

‘Le vertige de l’hyperbole’

Baudelaire, Longinus and the Poetics of Excess

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In ‘Théodore de Banville’, Baudelaire highlights hyperbole as the very marrow of modern lyric as it speaks to the very spirit of the word *lyre*, ‘l’ardente vitalité spirituelle’. In fact, leafing through *Les fleurs du mal*, one can readily find hyperboles which inspire in the reader the affective intensity of *le vertige*, a word that recurs in Baudelaire’s poetical works. Nevertheless, whilst hyperbole occurs frequently in his poems and is central to his affective poetics, the scholarship on his poetical use of hyperbole is skimpy. The aim of this paper is therefore twofold. First, it seeks to do justice to Baudelaire’s keen engagement in hyperbole. There are few Baudelaire critics who have called attention to his taste for hyperbole; moreover, in attending to the issue they show only lukewarm interest. Second, in paying sufficient attention to his fascination with hyperbole, this paper also aims to cast light on how Baudelaire impregnates his hyperboles with Longinian *phantasia*, ‘image-production’, to practise the Romantic – subjective and affective – expression of beauty fully.¹

Keywords: hyperbole, sublime, beauty, Romantic, phantasia, novelty.

[S]i nous voulons faire comprendre la légèreté d’un cheval qui court extrêmement vite, nous disons qu’il *va plus vite que le vent*. Cette figure s’appelle *hyperbole*, mot grec qui signifie *excès*.

— Du Marsais, *Traité des Tropes*²

Enfin, nous avons, pour noyer
Le vertige dans le délire,
Nous, prêtre orgueilleux de la Lyre,
Dont la gloire est de déployer
L’ivresse des choses funèbres.

— Charles Baudelaire, ‘L’examen de minuit’³

In his preface to the 1869 edition of *Les fleurs du mal*, Théophile Gautier hails Baudelaire’s taste as ‘excessif, baroque, anti-naturel,

presque toujours contraire au beau classique' (Gautier 1869, 27). If we agree with Gautier, to whom Baudelaire dedicated *Les fleurs du mal* (first published in 1857), hyperbole certainly lies at the heart of Baudelaire's *œuvre*. For one thing, hyperbole, with its extravagant nature, tends to disregard credibility, accurate similitude, and truth, the principles that are central to Classical beauty: Quintilian, for example, deems hyperbole the most audacious ('audacioris') trope in inventing the 'untrue' ('falsa') and exceeding decorum (bk VIII, vi.67, bk X, i.28–29; Quintilian 1921, III.339, IV.19). It is no accident, then, that Baudelaire highlights hyperbole and apostrophe as 'des formes de langage qui lui sont non-seulement des plus agréables, mais aussi des plus nécessaires' to modern lyric, inasmuch as they contribute substantially to the very spirit of the word *lyre*, 'l'ardente vitalité spirituelle' ('Théodore de Banville'; Baudelaire 1976, II.164–165). For another, Baudelaire's fondness of hyperbole – as a means of producing affective fervour – manifests itself as well in the fact that he highly commends the spectacle of an English pantomime and the fantastic caricatures of Goya for the sensations they elicit respectively: 'le vertige de l'hyperbole' (*De l'essence du rire*; vol. II, p. 539) and 'les hyperboles de l'hallucination' (*Quelques caricaturistes étrangers*; vol. II, p. 568). Baudelaire considers the spectacle of the English pantomime to be the prime example of *le comique absolu*, the highest form of contemporary art, and Goya to be one of his eight artistic beacons, whose works serve as 'pour les cœurs mortels un divin opium' ('Les phares', l. 36; vol. II, p. 14).

Admittedly, Baudelaire shows a pronounced commitment to hyperbole. In fact, leafing through *Les fleurs du mal*, one can readily find hyperboles that inspire in the reader the emotional intensity of *le vertige*, a word that recurs in Baudelaire's poetical works and a state that, as we shall see, is intimately related to the 'ultra-poétique' intoxication of hashish ('Le poème du haschisch'; Baudelaire 1976, II.415). Markedly, eager to '[g]lorifier le cult des images' (*Mon cœur mis à nu*; vol. I, p. 701), Baudelaire equips his hyperboles with the power to visualise passion, a feature that speaks directly to the poetical use of *phantasia*, 'image-production', that Longinus advocates as a literary technique essential to the evocation of sublimity (*hupsous*) (15.1; Longinus 1989, 159). Quick examples can be found in 'Le masque' – a poem inspired by the sculpture of a woman by his friend Ernest Christophe – wherein

Baudelaire describes his obsession with the deep sorrow of the woman: ‘mon âme s’abreuve / Aux flots que la Douleur fait jaillir de tes yeux !’ (ll. 27–28; Baudelaire 1976, I.24). Besides, in the first poem of ‘Le monstre’, Baudelaire praises a macabre nymph (possibly his beloved Jeanne Duval) by endowing her cold, cruel eyes with a flash of lightning: ‘Tes yeux qui semblent de la boue, /... / Lancent un éclair infernal!’ (ll. 31, 34; vol. I, p. 165). In these two examples, strong emotions are pictorialised so powerfully as to rape the reader. They illustrate, Longinus would say, poetical *phantasia* in contrast to rhetorical *phantasia*: the former aims at ‘astonishment’ (*ekplêxis*) and the latter at ‘clarity’ (*enargeia*):

[Poetical visualizations] have a quality of exaggeration which belongs to fable and goes far beyond credibility. In an orator’s visualizations, on the other hand, it is the element of fact and truth which makes for success; when the content of the passage is poetical and fabulous and does not shrink from any impossibility, the result is a shocking and outrageous abnormality. (15.8; Longinus 1989, 161)

This contrast, Mats Malm suggests, may well serve to distinguish between neo-Classical and Romantic poetics (Malm 2000, 8).⁴ One aim of this article is to carry Malm’s idea one step further by showing how Baudelaire supports his hyperboles with Longinian *phantasia* in such a way as to exemplify Romantic poetics.

Another aim is to do justice to Baudelaire’s keen engagement in hyperbole. Despite the considerable frequency of hyperbole in his poems and its significant role in his poetics of excess, the scholarship on his poetical use of hyperbole is skimpy. There are few Baudelaire critics who have called attention to Baudelaire’s taste for hyperbole; moreover, in attending to the issue they show only lukewarm interest. Jonathan Culler, for instance, ends his article ‘Baudelaire’s satanic verses’ (1998) and begins his article ‘Baudelaire’s destruction’ (2012) with the same quote from Baudelaire’s essay on Banville to the effect that Baudelaire regards hyperbole as the very quintessence of modern lyric and then moves on to claim that ‘l’art moderne a une tendance essentiellement démoniaque’ (‘Théodore de Banville’; Baudelaire 1976, II.164–165; Culler 1998, 99–100; 2012, 699). Nevertheless, Culler is interested not in the hyperbolic but in the demonic – a trait that for many Baudelaire critics runs against modernity – as the force behind modern poetry.⁵

Also, in her book *The Impersonal Sublime: Hugo, Baudelaire, Lautréamont*, Suzanne Guerlac devotes a long chapter to Baudelaire's interest in 'aesthetic enthusiasm' (*un cri de reconnaissance*; Guerlac 1990, 69) – which he experiences with the work of De Quincey, Wagner and Poe – in relation to the theories of the sublime proposed by Longinus, Burke and Kant. In so doing, Guerlac touches – only sporadically, though – upon how, theoretically, hyperbole can literalise metaphors to provoke the sublime effect of shock. Though arguably the most thorough discussion of the philosophical and ethical links between Baudelaire's aesthetics and the sublime, Guerlac's chapter centres on Baudelaire's critical writings so much as to marginalise his poetic practice, let alone his poetical use of hyperbole. In Guerlac's chapter, as in Culler's articles, Baudelaire's interest in hyperbole does not gain the attention it deserves.

In what follows, I shall first provide an account of Baudelaire's (Romantic) relation of beauty to *l'irrégularité* to contextualise his pursuit of hyperbole, a bold trope that easily transgresses Classical tenets of art. I shall then move on to shed light on how Baudelaire invests hyperbole with Longinian *phantasia* to materialise his notion of beauty in *Les fleurs du mal*, notably his representation of woman.

I. 'Ce qui n'est pas légèrement difforme a l'air insensible'

In *Journaux intimes*, Baudelaire defines beauty in terms of surprise and astonishment, the emotional effects closely tied to hyperbole: 'Ce qui n'est pas légèrement difforme a l'air insensible; – d'où il suit que l'irrégularité, c'est-à-dire l'inattendu, la surprise, l'étonnement sont une partie essentielle et la caractéristique de la beauté' (Baudelaire 1976, I.656). Such a definition of beauty – the *excess* of decorum – is a radical response Baudelaire had to make to the (Platonic) equivalence of the beautiful – the true which was so loudly trumpeted in his time as to make beauty absolute, universal, monotonous and thus lose sensible appeal.

Nineteenth-century France witnessed the great struggle between Classicism and Romanticism, imitation and imagination, antiquity and modernity, Ingres and Delacroix. By the time Baudelaire wrote as a critic, the dominant taste had started to lean towards the former.⁶ In *Salon de 1846*, Baudelaire responds to this struggle by putting forward

three styles of drawing: 'exacts ou bêtes, physionomiques et imaginés' (Baudelaire 1976, II.434; see also *Salon de 1859*, vol. II, pp. 627–628). Baudelaire deems the first style 'stupid' because it slavishly imitates nature; that is, there is no room at all for artistic licence.⁷ The second style, albeit also based on the imitation of nature, allows the artist to correct or idealise nature according to academic standards, and has Ingres as its most distinguished practitioner (*Salon de 1846*; vol. II, p. 434). In contrast to the first two styles, the third style enables the artist to ignore nature completely and to paint his/her own soul, that is, to paint impassioned pictures as a result of the imagination given free rein. Following Poe, Baudelaire highly regards the imagination as 'la rein des facultés' (*Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe*; vol. II, p. 328), one that follows no rules but those stemming from 'le plus profond de l'âme'; and that immediately apprehends the hidden correspondences between things, thereby creating 'un monde nouveau' and evoking 'la sensation du neuf' (*Salon de 1859*; vol. II, p. 621). It is due to the unbridled exertion of the imagination that Baudelaire considers the third style to be 'le plus noble et le plus étrange'; and Delacroix is decidedly the exemplary artist of this style (*Salon de 1846*; vol. II, pp. 434–435), to which I shall return shortly: 'it is his [the artist's] imagination which creates the beautiful, and precisely because he follows his genius', said Delacroix in 1853 (Delacroix 1848, 330). This style, so to speak, produces as manifold forms of beauty as there are individual artists with originality and genius.

In nineteenth-century France, critics and commentators commonly characterised the first two styles of imitative nature, respectively, as 'realist' and 'classic'. The two styles disagree with each other in the choice of subject matter: the 'realist' style is limited to the representation of real, tangible objects, whereas the 'classic' style has the latitude in painting metaphysical objects such as mythological figures. Nevertheless, their difference, for Baudelaire, is one of degree rather than of kind, as they more or less satisfy the public's 'goût... du Vrai' and thereby 'étouffe[nt] le goût de Beau' (*Salon de 1859*; Baudelaire 1976, II.616). Accordingly, Baudelaire finds fault with Ingres for his 'despotique' desire to perfect objects in a dispassionate manner by servilely adopting the 'répertoire des idées classiques' as the true, faithful representation of beauty (*Le peintre de la vie moderne*; vol. II, p. 696). Ingres, notwithstanding 'un

amateur éloquent de la beauté', is 'dénué de ce tempérament énergique qui fait la fatalité du génie' (*Exposition universelle de 1855*; vol. II, p. 588).

Presumably, by 'ce tempérament énergique', Baudelaire refers to the imagination, the divine faculty that subordinates academic orthodoxy to the innermost thought of the individual artist to produce 'la sensation du neuf':

Tout le monde conçoit sans peine que, si les hommes chargés d'exprimer le beau se conformaient aux règles des professeurs-jurés, le beau lui-même disparaîtrait de la terre, puisque tous les types, toutes les idées, toutes les sensations se confondraient dans une vaste unité, monotone et impersonnelle, immense comme l'ennui et le néant. La variété, condition *sine quâ non* de la vie, serait effacée de la vie. Tant il est vrai qu'il y a dans les productions multiples de l'art quelque chose de toujours nouveau qui échappera éternellement à la règle et aux analyses de l'école ! L'étonnement, qui est une des grandes jouissances causées par l'art et la littérature, tient à cette variété même des types et des sensations. (*Exposition universelle de 1855*; Baudelaire 1976, II.578)

Here Baudelaire links beauty to the heterogeneous nature of life and therefore divests beauty of transcendental and universal qualities. From this situation arises at least two points – two sides of the same coin – that need our special attention. First, right after making the above remarks in which novelty and astonishment are qualities rejected by the rules of the school, Baudelaire goes on to announce the catchphrase '*Le beau est toujours bizarre*' (*Exposition universelle de 1855*; vol. II, p. 578) and thus has astonishment, novelty and strangeness intimately tied up with beauty. It follows that just as there are diverse ways of generating astonishment, novelty and strangeness, so there are various forms of beauty. Seen in this light, Baudelaire's fascination with *difformité* and *irrégularité* – readily leading to 'l'inattendu, la surprise, l'étonnement' – is a war against the taste for the true, the taste that leads to 'un *beau banal*' (*Exposition universelle de 1855*; vol. II, p. 578). Baudelaire's intention to belittle Classical beauty is obvious, inasmuch as it results in the humdrum stasis of art and life, 'le vice de la banalité' (*Salon de 1859*; vol. II, p. 625), and therefore fails to excite the soul, a form of beauty superior to 'un *beau banal*'. Baudelaire's discontent with the single and thus droning form of Classical beauty leads us to the second point worthy of our attention.

By jettisoning antiquity for modernity, monotony for variety, stasis for dynamism, Baudelaire reminds us of Hugo before him, who, in 'La préface de Cromwell' (1827), valorises the aesthetic importance of the grotesque – which he associates with ugliness – in the perception of the uniform beauty of antiquity:

Cette beauté universelle que l' Antiquité répandait solennellement sur tout n'était pas sans monotonie;... l'on a besoin de se reposer de tout, même du beau. Il semble, au contraire, que le grotesque soit un temps d'arrêt, un terme de comparaison, un point de départ d'où l'on s'élève vers le beau avec une perception plus fraîche et plus excitée. La salamandre fait ressortir l'ondine; le gnome embellit le sylphe. (Hugo 1968, 72)

Here Hugo highlights the inability of Classical beauty to intensify aesthetic pleasure in its own right due to its lack of variety. It should be noted, however, that Hugo treats the grotesque ('la salamandre', 'le gnome', or Quasimodo) simply as an aesthetic means of bringing Classical beauty ('l'ondine', 'le sylphe', or Esmeralda) into sharp relief. In other words, Hugo's aesthetics in fact does not pose a serious challenge to the (Platonic) pursuit of universal and eternal beauty.

By contrast, in Baudelaire's aesthetics, the grotesque⁸ or horrible, per se, can be beautiful since either of them constitutes the diverse nature of life. As he writes in the introductory poem of *Les fleurs du mal*: 'Aux objets répugnants nous trouvons des appas' (l. 14; Baudelaire 1976, I.5); and as he speaks to beauty in his poem 'Hymne à la Beauté': 'De tes bijoux l'Horreur n'est pas le moins charmant' (l. 14; vol. I, p. 25). Beauty, so to speak, carries within itself charming horror. Also, in *Théophile Gautier* (1859), Baudelaire states: 'C'est un des privilèges prodigieux de l'Art que l'horrible, artistement exprimé, devienne beauté, et que la douleur rythmée et cadencée remplisse l'esprit d'une joie calme' (vol. II, p. 123). No longer merely a foil to beauty, horror or pain, per se, is capable of inducing aesthetic pleasure. Gautier is one of the first nineteenth-century French writers who were keen to turn beauty from an objective quality into a subjective feeling. Surprisingly, though, Gautier, who, amongst others like Hugo, pioneered Romanticism, went so far as to promote the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art* – which was inspired by Kant's disinterested, or 'pure', judgement of beauty – to the extent that he subjugated emotional expression to formal perfection and thus hailed the art of the neo-Classicalist Ingres as the prime example of art's

autonomy. As a result, 'Gautier slipped, unawares, into one of the final traps of Classicism, while Baudelaire inaugurated, with complete awareness, the age of modernity' (De Paz 2000, 45).⁹

In shaping the nature of beauty, Baudelaire, unlike Hugo and Gautier before him, does not shrink from breaking up with the influence of Platonism or of idealism. We can better understand Baudelaire's crucial role in this matter by returning to the difference between Baudelaire and Hugo. As discussed before, Baudelaire goes one step further than Hugo by finding beauty from/of ugliness or horror. This situation can explain why they perceive differently the female figures in Delacroix's painting. Whilst Hugo shares the public's conception of Delacroix's female figures as ugly or even frog-like (*Exposition universelle de 1855*; Baudelaire 1976, II.593), Baudelaire considers them the very epitome of the most modern, or Romantic, expression of beauty. According to Baudelaire, Delacroix, raising 'son art à la hauteur de la grande poésie' (*Edgar Poe, sa vie et ses œuvres*; vol. II, p. 317), is the most Romantic of all painters primarily because he shows a brilliant command of suffering and passion in his works and saturates them with 'cette mélancolie singulière et opiniâtre' in such a way as to create for the viewer 'profondes avenues à l'imagination la plus voyageuse' (*Salon de 1846*; vol. II, pp. 440, 431). We see that Baudelaire ties the Romantic expression of beauty neither to the choice of subjects nor to the perfection of form, but to 'la manière de sentir' (vol. II, p. 420), that is, the awakening in the viewer of 'the very feeling which made the painter find it beautiful' (Brix 2001, 12). Beauty, so to speak, depends on the subjective feeling of the artist and the viewer rather than on objective or universal qualities: if an object, as Baudelaire puts it, 'est beau, ce n'est pas par lui-même, mais par moi, par ma grâce propre, par l'idée ou le sentiment que j'y attache' (*Salon de 1859*; Baudelaire 1976, II.1076). This wipes out the distance between subject and object and rejects outright Kant's 'pure' aesthetic experience – the proper judgement of what is beautiful – in favour of his 'empirical' aesthetic experience, which has charm or emotion as its determining basis and therefore differs according to individuals (Kant 1987, §13, p. 69; §14, pp. 69–70, 72).

For Baudelaire, the subjective and affective conception of beauty is Romantic par excellence and manifests itself well in Delacroix's represen-

tation of women: almost all the women in Delacroix's works are not 'jolies' but

malades, et resplendissent d'une certaine beauté intérieure. Il n'exprime point la force par la grosseur des muscles, mais par la tension des nerfs. C'est non-seulement la douleur qu'il sait le mieux exprimer, mais surtout... la douleur morale. Cette haut et sérieuse mélancolie brille d'un éclat morne... (*Salon de 1846*; Baudelaire 1976, II.440)

Put another way, Delacroix does not seek to reproduce – according to the academic norms of proportion or symmetry – the contour of women to achieve formal perfection, as does Ingres (in, say, *La grande odalisque* of 1814). Instead, Delacroix, in, say, *Les femmes d'Alger* (1834), devoted his imagination to organising the subject matter, colours, prostitutes' poses and countenances, and so on into an exotically melancholic atmosphere, a *tangible* emotion¹⁰ that entices the viewer into 'les limbes insondes de la tristesse' (vol. II, p. 440). Baudelaire is attracted to morbid and melancholic women as represented in Delacroix's paintings to the point that he considers joy a vulgar element of beauty and yet melancholy 'l'illustre compagne' (*Journaux intimes*; vol. I, p. 657): compared to joy, sorrow, a form of *le mal*, is *difforme* in such a way as to diversify beauty and increase its sensible appeal. In fact, he goes so far as to say that 'je ne conçois guère... un type de Beauté où il n'y ait du *Malheur*' (vol. I, p. 658).

To sum up, in *Théophile Gautier*, Baudelaire urges the poet to enlarge the domain of beauty by rejecting *le Vrai* (and *le Bien*) as the goal of poetry in that truth sustains science and nourishes reason, and therefore does not lend itself to 'un enlèvement de l'âme', an enthusiasm that embodies 'l'aspiration humaine vers une Beauté supérieure' (Baudelaire 1976, II.111–114). In dissociating beauty from truth, Baudelaire, as we have seen, boldly ties beauty to subjective and affective judgements – 'la manière de sentir' – and, furthermore, turns what excites the soul with intense emotions – *irrégularité*, *difformité*, *bizarrierie*, *morbidité* and the like – into the *sine quibus non* of beauty. He thereby distances himself from Kant's disinterested, cold, aesthetic judgements and aligns himself with the Longinian tradition of emotionalist, or heated, aesthetics, one that seeks to strike electric shock into the heart of the reader by the *tangible* power of words.

II. 'Le vertige de l'hyperbole'

In *Peri hupsous* (*On Sublimity*, 1st century AD), Longinus, in order to promote frenzy over decorum, unscrupulously unburdens poetry of the rhetorical duty of pursuing the true so as to delight and instruct its reader. Horace is one of the towering figures who valorise the rhetorical duty of poetry: in *Ars poetica* (c.10 BC), he urges poets to invest poetry with ethical, educational and social functions by 'let[ting] it be near to truth' (ll. 330–340, Horace 1989, 106–107). Unlike Horace, Longinus believes in the power of 'strong and inspired emotion' (8.1; Longinus 1989, 149) to elevate and ravish the soul, thus becoming the first critic who 'brought passion to the study of literature' (Russell & Winterbottom 1989, xvii).

Longinus begins *Peri hupsous* by privileging 'ecstasy' over 'persuasion', excess over restraint: 'grandeur produces ecstasy rather than persuasion in the hearer; and the combination of wonder and astonishment always proves superior to the merely persuasive and pleasant' (1.4; Longinus 1989, 143). For whilst the force of persuasion is resistible, that of astonishment exceeds our control. By 'grandeur' Longinus refers to something dangerous, unknown, or beyond the bounds of human knowledge as he further relates the aesthetic import of grandeur to our natural, 'irresistible desire' for something new and supernatural (35.3; p. 178) or, to quote Baudelaire, 'l'aspiration humaine vers une beauté supérieure':

The universe is therefore not wide for the range of human speculation and intellect. Our thoughts often travel beyond the boundaries of our surroundings... It is a natural inclination that leads us to admire not the little streams, however pellucid and however useful, but the Nile, the Danube, the Rhine, and above all the Ocean. Nor do we feel so much awe before the little flame we kindle, because it keeps its light clear and pure, as before the fires of heaven, though they are often obscured... A single comment fits all these examples: the useful and necessary are readily available to man, it is the unusual that always excites our wonder. (35.4; p. 178)

Accessibility and familiarity, as Baudelaire would say, breed banality instead of wonder. Longinus suggests here and elsewhere that in poetry, as in (human) nature, the large is preferred to the small, obscurity to clarity, excess to exactness, and the unusual to the usual (see also 33.1–2; p. 175), inasmuch as the latter provide an easy route to familiarity and therefore lose sensible appeal. It comes as no surprise, then, that

Longinus regards tropes (especially bold ones) as ‘natural allies’ of sublime grandeur (17.1, 32.6; pp. 163, 174) since they lend themselves to, in Baudelaire’s terms, ‘la sensation du neuf’. As mentioned initially, in violating truth and creating surprise, no trope ventures further than hyperbole, a daring trope which ‘covers a broad spectrum of exaggeration and intensification, from the mildly implausible to the downright impossible’ (Ettenhuber 2007, 197). This explains why Longinus, as Christopher D. Johnson points out, frequently commingles sublimity and hyperbole (in Greek, ‘overshooting’) throughout his treatise (Johnson 2010, 59, 1).¹¹ I shall return to the issue of hyperbole.

Noticeably, whilst maintaining that (bold) tropes are naturally sublime, Longinus asks the poet to use them skilfully such that the reader would be unaware of their artifice: ‘A figure is therefore generally thought to be best when the fact that it is a figure is concealed... The artifice of the trick is lost to sight in the surrounding brilliance of beauty and grandeur, and it escapes all suspicion’ (17.1–2; Longinus 1989, 164). But how can the poet conceal a trope so cleverly as to render it invisible and thereby exert its emotive power? *Phantasia*, the making of images, provides *an* answer, if not *the* answer. By *phantasia* Longinus refers to ‘the situation in which enthusiasm and emotion make the speaker *see* what he is saying and bring it *visually* before his audience’ (15.1–2; p. 159). Put another way, *phantasia* visualises emotions – which are abstract by nature – in such a forceful way as to allow the reader vicariously to incorporate him- or herself into the emotions and forget or ignore the linguistic means of producing them.

Longinus may have borrowed the term from Aristotle, who in *De anima* (350 BC) stresses the primacy of sight (the noblest sense of mankind) in activating sensations, without which *phantasia* – the faculty of reproducing in the mind images of absent objects – would not occur to make the soul think (Aristotle 429a; 1935, 163). Nevertheless, in Aristotle, *phantasia* is of reproductive nature, whereas in Longinus, *phantasia*, or indeed poetical *phantasia*, is of creative nature. For Longinus divides *phantasia* into poetical and rhetorical uses: the latter relies on ‘fact and truth’ in order to induce ‘clarity’; by contrast, the former has ‘a quality of [fabulous] exaggeration’ and ignores any impossibility so as to cause ‘a shocking and outrageous abnormality’ (15.8; Longinus 1989, 161). Examples of the former can be seen in

Homer's hyperbolisation of the divine power that Longinus quotes (9.5; p. 151):

As far as a man can peer through the mist,
sitting on watch, looking over the wine-dark sea,
so long is the stride of the gods' thundering horses.

Longinus finds it outrageously stunning that Homer measures the speed of the 'thundering horses' by 'a cosmic distance'; and that he creates an 'enormously impressive image' to force the reader to forget the artifice of the hyperbole but instead to register its emotional impact and wonder that 'if the horses of the gods took two strides like that, they would find there was not enough room in the world'. This quotation, as in other quotations used by Longinus, shows that an animated trope or turn of phrase can be sublime (as can a single noble thought) as long as it contains something either extraordinary or surprising.¹² Poetical *phantasia*, as Malm cogently argues, manifests itself conspicuously in almost every example Longinus employs to cast light on sublimity (Malm 2000, 6), and, as we shall see, is carried to the limit in the hands of Baudelaire, 'the most visual of French nineteenth-century poets' (Hiddleston 2004, 130), to push the reader into 'le vertige de l'hyperbole'.

Baudelaire is exemplary of French Romantic poets who actively seek to make poetic language more plastic or sensory by examining the medium rather than the subject of painting (Scott 1988, 21). Following Delacroix, who consistently promotes 'the *power of painting*' to make emotions 'tangible', Baudelaire takes it as his 'grande' 'unique', and 'primitive passion' to '[g]lorifier le cult des images' (*Mon cœur mis à nu*; Baudelaire 1976, I.701). Delacroix writes of the power of painting in his journal:

You enjoy actual representation of objects as if you really saw them, and at the same time the meaning which the images have for the mind warms [échauffe] you and transports you... These figures, these objects... are like a solid bridge on which imagination supports itself to penetrate to the mysterious and profound sensation... [I]t is in this sense that the art is sublime. (Delacroix 1948, 336–337)

Here Delacroix seems almost to paraphrase Longinus' assessment of poetical *phantasia*: to bring enthusiasm visually before viewers in order, effectively, to transport them out of themselves. Inspired by Delacroix, Baudelaire engages himself in translating into poetry the power of paint-

ing to visualise emotions. His devotion is evident in his fascination with the ‘ultra-poétique’ intoxication of hashish, its alchemical power to *embody* linguistic abstractions: ‘les mots ressuscitent revêtus de chair et d’os, le substantif, dans sa majesté substantielle, l’adjectif, vêtement transparent qui l’habille et le colore comme un glacié, et le verbe, ange du mouvement, qui donne le branle à la phrase’ (‘Le poème du haschisch’; Baudelaire 1976, I.415, 428).

What else is Baudelaire talking about here other than the condition for poetical *phantasia*? Two lines in, say, ‘La géante’ would suffice to illustrate Baudelaire’s ardent pursuit of visualisation: ‘Deviner si son cœur couve une sombre flamme / Aux humides brouillards qui nagent dans ses yeux’ (ll. 7–8; Baudelaire 1976, I.22). Not only does the adjective ‘sombre’ freshens up the noun ‘flamme,’ but the verbs ‘couve’ and, notably, ‘nagent’ give life and action to, respectively, ‘cœur’ and sorrow (‘une sombre flamme / Aux humides brouillards’), thereby galvanising this sentence. Tangibility is not an extraneous by-product of Baudelaire’s poetical practice but lies at the heart of what he is doing. ‘Imagery of the most original and disconcerting kind’, as J. A. Hiddleston has put it, ‘is central to his poetic practice... Baudelaire’s similes and metaphors [which Hiddleston elsewhere calls ‘comparaisons énormes’] are never weak or humdrum; they spring dramatically into life with a physicality so powerful as to give an acute sense of the tactile’ (Hiddleston 2004, 130; 1980, 106). Indeed, Baudelaire’s hyperbolic images, as we shall see shortly, would be most violently affective of poetical *phantasia*.

Throughout his *Paradis artificiels*, Baudelaire frequently underscores the *ultra-poétique* power of hashish to ‘rend[re] l’imagination plus habile’ (‘Le poème du haschisch’; Baudelaire 1976, I.434) and to magnify excessively our poetic nature (‘le développement poétique excessif de l’homme’) (‘Du vin et du haschisch’; vol. I, p. 397). Under the sway of hashish, the senses, notably sight, become extraordinarily acute so that objects of different domains are incongruously and fortuitously (con) fused together (‘Le poème du haschisch’, vol. I, p. 411). For instance, Baudelaire vividly describes how, intoxicated by hashish, ‘[v]os yeux s’agrandissent’ and see external objects ‘se déform[e]r, se transform[e]r’ and merge with you or other objects (‘Du vin et du haschisch’; vol. I, p. 392). Under such circumstances, reason is nothing but ‘une épave à la merci de tous les courants, et le train de pensées est *infiniment plus*

accélééré et plus *rapsodique*' ('Le poème du haschisch', vol. I, p. 428). Baudelaire's claims here are evidently a far cry from Pierre de Ronsard's Classical view of poetic imagination: in *Abbrégé de l'art poétique françoys* (1565), Ronsard encourages the poet to curb the imagination so as not to breed, as in a sick man's dreams, 'inventions fantastiques et melancoliques', that is, 'mille formes monstrueuses sans ordre ny liaison' (Ronsard 1994, II.1178). In a word, the *ultra-poétique* power of hashish enables the poet to exceed the bounds of reason as well as of poetic medium, thus lending itself to Longinian *phantasia*.

Apart from his involvement in the Longinian tradition of *phantasia*, Baudelaire, like Longinus, prefers the large to the small, which provides rich loam for hyperbole to grow in his poetical works. In *Salon de 1859*, whilst censuring the neo-Classical painter Meissonier for popularising 'le goût du petit' (Baudelaire 1976, II.612), Baudelaire explicates his 'amour incorrigible du *grand*' in both nature and art:

[D]ans la nature et dans l'art, je préfère... les choses *grandes* à toutes les autres, les grands animaux, les grands paysages, les grands navires, les grands hommes, les grandes femmes, les grandes églises, et, transformant, comme tant d'autres, mes goûts en principes, je crois que la dimension n'est pas un considération sans importance aux yeux de la Muse. (vol. II, p. 646)

It is tempting to say that Longinus' celebration of *grandeur* finds an echo here in Baudelaire's predilection for the large as artistic materials. It is only a small step from *le grand* to *la difformité* or *l'irrégularité*, which Baudelaire regards as indispensable to beauty and binds together with sublime sensations of 'l'inattendu, la surprise, l'étonnement'. A quick example of his artistic pursuit of the large is the aforementioned poem 'La géante', wherein Baudelaire explores the ideals of femaleness by leading the reader to roam over the body of a giantess who is valued for her immense dimension. In the last two stanzas, the speaker, likening himself to 'un hameau', expresses his desire

Parcourir à loisir ses magnifiques formes;
Ramper sur le versant de ses genoux énormes,
Et parfois en été, quand les soleils malsains,

Lasse, la font s'étendre à travers la campagne,
Dormir nonchalamment à l'ombre de ses seins,
Comme un hameau paisible au pied d'une montagne. (vol. I, p. 23)

Here ideal femaleness does not lie in a woman's perfect, delicate form but, paradoxically, in her languorously gigantic form – her *difformité* – which Baudelaire hyperbolises to the point of being immeasurable.

Baudelaire's enthusiasm for the large makes it an inevitably corollary that hyperbole, amongst his 'comparaisons énormes', occupies an especially vital position in the production of the vertiginous sensation of novelty, the function of the imagination. Hyperbole, as we have seen, distorts truth and destroys decorum by exceeding the limit of credibility in an utterance. It is because of its excessive nature that Classical rhetoricians like Quintilian warn orators to use hyperbole cautiously for fear that the audience refuse to believe their remarks: '[because] every *hyperbole* involves the incredible, [the use of] it must not go too far in this direction, which provides the easiest road to extravagant affectation' (bk VIII, vi.74; Quintilian 1921, III.343).¹³ Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* is not short of hyperboles – be they mildly implausible or downright impossible – which strike the reader with 'extravagant affectation' or, to quote Longinus, 'tears 'everything up like a whirlwind' (1.4; Longinus 1989, 144). For instance, Baudelaire concludes 'Le couvercle', a sonnet shrouded by claustrophobic helplessness, with the image of the sky turning into a colossal pot lid: 'Le Ciel! couvercle noir de la grande marmite / Où bout l'imperceptible et vaste Humanité' (ll. 13–14; Baudelaire 1976, I.141). Also, in 'A celle qui est trop gaie', a poem in the cycle of Apollonie Sabatier (the 'White Venus'), Baudelaire projects his agony caused by unrequited love onto nature: 'J'ai senti, comme une ironie, / Le soleil déchirer mon sein' (ll. 19–20; vol. I, p. 157). No less enthralling is the 'immense douleur' (l. 74; vol. I, p. 138) that weighs overpoweringly upon Hippolyte's heart owing to her forbidden relationship with Delphine in 'Femmes damnées: Delphine et Hippolyte':

Je sens s'élargir dans mon être
Un abîme béant; cet abîme est mon cœur !
Brûlant comme un volcan, profond comme le vide ! (ll. 75–77; vol. I, p. 154)

In the above hyperboles, Baudelaire thrusts the speakers and readers into the vertigo of cosmic terror, the fear of what is infinitely huge or powerful and cannot be overcome by human force.

In what follows, I would like to focus on Baudelaire's use of hyperbole to present the beauty of woman. The image of woman frequently recurs in

Les fleurs du mal as almost half of its poems are love poems. Eliane DalMolin draws attention to the fact that Baudelaire has a pronounced tendency to *détailler* woman in his poems, a symbolic act of his bitter frustration in love: for him, paradoxically, 'woman must be apprehended in pieces if her beauty is to be thoroughly relished' (DalMolin 2000, 19). Going one step further than DalMolin, I would like to demonstrate that Baudelaire is fond of hyperbolising woman's body parts with lively images to satisfy his taste for the large and to glorify the cult of images.

Les fleurs du mal is full of hyperbolic visualisations of isolated body parts of woman: Baudelaire endues them with irregularity and morbidity rather than with elegance and serenity as seen in typical Renaissance love poems.¹⁴ 'Les promesses d'un visage', for example, begins with a hyperbolic image of a woman's drooping eyebrows: 'J'aime, ô pâle beauté, tes sourcils surbaissés, / D'où semblent couler des ténèbres' (ll. 1–2; Baudelaire 1976, I.163). Here the use of the verb 'couler' not merely exaggerates dramatically the intensity of sorrow ('ténèbres') but hits the mind's eye with an energetic picture, one that is further enhanced by the arresting contrast between white and black. Even more extravagant is that in 'Le beau navire', a poem in the cycle of Marie Daubrun ('the Green-eyed Venus'), Baudelaire compares Daubrun's arms to two 'boas' to present vividly the deadly attractive power of her amorous embraces:

Tes bras, qui se joueraient des précoces hercules,
Sont des boas luisants les solides émules,
Faits pour serrer obstinément,
Comme pour l'imprimer dans ton cœur, ton amant. (ll.33–36; vol. I, p. 52)

Readers of Renaissance love poems would find it downright outrageous to equate the arms of a lady with two boas in that such comparisons are not only *unbeautiful* but outlandish. Apparently, that which is 'beau' ('Le beau navire') for Baudelaire lies in the opposite of grace and sweetness.

Noticeably, amongst the body parts of woman that Baudelaire strikingly hyperbolises, her head is the one that Baudelaire is most eager to explore: he claims that a woman's head has the seductive power to 'fai [re] rêver à la fois, – mais d'une manière confuse, – de volupté et de tristesse' (*Journaux intimes*; Baudelaire 1976, I.657), that is, a head that allows one to extract beauty from/of *le mal*, to find the infinite in fini-

tude. Woman's hair is the component of her head that Baudelaire frequently writes of. For example, in 'Le serpent qui danse', a poem in the cycle of Jeanne Duval (the 'Black Venus'), Baudelaire imagines Duval's thick and heavy hair that is pungently perfumed ('Aux âcres parfums') as a 'Mer odorante et vagabonde / Aux flots bleus et bruns' (ll. 6–8; vol. I, p. 29), a sea that inspires the speaker's soul as a ship to set out on the journey for a sky far away. Baudelaire does not endow the woman's hair with Classical qualities like delicacy and serenity but turns it into a boundless sea of 'âcres' and 'vagabonde' qualities to bring into play the emotional involvement of both the poet and the reader. This situation becomes even more patent in 'La chevelure' (vol. II, pp. 26–27), another poem in the Duval cycle which is filled with blatantly impossible hyperboles. In this poem, the woman's hair undergoes a series of phantasmagorical *trans*-formations into a deep, 'forêt aromatique' where a whole remote world 'vit' (st. 2); a 'port retentissant' where vessels open their 'vastes bras' to embrace the glorious sky (st. 4); a 'noir océan' into which the speaker 'plongerai ma tête amoureuse d'ivresse' (st. 5); a 'pavillon de ténèbres tendues' that makes the blue sky look immense and round (st. 6); and, finally, a 'crinière lourde' in which 'ma main... [s]èmera' rubies, pearls, and sapphires (st. 7). These sublime hyperboles, deprived of cold abstractions, carry the reader into a world of dazzling sensuousness, a world of the hashish intoxication, or a canvas of a surrealist painter. 'Tes cheveux contiennent tout un rêve' (*Le spleen de Paris*; vol. I, p. 300), as Baudelaire writes of a woman's hair in his prose poem 'Un hémisphère dans une chevelure', the counterpart of 'La chevelure'.

Woman's eyes are the component of her head that occurs even more frequently than her hair in Baudelaire's poetry. It is tempting to say that nowhere is the combination of *volupté* and *tristesse* more incarnated than in his hyperbolic visualisations of woman's eyes, the window to her soul. In 'Hymne à la Beauté', for instance, Baudelaire embodies the 'infernal et divin' (l. 2; Baudelaire 1976, I.24) traits of Beauty ('tu') in her eyes: 'Tu contiens dans ton œil le couchant et l'aurore; / Tu répands des parfums comme un soir orageux' (ll. 5–6). That is, the eyes of Beauty can 'répand[re]' tempestuous enchantment as if they were the eyes of Medusa, 'the [very] object of the dark loves of the Romantics' (Praz 1970, 27). In a similar vein, in 'A une passante', Baudelaire describes the speaker's chance encounter in the street with a slim and agile woman

who, in mourning and 'douleur majestueuse' (l. 2; Baudelaire 1976, I.92), exhales from her eyes vertiginous appeal to him:

Moi, je buvais, crispé comme un extravagant,
Dans son œil, ciel livide où germe l'ouragan,
La douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue. (ll. 6–8; vol. I, p. 92)

This woman's eyes, filled with charming sorrow, are likened to a livid, stormy sky; her sorrowful eyes, so to speak, are at once attractive and destructive. That Baudelaire finds 'le plaisir qui tue' in woman's melancholic eyes also occurs in, say, his comparison of Duval's black eyes to 'la citerne où boivent mes ennuis' ('*Sed non satiata*', l. 8; vol. I, p. 28) or of the eyes of a female statuette to '[l]e gouffre... plein d'horribles pensées' ('Danse macabre', l. 37; vol. I, p. 97).

The fatal charm of woman's sorrowful eyes is carried to the utmost limit in 'Le poison', a poem in the Daubrun cycle in which Baudelaire visualises *l'amour fou* by hyperbolising her green eyes as unfathomable poisonous lakes that allure his thirsty soul:

L'opium agrandit ce qui n'a pas de bornes,
Allonge l'illimité,
Approfondit le temps, creuse la volupté,
Et de plaisirs noirs et mornes
Remplit l'âme au delà de sa capacité.

Tout cela ne vaut pas le poison qui découle
De tes yeux, de tes yeux verts,
Lacs où mon âme tremble et se voit à l'envers...
Mes songes viennent en foule
Pour se désaltérer à ces gouffres amers.

Tout cela ne vaut pas le terrible prodige
De ta salive qui mord,
Qui plonge dans l'oubli mon âme sans remords,
Et charriant le vertige,
La roule défaillante aux rives de la mort ! (ll. 6–20; Baudelaire 1976, I.48–49)

We have seen Baudelaire's amazement at the demonic power of hashish or opium to take us beyond the limits that confine us, to penetrate the infinite. Here the hashish/opium intoxication is outperformed by the destructively attractive power of this woman's sorrowful eyes ('le poison qui découle / De tes yeux'), namely, poisonous lakes that intoxicate the

speaker's soul to travel beyond the boundaries of its capacity and have it satisfactorily drown in them. Simply put, her eyes – and her kisses ('ta salive') – are sublime in the extreme. In *Peri hupsous*, Longinus quotes Sappho's vivacious description of crazy love in 'Phainetai moi' to illustrate how to create sublimity by selecting and combining 'the most striking details' into a unity:

When I see you only for a moment, I cannot speak; my tongue is broken, a subtle fire runs under my skin; my eyes cannot see, my ears hum; cold sweat pours off me; shivering grips me all over; I am paler than grass; I seem near to dying; but all must be endured... (10.1–3; Longinus 1989, 154)

Longinus highly appreciates Sappho's ability to fragment her body into pieces to visualise the madness of being in love and at the same time organise the pieces as a whole to make herself visible within the passion she depicts (Malm 2000, 7; Guerlac 1985, 282). Had Longinus read Baudelaire's 'Le poison', he would perhaps appreciate even more Baudelaire's treatment of the feelings involved in *l'amour fou*. For whilst Sappho, albeit madly in love, can still control herself ('all must be endured'), Baudelaire is already *beside himself* with love: he is not 'near to dying' but on the way to death willingly. If poetical *phantasia* aims to bring the poet's passion visually before readers and thereby transport them outside themselves, here Baudelaire's hyperbolic visualisation of *l'amour fou* accomplishes the purpose to the full since the poet in the poem is clearly under the sway of invincible passion.

The epigraph by Baudelaire in this article indicates that the poet's glorious task is to display the vertiginous ecstasy of things dark or terrifying. With the hyperboles we have seen, Baudelaire shows us how to achieve this task: he engages himself in the Longinian tradition of *phantasia* to invite readers to *see* the astonishing beauty of excess and engulf them in its vertiginous *jouissance*. Sartre begins his book on Baudelaire by saying that 'His poetry is full of "invitations to travel"; he clamoured for escape from his surroundings, dreamed of undiscovered countries' (Sartre 1950, 15). To go one step further than Sartre, one can say that Baudelaire's hyperboles effectively invite readers to travel with him beyond the boundaries of their surroundings to, as Apollinaire puts it, 'examine the sublimity and monstrousness of something new' (Apollinaire 1971, 243). For Apollinaire, '*surprise is the greatest source of what is new*',

and Baudelaire is the first to breathe novelty – ‘the modern spirit’ – over Europe (p. 243). Indeed, in theory and in practice, Baudelaire, as I have shown, ventures further than his Romantic precursors in forsaking normality and celebrating surprise. If Baudelaire pioneers in constructing the *modern* idea of beauty, the *excess* of Classical beauty, hyperbole evidently is *a*, if not *the*, keystone of his aesthetic construction.

NOTES

1. This article results from a research project funded by the National Science Council in Taiwan in the academic year 2012–2013.
2. Du Marsais 1977, 108.
3. ll. 25–29; Baudelaire 1976, I.144. This is Baudelaire’s self-portrait as the author of *Les fleurs du mal*.
4. This contrast, I suggest, also paves the way for Edmund Burke to draw the line between the sublime and the beautiful, obscurity and clarity, pleasantness of pain and pleasantness of pleasure, the distinction that greatly fashions the Romantic engagement in and appreciation of literature, art and natural scenery. See Burke 1990, 57–59.
5. Culler argues that the Devil Baudelaire invokes in *Les fleurs du mal* is not the traditional Devil, who offers the temptation of power or erotic satisfaction, but the Devil who works ‘to fatten up our *part infernale*, which we then take pleasure in explicating to ourselves’ (Culler 1998, 86–87; 2012, 710–711).
6. Baudelaire did not write in the heyday of Romanticism: his critical writings, as William Vaughan points out, ‘reaffirmed [or rather, I suggest, radicalised] many of the tenets of Romanticism at precisely the moment when they were becoming utterly outmoded’ (Vaughan 1984, 349).
7. It comes as no surprise, then, that elsewhere Baudelaire shows contempt for the growth of photography, an enemy of art that is able to provide ‘la reproduction exacte de la nature’ (*Salon de 1859*; Baudelaire 1976, II.617).
8. For a discussion of the role of the grotesque in Baudelaire’s poetry and poetics, see chapter 4, ‘The Romantic grotesque: Baudelaire’s demonic imagination’, in Chao 2010, 98–129.
9. See also Prettejohn 2005, 96–97.
10. Delacroix 1948, 336–337.
11. It should be noted, though, that in Longinus, not all hyperboles aim at the sublime. He divides hyperboles into two types: those that ‘belittle’ and those that ‘exaggerate’ (38.6, Longinus 1989, 180); the first type, to which belong comic or satirical hyperboles, does not strive for the sublime but for laughter (see also Johnson 2010, 65–66).
12. This statement is based on Nicolas Boileau’s interpretation of *Peri hupsous* (see his ‘Préface’, *Traité du sublime*, in Boileau 1966, 338). As a neo-Classicist, he translated this treatise of anti-Classical nature into French in 1674 and broadened the territory of the Longinian sublime, thereby making it codified in the his-

tory of literary criticism. Several important critics of the sublime have pointed out that Boileau's keen interest in the sublime is not really discordant with the neo-Classical dogmas he promotes in *L'art poétique* (1674). For instance, Nicholas Cronk, following Jules Brody in *Boileau and Longinus* (1958), suggests that Boileau may not be a neo-Classicist par excellence as he seems, inasmuch as his engagement with the sublime is 'a strategy for discussing [the undercurrents of] platonism [i.e. *furor poeticus*] which allows him to challenge the prevailing tenets of classical poetic theory, while apparently remaining (just) within them' (Cronk 2002, 109). See also Gilby 2006, 8–12.

13. For a detailed account of the danger of hyperbole in classical rhetoric, see Johnson 2010, 20–59.
14. See, for example, Petrarch's Sonnet XII in *Il canzoniere* (Petrarch 2006).

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