

Keeping Narcissism at Bay: Kant and Schiller on the Sublime

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This essay considers the sublime as a veiled form of narcissism. Both narcissism and the sublime test and reveal the limits of the concept of the self and both can be viewed as attempts to transcend the borders of the self. Yet while narcissism has been defined as a “failure of spiritual ascent” (Hadot), the sublime has been used to transcend the limitations of the self by pointing to its infinite potential. The essay explores how the sublime in Immanuel Kant’s and Friedrich Schiller’s aesthetics relies on narcissistic impulses by creating a male inner self and protecting it from the stigma of vanity. I propose that their use of this aesthetic category helped objectify an essentially subjectivist aesthetics. Yet while Schiller follows Kant in deriding the sensual aspects of human nature as egotistical and amoral, Schiller’s dramas also challenge some of the Kantian premises. When Schiller’s protagonists sacrifice lives in the service of ethical ideas, the sublime’s oppressive spirit reveals itself.

Although a clinical definition of narcissism did not exist until 1899¹, there was already an abundance of references to the myth of Narcissus in late eighteenth-century German literature. In view of these references, one could define narcissism as the creation of an idealized image of the self and the desire to merge with this image, often expressed as a mirror metaphor. The narcissistic fascination with one’s mirror image captures both a search for the boundaries of a self and a yearning for self-expansion, or self-dissolution. This type of literary narcissism can be viewed as a means of testing the limits of the self by transcending limits that threaten the individual’s sense of autonomy and flexibility.

Narcissism is present in all facets of late eighteenth-century literary production. In the eighteenth century the preoccupation with the self was still widely regarded as amoral, unchristian, and socially inappropriate.² For this reason Narcissus often served to exemplify negative character traits or flawed, unacceptable behavior, such as selfishness, superficiality, self-deception, and vanity. Yet the preoccupation with the self was indispensable for the emergence of bourgeois individuality. As the self came to be regarded as unique and autonomous during middle-class emancipation, Narcissus became part of bourgeois identity. How could bourgeois individuals engage in self-examination without appearing vain or selfish? In order to uphold the subject’s moral integrity a distinction between virtuous self-control and immoral self-indulgence needed to be drawn. For instance, the Kantian differentiation between the sublime and the

beautiful can be regarded as an attempt to distinguish a spiritual inner moral capacity from purely sense-inspired pleasures.

In this essay, I view the sublime as a veiled form of narcissism. Both narcissism and the sublime test and reveal the limits of the concept of the self and at the same time aspire to transcend the borders of the self, although the sublime is presented as narcissism's opposite. Both concepts connect the self to an ideal that exceeds human limitations. The sublime enables the subject to enhance its autonomy by prevailing against superhuman powers. Narcissism inflates the subject's sense of self by evoking the desire for an ideal self that cannot be reached. In other words, the narcissist dissolves the borders of his self in the attempt to merge with an unobtainable infinite ideal, thereby losing himself. Yet while narcissism has been defined as a "failure of spiritual ascent" (Hadot 10), the sublime refers to the ability to transcend the limitations of the self by pointing to its infinite potential. In contrast to narcissistic desire, which entails the self's idealization and failure to merge with this ideal, the sublime is a triumphant, albeit momentary, overcoming of human limitations. Whereas the sublime promises an otherworldly, transcendent perspective that prevails over egotistical instincts, narcissism remains tied to them. In other words, one could regard the sublime as a spiritualized form of narcissism that allows the subject to recognize and ecstatically feel its borders from a depersonalized and therefore morally irreprehensible point of view.

This essay juxtaposes the Kantian sublime to the concept articulated in Friedrich Schiller's aesthetic essays "Of the Sublime" (1793) and "On the Sublime" (1794-96), relating these concepts in turn to Schiller's dramas *The Robbers* (*The Robbers*, 1782) and *Don Karlos* (1787/1805). The analysis of these texts seeks to illustrate how Schiller explores the sublime as a possible antidote to narcissistic desire. While Schiller agrees with the Kantian premise that the sublime belongs to the sphere of ideas and is incompatible with everyday life, his dramas problematize some of the Kantian premises. Schiller's plays show that even the most sublime ideas are degraded by personal ambitions. Although these plays serve a pedagogical function by promoting unselfish self-sacrifice for moral ideals over and against base egotistical motivations, they also reveal the sublime's potentially oppressive nature by questioning the sacrifice of life in the name of such ideals.

Why is it useful to pair narcissism with the sublime? Why should narcissism, a predominantly psychological concept, be linked to the aesthetic discourse surrounding the sublime?³ It is no coincidence that the rediscovery of both Longinus' tractatus *On the Sublime* and the myth of Narcissus are connected to the exploration of the self in the eighteenth century. Carsten Zelle, for instance, attributes the emergence of the sublime to what he calls "Emotionalisierung der Kunsttheorie" (the infusion of art theory with emotions) (Zelle, "Schönheit" 58). Accordingly, the sublime is not so much an object, but rather an experience that takes place in an observer/recipient in view of an object that exceeds the observer's comprehension.⁴ In a surprising move, Kant uses the sublime to connect the subject to a rational, ideal, yet "objective" sphere, untainted by the limitations of the senses. According to Kant, the experience of the sublime allows the subject to have access to this noumenal sphere by making it aware, upon reflection, of an inner rational strength, independent from and superior to the external reality that is mediated by the senses. Because of its independence from any uncontrollable sensual drives or emotions, the sublime is also portrayed as moral and selfless. Narcissism, on the other hand, remains tied to the senses and fails to live up to its promise to connect the subject with its ideal. Yet Kant's concept of the sublime is itself rooted in the narcissistic aspiration to merge with an ideal. While the Kantian sublime purportedly transcends the self in favor of impersonal ideals by overcoming egotistical desires that are associated with narcissism, it is arguably a narcissistic aesthetization of the self that serves to confirm human superiority over nature.

Understood in terms of the myth of Narcissus, narcissism has been commonly understood as intense if not excessive preoccupation with the self. The self demanded greater attention as self-observation became part of the socialization of the middle-class individual. The preoccupation with the self can be tied to feelings of insecurity in view of the growing complexity and anonymity of an emerging bourgeois society (Farrell 3). Ethical, social and moral values became part of the subject's internal selfhood. During the transition from an autocratic to a civil society an individual's inner self was gradually replacing the order formerly guaranteed by the presence of God or his secular representative. As self-examination was required from both virtuous Christians and morally conscientious citizens, narcissism touched a broad array of tenets extending

from Christian quietism to the foundation of new academic fields of research, such as *Erfahrungsseelenkunde*, also known as psychology or anthropology.⁵ In other words, the construction of bourgeois individuality in literature, philosophy, and early psychology would not have been possible without the “narcissistic” fixation on the self.

While this preoccupation with the self is present in all facets of late eighteenth-century literary production, it was at the same time frowned upon and often criticized as vanity.⁶ For instance, the paradoxical demand that proper self-examination had to be exercised without self-interest can be viewed as a remnant of Christian morals. Neo-Platonism helped foster the idea of selfless self-contemplation by promising spiritual progress or inner transformation of the self in terms of an ascent “from matter to Soul to Spirit to the One” (Hadot 2). Yet “for Plotinus Narcissus represents a failure of spiritual ascent, a complacency that leads the soul to allow itself to be fascinated by its corporeal reflection” (Hadot 10). Narcissists remain preoccupied with their particular individual existence and therefore are unable to partake in the spiritual universe, which requires distance from the self. As we will see, the sublime—according to German philosophers Immanuel Kant (1722-1802) and Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805)—is a state of mind that accomplishes what narcissism prevents: independence from any forces that threaten to obstruct a human being’s spiritual autonomy. While narcissism connotes dependence on the body and the sublime connotes independence from the body, both concepts share a deep reverence of the self. Even though Kant and Schiller claim that the sublime subject is devoid of individual self-interest and acts solely at the behest of universal moral laws, one could still argue that freedom from egotistical desires is in the interest of individual autonomy. In fact, the merging of the self with higher universal principles could be regarded as a megalomaniacal idealization of the self.

I will explore how the sublime in Kant and Schiller’s works functions to aestheticize narcissistic impulses by creating a male inner self and protecting it from the stigma of vanity. I propose that their use of this aesthetic category helped objectify an essentially subjectivist aesthetics. Yet while Schiller follows Kant in deriding the sensual aspects of human nature as egotistical and amoral, Schiller’s dramas also challenge some of the Kantian premises. When Schiller’s protagonists sacrifice lives in the service of ethical ideas, the sublime’s oppressive spirit reveals itself. Moreover, the protagonists’

identification with moral principles or ideologies is problematic because what appears to be a pursuit of justice can inadvertently become a matter of personal ambition. Schiller's tragedies not only present the sublime as transcendental, they also question the Kantian gender dualism that attributes moral strength exclusively to male characters. Before discussing Schiller's enactments of the Kantian sublime, it is necessary, however, to present the emergence of the aesthetic category in the context of eighteenth-century social and cultural developments.

The emergence of the sublime marks an aesthetic shift favoring emotion over beauty (Zelle, "Über den Grund" 58-61).⁷ A new experience of nature was responsible for this shift. John Dennis (1657-1734) described this experience when crossing the Alps as "a delightful Horrour, a terrible Joy," while observing that he "was infinitely pleas'd, [and] trembled" (2:380). Apparently the sublime involves a mixed emotion, a delightful shock in view of an unexpected, unsettling experience that exceeds human comprehension. The mountain peaks of the Alps, the immense force of breakers in the stormy sea, the infinite and bleak vastness of the desert, and other objects that instill a sense of awe in the spectator are considered suitable for evoking the sublime. The object's unprecedented vastness, its irregular, often threatening features cause an emotional disturbance, which can be overcome once the observer recoils from the overwhelming sensory impression and manages to gain some distance from nature's imminent threat.

The fact that an observer can also enjoy terror-instilling objects or events triggered the search for the emotions that the sublime caused in the spectator. Schiller and a new generation of bourgeois writers were less concerned with the question of what is beautiful than with the question of what evokes the feeling of joy in the recipient (NA, 20:133-47). In other words, the artifact's form became less important than its emotional effect on the viewer. While the experience of the sublime and the beautiful is initiated by a desire for self-expansion, the sublime assumes a superior status because it links the subject to the realm of universal moral law. Yet both concepts derive from life-preserving instincts that are rooted in the sensual and emotional apparatus of the human organism. The sublime as an act of self-preservation implies not only the domination of nature but also a distancing from or repression of its uncontrollable aspects. In Hartmut

Böhme's words the human control over nature is acquired "in Absetzung vom erniedrigten Anderen der Natur" ("in an act of distancing oneself from nature's debased Other") (123). In order to achieve this "Selbsterhaltung ganz anderer Art ("self-preservation of an entirely different kind") (KU, 161) over and against a wild, unbridled nature the subject may have to go as far as sacrificing his physical existence.⁸ Narcissus follows a similar calling: the preservation of an ideal self over and against a real one. Yet there is one notable distinction according to the Kantian paradigm: if innate desires persist, narcissism prevails; if these desires can be held in check, the sublime rules.

The sublime emerges precisely at the point when, as a result of the growing awareness of the self's sensibilities, aesthetic experience becomes subjective and is endowed with emotions. "Zwischen Grenzerfahrung und Größenwahn" ("Between Liminal Experience and Megalomania") is the subtitle of a noteworthy collection of essays that analyze the sublime's impact on aesthetic theory during the past two hundred years (Pries). The ambiguity of this characterization of the sublime as an experience that is both self-limiting and self-enhancing could, however, just as well describe narcissism. Both concepts refer to a subjective engagement with an other and both concepts involve an intense if not illusory perception of the self. While the object that evokes the sublime is, to be sure, of a different nature than the object of narcissistic self-reflection, both the sublime and narcissistic experience make the subject aware of his or her limitations while at the same time provoking the desire to transcend these.

Scholars have linked the emergence of the sublime to the physio-theological poetry of Barthold Hinrich Brockes. Walter Erhart uses the first poem of Brockes' collection *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott* (*Earthly Delight in God*, 1721), entitled "Das Firmament," to show how the unsettling awareness of a vastly expanded universe leads the observing subject from near desperation to the comforting discovery of God:

Die ungeheure Gruft des tiefen dunklen Lichts,
 Der lichten Dunkelheit, ohn' Anfang ohne Schranken,
 Verschläng so gar die Welt, begrub selbst die Gedanken;
 Mein ganzes Wesen ward ein Staub, ein Punct, ein Nichts,
 Und ich verlor mich selbst. Dies schlug mich plötzlich nieder;

Verzweiflung drohete der ganz verwirrten Brust.

Alleyn, o heylsams Nichts! Glückseliger Verlust!

Allgegenwärt'ger GOTT, in Dir fand ich mich wieder." (Brockes 1: C 5)

The uncanny grave of the deep dark light,
 The bright darkness, without beginning without limits,
 Consumed the entire world, even all my thoughts,
 My entire being was a piece of dust, a speck, a nothing,
 And I lost myself. This suddenly knocked me down;
 Despair threatened my all confused breast.

Except, o salutary nothingness! Fortunate loss!

Omnipresent God, in you I found myself again.⁹

Brockes' poem can be read as an attempt to compensate for the insecurities that arise in a secular world that is deprived of a divine order. Even more rational depictions of the sublime that portray it as entirely based on reason still echo Christian undertones. For instance, Kant's idea that the experience of the sublime evokes an inner capacity that allows the subject to withstand the allure of the senses is reminiscent of the Protestant tendency to defy all worldly desires. In contrast to beauty in nature, which appears harmonious and meaningful, the sublime is both terrifying and liberating. Just as in Brockes' poem the infinite power of nature confronts the subject with its mortality and in the moment of terror, as in a revelation, so too it makes the subject aware of its own internal unlimited powers, alerting it to its independence from worldly constraints. Feminist philosopher Bonnie Mann reminds us of the narcissistic nature of the sublime by claiming that "[t]he Kantian subject uses what most approximates the sublime in nature as a mirror, which allows him to experience his own might and magnitude as sublime" (46). One must add here, however, that the mirror is not a mimetic representation of the sublime. The sublime can by definition not be represented adequately, for the representation of nature's overwhelming powers is in itself not

sublime but only evokes the spirit of the sublime in the observing subject:

Das Erhabene kann in keiner sinnlichen Form enthalten sein, sondern trifft nur Ideen der Vernunft: welche, obgleich keine ihnen angemessene Darstellung möglich ist, eben durch diese Unangemessenheit, welche sich sinnlich darstellen läßt, rege gemacht und ins Gemüt gerufen werden (KU, 136).

The sublime cannot be contained in a sensory form, but meets only ideas of reason: which, even though they cannot be adequately represented, can be evoked and called to mind precisely through this presentable inadequacy.¹⁰

Because the sublime transcends the capacity of our senses, it cannot be depicted. Images of threatening thunderclouds, majestic mountaintops, or fear-instilling breakers conjure up the inner faculty of Reason that surpasses the power of imagination. We recall that Reason is, according to Kant, completely separate from the realm of the senses. This separation, reminiscent of the Lutheran separation of flesh and spirit, is the basis for the freedom of the individual. Consequently, the individual is free only if it overcomes the dependence on the senses. Nevertheless, the Kantian subject relies on sensory impressions of nature's powers by surreptitiously appropriating these powers. In a second step, Reason rejects the dependence on nature as the sublime induces a sense of superiority over nature. In other words, the subject recognizes an ideal version of himself through the appropriation and subjection of nature. Although Kant makes every effort to distinguish the sublime from any self-serving interest, his description of the sublime comes close to admitting to the sublime's underlying narcissism:

Also ist das Gefühl des Erhabenen in der Natur Achtung für unsere eigene Bestimmung, die wir einem Objekte der Natur durch eine gewisse Subreption (Verwechslung einer Achtung für das Objekt statt der für die Idee der Menschheit in unserm Subjekte) beweisen, welches uns die Überlegenheit der Vernunftbestimmung unserer Erkenntnisvermögen über

das größte Vermögen der Sinnlichkeit gleichsam anschaulich macht (KU, 154).

Therefore the feeling of the sublime in nature is respect for our own vocation, which we attribute to an object of nature through a certain subreption (substitution of respect for the object of nature instead of for the idea of humanity in our own self — the subject); and this feeling renders, as it were, apparent the supremacy of our rational faculties over the greatest faculty of sensuality.

Mann succinctly summarizes the Kantian subreption: “Kant cuts the subject loose from the natural world and reverses the order of dependence so that the world is dependent on the autonomous subject” (47). While Kant’s choice of words clearly indicates that “the feeling of the sublime in nature” is triggered by an emotional reaction, Kant portrays narcissistic self-enhancement—which leads the subject to replace (*verwechseln*) the respect for an object with that of “the idea of human nature within ourselves”—as a rational procedure that proves our independence from external reality. Kant attributes this spiritualization of a subjective, emotional reaction to the rational faculties that enable humans to become autonomous and withstand all outside-pressures. This subreption permits Kant to distinguish the experience of the sublime from narcissism that would leave the subject fixated on surface appearances and therefore unable to merge with an idealized self. The Kantian subreption thus conceals the sublime’s affinity to narcissism.

Yet there are other characteristics that connect the Kantian sublime to narcissism. In Lacan’s mirror stage, for instance, the becoming subject is initially not perceived as whole but rather as a succession of uncoordinated movements. These fragmented sensory impressions achieve coherence only through the subject’s narcissistic fantasy of a coherent self, the *imago*, which it then recognizes as its mirror image. Similarly, images of a disharmonious, incomprehensibly vast or powerful and hostile nature that evoke the sublime are also perceived as incommensurable and leave the observing subject with a sense of lack. As in Lacan’s mirror stage, the Kantian

subject mentally transforms the unsatisfactory sensual impression into a feeling that reinstates the subject as an independent autonomous unity through the subreption mentioned above. Even though the feeling of the sublime can only be achieved at the expense of all egotistical desires—and this often implies self-sacrifice—it is linked to self-empowerment. The feeling of the sublime lets the Kantian subject transcend its physical limitations and merge with the human species. This vacillation between megalomaniacal self-expansion and self-denial is also implicit in the narcissistic scenario. Yet Narcissus can hope to find himself in his mirror image only by losing himself in it because the mirror image stays on the surface. While the Lacanian self-*imago* is said to be a superficial fantasy, the Kantian sublime claims to be an inner truth as it is based on a moral human disposition to which Kant ascribes the status of an *a priori* principle (KU, 168-69).

In contrast to narcissism's "immoral selfishness," which is fixated on surface appearance, the sublime's foremost ethical quality is its selflessness, or overcoming of the physical self. It serves therefore as a suitable antidote to a superficial, vain preoccupation with the self. In other words, the sublime has been used as a tool that allows the subject to transcend the limitations of the empirical subject by pointing to its infinite inner potential. The creation of this inner potential promotes the empowerment of the subject in the name of individual autonomy. Contrary to narcissism, which, as noted earlier, entails the creation of an idealized self and failure to merge with this ideal, the sublime is a triumphant overcoming of human limitations. And yet both the sublime and narcissism share the common trajectory toward self-expansion by merging with an ideal that is greater than the empirical self. Even though the experience of the sublime claims to be selfless, the question remains as to who experiences the sublime if not an expanded self. In short, one could view the sublime as a spiritualized form of narcissism in that it allows the subject to recognize its physical limitations and yet intuit its infinite spiritual capacity from a depersonalized point of view.

The sublime permitted a new generation of bourgeois writers to set themselves apart from a courtly aesthetics that had relegated art to an ornamental function. Kant's juxtaposition of the sublime and the beautiful, for example, can be read as an attempt to endow art with a deeper meaning—a meaning that addresses the ethical dimension of

human nature (KU, 168-69). The Kantian sublime underlines human independence from nature by showing that the subject possesses a superior inner capacity capable of withstanding the adverse conditions of nature, no matter how powerful they are (KU, 161-62). As we saw in Brockes' poem, this empowerment is, however, preceded by a feeling of self-annihilation in view of the overwhelming power of nature. The independence from nature has to be acquired at the price of a willingness to sacrifice one's life in order to partake of the higher ideals of humanity. Both Cornelia Klinger and Bonnie Mann emphasize that the independence from and dominion over nature inherent in the sublime is a privilege of the male subject (Klinger 198, Mann 45). As a gendered concept advocating male individual autonomy, the Kantian sublime is indeed more closely related to male narcissism than to an objective universal truth. The sublime seems to be motivated by a desire for power over nature, or perhaps even a desire for an idealized, divine self. For Kant, war is sublime because it can be waged only if a nation is willing to sacrifice lives for an idea:

Selbst der Krieg, wenn er mit Ordnung und Heiligachtung der bürgerlichen Rechte geführt wird, hat etwas Erhabenes an sich, und macht zugleich die Denkungsart des Volks, welches ihn auf diese Art führt, nur um desto erhabener, je mehreren Gefahren es ausgesetzt war, und sich mutig darunter hat behaupten können: da hingegen ein langer Frieden den bloßen Handelsgeist, mit ihm aber den niedrigen Eigennutz, Feigheit und Weichlichkeit herrschend zu machen, und die Denkungsart des Volks zu erniedrigen pflegt. (KU 163)

Even war, if waged in an orderly fashion and with observation of all civil rights, has a sublime component, and makes the way of thinking of the people who are waging it all the more sublime the more it was exposed to danger and was able to prove its courage: whereas a long peace usually leads to mere mercantilism, which reinstates egotism, cowardice, and effeminacy and degrades the spirit of the people.

Kant's devaluation of physical life renders the sublime problematic, particularly in view of its consequences for German history, which shall not be discussed here. Instead I will use examples from Schiller's literary works to show how Schiller follows Kant in degrading the sensual aspects of human nature in his attempt to uphold the autonomy of the human spirit. According to Kant and Schiller after him, this sublime victory over the body distinguishes humans as reasonable beings and liberates them from the constraints of the senses. Art has a humanizing function in that it advances the transition from the sensual to the spiritual realm and thus promotes mankind's spiritual independence from nature (NA, 20:175). Yet, as we will see later, the enactment of the sublime in Schiller's dramas also reveals its despotic nature. As the sublime has to be achieved at such high cost, it can undermine the very humanitarian aims that it is supposed to serve.

Schiller's poem *Die Bürgschaft* (*The Pledge*, 1798) illustrates in a very condensed form the ascent from the overcoming of physical nature to the eventual overcoming of one's own desire of self-preservation for the sake of true friendship. The ballad also exposes the sublime's pedagogical purpose by dramatizing its humanizing effect on the audience. The protagonist's selfless willingness to sacrifice his life in order to save the life of his friend moves the onlooking tyrant so deeply that he has compassion with the two friends and abandons his despotic ways. I am briefly summarizing the poem's content only in so far as it serves as an example of the sublime. Möros attempts to assassinate the tyrant, Dionys. He gets caught in the attempt and is sentenced to die. However, the tyrant grants Möros three days of leave so that he can attend his sister's wedding under the condition that Möros leave his friend as a substitute. If Möros fails to return within the allotted time, the friend will be executed in his place. The friend's willingness to sacrifice his life shows that, for Schiller, true friendship needs no proof; rather, it is based on trust in the human good. When Möros sets out on his journey, the thought of fleeing never enters his mind, even though this would allow him to escape certain death. Although he must overcome nature's powers, which threaten to prevent him from returning in time, his will to keep his word in order to save his friend lets him rise to the occasion and swim through flood-swollen rivers, endure unbearable drought, and overcome a band of robbers who nearly kill him. Even as he hears, upon approaching the tyrant's palace, that his friend has already been executed, he continues

running toward the place of the execution, willing to sacrifice his life. Through this completely unselfish, sublime act, Möros liberates himself from all worldly desires and becomes a truly autonomous human being.

The narrator's comments underline the sublime's theatrically moving effect on the audience. For when Möros against all expectations reaches the execution scaffold before his friend is killed, the narrator says:

Und Erstaunen ergreift das Volk umher,
 In den Armen liegen sich beide
 Und weinen für Schmerzen und Freude.
 Da sieht man kein Auge tränenleer,
 Und zum Könige bringt man die Wundermär,
 Der fühlt ein menschliches Rühren,
 Läßt schnell vor den Thron sie führen. (NA I:425)

And the people watch in astonishment
 How both friends embrace each other
 And cry with pain and pleasure.
 All eyes are full of tears of joy,
 To the King one relates the miraculous tale,
 It awakens his human emotions
 And he has them quickly led to the throne.

While the two friends receive some personal gratification by being rewarded for their efforts to remain loyal to each other in the face of death, their tears of joy unite them with the audience. The friends' sublime way of behaving moves the tyrant to become an empathetic human being. By evoking the empathy of the on-lookers the protagonists transcend their limited individuality and join with the human species, making mankind more humane by upholding the ideal of friendship. By calling this happy ending miraculous (*Wundermär*) Schiller emphasizes the sublime's otherworldly nature. The separation of fiction and reality is in keeping with the Kantian separation of the

world of ideas from empirical reality, which then translates into the separation of art and life. The poem illustrates in allegorical form that educating a tyrant by appealing to his compassion is more effective than overthrowing him through violence. In revealing how the protagonist's sublime actions influence human behavior, Schiller's *Die Bürgschaft* stresses that ethics rather than political actions will make the world more humane.

The victory of the ideal over an imperfect reality is more problematic in Schiller's tragedies. Here Schiller chooses complex, dubious characters that reveal the full spectrum of human behavior. The author exposes the suffering of his *dramatis personae* with even greater intensity "um den mitleidenden Affekt in der gehörigen Stärke zu erregen" (in order to evoke an appropriately strong affect of empathy) (NA, 20:195). To show the heroes' autonomy, it is necessary to expose their power of resistance. However, the protagonists' suffering is aesthetically pleasing only as long as it serves a higher purpose. Schiller's plays illustrate the problems that arise when humans attempt to overcome their inclinations to pursue their ideals. These plays ask whether ideals themselves can become tyrannical and whether the sublime pursuit of ideals is indeed always unselfish.

The following examples from Schiller's *Die Räuber* and *Don Karlos* suggest that the literary enactment of the sublime is more complex than the Kantian premises suggest. Schiller is enough of a Kantian, even in his pre-Kantian phase, that his characters inhabit both an ideal and real sphere and fail in their attempts at reconciling them. The collisions of reason and nature, duty and inclination, freedom and necessity do not even allow the most well-meaning characters to overcome their flaws. The sublime is therefore seen as spiritual victory in view of a tragic failure. It is most apparent when the hero/heroine keeps his/her composure in the face of death. Yet the heroic sacrifice that the sublime exacts seems, at times, so excessive that one may ask whether the relentless pursuit of moral principles over and against one's personal inclinations may cause greater suffering than a less self-castigating approach. While Schiller's dramas on the one hand uphold the moral ideal over and against a corrupt nature/reality in order to improve and civilize human nature, they at the same time expose repressive aspects of these moral principles. Moreover, Schiller's enactments of the sublime reveal that the boundaries between selfish and unselfish ethical motivations become easily blurred as

the achievements of the moral good are taken over by narcissistic ambition.

Although Schiller wrote *Die Räuber* long before he studied Kant, the play seems to build up to a conflict that dramatizes Karl Moor's ascent from a horrific, albeit noble-minded, *Räuberhauptmann* (leader of a band of robbers) to a sublime hero. Moor sacrifices his one-and-only love, Amalia, to keep an oath that he has sworn to his fellow robbers (NA, 3:160). In Kantian terms this action would characterize Moor as a sublime hero as he decides in favor of the moral principle of keeping his promise over and against his inclination to start a new life with his beloved Amalia. In a scene of unrestrained pathos Moor takes fate into his own hands and kills Amalia before his fellow robbers can kill her (NA, 3:232-34). What seems to be motivated also as a mercy killing raises questions about whether Karl's emotional reaction to preempt his fellow robbers should be interpreted as an act that shows his sublime strength. For instance, Karl's emotional agitation and egotistical desire to have control over Amalia's life strongly discredit his "sublime" action. Traditional readings, however, accept Schiller's efforts to present Karl as a man who honors his moral obligations toward his fellow robbers and who liberates himself from all earthly commitments by bringing the ultimate sacrifice through this mercy killing of Amalia (Hofmann 48, Hinderer 57).¹¹ The play's ending, which shows Karl as an autonomous human being who turns himself in to be judged by a higher judge, seems to support such a reading. After all, Schiller compares Moor to Plutarch's "erhabene Verbrecher" ("sublime criminals") in his anonymous review of *Die Räuber* (NA, 22:118).

Yet the author also emphasizes Karl's monstrous character traits (NA, 22:120). Karl's impulsive behavior certainly does not suggest that he is a sublime character throughout the play (NA, 3:158-61; 217-19; 233). Schiller created such an ambiguous figure in order to depict the full range of human emotions and to intensify the play's dramatic effect (NA, 22:118). Nevertheless, he also feels compelled to explain Karl's shocking and unexpected killing of Amalia because it appears utterly unnecessary (NA, 22:127). Schiller cites technical reasons in justifying Karl's murder of Amalia. He stresses that if Amalia had simply acquiesced to a life without Karl, "dann hätte sie *nie* geliebt" ("she would have *never* loved") (NA, 22:127). Yet the author also characterizes the "zweideutige Katastrophe" ("the ambiguous catastrophe") as the pinnacle of the entire

play: “Offenbar krönt diese Wendung das ganze Stück” (“obviously this turning point crowns the entire play”) (NA, 22:128). This killing, which Karl comments with the words: “Ich habe Euch einen Engel geschlachtet. Banditen! Wir sind quitt—Über dieser Leiche liegt meine Handschrift zerrissen—Euch schenk ich die eurige” (“I have slaughtered an angel for you. Bandits! We are even—My signature lies torn over this corpse—I spare you yours”) (NA, 3:234), initiates his inner sublimation, which makes him a free man. Moor’s pronouncement according to which he must be free in order to be great could also be taken as the play’s message: “Frei muss Moor sein, wenn er groß sein will.” (“Free must Moor be, if he wants to be great.”) (NA, 3:234). Moor becomes autonomous by killing Amalia because he is no longer bound by any “worldly” commitment, neither by the oath he had sworn to the robbers, nor by the vow of love to Amalia. While the play provides a justification for the sacrifice of others, it also points to the repressive aspect of the sublime. The sublime depends in the end on the exclusion of everything that does not correspond to an idealized image of the autonomous male individual. Schiller acknowledges that Amalia may be underrepresented as “die einzige Repräsentantin ihres ganzen Geschlechts” (“the only representative of her gender”) (NA, 22:124). She serves exclusively to confirm Karl’s ascent to a sublime human being. Schiller’s concession that he did not know “was das Mädchen will, oder was der Dichter mit dem Mädchen gewollt hat” (“what the girl wants, or what the poet intended with her”) (NA, 22:125) highlights the author’s identification with the male characters. His indifference toward the woman character stands in sharp contrast to his programmatic intention “die Seele gleichsam bei ihren geheimsten Operationen zu ertappen” (to discover the soul in its most secret acts”) (NA, 3:5). Schiller leaves it open whether the means justify the ends and Moor is able to redeem himself by sacrificing the person he loved. While the play excuses Moor’s lack of respect for Amalia’s life by stressing his male protagonist’s struggle for individual autonomy, it also reveals the tyranny that ideals, however noble, can exert over individual lives. Franz Moor, as the extreme case of someone who subordinates all human emotions to purposive reason exemplifies Schiller’s awareness of the potential dangers of abstract principles. Even though Karl is not a cold-hearted, inhumane schemer, like Franz, he nevertheless shares with his counterpart a willingness to

sacrifice his fellow humans for what he deems “grander” rationales.

The problem of whether the end justifies the means becomes even more central in *Don Karlos*. Here the dubiousness of the sublime is personified in the character of Marquis von Posa. Schiller clearly shows Posa as an idealist who is not afraid to risk his life for the idea of individual freedom. By contrasting him to Don Karlos, who at the beginning of the play has abandoned his political aspirations for his personal love interests, Schiller underlines Posa’s seemingly unselfish struggle for the liberation of his country from absolutism that culminates in his bold admonition to the King to grant his people freedom of thought (*Gedankenfreiheit*) (NA, 7.1: 301). Yet, despite his sublime willingness to sacrifice his life for the noble cause of freedom, Posa reveals a lack of consideration for those who—like his best friend Karlos—are not prepared to forfeit their personal interests for his political cause. Ironically, it is Posa’s willingness to put his ideals above all personal inclinations that raises questions about the “unselfishness” of the sublime. When Posa in an act of betrayal risks Karlos’s life to accomplish his political goals, he makes decisions for his friend and thus violates the premise of individual autonomy for which he supposedly fights. Posa resembles Karl Moor in his disregard for the “creaturely” lives of others. Although Posa seems sublime because his struggle for freedom serves his country and not his self-interest, his intrigue, which plays off the King against Don Karlos, exposes a manipulative streak that questions his altruism. In this regard Posa resembles Schiller’s other deceitful characters, such as Karl Moor, Fiesco, Wallenstein, Elizabeth, and Maria Stuart. In view of reviewers’ strong reactions to Posa’s duplicitous actions Schiller felt compelled to defend his character in his *Briefe über Don Karlos* (1787), where he points to the proximity of narcissism and idealism in great leaders. He also explains how enthusiasm and inner conviction can lead the most virtuous and unselfish person to despotic, selfish behavior:

Unstreitig! Der Charakter des Marquis von Posa hätte an Schönheit und Reinigkeit gewonnen, wenn er durchaus gerader gehandelt hätte und über die unedeln Hilfsmittel der Intrige immer erhaben geblieben wäre. Auch gestehe ich, dieser Charakter ging mir nahe, aber, was ich für Wahrheit hielt, ging mir näher. Ich halte für Wahrheit, [...]daß der uneignünftigste,

reinste und edelste Mensch aus enthusiastischer Anhänglichkeit an seine Vorstellung von Tugend und hervorzubringendem Glück sehr oft ausgesetzt ist, ebenso willkürlich mit den Individuen zu schalten, als nur immer der selbstsüchtigste Despot, weil der Gegenstand von beider Bestrebungen in ihnen, nicht außer ihnen wohnt, und weil Jener, der seine Handlungen nach einem innern Geistesbilde modelt, mit der Freiheit anderer beinahe ebenso im Streit liegt als dieser, dessen letztes Ziel *sein eigenes Ich* ist. (NA, 22: 170).

Undoubtedly! if the character of Marquis von Posa had acted more honestly and had risen above his ignoble use of intrigue, he would have gained in beauty and purity. I also concede that this character was close to my heart, but what I deemed the truth was even closer. I consider true [...] that the most unselfish, pure, noble person out of enthusiasm for his idea of virtue and happiness is disposed to act just as highhandedly with individuals as the most selfish despot, because the objective of their aspirations rests within them and not outside of them, and because he, who models his actions according to his inner vision is almost as much opposed to the freedom of others as the one whose final goal is *his own self*.

Schiller makes the general claim that in order to defend a moral principle with conviction, one must identify with this principle. Once the subject internalizes his idea of virtue it becomes his personal ambition, and his inner conviction becomes so compelling that it is no longer possible for him to respect the freedom of others. Schiller's claim seems to differ from the Kantian assumption of an "objective" moral law because all ethical principles become part of subjective human actions and as such are far from impartial. What appears to be Posa's selfless pursuit of noble political ideals can also be viewed as a narcissistic striving for power, albeit in the name of a higher moral principle. Posa's action loses its sublime quality as soon as the pursuit of his moral principles becomes tied to his personal ambition. Schiller considers motivations that are derived from ideals of moral perfection "nicht natürlich im Menschenherzen" ("not natural in

the human heart”) (NA, 22:171). In Schiller’s view these motivations are extremely dangerous in human hands (“äußerst gefährlich in [menschlichen] Händen”) because individuals with a limited perspective tend to treat them as if they were universally true (NA, 22:171). It is even more dangerous if certain passions, such as hunger for power, egotism, and pride, play a role in the pursuit of these ideals of moral perfection, which seem almost inevitable according to Schiller (NA, 22:171).

This is why the effect of the sublime has to be represented as a purely spiritual conquest of one’s egotistical desire to live in the presence of an existential defeat. Posa’s taking responsibility for his intrigue by sacrificing himself for the idea of freedom would be an example that reveals a sublime frame of mind: “...um für sein [...] Ideal alles zu tun und zu geben, was ein Mensch für etwas tun und geben kann, das ihm das Teuerste ist” (“... to do anything for his ideal, and to offer everything that a human being can possibly offer for what is dearest to him”) (NA, 22:174). Even this action, however, cannot be considered entirely selfless because it is motivated by the intention to leave a lasting impression on others, as Schiller explains, citing the example of Lykurgus and the Spartans (NA, 22:174). Schiller de-emphasizes Posa’s sublimity by attributing his self-sacrifice to his emotional disposition. He cites Posa’s impetuous decision to rid himself of the guilt feelings over jeopardizing his best friend’s life (NA, 22:176-77). By portraying Posa’s actions as the result of his less than perfect personality he makes him appear more human but less sublime. The more Schiller fleshes out Posa’s character, the more his actions appear selfish. In contrast to maintaining a measured and reasonable attitude in the face of danger, which the sublime requires, Posa follows his spontaneous inclination “sich durch eine außerordentliche Tat, durch eine augenblickliche Erhöhung seines Wesens bei sich selbst wieder in Achtung zu setzen” (to regain his self-respect through an exceptional deed or an instantaneous aggrandizement of his very being”) (NA, 22:176). Consequently Posa’s actions are motivated less by the “selfless” sacrifice for his political ideals than by his desire to preserve his self-image. Posa’s like-minded brothers, Karl Moor and Fiesco, whose sublime character traits also become overshadowed by their political ambitions, illustrate the difficulty—if not impossibility—of separating self-interest from abstract moral principles. As soon as these protagonists identify with their political causes, they no longer act only in the interest of mankind but

also in the interest of their own personal aspirations. This is when lofty ideals suddenly become political instruments that serve the narcissistic goals of their purveyors. Schiller who, on the one hand, follows in Kant's footsteps by maintaining a moral distinction between selfish and unselfish actions, on the other hand, exposes this distinction between narcissistic and sublime motivations as a construct that is unsustainable in life. The tragic in Schiller's dramas is that the effort to realize the ideal is bound to fail. Some of Schiller's heroes and heroines, such as Karl Moor, Marquis Posa, Maria Stuart, and Joan of Arc accept their tragic fate, however, with great dignity, which leaves the audience with the impression of a sublime inner strength that does not falter in the face of death (NA, 3:235; NA, 6: 297-99; NA, 9:153; NA 9:314-15;). Neither the sublime nor narcissism is gender specific in Schiller's dramas. Just as it would be inaccurate to consider the sublime as limited to Schiller's male heroes, it would be inappropriate to associate narcissism with his women figures. As my analysis has shown, the sublime can be viewed as an attempt to establish both aesthetic and moral categories that transcend the limitations of the subjective point of view. To establish such an otherworldly point of view the sublime has to be in stark opposition to anything that depends on both human intentions and involuntary drives.

As stated at the beginning of this essay, both narcissism and the sublime are connected to bourgeois emancipation and the individual's liberation from absolutist spiritual authorities. The emergence of the sublime with its inherent criticism of narcissism can be regarded as the result of an underlying yearning for a spiritual haven that would grant a universal ethics and thus a promised stability, moral justice, and a perspective that transcends the exigencies of daily life in a rapidly changing world. The sublime can thus be interpreted as an attempt to imbue the secular subject with a spiritual dimension that, on the one hand, would enhance its value beyond its material existence and, on the other hand, would devalue physical life in light of the grandiose universal ideals worth dying for.

Schiller's plays are enactments of desperate attempts to reconcile these noble ideals with human needs and desires. The protagonists' willingness to sacrifice themselves for these ideals is intended to make the spectators aware of a sublime inner strength that allows them to overcome their existential fears and to uphold their ideals

in the face of death. Yet Schiller's presentations of the sublime reveal both its potentially repressive nature as well as its affinity to personal ambition. Schiller's art depends on the sublime because it is capable of expressing the tension between the two antagonistic spheres of human existence: the existential fear of death and the spiritual ability to overcome it. Schiller's explorations of the sublime then reveal that even the noblest ideals are in danger of being compromised by narcissistic motivations. The disclosure of the sublime's susceptibility to these motivations necessitates a widening of the gap between art and life to a point where art exposes its own artificiality, an artificiality that threatens to transform the sublime into irony.

¹ As Freud mentions in his essay “Zur Einführung des Narzißmus,” [“On Narcissism: An Introduction”] (Freud, *Studienausgabe* 3:41), Paul Näcke introduced the term.

² See, for instance, Johann Gottfried Herder’s poem, “Selbst,” [“Self”] which distinguishes a superficial and therefore narcissistic preoccupation with the self from sincere self-reflection about the moral character of the self (Herder 3:830-34).

³ Paul De Man would probably object to the coupling of these concepts of narcissism and the sublime for reasons similar to those that he invoked to criticize Schiller’s psychological (mis)reading of the Kantian sublime. Accordingly, Schiller uses Kant’s philosophical epistemic inquiry into “the structure of the imagination” for his own practical purposes as a playwright and by doing so psychologizes and trivializes Kant’s philosophical observations (141-42). De Man also claims that “the notion of danger occurs in Kant not as a direct threat of a natural force to our physical well-being” (139) and that Kant’s text “tells us nothing about self-preservation” (139). In section 28 on the dynamic-sublime Kant explicitly mentions, however, the mobilization of self-preservation (*Selbsterhaltung*) in view of nature’s overwhelming power (*unwiderstehlichen Macht*). De Man also finds “a total lack, an amazing, naïve, childish lack of transcendental concern in Schiller,” which my reading of Schiller’s dramatic enactments of the sublime proves to be unfounded. In contrast to De Man’s essay, which strives to protect the Kantian disinterested “critical philosophy” from the Schillerian goal-oriented Idealist ideology (147), my analysis views both Kant’s and Schiller’s notions of the sublime as cultural phenomena. My historically oriented perspective stresses the similarities rather than the differences of their notions of the sublime in the context of bourgeois emancipation. From this historical perspective the sublime and narcissism share basic underlying structures and the motivation to experience the self as an autonomous and unique entity.

⁴ The interest in the recipient’s affective reactions was the result of an increasing number of scientific studies that concerned themselves with the human subject’s emotional sensibilities. In the German context, one could mention the writings of Kant, Herder, Moses Mendelssohn, Ernst Platner, Karl-Philipp Moritz, Schiller, among others, all of which betray an intense interest in human psychology and anthropology. Zelle points out that the exploration of the human psyche and the self had already been announced in René Descartes study of the human passions (*Traité des passions de l’âme*; 1649).

⁵ Karl Philipp Moritz’s *Gnothi Sauton: Magazin zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde* (1783-93) was the first German scientific journal to explore the human soul.

⁶ Karl Philipp Moritz’s novel *Anton Reiser* depicts the protagonist’s difficulty to distinguish serious preoccupation with the self from mere self-indulgence.

⁷ In an essay, entitled “Über den Grund des Vergnügens an schrecklichen Gegenständen in der Ästhetik des achtzehnden Jahrhunderts”, Carsten Zelle refers to Richard Alewyn in explaining the emergence of the sublime as result of the advances in the sciences in the eighteenth century, which lead to nature’s increasing domestication. Accordingly, the sublime is an expression of nature’s demystification, as it signifies an overcoming of

the fear of nature. Yet, as Zelle points out, the emergence of the sublime is not only caused by a persisting subliminal fear of nature in spite of or even because of the technological advances of the Enlightenment but also by a conversion of fear into a desire for it (“Konversion von Angst in Lust”).

⁸ Kant, “Analytik des Erhabenen,” *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, ed. Gerhard Lehmann (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1986), 161. Future references to this source will be cited parenthetically in the text as (KU,); see also Schiller, “Vom Erhabenen,” *Schillers Werke. Nationalausgabe*. vol. 20 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1962), 184-85. Future references to these sources will be cited parenthetically in the text as KU (Kant) and NA (Schiller).

⁹ The translation is mine.

¹⁰ This and the following translations of passages from this source are mine.

¹¹ Walter Hinderer offers a deviating interpretation by analyzing the characters’ citation of literary sources. Accordingly, Schiller’s figures identify with illustrious characters from the Bible or Greek and Roman myths while the action of the play contradicts their wishful thinking. In Hinderer’s opinion Schiller’s multifaceted representation of the characters also shows their illusory perception of the world and themselves. Thus, one could read Karl’s murder of Amalia as the deed of an idealist who has lost touch with reality and no longer feels bound by secular justice.

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