Ramus 44 (1&2) p.184–199 © Aureal Publications 2015.
doi:10.1017/rmu.2015.9

HOMER AND THE SUBLIME

James I. Porter

Was Homer sublime? The question is rarely asked today. Sublimity was once a staple of the ancient intellectual traditions, as Homer is perfectly suited to show. The present essay will take up the question of Homeric sublimity by examining four case studies drawn from ancient astronomy to literary criticism to Homer himself, who not only licensed but also inaugurated these later traditions. Longinus will lurk everywhere in the background, but part of the point of this essay is that Longinus, while broadly representative, is in fact a minority voice in the wider landscape of ancient thought, as is the purely literary critical perspective that he is usually assumed to represent. Just as sublimity transcends customary frameworks of experience by putting these radically into question, so does it challenge the ways in which we tend to carve up antiquity into domains and disciplines that are artificially removed from one another. Sublimity by its nature crosses over genres and discourses and brings out the underlying patterns of thought that they share. But now to our case studies, which will give us a clear entrée to the problem, and will supply us with criteria of what should or should not count as 'sublime', as we follow each case in turn.

Astrophysics

We begin with a treatise entitled *On the Heavens*, dating from anywhere from 50 BCE to 250 CE, but more probably from sometime at the later rather than earlier end of this range. We enter the text at a triumphant climax: its author, Cleomedes, a Stoicizing Greek astronomer, is embroiled in a dispute with Epicurus' claim that the sun is in reality as large as it appears to the eye, namely one foot across (a view Epicurus very likely never actually held). Then we read the following:

> The Poet displays how great the speed of the heavens' course is through the following [verses]: 'As far as into the hazing distance a man can see / with his eyes, who sits in his eyrie (ἐν σκοπιῇ) gazing on the wine-blue water, / as far as this do the gods' high-sounding (ὑψηχέες) horses leap' [*Iliad* 5.770-72; tr. Lattimore, adapted]. This may well be expressed in an extraordinary way, and with marvelous expansiveness (ἀλλὰ μεγαλοφυῶς μὲν τοῦτο εἴρηται αὐτῷ καὶ κατὰ θαυμαστὴν αὔξησιν). [And it was so conceived] by a poet who not only is content to use sight stretched to its limits to indicate the speed involved in the rapid movement of the heavens, but who also adds [to his image] both height [i.e., the

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2015.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> promontory look-out] and the sea below (ἀλλὰ καὶ ὕψος αὐτῷ καὶ πέλαγος ὑποκείμενον προσθέντι).[1] Yet even this description falls short (ἀπολείπεται δ' ὅμως καὶ οὗτος ὁ λόγος) of properly indicating the swiftness of the heavens. The speed that the heavens employ in their rapid movement *has no limit, and no notion of it can be formed* (ἀπεράντῳ δὲ καὶ ἀνεννοήτῳ τῷ κατὰ τὴν ὠκύτητα τάχει κεχρημένου τοῦ κόσμου). So surely it is stupid to believe that a part of them that is 1 foot wide could rise in such an interval of time (τοσούτῳ διαστήματι χρόνου).
>
> (Cleom. *Cael.* 2.1.171-83, tr. Bowen and Todd [adapted])

The passage is a hidden goldmine of information about the history and aesthetics of the sublime in antiquity. The first clue to this buried history lies in Cleomedes' use and then rejection of the parallel to Homer. Homer is adduced as evidence of the sublimity of the universe and its magnificence; a special vocabulary is used to mark this sublime magnificence (μεγαλοφυῶς καὶ κατὰ θαυμαστὴν αὔξησιν, in a phrase that is perhaps best rendered, 'this is expressed in a sublime way and with a view to heightening one's sense of wonder'). But this language is spurned in the same breath with which it is invoked: ἀλλὰ μεγαλοφυῶς μὲν τοῦτο is probably concessive, as Reinhardt understood in 1921, rather than a simple contrastive remark, as its more recent translators construe the clause, though both constructions are possible.[2] Either way, Cleomedes is going out of his way to adduce a parallel from Homer only to reject it. Why? The object of Cleomedes' argument is not the poet Homer, but an entire approach to a cosmic question, be this literary (poetic) or literary-critical. He is in dialogue with a tradition, one that lies at the intersection of several traditions—natural inquiry, literature, and the sublime.

Suppose we have a concession: to whom is the concession being made? The answer must be the source from whom Cleomedes has drawn the language of *megalophyia* and *thauma*. And that is likely to have been a literary critic who found Homer's description worthy of these same epithets, for reasons that will emerge as we proceed. Cleomedes shows a respectful but cool distance towards Homer, and is seemingly critical of his source. The literary approach to the problem is in any case insufficient in Cleomedes' eyes. For, as hard as Homer tries to give a sense of the spatial immensity of the cosmos, he 'falls short' of the reality. He remains imprisoned in an empirical and naïve modality of observation (what the eye can see), every bit as much a victim of the senses as Epicurus was (hence καὶ οὗτος ὁ λόγος, 'this argument *likewise* falls

1. Bowen and Todd (2004) here translate: 'the [depth of] the sea below'. Goulet (1980), 139, (echoing Reinhardt [1921], 191) gets the accent right: 'et la mer en contrebas'.

2. Reinhardt (1921), 191: 'Groß ist das sicherlich gesagt und voller wundervoller Steigerung…und doch versagt auch dieser Ausdruck….' Cf. also Kühn (1941), 51: 'nicht daß er Homer kritisiert oder gar herabsetzt, im Gegenteil….' Bowen and Todd follow Goulet (1980): 'But this is expressed in an exaggerated way, and with striking expansiveness.'

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2015.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

short…').[3] True, Homer valiantly tries to improve the sight-lines of the eye and to enhance its perspective by placing his (focalizing) subject on an outcropping of the land and by giving him an unobstructed view. In this way, the reader obtains a greater sense of the gap between the spatial extremes (looking out, above, and below—this is where Homer's 'amplification' is apparent), and ultimately of the one spatial gap that matters, the one that the simile is after all designed to illustrate: Hera has mounted her horses, which are winging their way 'through the space between the earth and the starry heaven (μεσσηγὺς γαίης τε καὶ οὐρανοῦ ἀστερόεντος, *Il.* 5.769; tr. Lattimore). The implication is, of course, that Homer has elevated the observer's (and our) gaze in order to give it an elevated view—a kind of *hypsos*—beyond its mundane functions, a point that Cleomedes shows he grasps well elsewhere in the treatise.[4] But try as Homer might to indicate the true scope of the cosmos, poetry is no match for astronomical science, which knows better.

Cleomedes cannot be satisfied with vague and poetic analogies about the nature of the cosmos, and he is not. Instead, he *outbids* the literary and literary-critical approach, and then reasserts his own language again at the end of the passage: 'the speed of the universe has *no* limit, and *no* notion of it can be formed'. In other words, there is no reason to attempt to represent, even in a simile, the size and speed of the cosmos, because these physical realities surpass all words. With language like this, Cleomedes is doing more than defeating his opponents (the Epicureans, or the poets and possibly the literary critics) with rational arguments. He has left both his opponents *and* all rationality trailing in the dust, and is now ogling at the inconceivability and, a bit oddly, the *uninterpretability* (or the *inexpressibility*) of the speed of the universe. Either way, Cleomedes has passed beyond all scientific and philosophical speculative rigor, because he has entered into the territory of the (cosmological) sublime. So now we have two distinct sublimes to contend with in this one text: that of the natural scientist; and its rival, or rivals, in Homer and in Homeric criticism.[5]

Taken by itself, the passage from Cleomedes would be of great interest in the history of literary criticism. It shows his own vested interest in the notion of sublimity even if he is not fully in agreement with the literary critical project that runs parallel to his own, and which he knows how to exploit at will. But what is truly stunning in this convergence of interests is the fact that in *On the Sublime* 9.3 Longinus invokes the exact same set of verses from Homer as Cleomedes quotes (*Il.* 5.770-72) and he uses the exact same language of a sublime

3. For a similar subjection of aesthetic grandeur to philosophical irony, see Epict. *Diss.* 2.17.19 on Medea's slaughter of her children: 'a magnificent act from one point of view (μεγαλοφυῶς κατά γε τοῦτο), it shows she had the right idea of what it means to have one's desires dashed' (tr. Dobbin [2008]).

4. Cf. 1.8.1-18 and 113-23 Todd.

5. Posidonius is often treated as a predecessor to such kinds of speculation, but the evidence for this hypothesis is lacking, and there are plenty of other candidates available (not least, Crates of Mallos).

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2015.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(ὑπερφυές)[6] cosmic distance (κοσμικὸν διάστημα) and measurement (καταμετρεῖ) in order to provide a sense of how the universe in its vastness exceeds the capacities of human thought. And if Cleomedes concludes that the size and speed of the cosmos surpass all words, Longinus is in agreement here too.

> 'As far as into the hazing distance a man can see with / his eyes, who sits in his eyrie gazing on the wine-blue water, / as far as this do the gods' high-sounding horses leap' [*Iliad* 5.770-72; tr. Lattimore, adapted]. He measures their speed with a cosmic interval (κοσμικῷ διαστήματι καταμετρεῖ).
>
> (Longinus *Subl.* 9.5)

Is Longinus familiar with Cleomedes' text, or vice versa? Or are they both working from a shared source or set of sources?

Nor do the connections end here. Longinus' interest in the sublime's capacity to signal the limits of thought explains why he has us imagine what would happen if the steeds of the gods were to take another two steps *beyond* the limits of the cosmos: 'Who wouldn't say, moved by the exceeding grandeur of this image, and rightly so, that if the horses took two more strides, they would no longer find any place to stand in the cosmos?' Here, Longinus shows that he has tackled the problem that is named by Cleomedes (How can we grasp the notion of immensity and the immeasurable?) by suggesting, if only notionally, its paradoxical failure: there can be no place (*topos*) outside the universe if the universe names all that is; but what would happen if you were to try to reach a hand or a foot (or hoof) beyond that limit anyway? This is the problem posed long ago by Archytas (DK 47A24), now dressed up in literary-critical clothing. Longinus is patently quoting from problems in cosmology. But he is also doing so in the language of later philosophers (as *topos* shows), whether Aristotelian or Stoic, who disputed the same question—language that is reused by Cleomedes himself (e.g. *Cael.* 1.1.17-19;[7] 1.1.39-60; 1.1.81-97; etc.). Longinus is not interested in solving the disputes among the philosophers, but only in the puzzle that generates these and the effects that the puzzle has on the mind of a reader of Homer whenever she encounters this image in his poetry.

What is more, from the Cleomedes passage we can see that Longinus may not have needed to dress up the thought as a literary-critical question himself: it very likely came prepackaged for him, possibly as it did for Cleomedes. The parallels are doubly astonishing, because Longinus construes the verses as an experiment

6. Cf. the way Longinus introduces the next passage in 9.6 (on Tartarus exposed to our gaze): 'The images of the Theomachy are *likewise* extraordinary' (ὑπερφυᾶ καὶ τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς θεομαχίας φαντάσματα).

7. τὸ δὲ ἐκτὸς αὐτοῦ κενόν ἐστιν…. τούτου δὲ τὸ μὲν ὑπὸ σώματος κατεχόμενον τόπος καλεῖται ('what is outside [the cosmos] is void…. Of this [void] the [part] that is occupied by body is called "place"' [tr. Bowen and Todd]—a usage the Aristotelians would reject).

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2015.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in measuring speed by distance, exactly as Cleomedes wants to do: '[Homer] measures the *speed* of the horses (τὴν ὁρμὴν αὐτῶν) by means of a cosmic distance.' That is, he seems to understand the verses as indicating that the horses flew down from Olympus to Troy in one fell swoop (ἐπιθρῴσκουσι). The bT-scholia on this line make the same inference, which could indicate that some of Longinus' and Cleomedes' interpretation goes back to Hellenistic Alexandria.[8] Whether with his Archytan thought-experiment Longinus is in turn outbidding Cleomedes (or Cleomedes' source), or whether he is quoting a different version of the same ensemble of motifs, is impossible to tell. If Cleomedes were referring to Longinus, this would mark the only known reference to Longinus' work from antiquity, but this is again impossible to determine. What *is* certain is that by juxtaposing these two texts we can confirm what could be inferred from either of them alone: in antiquity, science and literary criticism share a good deal in common—at the limits of thought and representation, which is to say, in the area of the sublime, which can be quickly defined as whatever challenges these limits in a particularly powerful way: in the sublime, a concept or an object is elevated to the status of an impossible Thing.[9] What makes this particular comparison so astonishing is the precise coincidence of interests, verbal expressions, and evidence, in addition to one more factor that I have neglected to mention: the verses from Homer (*Iliad* 5.770-72) are quoted as an ensemble only by Longinus and Cleomedes, and nowhere else after Homer. The only other place where even parts of this ensemble appear is in the scholia to Homer.

Oddly, the text by Cleomedes has barely made a dent on studies of Longinus owing to a set of assumptions that dictate, among other things, that science and art must be kept rigorously segregated—wrongly so.[10] Crates of Mallos, the Homerist, allegorist, and dabbler in physical theories of the universe, is an active subtext behind Longinus' treatment of Homer in chapter 9, as I have shown elsewhere.[11] For all we know he lies behind Cleomedes' treatment as well.[12] The scholia to

8. 'Through the quickest speed that we are capable of [Homer] displays the speed of the [divine] horses' (διὰ τοῦ ὀξυτάτου τοῦ ἐν ἡμῖν ἐδήλωσε τὸ τάχος τῶν ἵππων). In the next comment, the divine horses are spoken of as ὁρμώντων, which recalls Longinus' use of ὁρμή and ἐφορμήσωσιν in 9.5. But it is the D-scholia that most clearly express all the key elements in the passage that catch Longinus' eye, and especially the conversion of speed into distance: 'As far as a man can see, sitting on a lofty place (ἐπί τινος ὑψηλοῦ τόπου καθεζόμενος) and looking off to the sea, to so great an extent do the divine steeds rush (ἐπὶ τηλικοῦτο μέγεθος ὁρμῶσιν)' (Σ *Il.*5.770 D/Z^{s} van Thiel).

9. Zizek (1989), 71.

10. I know of only two scholarly discussions that connect the Cleomedes passage with Longinus. The first (Kühn [1941], 51f.) does so in order to prove that the Posidonius lies behind both. But this is unprovable, and as weak as the pan-Posidonian hypothesis. The second (Bühler [1964], 24f.) mentions the parallel only to deny its relevance and the relevance of all such parallels in Longinus to ancient natural inquiry. I will return to these treatments below.

11. Porter (1992).

12. If so, then Cleomedes' *kyklikē theōria* (as the MS tradition knows his title) would echo Crates' *sphairikos logos,* or 'theory of the sphere' (Gem. 6.2), which is called a *geometrikē theōria* at [Heracl.] *Quaest. Hom.* 36.8. Could Cleomedes be actively criticizing Crates? Contrast Bühler (1964), 24.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2015.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Homer supply us with further evidence of the same nexus of interests, as does Eustathius' comment on the same passage from *Iliad* 5:

> [These verses are notable] because when the poet is measuring the movement of the divine horses in a very poetic and prodigious fashion (ὅτι μετρῶν ὁ ποιητὴς κίνησιν δαιμονίων[13] ἵππων ποιητικώτερον καὶ τερατωδέστερον), he says, 'As far as the haze', which plainly [refers to cosmic] distance (διάστημα δηλαδή), [etc.]…, 'a man can see with his eyes', [etc.], [which indicates] where the unobstructed limits of sight reach (ἔνθα τὰ τῆς ὄψεως ἀνεπιπρόσθητα), etc.
>
> (Eust. *ad Il.* 606.16f. = 2.199.15-18 van der Valk)

The logic overlaps with Cleomedes' own, as does the language of optical obstruction.[14] Evidently Eustathius saw no contradiction between the physics and the poetics of the Homeric image. Nor did his Hellenistic sources. And neither did, ultimately, Homer, who intuitively grasped this very connection when he sought to describe in words Hera's swift movement as she was driven by her divine steeds 'through the space between the earth and the starry heaven' (μεσσηγὺς γαίης τε καὶ οὐρανοῦ ἀστερόεντος) from Olympus to Troy (*Il.* 5.769).[15] Eustathius' reading is premised on an allegory according to which the image from Homer represents the structure of the cosmos: Hera is air; air fills the space that lies between heaven and earth, around which Hera drives her chariot.[16] In Eustathius' eyes, Homer's verses are as astonishing as they are because they involve two kinds of grandeur, physical and poetic, at once. When we return to Longinus, we can see that he operates along much the same lines, though he cleverly adds a twist of his own: the picture of Eris in *Iliad* 4 gives us the measure, not so much of Strife, who represents the *diastēma* between heaven and earth, as of *Homer* (9.5). In this way, Longinus manages to combine traditional physical allegory with a notion of Homer's own 'cosmic' dimensions, and he ultimately (at this point in his text, at least) renders the physical cosmos into an allegory of Homer's sublimity. There is no discrepancy whatsoever between these distinct levels of reading in Longinus' capacious mind.[17] If we today cannot accommodate these levels comfortably in our understanding of the sublime, the fault lies with ourselves, not with Longinus or his peers.

13. Cf. *Subl.* 9.5: 'How does Homer magnify *ta daimonia*?'

14. Cf. Cleom. *Cael.* 2.1.230 Todd (τῆς ἐπιπροσθούσης…κορυφῆς) and esp. 2.6.122-38.

15. A banal confirmation that he did is Socrates' comment to Ion on the range of Homer's subject matter: it includes everything, including 'the dealings of gods with one another and with men, the phenomena of the heavens (περὶ τῶν οὐρανίων παθημάτων), Hades, the genealogies of the gods and heroes' (*Ion* 531c, tr. Russell), though to be sure Socrates is pressing Homer's poetry as far as possible in the direction of Hesiod's here.

16. 606.12-14 = 2.199.13-14 van der Valk.

17. Recall the inclusion of writings on *physiologia* as conducive to sublimity in *Subl.* 12.5, a point reiterated elsewhere in ancient criticism (e.g. Demetr. *Eloc.* 231; Men. Rhet. 3.336.25-337.32 Spengel), with carry-overs in more philosophically oriented criticism (above all, the Neoplatonists).

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2015.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Intensity

So much for case one. Let's turn now to another way of answering the question of Homer's sublimity, this time by taking up the essay *On Style*, ascribed to a 'Demetrius' and of uncertain date, but generally thought to be earlier than Longinus, and probably earlier than Dionysius of Halicarnassus as well. Demetrius has no specific vocabulary for the sublime, but instead resorts to two terms that Longinus absorbs into his own concept of sublimity: *megethos* (or *megaloprepeia*), meaning 'grandeur', and *deinotēs*, meaning 'forcefulness' or 'intensity'. The two authors at times directly overlap; at other times, their ideas converge implicitly. First, let us consider a direct point of contact.

In his discussion of metaphors which, through their vividness and personification, come alive, and overcome their boldness through their very overboldness of expression, Demetrius picks out two from the *Iliad*. One is 'the battle shuddered [ἔφριξεν]' (*Il.* 13.339), which captures well 'the clash of spears and the low, continuous sound they make. In so doing,' he writes, Homer 'has simultaneously exploited the personifying metaphor…when he represents the battle shuddering as if alive [ὥσπερ ζῶον]' (Demetr. *Eloc*. 82, tr. Innes). Personification, vividness, and shuddering shock are all key ingredients of the Longinian sublime. In the next section (83), Demetrius turns to another metaphor that is even more reckless, as it risks producing 'triviality rather than grandeur, even though the metaphor is intended to impress [πρὸς ὄγκον λαμβανομένης], for example "all around the mighty heaven trumpeted [*Il.* 21.388]"' (tr. Innes). Here, Demetrius notes a certain discomfort with the verse: 'the whole heaven resounding ought not to have been compared to a resounding trumpet—unless perhaps a defense of Homer could be made that the whole heaven would resound if it were trumpeting' (tr. Innes). Longinus quotes the same verse as part of a pastiche of verses that together exhibit a dangerous moment in Homer: 'terrifying as all this is,' he says, '[the passage] is blasphemous and indecent unless it is interpreted allegorically' (9.6-7). It is hard to resist the conclusion that both authors are drawing on the same tradition here, unless Longinus is drawing directly upon Demetrius (and possibly others).[18]

Hyperbole affords another way in which Homer achieves a kind of grandeur and intensity that we can perhaps now qualify as the Demetrian sublime. The example I want to focus on happens to be one of two places where Demetrius uses *hypsēlos* ('sublime') in a significant way, albeit not as a critical term, but rather for its thematic relevance. The problem he is setting has to do with climactic progression:

18. See Russell (1964), *ad loc*., for this parallel and for further parallels in Pliny, the Homeric scholia, Plutarch, and Philostratus (*Her.* 25.9).

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2015.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> Homer similarly, in describing the Cyclops, keeps augmenting his hyperbole and seems to climb higher and higher with it (ἀεὶ ἐπαύξει τὴν ὑπερβολήν, καὶ ἐπανιόντι ἐπ' αὐτῆς <ἔοικεν>): 'for he was not like men who eat bread but like a wooded summit' [*Od*. 9.190f.], and what is more, the summit of a high mountain, one towering above all the others (καὶ προσέτι ὑψηλοῦ ὄρους καὶ ὑπερφαινομένου τῶν ἄλλων ὀρῶν). For however big they are, things which come first always seem less big when bigger things follow.
>
> (Demetr. *Eloc.* 52, tr. Innes)

Here we have a *truly* Longinian moment, for in question is not merely the figure of hyperbole (which elsewhere Demetrius memorably defines as the expression of an impossibility, an *adynaton*, 125), but hyperbole in its exponential form, practically a hyperbole of a hyperbole, which was, in fact, a recognized figure for the sublime.[19] In the quotation from the *Odyssey*, we have yet another accumulation of effects: an *auxēsis* compounds a hyperbole, both are added to the trope of height, while Demetrius repeats the series again in his own commentary, first by adding an amplification of his own ('and what is more'), one that shows Homer's mountain to be a high one, and then by climaxing the description by explaining that the mountain is a superlatively—or rather, inestimably—high one. This last effect is brought about with the first of two occurrences of a *hypsos*-word (ὑψηλός) in *On Style*. It is followed by a *hyper*-verb (ὑπερφαίνεσθαι), which reinforces the sense of appearing beyond and above.[20] We are clearly in the world of the sublime here (Longinus will likewise include the Cyclops among the sublime objects in Homer's landscape).[21] But we have never actually left Homer, for Demetrius' comment is in fact shaped on the next verse from the same passage (ὑψηλῶν ὀρέων, ὅ τε φαίνεται οἷον ἀπ' ἄλλων [*Od.* 9.192]), while also reflecting the preceding verses in which *hypsēlos* and *hypsi-* are frequent (ὑψηλός [*Od.* 9.183, 185, 192, all in first position]; ὑψικόμοισιν [*Od.* 9.186]; cf. πελώριος [Od. 9.187, 190]). Here, the language of critical commentary and that of poetic objects merge together imperceptibly and then drift apart again. The sublime language of *hypsos* in all likelihood *does* derive from Homer, and eventually descends into the vocabulary of later poets and critics. Indeed, we seem to have a perfect instance of this transfer right in front of us.[22] Demetrius' critical heirs, Dionysius and Longinus and

19. 'This is a hyperbole of a hyperbole (τοῦτο δέ ἐστιν ὑπερβολὴ ὑπερβολῆς)' (Σ Q *Od.* 9.187).

20. καὶ προσέτι ὑψηλοῦ ὄρους καὶ ὑπερφαινομένου τῶν ἄλλων ὀρῶν ('and what is more, the summit of a high mountain, one towering above [lit. "appearing above"] all the others', tr. Innes).

21. *Subl.* 9.14. See Hunter (2009), 149-51, one of the very few scholars to recognize the significance of the Homeric passage for Longinus. Nevertheless, it is not sheer size alone (Hunter [2009], 150) but contrastive sizes, and indeed the very threat to the criterion of size, that matter most of all, as the scholium just quoted also notes.

22. Other such instances are detectable in the scholia to Homer. See Porter (2015), where these are discussed under the name of 'critical hyperallage'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2015.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

their Roman counterparts, will take over from him in the next generations, exactly where he left off.[23]

They probably looked to Demetrius' passages on hyperbole, because these are among his most inspired, and the most conceptually affined to a sublimity that they found in earlier prose and poetry. At 48 Demetrius again comments on the grandeur of Homer, this time on a certain harshness (δυσφωνία) in his composition, which he finds productive of *megethos*. The example comprises a verse and a half from the *Iliad*: 'Mighty Ajax aimed always at bronze-helmeted Hector'. Demetrius comments, 'In other respects the ugly clash of sounds is perhaps unpleasant to the ear, but by its very excess it brings out the greatness of the hero.'[24] For excess, the Greek has *hyperbolē*. And finally, in 124 Demetrius returns to hyperbole again, surprisingly labeling it 'the most frigid of all figures'. What he must mean is that hyperbole *borders* on the frigid by virtue of its intrinsic impossibility, which is to say that it flirts with danger, not that it *invariably* reduces to frigid effects. We can be certain that this is so because of the examples he gives: 'like the winds in speed' (*Il*. 10.437, said of horses), 'whiter than snow' (*ibid*.), 'with her head she reached the sky' (*Il*. 4.443, of Eris). Was Longinus thinking of this passage too when he composed chapter 9.4-5 with its mention of Eris and the divine steeds rushing seemingly beyond the reaches of the cosmos? Or did this specific combination of imagery, which each critic is summoning, come pre-packaged in the tradition, available to both?[25] These need not be exclusive options. What is significant in both cases is not the application of the figure to an effect like grandeur (*megethos*) or to a style like the grand style (*megaloprepeia*), but the way the figure nearly undoes the very idea of measure on which these two categories are predicated.

P.Oxy. 410

One hint that Longinus and Demetrius are working out of a common tradition comes from an unexpected source, an Oxyrhynchus papyrus from the early fourth century which, though tattered, contains one astonishing column that is highly relevant to the present inquiry. The work is thought to be about the effects of *megaloprepeia* or high-mindedness in rhetoric, presumably ethical projection by the speaker (so its *princeps* editors, Grenfell and Hunt). But in the middle of the four preserved columns, out of the blue, a sequence of literary quotations

23. The second occurrence of a *hypsos*-word in *On Style* is in 148, in a discussion of Sappho 111 L.-P., which likewise has to do with hyperbolically excessive size.

24. ἄλλως μὲν γὰρ ἴσως δυσήκοος ἡ τῶν γραμμάτων σύμπληξις, ὑπερβολὴ δ' ἐμφαίνουσα τὸ μέγεθος τοῦ ἥρωος (tr. Innes).

25. Bühler (1964), 21, and Russell (1964), *ad loc*., do not suggest anything like these possibilities, though Bühler mentions the Eris parallel in Demetrius, *inter alia*. There are of course other possible sources for Longinus, including [Heracl.] *Quaest. Hom*. 29 and *P. Oxy*. 410 (to be discussed below), but this particular combination is unique.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2015.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

appear: four verses from Homer (all from book 9), one from Sophocles (only his name survives), and some key thematic terms which help to contextualize this material:

> About which … | … with [whom] one is conversing [or 'arguing'], and whatever they value, that is a great thing [for them] (καὶ ὅτι κ' ἀξιῶντι, | τοῦτο μέγα), as in: '[Nor will I marry a daughter of Atreus' son, Agamemnon] not if she challenged Aphrodite the golden for loveliness' [*Il*. 9.388f.], 'not all that the stone doorsill of the Archer [holds fast within it]' [*Il*. 9.404], 'not all that is brought in to Thebes of Egypt' [*Il*. 9.381f.], and 'not if he gave me gifts as many as the sand or the dust is' [*Il*. 9.385]. And examples like 'she strides on the earth with her head striking heaven [*Il*. 4.443] and Sophocles [three-plus lines missing] ‖ [three lines missing] we marvel ([θα]υμάζομεν) [two lines missing] … everything appears grander ([μεγ]αλοπρεπέστε|[ρα[26] … π]άντα φαίνε|[…])
>
> (P.Oxy. 410 cols. ii.44-iii.69)

Three lessons may be learned from this precious piece of evidence: first, a kind of sublimity, or at the very least grandeur of mind and diction, was being discussed in a continuous tradition of writings on rhetoric *à la* Longinus that stretched back well into the fourth century (if the conjectured date is correct); secondly, Homer was being cited as evidence of grandeur in such contexts; thirdly, and most astonishingly of all, the Iliadic verse about Eris was a *topos* in this tradition and an allegory of grandeur, even before Demetrius.

Divinity

One of the foremost attractors of sublimity in antiquity were the gods, and Homer led the way here too. But while Homer is typically praised for the concrete vividness with which he brings the gods to life in the mind of a hearer or reader, the Homeric gods inaugurate a further trait, which truly makes them sublime: they stretch the human imagination to its utmost limits. Thus, the attempt to make the Olympians palpable in song and verse never fully succeeds, nor, arguably, was it meant to do so. Everything the gods do involves the supernatural, or the *hyperphyes*.

Hera's flight in *Iliad* 15 is a case in point. When Hera returns to 'tall Olympus' from Mount Ida, she does so in a way that defies rational accounting:

26. [μεγ]αλοπρεπέστε|[ρα] Radermacher: [μεγ]αλοπρεπέστε|[ρον] Lobel et Hunt.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2015.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> [Zeus] spoke, and the goddess of the white arms Hera did not disobey him
> but went back to tall Olympos from the mountains of Ida.
> As the thought flashes in the mind of a man who, traversing
> much territory, thinks of things in the mind's awareness,
> 'I wish I were here or there', and imagines many things (μενοινήῃσί τε πολλά);
> so rapidly in her eagerness (μεμαυῖα) winged Hera, a goddess.
> (*Il.* 15.78-83, tr. Lattimore [adapted])

The conceit being drawn by Homer pointedly strains the very limits of picturability. Is the goddess's horizontal and upward movement physical or supernatural? Is she travelling with her body or her mind, or by urging her body with her mind? Beyond the difficulties of simply making out the logistics of the scene, there is a further twist to the problem. The improbability of the imagery is written right into its DNA: the point is not that such images strain the imagination or our credulity, but that they strain conceivability. Hera's movement is unthinkably quick. Yet we are being asked to think this very thought, and then to reflect on its unthinkability. The gap between the depiction of the goddess and her divinity is made palpable in our minds. This in no way diminishes the god's divine status. On the contrary, it enhances it. But it does push divinity to a realm that lies beyond the limits of the poem's language, of what the poem can actually express.

The beauty of the image lies in the way it combines opposing levels: it evokes dream-like scenarios, but it also takes place at an exquisitely high level of reflection. An image of thought, it is also *about* the nature of thought. Some of the other divine imagery found in Homer is purely physical—however improbable, as with Zeus's nodding brows, or however reliant on a simple magnification of ordinary dimensions, as with Strife, which for Longinus maps 'the gap between earth and heaven' (9.4). And gaps, especially cosmic ones, are by their nature uplifting: they challenge our imaginations to stretch beyond our customary perspectives into a region that Longinus calls 'higher than human' (36.3). That is why the sublime's most common synonyms in Longinus are *ta hyperphya* and *ta megala*.

Longinus' subsequent comment about Strife ('One might say that this is the measure not so much of Strife as of Homer', 9.4) is significant; it shows us that in his mind at least, Strife was less a god than a poetic device. She is a figure of speech and, above all, a figure of thought—a thought that resides in Homer's mind. Even if Longinus no longer accepts Homer's theology, as his last remark suggests, the point he is making nonetheless grants an internal validity to the poem's perspective. It is one we can adopt for ourselves: Strife as conventionally handed down strains the imagination; she causes strife wherever she appears, in the mere form of her appearance. Through Strife, heaven and earth are improbably conjoined.

By contrast, the verses about Hera's traveling 'faster than the speed of thought' not only subvert the imagination; they also invoke the very process of

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2015.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

imagination itself, and above all the limits of that process, in a way that is as vividly familiar in Homer as it is today. Hera's thought or mind is 'eager', and she imagines herself to be somewhere else in her thought, just as the mind of the man in the simile (μεμαυῖα corresponds to μενοινήῃσι for this reason):[27] as she thinks the thought, she accomplishes it in an instant, as no human thought could do—such is her superior mind's awareness.[28] The audience in turn strain to imagine the thought and its accomplishment, and, like the internal thinker, are left with a wish, or dream, and a barely imaginable god. There is a striking and I think significant intellectualism to this imagery, the identification of one of the gods' activities with *noos* or thought (which, I suppose, is what lies behind the action of Zeus's brows too), or better yet, the failure of the human mind to grasp the workings of the divine mind and its urges. And though Longinus does not treat the example, he treats others like it, as when he writes, 'our thoughts often pass beyond (ἐκβαίνουσιν) the limits of our surroundings' (35.3), an activity that puts us in touch with the divine in ourselves, if not quite with god himself (36.1).

This being the case, we can be fairly certain that Longinus would have considered the passage about Hera sublime, as the scholia seem to do:

> 'As the thought flashes in the mind of a man': [This simile is of note] because the divine speed of flying from place to place is compared in an exaggerated way (ὑπερβολικῶς) with the movement of thought, and because the proverbial phrase 'flew just like a thought' derives from these lines and from the line from the *Odyssey*, 'whose swift ships move like a wing or thought' [*Od.* 7.36], which is found in no other poet.
>
> (Σ A *Il.* 15.80 Ariston.)

Whether or not Homer's gods represent any kind of theology at all or are merely literary devices, the problem of their conceivability persists: the plastic images of the gods are, so to speak, an imaginary resolution of a real conceptual problem. Even if the gods were nothing more than this, a mere compromise formation—not gods themselves, but sublime objects keeping us at arm's length from God—the point remains that they display rather than conceal the imaginative difficulties that are bound up with the notion of god *in their very presentation*, as do all subsequent representations of divinity, from Hesiod to Aeschylus, Plato, Aristotle, and beyond. They invite speculation on their nature. The gods in Homer point to something greater than themselves, and they do so both in their incompleteness in the imagination and in the essential inconsistency of their representations. Too much a part of this world, they suggest something they cannot even embody. But what is that? The question, which suggests an inestimable excessiveness, is

27. See Janko (1992), *ad loc*. who also observes the correspondence.

28. See Thornton (1984), 195, who notes that the gods 'do not typically know what it means to *experience* time'; instead, they occupy 'a position outside time'. See also Purves (2006).

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2015.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

difficult enough to provoke a sublime response, for there is no ready answer available.

Consider another scene that attracted the notice of ancient critics. At *Iliad* 18.145-48, a narrative feature is felt to be sufficient to stir powerful emotions in the audience. At issue is nothing more than a scene change, marked by two sets of characters departing in opposite directions. One scholium reads, 'The departures of the characters are marvelous' (αἱ διαιρέσεις θαυμασταί). A second adds, 'And they hold the mind of the listeners in suspense' (καὶ τὸν νοῦν ἀναρτῶσαι τῶν ἀκροατῶν) (Σ bT *Il.* 18.145-48 *ex.*).[29] This all may seem like critical overkill until we look at the text more closely. Thetis is consoling Achilles and strengthening his resolve with a promise of divine assistance in the offing (Achilles' new weapons). Her sisters, the Nereids, 'plunged back beneath the wave of the water' to consult with their father down below, while Thetis heads up 'to tall Olympos and to Hephaistos, the glorious smith, if he might be willing to give me for my son renowned and radiant armour' (*Il.* 18.142-45, tr. Lattimore). Intriguingly, and tellingly, the Homeric critics locate the wonder in the mere separation of the characters. This might appear a curious place in which to locate wonderment, and in fact the second scholium has to add suspense as a second consideration, which guarantees that the separation of the characters is not strictly speaking part of the suspense but an independent source of wonder. The narrative breaks off, and readers must wait for its continuation (the request for Achilles' arms and his return to battle). But what is there to marvel at in the separation (*diairesis*) of the goddesses, which is not yet a change of scenery so much as a parting of the ways?

The answer surely has to do with the alternate directions in which the divine characters go and the extremes that their paths map. We are being reminded, again, of a sublime *diastēma*, one that runs down to the bottom of the ocean and up to the heavens, very like Eris and other physical embodiments of extremes that appear throughout the poems. In other words, the parting of the goddesses in two directions marks out a sublime gap, a vertical axis that opens up within the physical space of the poem and that reveals, in a momentary glimpse, the full range of the Olympian powers. This gap is in turn figured by a narrative *diairesis*, a scene change, that is being introduced into the narrative space of the poem, from the mortal realm to the divine realm. Readings along such lines can help to clarify what is normally felt and meant under the conventional label of *epische Breite* ('epic scale').

So viewed, the scene is indeed marvelous. But if so, it is because it reflects a characteristic feature of the Homeric narrative geography, which is governed by a sublime vertical, Olympian perspective: this is what gives the poem so much

29. Thanks to René Nünlist for setting me on the right track with the specialized meaning of *diairesis* here; and see his discussion of this passage in Nünlist (2009), 143f.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2015.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of its grandeur, or *semnotēs*, another term used by the grammarians to label such scenarios.[30] But there is more, for as it happens such contrastive moments are utterly typical of Homer's narrative, and not only of his narrative geography. Once again, the very presence of the divinities is all-determining here—their perch and perspective guarantee that this vertical axis is in place and governing both poems at a deep structural level. This was noticed by Zenodorus, who in his study *On Homer* in ten books postulated an uninfringeable rule of Homer's narrative patterns—namely, that 'no two Iliadic scenes on the divine plane follow upon each other immediately. There is a regular change between scenes on the human and divine levels.'[31] Not only does the evidence of the poems more or less bear him out, but so too does the judgment of the ancient critics, in whose eyes such rapid shifts from divine to human perspectives or actions served to elevate the poems in their entirety, as is shown, for example, by a scholium from *Iliad* 4: 'Homer convincingly changed the scene from the din down below [on earth] to heaven, thereby ennobling (σεμνύνων) the scene' (Σ bT *Il.* 4.1*a ex.*). It's not that there are two distinct actions (changing the scene and ennobling the scene); it's that simply to illustrate the vastness of the topography, by a scene-change, is to impart a profound grandeur to the image, by emphasizing the massive polarities that span the Homeric universe, from down below to heaven above. If *hypsos* is not being explicitly invoked in such readings, its connotations are consistently active nonetheless. Homer, meanwhile, receives credit for being the consummate (ἀκρός),[32] extraordinary (δαίμονιος), impressive (σεμνός), magnificent (μεγαλοπρεπής), convincing (πιθανός), and fine (καλός) poet that he is.[33] Zenodorus' principle of narrative shifts from divine to human and back again has an application that can be generalized well beyond literal scene changes: it describes a structuring principle of perception and aesthetics in the Homeric poems. Homer's sublimity is truly manifest at every conceivable level of his poetry.

30. Similarly, at *Il.* 15.694f., where Hector leads the attack 'and from behind Zeus was pushing him onward / hard with his big hand, and stirred on his people beside him', the critics remark that the imagery is astonishing (ἐκπληκτικόν), 'if the hand of Zeus *reaches down to earth* and presses the mortal forward (μέχρι τῆς γῆς φθάνει θνητὸν ὠθοῦσα)' (Σ bT *Il.* 15.695 *ex.*). I leave aside the more obvious cosmic images: the golden chain (*Il.* 8.19-27), Hera's anvils (*Il.* 15.16-28), theomachy, the cosmic apportionment of divine realms, and so on. By contrast, *Il.* 1.531-33 earns no such comment in the scholia, and deservedly so. While the passage marks a similar polar separation (Thetis goes down from Olympus, Zeus stays; the operative verb is διέτμαγεν, 'they resolved *to part ways*', followed by the line, 'and she leapt into deep sea from shining Olympus'), the similarity is only partial: there is no drastic scene change from mortal to immortal realms; and we never follow Thetis on her downward journey: her parting is merely a departing; etc.

31. Nünlist (2009), 280, paraphrasing Σ bT *Il.* 18.356*b ex.*

32. Cf. also the parallel use of ἀκρός to mark out narrative climaxes (e.g., Σ bT *Il.* 15.390 *ex.*).

33. These attributes often appear as adverbs in the scholia.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2015.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Final Thoughts

While the examples given thus far could be multiplied, suffice it to say that nearly every occurrence of expressions built off the *hyps-* root in Homer (and there are a little under one hundred of these in the *Iliad* alone) can be fairly labeled sublime according to the criteria that would later be recognized as this, every instance of which is used to capture or color something that is outsize and extraordinary, of magnificent and startling dimensions. And while it may be true that so many things in Homer are of this same magnitude—his poems, after all, are nostalgic and hyperbolic epic sagas pointing to an outsize, vanished past: even the pig-pen jealously guarded by the 'noble' swineherd Eumaeus and long ago built by him is remarkable for its architectural grandeur ('it was large (μεγάλη), lofty (ὑψηλή), beautiful (καλή), and built of hauled stones'[34])—not everything in Homer is. Not everything described by Homer is of one emotive tenor and deserving to go under the heading to which Longinus and others would later place his poetry, that of grand *pathos*. Homer may frequently be sublime, according to Longinian criteria, and he may even be this on balance, as Longinus believed, but he is not monotone. There is plenty of delicacy and humor and tragic sadness in Homer, as well as refined attention to exquisite sensuous detail, some of which could in turn be construed as sublime.

Be this as it may, the language of Homer would echo on throughout the next centuries, first among poets and then among prose-writers. But, as in Homer, the sublime carried with it associations that were as significant to its aesthetic meaning as were the individual terms by which one could point to its presence and contexts. Sublimity was less a marked category tied narrowly to any one domain of human or natural activity than it was an all-purpose register, signaling aesthetic and conceptual intensity and superhuman qualities and energies, that could be drawn on at will. The sheer and in principle unlimited range of the sublime's applications, and its appeal to the senses of feeling, atmosphere, and color (in contrast to those of logic, reason, and line), may have ensured that sublimity would forever elude easy denomination. But then so did the fact that the sublime was from the very start a concept that by definition challenges if it does not altogether defeat conceptualization—and, we need to add, one that simultaneously has a footing in but also challenges sensory (empirical) observation: one *prays* to Zeus with arms outstretched to the skies, but one does not *see* him up on high; one observes 'the bulging big waves…and the blown spume that scatters high before the force of the veering wind's blast' (*Il.* 11.307-08), but one is nearly obliterated in the act by this blast, whether imaginatively or otherwise.

Whenever one reads Homer and his echoes in later texts, the sense one comes away with is that of a poetic landscape that is littered with sublime subjects and objects, and, indeed, the very view of which is framed by a sublime perspective. It

34. Gladstone (1889), 288; I have supplied the Greek (*Od.* 14.6f.).

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2015.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is almost as if anything Homer touches with his language—anything he attends to aesthetically—is bound to become saturated with extraordinary value, lifted beyond the ken of everyday existence, and taken to another dimension of reality. In a word, the Homeric epics are sublime, and they are this by generic definition—as Longinus was neither the first nor the last to observe.[35]

University of California, Berkeley
jiporter@berkeley.edu

35. My thanks to the conference organizers and editors of this volume, as well as fellow members of the original and memorable event at Santa Barbara.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rmu.2015.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press