

The Sublime in poetry



BY EVE-MARIE MARCEAU

Marie Uguay, a modern French-Canadian poet, suggested that fragmentation of language could open on an "[infinity of discoveries]" (Journal, 2005, p. 203). Language, as a self-organizing system, multiplies the meaning of a text through each reader's unique interpretation (Milagros Ezquerro). A poem implies a tension between (1) universality, giving referents to the reader, and (2) singularity, articulating a new gaze on reality; it creates a space of resonance for the reader's memory. This singularity is necessary for the evolutionary aspect of words: "the poets, the writers, and even the youth – they're using language to cast new meaning" (Ocean Vuong, "A Life Worthy of Our Breath", On Being, 2020).

"YOU TEACH ME AGE
(MY LOVE)
THE PASSAGE
THE UNEXPECTED
THE USELESS
THE RESTRAINTS
OF THE NIGHT."

- Marie Uguay
translated by Daniel Soate

If language is infinitely evocative, are writing or reading possibilities to live more? Some poems are powerful, vertiginous, throwing light on the sensitive experience of living. Can their mystery be conceptualized or even modeled? Like numbers in mathematics, words operate functions for communication purposes, but poetry allows and often seeks to transcend these constraints, to go beyond limitations. The sense of the sublime can be considered as a qualitative experience of infinity, a glimpse of the most powerful forces of the universe. Edmund Burke described the sublime as the "strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (Of the Sublime, 1757). Because words are polyvocal, there are aspects such as hazard, unexpectedness, as well as familiarity in the interpretative process which participate in provoking such an unsettling emotion, on a spectrum from low to high.

Thoughts and testimonies

"Once was at a summer camp where I worked. It's at the edge of the sea, and one evening there was a beautiful sunset. We ran down the hill and saw the sea gulls, black against the reddening sky, and the clouds that broke up the deep orange and purple, and the quietly moving water of the bay, and I felt a bubble rise up from inside me and I wanted to cry from how beautiful it all was."

"My relation to music becomes that of a part to its whole. Existence stops being a facade bare beneath its limits it remains."

I think that our purpose in life is to experience the sublime.

Necessary conditions to a sublime poem

UNEXPECTEDNESS

"The apple doesn't fall far from the ..."

Do you have this one word in your mind at the moment? In poems, like in melodies, words like notes follow one another creating an imaginary path to which the reader is capable of adhering because of personal and cultural referents. Individuals are more, or less able to guess what will come next, and they do especially if the art piece is conventional or close to their reality. In this example, if I choose "tree", there will be no surprise, and the reader will understand, but the meaning of the words in this expression will not be renewed. Sublime is, involves a great amount of new discoveries, as Marie Uguay sustained. The observers play an active role when interpreting : they can immerse themselves, and transform their own memories.

HAZARD

"[Among the combinations that will be chosen, the most fruitful will often be those that are formed of elements borrowed from very distant domains. I do not mean that it is sufficient to invent by bringing together objects that are as disparate as possible; most of the combinations that would be formed in this way would be entirely sterile; but some of them, quite rare, are the most fruitful of all]." (Cédric Villani, freely translated)

Words are polyvocal and carry different types of information (ex. image, rythm). In a poem, they interact with each other. Their histories are considered. Instead of using them strictly for the purpose of communicating, a poet can choose them for their potential for ambiguity. Language surpasses the writer's ability to account for all complexities.. Hazard thus comes into play. Sublime hides in the senses of familiarity and yet astonishment when seeing particular words cohabiting in the same imaginary space.

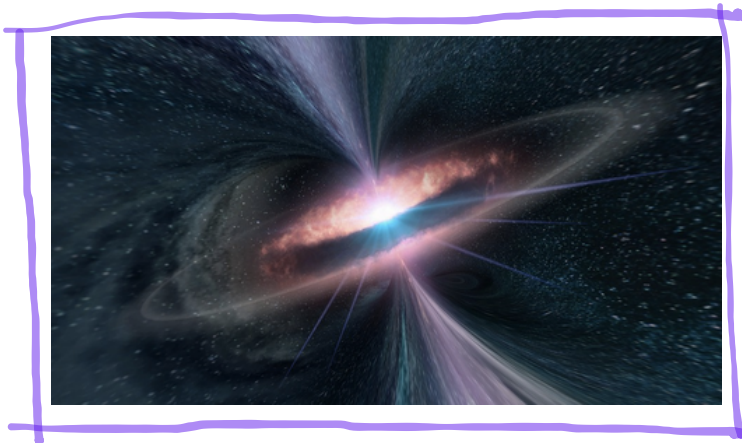
SINGULARITY

"I love you."

What does it evoke to you ? Nothing much ? That's exactly it ! A common technique in writing is referred to as « show, don't tell ». The reader needs context, and more than what one would usually say to someone close to them. Poetry is tension between universality and singularity. One one hand, the reader wants to relate, but, on the other hand, they want to learn a new perspective, The feeling of the sublime can arise from reading a very unique poem. It would be a necessary condition, but not a sufficient one.

What if the Sublime was like a ...

Black hole ! If considering the sublime as a concept of a form of an absolute, it becomes interesting to visualize it this way. The poem needs a high level of complexity, or density of information, in order to constitute a system that can elicit this feeling. When sublimity is involved, not only "[an individual memory, but also a collective one, marked by all the solitudes, all the embraces, the solidarities and tragic wanderings of the world]" (José Acuelin, freely translated) is solicited. It goes beyond one's own sense of self. Indeed, when one feels the sublime, to a certain extent, an ego dissolution occurs, ; one enters a timeless dimension.



After this experience, it is difficult to find words in order to explain the sensations.. Instead, one describes what led to it. Referring to the analogy, matter would be language in this case. The sublime is not found in language but rather where the latter lacks in the most absolute way. In a poem, it is through the revealing blank page.

A word on my experience

As an overthinker, I wanted to conceptualize the notions that I was learning at university. Even though I was studying literature, I would rather see phenomena in a scientific manner, which means that I was usually looking for objectivity, results that would allow me to draw conclusions. Nonetheless, I was attuned by the immensity of knowledge that poetry as an art could carry. When I am writing or reading, I am able to say that I am learning, but I used to believe that this intersubjective process involved too much chaotic information for me to make any rule out of poetry. I was not able to translate into words the feeling that I had when reading. It looked to me like one of the most beautiful mysteries. This became the main reason for my study choice ; it seemed to me like a philosophical one. What is ungraspable?

The impossibility for me to grasp the ungraspable is still the same today, after interrogating the philosophical issue through the creative process of writing, and interpreting poetry for a few years. The research that I chose to engage in at Building 21 was focused on this concern. I had the intuition that the concept of the sublime could answer these questions by approaching the idea of infinity in a qualitative way. However, studying and discussing the history and the philosophy of the sublime led Antoine and I to sort of a dead end. We could only find metaphors representing the impossibility to modelize poetry – which was our objective at first. Any attempt to modelize the sublime would fail : something was always missing. We then chose to define this concept by describing what it is not (i.e. language). Then, we have been able to explore the topic, and to consider poetry, mathematics, painting, dancing, and even food, from a perspective based on this rupture in logical reasoning.

A precious way for me to explore knowledge at Building 21 was through discussing and connecting with others. Creativity would come from spontaneous exchanges, by sharing a recipe for instance, or having a debate on an important matter. In this interdisciplinary space, I discovered that taking time to listen to others and to myself could also be highly productive, only maybe not in the way that I expected at first. Following my own pace, when possible, brought me a lot of joy that kept nourishing my motivation, and led me somewhere beautiful as well as enriching. This experience will stay with me for long.



this is a cookie that Ezel made, and as the fellowship is now ending, I feel like this lasting piece : around me are the echoes of my colleagues, a beautiful network which I will remember !



this is Alex and me (behind the camera) allowing ourselves to be musicians for a day, and Christian making something actually very nice

this is some of us at Hector's place after he called his abuelita para saber que poner a dentro de una receta especial, la sopa de tortilla mexicana !

Conclusion after debating:
Jennifer Coolidge is sublime

