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Self-affections of Imagination and Reason in Kant's Sublime

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I provide a detailed reconstruction of the way in which imagination and reason affect the inner sense in Kant's account of the sublime. My aim is to show how two different forms of self-affection combine with each other. In Section 2, I isolate and follow Kant's argumentative strategy for the transition from the displeasure due to the representational failure of the imagination to the counterbalancing appeal to reason – and the related pleasure. Drawing on this reconstruction, in Section 3 I frame the transition according to two complementary schemes meant to show the structural differences at each step of the sublime, as well as the way they consistently belong to each other. Section 4 draws some key implications from Section 3 in order to stress the relevance of the distinction and reciprocity between the failure of the imagination and the arousal of reason.

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1. Introduction

Kant famously accounts for the sublime, in general (both the mathematical and the dynamical sublime), by stating that, when experiencing nature's greatness and/or might, we move from imaginative displeasure to the pleasure related to reason, and our own supersensible substrate. If we were to phenomenologically describe and account for how exactly passive states turn themselves into the emotional arousal of reason – in its theoretical guise in the case of the mathematical sublime; as pure practical in the case of the dynamical sublime – what would we be actually observing when following a feeling of displeasure turning into its symmetrical opposite?

The aim of this article is to answer this question and fill a gap in the literature related to the overlooked status of the inner sense and its self-affection in the experience of the sublime. The latter issue, despite the

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richness of the insights we can reconstruct from several readings, is never addressed as a specific concern. As a result, the question about the steps through which the negative displeasure coming from the failure of the imagination and the related inhibition of the vital powers *gives rise* to a positive pleasure flowing from the emotional recognition of one's own rational-moral supersensible substrate remains unanswered.

In a way, this very question might seem superfluous – as we might well find satisfying Kant's statements *that* the two moments coexist, and not feel compelled to understand (a) *why* and (b) *how* they actually coexist. However, since the common starting point in the literature is arguably the idea that the transition mirrors a 'negative-to-positive structure' (Clewes 2023, 152) and that 'the experience of the sublime combines pleasure and displeasure, repulsion and attraction' (Zuckert 2024, 670), it might make sense to provide a detailed reconstruction of the steps these transition and combination consist of. My aim is to show that the 'structure' and combination at stake in the sublime result from a specific relation between two different forms of self-affection of the inner sense.

By focusing on the way in which imagination and reason affect the inner sense we indeed see: that the two moments of the sublime coexist (a) *because* the second-order¹ feeling of pleasure builds on the first-order feeling of displeasure; and that they coexist (b) *through* a reciprocal implication between a negative and a positive self-affection of the inner sense itself. The unity of the sublime follows from the way in which these two moments combine. The form of this combination is shared by both the mathematical and the dynamical sublime.

Here I do not focus specifically on the distinction between the mathematical and the dynamical sublime for what concerns the involvement of either pure theoretical or pure practical reason. Indeed, both forms of the sublime ultimately appeal to the practical employment of reason – to which Kant refers already in the section on the mathematical sublime (KU 1790, 5: 255–256), before recalling the point in the section on the dynamical sublime (KU 1790, 5: 265). As Merritt (2018, 34–50) has it, the notion of human vocation (*Bestimmung*) unifies the mathematical and the dynamical sublime by referring both to the disposition towards virtue (see also Merritt 2018, 45–47; GSE 1764, 2: 215, 217–218; Allison 2001, 326; 335).²

At least for three main reasons, we might not be content with an account of Kant's sublime as some sort of merely factual transition from the failure of the imagination to the appeal to reason. The first is that the source of the displeasure (the failure of the imagination in the representation) seemingly has nothing to do with the source of the pleasure (reason). How is it that two different feelings coming from two different faculties end up being together not only as successive, but also combined with each other? The second is that imagination and reason are in a counter-purposive, non-harmonious

relation – which then ends up being purposive and, even if not properly harmonious, at least consistent. Again, how do these two opposite poles generate and combine with each other? The third is that the path towards the practical sphere, unlike in the case of the beautiful, does not entail any sort of symbolic exhibition.³ While in the case of the beautiful a symbol might be conceived of as the unity between the imagination and aesthetic ideas, in the case of the sublime there is no third representational tool playing the same role. The unity of the sublime, therefore, is only in the feeling. In that it is a judgment about the state of the subject – not about this or that object as to attribute the predicate of sublimity – the judgment on the sublime always essentially entails the experience of the feeling of the sublime itself

While the issue of the self-affection of the inner sense plays a marginal role in the literature on Kant's sublime, I aim to show that it is key to understanding how the transition from a passive-negative moment to a form of pleasure – whereby passivity is positively connoted as receptivity to reason – is no mere matter of a factual succession from one state to another. More precisely, I aim to show that the experience of the sublime, as Kant conceived of it, entails two complementary feelings (two moments) mirroring two different yet complementary forms of self-affection of the inner sense. The transition from displeasure to pleasure relies on the transition from an imaginative to a rational self-affection of the inner sense.

The first moment – the first form of self-affection – follows from the imagination's failed representational grasp of nature's greatness and/or might and it is essentially *also* related to an external object; the second moment instead completely disregards the latter object and *exclusively* follows from reason.

The transition from the first moment (displeasure) to the second moment (pleasure) relies on a movement I aim to reconstruct in detail in order to show that the negative, as it were, is the condition of the positive. The displeasure can be said to ignite one's emotional recognition of reason as taking over all sorts of displays of nature's greatness and/or might, while also surpassing the function of the imagination, thereby generating a specific form of feeling and aesthetic experience.⁴

The emotional movement involved in Kant's sublime has been extensively discussed from a variety of interpretive perspectives, all ultimately taking their bearings from the relation between the negative and the positive moment, i.e. between the failure of the imagination and the appeal to reason. Crowther (1989, 123; 125) focuses on the displeasure-to-pleasure movement while facing the question about succession or simultaneity and argues that, since the transition is immediate, the elements cannot be discriminated properly. Clewis (2009, 132; 186) makes the case for the revelation of freedom as the key to move from the negative to the positive feeling. Cochrane (2012) argues, outside of a specifically Kantian scheme, that the sublime

involves a feeling of self-negation alongside a complementary imitative drive towards the features of the sublime object. Merritt (2018) expands on the feeling of the sublime and distinguishes between admiration [*Bewunderung*] towards things and respect [*Achtung*] towards persons – whereby only the former is properly involved in the experience of the Kantian sublime. Cohen (2020) understands feelings as ‘affective appraisals’ of our activity, thereby allowing us to think of some sort of reciprocity between the immediate displeasure and the indirect pleasure in the feeling of the sublime. Along the same interpretive lines, Milli (2023, 192) stresses that no experience of reason’s practical power is possible without the failure of the imagination. Choi and Cohen (2022, 180–181, 183, quoting from *KU 1790*, 5: 244–246, 262) provide a comprehensive comparison between the beautiful as the feeling of the promotion of life and the sublime as the ‘feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital powers’, which gives way to ‘the immediately following and all the more powerful outpouring of them’.

At *KU 1790*, 5: 245, Kant indeed states that the feeling of the sublime ‘is a pleasure that arises only indirectly, being generated, namely, by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital powers and the *immediately following* and all the more powerful outpouring of them’ (emphasis added).

As already mentioned, there can be different ways to understand this connection. The questions I aim to answer here are the following. How are we to understand the transition from a passive-negative affection to the feeling of reason’s arousal and our supersensible substrate? How does a passive moment lead to an active-spontaneous one? In order to answer these questions, I suggest, we have to look at passive states as the conditions of possibility for reason – in both its theoretical and pure practical guise – to display a function (which the subject acknowledges in and through the feeling) that surpasses the function of the imagination and overcomes nature’s greatness and/or might.

The experience of the sublime thus relies on a specific kind of unity between passive and active states according to two complementary forms of self-affection of the inner sense. The inability of the imagination to grasp both the mathematical magnitude and the dynamic impetuosity of the structures and forces of nature affects the inner sense – first moment – and also works as the condition of possibility for a second moment of self-affection related to reason.

In section 2, I read the Analytic of the Sublime through the lens of the twofold self-affection interpretive proposal in order to show that it is actually possible to isolate and follow Kant’s argumentative strategy for the transition from passivity and displeasure to reason – and the related pleasure.⁵ Drawing on this reconstruction, in section 3, I then frame the transition into details according to two complementary schemes meant to show the structural differences at each step of the Kantian sublime, as well as the way they

consistently belong to each other. [Section 4](#) draws some key implications from [section 3](#) in order to stress the relevance of the distinction and reciprocity between the failure of the imagination and the arousal of reason.

2. The Analytic of the Sublime in Kant's Third Critique

From the very outset, Kant addresses the issue of an oscillation between the two moments in the sublime (*KU* 1790, 5: 250). It is the 'inadequacy of our faculty for estimating the magnitude of the things of the sensible world' to awake 'the feeling of a supersensible faculty in us'. In the context of this felt inadequacy, 'the imagination reaches its maximum and, in the effort to extend it, sinks back into itself, but is thereby transported into an emotionally moving satisfaction'. It follows 'an enlargement of the mind which feels itself empowered to overstep the limits of sensibility from another (practical) point of view' (*KU* 1790, § 26, 5: 252, 255). The fact that *sinking back* into itself at the same time means *being moved* to a satisfying state is key, for Kant makes it clear that this sort of representational shock has a positive role to play.

Kant then points out that the displeasure following from the imagination's inadequacy takes place at the same time as the pleasure arising from 'the correspondence of this very judgment of the inadequacy of the greatest sensible faculty in comparison with ideas of reason' (*KU* 1790, 5: 257–258). Given that displeasure and pleasure cannot be felt at the same time – as the inner state of the subject cannot be affected, *at the very same time*, by two opposite feelings (because of the principle of non-contradiction) – the simultaneity of the two feelings is due to the fact that the sublime is a unified emotional movement consisting of two steps whereby the former, the displeasure, triggers the activation of the faculty, reason, that generates the latter (pleasure).

Notice that here the pleasure is not merely related to the acknowledgment of 'reason's idea of the supersensible' (*KU* 1790, 5: 258) – either pure theoretical for the mathematical sublime (infinity and the unconditioned) or pure practical for the dynamical sublime (freedom and our moral vocation) – but, more specifically, follows from a comparative judgment between the latter and the limits of the imagination. It goes without saying that the failure of the imagination does displease, but it is also important to notice that, *per se*, namely in isolation from the preceding displeasure, the acknowledgment of reason's ideas and higher function does not please. In the sublime, pleasure, as it were, is not an immediate appreciation of some positive aspects, but rather a reactive, indirect drive counterbalancing, by appealing to reason,⁶ the displeasure following from the imagination's inability to accomplish its representational task.

If this holds, however, then the objects the imagination fails to apprehend – the greatness or magnitude, the might or power of nature – do play an important role. Rayman (2012, 56) claims that, in order ‘to recognize its moral functions, we cannot think about the sublime in terms of natural objects and forces or even as a reaction to them’, for the ‘sublime is not an object’ but rather a state of the mind. I think it is instead important to locate the sublime within the scope of a certain relation to external objects. It is legitimate to claim that the external object is not the ground of sublimity, but it is at the same time necessary to understand its role in the Kantian sublime. There would simply be no sublimity without nature.⁷

Therefore, the claims that ‘[t]he whole drama takes place within and between the faculties’ and that ‘[t]he particular objects of nature – indeed, even nature itself as an object – are really not intrinsically relevant’ (Zammito 1992, 282) are mistaken. As I am going to show, to distinguish between two kinds of self-affection makes it clear that the alleged non-relevance of the object only concerns the second moment – while it is needed in the first moment.

Kant writes indeed that (*KU* 1790, § 27, 5: 258):

What is excessive for the imagination (to which it is driven in the apprehension of the intuition) is as it were an abyss, in which it fears to lose itself, yet for reason’s idea of the supersensible to produce such an effort of the imagination is not excessive but lawful, hence it is precisely as attractive as it was repulsive for mere sensibility.

Kant mentions at this point the inner sense explicitly, which undergoes the violence⁸ of the imagination (*KU* 1790, 5: 259). It is because of the following displeasure that reason ends up appealing to its own greater function. In its theoretical guise, reason is capable of the idea of infinity and the unconditioned, which surpasses the imagination’s failure in grasping the magnitude or greatness of nature. In its pure practical guise, the idea of freedom and our moral vocation is the idea of a power that cannot be conditioned or undermined by nature.

As for the theoretical idea of the infinite, which is ‘absolutely great’, Kant points out that ‘even being able to think of it as a whole indicates a faculty of the mind which surpasses every standard of sense’ (*KU* 1790, 5: 254). As for the practical idea of the human being’s moral vocation, it is rooted ‘in the predisposition to the feeling for (practical) ideas, i.e. to that which is moral’ (*KU* 1790, 5: 265).

Kant’s reference to the fact that the status of the inner sense can be altered by the exercise of reason’s faculties is utterly consistent with his own account of self-affection in the first *Critique*. In the *Transcendental Aesthetic* we read that through the inner sense ‘the mind intuits itself’ (*KrV* 1781–1787, B 37), and that an ‘inner sense, as far as regards its

form' is the way in which the mind is affected 'by its own activity [...] through itself' (*KrV* 1781–1787, B 67–68). In the Deduction, we then also read that the understanding too 'determines the inner sense' (*KrV* 1781–1787, B 153–155, see also B 156n). Though the literature provides readings of Kant's notion of self-affection in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Indregard 2017; Valaris 2008), the role self-affection plays for the experience of the sublime has been overlooked.

Ferrarin (2015, 19) has a point when he writes that, in general, 'no affection makes sense or even exists for us other than through and as an ordered organization of the given manifold in a pure form. And this is the act whereby we shape our receptivity – in Kant's words, a self-affection. All affection is a self-affection in this respect'. Though the feeling of the sublime might not properly qualify as a way to unify a manifold – at least not in the same terms of determined, objective cognition – it still follows from the interaction between the imagination and reason (whereby the former does actually attempt at a representational grasp and an apprehension of a manifold). Therefore, to understand self-affection as the act of shaping our receptivity perfectly fits with Kant's account of the sublime as well.

Kant recalls the notion of self-affection at several passages in the third *Critique*, and Lyotard's claim (1991, 64) that 'succession and the affection of the self by itself' are suspended in the case of aesthetic experience, allegedly in contrast to cognition, seems to overlook this point. Aesthetic judgments, Kant writes, are grounded on a feeling of the inner sense (*KU* 1790, 5: 228), and the function of the imagination is exercised 'on the organ of the inner sense' (*KU* 1790, 5: 234). In the case of the sublime, Kant mentions 'the inner perception of the inadequacy of any sensible standard for the estimation of magnitude by reason' (*KU* 1790, 5: 258), right before claiming that 'the subjective movement of the imagination' – unlike the case of the beautiful – 'does violence to the inner sense' (*KU* 1790, 5: 259). The idea of the faculties (sensibility, imagination, understanding, and reason) affecting the inner sense is undoubtedly at play in Kant's account of the sublime. If that is the case, we then need to account not only for the violence of the imagination, but also for the felt arousal of reason as a second-order positive reaction to a first-order displeasure. If the imagination affects the inner sense, reason – the faculty of ideas – does it as well.

Reason is both challenged by nature's greatness and/or might and – precisely because of this challenge – reason is unwilling to tolerate this sort of downwards scaling of its powers. This is why reason appeals to its own higher function and ideas in order to surpass the function of the imagination. The latter appeal originates pleasure, again, not *per se*, but as a counterbalancing reaction against a negative affection of the inner sense related to a failed representational grasp of an object. The judgment on the sublime thus

combines the outcomes of two different faculties. In these terms, we can make full sense of Kant's subsequent statements (*KU* 1790, 5: 259–260):

the displeasure and thus the contrapurposiveness of the faculty of imagination is yet represented as purposive for the ideas of reason and their awakening. It is precisely in this way, however, that the aesthetic judgment itself becomes purposive for reason, as the source of ideas, i.e. for an intellectual comprehension for which all aesthetic comprehension is small; and the object is taken up as sublime with a pleasure that is possible only by means of a displeasure.

One first remark (a) concerns the 'paradoxical conception of a *counter-purposive purposiveness*' Allison (2001, 310).⁹ The task – the purpose – of the imagination is to grasp nature's greatness and/or might in a way that, in turn, is also purposive according to the reflecting employment of the power of judgment.¹⁰ Yet the failed attempt at grasping nature's greatness and/or might runs against the representational purpose of the imagination, thereby generating displeasure. The imagination thus *sinks back into itself* in a counter-purposive way. The direction of reason's overarching reaction against this negative affection of the inner sense takes the opposite route, thereby resulting purposive for reason itself.¹¹

One second remark (b) is that reason's purpose at this stage is not representational. Reason is at this point no longer concerned with fulfilling the same task as the imagination. Rather, and this is key, reason aims at counterbalancing the failure of the imagination by bringing into play ideas that both surpass the function of the imagination and cannot be undermined by nature's greatness and/or might.¹² Said differently, reason does not aim to fulfill the same task as the imagination and succeed where the imagination failed – for example by representing an alleged sublime object. Rather, reason's aim is to counterbalance the negative affection of the inner sense following from the failure of the imagination (and the related displeasure). Reason's means is to employ ideas that take over the source of the displeasure and affect again the inner sense, in a positive way. Not only have the two feelings (displeasure and pleasure) different sources, but also the respective faculties (imagination and reason) have different – yet complementary – tasks.

The third, last remark (c) is that the pleasure is therefore necessarily dependent on the preceding displeasure. It is because nature's greatness and/or might reach the threshold of taking over the representational powers of the imagination that reason can enjoy its own appeal to what Kant calls an internal 'capacity of resistance [...] which gives us the courage to measure ourselves against the apparent all-powerfulness of nature' (*KU* 1790, 5: 261).

The fact that the transition seems immediate, or the two states seem simultaneous, should not lead us to frame the sublime in terms of a homogeneous emotional movement. As we have seen, this is in fact a *transition*, a

change from one state to another, whereby the former immediately triggers the latter. On a closer look at the way in which imagination and reason affect the inner sense, it is indeed possible to identify two complementary moments and the respective feelings, whereby the former, the negative, is the condition of the latter, the positive. According to this reading, while the displeasure qualifies as a first-order feeling originating out of a failed representational grasp, the pleasure is instead a second-order feeling originating out of the first moment – as the displeasure activates reason, which, in turn, affects the inner sense exclusively from within. In the next section, I will provide more details about how this second-order feeling originates. Before getting there, let me complete the reconstruction of Kant's argument.

While the effort of the imagination is, on the one hand, in vain, it is also true that, on the other hand

the feeling of the unattainability of the idea by means of the imagination, is itself a presentation of the subjective purposiveness of our mind in the use of the imagination for its supersensible vocation, and compels us to think nature itself in its totality, as the presentation of something supersensible. (*KU* 1790, § 2, 5: 268)

The satisfaction in the sublime is indirect in that it takes a further step – one more than in the case of the beautiful – precisely because of the need to turn the displeasure into pleasure – which is instead direct in the case of the beautiful. The very feeling ‘of the deprivation of the freedom of the imagination [...] is purposively determined in accordance with a law other than that of empirical use’ (*KU* 1790, 5: 269). What follows is ‘an enlargement and power which is greater than that which it sacrifices’ as the feeling concerns not only ‘the sacrifice or deprivation’ but also, at the same time ‘the cause to which it is subjected’ (*ibidem*).

The feeling of the sublime is multilayered, and this is the reason why the pleasure is indirect. The nexus between the first moment and the second moment is peculiar, for the conditions leading to displeasure (the imagination failing the representational grasp of the object) first have, as their outcome, a negative affection of the inner sense. The latter status of the inner sense is something against which it is necessary to remedy by means of a different form of self-affection, and this is not possible by appealing to the same faculty (the imagination) that is at the root of the displeasure. Reason has to appeal to a different, higher function, and this implies framing the imagination's failure in a purposive way, namely within the framework of a more comprehensive emotional movement.¹³ The latter is unified in that it consists of two complementary moments, but it is not simply homogeneous¹⁴ – for the two moments, taken in isolation, have different structures, sources, and mirror different aims.

The pleasure is not related *per se* to a supersensible faculty, for it rather concerns the fact that the latter faculty is able to remedy to a displeasure by appealing to a higher function than the one at the root of the displeasure itself (the imagination's representational inability to grasp nature's greatness and/or might). This is why the positive side in the emotional experience of the sublime is to be genuinely appreciated in terms of a reaction¹⁵ against something that seems to challenge reason. Reason's answer is to activate its own function, in its theoretical and pure practical guise, by means of ideas. The latter, in turn, lead us to conceive of nature – in its totality – *as if*¹⁶ it were displaying something supersensible.

With this in mind, we are now able to show how sublimity originates out of a unified series of steps within the inner sense as modifications of its status.

3. The First-order (Negative) Feeling versus the Second-order (Positive) Feeling

The steps involved in the first-order feeling can be listed in the following way.

0¹. Neutral status of the inner sense; the subject contemplates in peace and safety, at an adequate distance [*KU* 1790, 5: 261–262; 269; *Anth.* 1798, 7: 243; Allison 2001; 328–329].

1¹. Failure of the imagination's attempt at grasping nature's greatness and/or might: representational shock.

2¹. Passive-negative affection of the inner sense related to [a failed representational grasp of] an external object (nature's greatness and/or might).

3¹. Feeling of displeasure following from the imagination's failure, which does violence to the inner sense.

4¹. Passive (and even humiliating) acknowledgment of the imagination's limits and capacities.

5¹. Mismatch between the task (the representational grasp as the imagination's purposive movement) and the available means (the imagination's boundedness to sensible and conceptual constraints when confronting nature's greatness and/or might).

6¹. Outcome: the inner sense is negatively affected out of a failed attempt at representationally grasping nature's greatness and/or might.

The picture is different in the second moment, precisely because the feeling of displeasure already took place in the first moment. However, this does not mean to break the discrete continuity in the Kantian sublime, for instead it is only by means of the reciprocity between the two moments that the unity of the sublime is actually possible. Step 6¹ is basically the same as step 0², to which we now move according to the following complementary scheme.

0². Negative status of the inner sense: feeling of displeasure.

1². Reason's attempt at counterbalancing: inversion of the imagination's counter-purposive failure and appeal to a function (through theoretical and pure practical ideas) that (a) surpasses the one at the root of the displeasure (the limits of the function of the imagination); and (b) overcomes nature's greatness and/or might.

2². Positive self-affection of the inner sense related to reason, whose function overtakes both the imagination, concerning 1² (a), and nature, concerning 1² (b).

3². Feeling of pleasure following from the achievements related to 1².

4². Emotional (receptive) acknowledgment of a supersensible faculty and substrate.

5². Subordination¹⁷ of nature to reason. If the task (reason's overarching purpose) is to counterbalance the failure of the imagination and the related displeasure, the available means (unboundedness of reason's ideas) not only suffice, but also overtake both the imagination and nature's greatness and/or might, namely the roots of the displeasure.

6². Outcome: the inner sense is self-affected out of the subordination of nature's greatness and/or might to reason, and the related ideas of the supersensible (respectively infinity and the unconditioned, freedom and our moral vocation). Neither the external object nor its representational grasp play any roles at this point. The subject is exclusively concerned with reason and its own supersensible substrate. This is what the subject pleasantly feels, as this self-affection reaches further than the initial status at 0¹. At 0³, we would indeed find ourselves in a condition of rational and moral elevation above nature.

4. The Transition

By looking at the schemes sketched in [section 3](#), we first see that it is not possible to draw any one-sided distinction according to which the first-order feeling would allegedly be exclusively passive, while the second-order feeling would be exclusively active or genuinely spontaneous. Both feelings indeed involve passive and active states,¹⁸ and the transition from negative to positive, from displeasure to pleasure, actually concerns two different forms of self-affection. The first-order feeling follows from an affection *also* related to an external object. The active side is here the effort of the imagination, namely its attempt at grasping nature's greatness and/or might. The passive side is due to the imagination's failure and the following displeasure.

The second-order feeling follows from a self-affection related to reason *exclusively*. Its active side consists in activating reason and acknowledging its higher function. The passive – here positive, receptive – side consists in

feeling reason's elevation over nature's greatness and/or might, which brings pleasure with it.

To frame this comparison more specifically is to see that in the second-order feeling the passivity of reason's self-affection mirrors a positive pleasure, while in the first-order feeling passivity has a negative connotation, as it means displeasure. It is also easy to see that, therefore, it is not possible to identify passivity with negative displeasure *tout court*, while active states would allegedly always correspond to a positive pleasure.

Since both feelings always also involve active states – due to the activity of the imagination in the first moment, due to the activity of reason in the second moment – the transition from displeasure to pleasure mirrors a transition from passive states negatively connoted to passive states positively connoted as receptive-emotional states. The key to understand this transition is then to combine a self-affection of the inner sense *also* depending on an external object to a genuinely internal self-affection of the inner sense following – *exclusively* – from the activation of reason.

According to this picture, we can answer one objection related to the very notion of self-affection. Does not the imagination also affect the inner sense, as it implies an activity that, even if failing, still brings about a modification of the inner sense? Does not the first-order feeling already rely on a self-affection? On the one hand, it is indeed true that the imagination, even when failing, does affect the inner sense with its activity (its attempt at representationally grasping nature's greatness and/or might). However, this is true of any other employments of the faculties: to exercise a faculty is to alter the status of the inner sense. Therefore, this first sense of self-affection is not specific for the sublime.

On the other hand, indeed, there is a relevant difference. Only the second-order feeling does rely on reason's self-affection exclusively, without any reference to the external object or the representational grasp of it. In the former case, the activity of the imagination is related to an external object as its target, as it were. This is missing in the latter case, for the activation of reason is *per se* necessary and sufficient in order to positively affect the inner sense from within and originate the feeling of pleasure.¹⁹ If there is one thing that plays a role in the second-order feeling then it is only – indirectly – the first-order feeling itself. What we face is, said differently, a feeling that builds on another feeling.

Recall the schemes from [section 3](#): the first-order feeling concerns the activity of the imagination. Its representational failure is the root of a negatively connoted self-affection originating displeasure. The second-order feeling instead concerns the activation of reason and the related appeal to our supersensible substrate. The affection is in a way passive in this case as well. Yet it is a genuine self-affection *receptively* generating a pleasure

disregarding the object and the related (attempted but failed) representation which lies, in turn, at the root of the first-moment feeling. Said differently, the second-order feeling relates to the first-order feeling as to an outcome – *per se* negative – playing a positive role.

In the context of this transition, we face not only a twofold self-affection, but also a complementary twofold alteration of the condition of the experiencing subject. We already noticed how the inner sense is both negatively affected by the imagination's failure and positively moved by the arousal of reason. We are now in the position to appreciate how the subject becomes emotionally receptive to reason's ideas, in and through the feeling of the sublime – either mathematical or dynamical – as a unified movement. The subject, as it were, is no longer the mere observer of nature's greatness and/or might striving in vain to some sort of representational grasp of them, for she now becomes the *receiver* and *listener* of her most characterizing trait as an authentically *human* subject, namely its supersensible substrate.

The only thing affecting the inner sense from within is indeed the consciousness of reason's own higher function and ideas. To experience the sublime is to feel this elevation both counterbalancing and overtaking nature's greatness and/or might. What we truly experience in the context of the Kantian sublime is, in an emotional manner – by means of the faculty of feeling – the fact that reason (the supersensible substrate of human nature) in a way might surpass all displays of nature's greatness and/or might. Said differently, we feel that reason, the faculty of ideas, reaches further than the imagination and that, in a complementary way, our rational and moral, supersensible substrate cannot be undermined by nature.

If the greatest and mightiest displays of nature somehow seem to challenge our worth and cognitive abilities, the appeal to reason makes it clear to the subject herself that nature – however great or mighty its displays could be – cannot undermine our rational and moral supersensible substrate.

The other way around, to appeal to reason when confronting nature means at the same time to *feel* that reason cannot be undermined by nature, and to conceive of nature as mirroring our supersensible substrate. Consistently with Kant's general account of the reflecting employment of the power of judgment,²⁰ we are dealing with the purposive arrangement of nature and the power of judgment itself.

To recall that feeling is a faculty thus means to reconsider the relationship between passivity and activity itself, for in the case of the emotional appraisal of reason's exercise, this very exercise is at once a self-affection of the inner sense. In these terms, to feel is not to be passive with regard to some sort of intervention of an external agent or factor, but rather to receptively acknowledge the key function of reason itself. By no chance, the experience of the sublime belongs in the context of the reflecting power of judgment, whereby this function operates in accordance with itself and understands experience

and nature – in a broader sense than in the case of cognition – as if they were purposively mirroring its very function.

In *The Sublime*, Merritt (2018, 76) writes that Kant explains the sublime ‘as an enjoyment that draws from the satisfaction of reason, and thereby stands to gather strength the more that it is sustained’. While I share this effective phrasing, one might add to this picture that *if* reason’s satisfaction depends on its own systematic unity²¹ and *if* the experience of the sublime involves some kind of satisfaction for reason, *then* it is because of its peculiar way to contribute, as it were, to reason’s systematic unity. The sublime displays the arousal of reason as a reaction to nature’s greatness and/or might. It follows that the enjoyment in the sublime not only gathers ‘strength the more that it is sustained’, but also *gathers more strength than it is spent* when attempting the imaginative grasp of nature’s greatness and/or might. This sort of emotional surplus, in turn, fuels the (indirect) enlivenment of the faculties and raises the rational and moral vocation of the human being on the highest standpoint.

5. Conclusion

Throughout the sections of this article, I have tried to make the case for an understanding of Kant’s sublime in terms of a twofold self-affection of the inner sense. I have tried to show that this aesthetic-emotional experience relies on two moments of self-affection following from different sources: the imagination’s failure in grasping nature’s greatness and/or might; the appeal to reason’s own function and ideas. On the one hand, the former moment essentially *also* relates to an object the imagination is dealing with. The failure of the imagination generates displeasure. On the other hand, the latter moment builds on this felt displeasure as the ground for the appeal to reason, exclusively, one overtaking both the function of the imagination and nature itself. This latter form of self-affection of the inner sense is the source of the indirect pleasure Kant’s sublime consists in. This picture allows us to conceive of the experience of the mathematical and the dynamical sublime as the way in which the faculty of feeling and the reflecting power of judgment make us emotionally receptive to reason and its ideas.

Notes

1. Zuckert (2007, 233) deals with the pleasure in the beautiful in terms of ‘an intentional or second-order mental state, about another representation’. By borrowing Zuckert’s phrasing, one could say that the sublime is a second-order feeling building not on another representation but rather on a first-order feeling. While in the case of the beautiful the first-order representation is the

aesthetic representation of an object, in the case of the sublime the displeasure following from the failure of the imagination might qualify as a first-order feeling. In both cases different layers of mental states relate to each other. Obviously the first-order displeasure – in the sublime – is the reason why the pleasure is indirect (while in the beautiful pleasure follows immediately).

2. A sharper distinction between theoretical reason and mathematical sublime, on the one hand, and practical reason and dynamical sublime on the other, is framed by Zammito (1992, 281). An account of the main differences and similarities between the mathematical and the dynamical sublime can be found in Vatansever (2024, 648–651, here 649): ‘Similar to the feeling of mathematical sublime, the feeling of the dynamical sublime involves a state of displeasurable feeling’ that ‘makes us aware of another kind of capacity we have to resist nature’.
3. This is not merely to contrast the sublime with the beautiful, but to stress that the latter has a more robust representational side: there can be a beautiful symbol of morality. However, the sublime makes us access the moral sphere in a different manner, by relying more on the emotional affection of the inner sense than a symbolic representation. It remains obviously true that, in both cases, the structural features of the reflecting status of the power of judgment are shared. More properly symbolic understandings of the Kantian sublime are to be found in Clewis (2015) and Matherne (2023).
4. See Matthews (1996, 166): ‘the feeling of sublimity is closely related to moral judgment but is not identical to moral feeling, just as the feeling of beauty is related to cognitive judgments but not identical to the feeling of pleasure following cognition’. On the role of feelings in bridging the gulf between nature and freedom see Guyer (1990).
5. See (Guyer 2018, 157–162). I share the view that we can read the Kantian sublime ‘in terms of competing dispositions rather than competing sensations’. My remark is that – either we focus on dispositions or sensations – they are not competing, but rather complementary.
6. In the context of Herder’s criticism of Kant’s account of the sublime – also with reference to Burke’s view – Zuckert (2003, 225) pertinently notices, in the Kantian account, ‘the coincidence of pleasure and power’. Kant ‘explains our pleasure in such objects through proposing that we are not, in fact or in all ways, under the power of these objects – we transcend them through our reason, we are not subdued to their power’, but rather superior to them.
7. For reasons of space and thematic consistency, I do not deal here with the possibility of the sublime in art. However, even in that case, one cannot do without an external object challenging the function of the imagination.
8. Makkreel (1984, 308, 311) addresses this issue by arguing for a temporal regress of the imagination that ‘does not annihilate time as such, but suggests the possibility of negating the mathematical or linear form of time’. In the context of the sublime, ‘the imagination institutes a regress to reason which is not so much transcendent, as transcendental. It is not directed to the objective determination of the absolute, but is a subjective movement’ to a supersensible faculty. I think Makkreel has a good point against Lyotard’s claim (1991, 64), that ‘[t]he sensation provided by the free play of the faculties institutes a manner of being for time that cannot involve an inner sense’. The inner sense always keeps its temporal form, even if the latter might be shaped in different ways in cognitive and aesthetic experience. On Lyotard’s idea of an ‘extemporalization’ in the sublime see also Lyotard (1991, 143–146).

9. See also Vatansever (2024, 648).
10. On Kant's deduction of the sublime see Moore (2018). On the judgmental structure of the sublime see Zuckert (2024).
11. It is important to recall, as Deligiorgi meritoriously does, that the feeling of the sublime is also a judgment of the sublime. I share the view that the form of this judgment 'exactly replicates the negative and positive sensations that constitute the feeling: it is a judgment that unites contrapurposiveness and purposiveness' (Deligiorgi 2018, 173).
12. On the relation between imagination, reason, and time, also see (Makkreel 1990, 67–87).
13. It might be indeed reductive to think that the role of the imagination in the sublime runs out in its failure, for the positive pleasure following from the activation of reason actually expands the imagination and makes it possible, as it were, to think more than it could be represented. A more positive (and comprehensive) account of the imagination in the context of the Kantian sublime is in Matherne (2023) and Schleich (2020, 175–306). For the purposes of this article, it is enough to recall that both readings relate – not isolate – the expansion of the imagination and the arousal of reason. It is indeed only within the scope of the rational (self)-affection (second-order feeling of pleasure) of the inner sense that the imagination is able to serve reason's own appeal to the supersensible.
14. See Makkreel (1990, 78): 'The feeling of the sublime is dual in nature. It involves displeasure as the imagination recognizes that it is incapable of comprehending absolute greatness, and pleasure insofar as this recognition serves the purpose of disclosing the power of reason in the *same* subject'.
15. See GSE, 2: 229: 'efforts and difficulties that have been overcome arouse admiration and belong to the sublime'.
16. Though nature is not actually presenting anything supersensible, our way of looking at nature works analogously to a mirror. In the context of the sublime, we feel the arousal of reason when confronting nature. The supersensible arises out of our emotional interaction with nature – though not out of nature itself. This is the meaning of Kant's analogical framework.
17. This is not meant to justify predatory attitudes towards nature itself. On the contrary, the sublime shows that the capacity reason appeals to in order to counterbalance the failure of the imagination is the same reason relies on in order to establish the legislative domain of nature, through its disciplined theoretical employment, and the legislative domain of freedom, through its practical employment. Far from drawing a fracture, the sublime is a distinctive mark of the reflective unity of nature and reason. The interest in the ecological and environmental implications of the sublime follows from this. See Brady (2012, 2013).
18. As Cohen (2024, 579–581) rightly points out, this is true of Kant's faculty of feeling in general.
19. The claim that aesthetic pleasure (and feeling more generally) mirrors a self-conscious, affective, '*responsiveness to reasons*' (Gorodeisky 2018, 168–170) is illuminating. I also share the view that pleasure 'is neither passive, nor either theoretically or practically cognitive, and yet, it is an exercise of rational agency' (170). I try to show here that this is the case for the sublime as well,

for also the negative-to-positive transition combines receptivity and spontaneity (see Gorodeisky 2018, 187–189).

20. Zammito (1992, 278) writes that ‘the sublime is an experience which occasions self-consciousness through aesthetic reflection’.
21. On reason’s right ‘to see its need satisfied’ see Ferrarin (2015, 25–34 (27)). On the contribution of the sublime to reason’s teleological unity see Órdenes Azúa (2023).

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