Why Some Lines Never Die: Ancient and Modern Accounts of the Poetic Sublime

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Certain lines of poetry—many still alive and kicking from ancient times—never fail to send celebrated poets and first-time readers alike into ecstasy. These are perpetually breathtaking lines, their power emanating from what, in hushed and wonderstruck (and usually rather vague) tones, we have always called "sublimity." Surely you know some: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"; "Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!"; "Sing goddess, the anger of Peleus' son Achilles..."; etc[1]. Unsurprisingly, philosophers and poets have labored to define the elusive, hypnotizing, "sublime" effect animating these lines, and trap its magic since writing began.

Starting with Longinus of the Ancient Greeks, then leaping to Edmund Burke of the 18th-century English Romantics, I shall explore two philosophical definitions of sublimity. Poetic examples—examples that Longinus and Burke themselves examined—follow each account, demonstrating each respective definition. Finally, I shall propose an original definition of sublimity, in preparation for a grand finale: my own poem, designed to demonstrate this original definition of the sublime. But let me delay no longer, envisioning the end, before I have sighted a beginning.

Ancient Theory of the Sublime

Less than a century into the Common Era (CE), a definition of sublimity emerged. Its author, Longinus—an Ancient Greek literary critic of mysterious, hotly debated origins—asserted rather grandly that "sublimity is a kind of eminence or excellence of discourse. It is the source of the distinction of the very greatest poets and prose writers and the means by which they have given eternal life to their own fame...sublimity...produced at the right moment,

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[1] Shakespeare, "Sonnet 18"; Shelley, "Ozymandias"; Homer, *Iliad*

tears everything up like a whirlwind, and exhibits the orator's whole power at a single blow" (Longinus 143-144). That is, Longinus deemed sublimity the universal mark of accomplished writing; his sublime is the flight of common speech into immortal, enchanting, literary heights.

In fact, Longinus quite literally pictured the sublime as a kind of ascension: the Ancient Greek word that we translate as "sublime" is ὕψος—literally "height"/ metaphorically "loftiness" ("*De Sublimitate*" 1). So to become sublime, is to become both literally and metaphorically higher. This association of literal "height" with metaphorical "loftiness" seems comfortably logical: when mapped to the abstract territory of the mind, a sense of visual height translates to thoughts far above everyday contemplations. Such thoughts are the intellectual peaks of sublime art. We encounter the towering sublime with our exalted mind's eye, just as we glimpse faraway mountains through radiant sunsets; just as sublimity towers over normal language and experience, a sheer mountaintop dwarfs human activity into ant-like obscurity.

Moreover, Longinus' sublime requires specific and novel rhetoric. For Longinus' sublime "produces ecstasy rather than persuasion in the hearer; and the combination of wonder and astonishment always proves superior to the merely persuasive and pleasant…[it] exhibits the orator's whole power at a single blow" (Longinus 143). To be clear, his conception of rhetoric likely depended on Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, the reigning account of this discipline. For Aristotle, rhetoric was "defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (2155). Longinus appeared to counter Aristotle's total alliance of rhetoric and persuasion. Instead, Longinus exalted a speaker who "produces ecstasy rather than persuasion in the hearer", which "exhibits the orator's whole power at a single blow" (143). Rather than

Aristotle's carefully developed persuasion, audiences of Longinus' sublime ideally experience a sudden, irresistible euphoria—a near-antithesis of Aristotle's rhetorical mission.

So Longinus' sublime is more than lifeless craft displayed on the page; his sublime requires a linguistic performance, a deliberately impassioned syntax. It needs to be fired at the reader like some oratorical missile. Thus sublimity's creation is never a passive act, and the receiver succumbs inevitably to its power. In a word, sublimity is nothing short of literary mind-control.

Certainly, Longinus' rendering might seem puzzling. Indeed, nowadays "sublimity" encompasses general things of beauty, awe, power, or some other vaguely mighty concept. We herd everything from trees to oceans, from sunrise to moonlight, from caviar to that extra-greasy Friday-night cheeseburger, into the corral of sublimity. Yet, Longinus described a unique, passionate, ennobling force so powerful that no bystander can defy it. Marveling at the orator Demosthenes, he proclaimed that "the crash of his thunder, the brilliance of his lightning make all other orators, of all other ages, insignificant. It would be easier to open up your eyes to an approaching thunderbolt than to face up to his unremitting emotional blows (177). So rather than some catch-all term, sublimity is a specifically exalted condition of its subject.

Unfortunately though, Longinus provided little evidence for his lofty definition of sublimity. What little there is, sprawls through disconnected and wandering sections of text (many of which I shall detail below); while Longinus' definition confidently proclaims the properties or effects of the sublime detailed above, his ensuing arguments only approach a complete accounting of them. Not to mention that, while his definition enumerates various

effects of the sublime (e.g. it "gives eternal life", "tears everything up like a whirlwind", etc), his arguments fail to satisfactorily explain what causes them.

I concede, however, that Longinus did attempt such explanations. For example, his analysis of asyndeton[2]-driven speech (a manifestation of what he calls a "source" of sublimity, as we shall see), in which "the words tumble out without connection, in a kind of stream, almost getting ahead of the speaker", in which "disconnected and yet hurried phrases convey the impression of an agitation which both obstructs the reader and drives him on," seems to characterize a causal sublime grammar which "tears everything up like a whirlwind" as mentioned above (143, 165). However, I am externally imposing this association between vicious whirlwinds and asyndeton-driven speeches, for Longinus simply didn't articulate this connection. He didn't connect his logical dots for the reader, or explain precisely how these ballooning arguments support his definition (indeed, this particular example of asyndeton-driven speech appears over twenty pages after the initial definition). His arguments are vaguely developed, and no vaguely developed argument is convincing.

Though he catalogued more sublime principles later (e.g. he advised the reader that "real sublimity contains much food for reflection, is difficult or rather impossible to resist, and makes a strong and rather ineffaceable impression on the memory. Reckon all those things which please everybody all the time as genuinely and finely sublime"), his efforts perpetually suffer the same confusion (148). Namely, he catalogued more effects of the sublime, without clarifying their causes. Such a profusion of stray effects begins to overwhelm the reader.

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[2] The connection of multiple, accumulating clauses and/or phrases with commas alone; this conjunction-less tumble of words creates a breathless effect.

But, indeed, Longinus' contentions here suffer most because they don't seem logically relevant: this notion of universal pleasure connects only tenuously to Longinus' opening definition of the sublime (perhaps universal pleasure provokes the "ecstasy...wonder and astonishment" which he so exalts in his definition?). Moreover, the statement seems vague and general, an intriguing speculation, but without evidence to justify this reckoning: e.g. what is the cause and definition of pleasingness, how and why was the said definition established, and who has the capacity to define such things?

Even Longinus' most painstaking attempt to articulate such causes—a detailing of the "five sources of sublimity"—describes "sources" which themselves require further definition (149). For example, the first "source": "the power to conceive great thoughts" (149). What makes a thought "great" or, as he later phrased it, "weighty"? What enables such powerful conceptions? Though he provided some explanation, prescribing that "the orator must not have low or ignoble thoughts", and demonstrating the contrast between these "low" and "weighty" thoughts in several excerpts, basic definitions of the terms "low" and "weighty" are entirely absent (150-151).

These incomplete passages together cement the main flaw of Longinus' text, as mentioned frequently above: he displayed myriad disconnected effects or properties of the sublime in his definition and arguments, without clarifying what unifies or causes them. Upon finishing his examination, the reader can recite marvelous properties of the sublime—but nothing much to explain them, nothing much to outline how exactly we achieve them. This letdown is especially puzzling, considering Longinus' own essential standard for a textbook: "second, and more important, that it should explain how and by what methods we can achieve [its subject]"

(143). Apparently, he did not hold himself to the same standards. Or he considered his explanation of "sublime" logically connected, but his sense of logical connection differed from ours. Whatever the case, this reader feels more confused than enlightened.

To be fair, Longinus directed readers to his study of Xenophon (no longer extant) for a detailed explanation of a sublime "source"—hence many of the elaborating pages in this section are entirely lost (149-150). Thus, perhaps we are unable to fairly evaluate the author's structure, perhaps we should imagine many justifying explanations. Nevertheless, the evaluation of merely imagined text seems endlessly biased and inconclusive. So we are left with this incomplete work, and cannot help but regard its incompleteness.

Perhaps closest to a true definition of the sublime is Longinus' analysis of an (even more) ancient work by the Greek poetess Sappho. This poem details the physical effects of ἔρος (the Ancient Greeks' equivalent of lust-at-first-sight which knocks one off one's feet), as presented in my own translation below:

"That man blazes hot as the Gods to me
that man, sitting across the table from you
he hears you near dripping molten honey
from your lips

giggling deliciously that sends my heart
flying in my chest: when I look at you
before I know it you have stolen all my

words,

but my tongue shatters silently suddenly
splinter fire slices my skin apart and
now my eyes that look into nothing, and my
ears are humming,

now a cold sweat freezes me, dizzy fear stra-
-ngles me all over I am greener than grass
I seem to be almost dead I but slave
you survive everything.

Longinus considered this poem “sublime” in the sense described above because it displays the “adoption and combination of the most striking details...she brings everything together—mind and body, hearing and tongue, eyes and skin...She is cold and hot, mad and sane, frightened and near death, all by turns”—apparently (since this analysis appears in the souce’s section of text) an exemplification of his first “source” of sublimity: “the power to conceive great thoughts” (149, 154). Yet, the author does not explicitly describe the poem as such an exemplification. Moreover, if the poem is such an exemplification, he fails to explain why these particular details are “most striking”, and why bringing “everything together” achieves such an effect (154).

Perhaps, upon recalling Longinus' original definition of sublimity, the designation of this poem as a "source" of "great thoughts" is more justified (149, 154). That is, Sappho outlines ἔρος in such an irresistibly multifaceted and painfully specific, physically gripping way that her poem "tears [the reader's normal state of mind] up like a whirlwind" as prescribed in the definition (143). And—because Longinus' requirement of "great thoughts" is a "source" of this very definition—by simple logic, anything which "tears [the reader's normal state of mind] up like a whirlwind" must exhibit its writer's "power to conceive great thoughts" (143, 154). At least, in theory. For again, the way that this happens is not clear, and I am imposing this speculation from outside the text. Perhaps the climax of Longinus' arguments in this section comes closest to explaining:

> Do you not admire the way in which she brings everything together—mind and body, hearing and tongue, eyes and skin? She seems to have lost them all, and to be looking for them as though they were external to her. She is cold and hot, mad and sane, frightened and near death, all by turns. The result is that we see in her not a single emotion, but a complex of emotions
>
> (154)

It seems that Longinus praised the "whirlwind" (or what he calls, here, a "complex") of emotion so lauded in his definition: Sappho engages all of the reader's senses, conjuring a sensation of myriad emotion. So one might credit Longinus with implicit connections, but I contend that he still lacks explicit and convincing arguments.

18th-Century Theory of the Sublime

Luckily, not all investigations of the sublime are this nebulous. During the 18th-century Romantic era, the English philosopher Burke proposed his own theory of the sublime, which (in direct opposition to Longinus') possesses a manifestly connected, carefully developed structure. Indeed, Burke's work outlines a systematized, logical map or "exact theory of our passions" (Burke 3). Though his "exact theory of the passions" is expansively complex, it unfolds with (almost obsessively) careful precision into a definition of sublimity (3). Moreover, Burke himself emphasizes how each section fits in this connected structure, often reminding the reader of one's place in the expanding text. Indeed, after defining the sublime, Burke manifestly connects every proceeding argument regarding the sublime to this definition—unlike Longinus. Finally (also unlike Longinus), Burke explicitly and thoroughly investigates clear causes of the sublime—not just effects. So, let us follow "exact theory of the passions" into his definition of the sublime (3).

First, Burke defines the very beginning of our emotional life, "The first and the simplest emotion which we discover in the human mind…" as "curiosity": "whatever desire we have for, or whatever pleasure we take in novelty" (Burke 27). This definition of curiosity is the analogue of initial sensations of taste or sight in concrete, physical perception: it is the first and most basic expression of emotion. As such, this emotion lacks the sophistication of later feelings, e.g. pain or pleasure. In fact, Burke deems curiosity "the most superficial of all the affections" (27). However, curiosity's elementary nature by no means renders it unimportant.

For, while curiosity is the least developed of all emotions (according to Burke, at least), it is simultaneously the most foundational. Indeed, Burke asserts that "some degree of novelty must be one of the materials in every instrument which works upon the mind; and curiosity

blends itself more or less with all our passions" (27). So curiosity is the necessary entryway to every other feeling.

Now the first development of curiosity is the emergence of pain and pleasure, the former of which (as Burke will soon demonstrate) generates the sublime. Curiously, the normally painstaking Burke claims that these emotions are "simple ideas, incapable of definition" (28). This is perhaps the only instance in which Burke leaves one of his key terms undefined, the significance of which eludes me presently. However, he offers no shortage of claims regarding the nature of pain and pleasure.

Firstly, Burke asserts that pain and pleasure are "each of a positive nature, and by no means necessarily dependent on each other for their existence" (28). Unlike other philosophers, he does not consider pain and pleasure to be interdependent (i.e. he does not argue that pain is the removal of pleasure and vice versa, but he contends that they are two distinct entities). Moreover, Burke names the emotion which does, in fact, arise from the removal of pleasure and pain: delight (31).

Burke's careful outlining of developing human passions continues as such; it is unnecessary to outline it completely for our purposes. In this fashion Burke reaches a definition of the sublime, dependent on his concept of pain (and mainly, a sub-kind of pain, terror) outlined above: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (33-34). So, drawing on earlier analyses, the sublime is a subspecies of painful danger (specifically "terror", which exceeds mere pain or danger) inspired

by self-preservation. And since painful danger is “the most powerful of all the passions” , the sublime is a uniquely potent emotion (33).

Yet, significantly, mere untempered terror does not produce the sublime. Mere overwhelming terror is nothing more than, well, mere overwhelming terror. Such an onslaught of danger is more likely to paralyze than to spellbind. When, however, that great terror is distanced from the observer, sublimity ensues. For “when danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful, as we every day experience” (34). It is most intriguing, that (according to Burke at least) the application of distance entirely transforms something’s effect, from pure terror to strangely pleasurable “delight”. His delight seems different from the word’s modern sense (associations with great joy or happiness); Burke’s delight is instead a kind of monumental relief, upon witnessing something dangerous or painful from a safe distance away.

In fact, there are numerous manifestations of Burke’s sublime, all arising from terrifying danger, which “is in all cases whatsoever, either openly or more latently the ruling principle of the sublime” (48). This guiding “principle” is a signpost that the philosopher returns to, again and again. Again, let us observe how encompassing yet concise that statement of cause is, compared to Longinus’ attempts.

First and most potent of all sublimities, is astonishment: “the passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (47). Significantly, astonishment occurs in nature, implying that astonishment arises from

circumstances that are not humanly conceived—circumstances, thus, which are greater than human. It is appropriate, then, that this kind of sublimity is uniquely potent, "the effect of the sublime in its highest degree" (47). For not only does astonishment convey terror, but it conveys terror from the most imposing backdrop imaginable: the vast world itself.

Indeed, the magnitude of sublimity's origins is very important. Not just important, but causal: "greatness of dimension...is a powerful cause of the sublime" (59). So the experience of terror amidst gobsmacking mountaintops would profoundly outweigh terror in, say, one's living room. Again, the need for some distance, as described above, to generate the sublime is apparent. When one is (both literally and metaphorically) distanced from everyday surroundings—and marooned in a vast mountainous landscape to boot—any experience therein is less familiar and comprehensible, thus more terrifying. And thus more sublime.

Perhaps the most intriguing manifestation of Burke's sublime involves obscurity, and the philosopher's declarations surrounding it. For Burke asserts that "to make anything terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of our apprehension vanishes" (48). Certainly, we all experience the paralyzing fear of the unknown, beginning from a young age: monsters in the closet, ghosts in the hallway, rustlings in the forest. Obscurity (like vastness) induces sublimity by conveying something ungraspable, by hiding "the full extent of any danger" from both physical and intellectual sight (48). Moreover, for the intellect, there is nothing so obscure as words:

> The most lively and spirited verbal description I can give, raises a very obscure and imperfect *idea* of such objects; but then it is in my power to raise a stronger *emotion* than

> I could do by the best painting...The proper manner of conveying the *affections* of the mind from one to another, is by words; there is a great insufficiency in all other modes of communication.
>
> (Burke 49)

So not only is language sublime, but for Burke, language is more sublime than the grandest of paintings. And this is due simply to the limitations of language: unable to depict anything with the visual accuracy of paint, words appeal primarily to what we can imagine, rather than what we can see. And since our mind's eye—being trapped in a skull—relies primarily on things beyond concrete, physical sight, it necessarily sinks more deeply into obscure (and thus, in Burke's estimation, sublime) realms of vision.

For Burke, the exemplary language of obscurity is poetry, and poetry's preeminent wordsmith of obscurity is Milton. Indeed, Burke proclaims that "no person seems better to have understood the secret of heightening, or of setting terrible things, if I may use the expression, in their strongest light by the force of a judicious obscurity, than Milton" (49). In other words, no author wrote less like a painter than Milton. For Milton's obscuring descriptions—which utterly resists visualization—are the very opposite (at least for Burke's conception of art) of brushstrokes which realize and clarify visual experience:

> *The other shape*
>
> *If shape it might be called that shape had none*
>
> *Distinguishable, in member, joint, or limb;*
>
> *Or substance might be called that shadow seemed,*
>
> *For each seemed either; black he stood as night;*

Fierce as ten furies, terrible as hell;

And shook a deadly dart. What seemed his head

The likeness of a kingly crown had on.

(Burke 49)

There is little for a reader to reasonably grasp in this description, or (most importantly) picture. Neither setting, characters, nor even actions are clearly visualizable in this moment. As Burke marvels, “it is astonishing with what a gloomy pomp, with what a significant and expressive uncertainty of strokes and colouring...all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree” (49). Indeed, one can hardly imagine any accurate rendering of this description onto a canvas. Hence, one can hardly imagine a more sublime description.

However, mere obscure, un-visualizable language is not automatically sublime. For, remember, sublime language must also convey that all-important, distant terror, that universally essential heart of Burkian sublimity (48). And language can be simultaneously obscure, and decidedly un-terrifying. For example, consider the following sentence: The donut was unlike any other donut, being neither soft, nor round, nor glazed—nor tasty, even. Clearly, the appearance of this donut, unlike any other donut imaginable, is obscure indeed. For we cannot clearly picture either its texture, or its shape, or its color. We can’t even imagine its flavor. However, while obscure, this object is certainly not terrifying. Rather than terror, the imagining of such a donut elicits humor alone.

In fact, Burke himself clarifies something else which cannot be sublime. His sublime is, most certainly, not anything beautiful: "The sublime, which is the cause of the former, always dwells on great objects, and terrible; [the beautiful] on small ones, and pleasing; we submit to

what we admire [that is, the sublime], but we love what submits to us [that is, the beautiful]...one being founded on pain [the sublime], the other on pleasure [the beautiful]" (91, 101). Evidently, his sublime requires the obscuring properties of terror and magnitude as explored above. On the contrary, Burke's conception of beauty requires quite the opposite: pleasingly small (thus clear and non-terrifying) objects. As Burke himself clarifies, "in short, the ideas of the sublime and the beautiful stand on foundations so different, that it is hard, I had almost said impossible, to think of reconciling them in the same subject" (91). Not only can a beautiful thing not be sublime—it must not be.

So Burke has clearly outlined his definition of the sublime—as well as the development of rudimentary emotions which, eventually, evolve into the sublime. Unlike Longinus' definition of the sublime, Burke's is fastidiously organized and connected. So much so, that one might challenge particular instances of Burke's arguments, but would balk at criticizing the logical connections of Burke's completed system; a pillar may fall, but the whole castle would stand impregnable.

My Theory of the Sublime

Having examined how both ancient and modern philosophers/poets define and demonstrate the sublime, I will now propose my own definition. It is relieving to me (and, I expect, to my readers) that my conception of the sublime is not terribly different. For my definition depends largely on the arguments of Longinus and Burke: I envision a force both as overwhelmingly turbulent as Longinus', and as transparently concentrated as Burke's. Yet, I feel that something is missing from both assessments. While these two philosophers certainly captured the overwhelming awe and terror and unnerving pleasure (Burke's "delight") of the

sublime, I believe that they miss the more dramatically positive elements which underlie any distant confrontation with awe-inspiring or terror-producing things—elements which stir a pleasure far beyond the delights of Burke (Longinus 143; Burke 34).

In short, I define sublimity as nothing less than communion of the tiny self with the tremendous world, and by extension, finite humanity with the infinite universe. For through the extraordinary communion of sublime encounters—e.g., as mentioned in above sections, those between a reader and Milton's epic poetry, or a person and a towering mountain—a newfound awareness of such vast relationships emerge. These relationships form a harmony, a proportional linkage of this miniscule self with the ultimate cosmos (expressed in proportional form, the self:the world::all humanity:the entire universe that it perceives). And I contend that these experiences possess a dimension beyond what Longinus and Burke described.

For during these sublime revelations, one certainly experiences the "terror" and "wonder" of Burke and Longinus, as one feels insignificant before obscure and colossal somethings. But one also (and, I contend, more importantly) experiences something else: a perhaps singularly affirming realization of one's belonging to something almost unimaginably greater, and more lasting, than one's self. And the American poet Walt Whitman exemplifies this seemingly paradoxical balance. In his celebrated, revolutionary "Song of Myself", Whitman urges the reader to

> Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,
> You shall possess the good of the earth and the sun...there are millions of suns
> left,
> You shall no longer take things at second or third hand...nor look through

the eyes of the dead...nor feed on the spectres in books,

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,

You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself

(Whitman 8)

Certainly, that sublimely fervid, rhetorical awe of Longinus appears: the chantlike anaphora[3] of "you shall" is irresistibly animating, the effect of which is not unlike the asyndeton-driven speech that Longinus considered sublime (8; Longinus 165). In addition, the distant-terror-inducing, vast, and obscure sublime of Burke animates this passage: images like "you shall possess the good of the earth and the sun...there are millions of suns left" are so immense, powerful, and challenging to picture that they produce terror (8). But this terror is distant, imagined from one's comfortable room or backyard (or wherever one enjoys reading Whitman). So this terror is sublime indeed. Thus, these lines leave readers feeling overwhelmed and dwarfed by their sublimity.

Yet, readers also experience a kind of nirvanic joy. For Whitman's exhortations are not merely terrifying to contemplate—they are also uplifting. Because in addition to feelings of diminishment against such immensity, one also feels—seemingly paradoxically—enlargement. Whitman pictures a kinship with unimaginably vast planets, a relationship to entire starscapes ("millions of suns", in fact) that normal experience cannot fathom (8). Such vastness (in contrast to our smallness) is naturally terrifying, sure, but it is also consoling. For elements of the universe, normally lifeless and unreachable, become forever accessible to the human spirit. This, to me, is the most profound dimension of sublimity.

[3] The repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of consecutive sentences, creating effects of greater animation and connection between ideas therein.

Having constructed a definition based on Longinus, Burke, Whitman, and my connection of them, I shall now attempt to demonstrate it: in a poem of my own, I summon the awe, terror, and unnerving pleasure of Longinus and Burke, along with the nirvanic affirmation of Whitman. Hopefully, the two main sections of this poem exemplify my hybrid sublimity. The first main section, containing phrases such as "fleshy, bottom-fed corpses rising pyrelike through undersea sunsets..." serves to exemplify the awe-inspiring, terror-inducing, and strangely pleasurable sublimities of Longinus and Burke; the second section (beginning with "...until"), with phrases like "finding you there freestyle freefloating so fashionably dreamboating" aims on the other hand (with its more affirming and humorous tone/imagery) to depict the nirvanic, almost carefree joy of Whitman. Together, these sections should depict that seemingly paradoxical balance of self-diminishment and self-enlargement. Whether I have successfully demonstrated this two-part definition, the reader alone will judge.

Ones That Get Away

Sunset memory blushing from deepsea rooftops,
soggy cosmos unshipwrecked,
fleshy, bottom-fed corpses rising pyrelike through undersea sunsets, legion spectral Atlases hefting
sewergreen nuclear dawns to bomb eyeholes
through the starblown veil of Plutonian night to breathe in rings from Jupiter,
moldy eyeless Prometheuses evangelizing for the numinously blind
in timeless stormgutters clogged from the inside,
radiant halfeaten shadows on the Cave walls grubby with worddrunk fingerprints,
backstroking through marathon tides of unexpired wonderment, washing up barnacled to
shake off the ages at the beached umbilical maw of some Eternal City,
slurping cataracts from the tender backwash of
wasted Medieval dawns

To fish you gasping from your dreampassaged window, rising Aphroditic from your room

perfumed with oceanbreath,
sinking on the crest of swarthy urban night's drowning constellation.
Your eyes watering the ides of stargazed lookbacks
Your hair of waveswells
Your words like
Timely wavewhite soulbride softly

Sing

City of luxuriant sorrow, slowly elegied from insomniac belltowers, tolling breathless ages
into radiant Neptune shudderings,
Elegied into rivers of moonblood emptied by sore redeyed curators from the flanks of
gory fortresses wounded by romance,
Elegied into secret midnight divebombing Pacific ruins to lounge on the Titanic,
Elegied into tombs of glorious slaughter opulently frightened,
Elegied into beachstranded parks tasting sunburnt eyes and glossy lips,
Elegied into woozy nightblue rooms courted by distant sirens, fornicating scythelike through the unwashed reptilian night,
Elegied into you.
Into unbodied from 10 to 5 AM in the crusty-eyed morning having kicked off our feet and untied our lips and snatched our gaping hearts from each other's chests and hurled them from psychedelic heights to fall shrieking into seas of offkey unaging rhyme all the while...

...until from ebony turbulence spills azured entrails,
awoken gurgling on the dawning shorelines
of sweetly dreamsoaked beaches

Sweating off those oceansalted dreams, standing before bloodsoaked Trojan walls
that Apollo savages with eternal vengeance, even while Father Zeus
gnaws their soggyfied afterimages.

Diving then, beneath the walls, beneath redeeming undersea radiance where Adam and Eve still garden for Neptune's delight

Finding you there freestyle freefloating so fashionably dreamboating

And you, retuning the strings, the strings which lasso wandering planets from supernovic excursions

And you, rebreather of sunlight into cantatory dawns

And you,
Before you get away

After Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself"; Allen Ginsberg's "Howl"

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