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Moving Mountains

Resituating the Sublime in Fichte's Early Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT

Fichte's "Concerning the Concept of the *Wissenschaftslehre*" concludes by claiming that the *Wissenschaftslehre* makes possible an account of "the pleasant, the beautiful, and the sublime." Attempts have subsequently been made to reconstruct an aesthetics on Fichte's behalf, yet these omit consideration of the 'sublime'. Fichte's aesthetics concerns almost exclusively 'the artist', and refers to Nature as merely the subject of scientific analysis, so what does he mean by 'the sublime'? This paper attempts to present a way in which a Fichtean can talk meaningfully about 'the sublime', simultaneously reaffirming the sublime's importance in Fichtean aesthetic experience, and subordinating it to the creative acts of the I. I argue the sublime is itself an artwork, a creation of the I, and something that directs the I back upon itself. It is, in other words, a prompt for the subject's move from the practical to the transcendental standpoint.

Keywords: Fichte, aesthetics, theoretical, practical, sublime, striving

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Fichtes „Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre“, schließt mit der Behauptung, die Wissenschaftslehre ermögliche eine Theorie des „Angenehmen, des Schönen, und Erhabenen“. Später wurden Versuche unternommen, in seinem Namen eine Ästhetik zu rekonstruieren, doch wurde dabei die Berücksichtigung des „Erhabenen“ vernachlässigt. Fichtes Ästhetik befasst sich fast ausschließlich mit dem „Künstler“ und betrachtet die Natur lediglich als Gegenstand wissenschaftlicher Analyse. Was meint er also mit „dem Erhabenen“? Dieser Aufsatz versucht, einen Weg aufzuzeigen, wie ein Fichteaner sinnvoll über „das Erhabene“ sprechen kann, indem er gleichzeitig dessen Bedeutung in der fichteschen ästhetischen Erfahrung bekräftigt und es den schöpferischen Akten des Ichs unterordnet. Ich argumentiere, dass das Erhabene selbst ein Kunstwerk ist, eine Schöpfung des Ichs und etwas, das das Ich auf sich selbst zurückführt. Mit anderen Worten, es ist ein Anstoß für den Wechsel des Subjekts vom praktischen zum transzendentalen Standpunkt.

Stichwörter: Fichte, Ästhetik, theoretisch, praktisch, Erhabene, Streben

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1. Introduction¹

Keeping the title of this paper in mind, I want to list a couple of things, and see if you can identify what they've got in common: the formidable cliff edges of the Dolomite Mountains in Italy; the raging sea during a storm, *à la* paintings by J. M. W. Turner, for example; and purple and orange shards of light carving their way through an otherwise unblemished night sky, peppered with stars. Any guesses? That's right, they are all products of the productive power of the absolute I in Fichte's philosophy.

A more common response might be to say that these things are generally considered to produce in us a feeling of the *sublime*. There are relatively few passages in Fichte's early work (broadly, that produced while Fichte was at Jena University, covering the years 1794-99) which concern the 'sublime' [*erhaben*], or Fichte's doctrine thereof. Worse still, the passages that *do* make such a move are philosophically vexing, in part due to Fichte's later inability to follow through on his promises concerning them, or because of his failure to present a systematic account of both what he means by 'sublime', and what it means to undergo a feeling of the sublime.

This paper aims to fill these gaps in scholarship on Fichte and early Romanticism, by supplementing Fichte's aesthetic theory with a robust conception of sublimity, that is in keeping both with Fichte's invocations of the sublime, and with the kind of contemporaneous examples of artworks and philosophical accounts of aesthetics with which he was engaged. I want to first address the passages on the sublime in Fichte's early writings, before acknowledging the work of previous scholars to construct, on Fichte's behalf, a theory of aesthetics more broadly. However, I suggest that such work has, thus far, largely ignored the possibility of a sublime-specific aesthetic theory, and conclude by, at the very least, *initiating* an attempt to construct one on Fichte's behalf. This comes, I argue, as an impetus-to-another-impetus. That is to say, if, with Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, we hold that 'aesthetic sense'² is an impetus to move us from the 'real' to the 'transcendental standpoint', then the sublime can initially prompt us to engage with this impetus. The sublime is, then, as such, a first jumping-off point, or *Anstoß*, for any movement from the practical to the transcendental standpoints.

¹ I am indebted to audiences at the Sixteenth Biennial Meeting of the North American Fichte Society and the XII Congress of the Internationale Fichte-Gesellschaft for advice on early drafts of this paper, and to Laure Cahen-Maurel, Eli I. Lichtenstein, and David W. Wood for their invaluable comments. Thanks as well to Maria del Mar Copes for arguing about what harm sublimity actually does to notions of time and representation.

² As with Breazeale, I shall use terms like the 'aesthetic sense', 'aesthetic standpoint', 'aesthetic point of view', etc. more or less interchangeably. See Breazeale 2013*b*, 384.

2. “Concerning the Concept” and Fichte’s *Grundlage*

Fichte’s reference to aesthetics in any sense during his Zurich period and early Jena period is relatively sparse. One of the most conspicuous references made thereto is in his short text “Concerning the Concept of the *Wissenschaftslehre*”. This was published in May 1794, just as Fichte was moving to Jena, having been written whilst he was still in Zurich as an apparent prolegomenon to the forthcoming lecture series he intended to give on his arrival in Jena. The third and final section, entitled ‘Hypothetical Division of the *Wissenschaftslehre*’ concerns the notion of ‘striving’ [*streben*] that was to receive fuller attention in the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* (I will henceforth refer to this as both the *Foundation* and the *Grundlage*) of 1794-5, and contains within it the assertion that the practical part of the *Wissenschaftslehre* lays the groundwork

for new and fully elaborated doctrines of the pleasant, the beautiful, and the sublime, of the lawfulness of nature in its freedom, of theology [*Gottslehre*], of so-called common sense or the natural sense of truth – and finally, for new doctrines of natural law and morality [...].³

Such further doctrines, Fichte believes, all stem from the establishment of an absolute I, a Not-I posited in opposition to it, and a relational I brought about by the I’s power to freely determine itself in response to the Not-I. Fichte later went on to elaborate on *most* of these during the remainder of his Jena years, notably in his *Foundations of Natural Right* (1796-7) and the *System of Ethics* (1798), and to a lesser degree in *The Vocation of Man* (1799). However, of all of these promised ‘doctrines’, the one concerning “the pleasant, the beautiful, and the sublime” is the most conspicuous absence from Fichte’s later corpus. Indeed, the entirety of this third section of “Concerning the Concept” was later omitted from the bowdlerised reedition that Fichte commissioned in 1798, since the 1794-5 *Foundation*, according to Daniel Breazeale, had “made [it] redundant.”⁴

In other works of a similar period, mention of aesthetics or beauty is equally lacking: Fichte mentions in “Concerning Human Dignity” (a speech given at the conclusion of his 1794 Zurich lecture series) that because of the human being, that which “lacks form [...] will resolve itself into the most beautiful order.”⁵

³ GWL 190 [GA I/2: 151].

⁴ Breazeale 2022, 20-1.

⁵ GWL 459 [GA I/2: 87].

Meanwhile, in the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre* itself, he briefly mentions ‘the judgement of taste’. On the account given here, the claim ‘A is beautiful’ means ‘A’ contains something definitive that is *also* contained in the ideal of the beautiful, and claims like this command the individual to set about “discovering such an ideal.” This is a ‘task’ set for the individual, which consists in exhausting the predicate ‘the beautiful’, a task that Fichte believes, with Kant, is an “infinite judgement.”⁶ There are hints here of a pedagogic role that I shall discuss in greater detail in the next section, but for now, it will suffice to say that the notion of the beautiful gives us an imperative to seek the absolute due to its situation as a created product, and recipient of some characteristic qualities of the same.

To my mind, however, the most important claim Fichte makes during this period comes in a bracketed section in Part Two of the *Foundation*. Here, Fichte is primarily concerned with the notion of time, which he describes as an “oscillating of the power of imagination between components that cannot be united”, that is, the relational and the absolute. The subject comes about from within this, as a manifestation of the relational endowed with a conception of the absolute. Within the practical sphere, the productive power of the I extends outwards, until it reaches a notion of absolute unity. Given this is practically impossible, except through the power of the imagination, the self-reverting activity of I is constantly futilely striving for it.⁷

So far so obvious – indeed, this is the very notion of striving that enables all the further doctrines mentioned in “Concerning the Concept” to come about (*Sittenlehre*, *Gottslehre*, *Rechtslehre*, etc.). However, on this occasion Fichte goes further, declaring that, though the oscillation is not sustained by the imagination for any longer than a ‘moment’, the exception to this is in a “feeling of the sublime”. The result is a feeling of “*astonishment* [...] in which the reciprocal-acting-and-being-passively-affected in time comes to a standstill.”⁸

There are a couple of things to note in this passage. Firstly, it sounds very similar to Kant’s notion (following Burke) that the sublime causes “*astonishment* amounting almost to terror, [...] horror and sacred awe,” but that “all this, when we are assured of our own safety, is not actual fear.” Instead, for Kant, what we feel in the presence of the sublime is “an attempt to gain access to it through imagination.”⁹ The sublime, by its nature, goes

⁶ GWL 22 [GA I/2: 278].

⁷ GWL 298-9 [GA I/2: 360-1].

⁸ GWL 298 [GA I/2: 360-1], italics original.

⁹ KU §29, 269.

beyond the sensible,¹⁰ so the imagination attempts to give itself an idea of the might that it cannot, by itself, understand. What occurs instead, is a stunned ‘horror’, by which the imagination attempts to give sensory form to the sublime. It judges the scale of the sublime by trying to transcend its own limits, by manufacturing a feeling of fear, such that the subject can understand the degree to which the sublime confounds its cognitive faculty.

This comparison hints at a second noteworthy point: how does our response to sublimity square with Fichte’s wider theory of striving? When the ‘reciprocal-acting-and-being-passively-affected’ reaches a ‘standstill’ when we feel the sublime, what actually happens? The three options, it seems to me, are that the subject becomes *only* active, *only* passive, or else *everything* is paused. The notion of being merely ‘active’ seems to run counter to the feelings we feel when affected by the ‘sublime’, whilst being merely ‘passively affected’ negates the absolute positing-power of the I. Hence, I would be inclined to suggest that the latter is the most likely option, that is, that *everything* comes to a standstill. But given this passage is written in the context of Fichte’s account of time, this seems to suggest that, in the presence of sublime feeling, time simply *stops* for the subject.

Kant encounters a similar problem. He claims that “the comprehension of the successively apprehended parts at one glance, is a retrogression that removes the time-condition [...]. Therefore, since the time-series is a condition of inner sense and of an intuition, it is a subjective movement of the imagination by which it does violence to inner sense.”¹¹ If read as a ‘mode of intuition of time’, Rudolf Makkreel suggests, “then this would mean a violation of the critical framework.” He argues instead that Kant isn’t contravening time as a whole, but merely the ‘linear form of time’.¹² But since Fichte emphasises self-positing and the fundamentality of the absolute I, his construal of time seems far more vulnerable to problems caused by moments of ‘sublime feeling’.¹³ Time, for Fichte, isn’t an intuition external of the subjective experience of it, nor indeed a category of the understanding. It is,

¹⁰ Schaper 1992, 384. For ease’s sake, and in line with the way Fichte talks about the sublime, I will here collapse the Kantian distinction between the mathematically and the dynamically sublime. For the Burkean origins of Kant’s notion of ‘astonishment’ that Fichte appears to inherit, see Burke 2015, 47.

¹¹ KU §27, 258-9.

¹² Makkreel 1984, 307-8.

¹³ Makkreel interestingly has done work to highlight this problem, in particular in relation to Kant and Fichte’s respective modes of relating the imagination to the feeling of the sublime. Makkreel’s solution is to insist that, for Fichte, “the sublime allows us to experience time as not merely a hovering flux but as a duration” because, in an experience of the sublime, the imagination is related to ‘reason’ rather than to the ‘understanding’. See Makkreel 1994, 10-1.

instead, bound up with our very being. He suggests that “time exists only for the power of imagination”, whereas “for pure reason alone, everything is simultaneous.”¹⁴ While the pure, conceptual notion of reason, the law-prescribing end of the rational being,¹⁵ is timeless and absolute, the imagination wavers “between determination and non-determination [...] [which] characterizes the power of imagination by means of its product,” the I’s determinate limit.¹⁶ Both of these faculties are important for Fichte’s conception of subjectivity: the imagination’s oscillating power moves constantly between the opposed concepts of I and Not-I and makes them intuitable, before reason fixes its products by reflecting upon them, thereby bringing these components under the I’s laws of cognition.

Responding to the question ‘Has time really passed?’ in “Outline of What is Distinctive of the *Wissenschaftslehre* with Respect to the Theoretical Power”, Fichte answers “Of course time has passed, if you posit it as having passed.”¹⁷ Positing here encapsulates the entire process outlined above, of the imagination’s hovering between components, which is then stabilised by the reflecting power of reason. This is bound up with positing a past time which, Fichte claims, necessarily exists. Space and time (seemingly *linear* time, if we accept the foregoing), for Fichte, are intimately bound up with one another: we measure space in terms of the time required to traverse it.¹⁸ What, then, of moments in which we cannot measure space by time, when the scale of space is immeasurable in these terms? When we have these moments of repose, and our being efficacious / affected comes to a standstill, time itself appears to have no place and essentially ceases to exist.

3. Constructing Fichte’s Aesthetics

It is these dilemmas to which we will return in the final section. But for now, I want to discuss Fichte’s account of aesthetics more broadly. As established, Fichte never completed the *Ästhetik* promised in “Concerning the Concept”, and attempts have been made to construct one on his behalf. I shall give a brief overview of these, before returning to the sublime, and see if we can find a place for it.

Fichte’s theory of aesthetics, as pieced together from later works, is fundamentally inward-looking. Just as his wider *Wissenschaftslehre* concerns

¹⁴ GWL 298 [GA I/2: 360].

¹⁵ See Hoeltzel 2018 for a discussion of Fichte’s notion of reason, its operations and end.

¹⁶ GWL 298 [GA I/2: 360].

¹⁷ GWL 435 [GA I/3: 207].

¹⁸ GWL 435 [GA I/3: 207].

the positing and coming to self-efficacy of the I, so his aesthetics is geared towards this project too. The project of the ‘philosopher’, he claims in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, is to raise herself to the ‘transcendental’ or ‘ideal’ standpoint; that is, to

[look] down upon the ordinary point of view. This constitutes the very essence of transcendental philosophy: that it has no desire to become a way of thinking [*Denkart*] that could be employed within life, but observes an I that embodies this system of thinking within life. Transcendental philosophy itself creates nothing. The I it is investigating occupies the ordinary viewpoint.¹⁹

Ordinarily, we occupy the ‘standpoint of life’, we view things as they appear to us – when I see a chair, for example, I may think merely ‘chair!’, experiencing it as an object of common consciousness, and without bothering to interrogate the underlying structure of these appearances. Transcendental philosophy, contrastingly, aims to explain life as it appears to us directly, or to explain the basis of “representations accompanied by a feeling of necessity.”²⁰ Why does the world seem to be the way it is to us? Why do we have the experiences we do? To answer these questions, the philosopher must raise herself above ‘the standpoint of life’, so that she can, in Breazeale’s words, “reflect upon what is involved *a priori* in and thus presupposed by our ordinary consciousness of a world of apparently mind-independent objects and other self-cognizing agents.”²¹

The difficulty with this, Fichte rightly notes, is that the philosopher too initially occupies the ‘real’ standpoint to begin with. After all, she is only human. To elevate herself to the transcendental, then, she requires a middle term to reconcile these viewpoints, the ideal and the real. The existence of a middle term – the ‘aesthetic standpoint’ – unites these two. “From the aesthetic point of view,” Fichte claims, “the world appears to be given to us just as if we had produced it.”²²

On this view, Fichte’s notion of aesthetics is directed inwards. If the task of philosophy is to explain external representations, and the grounding for these representations transpires to be the I, then aesthetics must serve the purpose of turning the philosopher’s attention inwards, on the aesthetic quality of the I itself. Diego Fusaro puts this explicitly by suggesting that for

¹⁹ WLnm GA IV/3:265; FTP, 472.

²⁰ IWL 8 [GA I/4:186].

²¹ Breazeale 2013b, 362. See also Kim 2022, 342.

²² WLnm GA IV/3:265-6; FTP 472-3.

Fichte, representations can't merely *be, qua* representation.²³ Instead, they must be endowed with an aesthetic quality, such that we can see exactly *how* we ought to change them – a claim that is endorsed by Fichte himself in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*.²⁴ Note that this carries with it an instructive tendency: I shouldn't just take the world at face value. My coming into contact with the world should be productive, I should transform the world according to the concepts I form of it. At this stage, however, I don't desire to change it according to my moral sense, but instead according to my aesthetic sense.

As with philosophy more generally, aesthetics is subsumed under the moral law – “no ‘art for art’s sake,’ for Fichte”, says Breazeale – but Fichte would argue that this does not impede aesthetic judgement’s value in providing an imperative for the subject.²⁵ When I see, to take some contemporaneous examples, a work by Caspar David Friedrich,²⁶ or read Novalis’ *Hymns to the Night* (1797-1800),²⁷ I am not necessarily coming to understand that I ought not murder, but I am learning about what is beautiful, and as such am coming to form beliefs, such as that the world ought to be beautiful. Nothing in Friedrich’s *Seashore by Moonlight*, a depiction of anchored boats in repose on a luminously moonlit sea, nothing in this scene depicts any kind of moral imperative. That murder is morally impermissible is not directly the object of my aesthetic beliefs, but they set me on my way to such judgements. Indeed, Fichte himself claims in the *System of Ethics* that aesthetic sense is “a preparation for virtue.”²⁸ By liberating the subject ‘from the bonds of sensibility’, it is a means for achieving moral oneness, rather than an end itself.

Hence, aesthetics serves as a go-between between the real viewpoint, the world as it immediately appears to us, and the transcendental standpoint, the basis of these appearances. Aesthetics directs the individual’s attention *inwards*; it makes one see one’s own ability to create beautiful things, and thereby makes us consider the individual, initially from a purely aesthetic standpoint, but eventually from the standpoint of the philosopher, as the

²³ Fusaro 2016, 36.

²⁴ “The world is a theoretical concept. The concept of the way in which the world *ought* to be lies within us and is practical. Aesthetics is therefore practical as well. However, it does not coincide with ethics; for we are obliged to be conscious of our duties, whereas the aesthetic way of looking at things is natural and instinctive and does not depend upon freedom” (WLnm IV/3:266; FTP 473-4).

²⁵ Breazeale 2013a, 37.

²⁶ Cf. Cahen-Maurel 2014, 74-5.

²⁷ For a more direct relation between Fichte and contemporaneous examples of romantic art and the aesthetics of nature, see Hoffman 2019.

²⁸ SE 335 [GA I/5: 308].

source of “representations accompanied by a feeling of necessity”. Fichte, remember, says that “from the aesthetic point of view, the world appears to be given to us just as if we had produced it”; that is, the world is simultaneously given and a creation of the I. Therefore, a work of art is ‘beautiful’ if it succeeds in making us consider ourselves in-and-for-ourselves. The artist, through her work, should aim at changing the mind of the audience, not at changing the world, and though the physical manifestation of an inner image *may be* necessary to be comprehended by the aesthetic drive, the inner image itself is what matters.²⁹ That is, the object of artistic expression is subordinate to the effect upon the audience, and it is only endowed with the quality of beauty if it coincides with the inner impression it evokes within the consumer. I may find a painting ‘nice’ etc., but I can only call it ‘beautiful’ if, as a result of its influence, I come to consider myself differently, as a subject with moral efficacy. This gives further credence to Fichte’s claim that ethical obligation requires more than “the aesthetic way of looking at things”, which is “natural and instinctive”, as opposed to our being directly aware of it.³⁰ We have a more immediate awareness of the aesthetic standpoint, and as such it acts essentially as a springboard (or *Anstoß*) to the more inaccessible ideal, or moral, standpoint.

The foregoing has contained reference to something as yet merely granted that it is important to dwell on for a moment. This is the fact that Fichte’s aesthetics, as sketched out so far, is almost entirely concerned with the expression of the artist. I’ve talked about the beauty of a work of art and the duties of the artist. This is because art most fully reflects or spotlights the creative power of the individual. Fundamentally, the ‘true’ object of the aesthetic sense is the inner image produced by the I, and *not* the physical object. Resultantly, the more closely aligned with the productive power of the imagination the artwork is, the more ‘beautiful’ it is. This has the adverse effect of rendering anything (seemingly) other to the I – anything that is part purely of nature – beyond the scope of the aesthetic sense. I can’t find something that is *absolutely other* to my aesthetic sense beautiful, because it

²⁹ Breazeale 2013a, 33-4. Discussion of the notion of ‘drives’ [*trieb*] is not the topic of this paper, but is a term Fichte coined in his “On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy”, which he drafted in 1795, and published in Berlin in 1800. Friedrich Schiller held the moral drive to be fundamentally tied to the aesthetic or ‘play’ drive. See Letter 14 of Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (Schiller 2016, 51), published in his journal *Die Horen* just as Fichte was writing “On the Spirit and the Letter” for the same journal. Indeed, it was in part the similarity (and possibly hostile tone) of Fichte’s piece which prompted Schiller to reject its publication. See also Piché 2002, 299-300 and La Vopa 2001, 269-97.

³⁰ WLnm GA IV/3: 366; FTP 473-4.

inspires in me no sense of my creative powers, and doesn't turn my attention inwards. In Fichte's terms, it doesn't begin to raise me beyond the real to the ideal point of view.

Hartmut Traub goes as far as to claim that it is the artist's moral *duty*, therefore, to depict the ideal, however this manifests itself, so that *all* rational beings can share in it and realise their individual creative power. This, he claims, involves rejecting so-called 'mimetic-empirical' accounts of art.³¹ What kind of product does this yield, then? Breazeale notes that, by "sever[ing] the bond between art and nature", Fichte clears space for non-representational artistic expression, works that don't have as their object any latent thing in the world, and are instead directed at some apparent object of thought.³² As a rough guide, I include within non-representational artworks here such works as, for example, Wassily Kandinsky's *Composition 8* (1923), Jackson Pollock's *Circumcision* (1946), Mark Rothko's *Orange and Yellow* (1956), or the cover of Jennifer Nagel's *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction* (2014).³³

But the overall result is an appeal to alignment between philosophy and expressive art. Fichte draws parallels between the philosopher and the artist; in "Concerning the Concept", he states that the philosopher needs an 'obscure feeling' for what is right, that is, a sense of 'truth'. In a similar vein, the artist needs an obscure feeling for 'genius', in this case, a sense of 'beauty'. Indeed, in the second edition, Fichte emphasised the words 'beauty' and 'truth',³⁴ and added a rebuttal against Salomon Maimon, who argued that 'genius' is an 'empty word', best left to chefs, tightrope walkers, and artists.³⁵ He stipulates in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, however, that this doesn't mean the philosopher *needs* to be a "poet or a fine writer".³⁶ The philosopher's task is to reach the ideal standpoint and attain the truth of the empirical world, and though the aesthetic sense *can* help them achieve this, it isn't the only means by which to do so. Aesthetic sense seems to be a sufficient, but not a necessary condition for philosophising.³⁷

³¹ Traub 2006, 99-100.

³² Breazeale 2013a, 36.

³³ Some of the examples I've mentioned here (i.e. the Pollock and the Rothko) may raise questions related to immoral artists, questions to which Fichte's insistence that artists should depict the moral law seems somewhat vulnerable.

³⁴ A move which, to my mind, conjures similarities with John Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. See Keats 1977, 346, lines 49-50.

³⁵ GWL 183n. [GA I/2: 143].

³⁶ WLnM GA IV/3: 266; FTP 474.

³⁷ My thanks to an anonymous peer reviewer for seeking clarity on this claim.

It is worth clarifying this latter claim, insofar as Fichte distinguishes in his lectures “Concerning the Difference between the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy” (delivered 1794, first published 1924) between the productive imagination, and the reproductive one. The productive, or creative imagination is the basis of spirit, which one needs to possess in some degree at least to be a rational being. The latter, conversely, simply repeats and reforms what is given by the former which, as Fichte says is, “at least from the point of view of empirical consciousness, completely creative.”³⁸ There are admittedly ambiguities between the ways in which Fichte understands imagination as it is depicted in “Concerning the Difference between the Spirit and the Letter” and the *Grundlage*, but I take it that the creative imagination resembles more the oscillating power of the imagination that intuits the opposition between I and Not-I and makes these absolute opposites intelligible to the empirical subject. In this respect, the artist deploys the reproductive imagination, reforming elements of the world in creating the artwork, in ways that strive towards depicting the ideal, the activity of the creative imagination. It is the former, the reproductive imagination, that can invoke philosophising, that can prompt the inner construction of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. But to philosophise, one does not *need* this re-productive form of imagination; the aesthetic sense, which grasps the productive by means of the reproductive, is not the only means of grasping the “ideal that hovers before [one’s] soul,” as Fichte makes clear in his instruction that one ought “not make [oneself] into an artist against the will of nature.”³⁹

Fichte believes the artist has the privileged position of already occupying the ideal standpoint. I mentioned earlier that the philosopher merely occupies the real standpoint in the first place and must thereby be emancipated from it. From the start, the artist occupies the philosophical standpoint, and as such doesn’t *realise* that she does so. The artist views the world as a product of the I *solely*, it never occurs to her that there is a different standpoint, that there is a real-world to be explained, “[occupying] this viewpoint without thinking of it in any determinate manner.”⁴⁰ Only true ‘philosophers’ can philosophise properly on the real *and* ideal standpoints – if you like, they should be able to ‘oscillate’ [*schweben*] between them. The artist, who occupies merely one, should be able, through her work, to prompt people to look inwards and discover within themselves the ideal standpoint.

³⁸ EPW 193 [GA I/3: 316].

³⁹ SE 335-6 [GA I/5: 309].

⁴⁰ See SE 334 [GA I/5: 307].

In this, the aesthetic sense is both pedagogic and architectonic.⁴¹ It is a means, though not the only one, of being taught how to transcend the real standpoint and reach the ideal, and a bridge by which the individual may do so. The end of this process is a reflection of the individual on themselves,⁴² and an ‘oscillating’ between both the ideal and the real.

4. A Place for Sublimity?

On Fichte’s view, as it has been construed so far, aesthetic judgement concerns the inner-produced artwork, the created work, and its abilities to excite in the individual an affinity with her *own* creative power, her own I-hood. An artwork can, then, be judged ‘beautiful’ or not, on its ability to fulfil this criterion. A problem arises when we think about the apparently ‘not created’ work, that is, the beauty of nature, and in this case, the sublime. Think again about my examples from the beginning: the Dolomite Mountains, the stars emerging in the evening sky before night has completely fallen, and the sea during a storm, much like a Turner painting. How can Fichte explain these? They seem merely given, and don’t occupy the privileged position between the ideal and real standpoints that the artist does, since they are not endowed with ‘aesthetic sense’ – they are just inanimate objects.

I should note that I am treating ‘the sublime’ here *mostly* as caused by natural objects, e.g. mountains and so forth. I do this as it is, for the most part, consistent with Fichte’s intertwining of the notions of nature and the sublime – Piché goes as far as to assert, without citation, that Fichte’s understanding of nature is ‘primarily associated’ with the sublime’.⁴³ However, I admit that a feeling of the sublime, as described by Fichte in the *Grundlage*, can be caused by individuals – Laure Cahen-Maurel points out an excellent example in Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* (1791), and more specifically

⁴¹ Piché 2002, 300; Renaut 1986, 99.

⁴² Kant offers a theory which is similar in its emphasis on aesthetic judgements being subjectively grounded *reflective* judgements. When the understanding and the imagination ‘harmonize’ when we perceive an object, the object becomes ‘purposive’ in judgement’s perception. This purposiveness is subjective because the concept isn’t necessary, and the judgement obtained is not cognitive. It is, instead, an *aesthetic judgement of reflection*. (KU First Introduction VII, 20:221). The purposiveness of the object presented to aesthetic judgement, Kant stipulates, is “for our cognitive faculties”, for without it the understanding could not situate itself in its environment. Only in judgement do we apply the concept of ends to nature. Of these, the aesthetic judgement alone has the task of deciding when an object conforms to our cognitive faculties, and when it doesn’t. This it does via the faculty of ‘taste’ (KU Introduction, VIII:193-4).

⁴³ Piché 2002, 314n.22.

the character of the Queen of the Night.⁴⁴ A Soprano reaching notes that can make glass break may well evoke the same feeling of astonishment that one gets from looking at the Matterhorn.

With this caveat out of the way, we return to our question: how, for Fichte, can we explain the sublime? Fichte, as we have seen, admits that we *can* undergo feelings of the sublime. Is there, then, any way of reaffirming the importance of these feelings in Fichte's aesthetic triumvirate? The first thing to do is to dismiss the notion that nature is merely an *explanandum* for the *Wissenschaftslehre* and to thereby restate that nature can evoke feelings of beauty, or even of sublimity, within us. Ostensibly this runs counter to Fichte's own claim in the late-Jena work *The Vocation of Man*, that science makes nature 'transparent'. Nature is understood as an object of investigation for the 'human power' to "control without effort".⁴⁵ The natural world, on this view, is explained away by Fichte's doctrine of self-determination, it loses its quality of being *terra incognita*, and the 'romantic' appeal to 'mystery' in nature no longer has any recourse. Indeed, it is a common trope among scholars to see nature, for Fichte, as "a punching bag for our moral energies."⁴⁶ On this view, nature must be stripped bare, rendered *terra cognita*, and overcome by humans, a view which, admittedly, has ample textual support within Fichte's own works.⁴⁷

The view that the *Wissenschaftslehre* makes the world purely *terra cognita* seems to be challenged by a claim that Fichte makes in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*. He claims that the individual can only understand things that her body allows her to understand – through the senses, say – and only through the forms her body allows (Fichte's example is that gustatory 'sweetness' can't be heard). One cannot, therefore, feel 'in general', but only in part. This sentence lends itself to a phenomenological reading, insofar as the subject can only grasp part of a sensation. At no point does the sensation avail itself *entirely* to the imagination. From the standpoint of the real, then, the individual is thereby architectonically prohibited from achieving absolute knowledge: my consciousness is something accumulated, I can never truly

⁴⁴ Cahen-Maurel 2020, 235-6 and 241. Cahen-Maurel evokes this case to buttress her argument that, for Fichte, the 'songstress of the night' depicted in "On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy" (1795/1800) serves all three components of the triadic structure of aesthetics outlined in "Concerning the Concept": 'the pleasant, the beautiful, and the sublime'.

⁴⁵ VM 83 [GA I/6: 269].

⁴⁶ Mayer 1961, 336. Breazeale has done work to suggest that this view, though in many ways justified, is not the final word on Fichte's conception of nature, and that nature's ultimate truth for Fichte is "an affirmation of the ultimate harmony between [...] the 'realms of nature and grace'." See Breazeale 2014, 37.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., WLnM GA IV/3: 240-1; FTP 468.

grasp the whole, but only what is ‘already present’ to the imagination. Resultantly, when we *cannot* grasp something, “this provokes astonishment, which is the basis of the sublime.”⁴⁸ I take this to mean that the feeling of the sublime is ostensibly other to us, we cannot comprehend it in any way, but it nonetheless evokes in us the astonishment requisite to direct our thoughts onto the inner sense.

This relates to the earlier claim that the sublime in some way contains within it an ‘otherness’ that doesn’t initially seem explicable to Fichte. Returning to his description of the feeling of ‘astonishment’ when under the impression of the sublime that Fichte discusses in the *Grundlage*, I suggested that the ‘standstill’ of the subject’s ‘reciprocal-acting-and-being-passively-affected’ essentially made the I *external* to itself for these moments, that it ‘ceased to exist’. Since the ‘oscillation’ between un-unifiable components is what gives them their ‘reality’, or makes them ‘intuitable’,⁴⁹ when the sublime produces an astonished standstill, these representations must themselves cease. That is to say, the intuiting subject’s attention is held merely by this representation, and the oscillating pauses such that the intuited product is allowed to last in the imagination.

That the attention is *held* by the sublime feeling produces a warped moment in time for the subject, wherein she is ‘astonished’. The I is thereby *othered* from the power of imagination which makes things intuitable, and loses some kind of grip on her power to endow the non-unifiable relational and absolute with their reality. In other words, the sublime *blurs* the gap between the two, if only for a moment. This also brings Fichte into a closer relationship with Kant. Kant’s notion of the sublime ‘contravene[s]’ our judgement, as it makes us feel ‘ill-adapted’ to our modes of cognition: we appreciate the sublime because the greatest faculty of sense we have is inadequate to comprehend this incomprehensible other.⁵⁰ For Fichte, it seems, the sublime can’t *fit*. It looks as though it can’t be comprehended merely by the relational subject, who needs to bring in a conception of the absolute to be able to cognise it in its fullness.

This brings me to the crux of my argument. From at least one way of looking at it, the sublime, as evoked by products of nature *are* creations of the I.⁵¹ Without the absolute positing of the I, they would not exist. I joked at the

⁴⁸ WLnm GA IV/3: 135-6; FTP 278.

⁴⁹ GWL 305 [GA I/2: 368].

⁵⁰ KU §§23 & 27, 245 & 257.

⁵¹ To clarify, Kant thinks that objects can be beautiful, but *not* sublime. The sublime, for Kant, is only a sensation related to the absolute moral order, and I see no indication that Fichte thinks any differently. My investigation focuses on how, for Fichte, the objects of

beginning that all of my examples, the Dolomites, the sea, and the night sky were all products of the I's absolute positing power, and this is exactly why. They are not, however, created products of the relational I: unlike the Kandinsky, Pollock, Rothko, *et cetera*, they are not things that the subject (that is the relational I) sketches out for herself. They seem, at the very least, *given*. But we nonetheless have an aesthetic reaction to them, one of 'astonishment'. Again, this can be a result of the work of the artist – for example, Cahen-Maurel's opera singer. But when such a sensation is caused by something contained in nature (in this case taken to be whatever isn't the product of some relational act), then my argument runs that this prompts an aesthetic reaction because it *is*, fundamentally, a result of the I's productive power. In my view, the sublime provokes a reaction of astonishment because of the incomprehensibility of something produced, that the sublimity of nature comes about *as a result* of the I's absolute self-positing.⁵² It gives us our first glimpse of the connection between our real, mundane, or 'humble' world, and eternity which, Fichte asserts in the *System of Ethics*, is "the most sublime thought attainable by a human being."⁵³

To be clear, I am not claiming that the nature-induced sublime is some *partes extra partes*, something external to the aesthetic sense that Fichte talks of elsewhere – a sense which occupies a midpoint between the practical and transcendental standpoints. Instead, I hold the sublime to be a guide *into* that midpoint. The honour of being the midpoint itself is reserved for aesthetic sense; in terms of aesthetic reasoning, there is no other. However, the sublime is an important aspect of this aesthetic sense, one which doesn't wholly exist within it, but brings the imagination into contact with it through 'astonishment'. By directing our minds from the simple, mechanistic elements of nature towards the beauty thereof by an overwhelming feeling, in which the oscillating of time ceases, the philosopher is brought suddenly to the realisation that beauty is reproducible within herself. As such, she is brought into contact with the aesthetic sense, which further guides her towards the transcendental, absolutely creating I. When I see, for example, Monet's series of paintings *Storm Off the Belle Ile Coast* (1886), I think it beautiful precisely

nature can *produce* this sensation of sublimity within the cognising, creating subject, even if these objects are not sublime in and of themselves.

⁵² This is what I take Makkreel to mean when he claims that, for Fichte, an experience of the sublime is the result of relating the imagination to reason, rather than the understanding. In such cases, "a limiting point B is incorporated into [the imagination's] own core." In other words, the thing outside the imagination that limits it is experienced as a result of the imagination's own activity. See Makkreel 1994, 11.

⁵³ SE 331 [GA I/5: 305]. In this section, Fichte is discussing the role of the external church in relating these actions: eternity is held, here, to be synonymous with 'God'.

because I have been prompted to see its mimetic quality, its reflection of the sublime world that it depicts. This is not to say that *all* art does such things – the case could be made that the aim of such works as Diego Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* (1656), or Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912), is not to overwhelm us with their sublimity, and that their aesthetic merits lie elsewhere, perhaps in Velázquez’s confounding deployment of perspective, or in Duchamp’s depiction of fluid motion, rather than a static, definable scene. Rather, the merit of the sublime is that it directs us towards our own aesthetic sense, our ability, first mimetic, then creative, to bring the givenness of the world and the creating power of the I into their first initial contact.

We should note that not everything ‘beautiful’ in nature evokes feelings of sublimity. However, the sublime, and *only* the sublime, simply through its scale, constitutes a feeling of astonishment, which initiates the search for ‘beauty’ in art and the products of our own creative power as individuals. We can again draw parallels with Kant, here, and with his assertion that “for the sublime [we must seek a ground] merely in ourselves and the attitude of mind that introduces sublimity into the representation of nature.”⁵⁴ Nature’s sublimity arises precisely from the subject’s finding itself unable to adequately situate itself in relation to the absolute. The sublime makes the subject feel othered or astonished by something that is nonetheless a part of the absolute I and is in some sense, thereby, a creation of the I. As a result of this seeming contradiction, the subject is prompted to look to art as a source of beauty, be it mimetic *or* non-representational.⁵⁵

This preceding claim is a bit of a jump, which requires further clarification. Fundamentally, the I itself, and its realisation of the moral law is the highest source of sublimity. In “Concerning the Difference between the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy”, Fichte holds that the achievement of the ‘primal sublime’ is a feeling of ‘eternal truth’ and ‘ethical perfection’.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ KU §23, 246. The other part of this claim is that “For the beautiful in nature we must seek a ground external to ourselves.” Insofar as the imagination ‘oscillates’ between its relational and its absolute capacities, thereby constituting both, Fichte would disagree with this.

⁵⁵ Breazeale 2013a, 36.

⁵⁶ EPW 195-6 [GA II/3: 319]. Echoing Fichte’s discussion of temporality in the *Grundlage*, this passage further claims that, in coming to “stare in wonder at the ‘primal sublime’,” spirit “lifts itself above spatial and temporal limitations of sensation and sweeps beyond time and space”. Further, “everything that occurs for us happens within the physical world, and that includes a sensuous being’s spiritual ideas. The free spirit is clothed in a body” (EPW 195-6 [GA II/3: 319]). I take this to mean that Fichte himself endorses my notion of the sublime causing a ‘warped moment in time’, wherein the subject ceases to

This echoes his later claim in the Second *Introduction to the Wissenschaftslehre* (1797), that when we exhibit the ethical law within us, “the I is represented as something sublime.”⁵⁷ Elsewhere, Fichte seems to imply that cultivating the aesthetic sense is a moral imperative, and that the artist who fails to depict beauty actually ‘deforms’ the human being.⁵⁸ When one gains access to a feeling of ‘ethical perfection’ through acquaintance with the ‘primal sublime’, one also becomes acquainted with beauty, because the sublime and beauty are united by their fundamental ‘truth’. Hence, the overwhelming ‘astonishment’ heralded by the sublime is fundamentally a first contact with created beauty, insofar as the external sublime in nature is simultaneously the created product of the absolute I.

The sublime ostensibly seems to ‘overwhelm’ us with its beauty, but this is in fact a product of our inner creative faculty, by our relation to the absolute.⁵⁹ This astonishment (the ‘basis of the sublime’) divides the I into two. It seems to reaffirm the boundary between the real and the ideal standpoints, by showing us something that seems fundamentally other to us. Yet it simultaneously gives us a glimpse into the ‘eternal truth’ of the I. The sublime essentially entices us, it gives us a flavour of absolute beauty, absolute *truth*, which is to say, of the “unspeakably sublime character of duty.”⁶⁰

It is important to draw the reader’s attention here to the parallels between this account of the sublime and Fichte’s notorious doctrine of the *Anstoß*, which he introduces in the *Grundlage*. The *Anstoß* is understood, from the theoretical standpoint, as the ‘check’ upon the pure, unmediated activity of the I. This ‘original limitation’ serves as the first experience of limitation within the I, but must itself originate within, and resultantly be posited by the I, in order that the I, which Fichte characterises initially as pure activity, isn’t problematically constituted by passivity simultaneously.⁶¹ Fichte acknowledges, however, that this generates a ‘contradiction’, since subjectivity, in containing the check within itself, seems thereby to already contain

properly interact with the phenomenal categories of space and time, whilst nonetheless remaining a phenomenal, relational subject. See above.

⁵⁷ IWL 49 [GA I/4: 219].

⁵⁸ SE 335 [GA I/5: 309]. Further in the *Sittenlehre*, Fichte seems to imply we are in some way predisposed towards our own sublimity, through our aversion to whatever is *not* beautiful. He describes something that resembles Friedrich Nietzsche’s ‘master’ archetype, who “tramples [...] everything around him”, and claims that we generally perceive this as “*ugly and repugnant*”, whereas in the case of animals we find it “natural and in order”. The fact that we do so, he believes, “is proof of humanity’s nobility and sublimity” (SE 193 [GA I/5: 185], my italics). See also GM 1 I §11.

⁵⁹ See Piché 2002, 305.

⁶⁰ SE 147 [GA I/5: 145].

⁶¹ GWL 292 [GA I/2: 354-5].

its own limitation. Frederick Neuhouser puts this nicely when he says that the *Anstoß*, and more specifically its effect of making the I dependent upon a Not-I, makes representation ‘impossible’ without the theoretical subject being “irremediably dependent upon something other than itself”, a claim that “conflicts with the first principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre*”, which Neuhouser understands to be encapsulated in the notion of absolute self-positing.⁶²

Fichte’s solution is to claim that the “*dependence* of the I, qua intellect, is supposed to be annulled, and this is conceivable only under the following condition: namely, *that the I determines through itself this Not-I, [...] to which there is ascribed that check or impetus [...].* In this way, the Not-I that is to be represented would be *immediately* determined by the absolute I, whereas the representing I would – thanks to that determination [by the check] – be *mediately* or *indirectly* determined by the absolute I.”⁶³ In this way, the I retains its quality of being entirely self-determined, whilst simultaneously bringing about representation for the relational subject, a determination that the relational subject experiences as a ‘felt’ compulsion.

Similarities between this and the subject’s interaction with the sublime should now be clear. I believe the overwhelming response we have to the sublime is in fact the response to this seeming contradiction, the clash between the absolute positing-power of the I and the otherness of the Not-I. In coming to awareness of the beauty of the sublime, the subject is becoming familiarised with Fichte’s solution to this contradiction: that it is as intelligence that we are othered from these objects, whereas it is within the first principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, the absolute positing-power of the I, that we are united. On the one hand, we are distinct and separable from products that evoke feelings of the sublime, insofar as we are relational subjects. Whereas, on the other hand, these products and the perceiving subject as intelligence are in fact one and the same, insofar as they are all results of the same ‘absolute activity’ of the absolute I. The feeling of the sublime itself is the response we have to this apparent contradiction which is, with the reflection of the intelligent subject, thereby resolved.

Though Neuhouser is clear that the principle of self-positing found in the 1794-5 *Wissenschaftslehre* cannot be said to convey any information about the subject’s “practical freedom or moral autonomy,”⁶⁴ I think it is important to look at its implications for a doctrine of the same. If, with later works, we understand the moral law to be identifiable with universal truth, then the

⁶² Neuhouser 1990, 49.

⁶³ GWL 322 [GA I/2: 388].

⁶⁴ Neuhouser 1990, 46.

sublime can serve as the *Anstoß* to help us strive to attain it. An encounter with a feeling of the sublime brings either a new or renewed impetus to seek the transcendental standpoint, to become acquainted with the moral law and the absolute activity of the I, and thereby achieve ‘eternal truth’. At this point, the aesthetic standpoint kicks in and acts as a go-between between the real and the ideal standpoints, directing the philosopher to look inwards, to seek beauty in the work of the artist and the created products of her inner soul. In this, if the aesthetic sense is the impetus to seek the ideal standpoint, then the sublime is an ‘impetus-to-another-impetus’, it gives us prompt or reason to see beauty in the world. In essence, it encourages us to take note of the fact that there is more to the I’s existence than the real standpoint alone can account for. The brief section in which Fichte introduces the concept of the sublime suggests as much, claiming that the imagination is determined to subsume the object into the finite I’s activity, something which seems a somewhat larger task in the case of such overwhelming, for all intents and purposes “infinite” objects. Hence, this can only be achieved by means of a post-hoc ‘reflection’, in accordance with reason, rather than an immediately perceivable representation, as would be the case were the encounter intuited by the understanding. In this sense, Fichte says, “the power of imagination extends into the infinite, until it arrives at the utterly undeterminable Idea of supreme unity.”⁶⁵ The sublime, by bringing about the feeling of ‘astonishment’ and a ‘standstill’ in the imagination, sets the finite I on its way towards an (albeit unattainable) idea of an absolute infinity.

We should remember, of course, that Fichte’s aesthetic doctrine, as outlined in “Concerning the Concept”, is tripartite: “the pleasant, the beautiful, and the sublime”.⁶⁶ I would argue, however, that the sublime has a privileged position in relation to the aesthetic sense insofar as it overwhelms us. Astonishment is an enthralling reaction, we fall under its power to a greater degree than to, say, the pleasant, and as such are made far more susceptible to the sway of the aesthetic sense than we would be to that which is merely pleasant. Indeed, as noted, it is only in the context of the sublime that Fichte believes the oscillating of the imagination falters. The ‘astonishment’ that the sublime incites has the power to overwhelm us with the absolute incomprehensibility of something that should, somehow, be

⁶⁵ GWL 298-9 [GA I/2: 361].

⁶⁶ It would, perhaps, be interesting to consider the degree to which these three elements interact. It seems intuitively to be the case that the notion of the ‘beautiful’ encapsulates far more than the other two, and indeed is discussed more frequently and in greater depth by Fichte throughout his work. However, this is not what we are concerned with here.

comprehensible to the mind if we are to be able to transcend the boundary between the real and the ideal. Its incomprehensibility reaffirms that any understanding of the aesthetic sense can only come about thanks to a “necessary striving” of the I, “the applicability of which is conditioned by the effect upon feeling of the counter-striving Not-I.”⁶⁷

The I is *always* destined to fail in its striving to absolutely annul the Not-I, its striving to unite the real and the ideal. The relational subject can never assimilate the external world into her very being, except insofar as she is given it as a representation. But the possibility of doing so remains; the products of nature are in some sense products of the I, so there must be hope that these antinomies can be reconciled, and that the subject can unite her un-unifiable elements, the relational and the absolute.⁶⁸ The sublime, then, by representing the most supersensible of things in the world – the things that seem most ‘other’ to us – makes this union seem possible but incomprehensible, thereby giving the subject the task of striving, to attempt to make itself one with even the furthest reaches of its productive faculty.

In terms of aesthetic striving, too, the sublime can also allow the world to maintain at least some of its quality of being *terra incognita*. The aim of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is, as established earlier, to justify ‘representations accompanied by a feeling of necessity’, which runs the risk of explaining away nature as merely the object of scientific reasoning. However, while I don’t deny that this is the end goal of transcendental philosophy, insofar as it is understood by the relational subject, it can only be explained, and never *grasped*. That is to say, as Fichte explained in the *nova methodo*, we will always be prohibited from feeling ‘in general’, yet we nonetheless strive for the basis of feeling that underlies it. In essence, the hovering of the aesthetic sense between the real and the ideal standpoints mirrors the hovering of the imagination between the relational and the absolute. The sublime is merely the relational side of beauty, the initial prompt to send us back into ourselves and seek the ‘eternal truth’ of the absolute.

I don’t think this theory should be particularly shocking; indeed, my hope is merely that it has reaffirmed the importance of the natural sublime, and the reaction thereto, to Fichte’s wider aesthetic project. We shouldn’t be surprised that the sublime is critical to Fichte’s thought. After all, Fichte himself stresses in *On the Nature of the Scholar* (1806) that people of ‘noble’ character are naturally predisposed to “seek the sublime [...] in grand and imposing style.”⁶⁹ But thus far, its actual *role* has been seldom given the

⁶⁷ GWL 190 [GA I/2: 151].

⁶⁸ GWL 331 [GA I/2: 399].

⁶⁹ GA I/8: 99, my translation.

attention it deserves. That said, we can see the germ of my argument in most discussions of Fichte's aesthetic theory. What I have described is hinted at as early as Claude Piché's seminal work on Fichte's aesthetics: that "the function of the sublime (the confrontation with the incommensurable in nature) is to return the subject to the self in order that it may realize the greatness of its moral vocation."⁷⁰

5. Conclusion

"O dread and silent Mount! I gazed upon thee,
Till thou, still present to the bodily sense,
Didst vanish from my thought: entranced in prayer
I worshipped the Invisible alone."⁷¹

The reader may recognise these lines from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Hymn Before Sun-Rise, in the Vale of Chamouni", originally written in 1802.⁷² Coleridge here evokes precisely what I take a Fichtean account of the sublime to do. Though the sublime by no means accomplishes the complete movement from the practical to the theoretical standpoints that Fichte holds art to further achieve, I hold that it nonetheless plays an important role in this transition. Just as art directs our attention inwards, towards the creative power, as opposed to givenness, as a source of beauty, so the sublime gives us a reason to seek the beautiful, it overwhelms our sense with the sudden beauty of both the created product (the song of the opera singer) and (more importantly in this case) the beauty of the natural world. The sublime 'astonishes' us, a fact that, according to Fichte, brings time to a standstill and makes a large impression upon us. Henceforth, we are compelled to seek beauty within the human spirit, as opposed to the apparently given external world.

However, insofar as the productive power of the absolute I underlies and encompasses all posited reality, the sublime aspects of nature are in fact products of the creative process of the I. They are the furthest products of the I's positing from the relational subject, inasmuch as they are incomprehensible to the imagination. As such, the influence of the sublime is the first point of impetus to seek beauty in the world. I hope to have reaffirmed that

⁷⁰ Piché 2002, 314n.22. See also Breazeale 2013a, 29.

⁷¹ Coleridge 1997, 323, lines 13-16.

⁷² It is interesting to note that Coleridge was criticised in his day for plagiarism on *Hymn Before Sunrise*, purportedly failing to acknowledge the influence of *Chamouny at Sunrise* (1791), by the Danish writer and salonist Friederike Brun (1765-1835), at whose salon Goethe, Schiller, and August Wilhelm Schlegel, all correspondents and friends of Fichte, were attendees.

the sublime is critical to Fichte's aesthetic theory, and its role in the philosopher's quest to straddle the boundary between the real and the ideal standpoints, by acting as an *Anstoß* by which we are brought to consciousness of the otherness of beauty within nature, something that can be found simultaneously within the representing subject herself, and her acquaintance with the moral law.

Nature, *prima facie* merely an object of human conquest for Fichte, is, by virtue of the subject's relational nature, always to some degree impenetrable, but is nonetheless prompt for us to strive, *irrespective* of the absolute's unattainability, to come into closer contact with it. As Coleridge seems to suggest, the entire purpose of the sublime is to eradicate itself from aesthetic thought. This, of course, is the goal of the aesthetic sense: to 'worship the Invisible alone'. In the very first instance, it can take astonishment at seeing the Dolomite Mountains, the stormy seas that so obsessed Turner in the 19th century, or the sun setting over the Grand Canyon, to see that oneness with the absolute is desirable, and that 'the world of the beautiful spirit' lies "within humanity, and nowhere else."⁷³

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⁷³ SE 335 [GA I/5: 308].

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