Horizon of Error: The Function of the Sublime in Nietzsche's *Dawn*

CAMILLA PITTON | POLITECNICO DI TORINO

Abstract: This article assesses Nietzsche's engagement with the sublime in *Dawn* to shed light on an aspect thereof that has so far been overlooked: Nietzsche's deployment of the sublime as a philosophical framework for coming to terms with epistemic limits and transcendental errors. By engaging with the sublime both descriptively and methodologically, Nietzsche promotes an awareness of cognitive limits that fosters, instead of impeding, the pursuit of knowledge and the accomplishment of philosophical endeavors. While complicating the minimal existing literature on the topic, this article highlights Nietzsche's philosophically unique use of the sublime in navigating a characteristically post-Kantian epistemic issue (the awareness of epistemic partiality and inadequacy) and in mitigating an illusory faith in reason.

Keywords: sublime, knowledge, limits, errors, *Dawn*

The aim of this article is to examine an undertheorized aspect of Nietzsche's middle writings: *D*'s subtle but powerful reformulation of the sublime. Although Nietzsche's engagement with the notion of the sublime has been variously scrutinized and interpreted, the secondary literature has tended to focus on Nietzsche's early writings, particularly *BT*.[1] This thematic emphasis has led to two outcomes: the middle writings have been generally dismissed, or considered relevant only insofar as they critique the account of the sublime extractable from *BT*; connectedly, scholars have tended to argue that Nietzsche rejects the sublime starting from the middle period of his work.[2] In opposition to this prevailing view, I show in this article that Nietzsche offers, in *D*, a positive rather than just a critical restatement of the notion of the sublime: he employs the vernacular of the sublime to deal with issues concerning cognitive limitedness and epistemic partiality.

JOURNAL OF NIETZSCHE STUDIES, Vol. 55, No. 2, 2024
Copyright © 2024 The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
https://doi.org/10.5325/jnietstud.55.2.0184

[134.139.201.38] Project MUSE (2025-09-09 22:47 GMT) Cal State Univ @ Long Beach

Notably, Keith Ansell-Pearson has elaborated a thorough account of the reworked attitude toward the sublime Nietzsche assumes in *D*.[3] Ansell-Pearson's analysis perfectly highlights the significance of the alternative relation to nature *D* portrays vis-à-vis Nietzsche's call for experimenting with knowledge; it contextualizes, additionally, *D*'s remarks on the sublime within the broader polemic against Christianity the book carries out. While I welcome this engagement and endorse some of its insights, I argue below that the key philosophical issue at stake in Nietzsche's renegotiated sublime is different from the one Ansell-Pearson attends to. *D*'s sublime, I contend, foregrounds a confrontation with epistemic finitude. To be more precise, by engaging with the conceptual apparatus of the sublime, Nietzsche promotes an acceptance of epistemic and cognitive limits, which aligns with and contributes to the critique of morality *D* focuses on.

This argument comprises three principal interventions. First, I establish that Nietzsche fleshes out, in *D*, a new approach to the sublime compatible with his critiques of traditional deployments of this concept. In particular, I argue that Nietzsche's restatement of the sublime moves away from "romantic" and pessimist approaches, though it still incorporates and engages originally with motifs typically associated with the sublime: an overwhelming sense of finitude and a view of cognitive limitations reminiscent of Kant's mathematical sublime. Second, I shed light on the centrality of epistemic problems within Nietzsche's discussions of the sublime and the middle works more broadly. Third, I suggest that Nietzsche's deployment of an imagery associated with the sublime functions as a strategic and rhetorical tool allowing his readers to grapple positively with their cognitive limits.

I start my analysis by expounding some established understandings of the notion of the sublime. I refer specifically to Burke's views, as paradigmatic of the traditional attitude toward the sublime—which I dub "romantic"[4]—and to Kant's delineation of the mathematical sublime. In the next section, I address the criticisms Nietzsche wages against the sublime, which can be read as targeting both views like Burke's and Nietzsche's own early attitude. The section that follows delves into Nietzsche's reflections on the sublime as presented in *D* Book V and contextualizes these reflections within Nietzsche's philosophical evolution during his middle period. In particular, I focus here on Nietzsche's discussions of epistemic errors and on the relation between these errors and cognitive limits, underscoring their centrality within *D*'s exploration of the sublime.

In the final section, I establish that Nietzsche's analysis of cognitive limits both offers a particular interpretation of the sublime and employs the terminology associated with this concept for strategic purposes. Specifically, while complicating both Ansell-Pearson's and Christine Battersby's interpretations of *D* and a "middle sublime," I show that Nietzsche's account of these limits evokes important aspects of Kant's mathematical sublime and some features of the romantic sublime without being reducible to either.[5] I advance, additionally, that *D* fleshes out a philosophically unique, and potentially transformative, approach to a characteristically post-Kantian epistemic problem, precisely by engaging with the concept of the sublime.

Benchmarks: Burke and Kant

Burke's and Kant's respective investigations of the sublime hold significant sway in modern European thought. Because of their dissimilarity, they also provide benchmarks to elucidate Nietzsche's evolving position on this concept. Burke's romantic account offers some parallels with Nietzsche's, but it primarily serves as a framework to better situate Nietzsche's criticisms. Kant's mathematical sublime, more than his account of the "dynamical sublime," exhibits clearer continuities with the re-elaboration of the sublime I attribute to Nietzsche; consequently, it allows us to reflect on the philosophical status of the latter. Overall, by exploring Burke's and Kant's accounts, it becomes possible to contextualize Nietzsche's critiques (as I show in the next section) and his restatement of the sublime (which I address in the two sections that follow).

In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke advances that terror is "the ruling principle" of the sublime.[6] He defines terror as a passion that "has pain for its object,"[7] specifying that, by anticipating pain, death, or danger, terror causes physiological and mental effects akin to actual pain.[8] Terror and the sublime are not, however, synonymous for Burke: terror engages the sublime when it can also accommodate some delight—understood as a diminution of pain. Delight develops, in turn, "when we have an idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstances"[9]—that is, when a person is not directly facing a threat to her existence but is reminded of potential dangers. In this sense, delight is also distinct from pleasure, which Burke associates with

beauty, because it lacks the positivity of the latter or since it can be conceptualized, unlike pleasure, in terms of the absence of pain.

Burke further qualifies the pivotal notion of "delightful horror," citing vastness, extreme minuteness, loudness, and a disordered multitude as some of its causes.[10] Here I will gloss over these concepts in order to draw attention to two ideas of greater relevance to the present study: astonishment and obscurity. Burke defines astonishment, which is induced by terror, as the strongest effect of the sublime, describing it as "that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror."[11] He advances, connectedly, that astonishment anticipates reason: it captivates the mind, directing its focus to a particular object and thereby deterring rational thoughts or consideration of other objects. Obscurity is qualified, conversely, in terms of a "terrible uncertainty" and contraposed to clearness[12]—the quality of a thing allowing one "to see an object distinctly, and to perceive its bounds."[13] For Burke, something is sublime when it causes an obscure idea, meaning that the sublimity of an object prevents us from forming a well-defined and complete understanding thereof. The idea that best conveys a sense of obscurity is infinity.[14]

Infinity also plays a pivotal role in Kant's account of the mathematical sublime. However, whereas Burke focuses on the relations between infinity, delight, and horror—connecting the former to the "promise" of something to come[15]—Kant underscores the logical implications of the ability to conceptually entertain the infinite. This is just one of the many dissimilarities between Kant and Burke.[16] Particularly noteworthy, in this respect, is Kant's argument that the sublime pertains not to (artistic or natural) objects, as it does for Burke, but rather to ideas of reason. Like beauty, according to Kant, the sublime thus concerns the subject's judgment, or a "*movement* of the mind," rather than the object cognized.[17] Yet, unlike the judgment of the beautiful, the judgment of the sublime is ultimately "called to mind" by an "inadequacy" of certain mental faculties.[18]

Kant systematically expounds the meaning and status of this inadequacy in his investigation of the mathematical sublime. First, Kant advances that the sublime is a judgment about absolute greatness or magnitude—something great "*beyond all comparison*."[19] He then argues that there are two ways to estimate magnitude: an aesthetic estimation, judging size through intuition and the imagination, and a mathematical one, proceeding logically through numbers. Since numbers refer to one another, mathematical estimation, according to Kant, needs to be connected to aesthetic estimation in order to convey a

practical grasp of size. Put differently, aesthetic estimation provides, through intuitive grasp, "a first or fundamental measure" to which numbers are to be connected.[20] Aesthetic estimation, however, has its limits. There is a greatest possible measure we can represent sensuously or imagine: a "greatest fundamental measure for the estimation of magnitude."[21] This means that there are magnitudes that cannot be represented but can be cognized mathematically—most significantly infinity, which is reducible to a unity through a numerical or mathematical idea, but which cannot be represented sensuously.

For Kant, "the *mere ability even to think* the given infinite without contradiction, is something that requires the presence in the human mind of a faculty" that exceeds sensibility and the imagination.[22] The mismatch between the faculty that estimates size mathematically (reason, in Kant) and the one that estimates aesthetically accounts, therefore, for the aforementioned inadequacy. Experiencing "the inadequacy of even the greatest effort of our imagination in the estimation of the magnitude of an object" corresponds, in turn, to encountering the sublime: this experience conveys both a profound discomfort and delight, as it testifies to the presence of our cognitive powers outstripping the senses.[23]

Kant's account of the mathematical sublime fosters, ultimately, an appreciation of our power of reason. As he writes, "the subject's very incapacity betrays the consciousness of an unlimited capacity of the same subject."[24] This framework foregrounds, nevertheless, a certain deficiency of the thinking subject, insofar as the "immeasurableness of nature" is said to highlight "our own limitations."[25] It is starting from the centrality that inadequacy assumes in Kant's account that a comparison with Nietzsche's restatement of the sublime can be drawn. I address these similarities, after I examine Nietzsche's own account below. To prepare for this, I reconstruct Nietzsche's critique of the sublime in the next section.

Nietzsche's Critiques of the Sublime

Because the parts of Nietzsche's middle writings clearly concerned with the sublime are critical in character, it is unsurprising that his positive reengagements with this notion have been overlooked. Still, examining Nietzsche's admonishments is not necessarily distracting. Rather, these critiques can function as a reference point, indicating the conception of the sublime from which Nietzsche will seek to deviate.

[134.139.201.38] Project MUSE (2025-09-09 22:47 GMT) Cal State Univ @ Long Beach

Paradigmatically, Nietzsche offers a condemnatory assessment of the sublime in Zarathustra's discourse "Of the Sublime Men." The sublime man is here described as "ugly" and "gloomy," while the sunlight where "he has never yet lain" (*Z* II: "Sublime")[26] comes to refer to beauty and joyfulness. Nietzsche's Zarathustra thus adopts the binary of sublimity and beauty that both Burke and Kant foreground. However, he is ultimately skeptical about the philosophical status of the sublime. As Ansell-Pearson puts it, "Nietzsche is directing his thinking on the need to conquer the gloomy sublime with the gracious beautiful at himself and as a task which needs to inspire his own philosophical practice."[27]

Nietzsche's precise diagnosis of the philosophical status of the sublime and his self-criticism both gain clarity in light of the attitudes Zarathustra associates with the sublime. While he describes beauty in terms of a calm "descending," Zarathustra aligns the sublime with a "gushing passion," a violent disposition, and the desire for "ugly truths" (*Z* II: "Sublime"). On the one hand, this aversion to violence and over-effusiveness echoes Nietzsche's renegotiation of his own philosophical practice and position during his middle period—his growth, as Richard Schacht writes, into a "sober and analytical, colder and wiser thinker."[28] On the other hand, Zarathustra's remarks on "ugly truths" serve as a direct challenge to traditional conceptions of the sublime. Zarathustra juxtaposes, indeed, sublime truths to a contemplative and restful immersion into "the visible" (*Z* II: "Sublime"), which he associates with beauty. He thus summons the Burkean link between the sublime and the absence of clearness. Moreover, by insisting on the darkness and shadows (*Schatten*) of the sublime, Zarathustra links this lack of clarity to obscurity. It is this link that elucidates Nietzsche's negative evaluation of the sublime, particularly in the context of philosophy. The sublime, in this picture, engages an idea of truth unconducive to philosophical aims—one where truth remains undefinable (obscure) and unapproachable (ugly and unpolished).

The preface to the second edition of *GS* sketches out a similar view. Here, Nietzsche explicitly targets the "uproar and tumult of the senses" (*GS* P:4) typically associated with sublimity. Accordingly, he directs his criticism toward the pursuit of overwhelming pleasures and the search for what he terms "the elevated, inflated and exaggerated" (*GS* P:4), to which he contraposes an aesthetic that is delicate and transient. Following Christine Battersby, I contend that Nietzsche's remarks here anticipate Zarathustra's discourse in that Nietzsche "is criticizing his own younger self, as well as

[. . .] earlier accounts of the sublime"[29]—ultimately calling to attention a change in the positions he held in *BT*. Central to this is a critique not identical but continuous with Zarathustra's, targeting the connection between the sublime and a certain approach to "truth": the naïve desire for, and belief in, truths beyond veils.[30]

For Battersby, *BT* does not align the sublime with the Dionysian. Rather, it "locates the sublime in terms of the masking, breaking in, healing or transfiguring of the Dionysian."[31] Nevertheless, Battersby's analysis of the preface to *GS* is rooted in the idea that Nietzsche had previously failed to distance his understanding of the sublime fully from a Dionysiac (and Schopenhauerian) desire to destroy "the veil of maya" (*BT* 2). The external philosophical target of Nietzsche's critiques in *GS* thus becomes more ambiguous. Following Battersby's analysis, *GS* attacks an aesthetic connected to the notions of naked truths and intoxicated reality—traceable in Schopenhauer, Schiller, and Schelling[32]—rather than the tranquility tinged with terror Burke speaks about. There are points, however, where Nietzsche's vernacular recalls Burke's account of terror and foregrounds, therefore, a continuity between the latter and the views Battersby targets.[33]

Specifically, Nietzsche's mention of an uproar of the senses evokes Burke's depiction of terror as "a tension, contraction, or violent emotion of the nerves."[34] To this, we can add a more general consideration: Burke explores the relationship between the sublime, music, and sound, suggesting that sound has the capacity to "overpower the soul, to suspend its action, and to fill it with terror."[35] This assertion not only resonates with Nietzsche's early characterization of the Dionysiac, attacked in this preface, as a drive best manifested through music. It also aligns with the idea that Dionysian knowledge "kills action" (*BT* 7)—an earlier position Nietzsche directly condemns in *GS* for its inaccuracy.[36] It is true that Nietzsche already criticizes, in *BT*, the unintelligibility and sense of mystery Burke connects to the sublime by favoring an idea of pre-individuation, as Battersby contends;[37] precisely for this reason, however, Burke's view serves as a connecting bridge between Nietzsche's early and middle-period stances, highlighting some threads of continuity rather than a complete rupture.

Thus, insofar as Burke's account of the sublime involves some tranquility and the mediation of horror, it partially escapes Nietzsche's critiques in *Z* and *GS*. However, given its proximity to aspects of the Dionysian and the sublime that Nietzsche targets in *both* works, and to

views of the sublime from which Nietzsche would have always distanced himself, it also offers a paradigm that facilitates appreciating Nietzsche's middle-period position. As evinced by the passages here analyzed, Nietzsche assumes in this period a more moderate and cool-minded attitude toward philosophy. He denounces, accordingly, the strong emotions (addressed in *GS*) and the obscurity (understood both as gloominess and unintelligibility in *Z*) Burke associates with the aesthetic of the sublime. As Battersby contends, Nietzsche does problematize the allure of peering beyond the veil that Schopenhauer emphasizes. The critiques of the sublime in *GS* and *Z* find, nevertheless, continuity in implicitly contesting views like Burke's—especially his emphasis on experiences that overpower body and soul (kill action) and foreclose rational thoughts.

Interestingly, Battersby does highlight some similarities between Nietzsche's attitude toward the sublime in *GM* and Kant's account,[38] though she also specifies that Nietzsche foregrounds an encounter with a "real otherness" instead of a self-centered negotiation of cognitive capacities.[39] Still, she ignores the specific contributions that Nietzsche's middle writings afford to a view whereby the sublime "disarms conceptual understanding."[40] Specifically, in analyzing *D*, Battersby focuses on the idea that this book "still praises those 'losses that communicate to the soul a sublimity.'"[41] Although *D* ends on an "interrogative note" concerning the infinite,[42] it is not until *GS* and *Z*, she argues, that this infinite is reconceptualized. What Battersby misses, I suggest below, is Nietzsche's discussion of errors and cognitive limitations. These discussions present a significant restatement of the sublime and are continuous with the critiques Nietzsche levels against a romantic attitude in *GS* and *Z*.

Silence, Errors, and the Suspension of Reason

Nietzsche's stated project in *D* is not to investigate the sublime but to critique morality. Still, the term *erhaben* (sublime) appears here, in its different conjugations, more frequently than in any other of his published works (twenty-three times, to be precise). Some of the aphorisms where sublimity assumes a more central position—as a motif—echo the reproaching attitude displayed in *Z* and *GS*. For instance, in Book One of *D*, Nietzsche briefly examines the role the sublime plays within Christianity, exploring

its connections to the belief in an "imaginary world" (*D* 33), to intoxication and escapism, and to the desire for "a deeper world of truth" (*D* 32). In Book Two, he accuses the tale of two kingdoms (the earthly and the heavenly) of being nothing more than a "sublime diversion" (*D* 130). That *D* is not entirely dismissive of the sublime, qua byproduct of Christianity and a more long-standing yearning for "deeper truths," becomes clear, however, in Book Three. Here, Nietzsche contrasts the Hellenic approach to the sublime with the non-Hellenic—the first deploying "*small proportions*," the second taking "pleasure in great quantity" (*D* 169)—and suggests that the sublime has no single meaning. On the basis of this suggestion, he then assigns a positive function to *erhaben* in Book Five.

Book Five distances the sublime from intoxication and exaltation, associating it instead with more tranquil imagery: a repose "in the sun and the kindness of grace" (*D* 449), and a "deep and warm illumination" (*D* 461). Moreover, as Book Five deals extensively with the passion and pleasure of knowledge, their potential destructiveness but also their capacity to "elevate" humanity and create "*sublime ruins*" (*D* 435), Nietzsche unsurprisingly links the sublime to reflections on cognitive and epistemic capacities. *D* 423, the opening aphorism of the final book, best testifies to this shift in focus. Addressing the sea, a natural object traditionally associated with the sublime, the narrator of Nietzsche's aphorism states, "You teach the human being to *cease* being human! Ought he to sacrifice himself to you? Ought he to become as you are now, pale, shimmering, mute, prodigious, reposing above oneself? Sublimely [erhaben] above oneself?" (*D* 423). At first glance, this final invocation of the sublime could be interpreted as a mere lyrical choice. An attentive analysis of the aphorism, in the context of *D* and Nietzsche's middle writings more broadly, suggests however that more is at play in Nietzsche's employment of the term *erhaben*. My aim in this part of the article is to carry out this preliminary analysis, and thus lay the groundwork for an examination of the sublime in *D*, by delving into Nietzsche's reflections on epistemic errors and transcendental cognitive limits.[43]

D 423 is a good place to start. This passage describes an encounter with nature where silence, to which the title of the aphorism also refers,[44] assumes a central position. The narrator is far from the noise of the city, of which he is reminded for a moment by the sounds of church bells. The sea, the sky, and the rocks lying in front of him are mute, and this muteness is described as "beautiful and terrifying" (*D* 423). Throughout the aphorism, the narrator's attitude toward silence undergoes a series of shifts. He

[134.139.201.38] Project MUSE (2025-09-09 22:47 GMT) Cal State Univ @ Long Beach

first conveys contempt, explains feeling taunted by silence, and expresses compassion on account of nature's incapacity to speak. In the final part of the aphorism, he eventually realizes that he has lost the power of speech. Nietzsche associates a feeling of scorn and mockery toward others with this muteness and mentions disdain for both speech and thought. The unanswered questions spotlighted above, the brief reference to a sublime repose, end the aphorism.

Nietzsche's remark about a terrible beauty and his description of amazement, ridicule, and disdain offer further grounds for interpreting this aphorism through the conceptual apparatus of the sublime. It is, however, a seemingly unconnected claim that enables us to appreciate the philosophical focus of this aphorism, its import vis-à-vis epistemic issues, and its potential claim on the sublime. Nietzsche writes, "I come to hate speech, even thought: don't I hear behind every word the laughter of error, wishful thinking, delusion?" (*D* 423).

In addressing this passage, Ansell-Pearson highlights primarily that the human is, for Nietzsche, "an erring animal and dwells in the space of error."[45] By reading it in conjunction with *D* 424 and 425—aphorisms concerned with the moral underpinning of certain illusions—he also draws attention to Nietzsche's commitment to *overcoming* errors through experimentation and new experiences: because the errors Nietzsche addresses are of a religious nature and thus acquired and inessential illusions, the argument goes, they are also conquerable.[46] The potential to overcome errors, established on the basis of their connection with religious and moral worldviews, is central to Ansell-Pearson's interpretation. Insofar as Nietzsche is concerned with overcoming religious illusions, and since the sublime traditionally echoes religious sentiments, a restatement of the sublime, following this reading, must translate into the renegotiation of religious inheritances. As Ansell-Pearson writes, "In the book Nietzsche's concern is with a transitional humanity that is moving from a heritage of religions and moralities to something new, in fact, to uncharted conditions of existence. He is keen to militate against the sublime of dread and terror and to configure the sublime in a more modest and even humbling manner."[47]

Now, this interpretation is both convincing and exegetically attentive. Nevertheless, it risks missing potential nuances in Nietzsche's reference to "speech, even thought" (*D* 423), whose errors might exceed and be more chronic than the ones targeted by Ansell-Pearson. A concern with errors

arising from transcendental cognitive limits—with errors that cannot, therefore, be overcome—is indeed both textually plausible and argumentatively relevant. Ansell-Pearson's focus might still seem more strongly supported in Nietzsche's writings compared to the preoccupation with transcendental limits that I am attributing to Nietzsche. Besides the passages of *D* Ansell-Pearson cites, *GS*—the first work Nietzsche published after *D*—is clearly concerned, especially in its third book, with illusions that *can* and *should* be corrected. *GS* 110 speaks, for example, of primitive, prevalent, but ultimately surmountable epistemic errors preventing the integration of truth into the realm of knowledge. Following this aphorism, truth remains difficult because, for a long time, "the intellect produced nothing but errors" (*GS* 110), meaning that epistemic errors have been pervasive. However, truth's difficulty also indicates its accessibility, which is to say that these early errors are as surmountable as the challenges they have created.

Nietzsche follows a similar argumentative trajectory in *GS* 111 and 112, where he analyzes "errors" he considers foundational to logic: the reduction of similarity to equality, the belief in the immutability of things, and the idea of cause and effect. By highlighting the historical function of these precepts and theses (their contribution to individual and collective survival) and by simultaneously probing their foundations (thus attempting to challenge them), these two aphorisms underscore Nietzsche's concern with errors that can be surmounted. *GS* 115 is more ambiguous, seeming to suggest that the development of an erroneous self-perception follows the establishment of an individual sense of being. The disposition whereby one thinks too highly of oneself appears, in this sense, both constitutive and constitutional. Still, given that Nietzsche's primary objective in *GS* is to dissect Christian morality to aid its dismantling, there are grounds to interpret this "self-ennobling" as something to be transcended or conquered.

Just as *GS* supports Ansell-Pearson's interpretation, however, other middle texts can be used to corroborate mine. *HH*—the book that chronologically precedes *D*—in particular, offers some textual support for the suggestion that Nietzsche might be concerned with errors connected to transcendental limits, in addition to, and not in exclusion of, those analyzed by Ansell-Pearson. For instance, *HH* 31 advances the idea that the illogical "is a necessity for mankind" and mentions an "*illogical original relationship to all things*," thereby foregrounding the constitutional nature of illogical reasoning. In *HH* 32, Nietzsche targets judgments concerning the value of

life, arguing that any attribution of value is "false." He says, specifically, that any judgment is "the outcome of false knowledge, and is so with absolute necessity" because "all evaluations are premature and are bound to be" (*HH* 32). By describing judgments as necessarily premature, Nietzsche grounds falsity in an inherent problem or limitation of one's evaluative capacity. He is careful to highlight, at the same time, that it is impossible "to *live* without evaluating" (*HH* 32), suggesting, therefore, that inaccuracy is inescapable. It is true that this first part of *HH* ends with a call for a new temperament that is "firm, mild and at bottom cheerful" (*HH* 34), and thus for a shift that is philosophical, epistemic, and existential. As I will explain later in this article, this stance does not necessarily conflict, however, with an emphasis on errors associated with transcendental and insurmountable limitations.

A concern with this kind of errors clearly continues to manifest itself in *D*. This is particularly evident in *D* 483. In this aphorism, a first speaker ("A") laments the limitedness of his capacity to know and the fact that human knowledge and perception are inherently partial. A second interlocutor ("B") interprets this lamentation as an attack *by* reason itself and suggests that soon this attack will be over: "A" will "be right back in the midst of knowing again and so also in the midst of unreason" (*D* 483). In reading this passage, Ansell-Pearson focuses on the idea that, for Nietzsche, "there are good reasons for taking pleasure or delight in our continuing human-ness" and concludes that Nietzsche is redirecting the search for knowledge inwardly.[48] Only in a footnote does Ansell-Pearson concede that this aphorism draws "our attention to the limits of representation and the fact that we know largely a *human* world,"[49] but he does not qualify these limits in any way. My suggestion is that it is on their basis that Nietzsche's more holistic view of epistemic errors can be brought to light.

In this aphorism, Nietzsche does not outline these limits with precision but only highlights the partial knowledge humans are bound to. Yet, he identifies this type of knowledge with "unreason," thereby establishing a connection between misguided reason, partial knowledge, and the aforementioned limits. Put differently, in homing in on the inadequacy of human vision, *D* 483 suggests that the limits inherent in our capacity to represent are at the basis of both the "impossibility of knowledge" (*D* 483) and a certain unreason.[50] This entails that cognitive or representational limits subtend two different types of errors. The first type mirrors the false knowledge and premature evaluations Nietzsche speaks about in *HH* 32 and concerns a

partiality of knowledge directly linked to the limits of cognitive capacities. The second type of error can be understood in terms of the self-ennobling mentioned in *GS* 115 and is therefore of a second-order nature. Here, the lack of awareness of our cognitive limits permits an ennobling, and yet illusory, self-understanding.

Now, challenging the second-order error is one of the objectives *D* responds to, as emphasized by the preface to the book. Besides clarifying that *D*'s goal is to critique and campaign against morality, Nietzsche suggests here that "faith in reason" is ultimately "a *moral* phenomenon" (*D* P:4). As he would later explain in *TI* and *GM*, this faith is tied to both a "*morality of amelioration*" (*TI* "Socrates" 11)—the imperative toward self-perfecting—and an ascetic ideal, which are simultaneously Christian and Socratic. Critiquing the idea that human reason has no limits, in the sense that it already perfectly cognizes the world or that it is perfectible and indeed progressing toward perfection, thus challenges moral and Christian assumptions concerning the value of, and moral duty toward, knowledge and reason.[51] In this respect, a critique of rationality and of our belief in unconditional epistemic objectivity directly contributes to *D*'s broader project. This implies that Ansell-Pearson's emphasis on the overcoming of moral illusion is sound.

Having said that, *D* 483 also underscores the relevance of errors connected to cognitive limits to both *D*'s general project and the passages I have been analyzing. This aphorism provides a basis for associating the errors of thought and speech mentioned in *D* 423 with first-order errors, and thus with an inherent deficiency pertaining to cognitive faculties. It is indeed significant that in neither aphorism are certain errors either undone or corrected. While "A" will be back in the midst of unreason in *D* 483, Nietzsche resigns himself to silence in *D* 423. This suggests that the errors of speech and thought are not surpassed but simply suspended. Although Nietzsche mentions that nature teaches "the human being to *cease* being human" (*D* 423), it is hardly evident that this lesson can be embraced, or that the narrator learns to fully overcome his compromised humanity. It is indeed a question, rather than an affirmation, that ends this aphorism. Nietzsche asks whether the human being should become like nature—mute and sublimely above oneself—and thus ultimately inhuman.

In this context, Ansell-Pearson's interpretation of this passage, wherein Nietzsche is foregrounding "a new sublime of human self-conquest and overcoming,"[52] is not misplaced. Yet, because he does not bring into focus

[134.139.201.38] Project MUSE (2025-09-09 22:47 GMT) Cal State Univ @ Long Beach

Nietzsche's discussion of transcendental limits, Ansell-Pearson overlooks the interrogative tone and some nuances of this aphorism—the idea that, like "A" in *D* 483, who is bound to return to "the *pleasure* of being human," the narrator of *D* 423 will have to face the sounds of the city again. Neglecting this aspect of Nietzsche's engagement with the sublime leads to a view that takes his references to the overcoming of humanity and an elevated repose at face value. Accordingly, this approach risks validating the desire to feel "*sublimely exalted* above reality" (*D* 32), a desire Nietzsche links to morality and Ansell-Pearson connects to forces that, in his own interpretation, should be overcome.[53]

Complicating our reading in this manner, however, raises different questions. First, what conclusion ought we to draw here, and why invoke the sublime? Second, how can we reconcile the emphasis on insurmountable errors with the task of correcting moral illusions? My suggestion, which I will explore in the next section, is that references to the sublime help Nietzsche critique and challenge the faith in reason and the second-order error mentioned above. More precisely, *by* linking the acknowledgment of cognitive limits to the sublime, or to a sense of finitude that is overwhelming as well as delightful, *D* articulates an approach to sublimity conducive to both a critique of morality and the pursuit of knowledge.

As we shall see, this suggestion continues to foreground some aspects of Ansell-Pearson's interpretation (for instance, a form of self-conquest) but engages a significantly different understanding of intellectual advance. The work carried out in this part of the article and in the next will have offered some textual evidence for this position. If the reader remains unconvinced by the exegetical justification of my claims, however, I will be content with demonstrating that (1) Nietzsche's work gestures toward a restatement of the sublime whose focus is different from the one articulated by other scholars, even if only indirectly or unintentionally, and that (2) this restatement holds philosophical value and significance.

The Sublime and the Renegotiation of Limits

In addressing the shifts in Nietzsche's intellectual trajectory, Battersby argues that "it is the language of the '*sublim*'—not that of the '*erhaben*'—that Nietzsche will ultimately deploy to reconfigure" the sublime in his later writings.[54] According to Battersby, *erhaben* signifies loftiness and elevation,

and retains religious undertones,[55] whereas *sublim* carries "the connotations of purification (chemical and alchemical) and spiritualization."[56] It is linked, as Matthew Harris also suggests, to "a physiological conception of health."[57] Since Nietzsche's employment of the term *sublim* shifts the focus toward an "inner conflict" or "a self in conflict with itself," which recalls Kant's "analysis of the sublime as involving a conflict of the faculties," it foregrounds, for Battersby, both the risk of individual disintegration and the possibility of a purifying self-conquest.[58] This is particularly evident, Battersby argues, in Nietzsche's discussion of a "sublime [sublimer] wickedness" (*GM* II:24) in *GM*, though one begins to find traces of this change in the "sublime [sublimer] inclination and urge" (*BGE* 284) articulated in *BGE*.[59]

Battersby's analysis of Nietzsche's late sublime is broadly in line, at least in a structural sense, with the account I intend to extrapolate from *D*, barring her emphasis on forces external to the subject, which, in her reading, distance Nietzsche's late works from the Kantian sublime. Nevertheless, her remarks could also problematize an argument for a renegotiation of the sublime in *D* on two fronts. First, the prevalence of the term *erhaben* in *D* might suggest continued engagement with earlier ideas. Variations of the term *sublim* indeed appear only three times. In two instances, they do not carry any clear philosophical weight: Nietzsche addresses hedonists as "sublime [sublimen] cannibals" (*D* 402) and speculates about a "rare and sublimated [sublimirter]" vanity (*D* 558). One instance supports Battersby's characterization of *sublim*. *D* 202 mentions a "sublimation [Sublimirung]" of a drive that brings to mind the notion of health. If considered in conjunction with the near absence of the term in the book, this aphorism seems to corroborate, therefore, the idea that while *D* does allude to another approach to the sublime, this work is ultimately concerned with its more traditional characterization.

It is worth noting that Ansell-Pearson offers a convincing rebuttal of Battersby's linguistic analysis, explaining that *erhaben* continues to appear in Nietzsche's later writings, whereas *sublim* is employed at various points in the middle works.[60] If Battersby's engagement with Nietzschean terminology contains some flaws, however, her broader analysis still highlights a second potential challenge. Above all, Battersby's view of Nietzsche's late sublime places emphasis on the notion of self-conquest and the capacity to overcome the struggle typically associated with the sublime. For Battersby, Nietzsche, accordingly, attempts to distance his account from that

Dionysian conflict capable of killing action and the individual disintegration and "drive towards death" that he sees as a societal disease requiring a cure.[61] Battersby's interpretation thus poses a challenge inasmuch as it might underscore that the account I am extracting from *D* cannot be as easily distanced from this disease: since the type of inner conflict I have tentatively associated with the sublime—the acknowledgment of a limitation—is potentially paralyzing, my interpretation of *D* risks playing up the experiences Nietzsche will later criticize.

To be clear, the problem is not that the view of the sublime I address might differ from the one Battersby targets. As I explain in the concluding section, it is perfectly plausible that *D* articulates a fully self-contained account. More to the point, if *D* truly homes in on a paralyzing experience, it might seem that the approach to the sublime it describes either echoes Nietzsche's early writings or only elaborates on the stage of inner conflict preceding the purification Battersby links to Nietzsche's late sublime. In any case, the approach to the sublime found in *D* would, at best, be immature when considered within the context of Nietzsche's intellectual development, and thus lack originality. At worst, it would contradict his stated and pronounced opposition to pessimism and result, accordingly, in an incongruous interpretation.

In this section, I respond to these worries by bringing precision to my reading of the sublime in *D*, with the intent of emphasizing both its rejection of pessimism and its innovative aspects. Instead of tackling problems concerning pessimism and originality directly, however, I begin by juxtaposing the acknowledgment of cognitive and epistemic limits spotlighted in the previous section with Burke's and Kant's ideas. Having established through this comparative analysis that *Dawn* does articulate an account of the sublime, I will be in the position to offer a more holistic response to the concerns raised here.

Generally, the imagery Nietzsche employs does invite some comparison with Burke. This is not only on account of the focus on the sea in different aphorisms. Throughout his mentions of the sublime, Nietzsche also clearly conveys a sense of astonishment. Two less formalistic aspects of the discussions we find in *D* establish, however, a fundamental divergence from Burke. On the one hand, it is clear that the experiences described in *D* 423 and 483 do not call forth feelings that anticipate "our reasonings" or rob "the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning."[62] On the contrary, the source of terror and discomfort lies within reason, as the claim "*reason* is attacking

you" (*D* 483) indicates. On the other hand, the emphasis placed on the subject and, indeed, reason suggests that Nietzsche, unlike Burke, is concerned with the human mind more than with natural or artistic objects. It is significant, in this respect, that Nietzsche describes the muteness of nature, rather than nature itself, as "beautiful and terrifying" (*D* 423). If silence interrupts thought and speech, the interplay between beauty and terror seems to arise precisely from a confrontation with reason, its limits, and its other. Thus, while Nietzsche speculates on a suspension of reason, he brings into focus a reflexive process concerning reason itself rather than the anticipation of reason Burke foregrounds. Because of this, he also avoids summoning the gushing passion and violent disposition critiqued in *GS* and *Z*, which, as I argued earlier, arise in opposition to and in anticipation of sober reflection.

The position Nietzsche assigns to reason is, therefore, particularly relevant because it indicates a departure from both Burke's framework and some of Nietzsche's early ideas, potentially underscoring the originality of the type of sublimity invoked in these passages. Yet, these divergences might also signal that Nietzsche is not targeting the sublime at all. My defense against this claim—my rationale for connecting Nietzsche's arguments concerning cognitive limits to the sublime—is twofold. First, the conception of limitedness extracted from *D* aligns with Kant's examination of the mathematical sublime. Second, it is precisely the use of an imagery associated with the sublime that enables *D* to reconcile the recognition of limitedness with the furthering philosophical exploration. Nietzsche's proximity to Kant might appear obvious. As explained above, Kant explicitly associates the sublime with a "disposition of the mind" and with the acknowledgment of inadequacy.[63] He goes as far as to claim that, in the sublime, we find "our own limitation."[64] Although *D* is clearly unconcerned with estimations of size, Nietzsche's discussion can thus be interpreted in terms of the mathematical sublime in the sense that it signals a quasi-Kantian appreciation of cognitive inadequacy.

It is important to note, however, that Kant can coherently refer to the sublime on account of his articulation of delight, which allows him to foreground the tension through which the sublime is typically conceptualized. Specifically, Kant brings into view the interplay between fear and delight, suitably associating it with the sublime, by conjoining the acknowledgment of an inadequacy to the delightful recognition of "an unlimited capacity of the same subject."[65] This conjoining hinges, in turn, on Kant's compartmental account of cognitive faculties, wherein recognizing the limitedness of

[134.139.201.38] Project MUSE (2025-09-09 22:47 GMT) Cal State Univ @ Long Beach

one faculty enables us to appreciate the power of another. A less superficial analysis of Kant's framework raises, accordingly, a potential interpretative issue: there is, in Nietzsche, no explicit acknowledgment of different mental faculties, which means that we might struggle to incorporate delight and, subsequently, the tension characterizing the sublime. In the absence of an articulation of delight, we might end up articulating, to put it in Battersby's words, "a symptom of a disease,"[66] rather than a sublime cure or purification.

It is clear that addressing this concern has to entail either ascribing to Nietzsche a compartmental account of mental faculties or articulating a form of delight not identical to but compatible with Kant's. I explore the second option as it is both more straightforward and exegetically plausible. If we can demonstrate that acknowledging limitations is conducive to philosophy and the search for knowledge (as the trajectory of Book Five might suggest), it becomes possible to articulate a form of delight compatible with the one Kant foregrounds. Generally, there are philosophical reasons for viewing this conditional as satisfied: recognizing cognitive boundaries can be argued to facilitate a new relation to reason and knowledge. Such recognition can be said, therefore, to foster an ambiguous delight arising from the ability to address one's inadequacy and to render it transformative.

D offers further grounds for supporting this interpretation. In *D* 459, Nietzsche highlights, for instance, the importance of modesty and magnanimity, linking these to the recognition that one does not possess knowledge yet and to a sense of "sublime mockery" (*D* 459). In *D* 551, he suggests that pursuing knowledge involves relinquishing fearful attitudes and embracing "excessive magnanimity": by giving up on "dignity and solemnity," sentiments *GS* will associate with errors, we can begin to think more courageously (*D* 551). Both aphorisms thus link positivity, even delight, to the process through which errors are brought into focus. This effort elevates and lends the courage to approach oneself and the world anew. The specific nature of this intellectual transformation, and its link not only to errors but also to transcendental limits, becomes clearer when considered in light of Nietzsche's broader philosophical aims, namely the attempt to foster a shift in thinkers.

The transformative endeavor of Nietzsche's middle writings and *D* in particular is widely accepted and explained with particular clarity by Gianni Vattimo. Vattimo contends that the goal of Nietzsche's "philosophy of the morning" is "to prompt men to adopt a different outlook, one that is not based on particular philosophical propositions but rather on parting

company with attitudes inherited from the past."[67] He advances, additionally, that the attitude Nietzsche foregrounds is connected to an awareness of "those errors which have constituted human culture and which have lent the human world richness and depth."[68] For Vattimo, Nietzsche is, however, not interested in philosophically "refuting errors" and illusions.[69] Instead, he claims that a historical self-awareness, which corresponds to an awareness of the errors that have characterized humanity,[70] can be liberatory on account of enabling "a good temperament."[71] That is to say, we can consider the contemplation of errors transformative when it affects one's comportment and allows a shift in one's understanding and philosophical praxis. For this reason, Vattimo insists on Nietzsche's idea of feeling the history of humanity, which, again, is a history of errors, "as *one's own history*" or simply as one's own.[72]

Vattimo's interpretation holds, therefore, that the adoption of a new outlook needs not to be connected to positive philosophical theses and offers reasons for identifying a transformative potential in the awareness of errors. Vattimo does not tie errors to transcendental limits, nor does he invoke the notion of limits at any point. Yet, his framework legitimizes the idea that acknowledging cognitive limitations could foster a transformation in thinkers and philosophers. Recall that, in the previous section, I outlined two types of errors connected to cognitive limits: the partiality error and the self-ennobling error. While the partiality error remains inherently unchangeable as it pertains to the nature of cognitive limits, the self-ennobling error can be effectively mitigated by acknowledging these limitations. As a second-order error rooted in the ignorance of these limits, we can undo it by bringing these limits into view.

The recognition of transcendental limits can therefore be transformative because it allows us to correct or renegotiate the second-order error (the self-ennobling view resulting from an ignorance of limits) by making us aware of the insuperability of first-order errors (the ones directly connected to transcendental limits). Here, errors are not refuted, and limits are not surpassed in a process that would make us inhuman. Rather, the awareness of limits enables the individual both to feel the history of human errors as one's own—and thereby appreciate one's inadequacy—and to mitigate some of them. The acquisition of the new outlook Vattimo mentions translates, accordingly, into the possibility of living in abstraction from the blind faith in reason inherited from the past, from that elevation Battersby associates with Nietzsche's early sublime and that Nietzsche regards as a moral phenomenon to be challenged and critiqued.

The possibility of abandoning this second-order illusion in turn leaves space for delight and provides a basis for interpreting Nietzsche's discussions in *D* as a rearticulation of the sublime. In a manner similar but not identical to the Kantian subject, the thinkers populating *D* can find delight in the realization that they have overcome one of the errors marking humanity, and that they have liberated themselves from moral assumptions.

Connecting the sublime to the transformative objectives Vattimo identifies in Nietzsche's philosophy of the morning, however, raises a question concerning the function and conditions of success of these very discussions: Namely, can Nietzsche's reflections on this "transformative" awareness truly facilitate an epistemic shift in the thinker? My contention is that they can, and they do, precisely because the sublime also plays a methodological role in these discussions. Vattimo's claim that the adoption of a new attitude does not hinge on refuting errors or offering philosophical theses aligns with the passages I have been analyzing. Nietzsche does not present a direct argument about errors here. Instead, he includes mentions of errors while describing encounters with nature that are reminiscent of the sublime. In this context, references to the sublime take on a strategic role.

On their own, abstract philosophical arguments concerning epistemic capacities guarantee neither that thinkers will genuinely appreciate their own limits nor that they can find delight in this finitude. Conversely, depicting the recognition of limits and errors as a sublime encounter, prompting the reader to sense the terror and delight it brings, stands a better chance of integrating this recognition into one's life. The same delight that arises from a transformation is thus alluded to in order to enact this transformation. It is, in a sense, tactically anticipated. A reading attributing such a strategy to Nietzsche is, importantly, compatible with a certain interpretation of Nietzsche's general philosophical methodology. Christopher Janaway argues, for example, that Nietzsche contraposes, to the contemplative and ascetic truth-seeking he analyzes in *GM* III, a "model of interpretation through the affects, a model in which intellectual insight increases through multiplying affects as far as possible."[73] While Janaway proceeds to analyze the connection between this model and the capacity to appreciate a plurality of perspectives, he also spotlights the function of Nietzsche's rhetoric, contending that Nietzsche "urges 'philosophers' to practice a form of enquiry that engages as many personal feelings as possible."[74]

In this light, Nietzsche's engagement with the sublime in *D* can be doubly characterized. It is descriptive in that it offers an account of an attitude, and it is methodological insofar as it attempts to foster the adoption of

said attitude. In both of its facets, the sublime gains specificity via an articulation of delight. Descriptively, delight aligns with one's ability to bear the burden of cognitive inadequacy without succumbing to it. It arises from an acknowledgment of higher powers—the capacity to move beyond and survive in the absence of an illusory self-elevation. Methodologically, the idea of delight, like references to terror, functions as a strategy for urging the reader not to ignore cognitive limits. This sense of delight accounts for the ambiguity typically associated with the sublime. The twofold characterization of Nietzsche's endeavor enables us to identify, moreover, the sublime with both an attribute of a specific philosophical outlook (marked by a non-paralyzing appreciation of limits) and a literary technique.

It might seem that a problem of circularity emerges here: the transformative potential that, under the descriptive reading, renders the awareness of limits sublime can be justified only when this awareness is already assumed to be (potentially) transformative, as the strategic reading holds. Put differently, the descriptive account holds that the awareness of cognitive limits is sublime because transformative and hence delightful. Yet, according to the strategic reading, this awareness can be transformative because it is tied to the sublime. Note, however, that the methodological strategy (the function references to the sublime play) and the content of the account of the sublime we obtain as a result do not contradict each other. Nietzsche's usage of the conceptual apparatus of the sublime is compatible with—and can indeed be employed to justify—the account of the sublime I am extracting from *D*. It is perfectly reasonable, therefore, to accept a certain account of the sublime while simultaneously being subject to its methodological rhetoric, especially since the potential success of the methodological approach would validate the substantive aspect.

This picture placates the worries I extracted from Battersby, who is concerned with the idea that *D* might speak of the sublime in a manner that reproduces the early Dionysian or the drive "towards nihilism, nirvana and a 'Buddhist' renunciation of life" Nietzsche criticizes.[75] The sublime, in my interpretation, is also a creative force, drastically opposed to a state of psychological paralysis and intellectual stagnation, even in problematizing a certain faith in reason. In this respect, the account of the sublime I have offered also lends credence to an interpretation emphasizing Nietzsche's concern with humanity's transcendence "of its former sense of its (supra-terrestrial) meaning and destiny," as Ansell-Pearson holds.[76] Yet, it highlights the fact that this transcendence is conditioned by an accurate awareness of one's epistemic and cognitive capacities more than by the

[134.139.201.38] Project MUSE (2025-09-09 22:47 GMT) Cal State Univ @ Long Beach

overcoming of other particular sentiments and views explicitly associated with religion.

According to Ansell-Pearson, *D* is concerned with foregrounding a new "comportment towards life" that results in cheerfulness and that is subtended by a newly acquired, distinctively modern capacity to renounce solemnity, reverence, and indeed certain mechanisms of self-ennobling.[77] This "transfiguration of existence"[78] is connected to the sublime for two main reasons: (1) this process demands leaving behind religious sentiments reflected in traditional appreciations of the sublime (the specific illusions mentioned in the previous section as well as a sense of religious intoxication); (2) the renunciations at its basis constitute a more self-aware and truthful conversion of the self-sacrifice associated with morality and sublimity.

By emphasizing the capacity to give up on an ennobling view of ourselves as thinkers, my interpretation of the Nietzschean sublime foregrounds a similar transfiguration. The defiance of self-ennobling constitutes indeed a sacrifice and a renunciation. It is, however, precisely a concern with transcendental limits that accounts, satisfactorily, for the abandonment of self-elevation. As indicated by one of Nietzsche's direct references to the sublime, "Sublimely above oneself [Über sich selber erhaben]" (*D* 423), which is posed in the form of a question, this journey risks indeed reproducing a more traditional sense of elevation. Only insofar as one acknowledges an intrinsic inadequacy, can this feeling of elevation be problematized. Yet, it is only by remaining skeptical of the possibility of transcending humanness—by accepting rather than attempting to surpass this inadequacy—that one's former sense of meaning can be corrected. As I have argued, it is the strategic references to the sublime Nietzsche deploys that facilitate both the awareness of a deficiency and the renegotiation of one's sense of elevation.

Conclusion

Zarathustra's critique of the sublime mentions the sea that the various speakers in *D* face and address. Zarathustra even describes the sublime man as standing there "silent," like the narrator of *D* 423. Insofar as these similarities could indicate that Zarathustra is also attacking the very thinkers depicted in *D*, it might appear that Nietzsche moves beyond a view of the sublime tied to epistemic concerns after completing this work. Thus, while the restatement of the sublime in *D* may not mirror a nihilistic drive, as

I argued in my final section, it is still plausible that Nietzsche could have abandoned or subjected it to further critique. The finitude of human reason could, after all, count as one of the "ugly truths" sublime men concern themselves with—counterproductively, according to Zarathustra—even conceding that it should not be confused with the truth beyond veils Nietzsche's early account of sublimity targets.

Fully addressing this worry would require establishing that Nietzsche's later works display a similar preoccupation with transcendental limits and that the latter continue to be addressed through the vernacular of the sublime. Lacking the space here to investigate this idea fully, I limit myself to highlighting why my interpretation of *D* remains philosophically rigorous and relevant, even if it ends up fleshing out a quite self-contained account. First, the suggestion that *D* articulates an account that is then rejected is not a reason for ignoring or even refuting this account. If there is a tension between *D* and *Z*, we might find in *D* some grounds for querying Zarathustra's claims—his juxtaposition of beauty to the sublime, for example, which *D* problematizes by synthesizing the attitudes Zarathustra associates with each notion (tranquility and the desire to confront ugly truths).[79]

Second, and connectedly, the restatement of the sublime I have attributed to Nietzsche, independently of the position it occupies within Nietzsche's oeuvre, merits attention in light of its uniqueness and philosophical implications. By resorting to an imagery typically associated with the sublime, Nietzsche offers an unusual response to a distinctively post-Kantian problem: namely, an acknowledgment of epistemic limits that could have, otherwise, been paralyzing or readily forgotten. Because Nietzsche describes an emotionally charged experience and qualifies the recognition of limits as sublime, his portrayal has the potential to resonate with readers, possibly influencing their perception of these limits. Third, I have offered an account that is compatible with the explicit critiques Nietzsche levels against the sublime. By pointing to limitedness, *D* evokes an element that is central to the traditional understanding of the sublime. It spotlights human and subjective finitude. Nevertheless, the center of attention lies here in reason and knowledge, meaning that the Nietzschean picture comes closer to the Kantian one and that it can accommodate the rejection of traditional, romantic views of the sublime.

There is still a certain distinctiveness pertaining to this framework, which does not allow it to be fully reduced to Kant's. Since this framework does not hinge on a compartmental account of the faculties, it outlines a sense of delight that is different from, but structurally compatible with,

the one Kant discusses. *D* highlights, in this context, that while transcendental limits cannot be overcome, a thinker can find some delight in the capacity to acknowledge them and to engage with philosophy through new eyes. An awareness of this kind can lead to a novel, and less illusory, self-perception. The particularity of this type of delight, which is further evinced by the strategic use Nietzsche makes of it, enables us to reconcile, therefore, an awareness of cognitive finitude and the search for knowledge—destabilizing in a productive way that faith in reason Nietzsche views as tainted with moral assumptions. This aspect of Nietzsche's reflections not only imparts unique nuances to his renewed engagement with the sublime but also fleshes out a distinctive and captivating approach to philosophical praxis.

The interpretation of the Nietzschean sublime I have offered has the advantage, therefore, of simultaneously reconciling this concept with Nietzsche's philosophical objectives and of articulating a framework whose scope exceeds exegetical studies of Nietzsche's oeuvre. Still, my study contributes to scholarship focused on Nietzsche's attitude toward the sublime by offering an original account of Nietzsche's view in the middle period. Against a general disregard for the middle writings, and Battersby's claim that the sublime is reconfigured only in "*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and other later texts,"[80] I have shown that *D* does not simply reject traditional endorsements of the sublime. It also elaborates a novel and positive view of sublimity and of its philosophical status. As I have mentioned, Ansell-Pearson's analysis similarly foregrounds Nietzsche's deployment of the sublime in *D*. I have demonstrated, however, that the philosophical potential of this re-elaboration comes to light, more decisively, if we read Nietzsche's engagement of the sublime through the lenses afforded by an analysis of transcendental limits and cognitive errors. This implies not that the preoccupation with moral and religious illusion is irrelevant to a study of the Nietzschean sublime, but that a different philosophical concern, compatible indeed with a critique of morality, is at stake in Nietzsche's analyses.

NOTES

1. See, for instance, Julian Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Bart Vandenabeele, "Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and the Aesthetically Sublime," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 37 (2003): 90–106; Jim Urpeth, "A 'Pessimism of Strength': Nietzsche and the Tragic Sublime," in

Nietzsche's Futures: Nobility, Laughter, Art, Nature and the Transhuman, ed. John Lippitt (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan London, 1998), 129–48.

2. As an example, see Daniel Rhodes, "Sublime Borders: Schiller's Will and Nietzsche's Will-to-Power," *Epoché* 8 (2017), https://epochemagazine.org/08/sublime-borders-schillers-will-and-nietzsches-will-to-power/.

3. Keith Ansell-Pearson, "Nietzsche, the Sublime, and the Sublimities of Philosophy: An Interpretation of *Dawn*," *Nietzsche-Studien* 39 (2010): 201–32.

4. I refer to Burke's sublime as "romantic" both in acknowledgment of Burke's influence on English Romanticism and to contrapose Burke's account to Kant's mathematical sublime.

5. Christine Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror, and Human Difference* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

6. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 54.

7. Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 122.

8. Burke explains, specifically, "The only difference between pain and terror, is, that things which cause pain operate on the mind, by the intervention of the body; whereas things that cause terror generally affect the bodily organs by the operation of the mind suggesting the danger; but both agreeing, either primarily, or secondarily, in producing a tension, contraction, or violent emotion of the nerves" (*Philosophical Enquiry*, 120).

9. Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 47.

10. Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 123.

11. Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 53.

12. Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 58.

13. Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 58.

14. Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 57.

15. Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 70.

16. There are also numerous, more significant differences between these two approaches to the sublime that an examination primarily concerned with Burke and Kant should analyze attentively. Since the focus of this article is Nietzsche's work, and I will not address Kant's analysis in its entirety, I highlight only some general points here.

17. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, ed. Nicholas Walker, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 78.

18. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 76.

19. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 78.

20. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 81–82.

21. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 82.

22. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 85.

23. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 85–86.

24. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 89.

[134.139.201.38] Project MUSE (2025-09-09 22:47 GMT) Cal State Univ @ Long Beach

25. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 91.

26. This article cites the following translations of Nietzsche's works: *Dawn: Thoughts on the Presumptions of Morality*, ed. Alan D. Schrift, Keith Ansell-Pearson, and Duncan Large, trans. Brittain Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974); *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1969); *Twilight of the Idols; or, How to Philosophise with a Hammer*, trans. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

27. Ansell-Pearson, "Nietzsche, the Sublime, and the Sublimities of Philosophy," 231.

28. Richard Schacht, "Introduction to *Human, All Too Human*," in Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, vii–xxii, xiv.

29. Battersby, *The Sublime*, 179.

30. Battersby, *The Sublime*, 120.

31. Although she does not mention Burke, Battersby's account of Nietzsche's "tragic" sublime, whereby the Apollonian counteracts the nausea produced by the Dionysian, clearly recalls Burke's insistence on the idea that the sublime is never noxious (Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 123).

32. See Battersby, *The Sublime*, 185.

33. Daniel Came offers an interesting analysis of the continuity between Nietzsche's view of the sublime in *BT* and Kant's dynamical sublime. This analysis does not, however, problematize my claims here since Came also foregrounds similarities between the dynamical sublime and Burke's account. For further details, see Daniel Came, "Nietzsche's Attempt at a Self-Criticism: Art and Morality in *The Birth of Tragedy*," *Nietzsche-Studien* 33 (2004): 37–67.

34. Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 120.

35. Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 75.

36. Later in *GS*, Nietzsche distances the Dionysian from passivity, which he connects instead to romanticism or to a romantic pessimism (*GS* 370). As Joshua Foa Dienstag suggests, the Dionysian is here reformulated: "the combination of the Dionysian and pessimism" is taken to "stimulate activity rather than passivity"—the killing of action associated with Dionysius in *BT* ("Nietzsche's Dionysian Pessimism," *American Political Science Review* 95 [2001]: 923–37, 928).

37. See Battersby, *The Sublime*, 172.

38. Battersby, *The Sublime*, 189; see also 183.

39. Battersby, *The Sublime*, 189.

40. Battersby, *The Sublime*, 189.

41. Battersby, *The Sublime*, 180.

42. Battersby, *The Sublime*, 180.

43. Given the comparison with the mathematical sublime that will follow, one quick clarification is in order: in speaking of errors of reason and limitations, I do

not follow the Kantian differentiation between reason, understanding, and sensibility, but seek only to indicate that certain limits and errors concern the human mind and cognitive capacities.

44. "*In the great silence* [*Im grossen Schweigen*]" (*D* 423).

45. Ansell-Pearson, "Nietzsche, the Sublime, and the Sublimities of Philosophy," 217.

46. Ansell-Pearson, "Nietzsche, the Sublime, and the Sublimities of Philosophy," 218.

47. Ansell-Pearson, "Nietzsche, the Sublime, and the Sublimities of Philosophy," 205.

48. Ansell-Pearson, "Nietzsche, the Sublime, and the Sublimities of Philosophy," 220.

49. Ansell-Pearson, "Nietzsche, the Sublime, and the Sublimities of Philosophy," 219.

50. Note that my interpretation of this passage is continuous with a traditional reading of Nietzsche's position on perspectival knowledge, at least as interpreted by R. Lanier Anderson, who writes, "because our affects and values are cognitively essential even while they are partial, the *enabling* conditions of cognition are the *limiting* conditions (and vice versa)" ("The Psychology of Perspectivism: A Question for Nietzsche Studies Now," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 49 [2018]: 221–28, 225).

51. It is true that, as Nietzsche concedes, *D* also attends to an ethical imperative, that it responds to a "thou shalt." However, its ethical imperative concerns precisely an abandonment of "anything at all 'unworthy of belief'" (*D* P:4). This imperative still therefore opposes Christian morality.

52. Ansell-Pearson, "Nietzsche, the Sublime, and the Sublimities of Philosophy," 208.

53. Ansell-Pearson, "Nietzsche, the Sublime, and the Sublimities of Philosophy," 210.

54. Battersby, *The Sublime*, 162.

55. Battersby, *The Sublime*, 172.

56. Battersby, *The Sublime*, 162.

57. Matthew Harris, review of *The Sublime, Terror, and Human Difference* by Christine Battersby, *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 37 (2009): 103–5, 103.

58. Battersby, *The Sublime*, 183.

59. Battersby, *The Sublime*, 183.

60. Ansell-Pearson, "Nietzsche, the Sublime, and the Sublimities of Philosophy," 202 n. 3.

61. Battersby, *The Sublime*, 183.

62. Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 53.

63. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 86.

64. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 91.

65. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 89.

66. Battersby, *The Sublime*, 183.

67. Gianni Vattimo, *Nietzsche: An Introduction*, trans. Nicholas Martin (London: Athlone Press, 2002), 83.

68. Vattimo, *Nietzsche*, 82.

69. Vattimo, *Nietzsche*, 81.

70. Vattimo, *Nietzsche*, 81.

71. Vattimo, *Nietzsche*, 82.

72. Vattimo, *Nietzsche*, 80. Vattimo refers specifically to *GS* 337 and the task of bearing the history of mankind.

73. Christopher Janaway, "Beauty Is False, Truth Ugly: Nietzsche on Art and Life," in *Nietzsche on Art and Life*, ed. Daniel Came (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 39–56, 54.

74. Janaway, "Beauty Is False, Truth Ugly," 54.

75. Battersby, *The Sublime*, 183.

76. Ansell-Pearson, "Nietzsche, the Sublime, and the Sublimities of Philosophy," 208.

77. Ansell-Pearson, "Nietzsche, the Sublime, and the Sublimities of Philosophy," 225.

78. Ansell-Pearson, "Nietzsche, the Sublime, and the Sublimities of Philosophy," 225.

79. I lack the space to expand on this point here. It is worth considering, however, that shifts in a thinker's oeuvre do not necessarily imply improvement. Additionally, with a book such as *Z*, the identity of author and narrator—and thus the endorsement of the content on the part of the author—is not always beyond doubt.

80. Battersby, *The Sublime*, 176.