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The vertigo of the sublime

The sublime and the intuition in the philosophy of Longinus, Bouhours and Bergson

(Theses of a doctoral dissertation)

The “first and most important source” of the literature on the sublime is Longinus’ treatise *On the Sublime*, where he presents the sublime effect as an ecstatic experience, a modification of consciousness: the sublime “transport” from ourselves, “amazing us”, “elevates us”, it’s an “enthusiastic passion”, and is irresistible – “impossible, to resist”, “pleases all people at all times”.¹ What is this magic that triggers an ecstatic effect? Why is the sublime “captivating”? This question has been one of the starting points of my research.

Although the text itself is rather a rhetorical treatise analysing classical texts – tragedy, lyric poetry, epic poetry, philosophical works and political speeches, – writings that are not meant to carry any explicit philosophical reflexion. However, implicitly, it represents a Platonic metaphysical line of thought that is essential to the perception of the longinian notion of the sublime. This dominant metaphysical aspect is equally traceable in the early literature on the

¹ Longinus: *On the Sublime*, trans. W. H. Fyfe, in: Aristotle: *Poetics*; Longinus: *On the Sublime*; Demetrius: *On Style*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1995, 1, 7.

sublime, such as in the interpretations of Thomas Burnet, John Dennis, Milton, Shaftesbury, John Baillie, to name but a few emblematic figures. Burke breaks off with this line in his *Investigations* and, in keeping with his essentially social-philosophical attitude, he makes an issue of the sublime (and the beautiful) in an essentially philosophical anthropological, psychological approach that will overshadow the metaphysical aspects of *On the Sublime*.² The Kantian analysis is based on the concept of Burke:³ the sublime is an intensely sensorial experience with a consistent resistance to definition⁴ being the core message, thus to comprehend the limit of cognitive ability. These two significant and influential analyses have played a significant role in the emancipation of the sublime from Longinus, from antiquity, and from the Neo-Platonist spirit that contextualized those ideas, from the Enlightenment onwards.

1. In the first chapter of this thesis, we discuss the longinian approach to the sublime. The last decade has seen the appearance of several publications that shed new light on the sublime and reflect on its metaphysical reading.⁵ The most relevant opus for our research is Stephen Halliwell's *Mind's Infinity*.⁶ The historian of philosophy analyses the ecstatic impact of the sublime in the context of two interpretive schemas – psychotropic and cognitivist – on the one hand, and of the explanatory models of the three types of truth: intuitive, emotional and metaphysical, – on the other. He argues that the ecstatic impact of the sublime unfolds in the dialectic of these planes: ecstasy is triggered by a direct – intuitive and emotional – contemplation of metaphysical truth. In the first chapter of the paper, we will therefore discuss Longinus and, after some preliminary remarks on authorship and chronology, we will consider the text further from the perspective of ecstatic experience, mainly along the lines of Halliwell's conclusions. In fact, it was this research of Halliwell that provided the idea of putting these two aspects, the metaphysical approach to the sublime and the idea of its ultimate indeterminacy, into one single perspective.

² Burke, Edmund: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990.

³ Kant, Immanuel: *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, 2007, 90.

⁴ Kant is not reflecting at all to Pseudo-Longinus, Burke does, but only twice. Burke 1990, op.cit. x, 1.

⁵ Porter, James I.: *The Sublime in Antiquity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016. Doran, Robert: Longinus's theory of sublimity, in: uó: *The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

⁶ Halliwell, Stephen: *The Mind's Infinity – Longinus and the Psychology of the Sublime*, in: uó: *Between Ecstasy and Truth – Interpretations of Greek Poetics from Homer to Longinus*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011.

2. The second chapter focuses on the notion of the *je ne sais quoi* („I-know-not-what”) and on the first dialogue, *La Mer (The Sea)*, and the fifth one, the I-know-not-what, of Bouhours’ *Entretiens d’Ariste et d’Eugène (Conversations of Ariste and Eugène)*. We have chosen to focus our analysis on ‘I-know-not-what’ because it fits the Halliwell model of interpretation, as I-know-it-all, as Marin argues, is a broader concept that includes the sublime, and is also a ‘collective term’ concept in which many of the concepts of antiquity are found merged in Renaissance art theory, namely courtly culture and in moral philosophical treatises linked to Neo-Platonism, such as charm, *decorum*, *urbanitas*, or *honnêteté*, as well as their nuanced meaning and their metaphysical context, so that it can be associated with the sublime – and with Longinus. In the first subsection of the second part, we intend to present the aspect of the ancient and modern history of ‘I-know-not-what’, a relevant point of our reasoning – we will discuss certain aspects of *charm*, *urbanitas*, *decorum*, *despejo*, *sprezzatura* and ‘I-know-not-what’ in the 17th century French debates on taste, whenever the idea of *honnêteté* comes up. This overview is indispensable in order to contextualise the *Conversations*, in particular the two dialogues, by highlighting some relevant aspects of our investigation. The aim is to put our theses into perspective within the complex metaphysical, aesthetic and passion-theoretical implications of the subject, without pretending to be exhaustive, respecting however the limits of the present work.

If we have chosen Bouhours’ *Conversations* among the abundant literature of I-know-not-what, it is because the text stands for a key concept – as Richard Scholar’s analysis shows – in which the term is treated as a distinct, autonomous notion with clearly defined outlines. In the fifth conversation, it even refers to its history, when it focuses on ancient and modern connotations, so to articulate, for the first time, the diversified set of contemporary approaches. Further on, the *Conversations*, as Scholar points out, transforms the I-know-not-what into a philosophical typology of the whole of human experience – interpersonal relations, culture, nature and transcendence – organised into a leitmotif, the sympathy, as the direct, lived experience of the absolute, a synthesis of New Platonism and the Augustinian tradition. The spiritual attitude of Longinus and Bouhours is brought into kinship by this New Platonist tradition. Moreover, beyond the philosophical approach that links *The Divine* and the *Discourses*, which will be highlighted further on where subsequent chapters of the *Discourses* shall be dealt with, textual argument can also be invoked. For in the *Conversations* – and this is the third aspect – the notion of the sublime is brought forward:

at the beginning of the first conversation, Bouhours uses the vocabulary of I. 4 to describe the sea: the sea is amazing, it “fascinates”, “touches”, “enraptures” at the first sight. However, since the term “sublime” is not mentioned in the *Discourses*, we find it necessary and worthwhile to place this passage in parallel with Bouhours’ two late works, the *Manière* and the *Pensées*, in which the notion of Longinus and the sublime appear explicitly. In our opinion, *On the Sublime*, the *Conversations* and the Bergsonian texts we are discussing, despite terminological differences and different cultural contexts, are deeply related in thought, in so far as their authors present the direct experience of the absolute, the unconditional ‘intuition’ of the absolute.

3. The first two chapters prepare the ground for the third part of the thesis, in which the longinian notion of the sublime and Halliwell’s analysis, as well as the *Discourses*, are discussed from the point of view of Bergson’s psychophilosophy and metaphysics, the notion of the content and the philosophy of intuition. This section is divided into two subsections. The first examines the early Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, and the individual passages of Laughter, and interprets the sublime from the perspective of Bergson’s psychophilosophy: in *Time and Free Will*, the first thesis of this paper, a similar psychological dynamic to that of the Halliwell’s model is revealed: during the ecstatic experience of the sublime, the consciousness of the creator and the consciousness of the receiver are directly united. In Bergson’s terms, the sublime is a revelation of the content, a process of moving from the symbolic to the pure content, which is produced by coincidence with other contents, by sympathy. In this context, the sublime is “intangible” insofar as it is a *revelation of the indivisible continuity, of pure heterogeneity*, and as such cannot be deified by the means of reason, cannot be described on a conceptual-linguistic platform.

In the second sub-chapter I will examine the sublime in the context of Bergson’s metaphysics and philosophy of intuition – in the context of *Matter and Memory*, *The Creative Evolution*, *Mind Energy*, *The Creative Mind* and other works, lectures, letters, and Léon Husson’s work on the evolution of the Bergsonian concept of intuition.⁷ In this latter Husson makes the distinction between simple and isolated intuition as by Bergson. In connection with the relationship between

⁷ Husson, Léon: *L’intellectualisme de Bergson – Genèse et développement de la notion bergsonienne d’intuition*, Párizs, PUF, 1947.

philosophy and art, he further argues that with Bergson the relationship between the two disciplines is analogical and non-essential. In artistic experience Bergson merely illustrates the work of distraction of attention, the effort of intuition, which gets the concentration focused on action towards content. Therefore continuity (a non-reflective, simple intuition) in art is both spontaneously revealed and detectable incidentally or conditionally. It is accessible only to those with an artistic sense, and due to those two reasons, art, – unlike philosophical intuition, – cannot be used in general, as a method of grasping the experience of the continuity of content in reality.

In this paper, we intend to nuance and put this approach into perspective based on the longinian notion of the sublime and the ‘I-know-not-what’. According to this view, the sublime is a phenomenon that is not limited to art, but denotes a different spectrum. It is less than isolated intuition, because it is not reflected, but more than spontaneous intuition. More, because it allows getting in touch with continuity of duration, a *general and unconditional*, existential basic experience. Therefore we will call this type of intuition a *transformative intuition*, and argue that the sublime is such a transformative intuition, in which there is a direct contact, a coincidence, with the continuity movements of the universe, with the content-continuity of reality. What we see in it is that the sublime effect is caused by this change in the consciousness, a break with the order and operations of the intellect, and the “dizziness”⁸, the vertigo of a consciousness that is caused by the direct experience of the moving reality. So, the intention of this paper is, on the one hand, to argue for the metaphysical tradition of the sublime along the lines of the original longinian notion of the sublime, of the I-know-not-what, and of the content and intuition, and, on the other hand, to place it in the perspective and programme of the bergsonian philosophy.

⁸ Bergson, Henri: The perception of change, in *The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison, New York, The Philosophical Library, 1946, 176.