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A Dialogue

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The Religious-Sublime in Music, Literature and Architecture: A dialogue

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Abstract
The present article is an attempt to propose the semiotic aspect that produces the “religious-sublime”. Most of the semiotic characteristics that we use to represent (and produce) the signifiers of the religious-sublime, nevertheless, share their mechanisms with other modalities of “sublimeness”. The sublime will be regarded as the representation (in the sense of staging) of a perception. I will propose how the subjective perception – in this case of the divinity – is (re)constructed by the subject in a piece of Spanish Gothic literature, in sacred music and in architecture – the room which houses the subjective perception of divinity.

Keywords: sublimity, distance, diegesis, heights, vanishing, intertextuality, limits, the unknown.

Introduction
In the eternal quest to reach beyond beauty, beyond banality (and beauty considered as a banality), we encounter the quest for the sublime. The staging of this quest manifests itself as an approach towards an unknown or unprecedented border of beauty.

Nevertheless, that, and not any other, is the artistic meaning of the subliminal: to cross the border of the expected or what Gadamer (1993, p. 302) would denominate horizon of expectations, which fundamentally centers around the qualitative aspect of some phenomenon or artistic manifestation. I refer to the un-known or ‘unprecedented’ aspect that would represent an “ameliorative” expression, an exaltation regarding that, which the perceiving subject is accustomed to hear, see, touch, smell and taste. As Paul Crowther underlines: ...the sublime is used very variably in ordinary and critical discourse, it seems to operate nevertheless within broad twofold framework. On the one hand, it is used descriptively to denote vast or powerful objects and artefacts, or ones, which induce extreme states of emotion in us; on the other hand, it is used evaluatively in relation to artworks of extraordinarily high quality (Crowther, [1989] 1991). Kant distinguishes between beauty and sublimity and opposes the two. Beauty is understood as an entity, which is apprehensible, whereas the sublime cannot be properly be grasped by our senses, judgment or imagination, exceeding them all (Kant, [1790] 2014).

The aim of the present analysis is to find an objectification of the ‘narrated’ experience of the sublime and – at the same time – to analyse the ‘construction of the sublimity’ applied to art objects. Approaching the theme of the sublime through semiotic-narratological lenses will offer the reader a more fine-grained analysis of how the sublime is constructed in Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer’s short-story Miserere ([1938] 1970) and Gregorio Allegri’s musical piece Miserere (1630).
It is undeniable that a certain degree of subjectivity emerges in the definition of the sublime when it is based off a “border of the known”. We can at least assure that – according to the perceiving subject – the concept will be variable. The definition would, in this way, implicate an objectification of the subjective (I am referring to the intellectual act of reflecting on the concept and defining it). On the contrary, the experience of the sublime would implicate a subjectification of the objective. A particular and concrete phenomenon becomes perceptible and significant for a subject – beyond what is imaginably good, or excellent – while another subject, who has incorporated other texts, other knowledge or other measures of the qualitative into their sensitive and cultural heritage, would not necessarily react in the same way. The subject in this case may situate this phenomenon within the frame of the expected or within his/her own horizon of expectations.

Based on this assumption, my reflection will focus on certain artistic practices that have suggested a search for the sublime. The sublime is assumed as a form of the unknown inscribed in a superlative beauty. The eminently subjective character of the experience of the sublime and the difficulty to apprehend it, leads me to search for an approach, where the sublime is theorized as a phenomenon emerged from subjectivity and – at the same time – is distant and inapprehensible. The psychoanalytical approach offers an analytical frame, which can be combined with the semiotic-narratological approach we are working within. Laplanche and Pontalis (1978, s. 466) conclude that the Freudian category of sublime has a basis in the chemical definition of this term whose meaning points out the evanescence of something concrete:

*Le terme sublimation, introduit par Freud en psychanalyse, évoque a la fois le terme de sublime, employé notamment dans le domaine des beaux-arts pour déssigner une production suggérant la grandeur, l’élévation, et le terme de sublimation utilisé en chimie pour désigner le procédé qui fait passer un corps directement de l’état solide à l’état gazeux.*

(The term sublimation, introduced by Freud in psychoanalysis, invokes at the same time, the term sublime applied precisely in the domain of the fine arts to designate a production that evokes the aggrandizement, the exaltation, and the term used in Chemistry to designate the procedure that enables a body to shift from a solid state to a gaseous state.)

Furthermore, the concept of sublimation is defined by Laplanche and Pontalis (1978, p. 465) in the following way:

*Processus postulé par Freud pour rendre compte d’activités humaines apparemment sans rapport avec la sexualité, mais qui trouveraient leur ressort dans la force de la pulsion sexuelle. Freud a décrit comme activités de sublimation principalement l’activité artistique et l’investigation intellectuelle.*

(Process proposed by Freud in order to account for human activities that are apparently in no relation to sexuality, but whose origin could be found in the force
of the sexual drive. Freud has described principally the artistic activity and the intellectual investigation as the activity of sublimation.) (My translation)

This idea of sublimation is proposed similarly in several essays concerning the Freudian pulsion theory, specifically in Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie ([1905] 1922), ‘Die “kulturelle” Sexualmoral und die moderne Nervosität’ (1908) and Eine Kindheitserinnerung des Leonardo da Vinci (1910). In Drei Abhandlungen..., in the second essay ‘The Infantile Sexuality’, Freud describes the process of sublimation as a diversion of sexual pulsions towards other, non-sexual purposes which provide powerful elements for all kind of cultural manifestations. In the third text, ‘The metamorphosis of puberty’, the concept of sublimation is defined in the same way. Similarly, in Eine Kindheitserinnerung..., Freud analyses the childhood dreams of Leonardo da Vinci, proposing a principle of conversion of perverse libidinal drives into subsequent genius (Freud, 1910). As we can see, the Freudian approach focuses on the generating process of culture and its best products rather than on the ‘sublime’ quality of a given cultural artefact. In this sense, we can say that two of the elements that we will analyse here contain the act of artistic creation as sublimation in the Freudian sense, as, in both cases, there are two persons who wish to expiate a sin committed previously to the creation of the artefact (poem or music) in question.

Having presented the psychoanalytical definition of sublimation and sublime, the next step would be fundamentally relating to what concerns the search of aggrandizement and exaltation which, when combined, lead us to the sublime. This can be understood as a process of dissolution. There is, without any doubt, a metaphorical act in the path from the solid and earthly, to the gaseous and ethereal. The ethereal is that, which is located in the eternal, an unachievable space to anybody. For that reason, the character of “the chosen” is attributed to the subject that approaches or considers themselves entitled to come closer to the sublime. The sublime guards a seme (Greimas, 1987) of “revelation”, a kind of “not-for-everybody”, i.e. an exclusive revelation, and therefore it gives a status of “the chosen” to whom experiences the sublimity and confirms a certain narcissism in the subject that perceives. This phenomenon, in general, affects saints, prophets and artists; the latter produce their works as if a revelation were the cause of their privileged works, which promotes them above the status of common beings.

Similarly, the path from the concrete to the ethereal is another modality of the sublime. This is conceived as an ascending road of the phases or stages that brings a Buddhist to Nirvana, together with the consequent dissolution of the subject as a “conscious-I” through the annihilation of the desire as vital impulse. We could say that it is a concept, which belongs to everything that perceives itself as religious thought beyond any concrete religion. The concept is found in everything Religious without being exclusively religious. This is why it constitutes a reserve, a fallback, a human imaginary background, in the sense of the “sublime” being a necessary contrasting space to the space of occurrences, which we call the “everyday” space.

My intention is to reach at least the collection of one part of the semes that constitute the idea of the “represented-sublime”, being aware of the fact that we are facing a social representation of a concept constructed by many individuals and social practices, all of which is expressed in different ways. I will principally be focusing on three of its manifestations: the literary-musical, the purely musical, and the architectural space that shelters this music within Christianity.
A story about seeking the sublime

The literary-musical manifestation is taken from the gothic post-romantic Spanish short story “El Miserere” by Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer published in 1862 in El contemporáneo (Bécquer, (1970) [1938]).

Bécquer tells the story in the first person (a fictitious character/the narrator) who - visiting the abbey of Fitero in Northern Spain - is perusing some old manuscripts in its library. Though he does not understand musical notation, he is intrigued by an unfinished composition of a miserere. (The word "miserere" means "have mercy". The miserere is a penitential psalm of David: the fiftieth psalm in the Latin Vulgate and the fifty-first in the King James Version). Scribbled here and there on the manuscript are strange observations, not the usual annotation such as ‘forte’, ‘fortissimo’, and ‘piano’ but, instead, he finds annotations concerning creaking bones, clicking jaws and inextinguishable light. The narrator asks an old monk whether he knows anything about this manuscript. In reply, the aged monk tells him a story about a pilgrim who came to the abbey long time ago on a stormy night. The pilgrim told the monks and shepherds, who had taken refuge there, his own story sitting around the fire: Being a musician, he had used his talent at the service of ‘sin’ his whole life, instead of using it to glorify God. His sins weighed very heavily on his soul. The pilgrim had not known how to express his contrition, until he had come across the words "Miserere mei, Deus" ("Have mercy on me, O God") in a psalm of King David. Ever since he had read these words, he had been searching for the most sublime music to which the miserere could be sung - music that would profoundly express the contrition he felt in his heart. His search had brought him across Germany and Italy and now Spain. Having examined numerous musical settings of the miserere1, he believed he may have seen them all, but he had found them all disappointing.

A shepherd asked the pilgrim, whether he had heard the Miserere of the Mountain. It was a miserere heard only by farmers happening to be present with their cattle at the right time, the late night of Maundy Thursday. Since the pilgrim had expressed interest, he would tell the following story: The abbey of Fitero lay near a system of mountain ranges that were visible on the horizon. Amid these rugged sites were the ruins of a monastery that had enjoyed a brief existence long before the pilgrim's visit. The monastery owed its existence to the endowment of a rich man who had disinherited his unworthy son. In turn, the son had reacted with a barbaric act. Assembling a gang of ruffians as wicked as himself, he had attacked the monastery on Maundy Thursday, setting it on fire and killing all the monks. Some of the monks had not been prepared to meet God and, therefore, had to suffer in purgatory for some time. Each Maundy Thursday, their souls would return to the monastery and sing a moving Miserere.

It was precisely Maundy-Thursday-evening, when the pilgrim heard about this wonderful phenomenon. Although the weather was inclement, he took his staff and rode to the ruins of the abbey. Having arrived, the pilgrim could only hear a distant waterfall, the blinking owl singing, the whistling wind through the lancet windows without glasses… nothing else. Suddenly, the sound of a nonexistent clock struck midnight. At this precise moment, a mysterious light illuminated the whole ruin, and the monastery was miraculously restored, the natural sounds of

1 Miserere will be spelled with capitals when referring to the specific works that share this name, while it will be spelled with a lowercase letter when it refers to the general concept.
the waterfall, the nocturnal birds and the wind in the empty windows produced a deep and fascinating musical chord. The pilgrim could not distinguish whether this chord was a coincidence or a real chord coming from the moat of the ruin. He peered into one of the lancet windows of the abbey and saw the animated skeletons of the dead monks scaling the walls whilst singing the most profound miserere he had ever heard. As they sang, they placed themselves around the high altar, and the skeletons recovered their human form.

The pilgrim was profoundly affected by the phenomenon he was witnessing. Whilst the music thrilled him, he was also terrified. Suddenly, the apse of the church opened and the glory of God appeared with all the angels, singing with and for the monks and asking for eternal forgiveness. Before the monks finished the Miserere, the pilgrim fainted.

The next day, the pilgrim rode back to the abbey of Fitero, asked the monks’ hospitality for a year in order to write down the music, he had heard. He succeeded in reproducing what he had heard except for the most beautiful part of the tune, where he had seen the glory and fainted. It was impossible for him to achieve his ultimate goal, to complete the Miserere. He eventually became insane and died.

After the old monk had finished telling his story to the narrator, the latter looked at the manuscript once more. However, as he could not read music, he was unable to appreciate its worth.

**Metadiegesis in the process of sublimation**

In the field of narratology, Genette (1983) defines diegesis as the simple act of telling a story by a narrator in the third person. The multiplication of the narrative situation, that is, the appearance of another narrator in the story that tells another story, has come to be understood as a meta-diegetic situation.

In Becquer’s short story, there is an extraordinary multiplication of diegetic situations, which allow us to suggest the presence of metadiegesis and at the same time to attribute it a significant function.

In face, we find various diegeses and narrative situations in relation to the space in which they appear:

A. **Three spaces:**
   1. Abbey of Fitero
   2. Castle, unnamed (the ruin)
   3. The Glory

B. **Three temporal sequences**
   1. Abbey of Fitero: Two Temporalities
      a. **The present:** Mimetic narrator in the first person: “I arrived in Fitero. I found a manuscript.”
      b. **The past:** A monk tells the story of the manuscript: “Many years ago…” A shepherd tells the story of the miserere miracle and its origin: The story of the Castle that became an abbey.

   2. Castle, Unnamed abbey (the ruin)
      Past: a German composer awaits and experiences a miracle.
The significant function of these subsequent diegetic moves from the mimetic narrator to a diegetic and meta-diegetic narrator, produces an effect of proximity (the mimetic one) and of distance, an effect that takes place as the metadiegetic narrators multiply: Somebody tells what he himself saw: a musical score; a monk tells what happened so that this score came into being: the story of the pilgrim composer; a shepherd tells the story of the miracle and the story of the miracle’s origin; and, at last, we find the related experience of the musical miracle and the attempt to reproduce it.

What is interesting about the story that narrates the quest for the sublime, is that it actually narrates about a search, about the encounter of the sublime musical score of the Miserere, and the subsequent oblivion or the inexact memory of the perfection, which finally turns into madness. This could easily be explained as a Neoplatonic metaphor of somebody who has seen the perfection and in an attempt to reproduce it, has already forgotten it.

In the following distancing of the narration, there is a breach in the everyday space towards the divine space. There is a clear “locative” or topographical correspondence between what, is in the Christian belief, called “The Glory” and the Platonic *topos hyperuranios* (Plato), where the perfect ideas (that we vaguely remember after we are born) reside. In this case, the story refers to an extreme location that goes from the earthly to the heavenly.

The locative movements in this story are – in addition – inserted in these distances and proximities to the “object-document” of the miracle: The manuscript of the library of the abbey of Fitero (half eaten by the rats and about to disintegrate) and the distant origin of the composer who one day visited the abbey.

There are also proximities and distances in the narrative: We have an “I” (the narrator) who encounters the manuscript, a monk who tells the “I” that many years ago a German composer came searching for a Miserere and that this night a shepherd told him about the Miserere of the Mountain that the composer in the end went to listen.

The construction of the sublime and its search – as we can see – has its own phases that move us through different spaces and (temporal) sequences where the most distant space – in this story – is that of the vision or experience of the Glory, and the (temporal) sequence, barely touched upon, eternity. Thus, in the signifying system, we have a movement of proximities and distances in which the distance touches upon the border of the “beyond”. We can see that Bécquer’s subject is incapable to grasp magnitudes that go beyond the human perception system: he faints in front of the Glory and, later, he looses his mind, trying to reconstruct the sublimity of the tune he has heard. However, the category of the sublime could be related to the experience of the subject, too, as he is able to recognize the enormous beauty of what he is experiencing but cannot embrace it due to the limits of his human perception when facing the Divine.

The story narrates the intention of robbery or plagiarism by a composer who desires to reproduce a miserere – that is to say, he wants to retrieve a song in order to ask for forgiveness from God – and steals it from resurrected monks and the angels who accompany this petition, singing to God.

The phenomenon of intertextuality (Kristeva, 1980) immediately reminds us of the episode registered in the history of music, when a young boy named Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart arrives to
Rome with his father and is invited to attend the Pope’s private mass in the Sistine Chapel. This Mass of Holy Week – possibly on Thursday – the Pope is listening to the “Office of Darkness”, a (singing) Mass celebrated at sunset, in the completely dark church, in order to remember Christ in agony and death, which is why there is no longer light in the world. During this mass, the Pope – (then Pius VI) traditionally uses a piece that has been considered mythically miraculous: The *Miserere* by Gregorio Allegri, an Italian composer who lived between 1582 and 1652.

There are numerous documents, which address the mythically miraculous nature of the Miserere by Allegri, the Latin verses written by King David to ask for forgiveness for his crimes, are put into music. David is hoping to be forgiven for having stolen his general Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba, and for having killed the general. Mozart, fascinated by the musical piece and its exclusive status – it can only be performed within the Vatican and has never been published – copies it after hearing it during the above mentioned Mass in 1770. Not as special as we could believe, if we keep in mind that the piece is rather short (12 minutes approximately) and the main theme is repeated five times (Pound, 2016).

The intertextuality between the lyric of King David’s ‘Psalm 51’, and the protagonist in Bécquer’s story, *Miserere*, is that the two works are produced as an act of contrition in order to receive forgiveness. Both subjects, David and the pilgrim, ask for forgiveness for having offended God. The difference would rely in David’s psalm shaped on a “decent” literary level, appealing to what is worth in his request, which is the sincerity of his contrition.

> *Sacrificium Deo spiritus contribulatus,*  
> *Cor contritum et humiliatum, Deus, non despici.*

(My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart  
you, God, will not despise.)  
*(Psalm 51:17, 2016)*

Analogically, the German composer explains his motivation as follows: ‘I’m a musician [...] I was born far from here; in my country I enjoyed a day of great reputation. In my youth, I made my art a powerful weapon of seduction and provoked passions with it that dragged me to a crime. In my old age, I want to turn into good the powers I have used for evil, to redeem myself with the same skills with which I could condemn me’ (Bécquer, (1970) [1938], p. 133) (my translation).

Both subjects, the German composer and King David are sublimating from a Freudian viewpoint, insofar as they channel their energy away from mundane activities towards the divine forgiveness by ways of a cultural artifact.

In this way, the German composer tries to find a unique form of forgiveness, beyond any well-known beauty. We could suggest that the “inspiration” and the “search” for a musical form that is beyond well-known beauty is what Gregorio Allegri intended to achieve by composing music for King David’s Psalm 51. The mythological aspect of beauty “beyond the normal” is already a topic in the criticism of sacred music, as can be seen in Correggia:
Having introduced the myth of the sacred beauty of Allegri’s *Miserere*, I invite the reader to listen to Allegri’s *Miserere* preferably by the Tallis Scholars, which is, in my opinion, the best version.

**The semi-echo: the effect of the ascending “emptiness” and of exaltation**

In order to analyze the *Miserere* by Allegri we primarily need to look at the floating aspect of the Gregorian voice, how the voices seem to linger in space after they are sung. In the gothic space, the Gregorian modulation produces the ambiguity of its sound source: Illusion of a sound that – after the human breath – remains in the acoustics of the Gothic space and extends miraculously autonomous. The ascending space of the nave of the church carries the voice towards the heights where it disappears “in altus”, producing the physical illusion of a connection with the mystical heights of God. I am aware that the Gregorian chant is a monodic form of music, whereas Allegri’s *Miserere* is polyphonic. Nevertheless, we can recognize that Allegri has used “the Gregorian form”, combining its typical medieval monodic form with the Renaissance’s polyphonic musical form.

The Gregorian technique possesses intensity and distension, which creates a sound effect in the space that is initially hyper-present and then suddenly distant. This indicates a “step” from a close space to a distant space, a step that is a flight of a sound already without organic or earthly support. A phenomenon that remains in the movement of air-particles and nevertheless is disconnected from the instrument or the voice that gave rise to it.

The voices in Allegri’s *Miserere* use the Gregorian technique; they continue to sound almost independently, blending with traces of other voices that are floating in space, creating harmonies between them. The old Gregorian technique is here at the service of the Renaissance’s polyphonic modality. The emerging harmonies that are in contact with the harmonies already produced (that are floating in the space) give a similar effect to that of a musical form called a canon.

When the chorus seizes to produce a sound and creates the silence for the coryphaeus, we note that this monodic voice produces – according to the rules of the Gregorian style – moments
of intensity and distension, a kind of dialogue between voices and the space, particularly with the Gothic and Romanesque space.

There has never been an argument as to why the Gregorian chant dictates the rules in which music should be sung according to these rules of vocal intensity and distention. However, from the acoustic effect it produces, we can easily suppose a certain ideological intentionality; after all, every manifestation of art within the ecclesiastical institution is there to contribute to the belief of the faithful. Intensity and distension are a difference in volume that could be translated as “appear” and “disappear”, “be” and “dilute”, “concretion” and “spiritualization”. (Here we observe the relation to the physical-scientific senses of the process of sublimation, the step from the solid and concrete to the gaseous and spiritual).

The architectural sublime and the sound in it

It is necessary to talk about ‘the Gothic sound chamber’. The ‘classically’ Gothic architecture constructs different hierarchies of the space and underlines the most “sacred” space. Nonetheless, the Gothic architecture is above all an acoustic space where every sound is intensely manifested and its resonance diminishes as it reaches the heights, where it disappears. It is a space that makes of the sound just the same as the subjects do in the stories of miracles: the sound in a game of dying, reappearing and vanishing; the subject in the story sees and hears something, tries to reproduce it and cannot do it because this part has vanished from memory.

The sound in the Gothic space is a physical movement that imitates the supernatural. Having said that, this phenomenon, absolutely normal for a concrete sound that remains in the air and vanishes towards the heights of the Gothic construction, makes sense in a way that it signifies the supernatural in the Gregorian chant. After all, it is where the phenomenon is created – in a natural way – when the sound of the voices creates an “echo” effect of the space. The phenomenon that redoubles while, at the same time, the Gothic space embraces the sound sliding it around its ascending architectural body. The concrete space is not a transcendental space but means to be a transit toward God, the sounds move toward God; the earthly choir reaches the altitude and ‘joins’ the singing of the angels in the Christian mythology.

In Allegri’s *Miserere*, the three moments of the choir’s intervention are three spatial positions of two choirs and a coryphaeus that construct a space in altitude with the same height of the notes that go up to the incredible. Through a musical scale, they rise from the ground bringing them closer to a heaven created by the sound. This very ascendance and the three placements already mentioned also construct the Gothic nature of the space; the altitude of the Gothic cathedral and its many interior balconies where the choirs are arranged, are the rooms through which a game of dialogues is constructed.

In conclusion, we can say that the signifying semes, which create the sublime as an approximation to God, repeat themselves in the analyzed texts: Semes of proximity and distance, of limit and trespassing in the visual and in the auditive. On the literary level, we find in what is seen (in this case the manuscript) and what is narrated (the story of the manuscript that includes the “beyond”). In our analysis, we find that the locative semes of approaching and distancing of concretion and dissolution complement with the semes of “earthly”/”heavenly” (down and up) which are common in the search of the sublime in Gothic architecture and in the music that the Gothic chamber shelters: The monodic Gregorian chant. This is a very evident phenomenon,
especially in the polyphonic *Miserere* by Allegri, which is in dialogue with the literary text *El Miserere* by Bécquer and both of them with Psalm 51 of King David. As we see and hear, this musical piece builds a set of hidden games between two choirs and a coryphaeus that conjointly support each other in the petition for forgiveness. The effect of harmonies that emerge from beneath with the first choir, then, a coryphaeus, and later on the other choir, whose voices move away, disappear, in the heights with other coryphaeus, represent the departure from the concrete and the arrival to the ‘spiritual in the altitude’.

**An odoriferous and visual helper in the construction of the sublime**

In order to complete the idea of the construction of the sublime, we have to understand the relation between the concrete and the dissolution of the visual aspect. Here we have another element: *the incense* as the support to the meaning of exaltation and its odoriferous influence: In this way, it appears easier to understand the aromatic use of the incense that involves not only the aromatic effect but the visual as well.

Considering that the word incense comes from the Latin word “incensum” meaning “to set on fire” or “illuminate”, there is a relation between the fact of being illuminated and the approximation to the sublime. Bernal (2006) says that the Egyptian hieroglyph that designates the incense is “Ba”, a word that besides meaning incense also means “soul” and symbolizes a smoke that rises towards heaven as the soul leaves the body flying. As we can see in Figure 1 below, Ba is represented as a bird with a human face, symbolizing the soul or the flying side of the human being. We can see that the etymological sense of this word, i.e. to be illuminated, in combination with the flight of the soul and the upward movement of the incense, cooperate to create the passing of a limit, to go ‘beyond’, from the earthly to the celestial, connecting the subject with the idea of the sublime.

![Figure 1 Ba – Egyptian hieroglyph (Ancient Egyptian concept of the Soul, 2016)](image)

Understanding the Catholic Mass as a theatrical play, it turns out to be a complete performance. Every present element supports the meaning of the sublime as exaltation, as a detachment from the concrete, as the dissolution of the solid towards the spiritual-gaseous. Although we do not know what mental effect the very aroma of the incense produces, I dare to say that the person who perceives this phenomenon (if he/she is catholic), has experienced the significance of the aroma since childhood. Furthermore, because it is only used in the most solemn masses, the scent is connected to the ‘divine proximity’. This is how the churchgoers experience this practice: the greater the holiness of the Mass, the greater the use of the incense,
i.e. the greater the show. From a neurological perspective, it would seem that connections between the centers of smell and language are extremely weak. This is why we find it so difficult to describe an odor in words; after all it is beyond language (2014, p. 4/27). Nevertheless, referring to semantics, the very smoke tells us that it is naturally ascending and that this is how the connection between the earthly and the heavenly is produced. However, the function of the smoke as co-assistant element in the “production of the sublime” does not stop here. There is also a visual aspect that makes the smoke erase the chants of the concrete and make all that “is here” into “is not here”. The smoke transports, sublimates the solidity of reality, it dissolves it.

Conclusion
In our search to explain how the religious sublime is constructed in our culture, we have established the connection between locative isotopies of proximity and distance, the touchable (as a quotidian phenomenon) and the untouchable or ethereal, placed in a ‘beyond’. Defining the sublime implies a liminal issue that regards solidarity and spirituality, the earthly and the heavenly, as we saw in the quest of the protagonist in Bécquer’s novel. Analyzing Allegri’s Miserere, we found that the same isotopies of proximity and distance, concretion and vanishing can also be recognized (seen and heard) at a musical level. The Gregorian technic of this polyphonic piece evolves around “intensity and distension”, creating a displacement of the sound that goes from concretion to dissolution. This very sonorous phenomenon, when taking place in the architectural Gothic acoustic, is translated into a production of “in basso” and exaltation. The concrete proximity and the vanishing of the sound in the Gothic Chamber, is accompanied by the detail of the incense, which adds the aspects of solidity and dissolution of forms, completing the process of sublimation.

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