

# 17 The Sublime Clara Mather

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Many philosophers believe that art can be morally improving, not just adventitiously, but in a way closely related to its function as art. Most of the examples marshaled in support of this thesis are narrative art. This is hardly surprising given that defending such a thesis will usually involve locating something like a moral insight in the work. And that is much easier to do for a novel than a Beethoven piano sonata or a Rothko multiform. This is all well and good, but it does raise a question about the generality of the thesis. Can only those works of art that resemble moral philosophy in certain crucial respects enlighten their audiences? In this paper I want to push the boundaries of this thesis by presenting a case for the moral capabilities of a non-narrative genre: portraiture.

Portraits depict persons. They depict, in Kant's words, 'the subject of a morally practical reason,' a subject who 'possesses a dignity' whereby it 'exacts respect from all other rational beings in the world' (6:435).<sup>1</sup> This fact presents obvious moral hazards. A portrait may exploit, humiliate, belittle, defame, or objectify its subject.<sup>2</sup> But it also offers moral opportunities. In this chapter I consider the possibility that our aesthetic engagement with portraits may share certain qualities with the attitude of respect that Kant says persons merit, and indeed that it may inspire an especially potent version of this attitude.

## Respect and the Sublime

My suggestion has a natural home in the moral program of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. This program is guided by two thoughts. First, moral perfection requires the cultivation of feelings conducive to the duties imposed by pure practical reason. Second, aesthetic experience can assist this cultivation.<sup>3</sup> One particularly important role for the aesthetic is rooted in a kinship between respect and the sublime. Morally worthy actions, Kant says, are motivated by respect. As a motive, respect – '*reverentia*' he calls it – is a 'moral feeling' that follows from our consciousness of our ability to act independently of our sensible nature (6:402). It is a complicated feeling that involves both the 'humiliation' of inclinations arising

from self-love by the recognition that they do not have the authority we commonly attribute to them. And it is a feeling of exhilaration at the prospect of transcending our sensible nature through the use of reason (5:117). The moral feeling of respect therefore involves both the pain of humiliation and pleasure at the prospect of transcendence. In this respect, it is closely related to feelings of the sublime. The sublime combines a feeling of exhilaration at reason's elevation over nature with the pain of recognizing the insuperable shortcomings of certain parts of ourselves (our imagination in the case of the 'mathematically' sublime and our bodies in the case of the 'dynamically' sublime) (5:259). Indeed, it seems plausible that for Kant the 'moral sublime' is the basic form of that feeling, the one that somehow underwrites the more familiar examples of sheer cliffs and ominous clouds.<sup>4</sup>

Kant thinks that human beings have an inborn capacity to be motivated by the feeling of respect, but that this motive remains feeble without cultivation. The functional and phenomenological similarities between moral feeling and the sublime suggest an enticing possibility. Could feelings of the Kantian sublime somehow be used to cultivate feelings of respect? And if they could, can aesthetic objects be constructed that are particularly robust in this respect?<sup>5</sup>

But any attempt to answer these questions quickly runs into a problem concerning the objects of respect, a problem arising from the difference between respect for *my own* rational capacity and respect for *other persons*. Monument Valley inspires feelings of sublimity because in viewing it I recognize the inability of my imagination to complete the task of comprehension that reason sets for it when confronted with something so massive (5:250). This is both a feeling of humiliation and superiority. Respect involves the same awareness in a different guise. It is a feeling of the superiority of reason in its practical 'vocation' over the motivational part of our sensible nature – our sensuous wants, desires, and inclinations (5:257). But this feeling is very much attached to my own powers, and so we might ask what it has to do with the sense of respect that is more obviously of moral significance: respect for *other persons*.

Kant's answer to this question rests on two major pillars of his moral philosophy. First, the moral law is the supreme principle of any free and rational creature, so respect for reason's superior vocation is *eo ipso* respect for the moral law. Second, the moral law is a principle of respect for the dignity of humanity, so respect for the moral law will entail respect for persons *qua* legislators of practical law. As David Velleman (2006, p. 81) puts it,

Reverence for the law, which has struck so many as making Kantian ethics impersonal, is in fact an attitude toward the person, since the law that commands respect is the ideal of a rational will, which lies at the heart of personhood.

For Kant, then, there is a strong reciprocal relationship between our own free and rational nature, the moral law as an abstract principle, and the respect we owe other rational creatures. This is how respect for our own rational vocation is supposed to lead to respect for other persons.

But once more there is a basic problem. Even if Kant is right about these constitutive connections between my own power of reason, the moral law, and respect for other persons, why should we expect a *feeling* to be transferrable across them? That is, even if these claims are true about ‘respect in the practical sense’ – about the duties of respect we have and their source in practical reason – this by no means assures us that there are motivational correlates. It does not show that the feeling of awe produced by beholding the superiority of *one’s own* rational nature will lead to a cognate feeling attaching to *other* instances of this nature, nor that it will produce a motive to treat those instances with the respect they merit. So even if Monument Valley gives us a ‘moral feeling’ of our ‘vocation of the mind that entirely oversteps’ the domain of nature, and even if this vocation ultimately *entails* duties of respect for other persons, it is hard to see how it will tend to produce a distinctive *feeling* of respect for those persons. Now Kant may be happy with this, happy to do without a distinctive feeling of respect for other persons. Maybe it’s enough to have this feeling toward the moral law within and then work out what that law demands of us. But it does seem like a problem for any hope that experiences of the sublime can cultivate feelings that are moral in the more familiar sense of being directed at others.

This point raises a thorny question. What would a feeling of respect for another person even be? On the picture we have been working with, it would have to be something like a feeling of sublimity attaching to another person: a feeling of elevation and humiliation before someone else’s self rather than our own. But is this kind of feeling possible? Kant is dubious. ‘Sublimity is not contained in anything in nature,’ he says, ‘but *only in our mind*, insofar as we can become conscious of being superior to nature within us and thus also to nature outside us’ (5:264). Properly speaking, then, it is not Monument Valley that is sublime, but our own mind’s activities. There are two possible explanations for this conclusion. One is that Monument Valley is a bunch of big rocks, and so not something that could actually have the powers associated with sublimity. But this problem doesn’t apply to other persons. They have the same rational and intellectual capacities that we do, so attributing sublimity to them shouldn’t amount to the same kind of category mistake as attributing it to a big rock. The second problem is one of access. Our rational nature is a ‘supersensible’ faculty, and so not accessible in the ways ordinary empirical knowledge is. We have a special, first-hand experience of the activities of our own rational nature, since we are the ones performing those activities. But this is obviously not possible for other people. So it’s not clear how we could experience another person as sublime since it’s

not clear how we could have any aesthetic experience of their supersensible nature at all. This, I think, is the fundamental obstacle to any hope of using aesthetic experience to cultivate feelings of respect for other persons: we simply can't experience the appropriate aspects of those persons in the ways required to have such feelings.

There may be a way around this obstacle. Art is famously capable of reshaping and redirecting aesthetic reactions in novel and unexpected ways. In particular, it seems to have the ability to communicate ideas that are otherwise ineffable. Kant himself remarks on this:

The poet ventures to make sensible rational ideas of invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, the kingdom of hell, eternity creation, etc., as well as to make that of which there are examples in experience, e.g., death, envy, and all sorts of vices, as well as love, fame, etc., sensible beyond the limits of experience, with a completeness that goes beyond anything of which there is an example in nature.

(5:314)

Here Kant suggests that art (especially but not exclusively poetry) can 'make sensible' otherwise obscure ideas. Later I will say something about why Kant thinks art can do this. But for now, this apparent power gives us a way to move forward. We can investigate the possibility that works of art and their characteristic manipulation of aesthetic responses can somehow bridge the gulf between our aesthetic faculties and other persons in a way that makes possible an experience of those persons as sublime.

### The Sublime Dr. Gross

What sort of art should we consider in this endeavor? Portraits are an obvious choice because they depict persons. And rather than casting about for good examples, I propose to confine myself to a single *oeuvre* that I think will serve our interests well – the portraiture of Thomas Eakins.

Let's begin with a propaedeutic example, Eakins's famous *Gross Clinic* (See Figure 17.1). In the center of the painting Dr. Gross stands serene in harsh, white light holding a scalpel stained red with blood. The blood comes from a large incision in the milky leg of a prone and contorted patient. Over Gross's shoulder a woman hides her face behind a clenched hand. Rows of spectators recede into dimness toward the top of the painting. The initial impression of the painting is likely to be confusion.

With all its clarity, *The Gross Clinic* is not easily read at first glance; it has elements of enigma. The center of the action, the patient is almost hidden; his face is covered by the anesthetist's cloth, and all that is visible of his body is his left buttock and thigh and his sock-covered feet; it takes a little time before one realizes what the doctors

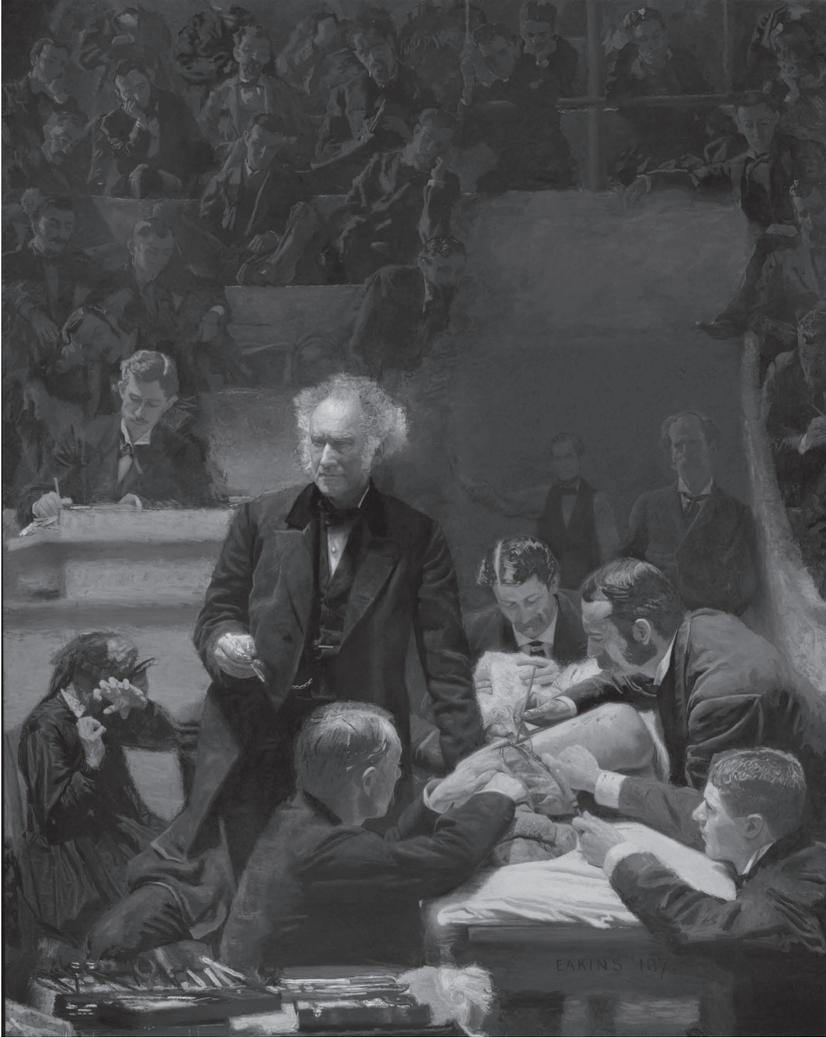


Figure 17.1 *The Gross Clinic* (1875).

are working on. Also there is a half-hidden figure behind Dr. Gross; at the latter's left appears a hand holding a retractor in the incision, and on the surgeon's right are the elbow, thigh, and knee of this figure.

(Goodrich 1982, vol. I, p. 124)

This confusion about the literal action of the scene is exacerbated by the painting's competing foci. Consider one natural circuit about the painting. The eye is likely first drawn to the flurry of activity emerging

from the red-on-white stain on the patient's thigh. This is an unpleasant, almost nauseating sight: flesh spread apart by iron retractors, a mysterious wooden instrument stained pink, and a foreshortened body that we have difficulty placing in space. So as quickly as the eye is led to this spot, it is driven away. It is probably next attracted to another patch of red on white, this one connected to Dr. Gross's bloody hand. This image is also unpleasant, but in a different way. The glossy blood extending up from the glint of the scalpel's blade and the relaxed pose of the hand are menacing, especially in the context of our experience with the thigh. We avert our eyes again. Along the same horizontal line we find the cowering woman, whose bony hands embody the terror-struck anxiety we just experienced upon seeing the bloody thigh. Our eyes move again. But now there is nowhere to go but up, and we find only dullness and obscurity. The crisp realism of the bottom of the painting dissolves into amorphous bodies of gray and umber. These bodies are audience members, of course, and our eyes are inclined to follow their gaze and rejoin the sharpness below. This takes us back to the unpleasant scene on the operating table.

There is one place of calm in the painting. And that is Gross's head. It is bright white, nearly the same color as the patient's thigh, but because it is not highlighted by red, the viewer only finds their way to it after making a circuit through the rest of the painting. This part of the painting is neither shocking nor obscure, and so the eye can linger over it to discover an assured face and wise forehead. The head puts the bloody scalpel into new perspective: it's not sinister, but skillful. Even though he is slightly off-center and not the first thing the viewer is drawn too, Gross is the scene's center of gravity and brings an order to it, both pictorially and thematically.

Whether everyone's eye takes this route doesn't matter much. The important point is about the combination of fascination, discomfort, and reassurance in the painting. This combination smacks of the vibration between attraction and revulsion that is characteristic of the sublime.<sup>6</sup> It is, Michael Fried (1987, p. 65) says, 'at once painful to look at' and yet 'all but impossible, hence painful, *to look away from*.' Beholding the prone patient, the bloody wound, and the cowering woman as we try to make sense of a confused scene, we become distinctly aware of our 'physical powerlessness.' On the other hand, our perception of Gross and the way his expertise elevates him above all this agony and confusion reveals a capacity that is 'superior' to nature<sup>7</sup> (5:261).

The painting inspires feelings of the sublime. But I want to suggest something slightly stronger than this. Not only do we experience the painting as sublime, but we experience Dr. Gross *himself* as sublime. By this I mean a few things. First, there is an obvious source of the fearsome power that prompts the revulsion that makes up half of this sublime experience – the man in the picture holding a scalpel. There is also an obvious source of the power that underwrites the attractive feeling of

superiority that constitutes the other half of sublimity's vibration, the man with the calm countenance and intellectual forehead. And these two sources are one and the same. So even if Kant is right that the proper objects of my feelings of sublimity are my own rational and sensible natures, when it comes to *The Gross Clinic* they have an obvious point of resonance within the portrait.

Second, Eakins's 'uncompromising realism' suggests a transparency to the painting that inclines us to think that we are looking *through* the canvas and seeing these qualities in Dr. Gross himself.<sup>8</sup> This impression is accomplished in part by context clues. The painting was originally called *Portrait of Professor Gross*, and many viewers know something about its connection with the medical college where Gross was a professor. This may dispose them to assume the painting depicts an actual operation. But much of the effect is due to Eakins's technique. Eakins's paintings record both minutiae and blemishes, which suggests an extraordinary diligence in capturing every aspect of a scene accurately. 'I never knew of but one artist,' says Walt Whitman, 'and that's Tom Eakins, who could resist the temptation to see what they think ought to be rather than what is.'<sup>9</sup> Eakins was also exceptionally good at giving a sense of the mass of bodies and exhibiting the tangibility of persons, a skill acquired from his unusually extensive anatomical training.<sup>10</sup> And he was an early adopter of photography as an aid to his painting, which allowed him to create novel effects that made critics wonder whether his paintings were in fact photographs.<sup>11</sup> This suggestion of transparency is crucial because it leads us to presume the ultimate source of the feelings of sublimity surrounding the image of Dr. Gross must be the man himself, and thus to experience *that man* as sublime.

This is the sense in which I think the painting gives us an experience of Dr. Gross as sublime. In this respect, *The Gross Clinic* is an excellent example of art that can present another person as sublime. But in another respect, the example is less than perfect. I was interested in the possibility that feelings of respect for the rational nature of others may be cultivated by the experience of those others as sublime. But the power that produces the exhilaration we feel in surveying this painting is related to, as I put it, Gross's intelligence, expertise, and skill.<sup>12</sup> These characteristics may presuppose Gross's humanity – his rational nature – but they are not identical to it. Likewise, we may wonder whether the painting inspires the right kind of respect – whether it leads us to recognize Dr. Gross as a moral equal, or merely to hold a high opinion of his abilities.<sup>13</sup> So the respect that *The Gross Clinic* fosters is only questionably of the right species and directed at the right target. This leaves us in search of other examples.

### The Depths of Humanity

As I suggested just a moment ago, Eakins is commonly understood as a paragon of mimetic fidelity. Nonetheless, I want to suggest that his

paintings exhibit an important kind of indeterminacy. These effects are highly restrained and selective, but in concert with the exactness that otherwise characterizes his portraits, they produce an important effect. We've already seen one instance of this indeterminacy in Gross's audience. We see it again in another prominent painting, *William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River*. The ostensible subject of this painting is barely visible amidst cavernous shadows, while, scandalously, his model's discarded clothes occupy the bright and detailed foreground. We find a more tempered version of this effect in Eakins's more traditional portraits.

Consider the boundary between Walt Whitman and the background on the right side of his portrait (See Figure 17.2). The near continuity of color makes it almost unlocatable. At the top the brushstrokes change weight and direction, and this gives us a hint of the boundary and invites us to look harder. But as we look further down his shoulder even this disappears. It is as if Whitman is dissolving into the shadows at the lower right side of the painting – an effect that is especially startling when compared to the bright and intricate lacework we find on his collar. The same contrast – bright pellucidity in one part of the painting, shadowy and obscured boundaries in another – is repeated in some of Eakins's most celebrated portraits: the billowy hair of Clara Mather, the shadows about Maud Cook's head, the sloping shoulders of Letitia Jordan Wilson (See Figure 17.3).

This effect serves two purposes. First, it puts the viewer in an inquisitive frame of mind: we are aware that not everything in the painting is being disclosed forthrightly, and we become more active in our engagement. Second, it leads the viewer to focus on the parts of the painting that *are* clear – for example, on the subjects' faces.

This second consequence introduces a more significant kind of obscurity. At least since the Renaissance, it has been commonplace that a good portrait discloses an 'inner' self – the sitter's 'essence,' 'air,' or 'depth of personality.' But what is this 'inner' self? Philosophers and artists have given us a handful of conceptions. Cynthia Freeland (2010, pp. 74–118), for example, shows how notions of attaching, respectively, to a sitter's body, her emotional and 'reflective' life, her moral character, and her relations to others have informed portrait-painting. I don't want to deny that any of these things are part of a subject's 'real' self, especially if this means saying that they are somehow part of a false self. But I do think there are good reasons to posit a self that lies behind all these things: a subject that possesses the forms of selfhood that Freeland describes without being identical to any conglomeration of them.

We might worry that even if we believe in such a self, there is no way to adequately represent it. Kant for one believes in this kind of self, but he thinks that it is essentially unknowable. We can designate it 'transcendentally' – as the thing that makes our body, our thoughts, our

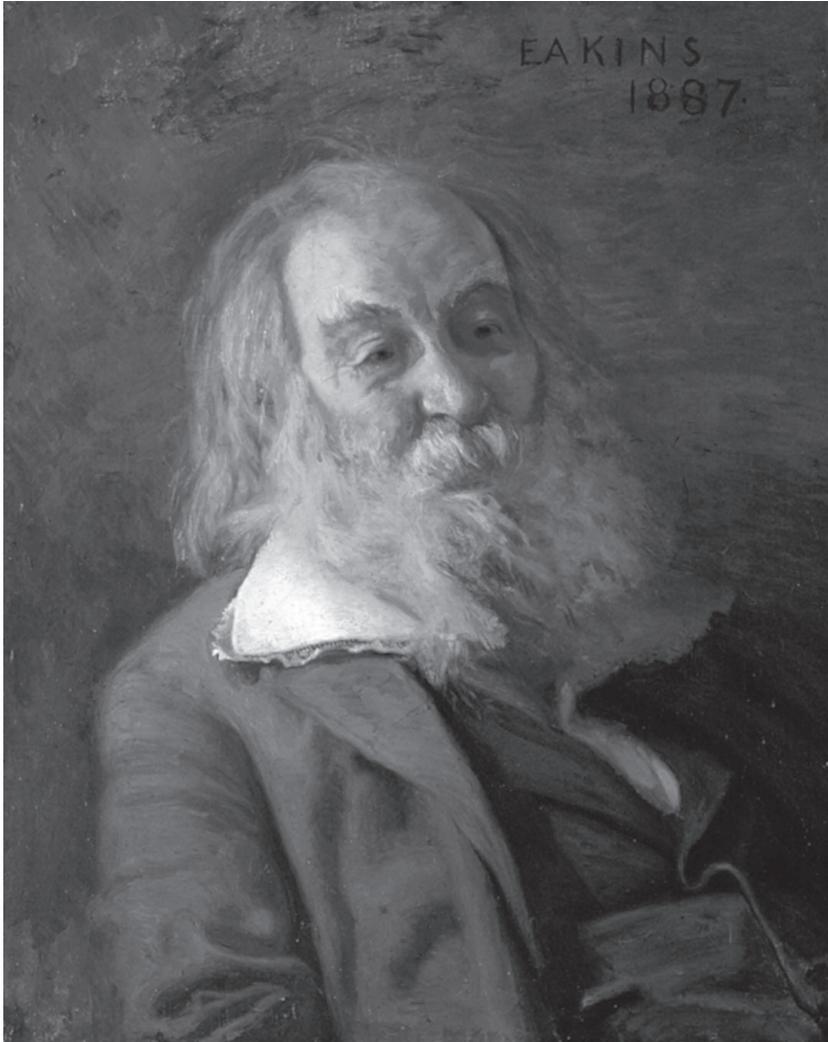


Figure 17.2 Walt Whitman (1888).

feelings, and our character ours – but ‘without noting in it any quality whatsoever – in fact, without knowing anything of it either directly or by inference’ (A355). On this point, however, our thought about the revelatory powers of art are once more relevant. For even if Kant is right that this deep self is not properly knowable, this needn’t mean that art cannot give us an *idea* of it, as it gives us ideas of ‘invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, the kingdom of hell.’



*Figure 17.3 Clara (1900).*

This, very roughly, is what I want to propose Eakins does. His subjects are distinguished by a kind of ‘psychological depth’ so pronounced that they resist psychological interpretation, a resistance that registers as psychological indeterminacy. This isn’t to say that his subjects are opaque or affectless, but that they are presented in a way that suggests multiple psychological interpretations and the ultimate inadequacy of each of them. In this way, they intimate a ‘deep’ self that lies irremediably beyond our powers of comprehension.

Look again at Whitman. The old man's heavy-lidded eyes are open wide and fixed on some point out of the scene. But because his mouth is completely covered by his beard – which is itself obscured in the shadows on the right side of the painting – it's impossible to say whether his expression is one of wonderment, mirth, surprise, or something else. Instead, the expression suggests a kind of unspecific openness. The beard itself is surprisingly variegated in color and shape. In some places it is the noble white beard of the philosopher, at others the yellow scruff of a hobo. Whitman definitely looks old, but the specific valence of this appearance vacillates between the self-assuredness of the venerable sage and the weariness of a weather-beaten crank. This portrayal is apt in its way, of course, since Whitman is very much all these things. As his most quoted lines have it: 'Do I contradict myself?/Very well then I contradict myself,/(I am large, I contain multitudes.)' In this portrait Eakins makes an attempt to capture these multitudes – not just by portraying a host of different aspects of Whitman, but by presenting the indeterminacy of a soul that contradicts itself.

Now consider Clara Mather. Her eyes look up and away from the viewer, giving a strong initial impression of wistfulness. But her mouth lies flat, her lips relaxed in calm contentedness. Or perhaps resolve. Her head is tilted, but just barely. Her long, graceful neck is still, and shoulders sit upright and poised. This position makes our initial suggestion of longing seem unsustainable. This is not a rueful woman, but one who is quietly resolute. Then again, perhaps her equanimity is just a façade, a stiff upper lip in the face of inner sorrow. The point is that it's not clear.

In *Head of a Cowboy* the viewer's eyes are immediately attracted to two things: the cowboy's fine costume, complete with fringe and wide-brimmed hat, and his cornflower blue eyes looking off, like Clara Mather, into the distance. This, we are led to think, is a cowboy yearning to be out on the range. But this impression is belied by his reclined posture, the softness around his eyes, and the mouth hidden behind whiskers. Maybe he is cowboy of stoic resignation? Maybe he has made his peace with the dark place in which he sits? Maybe he has given up? Once again, we are led to consider a handful of different basic interpretations, but none of them seem ultimately satisfactory.

Maud Cook has the thoughtful, slightly wistful expression we see in many of Eakins's subjects. She appears calm and self-possessed. But this impression is also thrown into question by further inspection. Her hair is a little untidy, fluttering up and away from its bindings. Her dress shows just enough wrinkling to create a tiny shadow suggestive of cleavage and disclose slightly more of her clavicle than we might expect. And then there is the large, dramatic shadow across the left side of her face. These things suggest something hidden beneath the veneer of composure. What it is, exactly, isn't obvious, but, once more, we are drawn into trying to figure out what it might be.

The portrait of Henry O. Tanner shows another thoughtful figure. But he is not completely at ease. In fact, he seems leery: his eyes are not completely aligned, as the left one appears to be trying to peer over his shoulder. What is he looking for? Tanner was Eakins's student and one of the first African American painters to gain an international reputation. This knowledge may suggest some ideas to the viewer, but they're just guesses. Tanner is reclined and his chin turned down in a position suggesting rumination, but his body seems strangely stiff. The impression the viewer is left with is a man poised between meditation and defensiveness. But *why* he appears so – what weighs on his mind – is left mysterious.

I am suggesting that these portraits exhibit a kind of psychological indeterminacy that produces a coordinate mysteriousness about their subjects.<sup>14</sup> Were Eakins a different sort of painter, we might attribute this indeterminacy to an expressive intervention on the part of the artist, conclude there's no fact of the matter, and lose interest. But Eakins's realism forestalls this reaction. The suggestion of transparency I described before makes us much more apt to impute the indeterminacy we find in these faces *not* to stylistic interventions by the painter but to the subjects *themselves*. When I am drawn into Kokoschka's *Martha Hirsch*, I do not experience it as an inquiry into Martha Hirsch, but into Kokoschka, his vision, style, and technique. This inquiry may prove informative about Martha Hirsch, but only second-hand, by offering a certain perspective on her. With Eakins, we have an experience of disclosure of the person herself. Eakins's realism therefore serves an important purpose. It inclines us to think that there is some fact of the matter about what Whitman, Clara Mather, Maud Cook, Henry O. Tanner, and the blue-eyed cowboy think and feel that somehow remains mysterious to us.

I don't want to claim that these selective obscurities are unique to Eakins. (Indeed, Gombrich (1945, p. 6) identifies a similar effect in Gainsborough's *Perdita*.)<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, a contrast with one of Eakins's contemporaries may help us appreciate these effects as deliberate aesthetic choices rather than a generic feature of portraits. For we see none of these things in John Singer Sargent's portraits. (Maybe this is too strong: we don't see them in *many* Sargent portraits.) *Mrs. Hugh Hammersley* is handsome and well-executed, but there isn't any mystery about it. The painting is all brightness and clarity, and Mrs. Hammersley herself has the unmistakable look of someone getting up to put the kettle on. *Lord Ribblesdale* is tastefully rendered, but when we look at the baron's face, we see a man who has had no more than four thoughts about anything other than fox hunting in his whole life.

Supposing I am right in my readings of these paintings, what follows? Burke (1757, part II, sections IV-V) suggests that obscurity is a source of feelings of the sublime. 'It is our ignorance of things that causes all our

admiration, and chiefly excites our passions,' he says. 'Knowledge and acquaintance make the most striking causes affect but little.' By contrast

hardly anything can strike the mind with its greatness, which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity; which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds; but to see an object distinctly, and to perceive its bounds, is one and the same thing. A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea.

William Gilpin's (1791, p. 252) remarks on the subject are less famous, but equally astute. 'What we call sublime,' he says, 'is that heat and fermentation which ensues in the imagination from its ineffectual efforts to conceive some dark, obscure idea beyond its grasp.'

Kant offers no explicit discussion of obscurity, but with some care I think we can understand the experience of viewing Eakins's portraits in terms of the mathematical sublime. Like the dynamical sublime, the mathematical sublime involves an awareness and feeling of superiority in the supersensible power of reason and a humiliation of our sensible nature. But in this instance, that humiliation involves the imagination's limitations in the face of objects that are 'great beyond all comparison.' These objects – the pyramids, 'shapeless mountain masses' – overwhelm our powers of comprehension. Reason puts to us the task of fitting these appearances into the orderly system governed by the standards of cognition. Imagination and understanding strive to complete this task. The mathematical sublime is a mixture of displeasure at the inevitable failure of this striving and pleasure in the power of reason to set such a task in the first place.

I propose that we experience the mystery of Eakins's portraits in a similar way: as a task we feel compelled to undertake but quickly recognize to be impossible. After a few minutes of striving to see our way into the mind of Clara Mather we come to realize that these mysteries are unsolvable. Not because she is too *large*, but because she is, so to speak, *too deep*. We are not going to be able to ascertain the totality of this person by examining the painting. Even if we had a decade to gaze on the portrait and entertain evermore elaborate stories about Clara Mather and who she is, there would always be some remainder – a lingering feeling that there is something *beyond* what we have explained, something lying *behind* the selves that our best psychological explanations can hope to capture. Our powers of understanding are simply not up to this task of grasping Clara Mather.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, we cannot ascertain the personal totality of Mrs. Hammersley or any other sitter either. But there's a crucial difference. *Mrs. Hugh Hammersley* offers no spur to seek such totality. We find a friendly face but are untempted to think we can know her in a deeper way; it's just a

picture after all. But if I am right about the effect of Eakins's portraits, we are drawn into *Clara* – and Clara Mather – in exactly this way. Eakins's combination of realism and obscurity presents us with a problem that we simultaneously feel we must solve by producing ever more exhaustive psychological stories about Clara Mather but also recognize, implicitly, as hopeless. In this experience depth is revealed.

Kant says that in recognizing the inadequacy of the imagination's efforts we are acquainted with an idea of something that is not merely comparatively great – something that may be cognized by a more or less extensive activity of the imagination – but *absolutely great*. This is an idea of infinity. Thus nature 'is sublime in those of its appearances the intuition of which brings with them the idea of its infinity' (5:251). *Clara* also presents us with such an idea. We experience Clara Mather as not only 'deeper' than what can be ascertained by looking, but as incomparably, infinitely deeper. That is, we implicitly understand that the investigations of the painting that its obscurity draws us into – formulating psychological hypotheses, testing them by putting ourselves in the place of the subject, inspecting the painting looking for confirmation – can be extended indefinitely without our fully comprehending what it depicts, without our really understanding Clara Mather in her totality.

The same transparency that makes our experience of *The Gross Clinic* an experience of Dr. Gross *himself* as sublime makes our viewing of *Clara* an experience of the sublimity of Clara Mather *herself*. We experience her as sublime because our experience brings with it the idea of her infinitude. But whereas in the case of Dr. Gross it was plausible that these feelings of sublimity were inspired by his scalpel or skillfulness, there is no such possibility here. What arouses these feelings is not Clara Mather's physical power, but her apparent infinite depth – her capacity to be more than the fixed psychological type suggested by, e.g., *Mrs. Hugh Hammersley*. And this is something Clara has just in virtue of her status as a rational creature.

I began this discussion with Kant's claim that art can disclose 'ideas' that are otherwise obscure. We can understand the power I am attributing to Eakins in those terms. Aesthetic ideas, Kant says, are imaginative representations 'that occasion much thinking' but for which no 'determinate thought, i.e., concept' is adequate. These ideas are characterized by the kind of unending striving that I suggested Eakins's portraits inspire. They inspire us to 'strive toward something lying beyond the bounds of experience, and thus seek to approximate a presentation of concepts of reason (of intellectual ideas).' But because 'no concept can be fully adequate' to these ideas, these strivings constitute an uncompletable task. These aesthetic ideas, as we have seen, can 'make sensible rational ideas of invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, the kingdom of hell, eternity, creation, etc. [. . .] by means of an imagination that emulates

the precedent of reason in attaining to a maximum.’ They do this by ‘stimulat[ing] so much thinking’ that they ‘aesthetically enlarge the concept itself in an unbounded way.’ This, in turn, sets ‘the faculty of intellectual ideas (reason) into motion’ (5:314–315). This language allows me to offer a concise summary of my claim about Eakins’s portraits. These portraits use artistic techniques (selective obscurity, etc.) to communicate aesthetic ideas of infinite depth. And these ideas, in turn, provoke a kind of thinking through which otherwise inaccessible rational ideas about the infinitude of other persons are made sensible.<sup>17</sup>

## Respect

I have now argued that some portraits produce an experience of their subjects as sublime. This experience differs from standard examples of sublime experience in crucial ways. I see Monument Valley and my rational nature sets a task of comprehending it, one that I cannot complete. This elevates my rational nature and humiliates my sensible nature. In this arrangement, Monument Valley itself is no more than a stimulus: when I step back from the experience, I can appreciate that what is really superior is not a pile of rocks, but me. This is why, as Kant says, the proper objects of sublime feelings are our own minds.

But the experience of *Clara* is different. Clara Mather is not just a pile of rocks. She is someone who can return my gaze, someone who is like me. This makes her, as I said earlier of Dr. Gross, a point of resonance for the mental activities that produce my feelings of sublimity. She is also inextricable from my experience in a way that Monument Valley is not. I cannot look at the portrait, experience Clara Mather as sublime, and still regard her *merely* as a stimulus to certain exalted activities of my own mind. The obvious explanation for this fact is that my experience is not just one of my own elevation and humiliation but of the elevation and humiliation of natures that Clara and I share. That is, my experience of the painting is of *our* elevation as rational beings and *our* humiliation as sensible creatures.

This is what I believe a feeling of respect for another person must be on the Kantian proposal laid out before. It is a feeling of shared sublimity: of our shared elevation as rational agents married to a shared humiliation of our sensible nature. What I have argued is that Eakins can cultivate respect for persons in this sense. Indeed, what I have argued is that a sympathetic viewing of *Clara* will inspire just this kind of respect for Clara Mather.

Several questions remain open. How efficacious is this conduit of moral enrichment: do those who spend hours looking at Eakins portraits become measurably fuller of reverence for the humanity of others? How general is the phenomenon: is it a feature of a handful of

masters, one we can find more generally in portrait-painting of a certain quality, or something that extends into other modes (e.g. film and sculpture)? What is the relationship between the power I have suggested can be found in Eakins's paintings and their value as art? I can't venture to answer these questions, but I hope I have at least provided a proof of concept.<sup>18</sup>

## Notes

1. All citations of Kant are to the volume and pagination of (Kant 1900–), except for the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which uses the standard A/B notation. Translations are from Cambridge University Press editions unless otherwise noted.
2. For more see (Freeland 2010, p. 198ff).
3. For a good overview of this program see (Guyer 1993).
4. I can't do justice to the connection here but see (Merritt 2012). For a general overview of Kant on the sublime see (Crowther 1991) and (Clewis 2009).
5. Arguments along these lines are much older than Kant. See, for example, Seneca's case for the power of nature to inspire an awe that acquaints us with the "god within us." Letter 41 in (Seneca 2017).
6. In saying this I am assuming, possibly *contra* Kant, that works of art can indeed be sublime. On this issue see the back-and-forth between (Abaci 2008) and (Clewis 2010).
7. The role of gender in this contrast is obviously important, but not something I can comment on here. But see (Berger 2000).
8. On "uncompromising realism" see (Fried 1987, p. 8). The notion of transparency I have in mind is roughly the one Kendall Walton (2008) claims for photographs and Dominic Lopes (1996, p. 179ff) says can be shared by paintings. I am not saying that Eakins's paintings are actually transparent in this sense, only that they give that impression.
9. Quoted in (Goodrich, vol. II, p. 34).
10. Compare (Werbel 2007).
11. For discussion see (Kirkpatrick 2006), especially chapter 18. A relevant quote is on p. 173.
12. Relevant here is Elizabeth Johns's (1983) argument that Eakins wants to glorify a new kind of heroism associated with technical achievements like medicine.
13. Compare Stephen Darwall's (1977) distinction between recognition and appraisal respect.
14. One can, of course, object that I am mistaken about these paintings. Henry Adams (2005), for example, says that Eakins's portraits portray people who are straightforwardly somber or depressed. I cannot comment fully on this alternative, but I do think it mistakes the lack of a definitive countenance for a particular downcast attitude. This phenomenon is common enough that it has earned a rude name: "Resting bitch face." See (Hogg 2014) for discussion of another case.
15. Thanks to Hans Maes for recommending this discussion.
16. One could argue that this experience is closer to the Kantian experience of beauty, which involves a similar feeling of perpetual cognitive activity. I'm reluctant about this suggestion for a few reasons, most notably feelings of magnitude (depth) and contrapurposefulness (frustration) are central to my experience of the paintings. There are obviously hard questions about

- whether the beautiful and the mathematically sublime can be separated as neatly as Kant supposes, but I can't discuss them here.
17. For a more general discussion of Kant's conception of reason as infinite (and what this means), see (Moore 1988).
  18. For very helpful discussion and comments, I am grateful to audience members at the conference on the Philosophy of Portraits as well as to Sarah Buss, John Kulvicki, Alice Phillips Walden, and Timothy Rosenkoetter.

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