Introduction

HELGE BAUMANN / LEON SCHMIEDER

Ille mi par esse deo videtur,
ille, si fas est, superare divos,
qui sedens adversus identidem te
spectat et audit

dulce ridentem, misero quod ***omnes***
eripit sensus *mihi: nam simul te,*
Lesbia, aspexi, nihil est super mi
<vocis in ore>

lingua sed torpet, tenuis sub artus
flamma demanat, sonitu suopte
tintinant aures, gemina teguntur
lumina nocte.

otium, Catulle, tibi molestumst:
otio exultas nimiumque gestis.
otium et reges prius et beatas
perdidit urbes.

He seems to me to be equal to a god, he, if it may be, seems to surpass the very gods, who sitting opposite you again and again gazes at you and hears you sweetly laughing. Such a thing takes away all my senses, alas! for whenever I see you, Lesbia, at once no sound of voice remains within my mouth, but my tongue falters, a subtle flame steals down through my limbs, my ears ring with inward humming, my eyes are shrouded in twofold night.

Idleness, Catullus, does you harm, you riot in your idleness and wanton too much. Idleness ere now has ruined both kings and wealthy cities.[1]

Catull. 51

1 Text and translation follow Cornish/Postgate/Mackail (1913; rev. Goold 1987).

The poet-persona of Catullus 51 (just like its model in Sappho 31) is overwhelmed by the sensory perception of the object of his desire, Lesbia, interacting with a man he sees as his rival. His tongue is numb, he feels feverish, his ears are ringing, his eyes are clouded by darkness. The sight of her and the sound of her 'laughing sweetly' (itself a synaesthetic metaphor)[2] in the company of her lover is emphatically said to have bereaved him of all his senses (*omnes* | *eripit sensus*, 5 f.), but there still is extreme sensory perception aplenty. He witnesses himself gradually losing control of his body's sensory functions. What we have here is an engaging representation of perception, affect, and emotion, in a multisensory way, covering touch/thermoception, sound, and sight.

But this poem is not just about the physical aspects of extreme sensory perception and its representation. Indeed, one encounters multiple layers of extremity. Catullus touches on medical aspects by employing, as Woodman has shown[3], the vocabulary of contemporary medicine, thus likening his lovelorn bodily reaction to symptoms of severe sickness (*misero*, 5). Then, there is the aspect of psychology: Catullus' persona adapts a distanced perspective on itself when the poem starts to fragment the incapacitated body verse by verse and part by part, culminating in the passive voice of *teguntur* | *lumina* (11 f.) which seemingly removes all agency from it.[4] Connected with this aspect of agency, there is the socio-cultural topic of gender roles: The poem's male persona is rendered as an object unable to properly utilize its own senses, including the active and itself objectifying male gaze[5], thereby shifting into a role that to the Roman reader could seem female or even effeminate.[6] This is further elaborated on in the closing stanza in which the poet-persona admonishes itself against the dangers of this inactivity (*otium*, 13) that has proven, it is said, to be the bane of kings and cities (*et reges prius et beatas* | *perdidit urbes*, 15 f.), again underpinning the extremity of the persona's sensory perception with yet another, though this time distinctly literary aspect by alluding to a more lofty, i. e. epic and ethical frame of reference for its subjective experience.[7]

While Catullus marks the totality of the poet-persona's sensory overtaxing with the explicit *omnes eripit sensus*, his predecessor and model Sappho gives even more symptoms of sensory and emotional extremity by both describing her persona's turning 'greener than grass' and referencing a feeling bordering on death.[8] This is *what* happens in the poems: the readers (or listeners) are confronted with a multifaceted array

2 Catrein (2003) 92.
3 Woodman (2006).
4 Greene (2007). For the concept of agency and disssociation in connection with extreme sensory experience cf. the contribution to this volume by Munro.
5 For the Roman gaze as a multifaceted and gendered phenomenon, see Elsner (2007).
6 There is much scholarship on this aspect in Catullus, which of course also hinges on Sappho's originally female-coded model. See, e. g., Wray (2001) and Manwell (2007).
7 On poem 51's literary context and connection with poem 50, see Finamore (1984) See also Stevens (2013) on the poetics of silence as a special kind of acoustic stimulus in Catullus.
8 Sappho 31.14–16: χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας | ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω 'πιδεύης | φαίνομ' ἔμ' αὔται.

of sensory stimuli and emotions that are not only physically induced, but also socially and culturally significant. But this concern for vividness also prompts the question of *how* the poems themselves try to represent this sensory overtaxing with their textual means. While Catullus und Sappho explicitly mark the experience (or failure) of all sensory channels as simultaneous (Catullus: *simul*, Sappho: αὔτικα), the textual strategy is necessarily sequential: all details are rendered into a carefully wrought catalogue. Interestingly, Ps.-Longinus, whom we must thank for preserving what we have of Sappho's fragmentary poem 31, gives an engaging critical reading of these textual strategies when he comments:

> οὐ θαυμάζεις ὡς ὑπὸ τὸ αὐτὸ τὴν ψυχὴν τὸ σῶμα, τὰς ἀκοὰς τὴν γλῶσσαν, τὰς ὄψεις τὴν χρόαν, πάνθ' ὡς ἀλλότρια διοιχόμενα ἐπιζητεῖ, καὶ καθ' ὑπεναντιώσεις ἅμα ψύχεται καίεται, ἀλογιστεῖ φρονεῖ †ἢ γὰρ† φοβεῖται †ἢ παρ' ὀλίγον τέθνηκεν ἵνα μὴ ἕν τι περὶ αὐτὴν πάθος φαίνηται, παθῶν δὲ σύνοδος; πάντα μὲν τοιαῦτα γίνεται περὶ τοὺς ἐρῶντας, ἡ λῆψις δ' ὡς ἔφην τῶν ἄκρων καὶ ἡ εἰς ταὐτὸ συναίρεσις ἀπειργάσατο τὴν ἐξοχήν.
>
> Are you not amazed how at one and the same moment she seeks out soul, body, hearing, tongue, sight, complexion as though they had all left her and were external, and how in contradiction she both freezes and burns, is irrational and sane, is afraid and nearly dead, so that we observe in her not one single emotion but a concourse of emotions? All this of course happens to people in love; but, as I said, it is her selection of the most important details and her combination of them into a single whole that have produced the excellence of the poem.
>
> Ps.-Long. *Subl*. 10.3

In his musings about the sublime in literature, Ps.-Longinus uses Sappho's poem as an example of how the selection and order of details can contribute to sublimity in diction, the success of which he connects with the evocation of both perception and emotion in the reader.[9] He stresses the literary surplus effected by the representation of contradictory and accumulated stimuli and furthermore points out the dissociative aspects we have also observed in Catullus 51 by writing that Sappho strived to represent everything "as though they had left her and were external" showing an ancient interest for aspects that concern the representation and discourse on extreme forms of perception, affect, and emotion in Graeco-Roman literature. The experience and/or representation of sensory overtaxing (with an affective-emotional component) we have presented in the examples of Catullus and Sappho is the subject of our volume, with which we want to contribute to a flourishing field of study in Classics by focusing on the aspect of the 'extreme' in the context of sensory experience.

9 For recent discussions of Ps.-Longinus' engagement with Sappho, see Lardinois (2022) on Ps.-Longinus' concept of authorship and persona and De Jonge (2022) on emotions and the sublime.

The study of the senses in antiquity has become, over the last decade, an ever-growing area of research, spanning philological, historical, and archaeological approaches informed by what could well be termed a sensory turn in the broader field of the humanities.[10] The work of, among others, Jerry Toner and of the contributors to the well-known Routledge Series on *The Senses in Antiquity*[11] have opened up a fruitful discussion of the senses both as embodied and discursive elements of Graeco-Roman culture. They have shown how the senses – the plural emphatically pointing to us having overcome the long-dominant perspective on the visual alone – must be investigated in a variety of perspectives ranging from medicine and philosophy to history and religion, and not least to literary and material culture, considering both shifts and constants of a social, cultural, and religious nature. Furthermore, scholarship on embodiment and enactivism, but also on the affects and emotions, has shown how sensory perception and the former intertwine.[12]

It is in this context that this volume seeks to investigate a specific and hitherto neglected aspect of sensory studies, namely the subject of sensory extremity in Greek and Latin literature.[13] One of the volume's premises therefore is to investigate the role played by the interaction and blurring of the distinct areas of sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. This textual strategy can be considered a further augmentation of a texts' extreme pragmatics and aesthetics, but also a space for metaliterary discourse, as can be observed in many of the volume's contributions.[14] But what does 'extreme' mean when it comes to the senses in Graeco-Roman literature? As the verses by Sappho and Catullus quoted at the beginning of this introduction exemplify, sensory experience, and the affects and emotions that may accompany it, can be considered extreme in several (oftentimes, as the papers of this volume show, overlapping) ways. How, then, can we conceptualize extremity in sensory experience as represented (or commented upon) by these texts? There are several core aspects:

Epistemological: Ancient medicine and philosophy not only theorized about the workings of human sensory perception, but also about its limits, making them a cen-

10 See Smith (2007) for a broad perspective.

11 Toner (2014) and Betts (2017) give overviews of the field, Bradley (2015) on smell, Butler/Purves (2013) on an array of phenomena labelled 'synaesthetic', Courtil/Courtray (2015) and Butler/Nooter (2019) on sound, Purves (2018) on touch, Rudolph (2018) on taste, Squire (2016) on sight.

12 For interactions of ancient theories of emotion with their representation, see Konstan (2006). For ancient emotions more broadly, see Cairns (2019), Cairns/Nelis (2017), Chaniotis (2012), for emotions and narrative de Bakker/van den Berg/Klooster (2022), Grethlein (2017), Telò/Mueller (2018), Caracciolo/Kukkonen (2021).

13 There have been individual studies on, e. g., pain and loss of perception, but no comprehensive study to date. See, among others, Flemming (2018), Harris (2018), and Clarke/King/Baltussen (2023).

14 On the blending of the senses in Lucretius as a didactic scheme, see Catrein (2003). For Late Antique poetry and its multisensory aspects, see Schmieder (2022).

tral problem of epistemology.[15] Ancient concepts of physiology and of the interaction of body and world are essential aspects of dealing with all the following aspects and therefore must always be taken into consideration when engaging with texts that are, even if they only exhibit this influence implicitly, informed by these approaches to seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting (story-)worlds. Thus, we must investigate which senses, according to the ancients, can be trusted, and to what extent. How do physiological concepts and ethical considerations interact when it comes to phenomena like pain, old age, or even death?

Psychological/Emotional: Sensory experience (or the representation thereof) is, as we have seen, furthermore intricately linked to affect and emotion, especially if it touches on aspects of the extreme.[16] The question of how sensory perception affects body and mind is relevant not only in ancient philosophy, but also in ancient literary theory, encompassing concepts of rhetoric and poetics from Aristotle to Quintilian[17] and, as we have seen, treatises like that of Ps.-Longinus. But what kind of extreme sensory phenomena precisely can trigger affective responses in Graeco-Roman texts? How subjective is the threshold for a given individual's reaction to sensory experience? Which dissonances in a text's plot or its logic are brought about by such affects? How can our reading of certain texts benefit from looking at their depiction of extreme sensory perception and its interplay with affect?

Literary: Given the observed ubiquity of the representation of sensory experience among texts as diverse in chronological and regional provenance as in genre and context, there are some aspects worth investigating concerning the phenomenon's literary ramifications: What are the textual strategies for portraying sensory overstimulation or lack and loss of sensory perception, and do they differ in texts from different backgrounds, e. g., in drama or historiography? Are the texts themselves hyperbolic or restrained? How do sensory experience and metaliterary comment interact, and is there a poetics of the extreme? Does striving for or commenting upon extreme sensory experience contribute to a given reading or a literary program? What influence do conventions of genre have on the representation of sensory overstimulation or the lack and loss of sensory perception?

Social: Another avenue for investigation presents itself in the historical and social contexts the texts are brought about by and engage with. Both the concept of extremity and its corresponding *extrema* (e. g., pleasure and pain) must be investigated with attention for the individual aspects of normative and discursive relevance according to each group, milieu, or culture. Sensory perception can be extreme (or not) accord-

15 Nightingale (2016).

16 This is especially true of tragedy, where affect and emotion are central features both of the plots and the interaction with the audience. Cf. the contributions by Combatti and H. Baumann in this volume.

17 Katula (2003).

ing to, e. g., gender, status, and religious conviction. How, then, do the texts establish, affirm, or contravene these standards? What role do social practices play in the evaluation of what is extreme? How do early Christian communities recalibrate traditional ways to be in and experience their (textual) world when it comes to extreme sensory perception, as in the depiction of violence and suffering?

This volume, which is the fruit of a 2022 conference with the title *Senses on Edge. Overstrained and Fading Sensory Perception in Ancient Literature*, hosted at Justus-Liebig-Universität Giessen, brings together a series of papers dedicated to these aspects, covering different genres, periods, and contexts of Graeco-Roman literature.

The first part of this volume ("Strained Senses, Fading Senses, and Epistemology") focuses on ancient concepts of extreme sensory experience by scrutinizing different philosophical takes on sight. Two scenarios are taken into account of which the first addresses seeing too much and the second seeing nothing at all. **Aleksandar Milenkovic** investigates Empedoclean concepts of sight as found in Theophrastus' *De sensibus* in order to find a possible origin for the Presocratic's teachings on the limits of sight. Taking the philosopher's hypothesis that sight comes about by the interaction of particles internal and external to the eye, and is hindered by an imbalance of both, as a starting point, the author traces this model back to two extreme cases of vision: looking at the sun and experiencing a divine epiphany, both of which events, according to Empedocles and other literary texts, presuppose such an imbalance due to their destructive nature. Staying with the topic of loss of eyesight, albeit as a natural process during old age, **Wim Nijs** studies Epicurean ways of dealing with this impairment. By focusing both on the epistemological and on the ethical ramifications of this geriatric condition as found in the writings of Diogenes of Oenoanda, he shows the Epicureans took a pragmatic approach to losing one's eyesight by allowing failing sight and even touch to be a valid epistemological tool for appreciating beauty in the world. In the nexus of epistemology and sexuality, this appreciation of the world by the elderly appears as neither immoral nor lacking in empirical soundness, but as a perspective every ageing Epicurean could look forward to thanks to these teachings.

Part 2 ("Strained Senses, Fading Senses, and Affects") gathers contributions that explore the link between sensory experience and affective reaction. By addressing issues of agency, gender, and textuality, they survey literary strategies for the portrayal of affective states triggered by extreme sensory events and analyse them within their social and cultural context. In her study of aesthetic experience and affect in Euripides' *Alcestis*, **Maria Combatti** explores the characters of Alcestis and Admetus, whose dynamic affective reaction to each other sheds light on aspects of embodiment in the communication between the actors and the audience, both of whom are situated in a matrix of sensations and emotions characterised by the oppositions of activity and passivity, sensory deprivation and overstimulation, and of what was considered to be male and female in sensory and affective terms in 5th c. Athens. **Thomas Munro** ex-

amines phenomena in Latin poetry that present their readers with narrative lacunae in passages where extreme sensory experiences are only alluded to. By using the concept of 'dissociative moments', he explains these textual denials to the reader of relatable information on the sensorium and psychology of a diverse range of characters affected by serious trauma (Ariadne, Attis, Aeneas) not as a deficient property, but as an incentive to the readers to fill the gaps in the narrative and relate their own experiences. Finally, **Rebecca Moorman** revisits a famous passage in the *Aeneid*, the gory discovery of Polydorus' corpse by Aeneas during the gathering of sacrificial branches which turn out to be the spears that killed Polydorus, in order to reach a better understanding of Aeneas' conflicted behavior in this transgressive situation. She proposes a solution to this long-discussed textual ambiguity by making use of the concepts of unknowing and sovereignty, two states of mind (and bodily sensorium) that, suspended between proximity and distance, blur the lines between subject and object. This affective state, then, she argues, does not render Aeneas impious, but enables him to ultimately grant his cousin a proper burial, visit the Sibyl with a gift from the reluctant golden bough, and exact Pallas' revenge on a pleading Turnus.

The third part of this volume ("Strained Senses, Fading Senses, and Literary Program") tackles the representational aspects of extreme sensory experience and therefore focuses on two main aspects of the extreme: how can it be evoked in a purely textual and literary setting, and how do these representational strategies interact with (meta-)literary concepts of extremity in different texts? For this purpose, this chapter assembles contributions on diverse genres and periods of ancient literature. **Fabian Neuwahl** focuses his study on the plague motif found in Late Republican and Early Imperial Latin poetry. By tracing the motif from Lucretius to Silius Italicus, he shows how it became a subject for poetic *aemulatio*, the textual strategies of which were not only intended to evoke the extreme experience of sickness and death, but also to affect viewers, and, in turn, readers, of this common experience. Furthermore, he goes on to reveal the metaliterary aspects of these narrative strategies, which encompass ethical, epistemological, and aesthetic (re)evaluations of disease and perception. Continuing the subject of the textualities of extreme sensory experience, **Mario Baumann** seeks to pin down the elusive nature of smell both as physical sensation and as object of literary description in his analysis of the third book of Diodorus' *Bibliotheke* and its recurrent focus on *Arabia Felix*' legendary olfactory riches. By drawing our attention to the textual strategies involved in evoking the smell of distant lands, he goes on to show that Didodorus does not only inform the reader about the pleasures and dangers of smelling the province's olfactory sensations, but also comments on the way his historiographic work should be read: in a balance between readerly involvement and reflection. Finally, **Helge Baumann** investigates the notion of extreme loudness in Late Republican and Early Imperial Roman poetry, namely in Lucretius' *De rerum natura* and the Ps.-Senecan tragedy *Hercules Oetaeus*. By taking the question of how sound and loudness are evoked in these literary texts as a point of departure, he shows

that both authors do not only make significant use of textual sound patterns, but also have them play a vital role in the text's representational strategies, be they didactic or dramatic. In both cases, the loudness of thunder is highly aestheticized and aimed at making their readers – or, as Baumann insists, listeners – feel the thunder.

Part 4 ("Strained Senses, Fading Senses, and Society") addresses the social and cultural contexts of extreme sensory experience by looking at different practices and agents involved in experiencing and evaluating what is extreme both from a physiological and a moral standpoint. In her contribution on the extreme culinary practices of Rome's elite, **Isabelle Künzer** maps out the complicated interactions of escalating dining customs and its accompanying moralistic discourse. By drawing on sources dating from the Late Republican to the Early Imperial period, and from Cicero's bowels irritated by extremely spicy dishes to Seneca's ramblings against gustatory overkill, she contrasts the relative scarcity of texts commenting upon overstrained palates with its widespread criticism, suggesting that this imbalance may very well be caused by the ubiquitous nature of these practices which have to be evaluated in their historical context, and that they can be seen as a coherent part of the elite's competitive lifestyle. But the attribution of status by way of conspicuous overstraining of one's own senses is only one facet of many, as interpersonal sensory experience was also never without social premises and consequences: Thus, **Johanna Kaiser** investigates the interplay between physiological and moral layers of disgust by focusing on stench and foul odors as a cause for sensory strain in Martial's epigrams. She shows that the poet uses the priamel as a potent poetic device to evoke and approximate extremely unpleasant smells said to be exuded by certain groups, especially women. Thereby, he realizes a paradoxical, i. e. both repulsive and entertaining, aesthetics of disgust which is firmly based on societal norms and conceptions. These conceptions tend to blend the physiological and moral spheres, sometimes even reversing their logical relationship, qualifying bodily smells as disgusting due to a person's role in society. In this context, the contribution calls attention to Martial's own inconsistency in judging smells which is caused by the different interpersonal situations offered in individual epigrams. This social and cultural dimension in the qualification of smells as extreme is not confined to the world of Martial's epigrams, but remains a topic of interest well into Late Antiquity: Accordingly, in his contribution on the depiction of and discourse on sensory extremes in Latin Hagiography, **Leon Schmieder** focuses on the *liber Peristephanon*, a book of poems that drastically depict martyrdom, by the Late Antique poet Prudentius. In the impressive blending of classic form (metre, language, tradition) and the new content (Catholic dogma and Hagiography), this collection exhibits a particularly complex relationship with the senses. By looking at the depiction of its intratextual characters, the author investigates the questions of what is an extreme sensory experience in a Christian context, the appropriate response to it, and the role this discourse plays in the poet's aesthetics. This poetic discourse on the senses is shown to be invest-

ed in mapping out a new, Christian way of making sense of extreme sensory experience during martyrdom.

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