim that, under certain circumstances, it can itself be a summons to an ethically serious view of life.



Considering this will gradually bring us down from the abstract level on which the discussion has been operating up to now, and return us to the very specific location of Kierkegaard's authorship in the dynamics of the early modern spectacular city. In doing so it will also move us into what might seem like a very different conceptual and experiential world from that of the psalms. For 'time' does not only engage Kierkegaard as a category of metaphysical, anthropological or psychological thought – it also concerns him as a category of cultural life. Our experience and understanding of 'time' are, for Kierkegaard, inseparable from our lived experience and understanding of 'the times' in which we live.

## III

Kierkegaard shared the assumption, widespread amongst aesthetic theorists of his period, that the internal structure of the sphere of the aesthetic as well as its overall place in the economy of spirit was determined by the interrelationship between space and time exemplified in the various forms and stages of aesthetic production and experience. Following Lessing, it became customary to divide the arts into the plastic (architecture, sculpture and painting) and the musical (music itself, dance, poetry and drama), according to whether space or time had a larger or smaller role in the formal constitution of the particular form of art concerned. It was further assumed that it was possible to correlate spatiality with sensuousness and temporality with spirit, although it was also believed that all art, qua art, was marked by some vestige of spatiality or sensuousness. Naturally, judgements varied as to what should be made of all this. For a Romantic philosopher of art such as Schelling it meant that art was pre-eminently suited to be the organon of philosophy because of its capacity to embrace both sense and spirit and to represent their unity in aesthetic form. For Hegel, on the other hand, it meant that art could never be more than a stage on the way towards the realization of spirit. Art, he taught, no longer fulfils our highest needs, which are better served by thought and reflection. In this respect at least Kierkegaard would appear to be closer to Hegel than to Schelling. It is typical of his critique of the aesthetic that art's inability to express the truth of temporality is one of the

characteristics that makes it ineligible to serve the articulation of religious faith.<sup>13</sup>

The territory which we are penetrating is, as will be obvious, one that is criss-crossed by a sequence of disputed boundaries. There are, for example, the boundaries between the aesthetic and the religious, appearance and idea, sense and spirit, and time and space, and, as the reference to Hegel and Schelling might also suggest, there are further complexities arising from philosophy's claims to define and regulate what these boundaries are. As this study is directed towards one aspect of the cultural implications of Kierkegaard's critical aesthetics, it would not be appropriate, even if it was feasible, to attempt to settle the multitude of claims and counter-claims besetting those who venture into such regions. My aim is simply to show how the co-implication of the aesthetic and the religious in the anxious sublime manifests itself in the mode of our experience of time.

The point we are seeking would seem to be provided by Kierkegaard's discussion of the moment of vision (*Oieblikket*). This moment of vision is intimately bound up with the awakening of anxiety. Also, as Kierkegaard says (perhaps introducing yet another boundary into an already overcrowded map), it marks the intersection and interpenetration of time and eternity. Now, insofar as the moment of vision is regarded as the revelation of eternity, it would seem to constitute the point at which the uneasy alliance between time and representation, an alliance that is normative for the whole sphere of the aesthetic, is dissolved. Thereby it also becomes the boundary – uniting and dividing, dividing and uniting – between representation and the unrepresentable.

In his arguably epochal discussion of time in Chapter 3 of *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard addresses himself to the question as to how we can think time according to its truth, since, typically, we think of it by means of a spatialized schema of past, present and future. Why does Kierkegaard call this schema spatialized? Because, he says, it presupposes an understanding of the present as a fixed point in relation to which past and future are represented. But such a geometrical projection cannot help us to think time

<sup>13</sup> For a fine discussion of this see Jan Patočka, 'Die Lehre von der Vergangenheit der Kunst', in *Kunst und Zeit*, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1987, pp. 217–33.

according to its temporality. To do this we would need to face up to the situation that there are no fixed points in the endless flux of time. No moment is ever really present, because even the present itself is in flux, and without the presence of a present, past and future likewise dissolve into unrepresentable flux.

Is time, then, simply unrepresentable?

No, because if the moment as the mathematically conceived 'atom' of time proves insubstantial, 'the moment of vision' provides a way of thinking time that does not falsify time's temporality, while allowing time to give itself to representation after a manner. It is important to note that Kierkegaard has been ill-served by translation here – not that anyone can envy the translator's task of providing an English equivalent to a style that depends on rich overlays of poetic, religious and philosophical connotations and makes much play of the resulting possibilities of ambiguity, irony and humour. Thus, we need to notice that when Kierkegaard speaks of the moment as the geometrical point from which the schema of past, present and future is projected, he consistently uses the Latin-derived term 'moment', and it is noticeable that he also makes unusual use of another Latin-derived term, *spatiere*, for 'to spatialize'.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to this, the term I have rendered 'moment of vision' (following Heidegger's translators in their translation of the cognate German term) is the Danish term *Øieblikket*, paraphrased in the most recent English version as 'the blink of an eye', but better rendered 'the glance' or even 'gaze' of an/the eye.<sup>15</sup> Given this figurative charge it therefore seems peculiar that Kierkegaard has chosen just this term, since the emphasis on visuality would seem to lock it into the sphere of the spatial and, therefore, the aesthetic. What makes it

<sup>14</sup> The term is itself derived from the technical printing use of the term 'spatium', and it is very possible that Kierkegaard was the first to make it the basis of a verb, since such a usage is only acknowledged by dictionaries of loan-words subsequent to Kierkegaard's time.

<sup>15</sup> The earlier English translation by Lowrie did give 'glance' rather than 'blink' in explanation of the term. Hong and Hong draw a distinction between the Latin and Danish terms by enclosing the latter in quotation marks. The point being made is not, however, going to be obvious to the reader. 'Gaze' would seem to take away from the 'momentary' character of what is being talked about, although there are contexts where this would be a more appropriate translation of the term *Blik*, as in art-historical discussions of 'the gaze'. Cf. R. Linnet, *Kierkegaard og blikkets koder*, Copenhagen, Center for Urbanitet og Æstetik, Arbejdsrapport 20, 1996.

appropriate to use it of the coming-to-consciousness of the division between time and eternity?

Kierkegaard is acutely aware of the problem. “‘The glance of the eye’ is a figurative expression and therefore it is not easy to deal with’, he acknowledges. ‘However’, he continues, ‘it is a beautiful word to consider. Nothing is as swift as a glance of the eye, and yet it is commensurate with the content of the eternal. Thus when Ingeborg looks out over the sea after Frithiof, this is a picture of what is expressed in the figurative word’ (*CA*, p. 87).

Still, we might be uneasy. We might, for instance, recall the constant emphasis on the visual quality of aesthetic existence epitomized in the role of the eye in ‘The Seducer’s Diary’, and the Seducer’s pride in his side-glance, as he calls it, and his use of the eye both to capture interesting images and to impress his own image onto the consciousness of others. We might also recall that the preoccupation with seeing and being seen in contemporary society is, for Kierkegaard, indicative of its inherent vacuity and triviality.<sup>16</sup> Like many Christian moralists since Augustine, Kierkegaard readily identifies ‘the glance’ or ‘gaze’ as ‘the lust of the eye’, the epitome of those seductive powers that chain us to the realm of sense.

Kierkegaard’s example of Ingeborg’s glance, however, points to another way of understanding things.<sup>17</sup> In the first instance, as the text tells us, her glance looks across the sea, after her departing lover Frithiof. ‘What’ she is looking at is a vanishing object, something in the process of disappearing from her field of vision. Moreover, Ingeborg knows that while Frithiof is away, she will be forcibly married by her brothers to another, a situation of which Frithiof is unaware. She is therefore in possession of knowledge that, for various reasons, she cannot communicate to him, i.e., the knowledge that their separation is final and irrevocable.

In *The Concept of Anxiety* Kierkegaard goes on to say that the instant she expresses her feelings in a sigh or a word ‘the moment of vision’ in the strong sense is essentially past, because a sigh or a

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, *JP* v: 5181, iv: 4915. For a further discussion of this aspect of Kierkegaard’s contemporary culture, see Chapter 3 below.

<sup>17</sup> For the interpretation of Ingeborg’s glance that follows I am essentially indebted to N. N. Eriksen, *Kierkegaard’s Category of Repetition: A Reconstruction*, Kierkegaard Monograph Series 5, Berlin and New York, Walter de Gruyter, 2000, esp. pp. 69ff.

word would be an attempt to articulate what she feels within the relativistic web of language and temporally determined communication. The pure moment of vision, however, is the unqualified, because unarticulated, apprehension of the eternal in, with and under the incognito of a temporal 'moment': the apprehension, in this case, that the parting is 'for ever'.

In a couple of later journal entries Kierkegaard raises the question of what he calls an 'eternal image'.<sup>18</sup> The examples he gives suggest that what he means by this is an image that would capture a single moment that was both unique and expressive. Its 'eternal' quality would arise from the infinite internal reciprocity between form and content, no matter how insignificant the content might be in itself. (One example he gives is of a man fishing for eels from a boat.) There is no fissure in its internal consistency. The conjunction of eternity and time called 'the moment of vision', however, is very different. What the image of Ingeborg's glance gives us is precisely that which cannot come to expression within the image we are given: the eternal separation of the lovers.

The metaphor of 'the moment of vision' will not and cannot therefore allow us to think of the eternal as the object of a particular kind of experience. It is not a special sort of moment within a concatenation of moments. If we are to understand it as a temporal term at all (and, especially, as a term that provides the key to the meaning of time), we have to renounce what Heidegger would call the 'everyday' conception of time, the conception of time that thinks it *more geometrico*. In its strong sense it is 'the fullness of time', the 'kairos' of the New Testament, the 'moment' that yields a vision of the meaning of life as lived before the face of the eternal. In its most decisive application it is understood by Kierkegaard in a Christological sense, as 'the moment' of the incarnation, 'the moment' in which the eternal comes into time and makes time meaningful.

'The moment of vision' is, potentially, all this. More to our present purpose it also indicates the possibility that the visible might show forth the invisible, the figurative figure the unfigurable, and the metaphorical name what withdraws from all expression and

<sup>18</sup> *JP* I: 163 and Pap. VIII 1 A 677. See also my article 'Aesthetics and the Aesthetic', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 31, No. 2, 1991, pp. 140–51.

naming. By choosing, with deliberation, precisely this metaphor of 'the glance of the eye', Kierkegaard thus lays open the whole field of the seeable to a double interpretation, according to whether we direct our gaze spectator-wise towards the seen (and nothing more) or see the seen itself as bearing an unseen and unseeable surplus of meaning that can never be stabilized or regulated within the parameters of the seeable. It is notable in this respect that in an etymological aside, Kierkegaard brings 'the moment of vision' into connection with the Greek term *exaiphantēs*, which he understands as 'the invisible' and which he regards as more pregnant than the Latin-derived 'moment', which he connects with motion and the simple evanescence of time (*CA*, p. 88).

However, and this moves us closer to what will be the main focus of the present enquiry, the moment of vision is, in another aspect, indistinguishable from the moment in the sense of the momentary, the succession of figured experiences, the moving pictures that make up the content of everyday consciousness.

## IV

To see how this is so, and what the cultural implications of this ambiguity might be, let us turn to the work Kierkegaard called, simply, *A Literary Review* and that dealt with Madame Thomasine Gyllembourg's novel *Two Ages*. This review is of particular interest because Kierkegaard used it to make his most sustained critique of modernity as 'the age of reflection'. However, if this critique provides the climax of Kierkegaard's book, it opens with a consideration of the literary character of the author of *Two Ages* that is also full of important insights into Kierkegaard's understanding of modernity. The author is said by Kierkegaard to have contributed faithfully to the Danish literary scene for twenty years and throughout that time to have produced works that reflect a consistent life-view. She has been faithful to her public, but also faithful to herself, and this has been rewarded by her readers' faithfulness to her. Her novels are said to inspire confidence in life and in the essential goodness of human relationships, despite the passage of time and the disappointments and reversals that time brings in its train. Her qualities are said to be very much those of an older generation,

and they are qualities with corresponding values and achievements that Kierkegaard claims should be respected and preserved. The younger generation, however, has a very different outlook. It does not value continuity with the past but, instead, ‘the momentary (*Det Øieblikkelige*), a brilliant beginning, and a new era dating from this are the little that is understood, that is, if it is indeed possible to understand the momentary and the beginning, inasmuch as the momentary, after all, lacks the eternal and the beginning lacks the conclusion’ (*TA*, p. 10).

The slogan of the younger generation is ‘What the Age requires’. However, Kierkegaard’s own expression here contains an ambiguity that, once more, English loses. The term for ‘the Age’ is, simply, *Tiden*, a word that could, in other contexts, be translated ‘time’. In the expression ‘what the Age requires’ it is therefore possible also to hear ‘what time requires’. ‘The Age’, heard like this, might be interpreted as what a life lived in time without any perspective on eternity might give itself over to – and what such a life in fact gives itself over to is ‘the momentary’. This may (in the form least respected by Kierkegaard) express itself as jumping on political bandwagons, or it may appear as the dedicated following of fashion in music, clothes, art, the whole merry-go-round of seeing and being-seen, the world of the eye, the gaze, in which people ‘keep a careful eye on each other (*passe paa hinanden med Øinene*)’ (*TA*, p. 78), but not in such a way as to allow the otherness of the other to be seen for what it is. Nevertheless, in all of this, at every moment, the moment may become, may be seen as, the moment of vision. Every time and every triviality is equally near and equally far from the eternal. The culture of modernity, as described by Kierkegaard, is precisely the culture of those whose horizons are completely filled by ‘the-time-that-now-is’, the momentary, the shock of the new. It is therefore a culture that systematically excludes the fearful fascination of anxiety and sublimity – yet the temporal structure of even the most fleeting and ephemeral novelty means that it has the possibility of revealing the interlacing of the two meanings of the moment in their mutual non-correspondence, and this revelation is, to reiterate, the revelation of the anxious sublime. It cannot be surprising that the affective correlate of this moment often takes the form of melancholy, a sense of loss, emptiness or absence in the