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978-0-521-12185-9 - Kant and the Power of Imagination

Jane Kneller

Excerpt

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Introduction

This book situates Kant's aesthetic theory within the context of his overall philosophical enterprise and also within German aesthetic theory of the eighteenth century. Although the aim of the book is not primarily historical, I have found it useful to frame the analysis of Kant's theory of imagination historically, by locating his views within a line of German aestheticians from the early German Enlightenment through early German Romanticism. Kant is not often viewed as an advocate of the didactic value of aesthetics nor as a precursor to early German Romanticism, but the chapters at the beginning and end of the book (chapters 1 and 7) argue that these are important aspects of his aesthetic project. In so doing they situate Kant's aesthetic theory between rationalist aesthetic pedagogy and early German romantic aesthetics in a way that brings into relief certain commonalities of these otherwise very different theories. Given a prevailing attitude that casts Romanticism as an irrationalist mysticism with sinister inheritors, connecting it to rationalist philosophies at all may sound implausible. This book aims to show that by focussing on certain important but neglected aspects of Kant's aesthetic theory, a window is opened on the common link between both perspectives in German aesthetic theory of the eighteenth century. That link is the recognition and gradual elevation of the power of imagination.

Rationalist aesthetics and art criticism in Germany prior to Kant was principle-bound and rigid in many ways, so that Alfred Bauemler could say of Gottsched and Bodmer and Breitinger and their circles that the concept of criticism (*Kritik*), which Shaftesbury "handles with a fine sense of humanity, becomes in Leipzig and Zurich an instrument of punishment for poetical sinners."¹ Yet Enlightenment concern for education required a reconciliation, if not an overcoming, of the divide between the "higher" and "lower" cognitive faculties of reason and of sensation,

¹ Alfred Bauemler, *Kant's Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Halle: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1923), pp. 97–98.

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perception, and inner feeling. The role of the imagination gradually took on great significance as a mental power that interfaces with these aspects of human experience.² Thus we find the imagination playing an especially crucial role in Kant's account of cognition, and that role in turn being adapted and incorporated into his theory of beauty. Dieter Henrich points out that, since Kant regularly taught Baumgarten's Metaphysics text, and in his Anthropology course worked directly from the section of that text that dealt with empirical psychology, including the doctrine of the lower cognitive faculties including the imagination: "Therefore it is no surprise that Kant had developed his own aesthetics before he came to terms with the problems he intended to solve in the *Critique of Pure Reason*."³ Although for a time after writing the first *Critique*, Kant denied the possibility of a critique of taste – i.e. a critique of the power of imagination in judgments about beauty – he changed his mind once he realized that he could provide an account of the universal elements of such judgments, specifically the *generic* relation of harmonious play between the power of imagination and the understanding, without appeal to determinate empirical or *a priori* rules. Henrich argues for a certain continuity in Kant's view of imagination between his pre-critical and final critical view that taste could claim justification *a priori*:

When he rethought the epistemology of the *Critique of Pure Reason* he quickly saw that his epistemological theorems about the relationship between imagination and understanding would allow him to produce an explanation of aesthetic judgment whose sources would not be empirical throughout but rather derived from the explanation of the possibility of our knowledge of objects. Hence the new explanation would have the "a priori" status of a transcendental insight. We can now understand why Kant felt he could carry out his plan, once conceived, with little trouble. Most of the content of his aesthetics had been available to him for a long time. Its views and its conceptual apparatus of the cognitive activities had only to be transferred to a new context.⁴

Kant did not invent or change rationalist notions of the faculties involved so much as make them more precise, Henrich argues. Thus in the

² This becomes apparent in Baumgarten's attempt to discover a special "logic" of the lower cognitive faculty, which included imagination. Bauemler points out that Wolff already prepared the way for this move in his discussion of the "expectation of similar cases" ("*Erwartung ähnlicher Fälle*") as a function of inference (induction) based in the lower cognitive faculties. *Ibid.*, pp. 188–197. See also Bauemler's *Das Irrationalitätsproblem im ästhetischen Denken des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Halle, 1923; republished Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967) for an account of the ascendancy of the imagination in this period.

³ Henrich, *Aesthetic Judgment and the Moral Image of the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 33.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 34–35.

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first *Critique* Kant carefully delineates the nature and operation of imagination in cognition: it operates subconsciously, at least in part, and is the *source* of all combinations of the sensible manifold, but not of the rules that prescribe its combinatorial activity.⁵

Kant's aesthetic theory in its final form still utilizes the apparatus of rationalist psychology, but in a more articulated way. One can also add to Henrich's point, however, that this refinement of the faculty theory of psychology had dramatic consequences for German aesthetic theory: Kant's new articulation of the functions of imagination undermined the hierarchical structuring of the older rationalist approaches. In the third *Critique* Kant theorizes a new sort of relationship between imagination and understanding, one in which the former is "freed" from the latter – in other words, in which the imagination is seen as capable of operating independently of its function of processing the material of sensation into the products of experience via concepts *a priori*. It does not follow that imaginative freedom in this sense operates free of experiential backdrop, but simply that within the context of an already synthesized experience, imagination can function in a different capacity so as to reflect upon a sensory manifold without "determining" an object. The result is, instead, a certain kind of feeling.⁶ One important result of Kant's more complex account of imaginative functioning is a new appreciation for the way in which imaginative freedom contributes to an overall awareness in us, as individual subjects, of our own cognitive (including moral) operations. Kant's theory, that is, highlights the fact that the power of imagination produces a "feeling of life," making us aware of ourselves via pleasure that "forms the basis of a very special power of discriminating and judging" (V: 204, 277). This complex notion of imagination's functioning is the essence of reflective aesthetic judgment, and takes as its object (which is to say, it determines *a priori*) the feeling of pleasure and pain (XX: 208).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁶ An important issue emerges here involving the question of the cognitive role of reflection. Henrich, on historical grounds, distinguishes reflection from reflective judgment. The former is a "primitive" capacity of unconscious ideation, that concurs with the operations of the mind, keeping them distinct, and allowing an "awareness" of the operations of the mind. This process is discussed in the context of genius and fantasy in chapter 7 of this volume, but the overall role of such processes and their relationship to cognitive and aesthetic judgments must be postponed here. Important work on the prior function of reflection has been done by Beatrice Longueness, in *Kant and the Capacity to Judge: Sensibility and Discursivity in the Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Charles T. Wolfe (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). See also Henry Allison's discussion of Longueness' views on reflection with respect to reflective judgment, in *Kant's Theory of Taste* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), chapter 1, pp. 14ff.

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As such, the power of imagination takes on a central role in the mediation of the theoretical and the practical *a priori* (XX: 206–208).

Giving the imagination a lead role is not to say it is the only star of the human show, and Kant never contended that it was. But it certainly opens the way for a philosophical turn towards viewing imagination as the main player on the human mental stage. This is the connection to Romanticism that Kant's refinement of rationalist faculty psychology makes possible. The early Romantic theorists in Germany took the complex imaginative function as their central explanatory concept in analyzing human subjectivity. Charles Larmore, in *The Romantic Legacy*, suggests that Kant's primary influence on Romanticism was the view that the mind actively determines human experience. Yet it was not simply Kant's "Copernican" insight that had such an influence on Romanticism. Romanticism also took its cue more specifically from Kant's recognition of a special mental activity that (somehow) connects with the "matter of sensation" (the given), and is itself neither pure understanding nor pure practical reason. Charles Larmore points out that, for the Romantics, imagination came to mean more than a faculty of imaging and association, but was centrally "the enrichment of experience through expression." But this formulation also nicely captures Kant's account of the imaginative "free play" in reflective aesthetic judgment resulting in a special, "disinterested" pleasure that is universally communicable and expressed in judgments of taste and the sublime. Larmore goes on to point out that "Typically the Romantics considered the imagination, so understood, not as one mental faculty among others, and certainly not as a mere organ of make-believe, but rather as the very essence of the mind." The arguments of this book make the case that the move from Kant's third *Critique* account of imagination as a central, mediating faculty to the early Romantic view of it as the *primary* faculty is a logical next step, not an irrational leap, in the philosophy of human subjectivity.

In her account of the concept of *Darstellung* (literally: a "placing before," usually translated as "representation" or "presentation") Martha Helfer sketches the development of this notion in Kant's philosophy as "a technical term that designates the mediation of the imagination between sensibility and understanding." She argues that this Kantian notion of imaginative mediation is of great significance to subsequent philosophical and aesthetic thought:

Thus *Darstellung* constitutes an essential point of tangency for German Idealism and Romanticism, and the critical exposition of this Kantian notion of representation in various disciplines results in a tremendously productive interplay of

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philosophy, aesthetics, literature and linguistic theory in German critical discourse around 1800.⁷

Helfer argues that Kant's notion of *Darstellung* creates problems for him in three related ways, the first of which is the heart of his problem, and results from the fact that imaginative synthesis in cognition for Kant is "a hidden art in the depths of the human soul":

there is a breakdown at a crucial juncture in Kant's argument for the underlying synthetic unity of intuition and understanding in cognition . . . Because the synthetic unity of apperception falls beyond the limits of the transcendental *Critique*, the sensible subject cannot represent itself to itself as it really is, as a moral subject of reason. The fact that reason imposes these limits on the scope of philosophical investigation points to the third problem that Kant encounters, the problem of the rhetorical presentation or representation of his philosophical system.⁸

I shall explore the degree to which Kant himself saw these aspects of his account of imaginative mediation, or reflection as "breakdowns" in his system in chapter 5. Helfer is quite right to understand Kant's notion of (re)presentation as imaginative mediation, but it is not clear that Kant was concerned to give an account of the underlying source or foundation of this faculty, nor that he felt it necessary to provide a unified theory of subjectivity in a strong sense. If imaginative reflection, as I argue in chapter 4, is to be seen as performing the task of mediation in the sense of providing an interface or bridge between sensibility and reason such that human beings can move from one aspect of their selves to the other, it may not necessarily be the case that in Kant's mind, at least, these aporiae are so thoroughly problematic as the Romantics themselves came to believe. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, as well as Andrew Bowie and others who see Kant as a catalyst for Romanticism, also tend to emphasize the lack of a thoroughgoing account of unity between subject and object, moral demands and natural laws, and the practical and the theoretical as the jumping off point for Romantic philosophy. Thus Bowie, like Helfer, argues that Kant left a major problem for his own theory unsolved thanks to his inability to give an account of knowledge of freedom while simultaneously demanding that we must act in accordance with a belief in it: "In both the theoretical and the practical parts of his philosophy, then, Kant leaves a gaping hole where the highest principle is

⁷ Martha Helfer, *The Retreat of Representation: The Concept of Darstellung in German Critical Discourse* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 10

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

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located.”⁹ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy explain the Romantic debt to Kant, along similar lines, as the problem of what they refer to as the “weakening of the subject” as a result of Kant’s denying the possibility of an “original Intuition” – i.e., an intuition that produces its own “given”:

As a result, all that remains of the subject is the “I” as an “empty form” . . . that “accompanies my representations.” This is so because the form of time, which is the “form of the internal sense” permits no *substantial* presentation. As is well known, the Kantian “cogito” is empty.¹⁰

Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy view Kant’s valorizing of morality as a sort of compensation for the weakened cognitive subject, but here again the problem becomes one of the reality of the subject: “As a moral subject, in sum, the subject recovers none of its substance. Quite to the contrary, the question of its unity, and thus of its very ‘being-subject’, is brought to a pitch of high tension.” This tension is also referred to more dramatically by them as the “crisis” that Romanticism takes as its starting point.¹¹

All of these scholars are surely right to point to precisely these issues as catalysts to Romanticism, and yet by dramatizing the problem as a “gaping hole” or “crisis,” they tend to downplay the degree to which the younger generation of poetic philosophers adapted and developed some of Kant’s best attempts to solve these very problems. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy grant the point that Kant did try to solve the problem in the third *Critique*, but they view that solution as failed, thanks to the merely regulative nature of the principles Kant relies on in his attempt to unify subjectivity. Yet in the case of Novalis, at least, the regulative nature of philosophy was precisely all that philosophy could be and, for him, this was not in itself a problem. Helfer herself, commenting on the fact that Novalis sees philosophy resolved in “poesy,” points out that “Poesy, however, does not supplant philosophy in Novalis aesthetic program: “Without philosophy the poet is incomplete . . . (II: 531, #29).”¹² An important aim of this book is to show that Kant’s own solutions went a long way in the direction of Novalis’ and the early Romantics’ views: Kant’s theory enabled entertaining the importance of creative, reflective imagination in general as a possible source for the realization of substantive changes in the world.

⁹ Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 22.

¹⁰ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 31–32. ¹² Helfer, *The Retreat of Representation*, p. 88.

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Making that case requires not only a careful look at Kant's views on the power of imagination and its roles beyond judgments of taste, but also a less one-sided view of Romanticism. Much of the argument of this book hinges on viewing early German Romanticism as a philosophical position – and, moreover, one that is close enough in spirit to the anti-speculative position of Kantianism to be able to easily connect with it. Recent work has established this view on solid scholarly ground. Philosophers and literary critical theorists have gone a long way toward correcting the caricature of the early German Romantics as mystical irrationalists, and the case has been made for some time now that philosophically the early and late period of Romanticism in the German tradition are quite distinct.¹³

At the same time there has been a flowering of new studies in the past twenty-five years or so dealing with Kant's philosophy in a multitude of ways that go beyond the first *Critique* and his moral theory as famously, if also misleadingly at times, summarized in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.¹⁴ Kant's political theory, his social and anthropological

¹³ The most influential work in this regard is Manfred Frank's *Einführung in die Frühromantische Ästhetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989), trans. Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert as *The Foundations of Early German Romanticism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004). See also Karl Ameriks' introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 13: "The greatest problem for the philosophical appreciation of German Romanticism may be simply the word romanticism itself." Part III on "Idealism and romanticism" is a very useful summary introduction to the "Frühromantik." Several newly translated texts of philosophical writings of early German Romanticism have appeared, including my own *Novalis: Fichte Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and an English edition of Novalis' *Allgemeine Brouillon*, ed. David Wood, is forthcoming from SUNY Press (2007). Jay Bernstein's edition of *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) includes selections from earlier German theorists of art (Lessing, Moritz) and devotes large sections to works from Hölderlin and Novalis as well as Schiller and Friedrich Schlegel. Frederick Beiser's edition of works from this tradition, *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), as well as his important contribution to the politico-philosophical history of the era in *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) bear witness to a growing philosophical interest in the early German Romantics. At the same time, literary philosophical interest in these thinkers is growing, with works like Azade Seyhan's *Representation and Its Discontents: The Critical Legacy of German Romanticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) and Andrew Bowie's *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1997) being two fine studies in this area.

¹⁴ Enormous recent interest in Kant's aesthetics is reflected in new translations of the third *Critique*, (including even a new translation of the title of the book itself) and several major new English-language interpretive works on the *Critique of Judgment* that pay equal attention to the aesthetic theory (John Zammito's *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgment*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, is a fine example). English-language studies of Kant's aesthetic theory tend to focus primarily on Kant's theory of taste in the "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment," the first half of his *Critique of Judgment*. Paul Guyer's landmark earlier treatment, *Kant and the Claims of Taste* (Harvard University Press, 1979) along with other, less comprehensive accounts, were typical in this regard. More recent work has paid attention to the connection of morality and aesthetics,

studies, his theory of history, and his overall methodological approach have been the subjects of interesting and close textual analytic research in several languages and scholarly traditions.¹⁵ Focus on Kant's philosophically "lesser" works that were nevertheless written during the critical period has proved enormously helpful in filling in gaps, accounting for inconsistencies; and, perhaps most important, the new focus has in many cases corrected common caricatures by disclosing the complexity of Kant's theories. Allen Wood has perhaps gone as far as any scholar in this regard.¹⁶ Focussing especially on Kant's writings on religion and history, he has been able to counter many standard criticisms of Kant by showing the compatibility of Kant's moral theory with naturalist and materialist accounts of human development, progress, and culture. By carefully explicating the details of Kant's teleological conception of nature and humanity, and by reconstructing Kant's account of the coordination of "ends of nature" with human rational ends in promoting culture, Wood debunks criticisms of Kant's moral theory that see it as oriented towards a noumenal realm outside nature, individualistic in its prescriptions, and insensitive to material human conditions in its rigorism. A complete summary of Wood's comprehensive account is beyond the scope of this introduction, but in skeletal outline, the argument hinges on natural mechanism as the initial catalyst of human cultural development. Kant's

especially Guyer's *Kant and the Experience of Freedom: Essays on Aesthetics and Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Henry Allison's *Kant's Theory of Taste* (see n. 6) devotes a section to the link between morality and the theory of taste in Kant. Hannah Ginsborg's *The Role of Taste in Kant's Theory of Cognition* (New York: Garland Press, 1990) looks at the connection between aesthetics and knowledge, as does Christel Fricke's *Kants Theorie des reinen Geschmacksurteils (Kant's Theory of the Pure Judgment of Taste*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990).

¹⁵ John Zammito's excellent book on the genesis of the third *Critique* (see n. 14) links it to his *Anthropology* as well as to the younger generation of "aesthetic idealists." English-language works dealing with Kant's political writings and their connection to issues of teleology include Patrick Riley, *Kant's Political Philosophy* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1983), Yirmiah Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), and Thomas Auxter, *Kant's Moral Teleology* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1982). Important studies on Kant's anthropological writings include work, in addition to Allen Wood, by Holly Wilson, Robert B. Loudon, Patrick R. Frierson, among others. Representative samples of some of their work is included in B. Jacobs and P. Kain, *Essays in Kant's Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). John Zammito traces the historical development of the concept in the case of the conflicting views of Herder and Kant, in *Kant, Herder and the Birth of Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). Reinhard Brandt and Werner Stark have both published important work on Kant's *Anthropology* and have been largely responsible for the rise of interest in this area thanks to their painstaking work in compiling and editing, at the Kant Archiv at the Philips-Universität, Marburg, the lecture notes of students in Kant's Anthropology classes. Hannah Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* is one of the most well-known attempts to link Kant's aesthetic theory to political theory (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

¹⁶ See his *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

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well-known notion of “unsocial sociability” captures the drive of the species towards greater and greater freedom, equality and community arising out of natural self-interested inclinations and resulting social struggle. Human social progress is to be interpreted (regulatively) as a purpose of nature: “Nature’s own purposes require that human beings should emerge at a certain point from the tutelage of nature and begin to set rational collective ends” (p. 298). Wood gives a compelling account of the connection Kant sees between nature and human reason in terms of their ends:

Because human beings are the only beings in nature that can set a final end, they may be considered as the ultimate end of nature insofar as they do set a final end. Nature has no ultimate end except *through* human beings; or, what comes to the same thing, it has no ultimate end at all *until human beings give it one* by setting a final end . . . Kant’s philosophy of history can be regarded as a theodicy or theory of divine providence, as he himself also regularly regards it. But if so, it is a highly novel and perhaps unorthodox one. For in Kant’s view, the plan of providence remains incomplete until *we human beings* complete it. (p. 311).

The problem of the institution of a just social order – the “highest good” that Kant says is a direct command of morality – involves the impossible-sounding demand that we ourselves coordinate natural ends with moral ones, so that, simply put, moral goodness and happiness are systematically proportional. Wood points out that this demand for systematic proportionality of natural and rational ends is not just a baroque, “architectonic” feature of Kant’s theory, but is fundamental to his ethics. Kant insists that the moral law commands that humans in concert, as a species, attempt to create this system as the only means of guaranteeing systematic progress towards morality. Drawing on the *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Wood argues that for Kant “The pursuit of my own morality can be distinguished from the moral progress of the human race, but [Kant argues that] the two ends are necessarily linked in their pursuit. Human beings must join in free community to accomplish the task.” And he adds, “The moral progress of the human race, in Kant’s view is possible only through the progressive extension of such a free moral community to more and more people, until it eventually encompasses the entire human race” (p. 315). The problem with this demand is that it asks the individual to commit to a project only the species as a whole can fulfill. This leads, in Kant’s moral theory (V: 114ff.) to the (in)famous postulates of God and immortality, belief in which is a necessary condition of the rational hope each individual requires to shoulder his or her part of the burden of this enormous command. This issue is examined

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in more detail in chapter 2, but here I will simply point out that Wood explains Kant's appeal to the postulates of God and immortality as ways of turning, not to the "beyond" for hope, but to an enlightened human community of free believers that is not associated with the coercion of the state.

Wood rightly points out that the community of rational faith that Kant envisioned is so far removed from the social reality of our own time that it is nearly impossible to see how one could take heart and carry on social reform in any "really existing" religious community. Wood pleads for historical understanding of Kant's case: In an era of guarded Enlightenment optimism, Kant had reason to hope for the formation of a freely affirmed, rational religious community. Interpreting Kant in this way might suggest a kind of socialist ideal, and such a suggestion is not off target, Wood argues, if it does not expect cataclysmic change:

such a view would be Kantian in holding that if we are to fulfill our collective historical vocation, we will need to find (or invent) a form of ethical community that is capable of gradually reshaping our deeply corrupt social life by revolutionizing and uniting the hearts of individuals through the free power of reason. For Kant himself, however, the human race can no more expect to fulfill this moral vocation apart from organized religion than it can expect to achieve justice through anarchy. (p. 320)

What Wood's account shows, I believe, is how problematic the religious "postulate" has become, and thus how unlikely it is for people to band together in heart and mind to effect change in contemporary societies. If religion, even a "socialist" version, is the only alternative community, and a rational public can no longer envision belonging to it, then a new vision must be possible or moral progress is doomed. But if it is the case that we cannot hope for apocalyptic change, is it not equally impossible, after decades and centuries of possibilities closed and social reforms laid waste, rationally to hold on to hope for gradual change in the long term? I want to propose, in the chapters that follow, that Kant's natural teleology provides a "fallback" option when moral vision becomes clouded. The contingently available experience of beauty and its attendant interests, produced via a creative imagination, might also make it possible for despairing individuals to join with others in communities aimed at change. If no model is available at a given point in time, it is at least possible to model a new community in imagination, and like artists of any medium, to find ways to 'express' this community in concrete experience. That it seems to me, is the moral promise of imaginative freedom, and the real power of the imagination in Kant.