

Nature, Judgment and Art: Kant and the Problem of Genius

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In §46 of the *Critique of Judgment* Kant defines genius as ‘the innate [*angeborenes*] mental predisposition [*Gemütsanlage*] (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art.’¹ It is not immediately obvious how one should interpret cryptic remarks of this sort. It is clear that Kant is making a connection between the creative powers usually associated with artistic genius and the laws that nature mechanically obeys. It is also clear that Kant thinks such a connection is important because he takes nature to be the paradigm case of beauty. (§42) If art is to be considered beautiful – if fine art is to be possible – then it must in some way be ‘natural’. Kant needs a conception of artistic genius that can account for art objects that are at once products of artistic intention and yet conceal this intention by appearing as necessary products of natural mechanism. The problem

¹ 5: 307; 174. For comments on various drafts of this paper and for encouragement to pursue the project, I would like to thank Brigitte Sassen. Parts of this paper were presented in another form at the 11th International Kant Congress in Pisa, Italy, forthcoming in the *Proceedings*. I thank the audience members at that meeting for some very helpful and insightful comments. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at meetings of the ARPA and the CPA. I thank my commentators and audience members at those meetings. Two anonymous readers at *Kant Studies Online* provided extensive and very helpful comments. I also extend my gratitude to the SSHRC, under the financial support of which this research and writing was completed. All references to Kant’s texts are to the *Königliche Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968) edition of Kant’s works, followed by the pagination from the appropriate translation. In the case of the *Critique of Judgment* and the unpublished *First Introduction to the Critique of Judgment* I refer to the Werner S. Pluhar translation (Cambridge: Hackett, 1987). In the case of *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* I refer to Robert Louden’s translation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). In the case of Kant’s unpublished *Reflections*, I refer to the translation, *Notes and Fragments*, edited by Paul Guyer, translated by Curtis Bowman, Paul Guyer and Frederick Rauscher. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

can be understood in terms of the vague relation between the peculiar powers of free artistic creativity and judgments of taste, both of which Kant maintains are necessary for the creation of fine art. In both cases, there is a tension between a creative force that exceeds our conceptual capacities and a demand that art make sense to an audience. Given that all of this is so ambiguous, that nothing Kant says allows for an easy distinction between unbridled creativity and the judgment that allows for communicability, and that the ostensibly important connection between genius and nature is little more than mentioned, it is tempting to discard much of what Kant says about artistic genius as irredeemably obscure, as articulating some unrelated convictions but providing little in terms of a complete and coherent theory. But this would be an irresponsible interpretive strategy. Given Kant's influence on the development of art criticism, and given the fact that the inclusion of art in the realm of beauty hinges on the viability of his theory of genius, it is important that one decipher as clear a position as possible concerning Kant's account of art and artistic creativity. So even if Kant is ambiguous about artistic genius, it is the task of the interpreter to decipher his enigmatic remarks and determine the extent to which Kant has a compelling theory. This is the charge of this paper.

I shall structure my discussion as follows. In the first section, I will isolate what I take to be the basic interpretive hurdle facing any coherent interpretation of Kant's theory of genius; namely, the ambiguity about the relation between genius and taste. The task I have set myself in this paper is to provide an interpretation of genius that can accommodate both Kant's commitment to genius as an unbridled creative force and to taste as an essential element in the execution of a work of art; I will argue, in fact, that the separation between genius and taste is strictly analytic, and that Kant's most complete account embraces both in a seamless whole. In this, my strategy is to use what I call Kant's 'natural' theory of genius as an interpretive key. One of the most problematic features of Kant's theory of genius is the vague

connection he intimates between the genius and nature. By getting as clear as possible about this connection, the other features of genius, originality and exemplarity, are more easily incorporated into a unified theory. In a word, I will argue that since Kant seems to understand the genius' connection to nature as a relationship in which creativity mirrors nature's original productivity, the peculiar talent of the genius lay in an ability to find 'natural' expression for aesthetic ideas. This involves a unique attunement of the cognitive powers, one geared towards the goal of giving an aesthetic, sensible life to rational ideas that can be universally understood. In a final section, I will return to the discussion of genius and taste, arguing that these two central concepts must not be interpreted as separate cognitive operations and highlighting how my 'natural' interpretation avoids this dangerous interpretive trap.

1. The Interpretive Hurdle: Kant's Ambiguity about Genius

In reading Kant's doctrine of artistic genius, it is difficult not to be frustrated by the fact that it seems to have been treated as an afterthought. After an elegant and captivating account of the experience of beauty, Kant goes on to make some brief and confusing remarks about the nature of artistic creativity. Indeed, as Henry Allison observes, it is commonplace in the secondary literature on Kant to observe that his theory of genius is too episodic to be properly incorporated into the rest of the work.² At the end of the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, even at the end of the whole of the *Critique of Judgment* one is left to wonder just where the theory of genius fits into the economy of Kant's text.

The most common modern attempt to make sense of Kant's theory of genius approaches it as a solution to the problem of fine art; namely, the problem that while pure judgments of taste must hinge on the appreciation of the

² *Kant's Theory of Taste* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 271 n.1.

mere form of purposiveness, art involves intention and thus an actual purpose, not just purposiveness itself. The problem concerns how, given the irreducible element of conscious intention that art involves, pure judgments of taste about art are possible. The theory of genius is Kant's attempt at a solution. '[A]rt,' so the famous passage goes, 'can be called fine [*schön*] art only if we are conscious that it is art while yet it looks to us like nature.'³ Art is at once an *opus* of the artist and an *effectus* of natural fecundity (*Fruchtbarkeit*).⁴ The special relationship between the genius and nature is here explained by pointing out that on Kant's model of aesthetic appreciation nature is the paradigm case of beauty, so that if art can be called beautiful at all it is only insofar as it appears as a natural product.⁵ Without this, there would be no distinguishing fine art (*Schöne Kunst*) from craft (*Handwerke*) or mercenary art (*Lohnkunst*).⁶ In this vein, the relevance of the theory of genius to the economy of the text as a whole is its function in solving the problem of fine art. In the spirit of this interpretive strategy Henry Allison approaches Kant's theory of genius as 'parergonal to the theory of taste', as a derivative tangent meaningful only by virtue of its status as a solution to a problem generated within the theory of taste proper.⁷

I do not want to challenge this generally accepted interpretation. It is clear enough that the possibility of fine art

³ §45, 5: 306; 174

⁴ The distinction between *opus* and *effectus* is Kant's. (§43, 5: 303; 170) Kant refers to the "*Ursprüngliche Fruchtbarkeit der Natur*" in *Reflexionen* 753. (15: 329; 497)

⁵ §45, 5: 306; 173. I do not want to wade too far into the debate concerning Kant's commitment to natural beauty. I will say that given Kant's remarks in §42 to the effect that only natural beauty can arouse a direct moral interest, it seems to me that on balance Kant is charged with finding a way to explain art as in some way natural. One of the best defenses that nature is Kant's paradigm case of beauty is found in Guyer's *Kant and the Experience of Freedom*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996) 229-271. Salim Kemal has argued precisely the opposite; namely, that nature fulfills the requirements of beauty "by analogy with fine art." *Kant and Fine Art* (Oxford University Press: 1986) 20. Guyer has explicitly attacked Kemal on this point. (1996: 271-74)

⁶ §43, 5: 303-4; 170-71.

⁷ *Kant's Theory of Taste* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 272.

is a problem for Kant and that the theory of genius is the solution. Nor do I want to suggest that it is wrong to see the theory of genius as somewhat episodic. The fact is that Kant seems to have appended the bulk of his theory of genius to what was already a fully conceived theory of aesthetic judgment. As John Zammito points out, §49 was likely added, along with the *Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment*, the *Analytic of the Sublime* and, later, the *Methodology of Teleological Judgment* during the final months of the composition of the text.⁸ One of the results of this is that the theory as a whole comes off as fragmented and confused. Of concern to me here is that there appears to be a tension between the imaginative freedom of the genius and the judgment required to make a work of art tasteful. In some places, Kant even suggests that genius is not necessarily required for the production of beauty, that taste constitutes the beauty of the work, while genius constitutes its spirit.⁹ And when Kant continues on to say that of genius or taste, the former should be forgone in the creation of fine art,¹⁰ it is quite difficult to take the discussion in the preceding five sections seriously, where genius is offered as a solution to the problem of fine art. Allison goes so far as to suggest that Kant operates with two conceptions of artistic creativity. The first is characterized by the genius that creates original works by harmonizing the freedom of the imagination with the conceptual constraints imposed by the understanding, the results of which are then subjected to judgment in order to settle on expression. The second interprets genius as little more than a free imaginative capacity that must check its flights of fancy against taste and the rules of technique in order to be able to create something amenable to interpretation by a universal audience of potential viewers.

⁸ *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 264. Zammito identifies this final period of composition with what he calls Kant's "ethical turn", a period in which Kant became concerned with the metaphysical implications of his aesthetics and teleology and with the final destination (*Bestimmung*) of humankind as a rational species.

⁹ §50, 5: 319; 188.

¹⁰ §50, 5: 319f; 188f.

Allison calls these two conceptions the ‘thick’ and the ‘thin’ respectively.¹¹

But while it is clear that there is a fundamental ambiguity to Kant’s account of artistic genius, I think it is a mistake to settle with this ambiguity as Kant’s most complete and compelling position on the matter. Allison is quite right when he points to a tension in Kant’s theory of genius. But this tension can be resolved according – to employ an anachronism – to both the *letter* and the *spirit* of Kant’s text. As I will show presently, the fact is that judgment is implicated in the creative process well before §50. Any apparent ambiguity about whether genius or taste is more essential to the creation of fine art can be explained with reference to Kant’s desire to highlight his commitment to judgments of taste as decisive in evaluating what can or cannot be considered beautiful. As Allison himself recognizes, Kant’s ‘thin’ conception betrays a polemical bent aimed at the members of the proto-romantic *Sturm und Drang*, primarily Herder.¹² Kant’s desire to distinguish himself from this movement compelled him to find a way to reign in the powers of genius, to provide a *Kritik* of these powers by defining the domain appropriate to them. Kant simply thinks that he needs to do as much as he can to show that he, unlike the *Stürmers*, does not think that art can be called fine unless the creative output of the artist-genius is guided by reason.

In attempting to distinguish himself from the *Stürmers*, then, Kant only kicks up sand in already murky waters. Kant’s claim is that beautiful art is too bound up with authorial intention to give rise to a disinterested judgment of taste.¹³ But this is terribly unsatisfying. If Kant is simply going to reject that art can have the same status as natural beauty, then why does he bother emphasizing the connection between the artist genius and nature? Paul Guyer wonders about this too, asking why, if art is supposed to be

¹¹ 2001, 300-01.

¹² Cf. Zammito (1993, 136-42), who reveals Kant’s hostilities towards Herder to be at the heart of his theory of genius.

¹³ §42, 5: 298-99; 165-66.

ascribed to nature, it does not have the same moral significance Kant attaches to natural beauty.¹⁴ Guyer maintains that Kant does not have a compelling answer to this question, but that his restriction of the highest domain of beauty to that of nature seems motivated by the concern that art can discreetly co-opt the freedom of an audience for its own intentions, shrouded as they are as effects of nature itself.¹⁵ Guyer is pointing to the fact that Kant wants to simultaneously maintain both that a work [*opus*] of art is, by virtue of the connection between genius and nature, a natural effect [*effectus*] and that art is inherently intentional and thus incapable of giving rise to disinterested judgment. In a sense, this problem runs parallel to the problem of Kant's ambiguity about whether genius or taste is more important in the execution of a work of fine art. In both cases, Kant wavers between the more radical claim that genius can produce natural *effects* and the claim that art is always guided by the intentions of the artist. For if art is just an *opus*, then the artist must employ a judgment of taste to ensure that his intentions are communicable to others. The issue here has not to do with the relative soundness of Kant's competing claims about art. Indeed, the interpretive hurdle arises because both conceptions of genius are equally viable. To overcome this hurdle it is necessary to see that these competing conceptions are not really competing at all.¹⁶ I suggest that the tension between genius and taste is not evidence of ambiguity (at least not only ambiguity) on Kant's part, but is rather a tension internal to genius itself; that is, rather than being two opposed cognitive operations, genius and taste are

¹⁴ *Kant and the Experience of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 113-14.

¹⁵ Guyer 1993, 114-15; see §42.

¹⁶ John McCumber remarks that Kant's texts (and all great philosophical texts for that matter) contain intelligent elements that flow through them without Kant's explicit consent. I mention this here because it seems to me to justify a certain interpretive strategy. Kant might well have been ambiguous about art and genius, but this should not stop us from engaging in the detective work required for fleshing out a more compelling position, one worthy of Kant's greatness. See: 'Unearthing the Wonder', *Aesthetics and Cognition in Kant's Critical Philosophy* edited by Rebecca Kukla (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 266-67.

elements – or moments, to steal a Hegelian term – of a single, unified process of the ingenious execution of a work of art.

2. The Natural Interpretation of Genius

I have already pointed out that like his eighteenth century predecessors Kant takes nature to be the paradigm case of beauty. While art is necessarily tainted with the intentions of the artist, intentions that are clear to anyone who pays close enough attention, natural beauty houses, as Kant so nicely puts it, ‘a voluptuousness [*Wollust*] for the mind in a train of thought that he can never fully unravel.’¹⁷ This means that if artistic creativity does not somehow mirror the processes nature itself follows in the generation of its ‘voluptuousness’, then art would not be beautiful. It is difficult to avoid interpreting Kant’s requirement that the genius has some mysterious connection to nature as the paramount element of the theory in general. Such a view, however, is belied by the plain fact that Kant makes almost no effort to clarify the precise relation he envisions between the genius and nature. Still, a reasonable picture can be cobbled together by supplementing the third *Critique* account with some of Kant’s unpublished reflections. While this will not yield a complete interpretation of Kant’s theory of genius, it will provide the basic structure into which the other elements of artistic genius can be fitted. There are three basic ways that Kant defines genius: 1) originality; 2) exemplarity and communicability; and 3) naturalness.¹⁸ Let us begin, then, by exploring what Kant means with his claim that art must be natural, and that the genius must be a part of nature. After that, we can return to the elements of

¹⁷ §42, 5: 300; 166-67.

¹⁸ §46, 5: 307; 174. It is worth noting that in his classic study of Kant’s theory of genius Otto Schlapp identifies three similar axioms, namely, ‘Originalität,’ ‘Humanität’ and ‘Die Nature giebt durch das Genie der Kunst die Regel.’ *Kants Lehre vom Genie und die Entstehung der 'Kritik der Urteilskraft'* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901) 379.

originality and exemplarity to complete the picture of the theory as a whole.

‘Genius,’ Kant says in a 1772 Reflection, ‘is like a forest in which free and fruitful nature spreads out its riches.’¹⁹ Genius is a natural phenomenon, a result of nature's original productivity. Kant's term in the third *Critique* is ‘Naturgabe’.²⁰ ‘Art,’ so Kant's reflection continues, ‘is like a garden, in which everything happens according to a method [...]’.²¹ Genius is the avenue through which nature becomes subject to rules that have their origin in human reason. On this conception, fine art is a mediated form of nature itself. The third *Critique* echoes a similar idea. Genius is the subjective avenue through which nature can act, and it is the natural element in the subject that is the source of genius. A necessary condition for fine art is thus 1) that nature acts through the genius, and 2) that it is this natural force that is the source of creativity. From this, it is clear that for Kant what the genius creates is a product of nature.²² But this is hardly sufficient to explain what distinguishes fine art from other human artifacts. Kant gets a little more specific in summing up his reflection: ‘nature provides material for genius and example for rules’.²³ This seems to suggest that the genius takes nature as a model for the creation of fine art, but this does not do much to clear things up either, for it is clear neither what kind of model nature is, nor the manner in which the genius takes it as a model. Kant surely cannot have mere imitation in mind, for in §42 he explains that even flawless copies cannot be beautiful.²⁴ We might be fooled by such copies, but since art is only beautiful when it appears as nature but we know it to be art, imitation cannot

¹⁹ 754, 15: 330; 497.

²⁰ ‘Genie is das Talent (Naturgabe), welches der Kunst die Regel gibt.’ (§46, 5: 307; 174)

²¹ 754, 15: 330; 497.

²² §46, 5: 307-08; 174-76.

²³ 754, 15: 330; 497.

²⁴ §42, 5: 166; 299. For a contrary view, see Bradley Murray "Kant on Genius and Art", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 47 (2007) No.2: 199-214. Murray seems to take it that genius is simply not required for the creation of beautiful objects since Kant's formalism entails that beauty is reducible to form, which can be imitated with sufficient diligence.

be sufficient for beauty. A reflection from 1772-73 clarifies what Kant seems to mean by art taking nature as a model: ‘Not the imitation of nature, but rather the original fruitfulness of nature is the ground of beautiful art.’²⁵ No matter how flawless, copies of nature do not qualify as art in the Kantian sense; it is, rather, the fruitfulness of nature itself that is the model of artistic creativity. Again we are struck with a seemingly impenetrable ambiguity. What could it possibly mean that nature’s original fertility is the model for fine art?

Kant never explicitly clears this up in the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*. There he does not say much more than that it is as nature that genius gives the rule,²⁶ which is precisely what we are struggling to explain. In order to get better grip on Kant’s thinking here, it is helpful to briefly consider some claims Kant makes in the context of his discussion of teleology.²⁷ Perhaps the best way to get at Kant’s meaning is by appealing to the claim that natural forms – even beautiful ones – can be given a mechanical interpretation.²⁸ Kant’s example is that of crystals. Such things display, as Kant puts it, ‘a mechanical tendency to produce forms that seem made, as it were, for the aesthetic employment of our power of judgment.’²⁹ Crystals, Kant says, are ‘exceedingly beautiful [*überaus schöne*],’³⁰ and thus not amenable to conceptual determination; but their formation is governed by mechanical principles nonetheless. So while we may be able to account for beautiful forms with mechanical principles, we cannot explain the beauty that thus results. Kant makes this explicit in §80, where he argues that the mechanical must be subordinated to the

²⁵ 753, 15: 329; 497.

²⁶ §46, 5: 308; 175.

²⁷ It is of course an interpretive decision to read Kant’s teleology as relevant to his aesthetics. Indeed, one of the most perplexing things about the third *Critique* is its inclusion of aesthetics and teleology under the same banner, but, and this is only one example, the more one studies the text, the more one realizes it needs to be read as a whole.

²⁸ §58, 5: 348-49; 222-23.

²⁹ §58, 5: 348; 222.

³⁰ §58, 5: 349; 223.

teleological. '[I]t is reasonable, even praiseworthy,' Kant writes, 'to try to explain natural products in terms of mechanism as long as there is some probability of success'.³¹ Some things, however, are simply impossible (at least for human beings) to explain mechanically, and beauty certainly falls into this category.

So when Kant identifies the artistic genius with nature, he seems to mean: 1) that artistic beauty, just like natural, can be given at least a partial explanation in terms of determinate concepts; and 2) that such a mechanical explanation cannot explain the beauty that results from what on some level at least seems to be governed by determinate rules. Beauty, no matter what its genesis, is not amenable to human understanding; yet as with all objects, whether natural or artificial, beautiful objects have a form that can be partially explained determinatively. 'For every art', Kant writes, 'presupposes rules, which serve as the foundation on which the product, if it is to be called artistic, is thought of as possible in the first place.'³² The beautiful rose is red, prickly, fragrant, etc. The poem employs certain determinate concepts in order to express a rational concept in an imaginative way.³³ And just as the rose's determinate components can be accounted for within a mechanical model of nature, the components of a beautiful poem can be accounted for by explaining how their respective concepts interrelate.

But simply cobbling together conceptual components does not make a fine work of poetry just like any old natural form does not amount to natural beauty. The artistic genius may create 'another nature out of the material that actual nature gives',³⁴ but this is more than simply putting together elements according to the laws of the understanding because, as Kant says, the work of genius must proceed without the guidance of any rule.³⁵ To be ingenious is to

³¹ §80, 5: 418; 303.

³² §46, 5: 307; 175.

³³ §49, 5: 314; 183.

³⁴ §49, 5: 314; 182.

³⁵ §49, 5: 317; 186.

expand concepts by creating *new* associations,³⁶ new connections between concepts that expand the concepts themselves. Kant uses the example of the concept of the sublimity and majesty of creation.³⁷ In cases like these there is plenty of opportunity for imagination to come up with new presentations that would refer to the concept yet not be strictly bound to its content, to reflect on a concept without determining it according to established rules. As rational, such concepts do not admit of any obvious sensible expression. The talent of the genius consists in the ability to find ‘natural’ expression for such concepts, an expression that, while completely novel, completely unpredictable, seems to follow necessarily from what we mean by a concept. In this, we can understand what Kant means when he requires that fine art is both *original* and *exemplary*: art must be new, but it cannot be nonsense, it must serve as an example.³⁸ A great work of art strikes us as original; it gives us a *new, exemplary* aesthetic way to think a concept. Let us consider an example.

When in 1504 Michelangelo erected his famous *David* in the *Palazzo della Signoria*, it was instantly embraced as a symbol of the Florentine people. In this elegant work, one sees the strength of the individual’s ability to triumph over the sublime powers of nature and, specifically, the difficulties of late medieval and early renaissance life in Florence. *David* is looking out to the world and steadfastly refusing to be dominated by it. It is not only that the *David* captures the power of the human will to triumph over seemingly impossible obstacles; it is that this rational concept – human fortitude – comes to be thought of in terms of the *David*. There is no sensible, determinate content that exhibits it, but Michelangelo has provided us with an aesthetic way to think the concept of human fortitude in all of its complex implications and interrelations. The peculiar talent of the genius consists in the ability to render a rational

³⁶ §49, 5: 315-16; 183.

³⁷ §49, 5: 315; 183.

³⁸ §46, 5: 307-08; 175.

concept in such a way that it strikes us as ‘natural’, a necessary implication of the concept. The *David* just *is* what we mean by human fortitude, it resonates with this concept in a way that everybody can understand. A rational concept may not have any determinate sensible content, but it is something that everyone, at least in principle, can understand. The achievement of the artist is to have adhered to the interpretive capacities of a universal audience of potential viewers in generating a novel expression of a rational concept. This means that when the genius tries to communicate a concept aesthetically he must take a ‘*universal standpoint*’³⁹ and allow his creative energies to congeal around this task. To create art is quite literally to create another nature, a nature populated by ideas that exceed the bounds of sense, and held together by the aesthetic ingenuity that yet finds a sensible expression to capture such ideas.⁴⁰ This is why merely formal imitation is not the manner in which artistic genius takes nature as a model. It is indeed crucial that the work be original, but a work of art is also, as Kant puts it, ‘purposive for exhibiting the given concept’.⁴¹ And through this purposive creativity the artist does not just imitate what he sees, but rather creates another nature, a nature of ideas.

3. Ingenious Judgment and Serious Creativity

We can now see what Kant means by the idea that the genius creates another nature. What remains is to explore Kant's more detailed account of artistic creativity. Kant insists that a judgment of taste is a necessary condition for fine art, but it is not entirely clear how this is incorporated into the creative process. It is tempting, as I have pointed out, to interpret imaginative freedom and reflective judgments of taste as separate cognitive operations. In order to see that this is a mistaken interpretation, we need to see

³⁹ §40, 5: 295; 161.

⁴⁰ §49, 5: 314-15; 182-83.

⁴¹ §49, 5: 317; 186.

how it is only by operating together that the faculties are capable of creativity.

3.1 Reason and Reflective Judgment

In the unpublished *First Introduction* to the third *Critique*, Kant explains that empirical cognition requires three distinct cognitive acts [*Handlung*]: 1) ‘*apprehension* of the manifold of intuition’, requiring *imagination*; 2) *comprehension* of this manifold, requiring *understanding*; and 3) *exhibition* of the concept, requiring *judgment*.⁴² In a determinative judgment, the object *qua* a determinate instance of a concept is *exhibited* – I determine that the lump of fur on the chair in front of me is cat by *comprehending* the given manifold and *exhibiting* it as such. Reflective judgment, however, does not follow this familiar model of empirical cognition; in particular, it does not deal with the exhibition of a particular determinate concept. In reflective judgment, the order of operations from apprehension to comprehension to exhibition is short-circuited because that which is apprehended (beauty) resists comprehension. Before the third *Critique*, Kant had always maintained that imagination and understanding take on a relation of cooperation that unifies a manifold into a structured object. Now we learn that imagination and understanding can take on a new relation, a relation characterized by ‘harmonious free play’ rather than cooperation. This means that the typical relationship between imagination and understanding – the relationship in which imagination provides content that the understanding logically comprehends – is unhinged; that is, the imagination is no longer bound to the laws of the understanding, leaving its manifold free from the conceptual rule of the understanding and consequently from the imposition of determinative judgment. This is not, of course, an *absolute* freedom; the imagination is freely *lawful*; that is, the imagination still operates (freely) within the limits of the understanding, but is

⁴² VII, 20: 220; 408.

simply not compelled by the understanding to operate according to a determinate rule.⁴³ Without going into any of the necessary details, reflective judgment is not concerned to exhibit some concept of this state of the freedom of the imagination, but rather to *reflect* on it. The object of reflection is not, then, some object of experience (for to be an object at all in the Kantian sense is to be conceptually determined) but rather the purposive relation between imagination and understanding itself. In Kant's words, '[...] in a merely reflective judgment imagination and understanding are considered as they must relate in general in the power of judgment, as compared with how they actually relate in the case of a given perception.'⁴⁴ In the case of empirical cognition, the relationship between imagination and understanding is purposive in that its purpose is to determine an object by exhibiting a concept that fits a given manifold.⁴⁵ When confronted with the beautiful, this purpose of determining an object to be an instance of a concept is replaced by a *purposiveness without a purpose* because while the purpose of concept exhibition is absent, the purposive relation itself remains. That which is *apprehended*, though it cannot be *comprehended*, still harmonizes with the understanding. The beautiful object simply seems designed to spur on the state of the harmonious free play of the cognitive powers; that is, even though the manifold given in imagination cannot be conceptually determined, the imagination still finds itself freely in harmony with the conceptual laws of the understanding.

This explains the first side of Kant's famous formulation, '[n]ature, we say, is beautiful [*schön*] if it also looks like art; and art can be called fine [*schön*] art only if we are conscious that it is art while yet it looks to us like nature.'⁴⁶ Nature looks like art when, without being conceptually determined, it 'may offer just the form in the combination of its manifold as the imagination, if it were left to itself [and]

⁴³ *General Comment*, 5: 241; 91.

⁴⁴ *First Introduction* VII, 20: 220; 408.

⁴⁵ §10, 5: 220; 64-5.

⁴⁶ §45, 5: 306; 174.

free, would design in harmony with the *understanding's lawfulness* in general.⁴⁷ The idea here is that in the experience of beauty there is something like a 'cognitive fit' between mind and world. This 'cognitive fit' is evidence that the world itself is amenable to the structures reason imposes. Beauty is a kind of offering, or better, an invitation to discover "the highest point in the series of causes"; that "stranger in natural science, the concept of natural purposes"⁴⁸ first makes its appearance in the experience of the beautiful. So the feeling of pleasure in the beautiful comes, at least in part, from the pleasure we take in achieving our cognitive aims without any conceptual effort. It is a feeling of ease that accompanies the knowledge that the world is made for my thinking. This is the *Wink* Kant speaks of in the *Dialectic of Teleological Judgment*. There it is a hint that there is something to the suspicion that mechanical causation cannot account for everything, that we need to assume an intelligent creator if we want explain our experiences as completely as possible. But in terms of his aesthetics, this *Wink* takes on metaphysical significance in that it provides evidence that the world was made for my thinking.

For our purposes here, the preceding is enough to isolate what is distinctive about reflective judgment and its role in the experience of the beautiful; namely, that while it lacks the purpose of concept exhibition, it is still purposive since it retains the relation that in empirical cognition yields a determinate object of cognition. But this only covers Kant's account of the aesthetics of receptivity; that is, the *experience* of the beautiful. We need to get from here to an account of the aesthetics of creativity; that is, the *creation* of beautiful art. On this front, Angelica Nuzzo provides a helpful taxonomy of the various Kantian forms of cognition.

⁴⁷ *General Comment*, 5: 240-41; 91. Alexander Rueger argues that natural beauty acquires this significance for human cognition when nature presents a manifold that matches the unity that imagination would have provided had it been left to its usual task in empirical cognition. "It is the comparison of the actual with the counterfactual form that results in a judgment of beauty," Rueger writes. See 'Kant and the Aesthetics of Nature', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 47 (2007) No.2: 144.

⁴⁸ §72, 5: 390; 271.

In the case of determinate judgment understanding dominates the imagination, determining the unified manifold to be a case of a particular concept. Reflective judgment frees the imagination from conceptual domination and allows it to enter into a relationship of harmonious free play, the harmony this time dominated by the freedom of the imagination. In the case of the experience of the sublime, the imagination is given even more freedom in that it is charged with the task of coming up with some supersensible meaning for what is a purely sensible given content. But when it comes to Kant's account of artistic genius, imagination is charged with the even more challenging task of coming up with a sensible version of a supersensible idea.⁴⁹ I touched on this briefly in the last section: to create a work of art is to create another nature; it is to create an ideal nature, a natural domain for ideas. In the context of Kant's claims about the relation between the artistic genius and nature, I interpreted this as meaning that in fine art ideas find a 'natural' expression, an expression that seems to follow as necessarily as any of nature's mechanical products. Of concern to us here, however, as Nuzzo's taxonomy points out, is the role that reason plays in the process of artistic creativity. 'In the genius', Nuzzo writes, 'the faculties involved are not only imagination and understanding but also reason'.⁵⁰ This important observation helps explain the implications of Kant's requirement that products of genius be natural, for 'in the activity of the genius,' Nuzzo continues, 'imagination creates a new supersensible or ideal nature.'⁵¹ Such an 'ideal' nature, as Nuzzo puts it, is a nature that, as I put it in the last section, is populated by ideas that exceed the bounds of sense. This is a nature that can only be ascribed to human reason.

Following Nuzzo's lead is helpful in determining the kind of judgment Kant has in mind when it comes to artistic creativity. The power Nuzzo attributes to genius consists in

⁴⁹ Angelica Nuzzo, *Kant and the Unity of Reason* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2005) 307-08.

⁵⁰ Nuzzo 2005, 307.

⁵¹ Nuzzo 2005, 307. My emphasis.

an imaginative capacity to create something sensible that corresponds to that which is supersensible. Part of this is explained by Kant's theory of aesthetic ideas, which I will explore below. But also relevant is Kant's most general understanding of reflective judgment as the power to find a universal for a particular without any guidance from the conceptual rule of the understanding.⁵² In the unpublished *First Introduction*, Kant tells us that '[t]o *reflect* (or consider [*überlegen*])' is to compare given presentations with others in such a way as to make a concept possible.⁵³ The concepts Kant has in mind here are clearly not empirical concepts, for in this case determinative judgment moves from a universal to a particular in determining an object to be an instance of a concept. Rather, what Kant has in mind are rational concepts.⁵⁴ Reflective judgment allows one to think rational concepts without determinate conceptual content. In terms of Kant's basic definition of reflective judgment, this process of comparing presentations in order to think a supersensible concept can be understood as a search for a universal in a sea of particulars. Significantly, Kant likens the power of intellectual ideas (i.e. rational concepts⁵⁵) to the power of reason itself; the power, that is, to think more than what can be apprehended in any given presentation.⁵⁶ Using reflective judgment, the artistic genius combines presentations to create a sensible, aesthetic counterpart of that which can only be thought. This, I suggest, is what Kant means when he says that the artistic genius creates another nature, a sensible counterpart of something purely rational. Indeed, Kant claims that artistic genius is characterized by an 'ability to exhibit *aesthetic ideas*', and defines an aesthetic idea as 'the counterpart (pendant) of a *rational idea*'.⁵⁷ A rational idea is a concept that cannot be exhausted by any intuition;

⁵² IV, 5: 179; 18-19.

⁵³ V, 20: 211; 400.

⁵⁴ See §49, 5: 314; 182, where Kant says that ideas are an attempt to exhibit rational concepts. Kant's terminology is not very precise here, for he seems to use 'rational idea' and 'rational concept' interchangeably.

⁵⁵ §49, 5: 314; 182.

⁵⁶ §49, 5: 315; 183.

⁵⁷ §49, 5: 313-14; 182.

an aesthetic idea is an imaginative presentation that cannot be thought determinatively. An aesthetic idea gives sensible life to that which is purely rational. Let us now turn to explore the theory of aesthetic ideas in more detail.

3.2. Aesthetic Ideas and Creative Judgment

An aesthetic idea is, as Kant says, a 'presentation of the imagination' that exceeds any possible determination by concepts.⁵⁸ Aesthetic ideas have the power to bring ideas that exceed conceptual determination to the senses, and they do this by 'supplementing' the logical exhibition of a concept with 'presentations', or 'aesthetic attributes' that prompt the imagination to search for meaning in the multitude of relations that can be found between these presentations.⁵⁹ An aesthetic idea, then, is made up of aesthetic attributes, which are the forms that express 'the concept's implications and its kinship with other concepts.'⁶⁰ There is a good deal to unpack here. A concrete example should help to keep things straight.

Consider Vermeer's famous *Milkmaid*. At the centre of this elegant work stands a young maid at a table in a modest kitchen, measuring milk from a jug. On a table in front of the maid lay bread in a basket; above is a window with natural light pouring in. The viewer gets the sense that Vermeer just happened to be there to capture this young maid, surrounded by the banalities of everyday life. Yet in these banalities something honest and universal emerges. The striking thing about Vermeer's work is the way in which it captures, in a single moment, the entirety and complexity of a rational concept. In the case of the *Milkmaid*, the subject matter somehow captures the feeling we all have in moving through our daily lives. Vermeer has managed to take the idea that we all have of, say, the quotidian elements of life, and expressed this idea

⁵⁸ §49, 5: 314; 182.

⁵⁹ §49, 5: 315; 183.

⁶⁰ §49, 5: 315; 183.

aesthetically. The aesthetic idea is here made up of what Kant calls 'aesthetic attributes' that supplement the rational idea that everybody can understand, but that has no intuitive counterpart. The bread in the wicker basket on the table, the simple window with natural light, the wicker and copper baskets hanging on the whitewashed wall behind the maid, the foot warmer on the floor; all of these elements together speak to our idea of the quotidian by presenting implications and associations we can all understand but which are being presented together in the work for the first time through Vermeer's ingenuity. The supplementary presentations that make up the determinate content of the work are not the contents of a concept, but rather 'presentations' that, as Kant says, expand a concept, or idea.⁶¹ In terms of Kant's 'natural' requirement, such a work seems natural because it captures just what we mean by the quotidian; it is exemplary of such a concept and as such it is immediately clear to anyone who looks. Only Vermeer's genius could have come up with a way to express the concept in just this way, and nobody could have predicted Vermeer's creation; but once we see the work, it is obvious and impossible to forget.

But what are the cognitive structures at work in such a feat of aesthetic ingenuity? Most relevant here is Kant's claim that genius is explained by the principle of spirit. On this, Kant says that spirit 'is nothing but the ability to exhibit *aesthetic ideas*.'⁶² Spirit, Kant says, 'in an aesthetic sense is the animating principle in the mind'; it is precisely this principle that 'imparts to the mental powers a purposive momentum'.⁶³ Kant then goes on to say that there are two distinct activities in genius, only one of which can be associated with spirit:

first, to discover ideas for a given (rational) concept, and, second, to hit upon a way of *expressing* these ideas that enables us to communicate it to

⁶¹ §49, 5: 315; 183.

⁶² §49, 5: 313-14; 182.

⁶³ §49, 5: 313; 181-82.

others... The second talent is properly the one we call spirit.⁶⁴

It is important to notice that the function Kant assigns to spirit is to express an idea that enables the aesthetic communication of a certain rational concept. It is also important to notice that spirit is not some special faculty, like imagination, understanding, or judgment. Spirit is a 'principle' that 'animates' the cognitive powers in a way that makes aesthetic expression possible. On the one hand, genius requires the imaginative capacity to come up with aesthetic attributes related to a rational concept; on the other hand, these imaginative presentations must be guided by the purpose of concept exhibition. So it is not that the imagination is in a state of absolute free play, unbridled by any conceptual apparatus. It is rather that imagination's free play is guided by a search for particular aesthetic attributes that relate to the appropriate rational concept, '[f]or in order to express what is ineffable in the mental state accompanying a certain presentation and to make it universally communicable [...] we need an ability [viz., spirit] to apprehend the imagination's rapidly passing play and to unite it in a concept [...]'⁶⁵ The freedom of the imagination must be united around the task of concept exhibition. And reflective judgment too is similarly animated. Imagination only comes up with presentations; it is the task of reflective judgment to find the combination that expresses a rational concept in a way that makes sense to others; it is the task of reflective judgment, that is, to find the particulars for the universal, to take determinate particular components and 'ascend' to the universal. In this sense, a judgment of taste is just the unique employment that reflective judgment enjoys when it is animated by the principle of spirit. The artist succeeds in making something 'natural' when he succeeds in creating a sensible version for something that for most of

⁶⁴ §49, 5: 317; 186.

⁶⁵ §49, 5: 317; 186.

us only exists in the mind; when, that is, the artist creates another nature, one having its origin in human reason.⁶⁶

It is striking that Kant's understanding of 'spirit' is so similar to the function of concept exhibition that he assigns to determinative judgment. Just as the latter is charged with the task of exhibiting a concept that the understanding comprehends out of an apprehended manifold of imagination, the function of spirit is to exhibit a rational concept in an aesthetic way, as an aesthetic idea. "When the imagination is used for cognition," Kant says, "then it is under the constraint of the understanding [...] [b]ut when the aim is aesthetic, then the imagination is free."⁶⁷ But it is not just the relation between imagination and understanding that is upset; judgment too takes on a new relation in this creative process. In the case of empirical cognition, the order of operations is from imagination to understanding to judgment. That which is presented in the imagination is conceptually grasped and determined by judgment to be an instance of a concept. The process of creativity on the other hand moves from reason to imagination to judgment. Here, the process begins with a rational concept or an idea that needs to find expression. The first step is for the imagination to present an array of aesthetic attributes of this concept, imaginative presentations that flesh out the various implications and associations of which the concept admits. Kant's example here is a simile used to aesthetically express the rational concept of virtue: "The sun flowed forth, as serenity

⁶⁶ Only art, then, is capable of expressing aesthetic ideas. As presentations of the imagination, (§49, 5: 314,316; 182,185) aesthetic ideas have been subjected to the process of judgment that allows for their expression. Nature can trigger certain sentiments (§42, 5: 168; 303), but these sentiments are not aesthetic ideas unless they are subject to a process of aesthetic reflection, and these ideas are not expressible unless the artist judges which aesthetic attributes are most suitable for their expression. On my view, Kant intends this to be a process whereby the mind is able to create another nature. (§49, 5: 314; 182) For a contrary view, see Kenneth F. Rogerson's recent book *The Problem of Free Harmony in Kant's Aesthetics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), where he argues that the free harmony of the faculties is due to the expression of aesthetic ideas, both in art and nature. In Rogerson's view, it is the purposive structure of the expression of ideas that allows us to judge beautiful objects to be subjectively purposive.

⁶⁷ §49, 5: 316-17; 185.

flowed from virtue.’⁶⁸ Here the implication of the concept of virtue is taken to be serenity, which makes a connection between the two concepts, thus expanding the reach of the concept of virtue, adding something to it that is not logically contained in the concept itself. The task of spirit here is to exhibit the concept of virtue, and this task requires both the imaginative capacity to come up with presentations and the ability of reflective judgment to select the presentations that best speak in a universal voice. A reflective judgment of taste, then, is a part of the creative process itself, without which the genius would have no way to express the aesthetic idea.⁶⁹ Kant uses the example of a young poet, whose judgment has not been developed enough, and as a result does not understand the negative reception of his poetry.⁷⁰ The poet who does not properly subject his imaginative flights to judgment is not capable of creating a work of genius because he neglects a fundamental part of the creative process. The young poet’s imagination may well be animated by the spirited purpose of exhibiting a rational idea, but if his judgment is not similarly animated by spirit’s goal of expressing an aesthetic idea, then his poetry will not be fine art. The young poet fails to create a sensible counterpart to a rational concept, and thus fails to create another nature. So art is beautiful only when it is natural; only when, that is, it employs judgment to arrive at an expression that is meaningful to others and that gives aesthetic life to ideas that for most of us are only rational. And just as nature is not some inconceivable jumble, if art is to be successful in communicating a supersensible idea, then it is necessary that it too cannot be an inconceivable jumble; it is necessary, in short, that it be subject to a judgment of taste.

⁶⁸ §49, 5: 316; 184-85.

⁶⁹ Kant seems to use expression (*Ausdruck*) and exhibition (*Darstellung*) interchangeably on this point. The one consistency seems to be that aesthetic ideas can either be expressed or exhibited, but that concepts can only be exhibited. Only aesthetic ideas can express concepts, and they do this via aesthetic attributes.

⁷⁰ §32, 5: 282; 145-46.

4. Conclusion: Genius and Taste Revisited

It is now possible to see that a careful and somewhat generous reading of Kant's various remarks about artistic genius can yield a complete and coherent theory underpinning what on the surface seem to be some rather vague and disconnected convictions. Indeed, the most important consequence of the reading of genius I have ventured here is that the creative process is understood as single and unified. We have seen that on the surface of things, there appears to be a tension between the imaginative freedom of the genius and judgments of taste. In addition to the textual evidence we have already explored for such a view, there is an unpublished reflection from 1769-70, where Kant opposes genius to taste as if they were two separate faculties: "Taste," Kant says, "is the basis of judging, genius however of execution."⁷¹ The idea here seems to be that genius is the creative force behind the work, while taste makes the judgments that keep the work within the realm of comprehensibility. Thus, Kant continues, "[T]aste without genius brings dissatisfaction with oneself; [...] in contrast, much genius brings crude yet valuable products."⁷² Here, genius is responsible for providing the material for art, while taste gives it a meaningful form. Thus taste without genius is without material; it simply has nothing on which to pass judgment. The artist who finds himself without genius finds himself in the position of having nothing to which to give form.

This model of the relation between genius and taste is further developed in a later reflection from 1776-78, where Kant says that genius gives the material and judgment chooses among it.⁷³ And Kant returns to this familiar theme in the third *Critique*, where "Genius can only provide rich *material* for products of fine art; processing this material and giving it a *form* requires a talent that is academically trained,

⁷¹ 671, 15: 279; 490.

⁷² 671, 15: 279; 490.

⁷³ 814, 15: 363; 505.

so that it may be used in a way that can stand the test of the power of judgment.”⁷⁴ But there is another way to read this relation between matter and form. Kant does say that genius provides the matter and taste the form, but it is fairly clear that one cannot function without the other. On their own, genius produces nonsense and taste has got nothing to judge. Read in this way, the separation between genius and taste is merely analytical, highlighting the importance of both in the creative process. Genius is not some separate faculty, but rather the talent proper to fine art. Imaginative freedom and taste must work together to create fine art. Indeed, on the reading I have just ventured, creativity is not even possible without the freedom of the imagination and reflective judgment. It is neither imagination nor judgment on their own that are creative. Rather, it is the spirit of the genius that is responsible for creativity. Kant’s more considered position, then, embraces the harmonious operation of the faculties, and in this sense it is even a bit misleading to separate genius and taste, for a work is only ingenious when it is tasteful. Kant emphasizes this in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, where he says that to free imagination from all constraint of rules and allow it to “swoon” (*schwärmen*) would be to surrender its claim to exemplarity and thus genius.⁷⁵ On this conception, genius itself contains the tension between providing the creative material and giving it a form, both of which are part of the same creative process. This interpretation is supported by a further reflection from 1776-78, where Kant more clearly articulates a unified understanding of genius. I quote this important passage at length:

Genius is not some sort of demon that gives out inspirations and revelations. If genius is to have matter, then one must have learned much or formally and methodically studied. Genius is also not a special kind and source of insight; it must be able to be communi-

⁷⁴ §47, 5: 310; 178).

⁷⁵ §57, 7: 225; 120.

cated and made understandable to everyone. Genius only comes in where talent and industry do not reach; but if the illuminations presented *amant obscurum* and do not want to be seen and examined in the light at all, when they do not yield any graspable idea: then the imagination is raving, and, since its product is nothing (*Nichts ist*), it has not arisen from genius at all, but is only an illusion (*Blendwerk*).⁷⁶

Decisive here is Kant's claim that the raving imagination, which at other times seems to be identified with genius proper, is now considered incapable of giving rise to works of art at all without the constraint that allows for communicability. Products of pure genius without taste are illusory, not really products at all. On this model, the very execution of a work of genius requires judgment and taste. Otherwise, a work of art is nothing, and it is certainly not the product of genius.

I shall conclude simply by pointing out that all of this supports the interpretation that genius is not some separate faculty, but rather a *manner* in which the faculties are set into motion.⁷⁷ Kant makes this point explicitly in a reflection from 1776-78: "Genius [...] is a *principium* of the animation of all the other powers through whatever idea of objects one wants."⁷⁸ And in the *Anthropology* Kant claims that genius, talent and spirit constitute a certain animation of the faculties.⁷⁹ This more unified conception of genius guarantees that art speak in a meaningful and recognizable voice. It is thus not simply that taste thwarts the raving musings of the fanatical genius, that taste, so the oft-cited passage goes, 'clips the wings of genius'.⁸⁰ It is rather, as Kant himself intimates at the end of §50, that the art of genius requires the coordination of all the faculties to produce something that is at once free from familiar rules of concept exhibition and

⁷⁶ 899, 15: 393; 512.

⁷⁷ Cf. Crawford, Donald W. 'Kant's Theory of Creative Imagination', in *Essays in Kant's Aesthetics*, edited by Ted Cohen and Paul Guyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 169.

⁷⁸ 949, 15: 421; 516-17.

⁷⁹ §57-59, 7: 224-29; 119-24.

⁸⁰ §50, 5: 319; 188.

purposive for communicating a rational concept to a universal audience of potential viewers. For it is only, as we have seen, in the context of the task (set by reflective judgment) of exhibiting a rational concept, that the imagination is freed from the conceptual rule of the understanding to generate a plurality of presentations that supplement our understanding of a concept aesthetically.

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