Tweaking the Sublime: Translating the Poetics of the Sublime in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

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Abstract

This study aims at scrutinising how the notion of the poetics of the sublime in prose might travel in the event of translation. It is a little studied topic, presumably due to the elusiveness of the sublime. Here I nevertheless try to capture this concept by analysing Longinus' treatise *On the Sublime* with a focus on elevated writing. I apply these traits to the three most recent Danish translations of Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* as it is an exemplary novel of sublime passion in both content and style.
Keywords: style, the sublime, literary translation, poetics, Charlotte Brontë

Introduction

The literary sublime is one of our great aesthetic metaphors which cannot be translated into something directly visible or tangible. It is an affective response to meeting something which we invest with the feeling of transcendence. As the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge put it:

> I meet, I find the Beautiful - but I give, contribute or rather attribute the Sublime. No object of the Sense is sublime in itself; but only as far as I make it a symbol of some Idea. the circle is a beautiful figure in itself; it becomes sublime, when I contemplate eternity under that figure (Twitchell 21)

The Romantic sublime is a feeling of grandeur, awe and terror of the mind when meeting with typically boundless and terrifying natural landscapes, or with an elevated style of writing which strikes the reader with a mighty power. This sense of the sublime was certainly not unfamiliar to the Victorian novelist Charlotte Brontë in her most famous novel *Jane Eyre* (1847). In fact, the novel's skillful balancing of Victorian Puritanism, Romantic sublimity and Gothic terror has turned it into one of the most loved novels in British literary history. And here I set out to investigate how the notion of the sublime might travel in a translational recreation. If it is such an intangible metaphor of affect, how can it be translated into another language so that the same effect is reached in the target text?

As far as I can see, literature on translations of the sublime from one language into another is hard to find. Perhaps it is due to the elusive nature of the sublime and to the fact that it appears in the eye of the beholder – or the reader. However, some studies have undertaken to discuss translations of literary effects, which the sublime might be categorized as. In Parks (1998), for instance, the travel of the so-called "spirit" of various modernist works into Italian is studied. And such spiritual response, or "aesthetic qualia", must be maintained in translation and clearly distinguished from rapid emotional

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response according to Boase-Beier: "it would seem wrong for a translator to elicit the wrong level of response just as much as to elicit the wrong type of response" (102). Thus, trying to recreate the stylistic trait or poetics of the sublime may be both a constraint and a gift in literary translation in general:

> The main challenge to a literary translator is that s/he is expected to operate on both levels: making sure the target surface story matches the source surface story, both in terms of form and content, including dealing with such indeterminable features as 'tone', 'voice' and 'spirit', as well as simultaneously telling a more profound story whose purpose is to touch or move the reader in one way or another (Klitgård 250).

Thus, a translator must render the source style in such a way that the target reader is moved in the same way as the source audience. And in *Jane Eyre*, the sublime is not only expressed in the many striking nature descriptions; it is also a "perceived distinctive manner of expression", which is how we might define "style" broadly speaking (Wales 371). But in order to characterise Brontë's sublime style, we must first turn to the earliest work on the sublime *par excellence* by Longinus as his doctrines reverberate in Charlotte Brontë's writing style.

Passionate writing: Longinus' *On the sublime*

Longinus' treatise on the sublime is an important epistolary piece of Greek aesthetics of oratory and literary criticism dated to the 1st century AD, but not discovered until the 16th century. Together with Edmund Burke's exposition *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* from 1757, Longinus' ideas have had far-reaching impacts on the Romantic notion of the sublime immortalised in much British Romantic poetry. In his essay "The Sublime and the Beautiful" of *The Prelude* (1811-12) William Wordsworth, for instance, contemplates the rugged and infinite scenery of the Langdale Pikes in the Lake District – a scenery which resembles the one I have selected in *Jane Eyre*. The swelling of feelings of power and triumph when facing this natural wonder is the swelling of the sublime in the mind of the beholder (Wordsworth 2). Longinus' notion of the sublime has also had an impact on Gothic fiction, such as in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) in which the idea of the violently passionate sublime is the connection of astonishment, terror and pain with elevation, pleasure and delight. This feeling outmatched the small and the beautiful, and thus writers and artists yearned for the awe of fearful and irregular landscape sceneries, such as the Alps, rocks, abysses, the ocean, craters and mighty waterfalls rather than, say, nicely kempt gardens. And this was a conceit that kept flourishing in Victorian literature as well (Mishra). Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is no exception.

Longinus' treatise is a piece of dos and don'ts of good writing in order to reach sublimity which is defined as a certain loftiness and excellence in language which flashes forth and "scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and at once displays the power of the orator in all its plenitude" (chapter 1)[1]. It is the image of greatness of mind which lies deeply within our nature as a constant invincible yearning for something which is greater and more divine than ourselves:

> This besides many other things, that Nature has appointed us men to be no base nor 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, forthwith she implants in our souls the unconquerable love of whatever is elevated

> and more divine than we. Wherefore not even the entire universe suffices for 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. This is why, but a sort of natural impulse, we admire not the small streams, useful and pellucid though they may 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 over is) with greater awe than the celestial fires though they are often shrouded in darkness; nor do we deem it a greater marvel than the crates of Etna, whose eruptions throw up stones from its depths and great masses of rock, and at times pour forth rivers of that pure and unmixed subterranean fire (Chapter 35).

This passionate yearning for the elevation of mind can be masterly expressed through instruction and controlled by reason. To Longinus, sublimity and passion are not a unity, but a necessary disunity: "For some passions are found which are far removed from sublimity and are of a lower order, such as pity, grief and fear; and on the other hand are many examples of the sublime which are independent of passion, such as the daring words of Homer" (chapter 8). Passion has to surpass the limits of the human imagination to be authentically sublime: "there is no tone so lofty as that of genuine passion, in its right place, when it bursts out in a wild gust and mad enthusiasm and as it were fills the speaker's words with frenzy" (chapter 8).

So how does the writer succeed in being authentically passionate and great? Besides having the required gift of discourse, Longinus dictates five principal sources of elevated language. The first two sources are natural gifts, whereas the remaining three are the gifts of artistic instruction: The first natural gift is the power of forming great conceptions which comes natural to "the proudest spirits" (chapter 9). The second gift is the capacity of vehement and inspired passion, as exemplified in Sappho: "the skill with which she selects and binds together the most striking and vehement circumstances of passion" (Chapter 9). She holds the power of forming one body of various contrasting ideas, such as hot and cold, the senses and the mind, in such a way that "The effect desired is that not one passion only should be seen in her, but a concourse of the passions" (chapter 9). The first gift of artistic instruction is the due and natural formation of figures of bulkiness such as amplification, asyndeton, anaphora, diatyposis, hyperbaton, polyptoton and periphrasis (chapters 1-15). The second gift is noble diction which is divided into a) choice of words, b) use of metaphors and c) elaboration of language. The proper time for metaphors, for example, "is when the passions roll like a torrent and sweep a multitude of them down their resistless flood" (chapter 32). The number of metaphors is irrelevant "For it is the nature of the passions, in their vehement rush, to sweep and thrust everything before them, or rather to demand hazardous turns as altogether indispensable. They do not allow the hearer leisure to criticize the number of the metaphors because he is carried away by the fervour of the speaker" (chapter 32). The last gift of artistic instruction is that of dignified and elevated composition. When elements of a passage are joined in a harmonious arrangement, they form a full and perfect organic whole leading to a dignified stateliness of "rotundity; and in periods sublimity is, as it were, a contribution made by multiplicity". This feeling of vast unity makes the listener share the passions of the speaker (chapter 40).

Longinus has been accused of "repetitions and glancing analogies", which endanger his credibility (Hertz 4). The analogy to Sappho, for example, is used to explain the selection and ordering of material, but it is intertwined with allusions to Socrates and

Homer to such an extent, that the analogy seems merely "wishful or glib" (Hertz 7). Thus, Longinus' own rhetoric seems pervaded by pathos, rather than logos, which damages his ethos. Also, a hierarchy of natural versus instructed artfulness is gradually formed in his ideas suggesting that the desired authenticity is a concept with modification. In this way the sublime passion Longinus so passionately wants to convey, sublimates the line of reason of the treatise.

Longinus' principles are built on what is natural and what is learned, what is right and what is wrong, the true and the false (Hertz 17) This becomes apparent when he explains what the writer should avoid, such as bombastic, inflated and high-flown language which discloses the speaker's weakness and dryness in trying to be more elevated than he actually is (chapter 3). So-called "puerility" must also be shunned. Here the writer aiming at the elaborate may drift into the tawdry and affected (chapter 3). Finally, fake and empty passion must be avoided, as when a speaker displays an out-of-place false sentiment which is purely personal and has nothing to do with the subject (chapter 3). Emphatically, Longinus elaborates on how the sublime can be controlled and mastered which, paradoxically, departs from the powerful authenticity and immediacy of the sublime.

In total, the sublime style advocated by Longinus represents a magnitude and power of mind, emotion and language – in both dimension and number - to such an extent that the sum of the many traits forms an elevated concordant organism which lifts us up to that which is greater than ourselves. And this is not necessarily an inherent quality in the writer as it can be learnt and controlled.

Sublime Style in *Jane Eyre*

The sublime pervades *Jane Eyre,* too, as there are many common denominators with Longinus' dicta which I will review in the following.

Without a doubt, the novel forms great conceptions of how to merge larger-than-life universal dichotomies, such as Victorian reason and Romantic passion, independence and marriage, norms and self-fulfillment. Terry Eagleton regards Jane Eyre as "an extraordinarily contradictory amalgam of smoldering rebelliousness and prim conventionalism, gushing Romantic fantasy and canny hard-headedness, quivering sensitivity and blunt rationality" (16). This grandeur is expressed through the writing style as it complements the novel's content as well as structure (Brennan 15). The elevated style is for instance traceable in the at the time rare combination between poetry and prose (Peters 162). Thus, stately speech may come naturally to the proudest spirits, as Longinus noted.

As for the requirement of vehement and inspired passion, again, without a doubt, we have come to the right work of art. And as with Sappho, lauded by Longinus, Charlotte Brontë, too, manages to form one body of contrasting ideas, such as hot and cold, fire and ice, the senses and the mind - as suggested by Longinus - in such a way that all the passions merge in a concourse of passions. We see this in all the passages with Jane's tormented mind and burning feelings, often hooked up in imaginative ways of introducing the natural elements and particularly the symbolism of fire and ice which amplify the sense of conflict in Jane's *Bildung.* This pervasive passionate tone leaves little room for "middle ground". Jane's responses are typically "intense, and vividly penned in violent and emphatic language" (Brennan 17). That is, her reactions are taken to be natural outbursts inspired by the occasion, as Longinus puts it, and not consciously studied to such a degree that they end up in affected frigidity or as false sentiment.

The desired formation of figures in sublime language follows to some degree Longinus' suggestions. The figures of bulkiness shine forth through the very amplification of intense passages, often expressed through a heavily used conceit. Cries of passion are not brief, but emphatically prolonged and elaborate. An example is Jane's questioning of Rochester after having discovered the existence of Bertha (chapter 27). This is not a brief, concise dialogue, but an enlarged, almost hyperbolic, cross-examination whose vocabulary resembles that of a courtroom trial (Brennan 17).

A quintessential feature of *Jane Eyre* is also the noble diction required by Longinus. He mentions vehement torrents of metaphors, which we especially see in the novel's emblematic use of the passion/fire motif, and ornamental language, which we see in for instance the lyrical qualities of this passage in which Jane rejects marrying Rochester:

> 'This life,' said I at last, 'is hell: this is the air—those are the sounds of the bottomless pit! I have a right to deliver myself from it if I can. The sufferings of this mortal state will leave me with the heavy flesh that now cumbers my soul. Of the fanatic's burning eternity I have no fear: there is not a future state worse than this present one—let me break away, and go home to God!' (chapter 27).[2]

Then we have reached Longinus' conclusive level of dignified and elevated composition ideally forming a perfectly harmoniously united organism leading to a dignified stateliness, or sublime "rotundity". Here I would like to suggest that Brontë is very much on a par with this aesthetic vision. Jane's voice is "unfailingly honest" (Roberts 50) and particularly insistent and persuasive which draws us into the story (Brennan 23). Thus, it is suggested, Charlotte Brontë refrains from falling into the pitfalls of bombastic puerility and false sentiment. As Virginia Woolf puts it in her essay "'Jane Eyre' and 'Wuthering Heights'":

> The writer has us by the hand, forces us along her road, makes us see what she sees, never leaves us for a moment or allows us to forget her. At the end we are steeped through and through with the genius, the vehemence, the indignation of Charlotte Brontë […] It is there that she takes her seat; it is the red and fitful glow of the heart's fire which illumines her page" [The Brontë sisters} seized those aspects of the earth which were most akin to what they themselves felt or imputed to their characters, and so their storms, their moors, their lovely spaces of summer weather are not ornaments applied to decorate a dull page or display the writer's powers of observation — they carry on the emotion and light up the meaning of the book (Woolf, 1916).

There is in fact a powerful concord between the elevated style of writing and the passionate confidential contents and dramatic structure of the book giving the work a "polyphonic and multi-layered quality" (Brennan 25) which is highly startling, gripping and enriching – and thus persuasive. And this reflects the very conclusion to the novel and Jane's hardships: "All my confidence is bestowed on him, all his confidence is devoted to me; we are precisely suited in character—perfect concord is the result" (chapter 38). And this "concord" is exactly the word used in the English translation of Longinus' sublime.

Translation Analysis

Even though several Danish translations of *Jane Eyre* have been published since 1850, I have decided to select the three most recent translations. One by Aslaug Mikkelsen (AM) in 1971 and two translations by Christiane Rohde (CR) in 2015 and Luise Hemmer Pihl (LP) in 2016. The first translation is interesting as it proves to be an abridged version. The

second translator, Christiane Rohde, is in fact an actress, not someone educated in languages or literature, and Luise Hemmer Pihl's translation is printed in her own small private publishing house. We are thus not dealing with big established translators of British fiction in Denmark.

Methodologically, my analysis will scrutinise a selected passage in the three translations in order to hopefully catch the sublime. And even though the sublime is a metaphor, an affective response, whose manifestation in a translation would be best examined in a large-scale audience response study, I here limit myself to a case observation evaluated by myself only. I humbly try to break ground for further studies in the translation of the sublime. Back-translations will be provided to ease the understanding of Danish.

Translating Sublime Landscapes

Passages with painterly sublime landscape echo Jane Eyre's noble spirit longing for greatness. I have selected a passage that not only describes a prototypical Romantic sublime scenery, but also explicitly expresses the vehement and inspired torrents of passion explained by Longinus above. When watching such a scenery "our imaginations often pass beyond the bounds of space", he said (chapter 35). And this is exactly what happens to Jane in this passage. It simply encapsulates the great conceptions of Charlotte Brontë's elevated composition in which a harmonious concourse of the passions presents itself as an organic whole:

> I discovered, too, that a great pleasure, an enjoyment which the horizon only bounded, lay all outside the high and spike-guarded walls of our garden: this pleasure consisted in prospect of noble summits girdling a great hill-hollow, rich in verdure and shadow; in a bright beck, full of dark stones and sparkling eddies. How different had this scene looked when I viewed it laid out beneath the iron sky of winter, stiffened in frost, shrouded with snow!—when mists as chill as death wandered to the impulse of east winds along those purple peaks, and rolled down "ing" and holm till they blended with the frozen fog of the beck! That beck itself was then a torrent, turbid and curbless: it tore asunder the wood, and sent a raving sound through the air, often thickened with wild rain or whirling sleet; and for the forest on its banks, that showed only ranks of skeletons. (Chapter 9)

This panorama is of sublime nature as brightness contrasts with darkness, warmth with coldness, and roaring sound with stillness. It is a scene of both instant and recalled nobility and richness which appear awe-inspiring to Jane and heightens her inner state of turmoil. Besides a downright sublime word and phrase choice ("noble summits") and reference to Longinus' preference for torrents of passion rather than small streams, the passage contains a number of alliterations ("girdling" and "great"; "hill-hollow"; "bright beck"; "stiffened in frost"; "shrouded with snow"; "purple peaks"; "frozen fog") and assonance ("turbid and curbless"). Moreover, there are images of ghosts ("mists as chill as death wandered to the impulse of east winds"), skeletons ("ranks of skeletons") and corpses ("stiffened in frost, shrouded with snow"). These are the three translations:

> AM: På disse ture opdagede jeg også de glæder, som lå uden for den høje havemur og kun begrænsedes af horisonten: udsigten til de stolte tinder, der indrammede en bjergdal med yppige grønne skråninger, skyggefulde pletter og en klar bæk, fuld af mørke sten og lysende krusninger (62)

AM only translates the first four lines and normalises the poetic flow. It can be back-translated into: 'On these trips I also discovered the pleasures which were situated outside

the high garden wall and were only limited by the horizon: the view to the proud summits, which framed a hill-valley with luscious green slopes, shadowy spots, and a clear beck, full of dark stones and sparkling eddies'. In this way, AM deprives the scene of its mighty sublimity of contrasts, vastness and death. The landscape is on the contrary represented as a picturesque fairytale land.

Now I turn to CR's translation:

> CR: Jeg opdagede også, at en stor glæde og fornøjelse, som horisonten bare begrænsede, lå uden for de høje pigbesatte havemure. Denne glæde bestod i en udsigt til stolte bjergtinder, der omkransede en dal med grønne skrænter, skyggefulde græspletter og en lysende bæk fuld af sorte sten og glitrende hvirvler. Hvor forskelligt havde dette sceneri ikke taget sig ud, da jeg så det under vinterens mørke, tunge himmel, stivnet i frost, dækket af sne! Når disen, kold som døden, pisket af østenvinden vandrede over disse rødviolette tinder og rullede ned over engene og dalen, til den forenede sig med bækkens dampende frosttåge! Selve bækken var om vinteren en fos, grumset og utæmmet. Den rev træer i stykker og sendte en brølende lyd gennem luften, tit tyknet af piskende regn og hvirvlende slud, og de overlevende træer stod som skeletter langs dens bredder (87-88)

First, as it is impossible to render the same alliterations and assonance in Danish, a few permutations have been included as we now have alliterations in "sorte sten" [black stones] and "stivnet I frost" [stiffened in frost].

But more interestingly, CR's translation is just as dramatic as Brontë's text, but perhaps mostly due to the liberties she has taken in trying to generate the vivid imagery. In for instance the sentence with the chilled mists wandering to the impulse of the east wind, CR translates "to the impulse of" into "pisket af" [whipped by] which is stronger than an impetus or force. Thus, the death imagery is enlarged into connotations of slavery or hell.

The same is the case with the mists blending with "the frozen fog of the beck" which turns into the more dynamic "bækkens dampende frosttåge" [the steaming frost fog of the beck]. And the torrent is "turbid and curbless", that is opaque and without curbs, but in this Danish version it is opaque and "utæmmet" [untamed], that is 'wild'. Again, this adds another layer of wild nature to the original text.

And, eventually, when representing the torrent tearing the entire wood asunder, where the reader can almost visualise from a bird's eye view a gigantic cut down through the middle of the wood, CR translates it into "Den rev træer i stykker" [it tore trees asunder] which is diminishing the damages. CR also turns the forest on the banks of the beck in the last lines into "de overlevende træer" [the surviving trees] which elaborates on her representation of singular torn trees rather than the entire wood.

> LP: Jeg opdagede også, at en større glæde, en nydelse, som kun horisonten afgrænsede, lå hele vejen rundt uden for havens høje mure med deres pigge. Denne glæde bestod af udsigten til de ædle bjergtoppe, der omgav en stor hulning i bakkerne, rig på grønne vækster og skygge, af en klar bæk, fuld af mørke sten og glitrende hvirvler. Hvor helt anderledes havde dette sceneri taget sig ud, mens jeg så det udbredt under vinterens jernhimmel, stivnet af frost, ligsvøbt i sne! – da tåger så kolde som døden vandrede langs disse purpurfarvede toppe på tilskyndelse af østenvinde og rullede ned ad græsbevoksede bakkeskråninger og enge, til de blandede sig med den frosne tåge over bækken! Dengang var bækken selv en rivende strøm, grumset og utøjlet; den rev skoven itu og sendte en rasende, vanvittig lyd gennem luften ofte fortættet af vild regn eller hvirvlende slud, og hvad skoven ved dens bredde angik, fremviste den kun rækker af skeletter (88-89).

LP is truer to the formal features of Brontë's style. For example, when it comes to the lyrical "great hill-hollow", where it just might have said "valley", LP has "en stor hulning i bakkerne" [a great hollow in the hills]. Here AM has the more mundane "bjergdal" [hill valley], and CR plainly says "dal" [valley].

As far as the metaphoric "iron sky of winter" is concerned, LP is the only one to translate it into the equivalent "jernhimmel" [iron sky], as CR domesticates it into "mørke, tunge Himmel" [dark, heavy sky].

LP also maintains the wanderings of the mists on the impetus of the east wind [på tilskyndelse af] rather than adding another metaphor of whipping.

Lastly, LP can, however, not resist laying the metaphoricity bare in the phrase "shrouded in snow" which reads "ligsvøbt i sne" [wrapped for burial in snow], and in "curbless" which becomes "utøjlet" [untamed]. And when it comes to the "raving sound", LP translates it into "vanvittige lyd", which refers to raving in the sense of raving mad, crazy. This may be uncalled for at this point, but on the other hand, it may spark off a pointer to the significance of the raving mad woman in the attic later in the novel.

Conclusion

The sublime is an affective response to an experience which gives rise to the feeling of transcendence. It is a notion of grandeur, awe and terror of the mind which may be represented in the literary writing style or in the content and scenery of the story. And it is the translator's task to recreate such "aesthetic qualia" in the transformation from one language to another.

The three most recent Danish translators of *Jane Eyre* immerse themselves in different, but less dramatic ways. Aslaug Mikkelsen simply deletes significant passages of the sublime; Christiane Rohde takes some liberties as she elaborates on metaphors; and Luise Hemmer Pihl tries to stay as close to Brontë's diction as possible, but not without some liberties in emphasizing certain points. Longinus said that the proper time for metaphors "is when the passions roll like a torrent and sweep a multitude of them down their resistless flood" (chapter 32). But if you overdo this, he warned us, you may end up more elevated than is necessary, or you risk puerile learned trifling and false sentiment.

Thus, translating the poetics of the sublime may be both an impediment and a reward as deflating the noble diction of the sublime in some passages and then re-inflating it in others is a controlled tweaking of the sublime which was strongly opposed by Longinus. But from a Danish reader-oriented point of view, this may not be a problem if the reader is unable to compare the original with the Danish version. What the translator can hope for is to have created a work of art that instills in the reader an affective response that attributes the sublime to this novel.

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Notes

[1] All references to Longinus will be to this online version: https://ebooks.adelaide. edu.au/l/longinus/on_the_sublime/

[2] All references to *Jane Eyre* will be to the Gutenberg online version available at: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1260/1260-h/1260-h.htm.

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