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Theories of the Sublime in the Dutch Golden Age: Franciscus Junius, Joost van den Vondel and Petrus Wittewrongel

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SUMMARY

This article explores how writers from the Dutch Golden Age thought about human contact with that which is elevated far above everyday life. The Dutch Republic offers an interesting context because of the strikingly early use there by seventeenth-century humanists of the Greek concept *ὑψος*, from (pseudo-)Longinus, to discuss how writers, artists and their audiences were able to surpass human limitations thanks to an intense imagination which transported them to supreme heights. Dutch poets also used the Latin *sublimis* to discuss how mankind constantly aims at that which is far above it, but, despite this, can never entirely be a part of it. Thirdly, protestant writers discuss the concept of the Fear of God by explaining that elevated contact with God should be accompanied by the contrasting emotions of attraction and fear. With reference to the humanist Franciscus Junius, poet Joost van den Vondel and preacher Petrus Wittewrongel, I will discuss how these artistic, literary and religious discourses concerning contact with the sublime are related to one another.

KEYWORDS


Longinus; Ovid; literary criticism; art theory; Calvinism

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1. Introduction

It is still too often assumed that the sublime becomes a poetical concept only after the translation of (pseudo-)Longinus' *Περὶ ὑψους* (*On the Sublime*) by Nicolas Boileau in 1674, and an art theoretical concept even later thanks to Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* of 1757. These assumptions are already disputed for early modern France and Italy. From the middle of the twentieth century onwards scholars have made it increasingly clear that in these countries, the sublime as a literary concept had already developed long before Boileau.¹ In the last decade, we have also gained more

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¹Research into the early modern influence of Longinus started with bibliographical research: Bernard Weinberg, 'Translations and commentaries of Longinus' *On the Sublime* to 1600, a Bibliography', *Modern Philology* 47 (1950): 145–51; idem., 'ps. Longinus, Dionysius Cassius', in *Catalogus Translationum et Commentariorum: Mediaeval and Renaissance Latin Translations and Commentaries*, ed. Paul Kristeller and Ferdinand Kranz (Washington DC, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 193–8; Giovanni

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insight into how this antique treatise was used in art theory and practice from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries onwards.²

There has, however, been little or no research done into the use of Longinus' treatise during the Dutch Golden Age.³ This is as surprising as it is deplorable, since the treatise was used very early, sometimes even earlier than in Italy or France. Jan Meter and Anne Duprat have referred briefly to the influence of Longinus on the poetical thought of Daniël Heinsius.⁴ In his *De constitutione tragoediae* of 1611, the humanist writes that everyone who deals with tragedy must have read *Περὶ ὕψους*.⁵ Heinsius' poetics had a major influence on prominent writers and theoreticians throughout the whole of Western Europe, such as d'Aubignac, Corneille, Racine, Milton and Dryden.⁶ However, in this article I will deal with three Dutch writers to assess the importance of the sublime in the Dutch Republic. I will concentrate on the philologist and art theoretician Franciscus Junius, the poet and playwright Joost van den Vondel, and Calvinist preacher Petrus Wittewrongel.

In the first part of the article, I concentrate on Junius' influential *De pictura veterum* of 1637.⁷ Junius' book is crucial in the early modern history of the Longinian sublime, since he introduces *Περὶ ὕψους* into Western art theory. I will clarify that Junius uses Longinus' concept of *φαντασία* (or imagination) to indicate that the successful artist needs to rise to *ὑψος* in order to make overwhelming art. The art theoretician also ascribes this elevating imagination to the beholder. He repeatedly takes the celestial realm as an example to show that a powerful imagination can completely overwhelm both artist and beholder, transporting them to unknown heights.

The American classicist James Porter recently explicitly encouraged scholars of the early modern sublime not to limit their research to the dissemination of Longinus' treatise alone, pointing out that, in antiquity, several alternative theories developed alongside the Longinian sublime.⁸ The term 'sublime' is therefore not used exclusively to translate Longinus' *ὑψος* in this article, but in a broader sense to describe that which is located far above everyday life, and which completely transcends human characteristics. Thus, intense longing, strong attraction and extreme delight define the

Costa, 'The Latin Translations of Longinus's Peri hupsous in Renaissance Italy', in *Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Bononiensis. Proceedings of the Fourth International Congress of Neo-Latin Studies, Bologna, 26 August to 1 September 1979* (Binghampton and New York: Center for Medieval & Early Renaissance Studies, 1985), 225–38; Jules Brody, *Boileau and Longinus* (Geneva: Droz, 1958), 9–13. Marc Fumaroli encouraged the research into the Longinian influence in 'Rhétorique d'école et rhétorique adulte', *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 86 (1986): 35–36, 39–40; and idem., *L'École du silence. Le sentiment des images au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Puf (Presses Universitaires de France), 1988), 126–9. His work is elaborated by Sophie Hache, *La langue du ciel. Le sublime en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: H. Champion, 2000); and Emma Gilby, *Sublime Worlds. Early Modern French Literature* (London: LEGENDA, 2006); and most recently by Dietmar Till, *Das doppelte Erhabene. Eine Argumentationsfigur von der Antike bis zum Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012); and Klaus Ley, *Longin. Von Bessarion zu Boileau. Wirkungsmomente der 'Schrift über das Erhabene' in der frühen Neuzeit* (Berlin: Weidler Buchverlag, 2013).

²An early example of this kind of research is Louis Marin, *Sublime Poussin* (Paris: Seuil, 1995). Later on, there were Clélia Nau, *Le temps du sublime. Longin et le paysage poussinien* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2005); and idem., *Claude Lorrain. Scaenographiae solis* (Paris: Editions 1:1, 2009). For the most recent studies on the sublime in relation to the visual arts and architecture, see *Translations of the Sublime*, ed. Caroline van Eck, Maarten Delbeke, Stijn Bussels, and Jürgen Pieters (Leiden: Brill, 2012) and Éva Madeleine Martin, 'The "Prehistory" of the Sublime in Early Modern France. An Interdisciplinary Perspective', in *The Sublime. From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Timothy Costelloe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 77–101.

³For the Dutch Republic, there are no studies comparable to those mentioned in notes 1 and 2, although the Dutch edition by Wessel Krul of Burke's *Enquiry* (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 2008) and Christophe Madelein's *Bilderdijk. Kinker en Van Hemert: als van hooger aart en bestemming* (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 2010) pay some attention to the early history of the sublime.

⁴Jan Meter, *The Literary Theories of Daniel Heinsius. A Study of the Development and Background of his Views on Literary Theory and Criticism During the Period from 1602 to 1612* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1984), 77; and the introduction to the French translation of Heinsius' *De constitutione tragoediae* by Anne Duprat (Genève: Droz, 2001), 7–98 (94).

⁵Longinus: *cujus de sublimitate scriptum Tragico poetæ ediscendum putem*. Heinsius, *De tragoediae constitutione*, 17.310.

⁶Edith Kern, *The Influence of Heinsius and Vossius upon French Dramatic Theory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1949).

⁷See Judith Dundas, *Sidney and Junius on Poetry and Painting. From the Margins to the Center* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 227–33; Philipp Fehl and Raina Fehl, 'Introduction. Franciscus Junius and the Defense of Art', in Franciscus Junius, *The Painting of the Ancients*, ed. Keith Aldrich, Philipp Fehl and Raina Fehl (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), xxi–lxxiii (lxii–lxiv); and Colette Nativel, 'Le traité "Du sublime" et la pensée esthétique anglaise de Junius à Reynolds', in *Acta conventus neo-latini hafniensis. Proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of Neo-Latin studies*, ed. Rhoda Schnur (Binghamton and New York: Center for Medieval & Renaissance Studies, 1994), 721–30.

⁸James Porter, 'Book review of Costelloe, *The Sublime* and Van Eck, Bussels, Delbeke and Pieters, *Translations of the Sublime*', *Rhetorica* 4 (2014): 419–23.

human experience with the sublime. However, at the same time, humankind experiences the sublime as a stupendous, abstruse, dumbfounding and terrifying power.

In the second part of this article, I accept James Porter's invitation to place Junius' use of Longinus' *ὑψος* alongside other, related theories of the sublime. In his 1663 tragedy *Phaethon*, Joost van den Vondel uses the antique world of the gods as a means to discuss the extraordinary human relation with that which is infinitely far beyond mankind. Specifically, Vondel uses Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and adopts his use of the adjective *sublimis*. In contrast to *ὑψος* where the emphasis is on the capacity of the imagination to reach the sublime, Ovid uses *sublimis* to emphasise the life-threatening dangers of the sublime for humankind. So, in the Dutch Golden Age, the myth of Phaethon plays an important part in the reception of Longinus' *Περὶ ὑψους*, but the myth is a privileged reference for other discussions on the sublime as well.

To contextualise the early reception of Longinus' *Περὶ ὑψους* even further in the Dutch Golden Age, I will look at a third context in which the sublime plays an important part, but resonates quite differently from the two other cases. I will focus on Dutch Calvinism, in which the *Vreze Gods* (Fear of God) functions as the crucial motivation for a pious life. Preachers explain to their flock that the Fear of God is no common emotion of fear of something terrestrial, concrete or comprehensible, but an overwhelming combination of the emotions of respect and reticence with fright and dismay, as well as devotion, admiration and love for the most elevated force residing infinitely high and beyond mankind. In this context, the pagan notion of great heights is not taken explicitly into consideration but, in parallel to both the art theoretical and the literary text, a very similar set of conflicting emotions is used to define human contact with that which exists far beyond man. To clarify this, my final focus in this article will be on the *Oeconomia Christiana* of preacher Petrus Witte-wrongel, from 1661.

2. Junius' *De pictura veterum*

As has already been stated, *De pictura veterum*, by Franciscus Junius, is the first fundamental application of Longinus' *Περὶ ὑψους* in art theory. Junius was a preacher in Rotterdam, but left the Dutch Republic to escape the fierce religious conflict between the Remonstrants and Counterremonstrants. In England he became librarian to Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel, and the Earl commissioned him to write his theory of art to give theoretical depth to his passion for antique art.⁹ An English translation by Junius was published one year after the publication of the Latin edition.¹⁰ Despite the importance of the English context, *De pictura veterum* is also strongly related to the Dutch Republic, and the Latin version was printed in Amsterdam. Moreover, in 1641, a Dutch translation by Junius was published which included a laudatory poem for the art theoretician by Vondel. Recent research has also demonstrated convincingly that Dutch artists and art lovers quickly adopted Junius' theory of art.¹¹

De pictura veterum differs from earlier biographies of artists and collections of technical guidelines in that Junius develops a profound theory, which concentrates on the creation as well as on the perception of art. To do this, he relied to a great extent on antique poetics and handbooks of

⁹Fehl and Fehl, 'Franciscus Junius', in Junius, *The Painting of the Ancients*, xxxi–xxxvii; and Nativel, 'Le traité "Du sublime"', 721–30.

¹⁰According to Junius himself, he made this translation for Aletheia Arundel, wife of the Earl. Junius, *The Painting of the Ancients*, 5–6.

¹¹Thijs Weststeijn, *Art and Antiquity in the Netherlands and Britain. The Vernacular Arcadia of Franciscus Junius (1591–1677)* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015). *De pictura veterum* was actually very successful in whole Western Europe. It was highly praised by respected artists as Van Dijk and Rubens, and was reprinted several times. Fehl and Fehl, 'Preface', in Junius, *The Painting of the Ancients*, xiv–xv, note 2 and 3; and Junius, *The Painting of the Ancients*, 325–30, appendix 2 (Rubens' Letter to Junius). Colette Nativel showed how Junius' art theory had an important impact on French writers, such as Roger de Piles; see 'Rubens, Franciscus Junius, Roger de Piles', in *République des lettres, république des Art. Mélanges en l'honneur de Marc Fumaroli*, ed. Christian Mouchel and Colette Nativel (Genève: Droz, 2008), 561–79. Colette Nativel, 'Quelques apports du *De pictura veterum libri tres* de Franciscus Junius à la théorie de l'art en France', *Revue d'esthétique* 31/32 (1997): 119–31; and Colette Nativel, 'Le *De pictura veterum* (1694) de Franciscus Junius et les académies', *Académie des inscriptions & belles-lettres, Comptes rendus* 1 (2013): 253–74.

rhetoric. Many instances can be found in Junius' theory of art where explicit comparisons are made between the poet or orator and the visual artist. In other places, he simply replaces the words 'poet' and 'orator' in the original with 'artist' and 'painter'.

Concerning the use of *Περὶ ὕψους*, Junius is groundbreaking, since he invokes Longinus' *φαντασία* to discuss the phantasy necessary in the beholder of an artwork. Art stimulates the beholder to begin a process of intense imagination. In beholding art, the beholder can have the same mental images that the artist had in his mind during his experience with the sublime. Thus, *φαντασία* accomplishes a contact of the artist and his audience with *ὕψος*. In other words, strong imagination is visualised in mental images, and all those involved can attain unknown heights.

The sublime is open to any perceiving subject. Right at the beginning of *De pictura veterum*, Junius compares beholding art with mankind looking up at one of the most overwhelming divine revelations: thunder and lightning. Thunder and lightning had already been given an explicit role in clarifying the sublime experience in Longinus' treatise.¹² According to Junius, God challenges man with these extreme forces of nature so that mankind can experience His vastness in a combination of the contrasting emotions of attraction and fear. In the same way, art can move the mind so strongly that it mentally elevates the beholder above everyday life to heavenly realms.

However, Junius' most extensive discussion is reserved for the *φαντασία* of the artist, which he equates with the *φαντασία* of the poet as discussed by Longinus. Junius' artist and Longinus' poet use mental images to reach the realm of the gods and to render it in images. Neither of them raises these images themselves, for the mental images appear at the moment in which the poet or artist is moved by inspiration. They cannot resist the great heat of that inspiration, and must respond to it by writing or painting. An irresistible and at the same time unaccountable force drives this urge to create:

Ende waer haer ghemoedt eenes gaende ghemaect is, soo en is het hun niet moghelijk de hitte haerder beoerder sinnen langher te bedwingen. Maer sy worden door ick en wete niet wat voor een onwederstaenelicke kracht aengheport om haere swanghere herssenen al met den eersten t'ontlasten, en haeren vryen Gheest door vreemde om-weghen, door den eenen of den anderen dienstbaeren Godt, door verscheyden fabulachtighe grepen overvloedighlick uyt te storten.^{13,14}

(...) their minds [of poets and painters] being once in agitation cannot containe themselves any longer, but out it must whatsoever they have conceived; it is not possible for them to rest, untill they have eased their free spirit of such a burden, powring out the fulness of their jolly conceits by strange fetches of by-ways, by the unexpected ministry of a favourable God, and a thousand other fabulous inventions.

An irrepressible and unaccountable force drives the artists to give form to a certain god. So it is not the god who exercises that force. The god is at the service of the artist and helps him to discharge his congested mind. In the Latin original, Junius calls this *ministeria Deorum*. So he sees the antique gods as a catalyst to the expression of grand thoughts, which is also emphasised in Longinus' treatise.¹⁵

Directly afterward, Junius refers to Ovid's story of Phaethon and concentrates on the poet. Ovid first had to reach the higher realms himself in order to write the verses that could elevate his readers to these regions:

Als *Ovid* den roeckeloosen jonghelingh, die sijnes Vaders vierighen waeghen verlanght hadde te bestreden, nae 't leven beschrijft, dunckt u dan niet dat hy selfs mede met Phaëton op den waeghen gestapt sijnde het selvighe ghevaer van 't begin tot het eynde toe uyt ghestaen heeft? want het en hadde hem andersins niet moghelijk

¹²For example, 'a well-timed flash of sublimity shatters everything like a bolt of lightning and reveals the power of the speaker at a single stroke'. Longinus, *On the sublime*, trans. W.H. Fyfe, rev. Donald A. Russell, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 1.4.

¹³Franciscus Junius, *De pictura veterum*, 1.4.6.

¹⁴I use the Dutch translation of Junius, *Franciscus Junius* (Middelburg: De pictura veterum, 1642), since this translation connects most closely to the context of Dutch thought on the sublime. However, I also give Junius' own translation in English from the edition by Fehl and Fehl.

¹⁵For example, the famous passage on Poseidon as an extreme, superhuman force: Longinus, *On the sublime*, 9.6.

gheweest de minste schaduw van soo een vreeselick verwerde noodts-praeme door 't verbeelden t' achterhaelen, 't en waer saecke dat hy sich selven aldaer, in maniere van spreken, ver-teghenwoordighet hadde om elcke bysonder geleghenheyd des perijckels aen te merken. (1.4.6)¹⁶

When Ovid doth describe that same temerary ladde that foolishly longed to tread upon his Fathers fiery chariot, would you not thinke then that the Poet stepping with *Phaeton* upon the waggon hath noted from the beginning to the end every particular accident which could fall out in such a horrible confusion? Neither could he ever have conceived the least shadow of this dangerous enterprise, if he had not been as if it were present with the unfortunate youth.

So, according to Junius, Ovid succeeded in writing an overwhelming description of the sublime course of the sun thanks to his own sublime experience of being transported to heaven.¹⁷ Ovid had to have been present in the most elevated regions himself; otherwise, he would never have been able to describe the heavenly subject in such a powerful way.

For his laudation on Ovid, Junius looked carefully at Longinus' laudation of Euripides. The Greek author had also taken Phaethon as the central subject in one of his tragedies. Only fragments of this tragedy have survived. In Longinus' treatise, the laudation reads as follows: 'Would you not say that the writer's soul is aboard the car, and takes wing to share the horses' peril? Never could it have visualised such things, had it not run beside those heavenly bodies'.¹⁸ Just as in Junius' laudation on Ovid, Longinus sets a clear limit to Euripides' elevation to *ύψος*. Where Junius indicates that the poet is in ecstasy 'as if' ('in maniere van spreken') he is elevated to the highest regions, Longinus point his readers to the fact that the poet was present at the rise of the sun, but that was only in his mind. The mental experience and not the actual bodily location is at the centre of attention in both Longinus and Junius.

Further on, Junius urges the artist to work in a similar way to Ovid. The artist needs to follow his imagination too and believe himself to be a direct eyewitness to the happenings in elevated regions. However, Junius sets certain limits to this *ut pictura poesis* idea, as he stipulates extra restrictions for the artist rising up to heaven: 'De Poetische fantasije en heeft anders gheen ooghenmerck, als een *onsinnigheid des verwonderinghe* te verwercken: de Konstenaers daer en teghen sijn maar alleen op de *uytdruckelickheydt* uyt'¹⁹ ('[...] the Imaginations of Poets doe intend onely "an astonished admiration", and of Painters that have no other end but "Perspicuitie"'). While the poet allows his imagination the free leap needed to lead his audience to unknown heights, the artist must restrain both himself and the beholder. Clarity and distinctness in presenting heaven should be central to his aims. Junius explicitly writes that he follows Longinus for this stipulation.²⁰

Junius describes the contact between mankind and the sublime as productive. He uses Ovid's verses on Phaethon as the clearest example of the need for mental contact between the poet and the sublime in order to describe the most elevated regions convincingly. However, Junius cancels out the end of the myth in which Phaethon meets a certain death. The moral of the story is that, ultimately, man cannot make contact with the supreme regions as such. Junius totally disregards this crucial aspect of the Phaethon story, which focuses on the limits of the sublime rather than the possibilities. For him, contact with the sublime brings forth a productive mindset, which he sees as the initial phase of the creative process of the artist.

3. Vondel's *Phaethon*

In 1663, Vondel published the tragedy *Faëton, Oft roeckelose stoutheid* (*Phaethon, or Reckless Valour*) based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Just as Junius uses Longinus' reference to the Phaethon

¹⁶Franciscus Junius, *De pictura veterum*, 1.4.6.

¹⁷Dundas, *Sidney and Junius on Poetry*, 230.

¹⁸Longinus, *Περὶ ὑψους*, 15.

¹⁹Franciscus Junius, *De pictura veterum*, 1.4.6.

²⁰Nevertheless, Junius keeps silent about the fact that in this context Longinus does not make a difference between the poet and the artist, but between the poet (who has to bring his audience to complete *ἐκπληξίς* or dismay/consternation) and the orator (who has to preserve verisimilitude and needs to give the subject described *ἐνάργεια* or vividness). So Junius' artist needs to follow Longinus' orator by not indulging too much in imagination.

myth to discuss the sublime, Vondel falls back on Ovid's version of the story to discuss the conflicting emotions of attraction and repulsion. So, in the Dutch Golden Age, Longinus was most certainly not the only route to sublimity in the context of narrations of Phaethon. However, the title already indicates that, in contrast to Junius, Vondel discusses the dangers crucial to the Phaethon myth. The Dutch poet warns emphatically against reckless valour. Here, Phaethon is a cautionary tale about the risks incurred by overdosing on the imagination; quite the opposite of Junius' discourse.

Phaethon is an exception in Vondel's oeuvre, since it is based on a myth instead of on the Bible. The poet himself brings nuance to this exception in the preface to the tragedy by explaining that the mythological story does not lead to the world of the ancient gods, but to God's heaven.²¹ He asserts that stories about the Olympians' jewels only make the holy message more alluring. The tragic plot which unfolds in Apollo's palace of the sun gives more insight into the Christian heaven. According to Vondel, the myth offers an additional advantage, since it unfolds the wisdom of the ancients. More specifically, the myth leads to the infinite wisdom of Ovid.

Vondel begins his tragedy at the moment at which Phaethon, his mother Clymene and his sisters have climbed up to the sublime gates of the elevated palace of Apollo. The poet stresses how Clymene knows how to preserve an ideal relationship between her own human limitations and the elevated position in which she dwells; however, he also stresses that it is not easy to preserve this relationship. Contrasting emotions of attraction and fear go hand in hand in her vivid description of the gates of the sun palace (100–20). Clymene describes how the divine craftsmanship and the dazzling and blinding splendour of gold and diamonds overwhelm her. For this description, Vondel makes a translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 2.1–20.²²

Ovid starts his description of the gates as follows: 'Regia Solis erat sublimibus alta columnis' ('The palace of the Sun was elevated thanks to its sublime columns').²³ Vondel translates these verses at the start of Clymene's description as: 'De pijlers dragen 't hof ten hemel' ('The columns carried the court into heaven', 104).^{24,25} Thus, in his translation of Ovid's first verse, Vondel unites the lofty aspect (*altus*) of the sun palace with the sublime aspect (*sublimis*) of the columns that support the palace, and replaces both adjectives with the substantive heaven (*hemel*). In that way Vondel combines Ovid's ideas on the sublime—which are inherent to the Phaethon story, but can also be found in other passages in the *Metamorphoses* where Ovid uses the adjective *sublimis*—with the Christian concept of the most supreme regions, namely God's heaven.

It is interesting to enlarge on Ovid's use of *sublimis*, for the concept offers an important and influential addition to Longinus' *ὑψος* in thought on the sublime.²⁶ Both concepts refer to that what is far beyond man, but in contrast to *ὑψος*, Ovid's *sublimis* is not a concept that focuses on the imagination of the writer or the overwhelming impact of literature on its readers. *Sublimis* is a concept that indicates crucial limits between the everyday lives of men and that which is highly elevated above them. In this Latin context, *sublimis* is contrasted with *humilis*, the humble, terrestrial position of man.

Ovid uses the adjective *sublimis* right at the beginning of the *Metamorphoses* to point to a most essential difference between mankind and the animals. At the beginning of the first book, the Roman poet

²¹Joost van den Vondel, *Faëton*, (12–9) Oft roeckelose stoutheid, 1663.

²²Longinus and Ovid are not the only ancient authors to use the myth of Phaethon to discuss sublimity. Seneca is another influential example who did so; see Giancarlo Mazzoli, *Seneca e la poesia* (Milano: Ceschina 1970), 48; and Gareth D. Williams, *The Cosmic Viewpoint. A Study of Seneca's 'Natural Questions'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 229–30. Thanks to the anonymous reviewer who pointed me towards Phaethon as a site of sublimity in Seneca's work.

²³Ovid, *Metamorphoses*.

²⁴Joost van den Vondel, *Faëton*, Oft roeckelose stoutheid, 1663.

²⁵In his translation, Vondel gives an active role to the columns. These propel the palace to heights that are unfamiliar to man. In doing this, Vondel pays extra attention to the upward movement to elevated regions. Clymene and her children make a similar movement. They are far removed from earthly life, have followed the columns to their extreme height and now reside in a most elevated place, which for them remains unreal and inscrutable.

²⁶This notion of *sublimis* can be found not only in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, but in diverse Roman poetic and rhetoric discourses. For example, Virgil uses the adjective to name the exceptional gates of the city of the Latini (*Aeneid* 12.133) or the high flight of Jove's eagle (*Aeneid* 5.255). On his turn, Quintilian uses *sublimis* in a figurative sense to name the elevated style, which may only be used at extraordinary occasions (*Institutio oratoria* 11.1.3).

discusses that man is the only creature on earth with *os sublime* ('sublime stature').²⁷ Man's total state of being aims at the sublime. Man is compelled to behold heaven. In the very first verse of the second book of the *Metamorphoses*, which is also the start of the Phaethon story, Ovid uses the adjective *sublimis* once again—this time, as has been said already, to emphasise the elevated character of the columns supporting the sun palace. The columns mark the superhuman aspect of the place. As much as man aims at the sublime, and even if he climbs up to it, Ovid stresses the strict limits to human contact with the sublime. Man must remain *humilis*. The sublime is that which is essentially different from the everyday world. Nevertheless, it is precisely for this reason that the sublime attracts man so much.

Where, in the first book of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid uses the adjective *sublimis* to indicate the irresistible longing for contact with the sublime, in the second book he uses *sublimis* to discuss the fact that this human longing certainly needs to be subject to strict limitations. The columns of the sun palace are *sublimis* because they support the palace in its most elevated position, a position distinct from the human world. The use of *sublimis* in the first verse of the Phaethon story sets the tone for the rest of the story, which pays central attention to the fact that mankind needs to fight against its craving to be the equal of the gods and to feel at home in the most elevated regions. Humans are not animals, so they want to reach the sublime. However, they are not gods either, so contact with the sublime can have detrimental consequences. Thus, we can relate the adjective *sublimis* to its (possible) etymology of *sub-limen* or 'on the threshold'.²⁸ Ovid's *sublimis* from the first verse of the second book of the *Metamorphoses* points to the fact that approaching the threshold of the sun palace involves a necessary recognition of the difference between man and the world of the divine. Out of pure self-preservation, mankind needs to take this difference into consideration under all circumstances.

Vondel paints this deep human problematic particularly well by appropriating the Ovidian figure of Phaethon for the title role in a tragedy. For Vondel, Phaethon is a boy full of energy and lust for life, but also full of thoughtlessness and daredevilry. The boy has not yet learned to restrain his impulses. He storms heaven without considering the consequences. Time and again his mother warns her son to be extremely prudent. Clymene chastises her boy, and urges him to treat his father with the utmost respect. Unfortunately, Phaethon does not listen to his mother. He is far too headstrong, and forgets to stay humble.

When he arrives on the threshold of heaven, he is not remotely impressed. He does not even notice the magnificent gates of the sun palace. Phaethon only starts to pay attention when his mother tells him that he is the son of the sun god. In great ecstasy he exclaims:²⁹

Gelukkig is de zoon die nu zijn vader kent.
Nu leef en zweef ik in mijn eigen element.
Schep moed, o *Faëton*, gij stijgt in 's hemels daken.
De bergen zinken in 't verschiet. Mijn voeten raken
geen aard.³⁰

Happy is the son who now knows his father.
Now I live and float in my own element.
Be brave, oh Phaethon, you rise to the roofs of heaven.
The mountains sink from sight. My feet touch
no ground.³¹

²⁷Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.85.

²⁸Baldine Saint Girons, *Fiat Lux'. Une philosophie du sublime* (Paris: Quai Voltaire/Edima, 1993), 18.

²⁹Joost van den Vondel, *Faëton*, (47–51) *Oft roeckelose stoutheid*, 1663.

³⁰I use the most recent scholarly edition of the play: Joost van den Vondel, *Jeptha, of offerbelofte; Koning David hersteld; Faëton, of roeckelose stoutheid*, ed. Jan Konst (Amsterdam: Bakker, 2004).

³¹All translations of Vondel's *Faëton* are by the author.

This boy is vain. He stands at the gates of the sun palace, but that does not move him. He cannot relate the palace to himself until he learns that his father owns it. But after his mother's revelation, he begins to think that heaven belongs to him too. The extremely precarious balance between the preservation of respect and the urge for contact with the sublime that Vondel scrupulously assigns to the personage of Clymene is, in Phaethon's behaviour, totally lost. To say it in Latin terms, Phaethon cannot manage to be *humilis* in the *sublimis* environment.

By stressing Phaethon's loss of self-control, Vondel also comments on beholding overwhelming objects, such as grand architecture. In contrast with Junius' discussion of *φαντασία*, where a mental image does not always need a direct connection with an object of observation, Vondel stipulates that the beholder needs to be related to a concrete object of observation at all times. Phaethon serves as a counter-example, since the boy is overwhelmed by a dumbfounding fantasy that makes it impossible for him to truly behold the wonderful gates. Phaethon's excess of imagination means it is inevitable that his contact with the sublime will go completely wrong, since Apollo is so happy to see his son that he swears the expansive oath to give the boy anything he wants. Phaethon asks for the chariot of the sun. It quickly it becomes clear that the reckless boy has aimed far too high. He cannot control the chariot, panics and burns heaven and earth. To prevent worse, the father of the gods, Jupiter, is reluctantly compelled to sacrifice his grandson, and Phaethon falls to his most tragic end.

Vondel deals with the conflicting emotions of attraction and repulsion that man needs to feel on being confronted with these supreme heights within a mythological frame. These emotions are also crucial in Calvinist discourses from the Dutch Golden Age about the contact of mankind with the most elevated regions, *in casu* God's heaven. As in Vondel's tragedy, Calvinists discussed the conflicting emotions of attraction and repulsion as being an ideal way to relate to heaven. However, the concept of the sublime resonates quite differently in the Calvinist context. In contrast to the Ovidian *sublimis*, Calvinists did not emphasise the extreme heights as dangerous for man, but as purely blissful. For the Calvinists, the true danger was not man's behaviour in heaven, but the ways in which man tries to reach heaven. Man must preserve humility and not start to believe that he can reach extreme heights autonomously. In this way, Calvinist discourse on the most elevated place also contrasts with the Longinian *ὑψος* where human potential is fully elaborated.

4. Fear of God

Two years before the publication of Vondel's *Phaethon*, in 1661, the Calvinist preacher Petrus Wittewrongel published his influential *Oeconomia Christiana ofte Christelicke Huyshoudinge (Oeconomia Christiana or Christian Housekeeping)*. In contrast to Vondel, who focuses on the dangers of the elevated heights of Apollo's sun palace for mankind as a metaphor to discuss heaven, the preacher deals with the Christian heaven directly, and does not doubt that everything there is peace and calm. The ascended soul is without question blissfully close to God. But Wittewrongel does stipulate clearly how that soul has to climb up, what it must do and what it must avoid in its quest for contact with God. He rigorously accuses those people who try to storm heaven presumptuously. The concept of the *Vreze Gods* (Fear of God) theorised this accusation.

Wittewrongel and Vondel were on strained terms with one another. The origin of their enmity lies with Vondel's tragedy *Lucifer*, which was taken out of the repertoire of the Amsterdam theatre after only two days of performance.³² The tragedy brought heaven to the stage, and that was unacceptable to the severe Calvinists, who won their case in the city council. In the very last pages of the *Oeconomia Christiana*, Wittewrongel again forcefully attacks *Lucifer* some seven years after its very short series of performances. The preacher asks himself out loud whether Vondel himself can believe 'dat soo veel te besteden, om soo kostelicken en kunstigen Tooneel-Hemel toe te stellen, oock een

³²For a recent overview on the secondary literature on Vondel's *Lucifer*, see Jan Bloemendal, 'Bibliography of Vondel's Dramas (1850–2010)', in *Joost van den Vondel (1587–1679). Dutch Playwright in the Golden Age*, ed. Frans-Willem Korsten and Jan Bloemendal (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 564–7.

goet werck is, ende tot Christi dienst gedaen³³ ('whether it is a good work and whether it is done in service of Christ to spend so much and to construct such an expensive and artificial Theatre-Heaven').³⁴ In the opinion of Wittewrongel, *Lucifer* keeps the theatregoer far from the real heaven. The expensive theatre machinery that conjures a fake heaven before the eyes merely appeases the thirst for cheap sensation.³⁵

In his bulky book, Wittewrongel discusses thoroughly what can elevate the true Christian family to heaven. In this context, he devotes an entire chapter to the Fear of God. On the basis of a multitude of quotations from the Bible, he comes to a definition of how the exemplary father and mother should act in their search for God. The preacher starts by making a clear distinction between purely terrestrial fear and the Fear of God. The first bears no fruit, since it does not orient towards heaven; for example, the fear of the loss of earthly goods should not guide true believers too much. If they do succumb to it nevertheless, they will lose sight of their most important objective: heavenly blessings after death.

The difference Wittewrongel discusses in the most depth is the difference between the negative *knechtelijke vrees* (fear felt by servants) and the positive *kinderlijke vrees* (fear felt by children). In both of these it is the contact with God which elicits the fear. However, the fear felt by servants only leads to a shallow contact with God; one that is focused on a longing for direct rewards and the avoidance of punishment. By contrast, love functions as the motivator in the fear felt by children. This love leads to the fact that true believers have blind trust in Him, and at the same time they feel boundless respect and admiration for Him. True believers are completely overwhelmed by any contact with God, but at all times they do maintain the indispensable abstinence.

To clarify this, Wittewrongel uses the metaphor of a needle and thread. The fear felt by servants is only like fearing a needle which might prick deeply and painfully, but in the fear felt by children, the true Fear of God, the thread becomes involved. The deep prick still arouses the fear of intense pain, and so a respectful distance is guaranteed, but at the same time, the Fear of God creates an ineluctable attraction driven by love for Him as well, in the way that a sewn thread connects firmly.

The next chapter of the *Oeconomia Christiana* ties in closely with this definition of the Fear of God, as here Wittewrongel deals with the so-called *Hemelsch-gesintheydt* or the orientation towards heaven. The good human father and mother must keep heaven always in mind: 'Ons ooghmerck niet anders daer in zijnde, als dat wij het gemoet, alle de gedachten ende bewegingen van de ziele, van de aerde, ende al het gehene, soo verganckelijck is, tot den Hemel souden optrecken, ende vesten op het ghene dat Eeuwigh ende onveranderlijk is'³⁶ ('Our aim is nothing other than that we must elevate our mind to Heaven, all our thoughts and movements of the soul, and of the earth and everything that is so transient, and turn our attention to that which is eternal and immutable'). However, this aim must not lead to the storming of heaven. Humility must be preserved. The preacher points out once again that in its contact with God mankind finds itself confronted with the paradoxical combination of attraction and repulsion and must maintain a *humilis* attitude. True believers should always stimulate their impetus towards the heavenly realms, but at the same time they must constantly show themselves to be respectful and modest.

If they maintain the necessary respect, believers may cultivate their desire for heaven as strongly as possible, since it is only with this cultivation that we can feel the love of God in its most pure form and reach the highest realms. For Wittewrongel, reaching the heights is not only possible after death. The preacher abundantly clarifies his opinion that true believers need only stimulate their love for God to transport themselves away from everyday life towards the most elevated and divine spheres.

The so-called movements of the soul play an important part in this mental exercise of elevation. In this context, we need to take the word 'movement' literally. The soul has to move the believer

³³Petrus Wittewrongel, *Oeconomia Christiana ofte Christelicke Huyshoudinge*, (1193) 1661.

³⁴All translations of Wittewrongel's *Oeconomia Christiana* are by the author.

³⁵Leendert Groenendijk, 'De Nadere Reformatie en het toneel', *De zeventiende eeuw* 5 (1989): 141–53.

³⁶'Ons ooghmerck niet anders daer in zijnde, als dat wij het gemoet, alle de gedachten ende bewegingen van de ziele, van de aerde, ende al het gehene, soo verganckelijck is, tot den Hemel souden optrecken, ende vesten op het ghene dat Eeuwigh ende onveranderlijk is' (320) Petrus Wittewrongel, *Oeconomia Christiana ofte Christelicke Huyshoudinge*, 1661.

upwards. Wittewrongel writes: ‘de affecten, de bewegingen zijn de vleugelen van de ziele, waer door wij na boven moeten vliegen, ende tot den Hemel, ende die Persoonen ende saecken die daer zijn, opgetrocken worden’³⁷ (‘the effects, the movements are the wings of the soul, whereby we have to fly upwards to Heaven and whereby we are drawn up to everyone and everything there’). A little further on in the chapter on the orientation towards heaven, the preacher uses a comparison with the flight of an eagle to visualise the ascent of the soul during life. The closer the soul gets to heaven, the more clearly the true believer can see the divine, and everything that happens down below on earth sinks further away. Wittewrongel presents intense prayer as a most privileged means to raise the powerful upheavals in the soul that will bring true believers to supreme places.

To enable our soul to fly freely to heaven, we need to concentrate on the truthful images of heaven we find in the Bible, and we need to step back from all terrestrial images, since they do not allow us a reliable view of what really matters. In this context, Wittewrongel uses the concept of *φαντασία* (345)³⁸ in an interesting way. He explicitly introduces it as a neologism taken from Greek and translates it as *inbeeldinghe* (imagination). Following a Platonic way of thinking, he uses *ydele phantasie* (idle phantasies) to clarify that the images of the earth do not bring us any closer to heaven, as they are only vague shadows of the heavenly images.³⁹ Only prayer can bring us closer to the heavenly images, which are far less fantastic than the mental images drawn from our observations here on earth. So here, correct imagination means concentrating on visualising heaven; terrestrial objects only remove us from God. Therefore, Wittewrongel uses *φαντασία* in a totally different way to Junius. The latter uses the concept to describe the creative motor of the writer and artist—imagination has no concrete prototype—the former uses it to name the means of making contact with the eternal realities in heaven, which Wittewrongel believes are very concrete.

So we can see that, for Wittewrongel, the Fear of God and the orientation towards heaven, which at first appear to be opposite, are actually not, for the Fear of God is not a form of pure fear that only repels; it is no base, earthly fear, but an elevated form of love for all that is related to God and His heaven. Wittewrongel discusses the emotions elicited by the Fear of God as emotions raised thanks to God’s vastness. However, this form of fear should not paralyse, but blend together perfectly with the movement of the soul that brings the true believers higher and higher towards Him. This can be achieved during life, but only if our soul learns how to disregard all earthly fantasies and pray intensely, concentrating on heavenly truths and rising up to divine heights.

5. Conclusion

With these three case studies from the Dutch Golden Age, I have tried to illustrate how a single concept, the sublime, can resonate quite differently in different contexts. Junius, Vondel and Wittewrongel deal with the overwhelming feelings elicited by the confrontation of man with that which is elevated far above him. They define the feeling as a combination of conflicting emotions of attraction and repulsion. Aside from this crucial correspondence, I would like to conclude that there is no one sublime. Here, I have presented three distinct modern versions. To develop the nexus of these three versions of the sublime, we can look at which aspects of the sublime Junius, Vondel and Wittewrongel discuss, at how they define the sublime, and at how they deal with the relation between the sublime and man.

But first we can look at the network in which the three authors found themselves. By looking at this aspect, we might expect Junius and Vondel to show the most correspondences in their discussions of human contact with that which is highly elevated. Junius and Vondel were on friendly terms

³⁷de affecten, de bewegingen zijn de vleugelen van de ziele, waer door wij na boven moeten vliegen, ende tot den Hemel, ende die Persoonen ende saecken die daer zijn, opgetrocken worden’ (324) Petrus Wittewrongel, *Oeconomia Christiana ofte Christelicke Huyshoudinge*, 1661.

³⁸φαντασία (345), Petrus Wittewrongel, *Oeconomia Christiana ofte Christelicke Huyshoudinge*, 1661.

³⁹Many studies have focused on the relation between Protestantism, and more particularly Calvinism, and (neo-)Platonism. The influential article by Roy Battenhouse is a good start to get a general insight into this relation: ‘The Doctrine of Man in Calvin and in Renaissance Platonism’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 4/9 (1948): 447–71.

with one another. I have already said that Vondel wrote a laudatory poem on Junius for the Dutch translation of *De pictura veterum*. Moreover, they had many friends, as well as interests, in common.⁴⁰ It will come as no surprise that the Phaethon myth was well known to both of them and carefully appropriated within their own discourses. These two were both closely related to the rich humanist tradition in the Dutch Republic. Seen from this network point of view, Calvinist preacher Wittewrongel could not have been more different. Junius had actually left the Republic due to the influence of extreme religious thinkers such as Wittewrongel. We have already seen that Vondel experienced many attacks from this strict Calvinist quarter, not least from Wittewrongel.

However, if we concentrate on the views of these three authors concerning the sublime, we can say that Wittewrongel strikes a middle path between Junius and Vondel. Whereas Junius and Vondel can be seen to have different views on man's contact with that which is far above him, Wittewrongel shares crucial elements of both views. Junius and Wittewrongel both concentrate on the act of elevating towards the sublime. Junius' artist and Wittewrongel's believer must both actively engage with the sublime. Wittewrongel explicitly says that heaven can be reached during one's lifetime thanks to intense prayer. Junius shows how writers can create the right set of mind to reach the greatest heights. From this point of view, prayer and the creative concentration of the writer and artist have much in common.

In spite of their famously hostile relationship, Vondel and Wittewrongel show even more correspondence in their discussion of the sublime. Both authors discuss the overwhelming contact with God's heaven (be it that Vondel does this via a metaphor and Wittewrongel directly). In both these discussions of heaven, *humilis* and *sublimis* are set alongside one another. Since man is defined by his terrestrial state of being, he needs to maintain a respectful distance with that which is high above the average of his earthly norms. Both authors take the relationship *humilis-sublimis* out of its traditional context of style (e.g. the influential Augustinian *sermo humilis* related to the sublime⁴¹) and relate it to human behaviour. Whereas Junius, in the context of literary and artistic *ὑψος*, concentrates on emulation in which humility has no role, Vondel and Wittewrongel see *humilis* as a *conditio sine qua non* to deal with *sublimis*.

Moreover, whereas Junius connects the sublime closely to the productive imagination of the writer or artist, Vondel and Wittewrongel place the sublime in contrast to this kind of imagination. When they discuss the most elevated place, they both condemn what Wittewrongel calls 'idle phantasy' (*ydele phantasie*). The believer has to concentrate on the divine reality of heaven. Correct imagination can help the believer to come closer to God, but that imagination must not concern the creation of new images, nor even the observation of terrestrial objects; it is a means to reach that which does and will exist forever and will never be changed by any human interaction or creative idea. So, concerning heaven, two fierce enemies shared an understanding.

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⁴⁰One of the most important connecting figures was the humanist Gerardus Vossius. He was Junius' brother-in-law and a close friend of Vondel. On Gerardus Vossius' network, see C.S.M. Rademaker, *Gerardus Joannes Vossius (1577–1649)* (Zwolle: W.E.J. Tjeenk Willink, 1967). For the influence of Vossius on Vondel specifically, see, among other publications, Mieke B. Smits-Veldt and Marijke Spies, 'Vondel's Life', in *Joost van den Vondel*, 51–84.

⁴¹See Erich Auerbach, *Literatursprache und Publikum in der lateinischen Spätantike und im Mittelalter* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1958). See also Jan M. Ziolkowski's foreword to Erich Auerbach, *Literary Language and its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, trans. R. Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), ix–xxxii.