

The Condemned Door: The Non-Sublime Side of the Kantian Sublime or the Intractable Excess of the Sensible World

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Abstract: Properly speaking, the sublime “cannot be contained in any sensible form, but concerns only ideas of reason”. Moreover, for the sublime to take place—Kant affirms—we must abandon sensibility. To some extent, the sublime is a negation of the sensible world. Therefore, in contrast to Kant’s approach, I will focus instead on the non-sublime aspect of the sublime, i.e., that sensible element that plays a critical role in the experience but is not considered worthy of the label “sublime”. After all, it is the Analytic of the Sublime that highlights what it tries to overshadow: the intractable excess of the sensible realm and imagination’s non-subservience to the mandates of reason. Unlike the properly sublime, art is not intended to serve a shielding function (the sublime comfort us by reassuring us of the purposiveness of our moral vocation); rather, like the non-sublime, it promotes the disruption of what is well formed.

Keywords: Kant, sublime, sensible, inadequacy, imagination, art

Introduction

I will centre my paper on the non-sublime part of the Kantian sublime, my claim being that it is the non-sublime that contains Kant’s most valuable contribution to art and literature. By “non-sublime”, I refer to that which, while playing a critical role in the experience of the sublime, is not considered worthy of the designation “sublime”, and is thus ultimately dismissed by Kant.¹ I shall therefore intentionally refrain from following Kant’s approach, namely the one focused on our supersensible vocation, the one

¹ Cf. Kant, I., 2000. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 129 (Ak 5:245). (From now on, and for all references to works written by Kant, I will refer to the pagination of Kant’s *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by the German Academy of Sciences. These pagination numbers, which are also indicated as marginal numbers in the Cambridge translations I will be using, will be preceded with the abbreviation “Ak.”). Beyond the various passages where Kant excludes any object from being called “sublime”, the designation “sublime” is explicitly attributed a noble connotation, cf. Ak 5:272-273.

concerned with “our independence in the face of the influences of nature.”² In other words, if according to Kant, for the sublime to take place, we must abandon sensibility,³ I, on the contrary, will highlight the side of sensibility. My focus is, indeed, less on what Kant aims to convey and more on what is exposed within the Analytic of the Sublime, notwithstanding Kant: the intractable excess of the sensible and our incapacity to deal with it. In that sense, because this manifestation of the domain of nature is well taken into account by Kant himself—however, only to turn his back on it—the perspective I aim to open comes from Kant’s own description of the sublime. As a matter of fact—and this will be highlighted as part of my argument—Kant is quite fixated on what pertains to the non-sublime. Yet, no proper philosophical attention is given to it by him.

This article will be divided into three parts. In the first, I will present the main features of the sublime and consequently, of the non-sublime. The second part will examine the sublime through the lens of the non-sublime, underscoring, among other aspects, the unmasterable nature of the sensible realm. Finally, the third part will explore the non-sublime’s contribution to art. The first part—I wish to state at the outset—will expound on points that are quite well-known to anyone familiar with Kant’s aesthetics. It is, however, only deceptively expository. There is a reason for me to emphasise Kant’s own description of the sublime.

1. The hybrid monster⁴

a. The properly sublime (or the floating head within its safe abode)

Kant clearly states that “what is properly sublime cannot be contained *in any sensible form*, but *concerns only ideas of reason*”⁵ and therefore that “we express ourselves on the whole incorrectly if we call some object of nature

² Ak. 5:269.

³ Cf. Ak 5:246.

⁴ I am not claiming that the sublime is about the monstrous. Kant clearly rejects any associations between them (cf. Ak. 5:253; see also: Kant, I., 2006. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Cambridge University Press, p. 140 [Ak. 7:243]). The distinctively Kantian understanding of the properly sublime banishes everything that lacks form. Kant’s exclusion of the non-sublime can be related to his aversion to *Schwärmerei*, which, among other things, refers to the illusion that creates hybrid beings and facilitates the “heterogeneous mixture of faculties or objects of thought”, cf. Allouche-Pourcel, B., 2010. *Kant et la Schwärmerei. Histoire d’une fascination*. Paris: L’Harmattan, p. 18. In brief, I will not be arguing that the sublime is synonymous with the monstrous, but that Kant’s thought cannot help but be haunted by it.

⁵ Ak. 5:245; emphasis added.

sublime”⁶ He asserts this premise not only explicitly but also reiteratively.⁷ However, such a position is not at all unexpected. The Analytic of the Sublime’s inclusion in the third *Critique* seems to be due to the significant place that the central theme of the sublime occupies within Kant’s overall thought. The experience of the sublime is, in fact, a pathway for us to feel, and thus acknowledge (and hence confirm, if only subjectively) our autonomy and superiority in regard to the sensible.⁸ The core of the sublime is indeed our rational and moral vocation.⁹ The sublime had therefore to be freed (radically and from the very start) from the sensible. But, aside from its meaning there is also a technical aspect explaining the exclusion of the sensible, namely the rigour that the concept “aesthetic” demands.

Rigorously speaking, as aesthetic judgments, both the sublime and the beautiful do not and cannot pertain to the object. Their “determining ground cannot be other than subjective”,¹⁰ affirms Kant, and this should prevent us from the outset from mixing an aesthetic judgment with a cognitive judgment (“nothing at all in the object is designated”)¹¹ or one based on mere sensation (both the beautiful and the sublime “presuppose and cultivate a certain liberality in the manner of thinking, i.e., an *independence of the satisfaction from mere sensory enjoyment*”).¹² Indeed, both of these judgments are objective and the blurring of this distinction would completely distort the essence of Kant’s understanding of “aesthetic”. Although Kant’s approach is straightforward in this regard, some extra precaution appears to be in order.

First, the fact of not being a cognitive judgment entails, among other things, that is not about norms or criteria that would give us tools to properly discuss art or what is beautiful. Such discussions are heavily dependent on the characteristics possessed by an object (how much these are distorted within our analyses is another matter). Though it’s true that such insight on the object would help elevate such discussions, that is by no means the kind of rigour that a strict comprehension of “aesthetic” demands.¹³ Second, concerning the distinction between “aesthetic” and mere sensation, it is not uncommon to encounter the conflation of “sub-

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cf. Ak. 5:250, 268, 280.

⁸ Also in this regard, Kant is quite persistent: cf. Ak. 5:246, 257, 258.

⁹ Cf. Ak. 5:245, 269.

¹⁰ Ak. 5:203.

¹¹ Ak. 5:204.

¹² Ak. 5:268; emphasis added.

¹³ Cf. Ak. 5:284-285.

jective” with “private”, thereby associating “subjective” with what remains confined to the narrow sphere of the personal. This conflation is further nourished by the (post-)Romantic exacerbation of the individual feeling. However, the distinct characteristic of the Kantian aesthetic judgments lies precisely in their *a priori* foundation, which consequently grants them universality. It is exactly what explains their placement in a *Critique* and not just in any minor writing like his 1764 essay. Moreover, although we tend to understand “objective” as independent of bias and subsequently associate it with knowledge, “objective” refers as well to “what is real in an empirical representation”.¹⁴ In other words, the intellectually humble “judgment of the senses” can also be objective, and though a part of that judgement may be subjective (e.g. the fact that a meal is pleasant to me), it is built in direct sense relation to the material aspect of the object.¹⁵

Kant presents aesthetic judgments in a radically different manner, as they pertain solely to what occurs within the subject, specifically the interaction between its faculties. By definition, the beautiful and the sublime are not and cannot be ascribed to external objects.¹⁶ Certainly, this association of pleasure (and displeasure) primarily with the subject rather than with the object is not an original idea of Kant. It was previously articulated by other philosophers—such as Alexander Gerard—though the extent to which pleasure was attributed to the object or the subject varied among them. However, in every case—and that includes Kant before the third *Critique*—it was developed within an empirical framework. In any case, it is in Kant’s third *Critique* that this view will reach a rigorous conceptual delimitation, as Kant took a step further (when not a whole leap) from his predecessors and contemporaries. This conceptual turning point is particularly evident on his own approach of the sublime: the sublime is not to be found outside but only within us.

It is worth noting that, when it comes to what should be strictly understood for “sublime”, there are more similarities between the beautiful and the sublime than is typically acknowledged.¹⁷ In fact, in his *Anthropology*, Kant explicitly asserts: “The sublime is the counterweight but not the opposite of the beautiful”,¹⁸ and a (not even that) careful reading of the third *Critique* cannot but lead us to the same conclusion. After all, the central

¹⁴ Ak. 5:203-4.

¹⁵ Cf. Ak. 7:239-240.

¹⁶ Cf. Ibid.

¹⁷ There is also this significant affinity: “[both] are purposive in relation to the moral feeling” (Ak. 5:267).

¹⁸ Ak. 7:243.

interest of the third *Critique* is purposiveness, with both the feelings of the beautiful and the sublime offering their own distinct form of purposiveness. The beautiful suggests the purposiveness of nature, while the sublime the purposiveness of our moral vocation,¹⁹ which is why the term “sublime” itself “designates an expression of approval.”²⁰ Indeed, the sublime and the beautiful are also analogous in this regard: they both provide a satisfaction [*Wohlgefallen*].²¹ Certainly, more than once, the sublime is depicted as a negative satisfaction.²² However, a negative satisfaction does not equate to displeasure. And more importantly, Kant is explicit explaining that it is only negative on the aesthetic side, but positive when considered from the intellectual side.²³ Once again, the core of the sublime is our pure rational nature.

Furthermore, the clear-cut distinction between those feelings is due to the fact that every time they are discussed, i.e., in the *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, and in his *Anthropology*, the sublime is introduced and described in contrast to the beautiful. Their distinction is therefore aimed at better outlining the particularities of the sublime but it does not mean that Kant’s approach set them as radically different. However, considering that it conveys our superior nature, the sublime could be considered a source of a more fulfilling satisfaction, since our rational nature—within a Kantian framework of understanding—is more meaningful than the “feeling at home” that the beautiful provides. As a side note, this raises the question: considering that it not only saves us from our utter insufficiency [*Unzugänglichkeit*] but also grants us a comforting idea of ourselves, can the sublime legitimately be deemed an uninterested feeling? The sublime pertains indeed to our *proprium* and therefore, it suits Kant’s pursuits. The sensible realm, on the other hand, does not.

b. The non-sublime (or the intractable amorphous body propelling the floating head)

The Analytic of the Sublime is unambiguous in distinguishing the *objects involved* in the experience from the *feeling produced* by the experience. And Kant’s focus is unmistakably directed toward the reassuring aspect of

¹⁹ Cf. Ak. 5:258.

²⁰ Ak. 5:245.

²¹ Cf. Ak. 5:244.

²² Cf. Ak. 5:269.

²³ Cf. Ak. 5:271.

the sublime, namely its conformity with the laws of reason.²⁴ Now, because of that conformity, the sublime can be said to be under control, since not only it does not break Kant's rational order of things but, actually, it rather confirms it. However, if what is properly sublime (a *feeling*) suits that order, conversely, the *objects* that trigger this experience, on the contrary, "appear in its form to be contrapurposive for our power of judgment".²⁵ Consequently, they cannot but be described negatively: "Who would want to call sublime shapeless mountain masses towering above one another in wild disorder with their pyramids of ice, or the dark and raging sea, etc.?"²⁶ This explains the particular necessity of not ascribing the sublime to the sensible: if the sublime expresses our moral purposiveness, thus our superior nature, the objects mistakenly labelled as "sublime" expose, on the contrary, our unsurmountable frailty and insufficiency, and consequently, our lack of correspondence to the world we inhabit. Whether it is in the context of the mathematical sublime or the dynamic sublime, the non-sublime—i.e., not the ultimate effect of the experience but the unfolding that leads to that effect—puts us in relation with our surrounding world, and reveals the latter as an excess, an overflow, as an abundance that surpasses our capacities to measure, determine, comprehend, contain, master it. In other words, the non-sublime is what does not suit us (our human capacities, our view of ourselves, and thus, our expectations). The non-sublime reveals indeed a "greatness that is contrapurposive (*magnitudo monstrosa*)".²⁷ But if the sublime is so dear to Kant, it is precisely for the opposite reason: it reveals "*our own greatness and power*".²⁸ The barring of the formless objects that excite in us the sublime must then understandably be radical. This explains that, for Kant, "the representation in thought of the sublime by description or presentation can and must always be beautiful",²⁹ and that accordingly "[an] artistic presentation of the sublime [...] can and should be beautiful [...]".³⁰ Lacking form, not only no presentation is possible, but no idea and no concept either. If the third *Critique* is concerned with the forms left undetermined by the

²⁴ Cf. Ak. 5:257.

²⁵ Ak. 5:245.

²⁶ Ak. 5:256.

²⁷ Ak. 7:243.

²⁸ Ibid., emphasis added.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid. In the third *Critique*, this approach is radicalised: no product of art could correspond to the sublime (cf. Ak. 5:252). However, in §52 (Ak. 5:325), he goes back to the idea present in his *Anthropology*, namely that in art, the presentation of the sublime has to belong to beautiful art.

a priori laws of our understanding,³¹ the beautiful and the sublime (as crafted by Kant) fulfil that lacune, even though only partially and only by an empirical law. With the non-sublime that is by no means the case. The non-sublime remains ungovernable. Understandably, it is set aside. But what does this exclusion reveal about our idea of us, if, aware of their existence, we deny the forms that do not conform to our capacities and projections? We will address that matter later. In any case, the non-sublime is, indeed, disregarded, but only when it is deemed unnecessary.

Kant rejects the unsettling nature of the sensible, however he employs precisely its unsettling character, as it is the necessary trigger for the experience to actually unfold, i.e., for us to feel our rational nature.³² Indeed, just as he draws an unambiguous demarcation between what is properly sublime and what cannot be named sublime, Kant is equally unequivocal when asserting that the sublime is “a pleasure that arises *only indirectly*”,³³ “a pleasure that is *possible only by means of a displeasure*”.³⁴ So despite the fact that a rigorous understanding of the sublime demands the exclusion of the sensible, it cannot be overlooked that this interaction between faculties takes place in response to certain elements present in our surrounding sensible world, and not *ex nihilo* within us. To put it another way, the interaction within the subject happens because of an interaction with the world. Almost every one of Kant’s assertions concerning the role played by the “formless” [*formlos*]³⁵ and “shapeless” [*ungestalt*]³⁶ objects giving rise to the sublime is clear in asserting how crucial they are for this experience to take place: it is “*the very inadequacy of our [imagination that] awakens the feeling of a supersensible faculty in us*”.³⁷ Not only there is no ambiguity around it but Kant is quite persistent in putting forward the need of inadequacy for the feeling of the sublime to manifest. In other words, the non-sublime, that is, that which is excluded from the label “sublime”, is no minor feature at all but, quite the opposite: it is precisely “that which [...] excites in us the feeling of the sublime”.³⁸ In short, the non-sublime is constitutive of the Kantian

³¹ Cf. Ak. 5:179-180.

³² Cf. Ak. 5:257.

³³ Ak. 5:245; emphasis added.

³⁴ Ak. 5:260; emphasis added.

³⁵ Ak. 5:244, 247, 249, 279.

³⁶ Ak. 5:279.

³⁷ Ak. 5:250; emphasis added. If we follow the text, Kant does not refer exclusively to the effect on us but also to the object. This is more evident in Ak. 5:245.

³⁸ Ak. 5:245.

sublime. However, no matter how necessary they are, no object of nature will be transformed because of this experience into something sublime. They will remain non-sublime. Otherwise, the essence and the worth of the sublime, which are rooted in the independence of our reason vis-à-vis nature, would be lost. And yet, the sensible is there, traversing the totality of the experience, and not just in a moment of time.

2. The upsetting pervasiveness of the sensible

a. The sensible within the sublime

As much as they ought to be distinguished from mere judgments of the senses, it is just as important to underline the fact the feelings of the beautiful and the sublime happen within the sensible realm. In brief, the role of the sensible is significant. Certainly, such a statement lacks substantive content. To begin with, they are feelings, and in most scholarly works, they are addressed as such. Next, the domains of knowledge and of morality also take the sensible into account; in fact, they make no sense without it; the sensible world and the challenges it poses to our faculties are far from being disregarded by Kant. Furthermore, it permeates his whole philosophical itinerary. However, the sensible plays a lesser role in those other domains, as it does not shape the judgment as decisively as it does the aesthetic judgment. Deceptively passive, the manifold of the sensible ultimately presents a false challenge to the cognitive judgment; it is rather a given to give form to. Some sense impressions won't be even acknowledged but being negligible, their absence will have no consequence. As for the ones that we are conscious of, they will be easily subsumed.³⁹ Concerning morality, the sensible is simply muted, as the moral law determines the will immediately.⁴⁰

Conversely, in the context of aesthetic judgement, the sensible is really at play, as it shapes the fundamental features of the judgment. Aesthetic experiences are thoroughly moulded by one of the most intellectually burdening features of the sensible, i.e., they are concrete singular experiences. By establishing the aesthetic judgments as reflective judgments, their outset comprehension bars any attempt of drowning them (in advance) and thus defacing them through the subsumption of an *a priori* principle. This suggests that, in contrast to other empirical occurrences,

³⁹ Cf. Ak. 5:179,

⁴⁰ Cf. Kant, I., 2015. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Ak. 5:25, 48, 71.

their way of being—i.e., individual physical experiences—is respected. It is precisely in their singularity that lies their philosophical interest, their originality, their intellectual challenge. In fact, it is because they are permeated through and through by the sensible, that it took Kant so long to give them a philosophical treatment. And though his view on aesthetic feelings took a radical turn with the discovery of *a priori* principles, the prevalence of the sensible aspect, i.e., their configuring role, was not obliterated. That explains also why, after being admitted in the philosophical sphere, they still presented a challenge. Kant stresses, indeed, that the judgments of the beautiful and the sublime are both singular.⁴¹ Furthermore, it is not just that objects have a considerable influence in these experiences. Their participation is more pervasive, the dynamics of the aesthetic experience being much more complex, as it is not simply about the things that are already there, but that what is already there has to be or appear a certain way. The feelings of the sublime (and of the beautiful) do not arise over just any object nor over any manifestation of the object. As feelings, they are awakened, i.e., they have to be awakened. They need to arise. And they happen by means of singular and particular empirical occurrences. In that sense, although not regarding its foundation (which is only *a priori*), the sensible is nonetheless *sine qua non* for the unfolding of the experience. There is indeed a difference between the foundation of the feeling of the sublime and its taking place. And notably regarding aesthetics judgments, one cannot diminish the value of their taking place. It matters for Kant that this feeling unfolds. Its possibility is not enough, for it is with the feeling being awakened that the superiority of our rational vocation becomes intuitable [*anschaulich*] and palpable [*fühlbar*] to us.⁴²

If I choose to stress this, it is because I believe that we do not sufficiently underscore the critical role played by the phenomenal framework in the experiences of the beautiful and the sublime. Not that the reader is oblivious of that fact, after all the beautiful and the sublime are almost always discussed within the framework of Aesthetics. Rather, it is when they are applied to other subjects, such as politics, that they raise some eyebrows. However, in our effort to follow rigorously the demands of Kant's approach, we tend to focus more on their autonomy, on their universal validity, hence, on the necessity to separate them from the mere sensuous. Certainly, their *a priori* nature is what fundamentally

⁴¹ Cf. Ak. 5:244.

⁴² Cf. Ak. 5:246, 257, 262.

transformed his approach to aesthetics and what established a profound distinction between his perspective and that of his contemporaries: aesthetic judgments are singular, they have however a universal validity;⁴³ and it is precisely because their possibility is grounded on human nature⁴⁴ that the demand for universal assent is legitimate.⁴⁵ Furthermore, Kant does not only make them universal, but connects both the beautiful and the sublime to morality (although, differently),⁴⁶ which gives even more weight to its proximity to the *a priori*. I, for one, don't want to overlook their differences. Yet stressing the sensible aspect does not contradict Kant's assertion that the feeling of the sublime has an *a priori* foundation. It just points out that the theme of the sublime calls for more than reflecting on the faculties that make them possible, for the sensible is acknowledged, even particularly emphasised, but only as something to surpass, i.e., they are not reflected upon. Despite its shaping role and, above all, the manifest challenge they pose, the philosophical gaze is directed elsewhere, namely towards the purity of our rational nature. Certainly, when contrasted with the intellectual achievement that was the discovery of *a priori* principles, the sensible appears to be merely the (almost too) evident aspect of the experience. However, does its apparent evidence render it philosophically irrelevant? Most notably concerning the sublime, the impact of the singular phenomena on the promotion of the feeling should be highlighted, since those occurrences are rare. We are not regularly confronted with objects that evoke limitlessness or power. Why is this relevant? Because elsewhere (in the context of cognition, for instance), the weight and scope of the non-regular would be dismissed as ineffectual. But in the context of the sublime, on the contrary, it has a profound role in the sculpting of the experience; the forms of the sensible world are far from being passive, they actually are a disruptive force. The non-sublime reveals a sensible realm that lacks order or at least an order receptive to our purposes. And precisely for this reason, I believe it is necessary to ask: how does Kant's thought handle those objects that appear contrapurposive [*zweckwidrig*] and unsuitable [*unangemessen*] for our faculties? The sensible in its impertinence cannot be philosophically neglected.

⁴³ Cf. Ak. 5:249.

⁴⁴ Cf. Ak. 5:265.

⁴⁵ Cf. Ak. 5:249.

⁴⁶ Cf. Ak. 5:267.

b. The dark side of Kant's sublime: the sensible beyond (?) the sublime

From the angle I have chosen to read the sublime—which is a side exposed by Kant himself—Kant's most exciting contribution to art and literature lies in the transparency with which he carries out his fight against forms that our faculties cannot get a hold of. The fight against our cognitive and physical insufficiency is, indeed, far from being hidden by Kant.⁴⁷ However, despite his own insistence on the existence of contrapurposive forms of nature and how much this disparages our order, the Analytic of the Sublime chooses to guide the reader through the corridors of the rational-moral dimension and apply its intellectual focus to it. There is, certainly, a legitimate excess of reason, i.e., our capacity to transcend the influences of the sensible, something Kant also insists upon.⁴⁸ However, there is what the sublime says about us (as Kant intended), and then what the non-sublime reveals about us, notwithstanding Kant. And although reason may prove its capability to go beyond every standard of sense and, as such, to overcome inadequacy, this is only possible by escaping the sensible.⁴⁹ In other words, it does not happen within the sensible realm. The only self-preservation [*Selbsterhaltung*] available for us, Kant himself clarifies, is of quite another kind [*von ganz anderer Art*] than a physical one.⁵⁰ As natural beings [*Naturwesen*], there is only insufficiency [*Unzulänglichkeit*] and physical powerlessness [*physische Ohnmacht*].⁵¹ Regarding this world, inadequacy is and will remain ineluctable. Reason may abandon sensibility but the sensible realm does not go away, and actually neither does our presence within it. Therefore, not only reason's sufficiency is not all-encompassing, but this makes us wonder: is reason truly independent as the theory of the sublime claims it is? For if sensibility has to be abandoned, if the door has to be closed to the formless objects that exert violence on our faculties (and to imagination in its unbounded ways, as we shall see afterwards), then a banning of existence (at least, of one of its ways of being) is being executed for our own sake. Since this desertion of the sensible is in conformity with reason, the sublime can be read as the validation of the negation of the sensible.

⁴⁷ To reference only a few passages: on the formless objects, cf. Ak. 5:244, 247, 249, 279, 280; on inadequacy: cf. Ak. 5:245, 250, 252, 255; on the violence [*Gewalt*] exerted on imagination, cf. Ak. 5: 245, 259.

⁴⁸ Cf. Ak. 5:246, 257, 258, 261, 268.

⁴⁹ Cf. Ak. 5:246, 261-2.

⁵⁰ Cf. Ak. 5:261.

⁵¹ Cf. Ibid.

Paradoxically, in its aim to underscore our supersensible nature, the Analytic of the Sublime highlights what it strives to overshadow: the intractable excess of the sensible, that which overwhelms our faculties, including reason, to the point of choosing to abandon it. With the non-sublime, the sensible realm reveals that it has not been entirely dealt with. Unlike the judgments of knowledge, of morality, and of the beautiful, the sublime—though by way of the non-sublime—shows that the sensible remains a challenge, yet a stimulating one. Another understanding of the sensible realm indeed emerges. What is the path chosen by Kant (but not just by him)?

c. The true scope of the Kantian sublime

Contrapurposive, the sensible messes up our plans, our expectations, our need of order. In the face of our unsurmountable defeat, a window is desperately opened towards “our nature”. It is, indeed, more so a window than a door, because being only a feeling, the sublime offers only a view. Being aesthetic, nothing can be built upon. In any case, with the sublime, our *proprium* lies outside. Kant, it’s true, characterises the theory of the sublime as a mere appendix,⁵² since, compared to the beautiful, it is far less important and rich in consequences. However—and this is explicit in his text—such a depiction of the sublime pertains to the purposiveness of *nature*. As the section of the sublime progresses, it becomes clear that the sublime is about the purposiveness of *our* nature, of our moral vocation.⁵³ And even though it is only an alternative and less consequential one than the moral law for affirming our rational nature, it is still more decisive within Kant’s system than the accordance with the world that the beautiful suggests, for it pertains the possibility of a supersensible nature. Even though it provides no solid ground upon which we could build something further, the sublime fulfils, though partially (and awkwardly), that intellectual craving, or at least it makes possible for us to feel some reassurance in the face of our unsurmountable inadequacy.

When exploring the sublime, two different scopes of the theory of the sublime become apparent. The first is the more familiar and narrower one, the one circumscribed to the formless objects capable of doing violence to our imagination. Second, the one that encompasses the whole sensible realm. Certainly, the sublime is awakened, not by just any object, but by the ones that potentially threaten our safety, i.e., the first scope is what

⁵² Cf. Ak. 5:246.

⁵³ Cf. Ak. 5:269.

seems to be supported by the Analytic of the Sublime. This narrower view is, in any case, pertinent, since through the contrast with the possibility of our harm, an important aspect of the sublime is outlined. Against such magnitudes and forces, our helplessness in the physical realm is undeniable.⁵⁴ It could therefore be argued that the sublime is what allows us, if not to physically preserve ourselves, at least to keep our humanity unharmed.⁵⁵ However, the sublime does more than provide us with this sort of safe space or panic room in the face of what presents itself as, to say the least, distressing. Its function is greater. The worth of the sublime, and Kant hardly ceases to remind us, is to show us our independence from the influences of nature,⁵⁶ that is, from the sensible in its entirety, and not just this or this other unsettling object. Kant's approach of the sublime seems aimed at confirming the gulf between nature and freedom. Therefore, it can be suggested that the true scope of the theory of the sublime, extends beyond its common description, beyond those specific (and disturbing) entities capable to precipitate the arousal of the feeling of the sublime. The sublime encompasses the whole sensible realm. It is Kant himself who puts it like this when he explains that for the sublime to take place, we must abandon sensibility.⁵⁷ Contrary to what appears to be—an aesthetic subject of limited reach, namely those very rare occasions when nature presents formless forms that disrupt our otherwise, if not harmonious, at least uneventful, relationship with the surrounding world—when one considers what the Analytic of the Sublime aims to convey and what this says about how we view ourselves, about our place in the sensible realm, about our relation with it, the sublime contains much more than an “aesthetic theory”.

d. The Kantian loophole (or That other contribution to art and literature)

First (apparently) felt and judged as negative, inadequacy reveals itself afterwards as what is actually properly adequate: it is only appropriate for us to be insufficient within the sensible.⁵⁸ Thus, a very palpable inadequacy,

⁵⁴ Cf. Ak. 5:261.

⁵⁵ Cf. Ibid.

⁵⁶ Cf. Ak. 5:269.

⁵⁷ Cf. Ak. 5:246.

⁵⁸ Cf. Ak. 5:245, 268. Viewed in the context of his entire philosophical journey, the gulf preventing the reconciliation between both spheres—an ambition of the pre-Critical Kant—later served as a relief, as it demonstrated the superiority of our nature. However, this idea requires further development, which would distract us from our current focus.

instead of being fully accepted, is transformed into something that suits us. What is more, it is precisely what proves a more elevated adequacy⁵⁹ than the one between us and the world. Not only the failure of our imagination is in accordance with the law of reason⁶⁰ but it is what allow us, within the sensible and through the effect of the contrast with the capacity of reason, to “reach” the supersensible. Thus, the fact of not belonging, the gulf between our nature and the place we dwell, which otherwise would be a source of tribulation, conversely attests our independence and superiority; a higher adequacy.

Now, isn't that one of the threads weaving through what constitutes the Romantic hero? (Because Romanticism is not the subject of this article, I allow myself to set aside the rich details of the development of this current, as well as Kant's intense battle against the *Sturm und Drang*). The crucial matter of an inescapable inadequacy being explained/reshaped by the belief or the idea of a more suitable and proper belonging that is however of another nature, that matter, and attached to the term “sublime”, can be found conceptually crafted in Kant. Within Romanticism, though, it won't pertain to every human being. In Romanticism, another gulf is indeed dug, this time amongst humans, for this belonging to another nature will only apply to a select few. The Romantic hero's inadequacy in regard to the world, which translates into suffering and/or rebelliousness, lies in the fact that the laws pertaining to society, and therefore, to every man, do not apply to him, which does not mean that he is bound to no principle, but that the ones governing him are of another order, which in turn explains his social maladjustment.

The Kantian contribution to this narrative is the distinct outlining of the abyss between realms and the attribution of a more noble meaning to this gulf, something which Romanticism radicalised. To put it in very simple terms: the world will never agree with us, but it couldn't be any other way. The sentiment of not belonging, the inadequacy manifesting itself over and over again, whether through a tragic fate or an outlaw's life, does not render the Romantic hero's existence illegitimate or wrong. As a matter of fact, it is the reverse: as with the Kantian sublime, there is a higher adequacy that relies precisely on a fracture. There is then a truth that suits the Romantic hero, but it resides, like the sublime, solely within him. Tragedy cannot but unfold, but it is precisely this that confirms his more elevated nature.

⁵⁹ Cf. Ak. 5:269.

⁶⁰ Cf. Ibid.

However different they may be—especially if one considers Kant’s rejection of both passion and the pretension to immediately connect with the sacred—Kant’s sublime and Romanticism follow the same thread, the nurturing of the narrative of our meaning, of our distinction, of our belonging to a nature that is more elevated than the simple surrounding world. In contrast to a world that appears contrapurposive to our capacities and our needs, the concept of the sublime is conversely (and suspiciously) perfectly fitting. Such approaches mute the world. What the non-sublime emphasises, on the contrary, is not us (our capacities, our vocation) but the immeasurable variety of the sensible. The non-sublime makes the world emerge.

It is therefore what is discarded from the sublime that constitutes the best contribution, not to what preserves our supersensible vocation from any intrusion and subsequent harm coming from the sensible, but to that which feasts on the wreckage of any set ideas orienting, and therefore, fixing the limits of our minds: art. By privileging the non-sublime, we go from the negation of the sensible to the opening of the infinite within the finite.

3. The condemned door: imagination’s zestfulness and art as a playground

By (over)exposing inadequacy to underscore the distinct nature of our moral vocation, Kant simultaneously points to a door he carefully seals: that of the ungovernable aspect of the sensible realm with its overflow of forms (hence, a sort of infinite) that our faculties cannot help but leave undetermined. Within the theory of the sublime, confronted with forms that appear unmasterable, unmanageable, and unruly, we close the door to the “formless”—that is, to what does not align with our narrative. This is precisely what the non-sublime reveals: the excess of the finite sensible world, a diversity of nature that does not seek to be made sense of and that will not submit to us. The manifold elements of the sensible persistently overflow over the bounds we set in place for our cognitive benefit. After all, why should we expect our faculties to measure up to this tangle of singular pluralities that is existence? In any case, if our faculties do give up, it is only regarding our particular thirst for mastering what is presented to them. Mastering the sensible world is, however, a fiction of the intellect. Yet, another way of dealing with the world is possible. And this is where art and literature come into play.

In a 2002 interview, Chilean novelist Benjamin Labatut characterised literature as the “older, crazy sister of science”.⁶¹ He argued that because it is not tied down to any set idea of the truth, literature has a freedom that science and philosophy cannot afford. As such, with no obedience having to be rendered, literature (and by extension, art) can engage with the wrong, false and impossible. Certainly, Labatut’s depiction of literature suggests that “crazy” does not mean (or not only) merely disturbed, but rather unconcerned with truth. Is it pertinent to contrast this view with Kant’s thought? At first, glance, certainly not. Significant conceptual differences hinder any rigorous contrast.

First, the sublime is “a satisfaction of reason” [*Wohlgefallen der Vernunft*].⁶² Second, it is a feeling that, within a Kantian framework, is by no means equated with passion. Kant is, indeed, unequivocal: passion “can never, in any circumstances, be called sublime”.⁶³ In fact, even affectlessness or “*apatheia*” (*Affektlosigkeit*) is, according to him, closer to the sublime.⁶⁴ Furthermore, freedom, according to Kant, means rationally determined.⁶⁵ Our commonsensical view of freedom may deem this a negative version of freedom because of the self-restrain it imposes over our inclinations. However, within Kant’s thought, the moral law is, on the contrary, a positive account of freedom.⁶⁶ It is rather in the speculative realm where Reason is constrained, having to limit itself to an immanent use. And concerning affects, passion, in complete opposition to what freedom suggests, is an oppressive force.⁶⁷ Far from opening the door to passion, Kant’s understanding of freedom is related to the capacity of not been subjected to exterior forces, for such subjection would derail us from the law of reason. In brief, freedom does not equate to lack of constraints.⁶⁸ On the contrary, pretending to be able to see something beyond all bounds of sensibility is nothing but delusion. Kant is rather explicit: “if enthusiasm [*Enthusiasm*] can be compared with the delu-

⁶¹ Louisiana Channel, 2022. “Writing should give access to the world.” Writer Benjamin Labatut [Accessed: 2024-3-25]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohsQ3WtdWoM&t=43s>

⁶² Ak. 5:272.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Cf. Ibid.

⁶⁵ Cf. Doran, R., 2015. *The Theory of the Sublime. From Longinus to Kant*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁶⁶ Cf. Ibid., p. 187.

⁶⁷ Cf. Ak. 5:275.

⁶⁸ There is certainly a play in the experience of the beautiful, but only within boundaries of what is understood as freedom. The pleasure that we take from the beautiful relies, indeed, on the objects appearing adequate [*angemessen*] to our faculties.

sion of sense [*Wahnsinn*], the visionary rapture [*Schwärmerei*] is to be compared with the delusion of mind, the latter of which is least of all compatible with the sublime [...].⁶⁹ In other words, the path undertaken by imagination when unbounded and unbridled is deemed worthless by Kant. Enthusiasm may be considered less negatively than *Schwärmerei*, but is still regarded as incompatible with the sublime. Enthusiasm is unreined [*zügellos*], *Schwärmerei* is unruled [*regellos*].⁷⁰ One being blind, the other deranged, neither could be considered, in the slightest, sublime. What is, in any case, compelling, is Kant's "passion" for what must be barred. It is as if Kant was pointing to the door that leads to a playground.

Kant neither ignores nor conceals the possibility of deviations. In particular, with regard to the deviation he most firmly rejects—*Schwärmerei*—it is not only present here in the third *Critique*, but also throughout his corpus. To such an extent, that it could be argued that Kant has a "repressed fascination"⁷¹ for it, and that—being that what he fights against—it is the "guiding thread" of his entire work.⁷² From this, I want to suggest a parallel between *Schwärmerei*—a deviation of our faculties—with the non-sublime, i.e., the forms that deviate from our determinations. Similarly to *Schwärmerei*, the "forms left undetermined" is a matter Kant returns to more than once. The concern behind the third *Critique*—i.e., "what is left undetermined"—⁷³ is indeed not new. Having already dealt in the first *Critique* with the manifold of the sensible—that is, with forms that had to be determined—in the second *Critique* Kant affirms that "the moral law determines that which speculative philosophy had to leave undetermined".⁷⁴ In a way, his philosophical itinerary appears to be a continuous chasing of those forms, with the non-sublime resisting that rational urge and remaining indeterminate and undeterminable. As a result—as previously indicated—the non-sublime will be abandoned.

⁶⁹ Ak. 5:275. Only to not modify the source, we maintain Paul Guyer's translation of "*Schwärmerei*" as "visionary rapture". We agree with Karsten Harries in deeming inadequate to translate it to "fanaticism", for it corresponds to a more common use of the word, which in this case, does not entirely suit what Kant is convening. However, as Kant himself was ambivalent with the use of the word, we opt for keeping the German word.

⁷⁰ Cf. Ak. 5:275.

⁷¹ Allouche-Pourcel, B., 2010. *Kant et la Schwärmerei. Histoire d'une fascination*, ibid., p. 14.

⁷² Cf. Ibid. Since we do not have sufficient space for this discussion, we recommend this book for it explores a fundamental point to consider to better understand Kant: the legitimate need to combat *Schwärmerei*.

⁷³ Ak. 5:180.

⁷⁴ Ak. 5:47.

Now, if there is an overflow of the forms of existence, there is also the overflow of imagination: the defiant and zesty side of imagination. Just as with the unruly forms of the sensible, Kant may discard and invalidate those deviations, the reality of their possibility is nonetheless admitted. Indeed, within the well outlined framework of the properly sublime, Kant cannot help but underline imagination's propensity to stretch beyond its limits. Understandably, whatever lies beyond the law of reason is dismissed. But is this exclusion legitimate?

Being the supersensible the chosen aim to fulfil, imagination is bound to fail. By definition, it cannot attain the idea of reason.⁷⁵ Imagination's striving towards infinity is, as expected, depicted as "vain" [*vergeblich*].⁷⁶ And yet, its effort [*Bestrebung*] to go beyond its limits is stressed by Kant.⁷⁷ Imagination, Kant affirms, strives towards infinity.⁷⁸ Imagination, therefore, demonstrates, not only to be vigorous but also to be autonomous, as it tends to go against what purportedly corresponds to its nature, whether by pursuing the unattainable demands of reason or derailing into delusion. In brief, imagination is not, by nature, subservient. It is reason that assigns it a limited function. Certainly, from Kant's perspective, imagination is merely "an instrument of reason's idea",⁷⁹ and as such, its failure serves as evidence of its conformity to rational law. From another perspective, however, imagination has a disregard for the law, hence its readiness to ignore and push through its limits. Its effort is vain only within a framework that considers that every effort should be fulfilled. Within such framework, no playful expenditure of energy is allowed. However, not having a claim, imagination does not have a duty to fulfil. It is reason that has the claim to absolute totality,⁸⁰ i.e., a finished form. Despite being disregarded, or rather dismissed, there is an undeniable and lively interaction between our senses, our imagination and our empirical surroundings, that is, with the world. By the time reason is awakened by inadequacy, imagination has already begun engaging with the sensible, and in its eagerness, it pays no attention to the possibility of even derailing into delusion. However, is it really delusion? The non-sublime exposes that it is the world that puts up a resistance to our attempts to organise it and make it subservient to us.

⁷⁵ Cf. Ak. 5:268.

⁷⁶ Cf. Ibid.

⁷⁷ Cf. Ak. 5:252, 255, 257, 258, 269.

⁷⁸ Cf. Ak. 5:250, 253.

⁷⁹ Ak. 5:269.

⁸⁰ Cf. Ak. 5:250.

Conclusion

Indisputably acknowledged, the non-sublime exposes a rich terrain that ultimately is unexplored. Kant's three *Critiques* suggest that his thought was particularly concerned with what was left undetermined by our faculties. If his philosophical work subsequently undertook the path towards resolving that challenge (the reflective judgment aims to make sense of the diversity of the sensible world), his latest attempt,⁸¹ the *Analytic of the Sublime*, exposes through the non-sublime—that is, its photographic negative—its ultimate defeat. Kant, indeed, does not conceal the sensible's capacity to disrupt our configurations. He nevertheless seals that door (as well as the door to imagination's other possibilities that fall outside its conformity to reason), in favour of the beforehand well-established rational order. In contrast, the non-sublime opens a space where neither obedience nor dominion is required, where the sensible—unsettling forms included—is vigorously affirmed. The playground behind the condemned door is a place where *Unangemessenheit* is welcome, as art feasts on dislocated forms and, furthermore, provokes their dislocation. Unconcerned with the rational imperative to assert dominance over everything that surround us, art and literature can deal with what reason can't. Or rather, art and literature free us from our urge to exercise a dominion over everything.

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⁸¹ If Michel Souriau and Giorgio Tonelli are correct in asserting that the *Analytic of the Sublime* was one of the last (if not the final) texts written for the Third *Critique* (cf. Tonelli, G., 1954. La formazione del testo della *Kritik der Urteilkraft*. *Revue internationale de philosophie* 8(30), p. 434), then the theory of the sublime is quite telling of Kant's concern (and defeat) regarding what is "left undetermined".

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