Intermezzo

Four Letters

Development of landscape-related sublime sensations

The following collection of fictive letters represents a discourse over a long period of time. The letters express how the experience of nature and of designed landscapes including cities; has changed over time.

In the first letter, nature and landscape are generally viewed from a distance. Surrounded by mountainous landscapes and the night, the writer projected an imagined landscape onto a real landscape, one composed of large natural elements containing a divine secret. The writer's imagination was an interpretation of a grand view and so concerned the awareness of reality. It is a view Burke would have liked.

In the second letter, landscape is a man-made concept that reflects what mankind is capable of. The author is concerned about human nature because of its potential brutality and destructiveness, whereas natural scenery appears to be harmonious and sustaining. He argues that designed nature or protected nature can be used as a cure for unbalanced human behaviour.

This antidote is denied in the third letter. References to grand old nature is described as male-oriented. The sublime should not be situated in nature any more. The very notion of the sublime is tarnished and explicitly human. The fictive author, Nana, argues that should a sublime exist, it would be as a psychological and social construct in the human realm, preferably in an urban context. Humans themselves are sublime and artworks are their nature.

The fourth author introduces a Japanese perspective that regards the idea of the sublime as typically Western. Here, the sublime is interpreted as a design tool for human imagination. It is not an absolute sensation of something that appears to be a truth. At the same time it is an imaginative experience that is full of both 'densities of meaning' and a 'shallowness of meaning'. According to Wakahisa Japanese culture has turned the 'shallowness of meaning' into an art form to reinterpret a sense of loneliness. In Japanese Zen Buddhism, the ideas of imagination and truth are equally false

because they are essentially human. At the same time, there seems to be no alternative for being in this world without being human, as is expressed by the duality of *wabi sabi*. Her personal preference regarding these cultural circumstances is related to the principle of *sharawadgi*, an energetic buzz that is playful and dynamic.

The letters represent a long struggle to rationalize an intuitive resistance to 'the native mind' (Letter One), 'a terrible human sublime' (Letter Two), 'aristocratic male theatricality' (Letter Three) and 'imaginative loneliness' (Letter Four). An example of an incentive to change one's own life is a first-hand experience of seeing the hand of God or source of life in natural scenery (Letter One). In it, nature is considered powerful and pure, containing a pure source that could be felt and was vitalizing to one's health. Such a sensation was treated with the greatest respect: one might not survive the consequences of equating oneself with the purest nature – the tempest, the erupting volcano, the vast ocean, eternity.

The nineteenth century was a period of constructive make-believe (Letter Two). The construction of cities and parks and worldwide travel created major new realities. Nature was tamed in landscaped gardens to produce a cinematographic perfection or picturesque composition of the best cultures the world had to offer. The two-faced image of nature in the eighteenth century, which contained both wilderness and human pleasures, became relatively sexless or androgynous in the nineteenth-century gardens and parks (Ashfield and de Bolla 1996: 15; Crandell 1993; Ferguson 1992). The extremes of a wilderness sublime were compensated by beautified compositions, vistas and routings. This middle ground evolved into the successful picturesque style because it could be built, managed and used by the growing number of people attracted to a comfortable life. In a way, this is a cynical view of how the popularity of green spaces has instigated a professional pragmatism in landscape design, which dismisses any further progress in developing the oppositional qualities of the sublime. This is illustrated by the much greater difficulty of protecting an original wilderness such as Yosemite Valley and declaring it a National Park.

The twentieth century was defined largely by the world wars and increasing industrialization and mass mechanization. It equipped the drive within human nature to commit obscene acts of inhumanity on a large scale. Brutal reality reclaimed its place from Romantic androgynous conceptions. Large-scale experiments with pervasive technological and social

engineering, included in warfare and art (third and fourth Letter), have invigorated the once oppositional qualities of the sublime. Considerable doubts about whether the picturesque can really save human beings found a growing voice in the avant-garde resistance.

A twenty-first century idea of a sublime could – once more – make serious demands on humans to deal with contemporary 'densities of meaning' caused by global economic processes, social inequity, climate change, mass migration and a dependency on non-renewable energy resources. A revival of the resistant capacity of the sublime was the central motive in the work of Longinus and Burke and can be revived, yet again. Rather than being part of a frivolous set of artistic tools to satisfy aesthetic needs, the sublime is a most serious instrument to reposition one's very own soul in the act of being in a landscape, an environment or in nature.

THE FRENCH ALPS, September 1739

Highly esteemed Professor Criterion,

This letter will hopefully arrive at your place in London without much delay, although postage at this distance is hazardous and not without 'accidents'. We made acquaintance at the most pleasant occasion organized by Mme Brinoir in Oxford Street last spring. Right after that tremendously inspiring evening when I had the opportunity of meeting both yourself and the poet Thomas Gray, I left on the first coach in the morning to the nearest seaport to embark on the Dyonisius to France. My journey to the French Alps has gained much in importance due to our conversation.

I was sent by my clients to examine some exotic planting that can be used in the southern regions of Britain to enhance the country estates and their perceived beauty. Yet my objectives have, due to our agreement, been broadened to explore the rough and wild lands that are made of some pure essence-de-vivre. This is the reason that I am writing you this letter. I enclose some sketches of my recent discoveries. These will certainly excite you and prove your theory about untamed lands and their specific attractiveness.

During my sea voyage, I was much occupied reading the book you lent me, *On the Sublime* by William Smith. The French plant spotter I met at the hotel and who guided me into the mountains, at first sight a highly sophisticated fellow with a fine knowledge of classic literature, knew of a similar book in French by Nicolas Boileau Despreaux, published more than seventy years earlier. Boileau is known as a French poet and critic and expressed ideas that are very similar to your theory. The book by Smith almost seems to be a translation of Boileau's work.

If I had not been instructed by you, I would have put the book aside, because to me there seems to be hardly any familiarity between poetry and my occupation. However, the spines and pinnacles of the Alps made an instant impression on me. I saw the land anew, as if through the eyes of an infant. I could suddenly see something beyond the mountains, something grand and eternal. It was as if a mighty planter had spoken, but in the form of rock and clouds and winds and mist and sketchy tree lines. I could 'read' the mountains and their narrative was about a world I knew nothing about. At the same time, something seemed to be resonating inside me: an ancient tale about the source of these mountains, when even mountains

were young and without any awareness of their destiny in ages and ages to come.

Even beyond these mountains lies a narrative of such a grandeur and origin that it seems impossible to relate myself to such a deep and all-consuming source.

I dared not venture more into this sensation and turned round to face the ground and bury myself in all the dust and humbleness I could find. How frightened I became. Nothing had prepared me for this response. I felt ashamed to have explored the narrative behind these lofty mountains, without any permission. Not gentlemanly at all.

Later, in my cabin, I saw reason again and remembered passages in the book that seemed relevant. I spoke of this with my guide and he could not hide a gleeful smile, as if I had just seen a naked woman for the first time in my life and spoke of this with my own mother. My guide was patient with me, which revealed him as an equal. Although very familiar with the mountains, he too knew of this sensation, except without any shame.

This struck me as odd and almost uncanny. Nobody could have seen and known what I had seen and understood without the deepest shame and reluctance possible. At one time I was so angry with him that I raced outside to cool down. Yet, instead of a soothing night I found myself underneath the most dramatic and enlightening dome of stars that I ever beheld. The sheer vastness and clarity of all these lightened sources shining upon me in one singular direction nearly made me faint. All of heaven's consciousness peered into me without any possible resistance. I despaired and did not know where to go. I could not go out, nor go in, ashamed as I was.

Exhausted I fell asleep on the spot and yet found myself warm inside the cabin the next morning. After that experience I saw reason for the second time. I understood the attitude of my guide. You cannot be in a wild and ominous land without maintaining a certain distance from this 'sublime'. Man can create poetry that can be withstood and enjoyed, but being near the real source comes with an inborn distance that is respectful and dignified. Although my guide denied the distance I explained to him, he most certainly must have known all about it. There is simply no other way.

It is like you said that evening at Mme Brinoir's, tragic art is the human variation on the true sublime source that is laid bare in the wild land – underneath a heaven full of stars, I can now add. The pain and shame that is undoubtedly present in

the human incapacity to stand before the true sublime can be withstood by tragic poetry or a tragic play. Shame can thus be transformed into pleasure and a pleasant evening amongst educated gentlemen, very much like the empathic distance we keep amongst good company concerning our spouses and daughters. The sublime itself really ought to be manly, because its devastating powers are grander than any general with all the armies he can muster.

The 'real' sublime can strike us, ravish our souls and might even transport us to places where we do not belong and would not survive. The 'tragic' sublime is a style, very much like poetry. We express noble ideas that would otherwise be too great or awful to describe. Your theory has been proven. In the French Alps lies a sublime source that holds the secrets of all that goes beyond. I wonder if Britain contains such a true sublime source as well. Something inside me hopes that it does, but most of me is too frightened to experience yet another such accident as that particular day and evening. I have made some sketches of the view that took me at that sorrowful moment and hope it contains some tragic and artistic qualities. A tragic report is the best I can provide you with without having to experience the same anxiety that I did.

I want to share one more thing with you. My French guide spoke about an ancient Greek poet by the name of Dionysius or Longinus. This shook me because not only was Dionysius the name of the boat that brought me here, but Boileau's book was dedicated to this ancient master of poetry and speech, who discussed the great works of literature and poetry that have indeed survived the centuries until now. Longinus apparently believed that a great work of art somehow conveys a part of the true sublime source, as if blessed by creation itself or bearing a part of creation itself. This confers upon it a density of meaning we would otherwise not possess. Could this be the real secret of art that conveys the sublime? My guide merely smiled as I suggested this. He responded that we are tragic beings ourselves, not able to experience the fullness of creation. Even if we ventured to the very end, beyond that which is grand and inconceivable, we would not reach a source, we would only meet ourselves. At this point I can only assure you that I most effectively opposed his ignorant vision of our human capacity. After collecting some plant species and seeds I will be glad to set foot again in Britain, whose rich culture has rid itself of such primitive limitations.

Yours and truly,
Victor Venturous

CALIFORNIA, UNITED SATES OF AMERICA, MARIPOSA BIG TREE GROVE, May 5, 1889

Dear Mister Venturous, dear Victor,

This response to your letter is rather late, many apologies for that. My sincerity is, however, far greater than the loss of time. My forebear Professor Criterion died on December 5, 1739, about the time your letter arrived in London. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Edward Jameson Criterion and although I am of British origin I am currently occupied in the United States of America. My family noticed in me a similar disposition and interests as displayed by my great grandfather and so they left me his most personal possessions. Of his possessions I received his books, notes and correspondences concerning his studies on human judgement and natural scenery. Now, precisely 150 years after you wrote about your remarkable sublime experiences in the French Alps, I feel it appropriate to continue this 'correspondence across time and space'.

Your letter only revealed itself when I was in the US, working as an assistant to Frederick Law Olmsted. Ever since my childhood in Kent, South England, I was fascinated with the relationship between poetry and the land. Kent is blessed with fine natural scenery of delicate farmland and manorial estates. At the same time I have always felt that the interest of London citizens is pressing and almost resistant to any 'real' sublime that is present in the land. Most of these people are rich enough to possess a piece of Kent as a luxurious backyard and tend to mistreat their perceptions by imposing their all too personal needs. In the work of Mr Olmsted, an eloquent and concerned journalist with an agricultural interest, I read about values and desires that went beyond Kent and its beautifications.

Mr Olmsted is a travelled man and possesses a fine ability to observe any situation without hindrance of societal display. I accompanied him on his travels as a correspondent for The New York Daily Times. through the Southern states of the US to report on the influence of slavery on this region and the nation. He critically opposed slavery, yet nevertheless went through the effort of understanding this human enterprise. In that respect, I learned about a different type of 'sublime': that of a human sublime which is negative, destructive and at the same time fascinating in a morbid manner. To study this sublime is not to enjoy it, but to deeply understand it. There is a breathtaking measure and power present in this human sublime that is similar to an

immediate exposure to the French Alps, as in your case.

In your letter you introduce the 'real' and the 'tragic' sublime. I can see the point in doing that. However, I wish to doubt your statement that the 'tragic' stands for the practical human style that better conveys the 'real' or 'true' sublime. The way I have witnessed reality has made me aware of the fact that humans are quite capable of instigating a 'real' sublime themselves. Through abominations such as slavery humans have proven that even the most 'tragic' theatricalities do not withhold them from the act of inhumane slavery. On the contrary! It seems to be crucial in understanding the irresistible force that pulls a man into such a deed. If you believe that people will become aware of their wrong while reading a book or 'enjoying' a tragic play, let alone become aware of this while doing wrong in the moment, then you underestimate the position human beings have in the nature of things.

As an illustration of this, you mention in your last paragraph the differences of opinion you had with your native French guide. Making a concise analysis of such differences is Mr Olmsted's specialism. He would have enjoyed the native mind you so 'effectively opposed' and judged as ignorant. I share with Mr Olmsted the opinion that the native mind may be ignorant of civilized manners, yet at the same time contains more abilities and insights for dealing with the consequences of being part of nature.

The 'native' mind instead seemed to peek right through this situation. Mr Olmsted has discovered an equally native mind in the original people that once occupied the lands of what are now the United States of America. The local tribes we have met travelled the Sierra lands for generations and adopted a way of living that served both their people and the environment. We can learn from these people and rid ourselves of the societal display that only clouds any 'true' understanding and action. These tribes exhibit an equal understanding of themselves and that which lies beyond the view of the mountains: a world of spirits, forefathers and ghosts that mirror our human existence in a universe that we share with all living creatures, and even non-living rocks and sand. The idea of owning a piece of the earth is to them an utterly insane idea. Humans are part of this totality and cannot separate themselves from it in order to own part of it. There is no need to feel shame in identifying the deepness beyond the mountain view.

In your letter you seem to oppose this irresistible force and even consider this resistance the mark of civilization. However, we must give way to this irresistible force that anticipates our reasoning and societal display. By doing so we are able to analyse our reasoning and display. We can be young children again, learning about the world instead of being mature and pretending to know at a distance. I believe that this is what drives Mr Olmsted and certainly holds my devotion.

After his career as a correspondent, Mr Olmsted had a chance to reveal his competences in a much more practical manner. No doubt driven by a desire to stimulate dormant 'modern native minds', the conception of Central Park arose in the expanding city of New York in 1858. After his travels and critical texts, he could finally create something so revealing and at the same time humane that all his former words and opinions seemed to be carved in stone, planting and water bodies. Mr Olmsted was originally trained as a scientific farmer and turned out to become a farmer of emotions and meaning through the construction of natural scenery. This park is meant to educate and ease today's busy minds by a selection of natural arrangements. And it is now rapidly becoming the heart of an expanding city.

Throughout the design and materialization of this immense project, Mr Olmsted was in continuous communication with some 'true' sublime. His modern mind benefited from an inborn natural curiosity (an almost native instinct) and an undisputed talent as an organizer and manager. He employed thousands of people to construct a new landscape that would ignite the souls of hundreds of thousands of citizens. His style is not that of a 'tragic' sublime expressing noble ideas that would otherwise be unutterable. His style is to organize natural scenery that speaks and is expressive according to a striking 'natural density of meaning'. He gave the people the right to be filled by their own inner ability to communicate with the 'true' sublime, as well as the opportunity to do so. The time and space between your letter and mine, 150 years, has made clear to me that mankind has learned to deal with the 'true' sublime without a necessary 'tragic' style that only clouds our immediate responses. Such a notion fills me with pride and hope for humanity.

In the last twenty years we have been busy gaining yet another step towards a 'true' sublime. We explored the Sierra lands with the whole Olmsted family, the geologist and expert on fossils William Ashburner, his wife Emilia and an African-American guide who understood

the language of the local Miwok tribe. The wilderness landscape was 'of a very peculiar character and much the grandest that I have ever seen', as Mr Olmsted himself wrote. We met three young artists who spent the summer of 1865 in Yosemite Valley: the landscape photographer Carleton Watkins and the landscape painters Thomas Hill and Virgil Williams. Along with the paintings of Albert Bierstadt, their artistic work has contributed much to publicize the grandness of Yosemite. The three youngsters were commissioned to advise on the landscape as the debate rages on protecting these potential mining grounds by creating the first National Park. In terms of its economic value as a tourist destination, Yosemite should be considered at least equivalent to the Swiss Alps. The broad exploration of this 'true' sublime landscape from personal, scientific and artistic viewpoints is very striking to me. It convinces me that people need all their faculties and abilities to engage with such an ancient land and future prospect.

Although the act to protect Yosemite 'for public use, resort and recreation' was signed June 30, 1864 by president Lincoln, at this very moment, a National Park is not a fact of life. I still doubt whether Yosemite and Mariposa Grove will ever become part of a National Park, despite all our efforts and Yosemite's outstanding natural beauty. We had not foreseen that the protection of a true sublime source would be that much harder than creating an artificial park. In our opinion, science, art, politics, societal circumstances and economy all gain by this true sublime source. However, the general reluctance to establish a National Park is what motivated me to write this letter and hide it in a remote granite crevice in the heart of Mariposa Grove. I hope that in the next 150 years humanity will have gained another level of sublimity. It is to be hoped that scientists, artists, bankers and politicians will equally value the protection of natural sources and will at the same time endeavour to create new sublime parks and urban facilities that will compensate for the loss of ancient sublime sources. I am confident that ordinary citizens in that future will still consider Central Park to be a pure and true style of the sublime.

Maybe another 150 years of practice will perfect the art of creating landscapes to an extent that could even surpass the original conception of the park. Humans no longer live in valleys like Yosemite and Mariposa; we are not dependent upon them in the same manner as some tribes were once dependent upon the shelter and abundance of plants and wildlife they provided. To my mind, humans

become more human by exploring their independence from ancient sublime sources, allowing them to create more 'human' sublime environments. However, without some original sources as well, they will forget about the mother of their inspiration. I have no doubt that human creations add to what nature provides, but every new generation needs an example of the harmony and intricate interdependences that ancient nature has produced in its million years of probing and adaptation. We cannot expect to create in a lifetime what life has been developing over such a long time. The 'true' value of an ancient sublime such as Yosemite is therefore as a frame of reference, awe-inspiring example and proof of a possible atmosphere of interdependences.

Long live natural creativity and long live the density of meaning present in both a grand view of Yosemite Valley and a microscopic inspection of the bark of a tree in Mariposa! And long live human creativity and a density of meaning that can be contained in a small box – the size of Central Park, or the size of a book on a shelf. Our busy world could easily contain thousands or millions of such boxes, thus multiplying a once hidden sublime source to a quantity that can easily be shared with all of the children of this earth. They would feed authentic minds that critically and fully investigate the irresistible force driving us onwards.

Yours truly,
E.J. Criterion

NEW YORK, GREENWICH VILLAGE, UNITED SATES OF AMERICA, November 24, 1919

To Victor Venturous and Edward Criterion,

How unfortunate that your letters have been received by me. I am possibly the least appreciative character imaginable to have gained possession of your 'grand' discourse. I do not read love letters to nature like those by Wordsworth. They are full of repressed desires that reveal tormented minds, and they are not accurate descriptions of surroundings, but projected distortions. Since Freud we know about the dark sides of ourselves and can refrain from blindly following such impulses. We can, however, consciously expand such distortions. If we do that, it becomes art. Real art, not pottery. So I prefer to read Rainer Maria Rilke and his Neue Gedichte: 'Sieh, wie sich alles auftut: so sind wir' (Gesang der Frauen an den Dichter).

I do like to stroll through Central Park when we are uptown with my bohemian friends from Greenwich Village, and so it is only out of a sense of gratitude to the designer of that space that I have not ritually burned your aristocratic letters.

When I was fifteen my folks moved from San Francisco to Yosemite National Park to work in the Wawona Hotel. My father was called in to install the first telephone in that remote place. After the first successful call my mother got a job in the restaurant and my father as a park technician – installing lights, for crying out loud! Lights, in a place of utter darkness and tranquillity. One day my sister and I were playing in the woods. We were playing Indians being raided by evil Europeans, bloodthirsty and blindly obsessed with destroying all native reminders of the days before they arrived. I still was not sure whether I loved being the invader or the victim. I was alone and lost in the woods when I discovered the crevice in the rock containing these letters. At the time it seemed to be part of our game, although I did not dare to show the letters to my sister. I simply kept them as a token of my destiny to become either invader or victim.

Fed up with the tourists, who only seemed to be interested in seeing what everybody else had already seen a million times before, I left Yosemite and headed for the East Coast to start a different life – a more meaningful life with meaningful people who deal with meaningful subjects and act accordingly. I found them just before getting on a boat to Europe. In a crazy little place in downtown New York

I learned about love and life and art and human destiny. I changed my name in case someone would remember me from my earlier life. Everybody calls me Nana nowadays, Nana Nowhere or Nana the New or Nana Nimbus.

I do as I like and enjoy making love to whom I like. I like who I am, especially being a woman. It disturbs me that in your letters you don't discuss women at all. You talk about nature as if it is the property of males, as if only men have a deep connection with the sources behind nature, giving them a noble, stylish or philanthropic position. Men do not respond to nature, they impose their will on it. If there is one group of humans that are in touch with nature, it must be women. You should come and see the plays we perform with the Provincetown Players. We are all amateurs and so we do not have to act professionally. We do not need to act, we simply are. We do not need any mountain scene to provide our audience with a deep sense of meaning. We proclaim and interact. That is all.

It was at the Armoury Show in New York City in 1913, an exhibition that shocked aristocratic simplicity with a vision of the new world that is not invented but revealing, that I found my destiny. I instantly became a victim of myself and an intruder to the rest of the world. My place is not attached to any particular geographic locality, it is rooted in my character and existence. Everywhere I go I cause disturbances. Everybody causes disturbances, like the dissonant music by Igor Stravinsky in the Sacre du Printemps written for the expressive ballet by the Russian Serge Diaghilev. Although the overall theatrical presentation of the 'Sacre' resonates with an outdated upper class taste and the painted décor by the mystic Nicholas Roerich was inspired by his walks in the Himalayan Mountains.

This male theatricality and strange sense of romance is precisely the aspect I detest in your letters. There are very few male artists that dare to limit their own spectacle in favour of simplicity, such as Marcel Duchamp – although I also mistrust his theatricality, he has yet to make something ultimately simple. They still have to show off to their rivals or towards willing females, in the spirit of Nietzsche and his propaganda for the chaotic energy of Dionysus as opposed to the composed aspects of Apollo.

Not until females have gained positions of power will we be rid of such displays.

The president (Theodore Roosevelt) himself declared that the Armory Show

was not art. What was it then? Fraud, immoral, degenerate, ridiculous and demented? Those descriptions by the press were all made by men who are afraid of what they are. They all suffer from their own type of penis envy since they all met the authoritarian father with his own pants down. In a few weeks I will leave this place and go to Paris and perhaps Berlin, the metropolises of the world, where all genders, all nations and all liberty is bred and fed, to head for a new era.

We do not have to be in the mountains to know about the future. We cannot relate to mountains because they are not ours. The more we are in the mountains, the more confused we will be about ourselves. The names of mountains are probably too short to capture what they really are. Maybe they should be called NAFOIJONVSSOIUODV-OPMMDUEPOIIOPUOTOO; or some other inexplicable name.

We should not be concerned with our perception of mountains, we should be concerned with the existence of our own species. So I agree with the comment by Edward Criterion that humans only become humans when they become independent of the ancient sublime. Their own 'human sublime' already provides centuries of deepness. The human soul is as deep and old as the mountains, so we should begin to excavate it.

I know about the sublime from the books in the Wawona visitors library. I consulted them to find proof that I belonged in Yosemite Valley. I have always felt that it was a wrong place for me to be. No matter how big or old the place was, it never made me comfortable. On the contrary, it highlighted the idea of not being there and not bothering to understand. The Grand Cities are the New National Parks for humans. The dissonance in Stravinsky's music is what is human, not the presumed orderliness we look for as tourists. We cannot be tourists, we are partaking in a show without end.

The Great War that ended in 1918 is proof enough of the 'human sublime' that Edward mentions. The mountains and the trees did not fight a war, humans did, male humans with their love of steel and explosions. They would rather blow nature up than leave it be.

All I have to add to your letters is that the time of naive behaviour is over. We are both what we dream and what we do. There are many that see this now and we are expressive and will travel the inhabited world and not linger in the places that are not ours. Beware.

Yours, Nana

KYOTO, JAPAN, February 2008

Highly esteemed Mister Venturous,
Mister Criterion and dear Nana,
dear future reader,

It has been 269, 119 and 89 years since you wrote your letters. With great humbleness and respect I will undertake this lettered journey and will introduce yet another insight into the 'sublime'. My name is Wakahisa Kiwako. I am a Japanese female artist and was born in 1945, the year the atom bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, an act of sheer and awful 'human sublime'. My name Kiwako means 'child born on a border' and it was given to me in remembrance of the uncertain period Japan faced. My home country had been defeated and was occupied by allied forces, which lasted seven years. After this period the once hostile relationship between Japan and America became friendly in both trade and art.

In the summer of 1972 I discovered the letters in an antique bookshop in Paris, between the pages of a copy of Nightwood by Djuna Barnes. I was a student of literature and was glad to have found an original copy of this great feminist book. It comes from the bohemian environment of the interbellum. I am fascinated by various types of cultural 'in betweens': in between feminism and male dominance, in between peace and war, in between individualism and the masses. The salesman had himself noticed the letters and believed them to be part of the book. He insisted on keeping the book and letters together. At the time it seemed like a dream of some long awaited purpose and I recall an intense sense of gratitude and destiny. Sublime? According to my Shinto spiritual education this is the work of the kami that mostly live in natural features such as rocks or ponds. However, kami are not confined to natural elements, but can also live in objects such as books. In fact, they now mostly 'live' in the video game Pokémon that is so adored by children around the world.

I am convinced that the previous letter writer, Nana, must have known Djuna Barnes. There is an inscription on one of the first pages that says 'To Nana, my negentropy, D.B.' Also several sections of the book have been annotated with graphite scribbles and underlinings. Honestly speaking, as a student I did not know anything about the value of the word 'sublime'. In Japanese culture we do not use this term and are not familiar with its philosophical or artistic meaning. My first impression upon reading your letters was a smile.

A poem by Matsuo Bashô popped into my mind, one that is suitable for the argument I would like to make. In my opinion, the best works of Bashô reveal satori, a sudden state of transcendental freedom:

Sabishisa wo toute kurenu ka kiri hito ha
(Bashô 1692)

Won't you come and see
loneliness? Just one leaf
from the kiri tree.
translation by H. G. Henderson

This poem or haiku is not officially explained. It simply 'is'. It reveals suchness. Suchness is essential to the Buddhist spirit. One can ponder about it for a lifetime, yet the event itself will not be changed by it. That may be why these poems are short, seemingly simple and beautifully mysterious. In Bashô's version of a 'Buddhist sublime', 'loneliness' is experienced while watching one leaf that has fallen from a kiri tree. The master poet introduces a paradox here. How can you invite another person to join in experiencing loneliness?

This is a fundamental question and reflects the paradox that is inherent in resisting and at the same time being subdued. All the previous letter writers have experienced something equal to loneliness: in the first letter 'divinity', in the second letter 'independent human creativity' and in the third 'an existential feminism'.

Bashô regards loneliness in 'just one leaf'. Mister Venturous claims to see some act of creation beyond the panoramic view from the mountains. Mister Criterion claims to know the value of such viewings for humankind as an example of harmony and 'density of meaning' for our own human inventions. Nana is purely human oriented and embraces the dissonance that is more truthful than aristocratic romance. In all the letters, the sublime is an idea that seems relevant. It is related to something that is ideal and that raises a kind of ambition in mankind. The concept has evolved from being a divine sense of fear in the first letter into a confident self-governance in the last letter.

In my Japanese perception it is Bashô who clearly articulated the key aspect of a sublime experience: loneliness and its resulting reflections. We can choose how to interpret the fall of a kiri leaf, reflecting on both the event itself and our human interpretation of it. Both define the suchness of the event. Through a haiku we learn that we can unlearn such interpretations. This is why I have become an artist, because I

want to learn how to unlearn and learn anew. I am a student of life and your letters have been my teachings. All kinds of perceptional borders can be crossed and the 'in between' of the border itself can be studied. The duality of things can become a 'thickened' border that can be a place to dwell in. This is the way I understand the value of the sublime, as a method for training awareness.

Bashô's poetic riddle is about the imagination of the human mind and how we perceive our environment. In the Buddhist tradition, and especially Zen, astonishment is not essentially related to any kind of horror; it is neither pleasant nor troublesome, but is neutral to any such value judgement and can therefore be present at every interval and scale.

It is even indifferent to a moral sense, because morality is also a judgement. The highest Buddhist spiritual reward is in *satori*, which is a sudden awaking that can happen any time. First you wake up, which is essentially simple; then you learn what effects this has, which is the difficult part because you have to unlearn what has become routine.

Human perfection is different from natural perfection. This is reflected in the concept of *wabi sabi*. The word *wabi* refers to the same loneliness that Bashô recalls. It is the loneliness of living or travelling in nature. *Sabi* is the affection of duality that is aroused, affection for the worn aspects, the scars of use or the patina of time, and a tension between the now and what once was. This affection is not always comforting or tranquilizing. It sometimes refers to pressing survival and instincts, while at other times it is sheer beauty. It is a dynamic aesthetic experience, because our emotions are triggered differently depending on time, place and the people we are with. There might be a 'density of meaning' at some moments, but also a 'shallowness of meaning' at others.

The fact that *wabi sabi* is two words and sublime only one is perhaps significant. The ideas about the sublime in globalizing culture are driven by a desire to become one, a singularity. The ideas about *wabi sabi* are about a dynamic interaction, accepting a natural duality. European minds have accepted being guided by their imagination, even if they do not understand it. They experiment with failures and successes. The Buddhist belief is opposite and less creative. Buddhism is sure that the awareness of the illusion of living in a box will reveal a bigger box until there is no knowing possible, only awareness and humbleness. Instead of a box, they uphold the metaphorical qualities of the cup, that is open and can be filled and emptied. To

Buddhists there are boundaries beyond which there is nothing conceivable. European minds seem confident that they can perfect purely imaginative illusions within boxes, including a sense of boxed loneliness. To me it is obvious that the Buddhist sense of reality is true, and yet Western ambition is more adventurous. For instance, I grew up with the manga illustrations of Osamu Tezuka, creator of the immensely popular fantasy figure Mighty Atom – or Astro Boy in the American version. No other culture has embraced such a love of robotics and computers as rapidly as the defeated Japanese.

During the war, Japan still used bamboo constructions for their fire bombs, whereas the Americans developed the technologically advanced atom bomb. After their defeat the Japanese became obsessed with gaining technological mastery, this time for the cause of peace – the Americans had made the Japanese adopt a pacifist constitution. Mighty Atom was therefore imagined as a 'reverse Pinocchio', not a toy that wanted to become a serious human being, but a serious robot that wanted to become a playful human being. Mighty Atom is the symbol of a new Japan: a nearly perfect robot that strives to become more human and more flawed (i.e. emotional and illogical). Instead of developing a technology to dominate human beings militarily, the Japanese embraced a technology that included *wabi sabi* and the humble lesson it provides. Compared with the superpowers possessed by Superman and the pure innocence of Walt Disney characters, one of the great strengths of contemporary Japanese industry is the humanizing of complex technology.

My own work does not directly refer to the sublime or to *wabi sabi*. I have deliberately distanced myself from these notions to unlearn them. I create games and drawings for children and young adults, because they are most involved with learning and unlearning. I create work that does not enforce another world upon young people, yet provides a buzz of experience, like being in a beehive: changing, comforting and busy. They resonate with several possible ways to drift off. I once came upon the seventeenth-century term *sharawadgi*, used by Western travellers to 'oriental' China to refer to what they experienced as a naturalistic style of landscaping. *Sharawadgi* represents an unexpected aesthetic perception without any recognizable order or composition. It is a beautiful expression because the sound of the word represents the experience. The seventeenth-century travel guide carefully distinguished *sharawadgi* from the Kantian sublime. It is 'without

splendour or theatricality' (Augoyard and Torgue 2006), the gentle version of a confusion or discordance that transports us elsewhere. What is more important, it has essentially no roots in the natural, but rather in the cultural.

Amidst a soft and gentle confusion we can enjoy the buzz of life, giving us the energy to create. *Satori* is in experiencing the energy itself and not so much the products that might result from it. This resembles the playfulness of children playing outdoors or the exhilaration of a carnival or family feast. If only one leaf has fallen from the kiri tree, there are a lot more leaves still on the tree. So many leaves with the potential to fall and evoke all types of illusionary experiences over and over again.

Yours,
Wakahisa Kiwako

Postscript: This series of letters (all hand written) and the original copy of the book Nightwood have been carefully sealed in a specially designed cocoon that can withstand rainfall, chemical exposure, radioactivity and attacks by animals. It was inserted into the stem of a kiri tree that will gradually encapsulate it in its bark. The tree is now growing with healthy roots in the decomposing surface of an island of mostly plastic debris floating on the Indian Ocean.