Sublimity and human works:

Kant on tragedy and war

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"The salvation of States is in this world"

 —Richelieu

"…and history has not as yet provided us with any evidence that

the Prince of this world has changed his character"

 —Auden

Like poetry, philosophy is often experimental. A good poem is always an experiment, and the experiment's success is measured by the conviction it engenders in the audience. So, too, with philosophy. Instead of the word experimental, I might use the word constructive: both poetry and philosophy are constructions. That a poem or a piece of philosophy is a construction, or experimental, is an indication that in philosophy, as in poetry, we are always on this side of truth, despite the sometimes phatic styles of both philosophers and poets and the near religious reception each sometimes receives from his audience. I should make clear that what I mean when I use the word experiment is not that real world facts can prove a philosophy or a poem to be wrong. For instance, it is possible that no man has lived up to the demands of duty. In science this would prove the theory to be an inadequate description. In real life it merely means that no human being has proved himself to be perfect in virtue. Similarly if my love is no longer like a red red rose this is not an indication of failure on the part of the poem.

In philosophy, as in poetry, the construction or experiment is not defeated by bringing it into contact with the so-called real world. A construction can be defeated, in both cases, but only by another construction. Here we might go into some of the ways in which one construction overcomes, or leaves the field in favor of, another. That project would be a construction of literary criticism, which is like both poetry and philosophy. Some poetic constructions are not in conflict with each other; as is the case with the wave and particle theories of the propagation of light or a piece of shot silk, we are turning things or ourselves differently in each construction. But *Lear* is better than *Coriolanus*, just as Yeat's *Leda and the Swan* is better than any poem I have written, and probably better than every lyric published this month in *Poetry*. What works may be placed against each other in a field is another area of investigation for literary criticism, and literary criticism is something like science in this regard (phyla, genre).

In moral philosophy the field of the constructions in competition with each other is defined by the parameters of this question: ought a human being live this way? And in this field ought implies can; its opposite—ought not—does not imply cannot, however. In this field, turning ourselves and the constructions of philosophy under its particular light, we find that some pieces are more like *Lear*, some are minor scenes or divertimenti, and many are very bad pieces of work indeed. Here is one construction; tell me what you think.

Despite the fact that he claims that

if we are to give a suitable example of [a pure aesthetic judgement of the sublime] we must not point to the sublime in works of art, e.g., in buildings, statues and the like, where a human end determines the form as well as the magnitude, nor yet in things of nature that in their very concept import a definite end… but in rude nature (KU 253),[[1]](#endnote-1)

Kant admits that there are two kinds of human works that have something sublime about them, the work of the poet, e.g., tragedy, and the work of the politician, i.e., war.[[2]](#endnote-2) This paper will explore Kant's reasoning about the sublime element in these two human works.

The sublime, properly speaking, is a kind of delight at the accord, in a given intuition, of imagination with practical reason (KU 244). It arises indirectly, in that the imagination is checked by an intuition of limitlessness, formlessness, or exorbitant power ("an outrage on the imagination" KU 245), but this induces a feeling, whose source is the moral law, that we ourselves embody a finality independent of nature's rude limitlessness, formlessness or exorbitant power. A being without imagination (or without an imagination that can be outraged), like God, cannot feel the sublime, a being without the moral law, like a dog, cannot feel it either; each lacks one of the two faculties which are brought together in the reflective aesthetic judgement of sublimity.[[3]](#endnote-3) As Kant puts it,

in contemplation of [rude nature]… the mind abandons itself to the imagination and to a reason placed, though quite apart from any definite end, in conjunction therewith, and merely broadening its view, and it feels itself elevated in its own estimate of itself on finding all the might of imagination still unequal to its ideas (KU 256).

The reason Kant thinks rude nature is the source of the purest examples of judgements of the sublime is that "where a human end determines the form as well as the magnitude [or]… in things of nature, *that in their very concept import a definite end*" (KU 253, Kant's italics), the aesthetic judgement is mixed with a teleological judgement, which judgement in this case (of human art) would be determinant. Kant says that teleological judgements of objects in cases other than those in which a human end determines the form or which in their very concept import an end are reflective because they are only applied as *problematical estimates* working by analogy, but in works of human art we do not apply the teleological estimate of the work merely problematically, for we *know* that a work of human beings is constituted with a view to an end. We therefore estimate such works teleologically *in order to explain* them, and assuming that such an estimate was *constitutive* of the object, not merely regulative for our understanding of it (Cf. KU 360f).

Aristotle, for example, holds that the *telos* of tragedy is a catharsis of pity and fear; he can therefore make a *determinative* judgement about a work insofar as it meets or fails to meet this constitutive teleological principle. A tragedy aims to rouse certain of our powers; we can work out teleologically how this is accomplished. If the poem fails to rouse those particular passions, emotions and reactions, we determine that it is not a tragedy. Further, that *nexus finalis* is not only a possible explanation for the tragedy (as the hollow bones of a bird aim at flight), it is the true and proper explanation for such works of our hands. It is, on the contrary, a *nexus effectivus* which is problematical in the case of art. In rude nature things are precisely the reverse: a *nexus finalis* is only problematically assumed, the *nexus effectivus* is constitutive.

The first problem that raises itself if this understanding of Kant is so far correct, is how we can make reflective aesthetic judgements of works of art at all, since for them the teleological principle of understanding *is* constitutive and therefore calls up a determinate judgement based upon it—Aristotle's *Poetics*, e.g. Kant's sharp awareness of this problem is one reason he always prefers works of nature for his examples and arguments about aesthetic judgements. But the use of natural beauty merely makes the problem weightier by generalizing it to one about the relationship between reason and nature (noumena and phenomena). This problem is no minor one, then, but the figure of a difficulty that is central to both the *Critique of Judgement* and the critical philosophy as a whole. John Zammito[[4]](#endnote-4) puts it well:

Kant wished only to establish the *possibility* of immanent purpose…. If it were possible to promote this subjective possibility into an objective actuality, the consequences would be very serious for his whole system. The possibility of purpose in the world of nature was necessary to accommodate human ethical action, but it was not necessary to secure the validity of aesthetic experience. *Conversely*, the actuality of purpose in nature would destroy aesthetic freedom, and hence the whole possibility of beauty, by making it contingent upon nature. Even more profoundly, it would threaten human moral freedom, by making nature as a noumenal force immediately real to our consciousness (316).

Art seems to provide a perfect example of that converse, for it provides an aesthetic experience in which there is "actuality of purpose" in the work. Further, the definite intention fine art has is neither "mere sensation…accompanied with pleasure," (as the charming or the pornographic) nor the "production of a definite object [which] would only please by means of a concept" (KU 306) (as the morality play or the straightforwardly heuristic). Rather, the subjective play of our mental powers—imagination and reason—is the purpose:[[5]](#endnote-5) The work of art is made to *make* us move.

Kant, it seems, requires we forget that, for he says "the finality in the product of fine art, intentional though it be, must not have the appearance of being intentional" (KU 307). From the point of view of the artist, it seems as if he must intend the play of imagination with reason and hide this intention. From the point of view of the audience, it seems that we must be able to treat the work of art *as if* it were a work of nature, *as if* its striking up of a harmony in the free play of our faculties exhibits, like nature, a *possibility* of immanent purpose, and does not force its issue, playing our faculties like a marionette danced on the strings of necessity. If we consider art as made for the purpose of playing on our faculties then this "actuality of purpose" destroys our aesthetic freedom, and we would experience art not as an uplifting symbol of the moral, but as a disgusting enactment of our unfree pathological nature.

Kant's analysis of genius resolves this threat, for it shows that the work of art is indeed a work of nature, since it is through genius that nature gives the rule to art (KU 307).[[6]](#endnote-6) The free play of Beethoven's well educated faculties in composing the Ninth Symphony promotes a similar freedom in the faculties of the listeners. Genius "cannot indicate scientifically how it brings about its product, but rather gives the rule as *nature*" (KU 308). So the free play of the listener depends upon the free play of the composer, as an iron ring becomes magnetized when depending from a magnet.[[7]](#endnote-7)

While we may be suspicious of fine art, and of the artist, whose aim, as Aristotle said, is a catharsis of our pathological states—fear, pity, desire, sympathy[[8]](#endnote-8)—it seems Kant's remark about the sublimity of war falls under suspicion from another point of view. First the remark, then what is and what is not suspicious about its claim.

War itself, provided it is conducted with order and a sacred respect for the rights of civilians, has something sublime about it, and gives nations that carry it on in such a manner a stamp of mind only the more sublime the more numerous the dangers to which they are exposed, and which they are able to meet with fortitude. On the other hand, a prolonged peace favours the predominance of a mere commercial spirit, and with it a debasing self-interest, cowardice and effeminacy, and tends to degrade the character of the nation (KU 263).

Unlike the artist, we cannot suspect that the masters of war engage in their acts for the purpose of placing our faculties in free play. While war has aims, and those aims are constitutive of the act, and the judgement we make upon an act of war as such is whether or not and to what degree it succeeds in achieving its constitutive end—victory, the judgement of the sublimity of a war or its acts does not take note of that particular constitutive end. The judgement that there is something sublime in war is unquestionably legitimately reflective, not determined by teleology. We would regard a general who made his military decisions with regard to their probable effect in engendering the sublime in soldiers or historians as not being correct about the concept under which he is employed. On the other hand, we regard a tragedian who does not so consider as being equally confused about the concept.

If Kant is correct that there is something sublime in war, the difficulty, then, is not that we must take some human work *as* a work of nature, for war, according to Kant just *is* a work of nature. In the first supplement to *Perpetual Peace*, Kant discusses war as nature's way of populating the entire globe, saying that it seems "engrafted in human nature," and concluding his thoughts with "so much, then, of what nature does for her own ends with regard to the human race *as members of the animal world*" (26, my italics). In war man's theoretical and technical faculties are enlisted, as nations, under "one-sided maxims, applied by force" (PP 18).[[9]](#endnote-9) War, like sociology and history, reduces culture to nature. Men are used as machines (PP 4),[[10]](#endnote-10) and being translated to mechanism are understood, as nature is, entirely under mathematical and dynamical categories.[[11]](#endnote-11) It is in the face of such faceless power, it is against the impersonality of such mere magnitude, that an individual is aroused to a feeling of "respect for our own vocation…; and this feeling renders, as it were, intuitable the supremacy of our [moral] faculties … over the greatest faculty of sensibility" (KU 257). It is this which explains war's sublime aspect.

This story, as well, reveals the problem with considering it sublime, for in war our theoretical and technical powers are separated from their moral source. In war it is not just that human beings kill other human beings, but that in war humanity within the human being is made war upon—or, humanity makes war upon itself. Our speculative and technical powers attempt to subjugate the moral power to their un-unifiable ends and modern life is the proof that they have been largely successful, for everywhere we see technical brilliance applied without regard to moral purpose. The real is indeed the rational—the technically, speculatively, rational.[[12]](#endnote-12) Kant himself seems only to see the tip of this problem when he remarks that "the practice of hiring men to kill or to be killed seems to imply a use of them as mere machines and instruments in the hand of another (namely, the state) which cannot easily be reconciled with the right of humanity in our own person" (PP 4).

We should note that the work of the artist did not begin by neglecting the claim of other individual human beings to be members of the moral community, where the work of the politician and his general does. And it is not just the enemy that is treated as a mere weight or force in nature, but one's own are also just so many divisions of puissance, not individual autonomous beings worthy of respect. This is a misuse of our imagination, for rather than transfiguring the human being within nature into a member of a moral kingdom, war begins by disfiguring the human being into a piece of the machinery of nature—marring by starts the full course of glory. And if, in spite of this, there is something sublime in war, if war can arouse the feeling of our moral vocation, then the very next step that reason demands is our withdrawal from it,[[13]](#endnote-13) for *my* moral vocation has an explicit reference to *every other rational being* as an individual, and whether or not he, or she, recognizes it, I must, and study war no more.

This further step that the experience of the sublime moves us to is the step the politician absolutely cannot allow, for politics just is the use of force upon individuals for the ends of a state. The politician wants to have it both ways: the feeling of the sublime, without the moral claim. This is, of course, impossible, which is a word politicians of liberal democracies do not know, since they consider everything subject to compromise. It is, of course, possible to have the feeling of the sublime and *not want to consider* what the condition for its possibility is—and that is how the political compromise is worked out whenever a nation goes to war and calls it noble.

For once, Kant puts this problem and solution more colorfully:

Each individual is *compelled* to be, if not a morally good man, yet at least a good citizen. The problem of the formation of a state, hard as it may sound, is not insoluble, even for a race of devils, granted they have intelligence [and so are different from mere mechanistic nature, which never forms a state]…. [Founding a state] deals, not with the moral reformation of mankind, but only with the mechanism of nature; and the problem is to learn how this mechanism of nature can be applied to men, in order that…they may *compel* one another *to submit to the compulsory laws* and thus bring about the state of peace in which laws have *force* (PP 27f, my italics).[[14]](#endnote-14)

This is peace as the world gives it, and in order to give it certain recalcitrant devils must be given the perpetual peace suggested by Kant's opening image of that work—the peace of the grave (PP 1). This is the final solution of every state, and every state has its final solution.

Unfortunately, this devil, we have seen, is a permanent part of humanity, and of each of us scholars: It is the overweening pretension of theoretical reason to look on everything in the world as mere mechanism in a *nexus effectivus*, and treat it as such. That same theoretical power which imagines space shuttles and laser surgery, metaphysical systems and Turing machines, and can well nigh turn stones into bread is the same power which imagines human beings as so many weights and measures and forces to be moved and placed against each other in war. It is not only difficult to reconcile these imaginings with "the right of humanity in our own person," it is impossible, for the right of *humanity* is not solely *in* our own person,[[15]](#endnote-15) but in every other one as well, and war explicitly imagines it is not so. War is sublime when we see a man standing outside of it.[[16]](#endnote-16)

On the other hand, that further step from the feeling of the sublime to moral activity in the world is precisely the step the artistic genius allows us to take, and so it is that "the sublime, insofar as it belongs to fine art, may be brought into union with beauty in a tragedy in verse…and in this combination fine art is even more artistic" (KU 325). The sublime in art not only evokes moral feeling, it is also a symbol of the accomplishment of the moral end, and in fact, *in feeling* we are already in that state of accomplishment at the end of the play (thus is the beautiful the symbol of the moral), and the play encourages us to go forth and live in accord with that end by allowing us to feel it. If there is something sublime in war, it can only accomplish the first of these three—it evokes, without symbolizing or motivating moral action. If culture is "the ability to set any end whatsoever," art is the leaven, which raises culture to awareness of moral purpose. So it is that all of our ends, even the ends of art are essentially practical.

It seems, then, that while the work of the politician requires that others give themselves up to nature as he has mechanized it, and the work of the poet draws the audience to give themselves up into the work he has created, the poet must first give himself up to nature, while the politician is a purely teleological theoretician. The audience gives itself up to nature as it works through the pathé of genius—his sensibility and passions and constructive skill.[[17]](#endnote-17) The warrior gives himself up to nature mechanized by human techné. To speak like Kant, the audience and genius give themselves to feeling (aesthesis), the soldier to the toils of theoretical reason. We cannot say that one or the other of these works is more likely to achieve the end of evoking sublimity, for there are, no doubt, just as many bad poems and rightly unfinished symphonies as there are dead soldiers or morally maimed veterans. We can say pretty easily, however, which kind of failure is worse.[[18]](#endnote-18) Therefore the work of the artist is more important to humanity than the work of the scientist or politician, and both sorts of work are ordered and ranked by the only power that can judge of order or rank—the power that sets ends, practical reason.

This little article, then, has not only been a critique of reason in its theoretical use, but also the transcendental deduction of the truth that the pen is mightier than the sword. Even when rough and all unable. "In the absence of this critique," or in the lack of agreement about the success of this deduction, "reason is, as it were, in the state of nature, and can establish and secure its assertions and claims only through *war*" (A751/B779). I, respectfully, present this for your universal assent.

Notes

References

As much of the reference as possible I have kept in the text of the paper according to the usual scholarly conventions: Akademie pagination of Kant (except for *Perpetual Peace*); Bekker page for Aristotle. I have used the following abbreviations or translations:

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1. *The Critique of Judgement* (henceforth *KU*), translated by James Creed Meredith, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952): 253, *Akademie* pagination. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. *KU*: 325, for the remark on tragedy; 263, for the remark on war. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I should, perhaps, be slightly less quick here since Paul Guyer raises a problem around this issue in his *Kant and the Claims of Taste*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979). In "The Task of the Deduction" (264-268), he asks why Kant should have held that judgements of sublimity stand in no need of a deduction.

Tacitly equating reason in general with practical reason, Kant holds that since the judgement of the sublime relates the imagination to reason, we attribute necessity to this judgement "only under a subjective presupposition (which, however, we believe we are justified in having to impute to everyone), namely that of the moral feeling in mankind" (KU 266); with this, we attribute necessity to aesthetic judgements on the sublime. But even if we are justified in presupposing the existence of the faculty of reason in everyone else—and in equating reason as the source of moral feeling with reason as the source of limitless ideas in general—we must also assume that everyone has a similar faculty of imagination. The universal imputation of the judgement of sublimity presupposes that all persons have the same limits on their imagination, and that this faculty will interact with reason in the same way in the case of any given object.

But I think this problem is raised by science fiction examples. Suppose ameba have moral reason and imagination unifying their sensibility. Then for an ameba a 5 volt lamp (viewed from a position of relative safety) must raise the feeling of the sublime, for such a lamp is an overpowering threat to its existence. Kant, however, is thinking this way: *any* finite rational being must have an imagination, for it is imagination which unifies intuition (and a sensible intuition is the mark of finitude—ergo, God doesn't have one). Any being we can talk to about whether or not an experience is sublime must have a moral reason, or it would not have the concept of sublime. As Kant says, "the sublime is that, the mere capacity of thinking which evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense" (KU 250). The only beings which fit both qualifications are human. The picture of the man in front of the column of tanks on Tienanmen Square is sublime; someone who disagrees with us probably has no concept of tank; we would show him what they do to human bodies; he would agree with us. This exposition makes a deduction unnecessary. The ameba would argue in a similar fashion with other ameba. Human imaginations in regard to judgements of the sublime may be assumed to be similar because what threatens our faculty of sensibility *in toto* is the same for all of us. The formlessness of the weedlot (Guyer, *Taste*, 267) does not so affront our imagination. No imagination can keep up with a power of reason which assumes all of its divisions, extensions, shapes, forms as already completed and *proving nothing* about its power to set ends. Imagine a poker game between practical and speculative reason; speculative reason bets the entire universe and its whole causal network, and all its powers. Practical reason responds, I see you, and add "so what?" To this bet speculation has no response. This scene is played out in *Matthew* 4 and *Luke* 4.

In his most recent book, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom: Essays on aesthetics and morality*, Cambridge: University Press (1993) Guyer makes this point correctly: "The significance of the sublime lies in nothing less than its contrast between the greatest powers of nature and the even greater force of human practical reason" (264). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. John Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgement*. Chicago: University Press, 1992. The first italics in the following quote is Zammito's, the second is mine. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The beautiful is what pleases in the mere estimate formed of it in the free play of imagination and understanding, the sublime in an estimate born of imagination and reason. Kant's insistence on the reflective nature of these judgements has (yet again) recently been misinterpreted as peculiarly ascetic. (See, for example, Robin Schott, "Kant and the Objectification of Aesthetic Pleasure," *Kant-Studien* 80 (1989): 81-92.) However, as a later remark of Kant's indicates, this interpretation is not necessary. In §54 Kant says that the "essential distinction lies between *what pleases simply in the estimate formed of it* and what *gratifies* (pleases in sensation). The latter is something which, unlike the former, we cannot demand from everyone." Kant does not deny the pleasures of sensibility, nor does he deny that they are important, as his next sentences indicate: "Gratification…appears always to consist in a feeling of the furtherance of the entire life of man, and, hence, also of his bodily well-being, i.e., his health. And so, perhaps, Epicurus was not wide of the mark when he said that at bottom all gratification is bodily sensation" (331). The point is that sensual gratification and aesthetic pleasure are different, they are as different as the act of the man who does not commit suicide out of love for his life, and the act of the man who in adversity and hopeless sorrow wishes for death and yet preserves his life without loving it, from neither inclination nor fear, but from duty. Just as it is difficult to tell when a man is acting from moral motives (for everywhere we come upon the dear self), it is hard for finite beings to distinguish sensual gratification from beauty, since one of the powers at play in every judgement of beauty is sensibility. It is also sometimes difficult to tell the difference between love (if there is such a thing) and sexual satisfaction. At the end of *As You Like It* Audrey and Touchstone get as married as Rosalind and Orlando, but the cultured audience is supposed to feel something different is going on in the two cases, and that feeling is not supposed to be merely sensual (firmer breasts, sweeter lips). Touchstone is a material fool and reduces all the marriages to what his is: purely sensual, the touching of stones, country copulation. If you want to make a distinction between the beautiful and the gratifying you have to consider the sensual from a point of view *not of its own devising*, just as we must, in judging the moral worth of our choices, separate moral from pathological motives even though these are never found apart. If we do not distinguish the gratifying and the beautiful the way Kant does, then we are with Epicurus, and of him Kant says he "only misunderstood himself in ranking intellectual and even practical delight under the head of gratification" (KU 331). Kant's understanding is *either* this distinction (pleasing simply in the estimate formed vs. pleasing in sensation) *or* Epicurus. If this be asceticism and on me proved, I never writ, nor no man ever loved. Nor no woman neither.

A more historical response to Ms. Schott's problem might be run out of Salim Kemal, *Kant and Fine Art: An Essay on Kant and the Philosophy of Fine Art and Culture*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986): 98-105. I can summarize the application I mean by saying that if her problem is true of art in Kant, then Schiller's Fichtean explanation is the proper understanding of art, but neither antecedent nor consequent is true. Or, where she might like to conclude that beauty is an ideal for man, Kant argues that man is an ideal of beauty (Cf. Kemal, 103). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For a finely detailed account of how Kant's analysis of genius solves this problem see Salim Kemal, *Kant and Fine Art: An Essay on Kant and the Philosophy of Fine Art and Culture*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986): Chapter 2, "The Production of Fine Art." [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Plato's *Ion* 536. This dialogue is sorely disrespected in the history of philosophy. It broaches the problem Kant is dealing with in the third *Critique*, and Socrates's poem about inspiration figures Kant's answer. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. I am here assuming that *Poetics II* saw comedy as built around desire and sympathy as *Poetics I* saw pity and fear the central charge of tragedy. It is, in any case, true of Shakespeare's comedies. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. ["Second definitive article" of the Second Section, final paragraph.] [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. [First Section, article 3.] [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. It is for this reason that (unlike later German philosophers) Kant says "the question of right is never decided" by war (PP 16). War is not a moral enterprise, but a mechanical one. It is not a working out of Reason's ownmost ends, which are one and all practical, but the reduction of them, *against which* practical reason, whose voice in this context is not beautiful but sublime, calls out our true end. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. For a longer discussion of this point see my *For What may I Hope: Thinking with Kant and Kierkegaard* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), "De reductione scientiae ad bonos mores" in chapter 1. Technical rationality divorced from its final cause, morality, has intermediate finalities—make this work better—but no ultimate finality, and as Aristotle said, such "a process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain" (1094a20). It is possible that the mechanism we call a universe will extend itself in all directions infinitely, and as such it is a figure of purposelessness, but if a human being is so, it is because he made himself so. A physical universe is empty and vain, a moral being is the image of God—autonomously purposeful even though finite. We must make ourselves empty and vain—or not. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Hemingway's short story "Under the ridge" has a scene which seems to fit this point. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. [First Supplement, under number 1.] [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. As Paul Guyer says, "The respect for our own vocation which [the experience of the sublime] reveals is not a form of self-aggrandizement, for it is not a reason for one human being to think himself superior to any other" (*Kant and the Experience of Freedom: Essays on aesthetics and morality*, Cambridge: University Press, 1993). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. So, an unarmed civilian confronting a column of tanks. This may be the place to comment more fully on the status of Kant's remark that war has an aspect of sublimity "provided it is conducted with a sacred respect for the rights of civilians." What war is that? The war in the history books of the victors; and if there is any real war that has been fought with that sacred respect I should like to know on what distant planet it was accomplished. Yes, there is something sublime about Leonidas and his 300 Spartans, but when we imagine that, there is much that we do not imagine. Aeschylus, who fought against those very Persians, begins to imagine this less than sublime other in the oldest extant tragedy of the West. Further, we can make a judgement of the sublime only when we are in a position of relative safety—a study, a history book, a movie theatre—when we are not, it is simply horrible, fearful, and bloody, and as Kant himself says "no one would wish to have occasion for it, not even once in his life, or perhaps would even desire life itself in such circumstances" (KpV 88). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Precisely how Kant thinks a genius can both be moved by nature and yet be constructing as a human being, i.e., that it is neither determinations of reason's ideas nor transcendental nature guiding his naive Schillerian pen, is a dark topic. There are some very insightful suggestions, with convincing examples, in Kemal, chapter 2. The process of making a work of art is one "in which we do not follow rules because we only make piecemeal decisions as we proceed" (41). Kemal's remarks (about painting) remind me of William Stafford's, on writing poetry. See particularly "Capturing 'People of the South Wind,'" "The end of a golden string," and "The practice of composing in language" in *Writing the Australian Crawl* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1978). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. It is not, then, a failure of genius which is "more than ordinarily dangerous," as Timothy Gould claims in "The Audience of Originality: Kant and Wordsworth on the Reception of Genius," in Cohen and Guyer (eds.), *Essays in Kant's Aesthetics* (Chicago: University Press, 1982): 186. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)