

Sublime and Melancholy – Hermeneutics of the Sublime from Longinus to Gaston Bachelard

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Based on Kant's idea that the melancholic temper has an inclination towards the sublime, the purpose of this study is to explore concept of the sublime, as revealed in the history of aesthetics from a hermeneutic perspective. The sublime is a fundamental philosophical idea and, at the same time, an aesthetical concept. The first part of this paper is an excursion into the analytics of the sublime (in Longinus, Edmund Burke, Kant, Hartmann, and Bachelard), where the historical perspective is doubled by a comparative perspective. In the second part, I focus mainly on two works dating back to different periods and which are centred on the idea of the sublime: *Περὶ ὑψους* (*The Treaty about the Sublime*) by Pseudo-Longinus and *Air and Dreams* by Gaston Bachelard, which is considered to be the treaty about the sublime of the 20th century highlighting the common areas, which are the highness, the elevation, the greatness, the grandness and the differences with the purpose of enlarging, and not narrowing, the perspective.

We do not find the term as such in Homer's work, but it is Homer who makes reference for the first time to the noble speech. In the *Odyssey*, Telemachus is a *hiupsagores*. Dionysius of Halicarnassus uses the term *hiupselos* (high, sublime). For the Ancient Greeks, passion and grandeur are the characteristic elements of poetry, the concept of the *Sublime* being also involved in the Theory of the Three Styles. But Aristotle or the Peripateticians make no reference to the *Sublime*. (the term *μεγαλοπρεπες* is used). According to some researchers, the origin of the term could be traced back to some mystical currents of oriental tendency, influenced by Posidonius and other representatives of the Middle Stoicism.

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The first author who theorized the concept of the *Sublime* was Longinus in his treatise *On the Sublime* and in 1757, Edmund Burke, in his work *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, used Longinus' work as a source of inspiration. Burke handles the notion of the *Sublime* from an empirical and sensitive perspective seen as opposed to the notion of the *Beautiful*. In his view, the *Sublime* is based on pain, while the *Beautiful* is based on pleasure. The same holds true for Longinus's work, for Burke the basis of the *Sublime* is astonishment. The main sources of the *Sublime* are considered to be: the enchanting terror, the obscurity, the almighty power, the magnitude or greatness of dimensions, the infinity, the abundance:

Magnificence is likewise a source of the sublime. A great profusion of things, which are splendid or valuable in themselves, is magnificent. The starry heaven, though it occurs so very frequently to our view, never fails to excite an idea of grandeur. This cannot be owing to the stars themselves, separately considered. The number is certainly the cause. (Burke: 118)

The dramatic lighting is another source, since without a strong impression, nothing can be sublime; the sudden, as everything that is sudden and unexpected startles us in addition to obscurity. Resorting to the technique of dichotomy, Burke offers us a comparison of the *Sublime* with the *Beautiful*:

For sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small: beauty should be smooth and polished; the great, rugged and negligent; beauty should shun the right line, yet deviate from it insensibly; the great in many cases loves the right line, and when it deviates it often makes a strong deviation: beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy: beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, and even massive. (Burke: 172)

In Burke's doctrine, the concept of the *Sublime* is in harmony with the tendencies that announce the formation of a Romantic spirit, the Romantic aesthetics being aesthetics of the *Sublime*.

Following in Burke's steps, in his work *The critique of the Power of Judgement* of 1790, Kant maintains the opposition between the *Sublime* and the *Beautiful*, but the perspective is wider. Kant identifies, on the one hand, the mathematical *Sublime* and, on the other, the dynamic *Sublime* of nature. The mathematical one, of the magnitude, is "absolutely great". *Sublime* is something in relation to which everything else seems small. *Sublime* is that which, by the simple fact that we can think of it, proves the existence of a spiritual power that exceeds any measure of the senses. The dynamic *Sublime*, of the nature, is defined as follows: "*Nature, considered in an aesthetical judgement as might, that has no dominion, is dynamically sublime.*" (Kant a: 154-158) According to Kant's metaphysical conception, God is the absolute *sublime*; He is glimpsed as infinite and unreachable, through the entire partial *sublime* of nature and of spiritual life.

Aesthetician Nicolai Hartmann referred critically to the Kantian theory of the *Sublime*, considering it exaggerated and single-sided. In his *Aesthetics*, Hartmann distinguishes between the following species or peculiar forms of the *Sublime*:

1. The great and the mighty;
2. The grave, the solemn, what elevates above us;
3. The perfect, the outlined, the complete within itself;
4. That which is superior to us in strength and power – the sweeping along and the ravishing, the moral superiority, the grandeur, the generosity;
5. The huge, the monumental, the fearsome;
6. The moving and the deeply shocking;
7. The tragic.

Which is new about Hartmann's perspective? It consists of the following aspects: integration of the sublime with what is immanent, detachment of the sublime from the quantitative, detachment of the sublime from the oppressive, elimination of its foundation in an element of disvalue,

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also of displeasure, clear correspondence, suitability between the superiority of the object and silent nostalgia of the human heart for something great and superior (Hartmann: 411-416). The same as in Hartmann's case, from Longinus' perspective, the human being is attracted to what is great and superior.

In Pseudo-Longinus' view, the notion of the *Sublime* is based on the conception of an art which focuses on the pathos, the ecstasy, the imagination...etc. The *Sublime* overwhelms the souls; it is a product of character and not of technique. *Sublime* is the (most) excellent expression that has made great authors stand out. In chapters 6 and 7, there are emphasized the characteristics of the *Sublime* (the acquaintance with the *Sublime* by means of the experience). The *Sublime* is not limited to the appearance of mastery. What is really sublime is only that thing which is intriguing to the mind, which leaves in the soul memories that cannot be removed. *Sublime* is that thing which gives pleasure always and to everyone.

Chapter 8 discusses the sources of the *Sublime*, which are five:

a) The fortunate boldness of concepts (the power to form concepts that make an impression, a natural inclination to conceive great and noble ideas); the *Sublime* is an echo of the greatness of thought, as a gift of nature that needs to be fostered. One of the ways in which authors can reach the Sublime is by means of imitation and emulation of the great writers and poets, in other words, by trying to relive inside your soul the condition of the spiritual life which has generated the greatest literary works. For Pseudo-Longinus, to imitate is synonymous with being inspired by the same divine touch that inspired the model.

b) The strong and enthusiastic passion; *Pathos-Παθος* is the necessary spiritual condition in the absence of which it is not possible to create; a deep emotion that activates imagination. On the other side, feelings such as compassion, fear and pain generate a *Pathos* which lacks greatness, because the *Sublime* and the *Pathos* are not coextensive concepts.

The other sources are related to the *ars*:

c) The figures (of thought and speech); they are not artifices and techniques, they are an important part of the *Sublime* when they are arranged accordingly; they must be put in the context where they appear natural.

d) The noble diction; the noble words move and captivate. *Delectus verborum* is an important concern, since beautiful (noble) words are the light of our thoughts; they make greatness, simplicity and gravity flourish.

e) The dignified word arrangement (word order, rhythm, euphony). As an example we could refer to Sappho, the author of a lyrical poetry which lacks grandeur and greatness, but which could reach the *Sublime* by an artful combination of words.

In Chapters 9 and 12, Pseudo-Longinus makes a distinction between the *Sublime* and the *Amplification* (the *Accumulation*) which are not coextensive, because the *Sublime* means elevation while *Amplification* means a conglomeration, a gathering of elements which do not lead to the *Sublime*, which (the *Sublime*) can eventually consist even of a single word. Demosthenes (who reaches the *Sublime*, giving the impression of standing on a steep height) is compared to Cicero, whose richness of words illustrates the technique of the *Amplification*.

Chapter 35 sheds light the following idea: the human being is made by nature so as to admire everything that is great. The human being should not be considered a humble being, as s/he is bewildered by the divine lights and not by those we humans are lighting. Only the unexpected and the extraordinary dazzle the human beings.

This besides many other things, that Nature has appointed us men to be no base or ignoble animals ; but when she ushers us into life and into the vast universe as into some great assembly, to be as it were spectators of the mighty whole and the keenest aspirants for honour,

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forthwith she implants in our souls the unconquerable love of whatever is elevated and more divine than we. 3. Wherefore not even the entire universe suffices /or the thought and contemplation within the reach of the human mind, but our imaginations often pass beyond the bounds of space, and if we survey our life on every side and see how much more it everywhere abounds in what is striking, and great, and beautiful, we shall soon discern the purpose of our birth. 4. This is why, by a sort of natural impulse, we admire not the small streams, useful and pellucid though they be, but the Nile, the Danube or the Rhine, and still more the Ocean. Nor do we view the tiny flame of our own kindling (guarded in lasting purity as its light ever is) with greater awe than the celestial fires though they are often shrouded in darkness ;

βίον καὶ εἰς τὸν σύμπαντα κόσμον ἐπάγουσα, θεατὰς τινὰς τῶν ὅλων αὐτῆς ἐσομένους καὶ φιλοτιμοτάτους ἀγωνιστάς, εὐθύς ἄμαχον ἔρωτα ἐνέφυσεν ἡμῶν ταῖς ψυχαῖς παντὸς ἀεὶ τοῦ μεγάλου καὶ ὡς πρὸς ἡμᾶς δαιμονιωτέρου. [3] διόπερ τῇ θεωρίᾳ καὶ διανοίᾳ τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης ἐπιβολῆς οὐδ' ὁ σύμπας κόσμος ἀρκεῖ, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοὺς τοῦ περιέχοντος πολλάκις ὄρους ἐκβαίνουσιν αἱ ἐπίνοιαι, καὶ εἴ τις περιβλέψαιτο ἐν κύκλῳ τὸν βίον, ὅσῳ πλέον ἔχει τὸ περιττὸν ἐν πᾶσι καὶ μέγα καὶ καλόν, ταχέως εἴσεται, πρὸς ᾧ γεγόναμεν. [4] ἔνθεν φυσικῶς πῶς ἀγόμενοι μὰ Δί' οὐ τὰ μικρὰ ρεῖθρα θαυμάζομεν, εἰ καὶ διαυγῆ καὶ χρήσιμα, ἀλλὰ τὸν Νεῖλον καὶ Ἴστρον ἢ Ῥῆνον, πολὺ δ' ἔτι μᾶλλον τὸν Ὠκεανόν: οὐδέ γε τὸ ὑφ' ἡμῶν τουτὶ φλογίον

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ἀνακαιόμενον, ἐπεὶ καθαρὸν σώζει τὸ φέγγος, ἐκπληττόμεθα τῶν οὐρανίων μᾶλλον, καίτοι πολλάκις ἐπισκοτούμενων, οὐδὲ τῶν τῆς Αἴτνης κρατήρων ἀξιοθαυμαστότερον νομίζομεν, ἧς αἱ ἀναχοαὶ πέτρους τε ἐκ βυθοῦ καὶ ὄλους ὄχθους ἀναφέρουσι καὶ ποταμοὺς ἐνίοτε τοῦ γηγενοῦς ἐκείνου καὶ αὐτοῦ μόνου προχέουσιν πυρός.

In the last chapter, which discusses the causes of the decay of eloquence, the aesthete turns (metamorphoses) into a moralist. For Pseudo-Longinus, the true cause is not policy, but moral decay, the desire of profit, the thirst for pleasure, the love of wealth and the carelessness. The conclusion appears as a dialogue where the interlocutor is a philosopher who, like Tacitus, asserts that the decay of eloquence is owing to the despotism of the principality. We are nothing more than some great adulators and the humiliated slave s who do not know how to speak:

'we seem in our boyhood to learn the lessons of a righteous servitude, being all but enswathed in its customs and observances, when our thoughts are yet young and tender, and never tasting the fairest and most productive source of eloquence (by which/ he added, 'I mean freedom), so that we emerge in no other guise than that of sublime flatterers/ 4. This is the reason, he maintained, why no slave ever becomes an orator, although all other faculties may belong to menials. In the slave there immediately burst out signs of fettered liberty of speech, of the dungeon as it were, of a man habituated to bufferys.. 5. 'For the day of slavery/ as Homer has it, 'takes away half our manhood 1 .' 'Just as/ he proceeded, ' the cages (if what I hear is true) in which are kept the Pygmies, commonly called nani> not only hinder the growth of the creatures confined within

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them, but actually attenuate them through the bonds which beset their bodies, so one has aptly termed all servitude (though it be most righteous) the cage of the soul and a public prison-house.'

οἱ δὲ νῦν εὐοίκαμεν ἔφη ἰ παιδομαθεῖς εἶναι δουλείας δικαίας, τοῖς αὐτῆς ἔθεσι καὶ ἐπιτηδεύμασιν ἐξ ἀπαλῶν ἔτι φρονημάτων μόνον οὐκ ἐνεσπαργανωμένοι καὶ ἄγευστοι καλλίστου καὶ γονιμωτάτου λόγων νόματος, τὴν ἐλευθερίαν ἔφη ἄλεγω, διόπερ οὐδὲν ὄτι μὴ κόλακες ἐκβαίνομεν μεγαλοφυεῖς.' [4] διὰ τοῦτο τὰς μὲν ἄλλας ἔξεις καὶ εἰς οἰκέτας πίπτειν ἔφασκεν, δοῦλον δὲ μηδένα γίνεσθαι ῥήτορα: εὐθύς γάρ ἀναζει τὸ ἀπαρρησίαστον καὶ οἶον ἔμφρουρον ὑπὸ συνηθείας ἀεὶ κεκονδυλισμένον: [5] ἥμισυ γάρ τ' ἀρετῆς' κατὰ τὸν Ὅμηρον ἀποαίνυται δούλιον ἡμᾶρ.' ὥσπερ οὖν, εἴ γέ φησὶ τὸ τοῦτο πιστὸν ἀκούω, τὰ γλωττόκομα, ἐν οἷς οἱ Πυγμαῖοι καλούμενοι δὲ νᾶνοι τρέφονται, οὐ μόνον κωλύει τῶν ἐγκεκλεισμένων τὰς ἀύξήσεις, ἀλλὰ καὶ συναραιοῖ διὰ τὸν περικείμενον τοῖς σώμασι δεσμόν: οὕτως ἅπασαν δουλείαν, κἂν ἢ δικαιοσύνη, ψυχῆς γλωττόκομον καὶ κοινὸν δὴ τις ἀπεφήνατο δεσμοτήριον.'

At this point, Pseudo-Longinus “meets” the philosopher Richard Rorty, who, in what concerns the undertaking of the self-creation projects, considers as major impediments for the human being, besides the absence of leisure and freedom, the intense suffering and the humiliation, associated with the loss of speech. In Rorty’s view, the self-creation, namely the self-

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fulfillment of the human being is the supreme value of life, although the number of those who have succeeded in these self-creation projects is extremely low. The examples Rorty himself gives are the following: Nietzsche, Freud, Proust, Heidegger, Nabokov; “The world can blindly and inarticulately crush us; mute despair, intense mental pain can cause us to blot ourselves out.” (Rorty 1998: 88)

The *Sublime* does not identify with the rhetorical concept of sublime style and it is not identical to the great speech; its sources are the elevated thought and the strong feeling (the intensity of emotion). Taking over moral ideas from various currents, Pseudo-Longinus reveals himself as an eclectic Stoic.

From the assumed author Longinus, the scholar minister of Queen Zenobia of Palmyra, was beheaded by an order from Emperor Aurelian in 272 AD, we go forward to a philosopher of science, Gaston Bachelard, who, in the 20th century, marked a difference between the scientific knowledge (objective) and the literary knowledge, which is based on the reverie:

The axes of poetry and of science are opposed to one another from the outset. All that philosophy can hope to accomplish is to make poetry and science complementary, to unite them as two well-defined opposites. We must oppose, then, to the enthusiastic, poetic mind, the taciturn, scientific mind. (Bachelard 1989:2)

One of the volumes of the tetralogy of elements is *air and dreams*. Bachelard proposes two essential concepts: the truth of imagination and the awareness of amazement. In his view, imagination is the faculty of deforming the images offered by perception. “The fundamental word corresponding to imagination is not image but imaginary. The value of an image is measured by the extent of its imaginary radiance.” (Bachelard 1997:5) Therefore, imagination is open in the human psychism representing the experience of novelty (the type of the greatest spiritual mobility). “The poem is essentially an aspiration toward new images.” (Bachelard 1997:6) The exact antithesis of imagination is the habit, the inertia of psychic development.

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Likewise, imagination is of a material nature (the four elements: air, water, fire and earth represent the hormones of imagination) and it is dynamic because “Imaginary air allows us to grow psychically” and “The positive dynamism of verticality is so clear, that we can formulate this aphorism: what does not rise, falls” (Bachelard 1997:15). Air imagination is the least frequent type and the themes of air imagination, such as the blue sky, the constellations (the starry sky), the clouds, the nebulosity, the air tree refer to the concept of *Sublime*.

Based on the blue sky theme, Bachelard divides the writers into four categories, their psychism being dominated, according to the imagination laws, by one or two elements: “Those who see in an immobile sky a flowing liquid (...); those who experience the blue sky as though it were an enormous flame – “searing blue”; those who contemplate the sky as if it were a solidified blue, a painted vault – compact and hard azure (...); Finally, those who can truly participate in the aerial nature of celestial blue” (Bachelard 1997:167). The reveries of the blue sky, like the reveries of the starry sky, are so many ways of reaching the *Sublime*. The blue sky offers “an intimate lesson of lucidity. If the world is also will, then blue sky is the will to lucidity” (Bachelard 1997:176). The reverie of a tearful star is also a way of reaching the *Sublime*: “*And when we fix upon one star in the anonymous sky, it becomes our star; it twinkles for us; a few tears gather around its fire and aerial life brings us some comfort for the suffering that we endure on earth. Then it seems that the star is coming towards us. We are unmoved by reason, which tells us that it is lost in the immensity of space. (...) Distance is abolished. An infinity of communion erases an infinity of size. The world of stars touches our soul: it is a world of gazing*”. Kant, who theorized on the moral *Sublime* (“*the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me*”). Kant (b1995:186) would have found affinities and would have recognized himself in Bachelard’s philosophy ...

Chapter 4 is dedicated to the *ascensional psychology* of Robert Desoille. His method is that of directed reverie (of the daydream), thus entering the sphere where the *Sublime* is reached. “Anyone who tries to raise his life to the same level as his imagination will feel a sense of nobility welling up within him as he dreams of something rising or as he experiences the aerial element in its ascension” (Bachelard 1997:115). The

induced images, proposed by Robert Desoille, that are meant to heal the sick tormented spirits are those of the *High*, of the *Sublime*: the mountain tops, the trees, the birds. In the directed rising dream, “the elevation of the soul coincides with its serenity” (Bachelard 1997:123). For Bachelard, the background, the suggestions come from psychoanalysis. But he is, by essence, a phenomenologist. He starts from the literary work towards the reader, following the echo of the work upon the reader’s conscience. His criticism is revitalizing, euphoric. His spontaneity is so free that the impression of gnoseological optimism is extremely expressive. We are at the centre of universal analogy. Gnoseological euphoria would not be possible in the absence of ingenuity, ingenuity which is synonymous with an innocence of the eye (as if things would have never been seen since), accompanied by an easiness of producing words.

In the chapter entitled *Nietzsche and the ascensional psychism*, Bachelard shows that Nietzsche is not a poet of the earth, of the water or of the fire, but of the air, of the heights, of the *Sublime*, he is one of the greatest philosophers of the ascensional psychism: “Indeed, for Nietzsche, air is the very stuff of the human freedom and the substance of great joy” (Bachelard 1997:139) and “In this cold air of the heights we shall find another Nietzschean value: the silence. Is this winter sky with its silence...” (ibid:143).

The literary image has a double perspective: that of the expansion and that of the intimacy. Anyone writes because he wishes to express himself, because he has something to say (this is the perspective of expression or of expansion). At the same time, he wishes to express the ineffable of his being, the richness of his internal world (this is the perspective of intimacy). At the beginning, these perspectives are contradictory. But when the human being experiences the language genetically “giving himself over to literary activity, to speaking the imagination with all his heart and soul, the perspectives of expansion and intimacy manifest themselves as curiously homographic” (Bachelard 1997: 274).

The perspective of the expansion or the expression (of the literary image) would correspond to Pseudo-Longinus’ sources of the *Sublime* that

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are related to the *techne* (the last three), and that of the intimacy would correspond to the first two sources (the greatness of thought and the strong and enthusiastic passion).

As a conclusion, Bachelard considers that “a philosophy concerned with human destiny (...) must be an openly living language. It must study the literary man candidly, because the literary man is the culmination of meditation and expression, the culmination of thought and dream” (Bachelard 1997:275).

Could Kant have been right when he was asserting that melancholic temperaments were tending towards the feeling of the Sublime?

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