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THE GARDENS OF VERSAILLES AND THE SUBLIME

In envisioning himself as the distinguished guest of Louis XIV in the king's *Manière de montrer les jardins de Versailles*, the architectural theorist Vincent Scully refers to his *surprise* at a point of the tour offered by the Sun King, and says:

> Then it all bursts out before us, the *tapis vert* that slants gently down through the trees that are brought tightly in to focus the view, the Bassin d'Apollon, the Grand Canal, and, most of all, the *overriding* sky. Louis tells us to *admire* it all. He was quite aware that it was a moment of vast *release*. The oval of Latona opens up and surprises us, *releasing us* to the burst of velocity that explodes at the middle of the garden. Our gaze moves rapidly down the *tapis vert*, but when it hits the water it literally takes off. It no longer adheres but slides across the water to the sky reflected on it. (. . .) We are *released to infinity*, or at least to *indefinitely expanding* space. (A 227n.)[1]

If they do provoke these effects at all, the Gardens of Versailles apparently do so by means of strict regularity. But characteristically, in a well-known passage of the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Kant refers to the "English taste in gardens" and associates it with his concept of beauty proper, namely "free beauty," whereas a few lines below he expressly rejects every "stiff" and "mathematical regularity," for, he says quite clearly, "it contravenes taste" (KU 72). Certainly, in asserting this, Kant refers to the "regularity" of a "pepper garden" instead of directly speaking of Versailles, but the criticism of "regularity" applies to the Gardens of Versailles as well. Now, Kant did not reduce the "aesthetical judgment" to the "judgment of taste," that is, to the "judgment on the beautiful," for according to Kant the other kind of "aesthetical judgment" is the "judgment on the sublime." The goal of this paper is to probe whether the "release to infinity" referred to by Scully falls under the Kantian judgment on the sublime. But in fact, this does not seem to be the case, for regularity is a main feature of the French classical garden, which not only contravenes Kant's criterion of beauty, but also his concept of the sublime. On the one hand, Kant does not refer the sublime to a man-made object like a garden, but to an "object of nature" (KU 115), such as the ocean, peaks, overhanging rocks, and even equally important, Kant does not refer the sublime to any form or regularity in nature but rather expressly to nature "in its chaos, or in its wildest and most irregular disorder and desolation" (KU 78). On the other hand, Kant relates the sublime either to the "immeasurabil-

A.-T. Tymieniecka (ed.), Analecta Husserliana LXXVIII, 47–58.

ity of nature" (KU 104), or to nature insofar as it is "represented as causing dread" (KU 102), and obviously any garden is both measurable, a finite region, and not dreadful but rather pleasant.[2] In any case, I must examine the Gardens of Versailles in view of Kant's concepts of beauty and of the sublime.

1. "FREE BEAUTY" AND KANT'S CRITICISM OF REGULARITY

Kant defines the beautiful in several ways, but the most salient feature for us now is the definition of beauty as "free beauty" or "self-subsisting beauty," which "presupposes no *concept* of what the object should be." (KU 48) The main point here is "mere apprehension (. . .) of *form*," and just without concept. To recall the meaning of such a Kantian idea in a simple way, one can refer to Kant's examples. He says: "Flowers are free beauties of nature. Hardly anyone but a botanist knows the true nature of a flower, and even he, while recognizing in the flower the reproductive organ of the plant, pays no attention to this natural end when using his taste to judge of its beauty." (KU 49) To speak of the "natural end" of "the true nature of the flower" amounts to speaking of a concept, according to which one could judge from the stance of knowledge but not from the stance of beauty. Kant thus goes on as follows:

> Hence no perfection of any kind – no internal finality, as something to which the arrangement of the manifold is related – underlies this judgement [about beauty]. Many birds (the parrot, the hummingbird, the bird of paradise), and a number of crustacea, are self-subsisting beauties which are not appurtenant to any object defined with respect to its end, but please freely and on their own account. (KU 49)

Kant's rejection of "concepts" as related to aesthetical judgement amounts to rejecting "meaning." He says: "So designs *à la grecque*, foliage for framework or on wallpapers, etc., have no intrinsic meaning; they represent nothing – no object under a definite concept – and are free beauties. We may also rank in the same class what in music are called fantasias (without a theme), and, indeed, all music that is not set to words." (KU 69)

From here one can easily understand Kant's further rejection, namely the rejection of mathematical regularity. He says:

> (. . .) geometrically regular figures, a circle, a square, a cube, and the like, are commonly brought forward by critics of taste as the most simple and unquestionable examples of beauty. And yet the very reason why they are called regular, is because the only way of representing them is by looking on them as mere presentations of a determinate *concept* by which the figure has its rule (according to which alone it is possible) prescribed for it. One or the other of these two views

must, therefore, be wrong: either the verdict of the critics that attributes beauty to such figures, or else our own, which makes finality apart from any concept necessary for beauty. (KU 70)[3]

Mathematical regularity is thus linked to some concept; for this reason it violates Kant's definition of "free beauty." The concept does not need to be a mathematical one. We do not need to refer necessarily to mathematical regularity; it may be regularity as mere symmetry. Kant says:

Where some purpose is perceived, as, for instance, that of forming an estimate of the area of a plot of land, or rendering intelligible the relation of divided parts to one another and to the whole, then regular figures, and those of the simplest kind, are needed; and the delight does not rest immediately upon the way the figure strikes the eye, but upon its serviceability for all manner of possible purposes. A room with the walls making oblique angles, a plot laid out in a garden in a similar way, even any violation of symmetry, as well in the figure of animals (e.g., being one-eyed) as in that of buildings, or of flower-beds, is displeasing because the form is contrary to the finality, not alone in a practical way in respect of some definite use to which the thing may be put, but for an estimate that looks to all manner of possible purposes. (KU 70)

Kant is thus very clear. He goes on as follows:

With the judgment of taste the case is different. For, when it is pure, it combines delight or aversion immediately with the bare contemplation of the object irrespective of its use or of any end. The regularity that conduces to the *concept* of an object is, in fact, the indispensable condition (*conditio sine qua non*) of grasping the object as a single representation and determining the manifold in the form of the object. This determination is an end in respect of knowledge; and in this connection it is invariably coupled with delight (such as attends the accomplishment of any, even problematical, purpose). Here, however, we have merely the value set upon the solution that satisfies the problem, and not a free and indeterminately final entertainment of the mental powers with what is called beautiful. In the latter case, understanding is at the service of imagination, in the former, this relation is reversed. (KU 70n., i. a.)[4]

Therefore, mere symmetry leads mostly to a concept and on its part this leads to Kant's rejection of symmetry:

With a thing that owes its possibility to a purpose, a building, or even an animal, its regularity, which consists in symmetry, must express the unity of the intuition accompanying the *concept* of its end, and belongs with it to cognition. But where the maintenance of a free play of the powers of representation (subject, however, to the condition that there is to be nothing for understanding to take exception to) is intended: in ornamental gardens, in the decoration of rooms, in all kinds of furniture that shows good taste, etc., *regularity in the shape of constraint is to be avoided as far as possible*. (KU 71)

After the rejection of regularity insofar as it is linked to some concept, it follows that what can be understood is an unuttered decision for the English

garden against the classic French garden. Then Kant goes on as follows: "Thus English taste in gardens, and Baroque taste in furniture, push the freedom of imagination to the verge of what is grotesque, the idea being that in this divorce from all constraint of rules the precise instance is being afforded where taste can exhibit its perfection in projects of the imagination to the fullest extent." (KU 71)

Kant only mentions the gardens, but he immediately rejects explicitly any regularity connected with gardens. Kant says:

> All stiff regularity (such as borders on mathematical regularity) inherently contravenes taste in that the contemplation of it affords us no lasting entertainment. Indeed, where it has neither cognition nor some definite practical end expressly in view, we get heartily tired of it. On the other hand, anything that gives the imagination scope for unstudied and final play is always fresh to us. We do not grow to hate the very sight of it. Marsden, in his description of Sumatra, observes that the free beauties of nature so surround the beholder on all sides that they cease to have much attraction for him. On the other hand he found a pepper garden full of charm, on coming across it in mid-forest with its rows of parallel stakes on which the plant twines itself. From all this he infers that wild, and in its appearance quite irregular beauty, is only pleasing as a change to one whose eyes have become surfeited with regular beauty. But he need only have made the experiment of passing one day in his pepper garden to realize that once the regularity has enabled the understanding to put itself in accord with the order that is the constant requirement, instead of the object diverting him any longer, it imposes an irksome constraint upon the imagination: whereas nature subject to no constraint of artificial rules, and lavish, as it there is, in its luxuriant variety can supply constant food for his taste. (KU 72).

We can conclude that Kant's criticism of "stiff regularity" applies to the geometric, in fact almost mathematical regularity of the Gardens of Versailles. Kant considers the English landscape garden nearer to beauty than the classic French garden.

2. REGULARITY, POWER, AND UNLIMITEDNESS

In fact, it is important to stress regularity as a main feature in Versailles. An actual guide to the gardens[5] refers to the rigor in their design, and goes on as follows: "The general layout is geometrical: The garden is ordered starting from a principal axis, with secondary axes, alleys out of stars, basins in circle and half-circle; the whole in symmetry and staged on several levels. The trees are rigorously cut, composing a true vegetable architecture."[6] The ideal of regularity and symmetry is not only proper to garden design but is also a main character of Baroque aesthetic as such. In this respect, Wölfflin says in the pioneering work *Renaissance und Barock*:

The Baroque does not submit itself to terrain, on the contrary the Baroque masters the terrain and tries by all means to impose on it a homogeneous character: a main motive from one end to the other; it tries to impose main perspectives, to refer each detail to the whole. The axis of the mansion is the same for the garden; pavilions and other structures are not hazardous or mottled in an edge, but on the middle line; over all reigns correspondence and *strict symmetry* (RB 149).

Such regularity, according to Wölfflin, characterises the transition from the Renaissance to the Baroque. He says: "Certainly, the Renaissance was concerned in giving architectural motives, but without giving themselves an architectural relationship, all remained without unity of composition. At this point, thus, the Baroque means progress toward architectural composition of space." (RB 148)

Theoreticians often tend to interpret this "progress" as a political fact, and not merely a neutral "composition of space," but rather as an expression of a will to power. For example, Michael Kelly says: "Gardens are often places that situate viewers in positions of visual control over vast landscapes, allowing an illusory symbolic control over the world external to the garden (. . .)" (K2 275.b). Directly referring to Versailles, Tom Turner says: "To Louis XV, Versailles was a symbol of his sunlike magnificence. Power radiated outwards into France from Versailles like the great avenues, but extended to the furthest corners of France. All Louis's subjects were drawn into the orbit of his power and crowds milled through the grounds at Versailles" (T).[7] The most characteristic feature revealing the will to power seems to be, in any case, even regularity. Especially the strict geometrical cutting of trees and shrubs, and also the topiary proper not only to Versailles, but to the Baroque garden in general, are interpreted as the will to master nature as the expression of power.[8]

But in the Baroque garden regularity is a feature, which in the ideal case is used only in combination, even submitted to great extension. In fact, as Turner says: "The French 17th-century garden, a manifestation of Baroque taste, required variety as well as *unlimited vista* and achieved it with fountains, parterres, and lesser gardens disposed within the boscages (wooded enclosures) that flanked the central axis." (T) The issue seems to be not regularity itself, but regularity over a great extension in order to achieve "unlimited vista," as pointed out by Scully.[9] I can pick out two characteristic elements to show what is at stake: the strict geometrically cut trees and shrubs on the one hand, and the fountains on the other. The first mainly show regularity, the second are in fact also regular – though not as the serpentine lakes in English landscape gardens – but such regularity is intended to better