

This article is part of the fifth volume of the  
*International Review of Eighteenth-Century Studies*  
**(IRECS)**,  
titled  
*The Sea: fictions, powers and identities*  
and edited by Aurélia Gaillard (2019).

The entire volume is available on the ISECS website:

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ISSN 1797-0091

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## **Icy Voluptuousness: The Sea and the Sublime, Claude Joseph Vernet and Jens Baggesen**

When visiting the Gemäldegalerie in Mannheim in 1789 Jens Baggesen (1764-1826) payed special attention to a couple of marine paintings by Claude-Joseph Vernet (1714-1789) and considered them suitable illustrations of the sublime:

One no longer questions the nice anecdote about *Vernet*, that aboard in a thunderstorm he let himself tie up to the mast and when the ship was on the brink of going down, and the rest of the crew abandoned itself to devotional or blasphemous despair, he exclaimed in ecstasy: *o God! This is indeed great!* – the best text I know of for a dissertation on the sublime and a component of its history, which is more dear to me than everything that *Longinus* and every following theorist has folianted, quartered and octavated on this subject.<sup>1</sup>

The quotation stems from Jens Baggesen's Danish *Labyrinten* (The Labyrinth), which came out in two volumes in 1792/1793. This travelogue is considered a high point of Danish prose, and even Søren Kierkegaard views him as a forerunner<sup>2</sup>. Baggesen's style and way of writing should be understood as a Danish counterpart

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<sup>1</sup> Jens Baggesen, *Labyrinten eller Reise giennem Tydskland, Schweitz og Frankerig*, Copenhagen, Gyldendal, 2016 [ed. Henrik Blicher], 2 Vols., Vol. 2, p. 157. Translated by the author, here and elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup> See Henrik Blicher, "Jens Baggesen: Kierkegaard and His Master's voice", in Jon Stewart (ed.), *Kierkegaard and His Danish Contemporaries: Literature, Drama and Aesthetics*, Farnham & Burlington, Routledge, 2009, p. 33-48.

to Laurence Sterne's sentimental journey, in which the author's state of mind is everywhere present in his writing. An autobiographical travelogue it is. Indeed, Baggesen states his position as a practitioner of the sublime in my initial quotation. Not at all a theorist, like Longinus, Burke or Kant. As a matter of fact, Baggesen pays homage to an anecdote about Vernet as an artist, not to Vernet as a painter. One practitioner of the sublime salutes another practitioner of the sublime.

Nonetheless, you should not miss out on the actual paintings that sparked Baggesen's thought. When I prepared a new edition of his travels, I spared no effort in tracing the paintings. And I believe that I have found them. In the year of 1789 when Baggesen left Copenhagen the paintings were located in Mannheim, in a public part of the prince-elector Karl Theodor's home, but when his court moved to Munich in 1798 the collection, consisting of almost 800 pieces of art, was moved as well, and later it was to be a part of the local Alte Pinakothek<sup>3</sup>.

### The artist at work

"Immediately at the entrance", Baggesen states, "my eyes fell, like drawn to a magnet, on *two landscapes by Vernet*, both of them seascapes, the one in storm, the other in tranquility<sup>4</sup>". The paintings, we know, were ordered by the prince-elector from the painter himself in 1769 and called "Schiffbruch im Gewittersturm" (*Une tempête avec le naufrage d'un vaisseau*<sup>5</sup>) and "Seehafen bei Sonnenuntergang" (*Port maritime au soleil couchant*<sup>6</sup>), i.e. "Shipwreck in Thunderstorm" and "Seaport at Sunset". I believe it is fairly easy to see which is which.

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<sup>3</sup> See *Labyrinth*, Vol. 2, p. 413.

<sup>4</sup> *Labyrinth*, Vol. 2, p. 157.

<sup>5</sup> Claude Joseph Vernet, "Schiffbruch im Gewittersturm", Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen – Alte Pinakothek München, inv. 444. [<https://www.sammlung.pinakothek.de/en/artist/claude-joseph-vernet/schiffbruch-im-gewittersturm#&gid=1&pid=1>]

<sup>6</sup> Claude Joseph Vernet, „Seehafen bei Sonnenuntergang“, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen – Alte Pinakothek München, inv. 449. [<https://www.sammlung.pinakothek.de/de/artist/claude-joseph-vernet/seehafen-bei-sonnenuntergang#&gid=1&pid=1>].

Since Baggesen is mostly concerned with the story of the artist-painter confronting the sea in thunderstorm, and not the paintings, I will do the same. To be sure, we are dealing with the attitude that produces art rather than the artwork in itself.

Claude Joseph Vernet died in 1789 and the incident at sea is reported in an obituary by one of his friends: on board a ship bound for Rome he sailed from Marseille in 1734, and close to Sardegna they came across a thunderstorm, and Vernet let himself tie to the mast, like the cunning Ulysses before him. Although he was not able to depict the turbulence on the spot, he could memorize his first hand impressions and utilize them later on in his paintings.

The episode at sea has been scrutinized by an American art historian, George Levitine, back in 1967. Levitine makes a fine distinction between the original statement and later, more romantically inclined versions of the episode: “It transforms the idea of unavoidable exposure to danger into that of an actual search for danger, and changes courage and admiration into some kind of icy voluptuousness<sup>7</sup>”.

The *icy voluptuousness* of the artist is exactly what Baggesen is advocating. By linking the episode at sea to the idea of the sublime, reached for in vigorous confrontation with a horrifying scenery at sea, Baggesen anticipates a romantic conception of the artist in action. The distinction between the two attitudes, or even two centuries, is underlined by Levitine: in the romantic era – “[t]he ‘utilitarian’ aspect of the sea episode was de-emphasized the better to stress the painter’s superhuman attitude toward danger and his feeling for the sublime – unattainable and incomprehensible to the philistines and common mortals<sup>8</sup>”. So, if we stick to this notion of romanticism: less sense and more sensibility, Jens Baggesen is certainly a clear case of romanticism.

But, there are still questions to be answered. How did the story about the artist Vernet in the thunderstorm come around to

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<sup>7</sup> George Levitine, “Vernet Tied to a Mast in a Storm: The Evolution of an Episode of Art Historical Romantic Folklore”, in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 49, No. 2, June 1967, p. 96.

<sup>8</sup> Levitine, p. 100.

Jens Baggesen? Certainly not in the form of the painting done by Vernet's grandson, who was also a painter. Horace Vernet (1789-1863) perpetuated the tale, of which he is told to have been very proud, as late as in 1822. The painting by Horace Vernet<sup>9</sup> has been described by an art historian – I quote: “This painting depicts a partially dismasted felucca rising precipitously on a giant wave in a storm that has blown out the sails and blown off the hat of the helmsman in the stern. Vernet is tied to the foremast, incongruously dressed for the drawing room, with a sketchbook in his left hand and his right upraised in an overly dramatic gesture, as if he is about to begin to draw<sup>10</sup>”. And then he, Howard Isham, adds that when it was painted, the story “was already wellknown in poetry and prose, but this painting helped to emphasize the taste for the sublime terror of the sea then prevalent”. It seems that the theme of the sublime terror of the sea transcends the borderline between the long Eighteenth century and Romanticism.

Jens Baggesen travelled in 1789, the same year Vernet the Elder died, but it was not until 1793 that he, Jens Baggesen, published his travelogue dealing with his visit at the Gemäldegalerie in Mannheim – certainly before Vernet the Younger monumentalized the anecdote in 1822. So, there must have been other, but today unknown sources at his disposal.

### The sublime according to Kant

Another question seems even more pertinent: what is the origin and nature of Jens Baggesen's sublime? I have borrowed the term *icy voluptuousness* from Georg Levitine. By stressing the proper aesthetic experience as having to do with mixed emotions, he pinpoints the artist's attitude towards art in the making. The simultaneous presence of both delight and terror was a central point in the sublime. Jens Baggesen does not, it should be said, actually mention the sublime, he mentions ‘the high’, known as

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<sup>9</sup> Horace Vernet, “Joseph Vernet tied to a Mast studying the Effects of the Storm”, Musée Calvet, Avignon. [<http://mikestravelguide.com/things-to-do-in-avignon-visit-the-musee-calvet/>]

<sup>10</sup> Howard Isham, *Image of the Sea. Oceanic Consciousness in the Romantic Century*, New York, Peter Lang, 2004, p. 180.

‘das Erhabene’ in German. Not that it really matters; I have simply translated his aesthetic term, which covers the English sublime. In the late eighteenth century the sublime was part of an overall showdown with classicism, not least in Germany and nearby Denmark. Instead of beautiful order, unity and proportion the sublime came to signify a new sensibility for disorder, a dizzying lack of unity and confrontation with immensity – all of which is present in Jens Baggesen’s tribute to Vernet shouting *o God! This is indeed great* on the brink of shipwreck.

So, this is the nature of the sublime; what about the origin, how did the sublime enter Jens Baggesen’s travelogue? In my mind there is no doubt, that we should address Immanuel Kant’s third critique, the critique of the *Urteilkraft* or judgement. The third critique was published in 1790, a few years prior to Baggesen, and although Baggesen was not mainly a philosopher, he was well immersed in Kant’s thinking, especially in his early years, when he published his travelogue. On his way back from Switzerland in 1790 he met Karl Reinhold (1757-1823), the philosopher, who was to write *Briefe über die Kantische Philosophie*, which came to be Baggesen’s introduction<sup>11</sup>. He tells Reinhold, that he only wishes, “ehe ich sterbe”, before he dies, to kiss Kant’s feet or, “weil er dies vielleicht misverstehen könnte”, because the stern philosopher from Königsberg might misunderstand this, he would be modest and drown his hands in tears of gratefulness. In his opinion, Kant is the “greatest of all mortal teachers of humankind<sup>12</sup>”. Similar signs of adoration can be found in the travelogue, where Kant is called “the Messiah of philosophy” and the greatest contemporary ‘self-thinker’, as Baggesen has it, based on the German ‘Selbstdenker’<sup>13</sup>. The ultimate sign of adoration came about, when Jens Baggesen chose to adopt the first name Immanuel, thus calling himself Jens Immanuel Baggesen.

According to Kant the sublime is located in the mind of the beholder, not in the object itself. When confronted with formless nature, which gives rise to a conception about the unlimited and endless, the imagination falls short of gathering the

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<sup>11</sup> Anders Thuborg, *Den Kantiske Periode i dansk Filosofi 1790-1800*, Copenhagen, Gyldendal, 1951, p. 172.

<sup>12</sup> Thuborg, p. 172.

<sup>13</sup> *Labyrinten*, Vol. 1, p. 220.

separate perceptions into one coherent and intelligible notion. This inadequacy of the subject brings about a fragmentation of the imagination; it creates a feeling of unease, which nonetheless is turned into pleasure when reason is brought into action, thereby elevating the subject over sensuous nature. Thus the subject is saved, so to speak; the supremacy of mind over matter is confirmed.

This may be true, but Baggesen is leaving strict philosophy to the philosophers, and he mocks the theoretical approach for merely producing lengthy books on this subject. Instead of folianting, quartering and octavating the subject, they should learn from Vernet: “Certainly! There lies more in this exclamation than appears; at least it might very well be to a future aesthete what the falling apple was to Newton<sup>14</sup>”.

Despite biographical as well as textual evidence as stated here, a thorough search for the presence of Kant in Jens Baggesen’s travelogue has not been undertaken. This is certainly not the place or time – to use Kantian categories – to do so, but I will briefly sketch the opportunities.

Jens Baggesen left Copenhagen in 1789, heading for the spa resort in German Pyrmont. According to himself it was not the prescription of mineral water and regular walks that cured him; it was the prospect of a travel on an even larger scale. To Switzerland. He actually came to Switzerland, but he only managed to finish two volumes of his travelogue. So, when looking back on his grand voyage a few years later – he composed a text, that consisted of elevations: every hill and highpoint he encounters is compared to the Swiss Alps yet to come. When stumbling across a piece of rock in Northern Germany he imagines it to part of the hidden skeleton that links one part of Europe to the other. He experiences grandeur as well as death. His travelogue contains several incidents of such sublime endeavor, only to reach a peak in his *tour de force* of climbing the gothic cathedral in Strasbourg, the Straßburger Münster.

What volume! What height! What immense piece of epic poetry in stone! Can the earth carry this artificial mountain? Does it not

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<sup>14</sup> *Labyrinth*, Vol. 2, p. 157.

sink under the foot of this horrifying colossus? ... One is slain, destroyed by the first glimpse! ... Is it a pleasant or an unpleasant view? It is impossible for me to decide; but interesting it is to the highest degree! The astonishment, the shudder, the horror it produces; it holds you tight while hurting you. It is a Shakespearean tragedy, King Lear made out of stone<sup>15</sup>!

And when he finally arrives at the top, he transcends his earthly humanity by matching the size of the immense cathedral as well as the vast emptiness above:

Is it pleasure or pain I feel in this dizzying condition? Am I closer to life or death on this ethereal headland? I become and I cease to be – am created and annihilated – I triumph and faint in one and the same sensation<sup>16</sup>.

Before he descends he catches a glimpse of the faraway Swiss Alps in his imagination and promises to be back: “I am coming! I am coming – I descend in order to ascend, in order to ascend infinitely higher!<sup>17</sup>”.

Does this idea of the sublime play a major role in this extraordinary Danish travelogue? It can certainly be argued that it does, but by means of contrast. On the one hand the young Jens Baggesen’s meanderings in Europe at the time of the French revolution comprises contemporary reality in the form of people, not least artists he met, regions he crossed and memorable vistas and cities he encountered; on the other hand there is a contrasting idea of absence and cleanliness. This idea is connected to high points and elevations, in short to the sublime. It can be experienced at hills and on top of cathedrals, and it can be illustrated as a sentimental poetics by the anecdote of the artist facing thunderstorm. The collection in Mannheim did also house realistic paintings in the Dutch tradition. On this background, it makes sense that Jens Baggesen avoided them.

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<sup>15</sup> *Labyrinth*, Vol. 2, p. 185.

<sup>16</sup> *Labyrinth*, Vol. 2, p. 197.

<sup>17</sup> *Labyrinth*, Vol. 2, p. 199.