

ΦΑΙΔΙΜΟΣ ΕΚΤΩΡ

Studi in onore di Willy Cingano per il suo 70° compleanno

a cura di Enrico Emanuele Prodi e Stefano Vecchiato

# The Sublime in Motion: Longinus, Freud, and Embedded Metaphors

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**Abstract** This paper explores the relevance and the effect of the sublime in connection with Dionysian inspiration, Freud's concept of the uncanny, and the interpretation of metaphorical thinking developed in the field of cognitive psychology.

**Keywords** Sublime. Longinus. Dionysus. Freud. Metaphors.

**Summary** 1 The Sublime and Motion. – 2 Dionysiac Sublime. – 3 Motion(s) in the Text. – 4 Sublime Metaphors. – 5 The Sublime Embodied. – 6 The Uncanny Sublime. – 7 Stylistic Sublimity. – 8 Regressive Sublime?

An "Image" is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time [...] It is the presentation of such a "complex" instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.<sup>1</sup>

Ezra Pound

This paper is for Willy Cingano, his intelligence, his wit, his humanity, in grateful celebration of many years of nurturing friendship. I thank the Editors for their encouragement, and Luigi Battezzato, Massimo Fusillo and Guido Paduano for their valuable comments on an earlier draft.

**1** Pound 1913, 200-1.



Edizioni  
Ca' Foscari

**Antichistica 31 | Filologia e letteratura 4**

e-ISSN 2610-9344 | ISSN 2610-8828

ISBN [ebook] 978-88-6969-548-3 | ISBN [print] 978-88-6969-549-0

**Peer review | Open access**

Submitted 2021-05-17 | Accepted 2021-06-23 | Published 2021-12-16

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**DOI 10.30687/978-88-6969-548-3/036**

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## 1 The Sublime and Motion

The sublime is predicated on motion: *sublimis* originally describes the oblique movement from down below to high up of an object, or a person, who rises towards the sky, *in altitudinem elatum*.<sup>2</sup> This explanation would have appealed to the outstanding theorists of the Romantic sublime, Burke or Kant, who pay more explicit attention to its dynamic aspect.<sup>3</sup> It also represents an appropriate point of departure for this paper, where I propose to explore this dynamic dimension by discussing the relationship between sublimity and movement in the classical mastertext of sublimity, Longinus' *Peri hupsous*,<sup>4</sup> and then to suggest possible connections between his insights, psychoanalysis, and the study of embodied cognition.

## 2 Dionysiac Sublime

*Peri hupsous* establishes a clear connection between the sublime and Dionysiac-Bacchic inspiration. Defining the sublime as a form of 'distinction and excellence in expression' which can guarantee 'eminence... and immortality of renown' (1.3) to the writers who are able to attain it, Longinus quickly moves onto the effects that this stylistic strategy produces on the hearer or reader, as well as on the poet (1.4):<sup>5</sup>

For grandeur produces ecstasy (ἔκστασις) rather than persuasion in the hearer; and the combination of wonder and astonishment always proves superior to the merely persuasive and pleasant. This is because persuasion is on the whole something we can control, whereas amazement and wonder exert invincible power and force and get the better of every hearer.<sup>6</sup>

*Ekstasis* – and its cognate *enthousiasmos* – evoke Plato's theory of the poet as divinely inspired, partly follows, in a different perspective, Democritus' earlier intimations. We owe Plato's *Ion* (535a-b) the first

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<sup>2</sup> Festus 306, cf. Maltby 1991, 589. The adj. is a compound of *limus*<sup>2</sup> (also in the form *limis*), 'oblique, transverse', hence 'transverse from below upward', with *sub-* in its original meaning 'upward', which is clear in *sublimare*, 'to raise' (de Vaan 2008, 343). On movement and the sublime see Saint Girons [1993] 2003, 17-25.

<sup>3</sup> Kant discusses the category of the 'dynamic sublime' in the *Critique of Judgment* (Kant 2000, esp. 143-8).

<sup>4</sup> I will refer to Longinus as the author of this work.

<sup>5</sup> Longinus repeatedly stresses that reader and writer are conjoined in their experience of the sublime, and this is reflected in the frequent occurrence of compounds with *sun-*.

<sup>6</sup> Translation by Russell 1972, with occasional modifications.

explicit connection between inspiration and Bacchic ecstasy, specifically ‘wineless Bacchic ecstasy.’<sup>7</sup>

Longinus is doubtlessly aware of the Bacchic connotation of *ekstasis* and *enthousiasmos*, both terms which recur throughout his essay.<sup>8</sup> Within the same chapter he likens the effect of sublimity to that of a thunderbolt – ‘sublimity flashing forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a bolt of lightning’ (1.4) –, a traditional metaphor for the effect of Dionysiac inspiration on the audience, as confirmed by the specialised use of both the Greek συγκεραυνόω and the Latin *attonitus* to describe its impact.<sup>9</sup> Lightning is associated with Dionysos from the very beginning of his life, and with the poetry sung for him.<sup>10</sup> Longinus underlines the kinetic effects of the lightning, which scatters everything in its path, and is a suitable Dionysiac icon because of its intrinsically oxymoronic character: it promotes Bacchic frenzy, yet it also paralyses in a sort of hypnotic trance,<sup>11</sup> as befits a god who straddles categorical distinctions and makes opposites merge.<sup>12</sup> The experience provoked by the sublime, not unlike Bacchic trance, is too extreme to be considered simply ‘pleasurable’. Bacchic inspiration and the Longinian sublime find their common ground in the perturbing link between pleasure and terror, the very aspect of the sublime which will attract the attention of Burke and Kant (I will focus on this point shortly). As Kant argues, “the mien of the human being who finds himself in the full feeling of the sublime is serious, sometimes even rigid and astonished”.<sup>13</sup> Sublimity contains its own share of religious awe, the same feeling experienced by participants in Dionysiac rituals, removed as these are from traditional piety.

Experiencing the sublime is a *pathos*, but, as Longinus explains in chapter 8, the two do not necessarily coincide (as Caecilius assumed), because not all *pathe* can cause the peculiar combination of pleasure and awe which is at the heart of the experience of the sublime. There

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<sup>7</sup> Murray 1996, 115; cf. Murray 1981.

<sup>8</sup> For *ekplexis* cf. 15.1, 38.5; *enthousiasmos*: 8.4, 13.2, 15.1, 32.4. Cf. ἐμπνευσθεῖς ἐξαίφνης ὑπὸ θεοῦ καὶ οἶονεὶ φοιβόληπτος γενόμενος (16.1).

<sup>9</sup> Mendelsohn 1991-92.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. e.g. Archilocus (fr. 117.2 Tarditi), who describes himself as οἶνω συγκεραυνωθείς φρένας when he takes the lead in singing ‘a beautiful song in honour of Lord Dionysus.’

<sup>11</sup> According to Kant 2000, 128-9, 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”. Cf. Longinus’ notion of *agonia* below.

<sup>12</sup> Fusillo 2006 offers a fundamental discussion of Dionysus in this perspective; see esp. pp. 17-34 for the connection between Dionysiac logic and Matte Blanco’s symmetrical logic (cf. below).

<sup>13</sup> Kant 2012, 16. On the notion of the sublime in Kant and other nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors see Fusillo 2009, 24-9, and now esp. Fusillo, forthcoming.

exist mediocre *pathe* which do not attain sublimity, for instance pain, fear and lamentations, while, conversely, powerful images such the Homeric piling up of Pelion upon Ossa are sublime but not pathetic -an important qualification which paves the way to viewing grand cosmic themes as 'sublime'.<sup>14</sup> Only when genuine passions burst forth in all their Dionysiac energy does *to empathes* attain sublimity (8.4):

I should myself have no hesitation in saying that there is nothing so productive of grandeur as noble emotion in the right place. It inspires and possesses our words with a kind of madness and divine spirit (ὑπὸ μανίας τινὸς καὶ πνεύματος ἐνθουσιαστικῶς).

### 3 Motion(s) in the Text

The Dionysiac sublime invariably implies a sense of motion: when divine inspiration invades writers and audiences, hearers are transported to loftier heights. Bacchic rites produce a pervasive sense of movement, as the startled messenger describes in Euripides' *Bacchae* (726-727): πᾶν δὲ συνεβάκχεν ὄρος | καὶ θῆρες, οὐδὲν δ' ἀκίνητον δρόμῳ (and the whole mountain and its beasts were god-possessed as they were, and with their motion all things moved).<sup>15</sup> The enthused poet, as Horace famously describes in *Carm.* 2.19 and especially 3.25, can be as adventurous in his roamings through woods, rocks and caves as the Bacchantes who climb the rugged summit of Mount Cithaeron.<sup>16</sup> Cliffs and mountains share as important a place in the landscape of the sublime, especially in its post-classical incarnations, as they do in the usual setting of the Dionysiac experience not only because they imply isolation, but also because height and distance convey the smallness of human beings in the face of Nature at its mightiest. The sublimity inherent in great distances, as Longinus spells out in 9.5, or, as Kant adds, vast expanses of time,<sup>17</sup> threatens - or promises - a descent into the abyss of near-nothingness, thus challenging as much as the overpowering force of Dionysus does the integrity and meaningfulness of human boundaries. The result is the peculiar combination of *horror* and *divina voluptas* experienced, as Lucretius explains, when 'the walls of the world open out, I see ac-

<sup>14</sup> Russell 1964, xxxviii.

<sup>15</sup> Longinus 15.6 quotes πᾶν... θῆρες as an instance of bold *phantasia*.

<sup>16</sup> On 'Bacchic poetics' see Schiesaro 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Kant 2012, 18: "A long duration is sublime. If it is of time past, it is noble; if it is projected forth into an unforeseeable future, then there is something terrifying in it".

tion going on throughout the whole void'.<sup>18</sup> Precisely for these reasons height and distance can also be metaphorical, as in San Bonaventura's description of God as *altitudo terribilis*.<sup>19</sup>

Longinus, too, insists on the importance of motion, as his sharp analysis of Sappho 31 L.-P. in chapter 10 shows. Longinus has preliminarily listed the five 'most productive sources of sublimity' in literature (8.1).<sup>20</sup> The first two are 'for the most part natural': 'the power to conceive great thoughts (τὸ περί τὰς νοήσεις ἀδρεπήβολον)', of which he discusses several examples in chapter 9, and 'strong and inspired emotion'; the other three, however, 'involve art', namely 'certain kinds of figures' (both of thought and of speech), 'noble diction' and a 'dignified and elevated word-arrangement'. The discussion of Sappho's poem is preceded by the general statement that 'sublimity will be achieved if we consistently select the most important of these inherent features and learn to organise them as a unity by combining one with another. The first of these procedures attracts the reader by the selection of details, the second 'by the density of those selected' (τῆ πυκνώσει τῶν ἐκλελεγμένων προσάγεται) (10.1).

Sappho's eminence is then traced to 'the felicity with which she chooses and unites together the most striking and powerful features' (10.3):

Is it not wonderful how she summons at the same moment (ὑπὸ τὸ > αὐτὸ) - mind and body, hearing and tongue, eyes and skin, all as though they had wandered off apart from herself? She feels contradictory sensations (καθ' ὑπεναντιώσεις), freezes, burns, raves (ἀλογιστεῖ), reasons, so that she displays not a single emotion, but a whole congeries of emotions. Lovers show all such symptoms, but what gives supreme merit to her art is, as I said, the skill with which she takes up the most striking and combines them into a single whole (ἢ εἰς ταύτο συναίρεσις).<sup>21</sup>

There is a wealth of interesting details here, but I would like to focus first on Longinus' remark that Sappho attains sublimity by forcing together in both time (ὑπὸ τὸ > αὐτὸ) and space (εἰς ταύτο) all the contrasting emotions and symptoms she describes. This compression of sensations, and the rapidity with which it is carried out, gen-

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**18** *De rerum natura* 3.16-7, translation M.F. Smith. On the Lucretian sublime see Porter 2016, 445-54.

**19** Cf. Boitani 1989, 311.

**20** On the limited function of this catalogue see Russell 1981.

**21** I follow here the translation by Fyfe, Russell 1995, which brings out the chronological sense of ὑπὸ τὸ > αὐτὸ (Spengel's integration, followed by Russell and others, for the mss. ὑπ' αὐτὸ; Mazzucchi 1992 adopts the contracted form τ>αὐτὸ proposed by Toll), as does Russell 1964, 102 (Russell 1972 translates "she brings everything together").

erates amazement; a more leisurely list could not produce a similar effect, because it would not possess the energy to force together different and even contradictory concepts. Longinus' choice of example is of course significant – Sappho is in love, and love's irrational force (note ἀλογιστεῖ) requires no explanation – but 'sympathetic emotion' (τὸ συγκεκινημένον)<sup>22</sup> is an integral component of the sublime in general, for it is closely associated with *ekplexis*, which according to Longinus stands as the undoubted *telos* of poetry (15.2). A similar contrast, for instance, is drawn where Longinus discusses cases when 'the urgency of the moment gives the writer no chance to delay (διαμέλλειν), but forces on him an immediate change from one person to another' (27.2), i.e. forces him to take over abruptly from a character's speech. And already in the first chapter Longinus touches upon these 'technical' aspects of the sublime – a 'special effect'<sup>23</sup> rather than a style –, which, flashing 'at the right moment' (1.4 καίρῳ) like a thunderbolt, shows the 'whole power' of the author.

Chapter 20 offers further insights about 'order' and 'disorder'. Longinus deals here specifically with asyndeton, but formulates a general rule: 'monotony and a stationary effect (ἐν στάσει)' are associated 'with inertia, whereas disorder (ἐν ἀταξίᾳ) goes with emotion, which is a disturbance and movement of the mind (φορὰ ψυχῆς καὶ συγκίνησις ἐστίν)' (20.2). *Ataxia* is expressed through asyndeta, anaphora, 'vivid description' (διατυπώσει), or a relentless combination of the above, and as he deploys this strategy the orator behaves like an aggressor who 'deals blow upon blow on the minds of his judges' – here again the verb πλήττει echoes *ekplexis*. The opposite effect, as Longinus discusses in the following chapter 21, is attained by polysyndeton, because 'the urgent and harsh character of the emotion loses its sting and becomes a spent fire as soon as you level it down to smoothness by the conjunctions' (21.1).

Movement and motion are also the essence of another important ingredient of the sublime, hyperbaton, defined as κεινημήνη τάξις, 'an arrangement of words or thoughts which differs from the normal sequence... It is a very real mark of urgent emotion (ἐναγωνίου πάθους)' (22.1).<sup>24</sup> Longinus's analysis of hyperbaton, its logic, and its effects is particularly insightful. Hyperbaton forces the natural order of discourse by violently separating elements which would natural-

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**22** I adopt the *LSJ*'s translation rather than that of Russell 1972, because it foregrounds the importance of prefix. The verb is rare, and, of course, implies motion.

**23** Russell 1964, xxxvii, building on the important distinction between a sublime style and 'the sublime' developed by Boileau 1674: "Le style sublime veut toujours de grands mots; mais le Sublime se peut trouver dans *une seule pensée*, dans *une seule figure*, dans un seul *tour de paroles*" (*Préface*; emphasis mine): this paper is concerned precisely with these discrete 'special effects.'

**24** Lacuna in the text.

ly cohere, and inserting in their midst extraneous ones which therefore create a different pattern of association. This feature of hyperbaton is nothing less than ‘irrational’ (22.1 ἀλόγως), for thanks to it the author ‘diverted the order of thought’ (22.2 ἀπέστρεψε τάξιν) – note the role that motion plays once again in this context. Thucydides is singled out as a master of ‘ingenuity’ in the use of hyperbaton, ‘separating by transpositions even things which are by nature completely unified and indivisible’ (22.3).

The most important aspect of this section, which is unusually and, one suspects, intentionally complex, is to be found in the analysis of the psychological effects of hyperbaton upon the hearers. Demosthenes is the author held up as an example (22.3-4):

his transpositions produce not only a great sense of urgency but the appearance of extemporisation, as he drags his hearers with him into the hazards of his long hyperbata. He often holds in suspense the meaning which he set out to convey and, introducing one extraneous item after another in an alien and unusual place before getting to the main point, throws the hearer into a panic lest the sentence collapse altogether (ἐπὶ παντελεῖ τοῦ λόγου διαπτώσει), and forces him in his excitement to share the speaker’s peril (ὕπ’ ἀγωνίας), before, at long last and beyond all expectation, appositely paying off at the end the long due conclusion; the very audacity and of the hyperbata add to the astounding effect.

Hyperbaton can produce *phobos* because it threatens an unexpected suspension of the speech, which as it occurs is perceived as potentially final, and therefore as a means to deny the satisfactory attainment of the natural conclusion of the speech. Alongside *phobos*, hearers share in the speaker’s *agonia*, again a form of mental distress, a ‘vertiginous sense of peril’, which encapsulates *in vitro*, as it were, the emotion experienced at the contemplation of infinity.

Although he is dealing here with a very specific stylistic effect, Longinus’ reference to *phobos* establishes an important connection with modern theorisations of the sublime, where ‘terror’ looms large.<sup>25</sup> *Phobos*, Longinus explains, arises as speakers and hearers find themselves (figuratively) on the edge of a cliff, forced to stare in the abyss of the unsaid, or the unsayable. In a momentary pause of the narrative flow, in the *agonia* of suspended time and fearful expectation, they are denied the pleasure of intelligibility and of closure. Hyperbaton, especially as it rises to Demosthenic heights, produces within the context of a paragraph or chapter the same disconcerting, yet alluring, effect that narrative detours impose on the plot,

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<sup>25</sup> See esp. Burke 1990, and below.

thus delaying or even jeopardising the reader's expectation of narrative fulfilment.<sup>26</sup>

Longinus evokes the image of the abyss indirectly more than once thanks to his predilection for the otherwise rare adjective ἀπότομος,<sup>27</sup> which he uses both to indicate a curt and unexpected utterance, all the more effective because of its brevity (27.1), or, in the sense of Latin *praeceps*, a frightening downward movement. At 12.4 Demosthenes' greatness is located ἐν ὑψει... ἀποτόμῳ, a 'vertiginous *hupsos*', which expresses both the excitement of elevation and the danger of falling.

Vertiginous fear is an appropriate, if partial, description of Lucretius' own staring in the abyss in Book 1 of *de rerum natura*, where Epicurus' revelation that matter and space are infinite provokes a Kantian combination of *horror* and *divina voluptas*, or Horace's Bacchus-inspired *dulce periculum* (*Carm.* 3.25.18), the god's peculiar power to instil thrill and danger in equal measure. Therein resides the ultimately Dionysiac nature of Longinian sublime. Just like Dionysus, the sublime is 'a power and irresistible violence' (1.4) which 'reigns supreme over every hearer', and obliterates the difference between pleasure and pain<sup>28</sup> by making the two dependant on a sense of irresistible motion, the dynamic correlate -and consequence- of the attempt to embrace enormous heights and distances.

#### 4 Sublime Metaphors

In this reading of *Peri hupsous* I have privileged the mechanics and dynamics of the sublime in its effect upon hearers and readers, rather than the topics and images usually associated with the concept, many of which are already present in Longinus, while others are suggested or reiterated especially during the Romantic revival of the sublime: storms, volcanoes, tall and dark mountains, the desolation of deserts.<sup>29</sup>

Both the rapid movement between disparate concepts, the mechanism of condensation which Longinus calls παθῶν... σύνοδος (10.3), in connection again with Sappho's poem, and hyperbaton, produce a similar effect as they force together elements which would normally be kept separate from each other, and are in this respect arguably

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<sup>26</sup> I refer here to the theory developed by Brooks 1984.

<sup>27</sup> Cajani 1997, 107. The adjective recurs three times in Longinus (here and at 27.1, 39,4) and only four other times elsewhere.

<sup>28</sup> The complexities of this relationship have now been put on a new conceptual footing by Telò 2020.

<sup>29</sup> A comprehensive list in Porter 2016, 51-3.

comparable to the workings of metaphors. Longinus' remarks about hyperbaton are once again enlightening: this figure separates what belongs together as it 'introduc[es] one extraneous item after another in an alien and unusual place (ἀλλόφυλον καὶ ἀπεοικυῖαν τάξιν)' (22.4).<sup>30</sup> The same conceptual framework emerges from Longinus' remarks (10.6) on the Homeric use of the rare preposition ὑπέκ, a compound of ὑπό and ἐκ, in *Il.* 15.627-628 'and the hearts of the seamen are shaken with fear, as they are carried only a little way out of death's reach (τυτθὸν γὰρ ὑπέκ θανάτοιο φέρονται). This 'forced combination of naturally uncompoundable prepositions' (τὰς προθέσεις ἀσυνθέτους ὄυσας συναναγκάσας) is regarded as an act of violence, if not outright torture (συμβιασάμενος, ἐβασάνισε), yet it is this very process of extreme condensation which enables the poet to keep close to the emotions he depicts, and through it 'almost stamped the special character of the danger on the diction'.

Metaphors are a key ingredient of the Longinian sublime, and of *Peri hupsous* itself, a text which revels in the use of many daring ones.<sup>31</sup> Both Greek 'metaphor' and Latin *translatio* encode movement, and Longinus' analysis of the figure in the context of his critique of Plato's style in chapter 32 accordingly insists on motion. Metaphors 'conduce to sublimity' (32.6 ὑπελοποιὸν), and abound in passages 'involving emotion or description.' Here Longinus recalls Caecilius' admonition that metaphors should be used sparingly - ideally not more than two or three on the same topic (32.1) - but his position is actually different. The 'right' number of metaphors is simply a function of the strength of passions and degree of sublimity which the author is capable of attaining, as he explains, resorting once again to the language of enthusiasm (32.4):

strong and appropriate emotions and genuine sublimity are a specific palliative for multiplied or daring metaphors, because their nature is to sweep and drive all these other things along with the surging tide of their movement. Indeed it might be truer to say that they *demand* the hazardous. They never allow the hearer leisure to count the metaphors, because he too shares the speaker's enthusiasm.

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**30** Cf. 10.6 παρὰ φύσιν.

**31** Cf. esp. Von Staden 1999.

## 5 The Sublime Embodied

Longinus' insistence on movement as a key pleasurable component of the poetic sublime, attained by a number of techniques which privilege rapid, even disruptive, motion, invites comparison with recent theories about embodied emotion and its role in the perception of art.<sup>32</sup>

If all forms of our perception of narrative can be described, as has been suggested, as "liberated embodied simulation",<sup>33</sup> metaphors can claim a privileged status within this theoretical perspective: they can be regarded as compressed narratives which connect together different domains; while we can unpack them into their constituent components, we grasp them in their compressed form by exploiting the brain's ability to activate rapid exchanges of impulses between synapses – a mobility facilitated by the fact that metaphors tap into the associative mechanism of the primary system.<sup>34</sup> This movement is accompanied by sensation and emotion, as was instinctively clear to Longinus<sup>35</sup> well before neuroscientific studies would establish a relationship with measurable physiological processes.

Specifically, metaphors imply a complex interaction between the left and the right hemisphere of the brain, with the right side exploring a much wider range of possible meanings than those entertained by the left side. This 'exploration' is not, crucially, a metaphor itself, but is actually embodied in the physical, and measurable, activity of specific areas of the brain. Novel metaphors, as opposed to dead or trivialised ones, imply more work in the right part of the brain,<sup>36</sup> because more effort is needed in order to grasp their correct meaning (or indeed meanings).<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Cf. for instance Gallese, Di Dio 2012; on 'embodiment', Gallese, Lakoff 2005. A critical survey of the cognitive approach to metaphor in connection with literary analysis in Lyne 2011, 28-67.

<sup>33</sup> Gallese, Wojciechowski 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Freud 1915, 186, about one of the properties of the system 'Unconscious': "The cathetic intensities [in the *Ucs.*] are much more mobile. By the process of *displacement* one idea may surrender to another its whole quota of cathexis; by the process of *condensation* it may appropriate the whole cathexis of several other ideas. I have proposed to regard these two processes as distinguishing marks of the so-called *primary psychical process*" (emphases in the text).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Cic. *Orat.* 134 *ex omnique genere frequentissimae translationes erunt, quod eae propter similitudinem transferunt animos et referunt ac movent huc et illuc, qui motus cogitationis celeriter agitatus per se ipse delectat*. The passage is quoted by Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, 2663.

<sup>36</sup> Aziz-Zadeh, Damasio 2008, 38, with further bibliography; Lacey et al. 2012; De-sai et al. 2013.

<sup>37</sup> Holland 2009, 203. As Freud liked to point out, poets were the first to understand some fundamental truths. Cf. for instance Giacomo Leopardi's analysis of the main

## 6 The Uncanny Sublime

The pleasure-inducing effect of metaphors should not distract from acknowledging the other ineliminable component of the sublime experience, *horror*, or, in Romantic terms, terror and fright. Longinus has much to say on *phoberon*, but Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* locates the "source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" in "[w]hatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror..."<sup>38</sup>

Burke's is a very incisive, and very influential, formulation, which, in turn, runs the risk of underplaying the oxymoronic coexistence of pleasure and pain, or, more specifically, the fact that some frightening sensations are pleasure-inducing. This fact is essential to the notion of the sublime, and, according to Longinus, accounts for the best parts of the best literary texts. This is the kind of 'terror' which ancient texts frequently associate with the figure of Dionysus-Bacchus, a fear which we experience when we are pushed to the very limits of our imaginative capacity, where the enormity of the imaginative effort challenges the last vestiges of 'rationality' and invites abandon to Bacchic ecstasy, as, literally, an out-of-body and out-of-mind experience.

This combination of *voluptas atque horror*, which captures the shivering at the boundaries of rationality, is a perturbation which has been famously explored, in a different context, by Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay on the uncanny,<sup>39</sup> one of his most challenging texts, and of his stimulating engagements with literary issues.<sup>40</sup> Freud's *das Unheimliche* is a perturbing combination of strangeness and familiarity,

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strength of Horace's style, a poet who "tiene l'anima in continuo e vivissimo moto ed azione, col trasportarla a ogni tratto, e spesso bruscamente, da un pensiero, da un'immagine, da un'idea, da una cosa ad un'altra, e talora assai lontana, e diversissima: onde il pensiero ha da far molto a [2050] raggiungerle tutte, è sbalzato qua e là di continuo, prova quella sensazione di vigore [...] che si prova nel fare un rapido cammino, o nell'esser trasportato da veloci cavalli, o nel trovarsi in un'energica azione, ed in un punto di attività [...]; è sopraffatto dalla molteplicità, e dalla differenza delle cose, (vedi la mia teoria del piacere) ec. ec. ec." (*Zibaldone*, 2049-50, 4 November 1821). On this passage see Schiesaro 1986. It is worth noting that Leopardi's theories are indebted to seventeenth century sensism.

<sup>38</sup> Burke 1990, 36.

<sup>39</sup> Freud [1919], 81 distinguishes between the uncanny on the one hand and "the beautiful, sublime, attractive" on the other, but the list suggests that he is not using 'sublime' in any specific sense.

<sup>40</sup> Bloom 1982, 91-118 is the fundamental text on the relationship between the uncanny and the sublime; cf. also Ellison 2001, esp. 52-84. Kofman [1974] 1991, 119-62 discusses *Das Unheimliche* ("that work of Freud's which perhaps more than any other takes into account the specificity of literature", 63) as a key theoretical text of lit-

the resurfacing in life or literature of “removed desires or patterns of thought”<sup>41</sup> which are once again shown to hold true even long after they have been discarded.<sup>42</sup>

Freud offers a sampling of themes which he associates with the uncanny, especially the fear of castration and the *Doppelgänger*, but his more general reference to ‘discarded patterns of thought’ is more productive in the context of a dialogue between psychoanalysis and literary analysis. Freud’s main examples are related to what he defines “the omnipotence of thought”,<sup>43</sup> a form of animism according to which we can immediately and unfailingly obtain what we desire just by thinking it. This is a credence which is overcome both phylo- and ontogenetically, as primitive people evolve and children grow into adults.

Freud’s interpretation of the sublime as the resurfacing of patterns of thought otherwise overcome or discarded can fruitfully interact with the view of the Longinian sublime outlined so far. Once these ‘patterns of thought’ resurface with particular poignancy in certain literary texts, they provoke a complex set of conflicting emotions similar to the ones raised by the uncanny: recognition, estrangement, pleasure, fear, desire. What can these outdated ‘patterns of thought’ be, in the case of the sublime? And in what sense have they been otherwise discarded or overcome? Clearly, we must assume that these patterns are deep and relevant enough to provoke the strength of emotions connected with the sublime.

The answer I would like to propose was not available to Longinus in the same terms in which we are now able to formulate it, although thinkers such as Giambattista Vico<sup>44</sup> or Giacomo Leopardi intuited it long ago.<sup>45</sup> As already mentioned in passing, contemporary science confirms that metaphor likely stands as the original form of human thought. Our brain, according to the neural Darwinism championed by scholars such as Gerald Edelman, is first and foremost an associative brain, whose primary ability was, and remains, that of recognising patterns.<sup>46</sup> Logic develops later, but does not supplant, rather supplements the basic associative mechanism of metaphor. A brain-based epistemology is therefore prepared to recognise in associative, metaphorical patterns the first formulations of human thought, an intuition long shared by poets and artists, not to mention Freud

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erature and for the interpretation of literature, On the aesthetic dimension of the uncanny cf. Di Benedetto 2002. Masschelein 2011, 132-5 discusses recent developments.

**41** Freud 1919, 107.

**42** Freud 1919, 110.

**43** Freud 1919, 101; cf. esp. Freud 1912-13, 75-99.

**44** Cf. esp. *Scienza nuova prima*, book III, chapp. 28-35.

**45** See below.

**46** Edelman 2006, 58.

himself when he drew a distinction between the primary and the secondary system.

The approach to metaphorical thinking pioneered by cognitive psychologists such as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson,<sup>47</sup> comes to very similar conclusions via quite a different route, although their assessment of Freud's position is overall dismissive:<sup>48</sup> “[b]ut where Freud saw these as irrational modes of primary-process thinking, cognitive scientists have found that they are an indispensable part of ordinary rational thought, which is largely unconscious”. Yet this supposed contrast appears much too rigid once we take into account one of the most important contributions to post-Freudian psychoanalytic thinking, Ignacio Matte Blanco's *The Unconscious as Infinite Sets*, whose fundamental intuition is that what Freud calls “the unconscious” is a form of logic, not a set of repressed thoughts. A logic, or rather two, since the unconscious alternates freely between the usual patterns of Aristotelian asymmetrical logic, whose primary tenet is the principle of non-contradiction, and the unconscious logic based on generalisation, symmetry, and the absence of contradiction. As if closing a methodological loop, Matte Blanco acknowledges a measure of debt to earlier neurological studies, for instance those of Eilhard von Domarus, whose influential work on schizophrenia described what he calls “delirious syllogism”, and extreme form of symmetrical logic.<sup>49</sup> Also, although there is no evidence of contact between Matte Blanco and Gregory Bateson, it is in the same year, 1956, that, as the former published some of his early work on generalisation and symmetry, Bateson argued in his foundational article “Toward a theory of schizophrenia” that some mental and communicative disorders place on the same level classes which normal logic keeps at separate levels of abstraction.<sup>50</sup>

Recent neuroscientific work on the interaction between the left and right sides of the brain shows that the right hemisphere “seems to have a language system that actually uses, indeed may even be confined to, the spreading activations”, i.e. free associations, those typ-

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<sup>47</sup> The author of the influential *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*.

<sup>48</sup> Freud is virtually absent from the equally authoritative Gibbs 1994, while Edelman is ready to acknowledge the importance of his contribution. On the tensions between a psychoanalytic and cognitive approach to metaphor see Borbely 2012, 412-13. Some of Lakoff's more recent work, however, engages directly with Freud and his theories, see e.g. Lakoff 1993 and 1997, which advocates a *rapprochement* between cognitive science and ‘psychotherapy’ on the basis of a shared interest in the ‘cognitive unconscious,’ and translates the basic strategies of dream formation according to Freud – symbolisation, displacement, condensation and reversal- into their cognitive science equivalents: conceptual metaphor, conceptual metonymy, conceptual blending and irony.

<sup>49</sup> Von Domarus 1925; 1944. In a delirious syllogism, e.g. “all Indians are fast; all deers are fast; all Indians are deers”, the identity of the predicate ‘fast’ obliterates the difference between the two different subjects.

<sup>50</sup> Bateson et al. 1956. On these connections cf. Bodei 2000, xxv.

ical, for instance, of novel metaphors.<sup>51</sup> These associations, in an extreme, uninhibited form which defies categories and boundaries, also characterise schizophrenic language. Matte Blanco's most important contribution is the theory that these separate forms of logic coexist, and dialectically engage with each other. Art is the field where this interaction is most pronounced, where the domain of asymmetrical logic shrinks, and consequently leaves ample space to its opposite number. Developing a point which goes back in its essence to Freud himself, but which he places at the centre of his system, Matte Blanco further remarks that there exists a direct correlation between the intensity of emotion and the lowering of consciousness: the deeper we descend into the unconscious, the greater the space of bi-logic, the greater, and potentially infinite, the emotional level.<sup>52</sup>

The emotional impact of the sublime in all its unexpected and often compressed violence, can be defined, I suggest, as the consequence of 'special effects' - metaphor and other tropes - which are often the same we associate with Bacchic poetics, are heavily indebted to the symmetrical logic of the unconscious, and have been marginalised, overcome or tamed by (asymmetrical) logic.<sup>53</sup> They provoke 'emotion' (a more appropriate term than 'pleasure' not just in psychoanalytic terms but also in view of the explicitly complex nature of feelings such as *horror ac divina voluptas*), because they provide release from the strictures of Aristotelian logic, and afford a temporary, controlled return to primary patterns of thought which we have normally overcome in our personal or collective development, but which the potency of highly charged metaphoric expression, among other factors threatens -or indeed promises-, to make newly available to us.

In their extreme form, these strategies force us against the extreme boundaries of rationality, and force us to envisage the breakdown of the categorical classification which, once removed from the safe playing ground of literary imagination or preconscious experience, is the defining feature of the schizophrenic mind. Through the sublime, the overpowering phenomenon of the logical unconscious can be experienced in exciting but ultimately controlled form, as readers enjoy the exhilaration deriving from the transformation of the rules of asymmetrical logic.<sup>54</sup>

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**51** Holland 2009, 205, cf. 195-6.

**52** Matte Blanco 1975, 17: "The notion that the magnitudes of emotion are a function of the level of depth, which, in this respect, is understood not as stages of development but as the proportion between symmetrical and asymmetrical thinking [...] Put in simple terms, the more there is, in a given manifestation, of the deep unconscious, the greater will be the magnitude (in the mathematical sense of the word) of emotion: in the deep levels there will be an infinite value of the same magnitude".

**53** For a comparable approach to metaphor cf. Paduano 2013, 118-19.

**54** I agree with Halliwell's 2003 view of Longinus' sublime as a "modello cognitivo in cui il pensiero e l'emozione interagiscono strettamente" (67).

## 7 Stylistic Sublimity

While there is no space, in this paper, to explore in detail the features of Latin poetic diction which can be better understood, I would argue, in the light of this interpretation of the sublime, I would like to offer a few instances of how such an analysis would develop. A suitable starting point is Horace's description of dithyramb in *Carm.* 4.2.10-12: *seu per audacis noua dithyrambos | uerba deuoluit numerisque fertur | lege solutis*. Here *nova...* | *uerba* echoes *mente noua* of 3.25.3 (the 'Bacchic ode' *par excellence*),<sup>55</sup> and identifies neologisms together with metrical licence (*numeris...* | *lege solutis*) as the defining features of this poetic form. Greek dithyramb abounds in neologisms, especially in the form of 'unprecedented compound adjectives'<sup>56</sup> – we already mentioned the structural similarities between compound adjectives and metaphors. When their poetry turns to Bacchus and his actions, Roman poets between Catullus and Ovid share Horace's views, and break the boundaries of neoteric and Augustan restraint in the creation of neologisms. In Catullus' *cum thiaso Satyrorum et Nysigenis Silenis* (64.252), for instance, the adj. *Nysigenis* is probably a neologism, and *trietericus* appears for the first time in *Aeneid* 4.302 in connection with Bacchic rites. Another likely Virgilian innovation, *pampineus*, is always used by the poet in reference to the god or his rites.

Longinus himself offers a confirmation of this argument, for *Peri hupsous* abounds in neologisms and rare words, often culled from 'sublime' authors such as Pindar, Homer, the tragedians. More than half of the over two thousand words present in *Peri hupsous* are used once only there, as if to display in practice the theoretical assumption that words should constantly be adapted, if not 'tortured,' to conform to the specific feeling the author wants to express.<sup>57</sup> The point is reinforced by the presence of a large number of absolute *hapax*.<sup>58</sup>

Ovid offers numerous instances of the phenomenon, but none surpasses a short section of *Met.* 4 (lines 10-13) in its accumulation of metrical and linguistic extravagances, including a hypermetric line, two absolute *hapax* – *ignigena* and *indetonsus* –, the rare epithet *bi-mater*, the lengthening of *-que* in *telasque*:

telasque calathosque infectaque pensa reponunt  
turaque dant Bacchumque uocant Bromiumque Lyaeumque

<sup>55</sup> Cf. also *Carm.* 1.18.7-9; 1.27.

<sup>56</sup> Here and in the rest of this paragraph I follow Weber 2002, 327.

<sup>57</sup> An expressive strategy well captured by Boileau's epigrammatic dictum: "(Longinus) [s]ouvent il fait la figure qu'il enseigne; et, en parlant du Sublime, il est lui-même très sublime" (Boileau 1674, *Préface*).

<sup>58</sup> Cajani 1997, 117.

ignigenamque satumque iterum solumque bimatrem;  
additur his Nyseus indetonsusque Thyoneus  
et cum Lenaeo genialis consitor uuae

Ovid's stylistic tour de force is devoted to the exceptional features and overwhelming powers of Bacchus. Hypermetron is particularly effective as an icon for excess: indeed, virtually all the hypermetric lines we find in classical Latin poetry are connected with the notion of literal or figurative excess, with the breaking of boundaries, loss of control, and overcoming of human limitations which we also associate with Bacchic inspiration and Bacchic poetics:<sup>59</sup> hypermetra are a microcosmic icon of infinity, the ultimate sublime – and 'symmetrical' – concept.<sup>60</sup>

In this connection, Plutarch's comparison between dithyramb and paian is suggestive:<sup>61</sup>

They sing for the one god [i.e. Dionysus] dithyrambic songs full of passions and with a variety which exhibits irregularity and dislocation (μέλη παθῶν μεστὰ καὶ μεταβολῆς πλάνην τινὰ καὶ διαφόρησιν ἐχούσης) ... But to Apollo they sing the paian, an orderly and restrained form of music; and in their paintings they depict Apollo as ageless and youthful, Dionysus as multi-faceted and polymorphous (πολυειδῆ καὶ πολύμορφον).

Irregularity and dislocation recall some aspects of the sublime underlined by Longinus, but it is ultimately Dionysos' polymorphism which can help us grasp the strong emotions the sublime produces: it is neither a style nor a set of rhetorical prescriptions, but one of the ways in which literature, or indeed the best literature, allows us to negotiate intricate webs of emotions and the *cathexis* towards a dimension of indefiniteness and infinity. Sublime is, in other words, an enabler of *horror* which opens up the space of oceanic feelings as it challenges the very boundaries of the human, thus frightening and attracting in equal measure.

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**59** See e.g. Fortassier 1979; multiple enjambements produce a similar effect, cf. e.g. Hor. *Carm.* 3.25 (with Nisbet, Rudd 2004, 298), and 1.18.7-9.

**60** A similar effect is conveyed by the multiplication of enjambements. I intend to return to this and other issues in a separate discussion.

**61** *De E ap. Delph.* 389a-b. The contrast Plutarch posits, however, should not be assumed as absolute, but historically contingent.

## 8 Regressive Sublime?

As a final point, I would like to return to an issue briefly mentioned above, the fact that the progressive reduction of space for metaphorical (or indeed symmetrical) thinking can be observed not only in connection with each individual's intellectual development, but also in different historical phases: I will do so by reference to the comparison between Hebrew, Greek and Latin, that Giacomo Leopardi develops in 1821.

Leopardi analyses the main features of the three languages, and in so doing he offers a general theory about the creative potential of each. His focus is mainly on compounds and metaphors, which are seen as connected, but distinct means by which languages can develop their expressive potential in full. Of the two, he remarks, metaphors are the most archaic, and in a sense 'primitive' mechanism, for compounds, easy as they are to form once mastered, represent in their very simplicity a step further, a more economical and less unpredictable process. A case in point is Hebrew, the most ancient of all languages, whose greatness lies in metaphors, but not yet in the use of compounds:

Bensì naturalissimo e primitivo, e l'uno de' primi mezzi d'incremento che adoperò il linguaggio umano, è l'uso della metafora, o applicazione di una stessa parola a molte significazioni, cioè di cose in qualche modo somiglianti, o fra cui l'uomo trovasse qualche analogia più o meno vicina o lontana. E di metafore infatti abbonda il vocabolario ebraico, e gli altri orientali, cioè quasi ciascuna parola ha una selva di significati, e sovente [2007] disparatissimi e lontanissimi, fra' quali è ben difficile il discernere il senso proprio e primitivo della parola. Così portava la vivezza dell'immaginazione orientale, che ravvicinava cose lontanissime, e trovava rapporti astrusissimi, e vedeva somiglianze e analogie fra le cose più disparate.

The evolution of Latin is different:

Lasciando le radici, osserverò che la stessa immensa facoltà dei composti che si ammira, e rende più che altra cosa inesauribile la lingua greca, l'aveva ancora ne' suoi principii la lingua latina, e l'ebbe per lungo tempo, cioè per lo meno sino a Cicerone il quale principalmente [742] fissò, ordinò, stabilì, compose, formò e determinò la lingua latina. [...] E con queste considerazioni vedrete quanto la primitiva natura della lingua latina fosse disposta, a somiglianza della greca, alla onnipotenza di esprimere tutto facilmente, e tutto del suo ed a sue spese; alla pieghevolezza, trattabilità, duttilità ecc.

In this context, I am less interested in the actual historical trajectory Leopardi is sketching than in the Freudian masterplot it evokes. Here we have a language which is naturally fertile, inexhaustible, even omnipotent, enjoying, like a gifted, unfettered child, the ‘omnipotence of thought’, until called to order by a domineering father-figure, whose normative intervention, well meaning as it may be, brings to end this auroral creativity:

E così Cicerone fra gl’infiniti benefizi fatti alla sua [745] lingua, gli fece anche indirettamente per la troppa superiorità e misura della sua fama e merito, troppo soverchiante e primeggiante, questo danno di arrestarla, come arrivata già alla perfezione, e come in pericolo di degenerare se fosse passata oltre: e quindi togliergli l’ardire, la forza generativa, e produttrice, la fertilità, e inaridirla.

In Leopardi’s reconstruction, Cicero’s overbearing role and regulatory zeal brings to an end the specific brand of sublime he calls “ardire”, together with its “forza generativa, e produttrice, la fertilità”.<sup>62</sup> No such fate is visited upon the Greek language, since its perfection is a choral enterprise, not overwhelmingly linked to a single person’s eminence, and therefore less overbearing and frightening.<sup>63</sup>

Implicit in Leopardi’s argument is an invitation to regard ‘ardiri’ as a challenge to the repressive force embodied in Cicero’s narrowing down of the expressive potential of language. The relationship he posits between these different phases of linguistic evolution is the same one that articulates, in a Freudian perspective, the dialectics between asymmetric Aristotelian logic and the asymmetrical logic of the unconscious, which can also be metaphorically expressed as a contrast between ‘adult’ and ‘infantile’ modes of thought and expression. Hebrew and Greek have escaped the fate Cicero has imposed onto Latin, and, standing as an instance of a more natural, more primitive enjoyment of the expressive freedom of metaphors, they afford the distinctive pleasure of regression.

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. Schiesaro 1986.

<sup>63</sup> Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, 743.

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