

A Different Approach to the Sublime

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Neil Hertz seems a most unlikely theorist of the sublime, in the line of Longinus, Burke, and Kant. Longinus and Burke display an unbounded admiration for moments of elevation, in expression and nature – not so Hertz, a great raconteur with an ironic sense of humor, a man of the people, able to talk to anyone. Neither Longinus, Burke nor Kant is notable for a sense of humor, and they are all quite snooty about the low or the trivial. “The use of trivial words,” writes Longinus, “terribly disfigures passages in the grand style” (154). But the moments of incongruity that provoke and dismay Longinus are precisely what capture Hertz’s attention, and his best stories are likely to have as a punch line something incongruous that somebody said.

For Longinus sublimity comes from nobility of soul and manifests itself in elevated language. Hertz, *au contraire*, is suspicious of those moments when “the language rises,” as he puts it in *The End of the Line* (62). He has a nose for precisely those moments of “tonal heightening,” which attract his critical eye and reveal special investments, something suspicious going on – by contrast with moments of less inflated language.

It is not just Hertz the raconteur who savors the deflation produced by the vulgar or overly familiar but also Hertz the critic. In “Recognizing Casaubon,” an essay whose centrality for his work is marked by the fact that it appears in *George Eliot’s Pulse* as well as in *The End of the Line*, the opening page considers a passage where Eliot asks “Will not a tiny speck very close to our vision blot out the glory of the world and leave only a margin by which we see the blot? I know no speck so troublesome as self.” This is an example of what critics particularly admire in Eliot, Hertz writes

The intelligence at work extending a line of figurative language brings it back, with a nice appropriateness, to the ethical point. This is an instance of the sort of metaphorical control that teacher-critics have always admired in *Middlemarch*, the sign of a humane moral consciousness elaborating patterns of action and imagery with great inventiveness and absolutely no horsing around. (Pulse 20).

This is an instance of the sort of touch that readers have always admired in Hertz: if things seem to be getting too solemn, high-minded and potentially pretentious, he will find just the right deflationary turn, that punctures pretension while nevertheless making the point; and, since no doubt we all secretly fear that we are being pretentiously inflationary when we write about the important intricacies of these texts that fascinate us, his deflationary turns make his point all the more impregnable. We might have smiled indulgently at the “humane moral consciousness,” but “with no horsing around” enables us to embrace that judgment in better conscience.

In “More words: Nullify, Neutral, Numb, Number,” Hertz writes that the arrival of Daniel Deronda’s father is

the occasion for one of those scenes of morally impeccable denunciation that have punctuated George Eliot's fiction from the first –thoroughly gratifying scenes in which one character is licensed to verbally excoriate another. Her readers have always admired them and no doubt even come to expect them: Nanny in 'Amos Barton' giving the Countess what for... . (Pulse 122-3)

("Morally impeccable denunciation" should perhaps have warned us that we needed to be pulled up short). Later in the same essay, when consideration of *neutral* and *neutralize* demands a reference to *le neutre* in Blanchot, which necessarily heightens and solemnifies the tone, Hertz quotes the opening of *Le Pas au-dela*: "'Nous pouvons toujours nous interroger sur le neutre.' 'We can always ask ourselves about the neutral.' 'Lotsa luck!' would seem the appropriate unspoken reply to this proposal" (127). Wry amusement and suspicion are his responses to the inflated language that is characteristic of the sublime and that is likely to arise at other points when authors are getting wrought up about something. Writing of a moment in Flaubert's first *Education sentimentale*, he notes that "the language in these pages is more convincing because considerably less inflated" (End 67). With that value scheme, how did he become our most subtle and powerful theorist of the sublime?

One might expect this Hertz to be a debunker of the sublime rather than its patient theorist and expositor. In "Two Extravagant Teachings," in *The End of the Line*," he takes as one text a pamphlet that the Cornell English department used to distribute, "A Writer's Responsibilities." His reading shrewdly locates precisely those investments betrayed by the high sentiments and lofty expression of the passages about teaching and writing:

Education at its best, whether conducted in seminar, laboratory, or lecture hall, is essentially a dialogue between teacher and pupil in which questions and answers can be explored, arguments can be posed and resolved, data can be sought and evaluated. From the time of Socrates and his disciples to that of the nightly discussion on the corridor, this dialogue has been the mark and delight of intellectual life. (End 144)

But, another passage on the same page of this pamphlet specifies:

The Policy of the English Department

For the first instance of plagiarism or of any other kind of academic dishonesty or irresponsibility, the student will immediately receive a failing grade in the course and be reported to the appropriate department, division or college for whatever further action may be in order.

Hertz writes,

The lineaments of an American scene of instruction are sketched in these paragraphs. The student might be Alcibiades, but then again he might be Al Capone; his teacher is either a master of instructive dialogue or a disciplinarian, and the whole operation can feel like "the intellectual life" one moment the next like a low budget cops-and-robbers routine. (145).

He then takes up a particularly intense sentence of high-mindedness from the pamphlet about the punishment of offenders against intellectual honesty, the development of which is said to be one of the principal aims of a college education:

What a penalized student suffers can never really be known by anyone but himself; what the student who plagiarizes and 'gets away with it' suffers is less public and probably less acute, but the corruptness of his act, the disloyalty and baseness it entails, must inevitably leave an ineradicable mark upon him as well as on the institution of which he is privileged to be a member. (146)

Hertz notes “the rising rhythms of the last sentence, the echoing absolutes (‘inevitably,’ ‘ineradicable’), the huff and puff of its concluding phrase.” And the quotation marks around “gets away with it,” “perhaps mimicking student diction, present the difference between the vulnerable institution and its disloyal member as if it were also a difference in verbal refinement: we are polysyllabic, they are slobs” (146).

I shall return later to his analysis of this sublime scenario of scapegoating, but this paper shows us a critic with a nose for pretentiousness, pomposity, excessive investments of complacency and narcissism – the sort of critic one might expect to avoid the literature of the sublime and focus instead on the ironical, the colloquial, the understated.

Perhaps he became a leading theorist of the sublime by accident. Reading his “Reading of Longinus” of 1973, I am struck by the fact that the ultimate focus of this essay is the status of figurative language: the unspeakable that the sublime evokes as it defends against it is the inescapability of figurality. (The inescapability of figurality is developed further in the intricate, multi-stranded arguments of the wonderful later essay, “Freud and the Sandman,” also collected in *The End of the Line*.)

But the before pursuing this line, the essay addresses the odd rhetorical strategies of the text by the author whom I shall continue to call Longinus. The sublime, *hypsos*, is defined by Longinus as “a certain excellence and distinction in expression,” one that in particular exercises power: “sublime passages exert an irresistible force and mastery and get the upper hand with every listener” (Longinus 100). Or again, “A well-timed stroke of sublimity scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt and in a flash reveals the full power of the speaker.” Hertz turns out to be interested less in how this power is achieved than in the way in which Longinus manages seductively to represent this force by transfers of power from one agent to another – from the action of gods or heroes in the passages cited to the action of the poet or the text under consideration. One might even see Hertz’s essay as a deconstruction of the sublime, in the sense of an analysis of the way in which its effects are secured by rhetorical reversals; and in fact, he takes as his theoretical starting point not the numerous celebrations of Longinus’s critical achievement but what he calls W.K. Wimsatt’s “unsympathetic but acute” accusation that Longinus’s slide from one distinction to another “seems to harbor a certain duplicity and invalidity” – like the figures Longinus himself analyzes as wonderful aids to the sublime. (End 1)

Hertz’s reading of Longinus begins with the demonstration of how the subtle metonymic echoes between one citation and another, which Longinus does not even mention, work to build up a pattern of linkage between the action of gods and heroes on the one hand and the sublime speech acts of poets on the other. After Homeric examples of the battle of the Gods and Poseidon striding over the waves which part for him, the lawgiver of the Jews writes “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” In the next sublime passage, Ajax, bewildered as thickest night blinds the Greek army, cries out “O father Zeus, deliver the sons of the Achaeans out of the mist, make the sky clear, and let us see; in the light kill us.” “In this passage,” writes Longinus, “it is the real Homer, the gale of whose genius fans the excitement of the battle; the poet [then here are lines from the *Iliad*] Rages like Ares, spear-brandishing, or the deadly fire raging in the mountains, in the thickets of the deepest wood. Foam shows at his mouth” (End, 3-4).

Hertz writes,

Here in chapter 9 a series of analogies for sublime language is produced: it is like God’s creative word, or perhaps only like Moses’s echo of that utterance; it is like a heroically risky prayer to father Zeus, it is like a father’s elegiac naming of his dead son. We are made

to feel that somewhere among these versions of the godlike we are entitled to locate the poet's own language, but where? (End 3)

Sappho's ode number 31, "phainetai moi," known only because of Longinus's citation of it, provides a crucial turn for Hertz's argument. This poem has long served as the prime example of the sublime achievement the lyric, with its representation of a speaker (and supposedly the author) powerfully proclaiming the passion by which she seems to be carried away even as she describes it. Longinus presents this as a sublime portrayal of *eros* that selects and combines the most important symptoms, "a congress of emotions, all of which occur with lovers" (115).

He seems to me equal to the gods that man
 whosoever who opposite you
 sits and listens close
 to your sweet speaking
 and lovely laughing –oh it
 puts the heart in my chest on wings
 for when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking
 is left in me
 no: tongue breaks and thin
 fire is racing under the skin
 and in eyes no sight and drumming
 fills ears
 and cold sweat holds me and shaking
 grips me all, greener than grass
 I am and dead –or almost
 I seem to me.

But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty... (Carson 63).¹

The articulation of what dramatically happens whenever I catch a glimpse of you produces a striking effect: cast in the present tense, an account of what happens repeatedly impresses us as something happening now, in the performative temporality of the lyric. I would add that it is no accident that Longinus's examples are in the present tense rather than the past, which tells us something about the sublime; this array of examples also marks the centrality of address to sublimity: not only do most of these examples involve address, but Longinus at key moments addresses the reader, displaying a performative power of language.

This poem presents not only the paradox of the speechless state of one who elegantly narrates what happens but also a powerful declaration of helplessness, which for Hertz "bring the motifs of violence and risk of death into touch with the rhetorician's theory that an effective poem is an organic unity. For Sappho is introduced as an example of the poet selecting and composing elements so as to 'organize them into a single body'" – only the elements she organizes into the body of her poem "are precisely the names of the fragments of her natural body, seen as the debris of a shattering erotic experience" (End 4-5). Hertz posits that what fascinates Longinus is "the point where the near-fatal stress of passion can be thought of as turning into –as indistinguishable from – the energy that is constituting the poem" (5).

Now there are plenty of examples in the treatise where Longinus himself suggests such a turn – when Demosthenes describes the violence of an aggressor, Longinus writes,

“the orator does just the same as the aggressor; he belabors the judges’ minds with blow after blow” (130), and of a particularly dramatic passage about driving a chariot he asks, “Now would you not say that the soul of the poet goes into the chariot with the boy, sharing his danger and joining the horses in their flight?” (122). Some of these comparisons between god or hero and poet can, Hertz notes, “seem merely wishful or glib” (8) But the Sappho example is, I conjecture, more appealing as a model of the sublime –to Hertz as to us – because the narrative of self-scattering or self-loss (rather than self-aggrandizement or heroic display) makes the poetic force more acceptable, and I would suggest, because the first person stages a conversion that is not simply mimetic – not like Demosthenes’ forceful words imitating the force of the aggressor’s blows. The “I” that is shattered and cannot speak is closely related to the “I” that so eloquently speaks and powerfully performs this passion, but the second is not an imitation of the first.

Hertz explains the transfer of the power of the sublime in a more formal way: Longinus gives us a series of passages, all of which involve an agent (God, hero, natural force, passion, poet,) ferociously acting upon an object (other people, natural objects, body parts, words).

The turn itself, the transfer of power can take place only if some element can shift its position from one side of the scheme to the other; it is here that we can see how Sappho’s ode serves Longinus’s purposes, for it is not simply a poem of passion and self-division but one which dramatizes, in a startlingly condensed fashion, the shift from Sappho-as-victimised-body to Sappho-as-poetic-force. (7)

The Sappho example helps Hertz define what he calls “the sublime turn” as “a transfer of power (or the simulation of such a transfer) from the threatening forces to the poetic activity itself.” With the Sappho example, “the grounds for comparison are now seen to be not the grandeur of the hero’s calling but its ambivalent connections with both violent action and the pathos of self-loss” (8). Sappho’s ode provides the signal service, I think, of shifting us away from Homeric moments of grandeur, of gods and heroes, to scenarios of self-loss, and thus makes possible Hertz’s later work on the sublime. The essay on Longinus proceeds to other issues,² but this early example provides a model with staying power – perhaps, like the power it describes, an irresistible force.

“The Notion of Blockage in the Literature of the Sublime” approaches the subject not through Longinus and heroic poetry but through another *locus classicus*, Kant and the mathematical sublime. For Kant, the sublime involves a dialectical scenario: when we are confronted with the overwhelming excess of a natural force (the dynamical sublime) or an infinite series (the mathematical sublime), there is “a momentary checking of the vital powers,” but which leads, as Hertz puts it, “to a compensatory positive movement, the mind’s exultation in its own rational faculties, in its ability to think a totality that cannot be taken in through the senses” (End 40). Thus the very failure of imagination to compose what it confronts into a unity discloses a suprasensible faculty of mind –reason –which at a higher level guarantees our spiritual identity.

But a movement away from this traditional sublime is enforced right at the beginning of Hertz’s essay, before the end of the very first page, with the move from Kant’s sublime example, St. Peter’s in Rome, to comic contemporary versions of bewilderment and perplexity in the face of excess: the scholar confronting a flood of publications no one can keep up with. This mental overload prompts lurid self-dramatization. Thomas McFarland complains that we are supposed to read broadly but no one can any longer

keep up even with a specialized field, and he offers the no longer so remote fantasy that as the flood of secondary publications increases they “will be programmed into a computer and, as time passes, will be more and more remembered by the computer and forgotten by men” (End 42). The swift initial turn to McFarland is all the more striking and revealing because it is totally unnecessary: Hertz has to hand splendid literary examples of the same structural phenomenon: proliferation leading to bafflement and a spiritual rebound.

Oh blank confusion! true epitome,
Of what the mighty City is herself
To thousands upon thousands of her sons,
Living amid the same perpetual whirl
Of trivial objects, melted and reduced
To one identity, by differences
That have no law, no meaning, and no end —
Oppression, under which even the highest minds
Must labor, whence the strongest are not free. (End 55)

This is Bartholomew Fair in Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* (book 7, lines 615-22). This and the Blind Beggar passage from the same book bring Hertz’s essay to a triumphant climax, but the structure of the essay adduces them, and also Kant’s “Analytic of the Sublime” and Thomas Weiskel’s *The Romantic Sublime*, in order to help us understand *not* the literary sublime in the lineage of Longinus but the general structure instantiated by the scholar’s comical self-loss when confronted with more material than he or she can hope to master. Setting aside St. Peter’s for McFarland’s bibliography, Hertz brings the logic of the sublime to the most mundane, ubiquitous experiences, providing a subtle but extraordinarily telling critique of the dialectical model of the sublime and empowering reflection on psychological structures of considerable ambiguity and complexity. Analyzing Weiskel’s interpretation of the Kantian analytic of the sublime as an Oedipal scenario, he shows how Weiskel’s hesitation about whether the mathematical sublime can really be subsumed under the Oedipal dilemma rather than left with the more diffuse anxieties and relations of the pre-Oedipal reveals the scholar himself—Weiskel, like McFarland—*wishing for* a reduction of the serial and the diffuse to a single opposing force that would generate the blockage and the compensatory positive movement:

The scholar’s *wish* is for the moment of blockage, when an indefinite and disarrayed sequence is resolved (at whatever sacrifice) into a one-to-one confrontation, when numerical excess can be converted into that supererogatory identification with the blocking agent that is the guarantor of the self’s own integrity as an agent. (53)

The indefinite plurality, threatening to the integrity of the self, is tropologically reduced to a single opposing force which can be recognized in a one-to-one confrontation and give rise to the dialectical recuperation: “although the moment of blockage might have been rendered as one of utter self-loss, it was, even before its recuperation as sublime exaltation, a confirmation of the unitary status of the self.” But Hertz shows that this is a specular rather than a dialectical process. The reduction is sought by consciousness to master an epistemological threat to the status and integrity of the subject by misrecognizing it as a structured conflict *between* subjects. The compensatory positive movement of the mind that has been checked is not just a *result* of the confrontation of the sublime but its telos, what the mind was seeking in the first place.

It is the example of the scholar, Weiskel or McFarland, that convincingly demonstrates the wish for a moment of blockage, a one-to-one confrontation, to counter threats of dispersal. We might be less ready to attribute such wishes to sublime poets, who dramatize their predicaments more effectively, but we know that other scholars are self-serving, so we need have no hesitation. Their example deflates and displaces the scenario of the sublime.

This brilliant conversion of the Longinian and Kantian sublime to an economy of the sublime that pervades the most trivial scenarios of the self is the Hertzian sublime. It is an account of the sublime that seems to me an incomparable instrument for understanding a wide range of texts and situations. For me it wonderfully illuminates, for instance, Baudelaire's second "Spleen" from *Les Fleurs du Mal*, which Longinus certainly would not have counted as sublime, despite its oracular accents, because of the deliberate detailing of triviality. How could the scholar's or the poet's messy desk be sublime?

J'ai plus de souvenirs que si j'avais mille ans.
 Un gros meuble à tiroirs encombré de bilans,
 De vers, de billets doux, de procès, de romances,
 Avec de lourds cheveux roulés dans les quittances,
 Cache moins de secrets que mon triste cerveau.
 C'est une pyramide, un immense caveau,
 Qui contient plus de morts que la fosse commune.
 — Je suis un cimetière abhorré de la lune,
 Où comme des remords se traînent de longs vers
 Qui s'acharnent toujours sur mes morts les plus chers.
 Je suis un vieux boudoir plein de roses fanées,
 Où gît tout un fouillis de modes surannées,
 Où les pastels plaintifs et les pâles Boucher,
 Seuls, respirent l'odeur d'un flacon débouché.

Rien n'égale en longueur les boiteuses journées.
 Quand sous les lourds flocons de neigeuses années
 L'ennui, fruit de la morne incuriosité,
 Prend les proportions de l'immortalité.
 — Désormais tu n'es plus, ô matière vivante!
 Qu'un granit entouré d'une vague épouvante,
 Assoupi dans le fond d'un Sahara brumeux;
 Un vieux sphinx ignoré du monde insoucieux,
 Oublié sur la carte, et dont l'humeur farouche
 Ne chante qu'aux rayons du soleil qui se couche. (73)

Spleen

I have more memories than had I seen
 Ten centuries. A huge chest that has been
 Stuffed full of writs, bills, verses, balance-sheets
 With golden curls wrapt up in old receipts
 And love-letters — hides less than my sad brain,
 A pyramid, a vault that must contain
 More corpses than the public charnel stores.
 I am a cemetery the moon abhors,
 Where, like remorse, the long worms that trail
 Always the dearest of my dead assail.
 I am a boudoir full of faded roses

Where many an old outmoded dress reposes
 And faded pastels and pale Bouchers only
 Breathe a scent-flask, long-opened and left lonely...
 Nothing can match those limping days for length
 Where under snows of years, grown vast in strength,
 Boredom (of listlessness the pale abortion)
 Of immortality takes the proportion!
 — From henceforth, living matter, you are nought
 But stone surrounded by a dreadful thought:
 Lost in some dim Sahara, an old Sphinx,
 Of whom the world we live in never thinks.
 Lost on the map, it is its surly way
 Only to sing in sunset's fading ray. (trans. Roy Campbell)

This poem begins with the predicament of a subject overwhelmed by, unable to find itself in, an excess of memories – a familiar, prosaic condition. These memories or secrets, as the opening lines call them, characterizing their heterogeneity by comparison with the contents of a huge desk – registers or balance sheets, verses, love letters, legal papers, romances, locks of hair wrapped in receipts – are a mass of writings of different sorts which *could* be thought of as richness but which is experienced as excessive or oppressive, unmasterable as the experience of a subject. The equivalences established transform this heterogeneous series of texts into equivalent instances of an absence of life: the indistinguishable serial corpses of the common grave, “les morts de la fosse commune.” The mind is a tomb that contains more dead than the common grave, and then, in a gothic image supposed to make this a more awful condition, seeking to generate some of the energy of the sublime, “Je suis un cimetière abhorré de la lune.” The extra touch of a cemetery so dreadful even the moon abhors it gives us an agent, the moon, set against the cemetery and thus unifies the indeterminate dead of the common grave into a single lugubrious figure – the abhorred graveyard.

The movement here is one of self-loss: as the memories become dead, *ennui* takes over, acquiring immortal dimensions. And, as this disproportionate *ennui* blots out possibilities of interest, the self, further depersonalized and addressed just as “living matter” is identified with a granite monument forgotten in the desert.

How can we account for the fact that this poem, with its radical depersonalization, can strike such a posture of rhetorical exuberance? Hertz's model tells us that when consciousness is confronted with a mass of materials that it cannot take in, the cognitive overload produces a blockage, a “checking of the vital powers,” an experience of being overwhelmed. But this focusing of the mind on its inability to comprehend produces a turn: the mind “sinks back into itself,” exultant at its own confrontation with excess, with the blocking agent. The moment of blockage is rendered as one of utter self-loss, but since the “indefinite and disarrayed sequence” has been resolved into a one-to-one confrontation, the identification with the blocking agent becomes a guarantee “of the self's own integrity as an agent,” a confirmation of the unitary status of the self (End 53). Here, the proliferation of memories and writings that posed the threat to the integrity of the subject has been resolved into a single object, the sphinx. Identification with the sphinx is presented, of course, as tragedy, not triumph: the sphinx is ignored, forgotten, and its ill humor sings only in or to the rays of the setting sun. But with the resolution of heterogeneous excess into a single figure the problem has been altered and simplified. No longer is it a question of what becomes of the self among this excess of discourses

and experiences that cannot be mastered or integrated — a condition more frustrating, even ridiculous, than tragic. The problem is now focused on a figure of considerable pathos: the lurid figure of a sphinx forgotten in a desert, singing to the setting sun, where the element of song suggests a certain value, even a grouchy pleasure or pride in one's irritated isolation, *l'humeur farouche* of an agent whose identity is assured — which assurance helps to account for the rhetorical energy of the poem.

There is consolation in the lurid, highly dramatized conditions of deprivation — “Je suis un cimetière abhorré de la lune” or “Désormais tu n'es plus, O matière vivante/ Qu'un granit entouré d'une vague épouvante” — consolations linked to the solidity of an isolated self. Those supposedly catastrophic totalizations offer escape from the more banal and unsettling predicament of confronting a hopelessly messy desk, or an endless series of memories that cannot be integrated or — to move from the situation of the speaker to that of the reader — of coming upon potential patterns, hearing echoes, without being able to decide whether they signify or not.

Elsewhere I have taken this poem to illustrate a modernist model of lyric as a drama of consciousness, transforming reality by acts of consciousness, so that value comes to inhere not in the objects of consciousness but in the process — a model that provides strategies for coping with what we call modernity (Culler). The lyric works to construct a subject — the subject one constructs to read a lyric, the subject one overhears — in the face of all the threats of dispersal and incoherence that the lyrics themselves explore.

This scenario of blockage and compensatory affirmation of the self can be translated into what Hertz calls the “end of the line” structure, diagrammed as the T on its side, in the Afterword to *The End of the Line*. The horizontal axis, the shaft of the T, is the axis of a play of identification and distancing between subject and the objects generated through the scenarios of blockage, which function as surrogates for the subject. The crossbar of the T represents a splitting or doubling of that object that figures a minimal difference: a minimal difference whose function is to stabilize, even momentarily, the difference between subject and object. In the Blind Beggar passage from the *Prelude*, Wordsworth, as represented by his surrogate in the poem, moves through the chaos of London and is brought to a halt, baffled, before the beggar, whose fascination, Hertz argues, lies in the minimal difference between the label on his chest telling who he was and the “fixed face and sightless eyes.” (End 218).

My mind did at this spectacle turn round
 As with the might of waters, and it seemed
 To me that in this Label was a type
 Or emblem, of the utmost that we know,
 Both of ourselves and of the universe;
 And on the shape of the unmoving man,
 His fixed face and sightless eyes, I looked
 As though admonish'd from another world. (Book 7, lines 615-22)

The difference between what the speaker can read on the label and see in the face is minimal but it is a fixed difference. In its minimal fixity, as emblem of minimal difference, it reestablishes a boundary and, Hertz writes, establishing a minimal demarcation, between Wordsworth writing and Wordsworth written, for instance, works to separate poet from his double and “keeps the poet-impresario from tumbling into his text” (60). This resolutely non-dialectical structure focuses on a point of opacity, a minimal

differentiation, that helps establish the integrity of the subject that textual representation, self-reflexivity and doubling had threatened to break down.

In Baudelaire's second "Spleen," pushing to the end of the line, we follow the sublime consolidation of the indefinite series into the figure of the Sphinx, the figure with whom the speaker claims to identify, and with whom, by virtue of the address to "tu" (you) the reader might momentarily identify also; but the invocation "Désormais tu n'es plus, o matiere vivante, / Qu'un granit, entouré d'une vague épouvante," the address to living matter that is also a piece of stone, splits the Sphinx into a minimal difference: the singing Sphinx is both living matter and granite, and then, since "oublié sur la carte" arguably means both left off the map and forgotten and written down on the map and forgotten, the Sphinx also splits into a Sphinx written down and a Sphinx not written down.³ The minimal divisions between the animate and inanimate and written /not written make this identification the end of the line in Baudelaire's hyperbolic sublime.

We are accustomed to sublime scenarios of epic or lyric, though Hertz has taught us to interpret them much more skillfully and profoundly. We had not been accustomed to sublime scenarios in nineteenth century novels or in the vicissitudes of academic life. But now we are, thanks to *The End of the Line* and *George Eliot's Pulse*. The Hertzian sublime has become a fundamental articulation, a ubiquitous structure for making sense of experience in general and exploring the psychological complexities of the self's relation to the objects that it invests.

One difference between these cases, I would say, is that unlike the sublime of lyric, the moments of the prosaic sublime do not come at the end of the texts in which they figure, and typically, Hertz observes, the momentary equilibrium of the end of the line structure breaks down and gives way to violent scenarios of scapegoating in which "the aggressive reassertion of the subject's stability is bought at some other subject's expense" (End 223). In the case of the pamphlet on plagiarism cited earlier, where for the student who "gets away with it" "the corruptness of his act, the disloyalty and baseness it entails, must inevitably leave an ineradicable mark upon him," Hertz takes up this morally-indignant and complacently high-minded fantasy of the inevitable ineradicable mark that separates once and for all the plagiarizing goat from the dutifully acknowledging sheep. This sublime scenario is a compensatory one, whereby those who make their living by articulating in their classes ideas which cannot all be uniquely their own manage to focus their anxieties about the intertextual nature of writing and language in general on a scapegoat. The huff and puff of this language is designed precisely to project an internal division or difference *within*, where one cannot be sure which ideas are one's own and which are not, into a difference *between*: between the virtuous and the base, the institution and its stigmatized member. Here, as Hertz notes in an elegant turn, "in one of those nice economical turns that characterize powerful fantasies, the delinquent member is himself made to unwillingly represent an emblem of integrity, of the binding of self and its signs" (the ineradicable mark which makes his character legible) (End 149).

In *George Eliot's Pulse*, investigating the continuities between the sublime passages of romantic texts and passages in Eliot's novels, Hertz works much as Longinus does, linking salient passages that turn out to have points in common and facilitating transfers of agency, by marking particular characters as authorial surrogates in dramas of representation or of scapegoating that ultimately bear on powers of fictional agency and writing. And here it is Sappho 31 that serves as illustration of the possible connection between the poetic sublime and novelistic scenarios: there is a transfer of power, he writes,

from the force impinging on Sappho (when she is seen as a victimized body) to the force deployed by Sappho (when she is admired as a poet)...Sappho's physical fragmentation, her coming near to dying under the stress of overwhelming force, underwrites her activity as a shaper of language and aligns her poem with the *Iliad*, where, Longinus tells us, Homer "forces his prepositions," "tortures and crushes his words," and "stamps his diction" with a particular character. Something very similar, I believe, can be detected in Eliot's dealings with a series of put-upon women: the evidence of their agency (or lack thereof) –of their passive suffering or active (or fantasized) aggression –is linked to signs of the impingement of force on a receptive surface, either to the marks left on a receptive surface or to the forced fragmentation of the surface itself, the breaking down of larger into smaller units. (7).

I do not have time to explore these brilliant and resourceful readings of passages in Eliot taken as allegories of fictional agency, in which the pairing of characters and the endowing them with novelistic attributes creates scenarios that get invested with a great deal of moral force even – and perhaps especially – at moments when the frailty of such vessels is being emphasized. Thus a passage in *Daniel Deronda* about Gwendolen's desire to have a career, with which the great eponymous essay of the book, "George Eliot's Pulse," concludes, is redolent with visionary comparisons, and "seeks its force," Hertz writes, "by conjuring up effects of force" (earthquakes, armies, thunder, martyrs, chariots of flame), while Gwendolen herself feels "reduced to a mere speck" (17). The idiom of the sublime here, Hertz writes, "its language of impingement, inscription and scattering, relocates the question of Gwendolen's fate in another register, one in which the adjustment of her 'punishment' to her 'crime' is replaced by her allegorization as at once the dangerously chancy producer of writing and the target of its unrelenting force" (19). She is a supremely unlikely Sappho, I would say, but Hertz writes, "the resonance of that equivocal allegory is the pulse one catches in George Eliot's fiction."

But Hertz the ironist, the deflator of heightened language, should be allowed the last word: "To call attention to end-of-the line structures then, is no more than one way –one somewhat excited way – of talking about what happens when one reads" (End 222). Long live the somewhat excited way!

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Notes

¹ In line two of Anne Carson's translation (from *If Not Winter*) I have modified "whoever he is," to "whosoever," based on arguments by Winkler (179).

² This is just the first of three sections of the essay. The last two take up the question of the deceptiveness of figurative language and its relationship to the sublime, a matter on which Longinus spends considerable time. On the way, Hertz finds more evidence that the sublime involves mortals trying to capture for their language some of the power of the divine by self-

binding or self-sacrifice, in what can be seen as a movement of disintegration and figurative reconstruction; but Longinus's concern that sublime rhetoric plays trick by means of figures leads to a different reflection, about the concealment or revelation of the figurativeness of figures. Instead of treating the sublime as created by figures, Longinus sees figures and the sublime as aiding each other: "sublimity and emotion are a defense and a wonderful aid against the suspicion which the use of figures engenders. The artifice of the trick is lost to sight in the surrounding brilliance of beauty and grandeur, and it escapes all suspicion" (End 17). Demosthenes concealed the figurality of figure, Longinus avers, "by sheer brilliance. As fainter lights disappear when the sunshine surrounds them, so the sophisms of rhetoric are dimmed when they are enveloped in encircling grandeur" Hertz reads in Longinus that when figurative language is concealed, it may sustain the truthful, the natural, the masterful, and so on; but when it is revealed, it is always revealed as false" (18). But our reading of the sublime, which found it to be dependent on the rhetorical structures of his own critical discourse, reveals a certain figurality, so we cannot ourselves identify the sublime with the concealment of figurality. Hertz concludes that we are drawn to characterize as sublime literary texts that afford a powerful apprehension of language's "peculiar agility in moving between the two poles," which may be variously named (End 19).

³ It is Paul de Man who suggests that "oublié sur la carte" may mean written down on the map and therefore forgotten: the sphinx is "inaccessible to memory because he is imprinted on paper, because he is himself the inscription of a sign" (xxv). See also Cynthia Chase, 131-2.

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