

CHAPTER I

Introduction: the sublime before and after Longinus

Any search for the sublime in Greece and Rome has to begin with one work, the only treatise on the topic to have survived from antiquity, the so-called *Peri hupsous*. This hardly gives us a sure foothold on the problem. The treatise is riddled with unknowns, from its author, date, and title to its place of origin (Greece or Rome?) to the meaning of its core concept, which seemingly defies definition. For starters, next to nothing is known about the author, including his name. The primary Byzantine manuscript, a codex dated to the second half of the tenth century, attributes the work to “Dionysius Longinus” on the title page where the essay begins (Figure 1.1), while the table of contents that appears at the front of the codex assigns the title to “Dionysius *or* Longinus” (Figure 1.2).¹ Something has gone wrong here, but exactly what is harder to say.

A slip was obviously made somewhere along the line, but the confusion goes deeper than quality control. Evidently the author’s name was unknown. A copyist or scholar, puzzled by the problem and faced with so fine a work, must have assumed that it had to stem from one of the great critical names from the past, such as Dionysius of Halicarnassus, the Augustan literary critic and antiquarian, or Cassius Longinus, the third-century CE Neoplatonist, polymath, and critic. Neither guess is very compelling. While there are a few points of contact that might encourage the identification, the similarities are at best superficial, while other factors speak against either possibility, not least the distinctive critical styles of each of the writers in question.² None of this will have escaped the Byzantines to whom we owe the preservation of

¹ Parisinus (P) 2036, the archetype codex of the remaining ten MSS. See Roberts (1899b) 3–4; Russell (1964) xxii–xxx; Häussler (1995) 154; Mazzucchi (1989); Mazzucchi (2010) xxxix–xliv.

² Cf. the marginal note in P at *Subl.* 39.1: “NB: Dionysius wrote on composition” (202^v; discussed by Russell (1964) xxiv n. 2), which would appear to be corroborating the identification. But Longinus’ work of the same title was in two books (*Subl.* 39.1), while the study we have by Dionysius is in one. Cassius Longinus has not found favor, though the case has been restated most recently by Heath (1999) and Heath (2012) 11; 15–16. Kaibel (1899) lays out most of the counter-arguments against this latter’s candidacy; see also Russell (1964) xxiv–xxv; Russell in Halliwell, et al. (1995) 146–7; Mazzucchi (2010) xxxiii.

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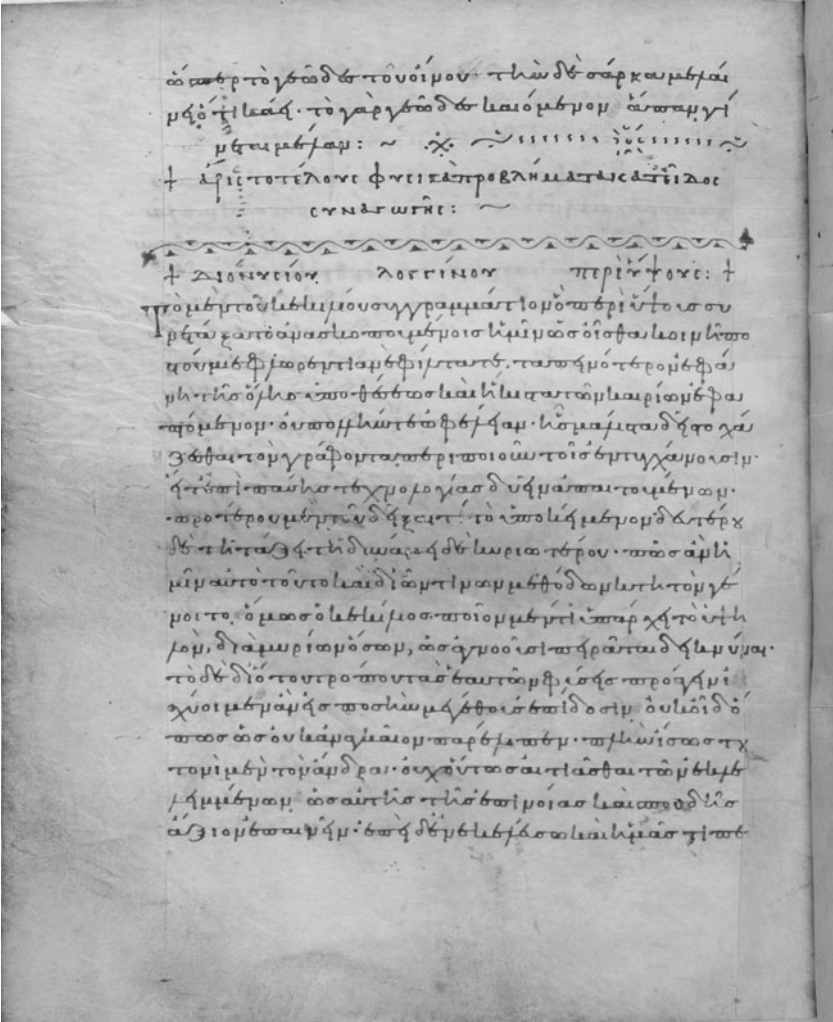


Figure 1.1 Title page to *Peri hupsous* listing “Dionysius Longinus” as the author (Διονυσίου Λογγίνου περί ὕψους). The treatise appears at the end of ps.-Aristotle’s *Problems*, which is also shown. *Codex Parisinus graecus* 2036, fol. 178^v.

the work. The indecision about the names in the manuscript indicates doubt rather than belief. Someone was grasping at straws.³

³ Renaissance and early modern writers took the author’s name to be Dionysius Longinus, as does Mazzucchi (2010), in accordance with the title page.

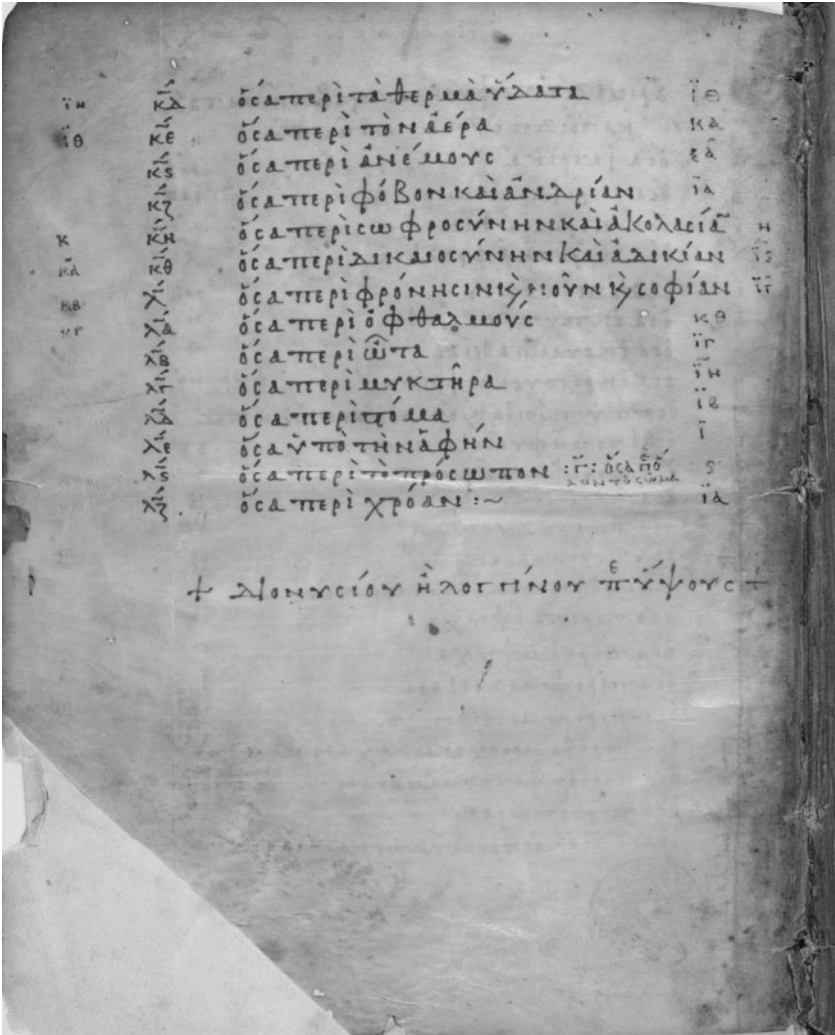


Figure 1.2 Table of contents to *Codex Parisinus graecus* 2036, fol. 1^r, listing “Dionysius or Longinus” as the author (Διονυσίου ἢ Λογγίνου περὶ ὑψους). The reference is preceded by the table of contents to a copy of ps.-Aristotle’s *Problems*.

A further mystery has to do with the way the text circulated once it was written. For whatever reason, possibly because it was intended for private use only, the text was transmitted silently until the Renaissance, unless we count three very unlikely allusions in John of Sicily, the later tenth or early

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eleventh-century rhetorician, and an anonymous scholium of uncertain date.⁴ No preserved classical writer cites or mentions the *Peri hupsous*, its author, or any other of his titles, at least three of which likewise dealt with sublimity.⁵ (A good third of his treatise is missing, but this does not change the picture.) And so the thread linking the author to his *Sitz im Leben* was forever lost, and only guesswork has been permitted regarding his identity and all other historical facts about his work.

Not only is the treatise of uncertain date, lacking internal markers of any kind that might help to locate it securely in time beyond the rough guesses of Roman, first to third centuries CE, possibly mid- to late first century CE (where consensus currently puts it),⁶ but its title, preserved in the manuscripts and universally taken at face value, can hardly be any more certain than the authorial ascription, both of which must have suffered the same fate. The title, labeled *Peri hupsous* in the same manuscript, has in all likelihood been culled from chapter 1.2 (“Since you have requested that I too should write up *something on the sublime* (*ti peri hupsous*) for you . . .”),⁷ in the same way that the presumed title by Caecilius of Caleacte, Longinus’ favorite opponent and whipping boy, has been culled from chapter 1.1 (“the little treatise by Caecilius, which he wrote *on sublimity*” (*peri hupsous*)).⁸ Meanwhile, the translation of either title is uncertain, for what does *hupsos* mean? “Height” is the literal meaning, but does this signify grandeur, loftiness, excellence, or something else altogether? Longinus does all he can to frustrate any final and official definition.

“Sublimity” and “the sublime” are the conventional translations of *hupsos*, and the ones I shall follow here. The trouble with any of these

⁴ Boyd (1957) mounts an argument in favor of the allusions, based on the slimmest of hopes. The possibility is rejected by Russell (1964) xxvi–xxviii and Wilson (1983) 150 (a “barely tenable view”).

⁵ These works, mentioned by Longinus himself, were on Xenophon, on verbal arrangement, and on some other topic that involved sublimity. (See Chapter 3 below for discussion.)

⁶ See Russell (1964) xxii–xxx; Häussler (1995); Innes (2002) 259. Favoring an Augustan date are Richards (1938); Goold (1961); more tentatively, de Jonge (2014).

⁷ ἐπεὶ δὲ ἐνεκελεύσω καὶ ἡμᾶς τι περὶ ὕψους πάντως εἰς σὴν ὑπομνηματίσασθαι χάριν Translations of Longinus here and below are my own, unless otherwise noted.

⁸ τὸ μὲν τοῦ Καικιλίου συγγραμμάτων, ὃ περὶ ὕψους συνετάξατο. Roberts (1897a) 307 at least voices some hesitancy about Caecilius’ title, and rightly so. Otherwise, both titles are taken for granted. By contrast, Longinus’ language in 8.1 where he refers to a work on Xenophon (κὰν τοῖς περὶ Ξενοφώντος), does not normally prompt the translation of “my work *On Xenophon*,” nor need it. *Peri*-literature (topical literature “about” some subject) is notoriously difficult to capture in modern bibliographical form. In short, ancient habits were casual and very unlike our own: the same title could take different forms, nor were titles always obligatory; they were also easily lost in transmission. See Schmalzriedt (1970), examining early Greek literature; Schröder (1999) 11–12.

Making sense of sublimity

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names is that they not only fail to fix a definition for the concept but they also fail to fix its range. Is sublimity a matter of language or of thought, of art or of nature? Is it a feature of texts, of art outside literature, of the mind, or of natural phenomena? Is it an aspect of style or an element of aesthetics? Is it a kind of beauty or a matter of unsurpassed intensity? Is it lodged in the object or the subject, a cause or an effect? Is it a self-evident category or does one need instruction to grasp it? The Longinian sublime seems to confirm all of these possibilities. The difficulty lies not in the range (all of these senses are valid) but in pinning sublimity down to any one thing at any given moment.

Making sense of sublimity

No approach to the sublime can hope to get off the ground without a working definition of its object. According to a recent analysis, which can be extended to antiquity without anachronism, the sublime is to be found wherever “a positive, material object [is] elevated to the status of [an] impossible Thing.”⁹ Simultaneously fascinating and fearful, such an object resists integration into one’s symbolic frameworks of understanding. The experience of the sublime is the gamut of responses one has in the face of such an object, although ultimately the experience one has is, on this view, of the contingency of one’s own frameworks of meaning and understanding. Defined most broadly as a sense of absolute structural impossibility and of total deadlock, the sublime produces profound mental or spiritual disruption, be this momentary or lasting – it is like a shock of the Real. Only, the Real one experiences is that of the structures of belief and thought that underpin one’s sense of reality, in all their fragile coherence.

Seen in this light, the sublime is broader than an aesthetic category, even if aesthetics is the first place one instinctually turns to in order to make sense of the concept.¹⁰ The sublime *can* have a powerful aesthetic value, but primarily because it is pitched at the limit of all values. Standing for a shattering and dislocating excess, it appears to exceed the grasp of systematic closure. Unlike beauty, grace, charm, and other of the more domesticated aesthetic virtues, the sublime, which has a bit of the rogue and

⁹ Žižek (1989) 71, developing Lacan (1986) 133. Cf. Stewart (1993) 140.

¹⁰ I attempt to make this distinction between aesthetics broadly and narrowly construed in Porter (2010a).

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dysfunctional family member to it, seems to speak more directly to one's experience: it betokens an overpowering immediacy and a bruising contact with some Real; it knows no canons or calipers: how can you measure a disaster, a dislocating rupture, or an abyss? Like a free radical, the sublime can be attached to anything one likes: to subjects or objects, actions or utterances, concrete manifestations or abstract thoughts, to literature or to reality. Plainly, the sublime is not contained by aesthetic sensibilities, even if it often seems to conjure these into a new or rejuvenated existence. In eradicating familiar values, the sublime seems to point beyond itself – and beyond ourselves – hazily but compellingly, to something else, creating a vacuum of sense that the mind rushes in to fill.

There are further ways of describing the sublime, for instance by defining it as whatever prompts or results from reflection on thought at the limits of the humanly conceivable, whether this suggests a transcendent region beyond or a depth and profundity immanent to one's immediate surroundings, and whether the experience is focused by something numinously divine, by some extraordinary feature of the human, or by nature. More a stumbling block than an object of thought, the sublime can be suggested by whatever appears in nature as preternatural, by a quality of the human that appears suprahuman and virtually divine, or by a magnitude that exceeds the bounds of all measure (however large or small the object). But as useful and flexible such attempts at a definition may be, they only begin to explain the attractions that the idea of sublimity could have held out to an ancient mind.

Longinus knows all these manifestations of the sublime, even if the spectacular range of his conception outruns modern and contemporary readings of him. The sublime as it appears in Longinus is a multifaceted phenomenon, part nature and part art, though more than anything else the sublime for Longinus is an artful and even treacherous reproduction of the effects of nature, which is to say that it is the art of *appearing* to be naturally sublime. Longinus' writing is deeply sophisticated and playful, and it works on several levels at once. This is in part a reflection of his rhetorical inheritances – and Longinus is in the first instance a rhetorician of the sublime who is deeply invested in the techniques and technologies of sublime appearances, which in turn are inextricably bound up with surreptitious deception and illusion (*apatē* in Gorgias' vocabulary). But this hardly exhausts his credentials.

A master of the expedient, Longinus is also a magnificently creative and capacious thinker. As a consequence, the Longinian sublime has a

breathtaking reach. It can locate sublimity in a particle of grammar or in a glimpse of the cosmos in order or in disarray, in thoughts about the divine or in expansions of the self. The wide reach of sublimity in Longinus' work suggests the synthetic method of his approach and the disparateness of his inspirations. Though he is typically viewed as an innovator, he is best seen as a collecting point for multiple strands of reflection about the sublime in antiquity, which renders his treatise into a complex amalgam of multiple and often contradictory forces. There are innumerable routes to the sublime in Longinus, who knows how to activate these multifarious sources at will. Taken together, these conflicting impulses make up the prehistory of the Longinian sublime. Modern readers, faced with so much intellectual energy, have resorted to desperate measures, first simplifying Longinus and then rendering his titular concept unknowable, undefinable, and unsayable – a true *je ne sais quoi*.¹¹ The results have been disastrous for understanding Longinus and the sublime in antiquity. But before proceeding any further, it will be important to examine these views about the Longinian sublime, how they emerged, and why they have such difficulty explaining the phenomenon they name.

Current biases

The current understanding of the sublime in antiquity, which has been dominant for centuries, rests on a number of faulty premises, and these touch on everything from the presumed centrality of Longinus to the question of when the sublime was born, the relationship of the sublime to ancient rhetoric, the significance of the word *hypsos* as a marker of sublimity, and finally the relationship between sublimity and the domain of the extra-literary (specifically, nature). The contemporary understanding of Longinus in Classics, which arose during the 1950s and 1960s, represents a particular refinement of the modern view. It can be quickly summarized.

¹¹ Translating *On the Sublime* 9.2, Boileau drew on Bouhours's formula (the *je ne sais quoi*) to coin the modern idea of the sublime: "Car ce silence [d'Ajax aux Enfers, dans l'Odyssée] a *je ne sçai quoi* de plus grand que tout ce qu'il auroit pû dire," where Boileau has introduced the italicized phrase into Longinus' sentence (Boileau Despréaux (1674) 18). See Litman (1971); Brody (1958) 54–6 (noting Boileau's "tentativeness" and "an inability to explain ... the inexplicable"). Ineffability and inexplicability continue to be attractive approaches to the ever-unapproachable sublime (Jankélévitch (1980); Jankélévitch (1986); Lyotard (1982); see also Scholar (2005)).

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On the current understanding, the sublime is defined less in positive terms than by a series of negations: it has no significant prehistory prior to the latter half of the first century BCE when its concept was first named by Caecilius of Caleacte, Longinus' sole predecessor in criticism;¹² it cannot be found outside rhetorical or literary contexts;¹³ it cannot be found except where the noun-form *hupsos* (or, by extension, *sublimitas*) is explicitly used in a technical, literary-critical sense,¹⁴ nor can synonyms and equivalents of *hupsos* replace the word itself; not even *hupsēlos*, the adjectival form of *hupsos*, is proof of the concept's presence: sublimity must be a meaty substantive, not a wispy modifier, and ultimately it must exist independently of a critic's exposition of it.¹⁵ Moreover, on this view sublimity is not equivalent to grandeur: it is something else and more; it is not linked in any way to the inherited rhetorical system of styles, let alone to poetic or rhetorical techniques, because it "transcends" these.¹⁶ *Hupsos* for Longinus is not a product of art or language because it is rooted in one's nature. Indeed, it manifests itself best of all in a single thought without the aid of words.¹⁷ For all of these reasons, "*hupsos* and its cognates are never entirely at home in [ancient] literary criticism."¹⁸ They point to some other spiritual home that transcends literature altogether, in a way that would be recognizable to a Boileau or a later Romantic,¹⁹ but not to a Plato, an

¹² Russell (1964) xl: "the critical use of the word ὑψος and its cognates dates probably from the latter part of the first century B.C."; cf. *ibid.* xxxi where two exceptions are given (Dioscorides and Aristophanes), only to be eliminated as too insignificant to affect the essential claim – mistakenly so.

¹³ Russell (1964) xxxvii–xxxviii; Bühler (1964).

¹⁴ Roberts (1902) 292; Costil (1949) 445 and *passim*; Russell (1964) xxxi–xxxii; Chiron (2001) 330.

¹⁵ Russell (1964) xxxi, xxxvi–xxxvii; Heath (1999) 66: "Hermogenes speaks frequently of grandeur (*megethos*) and magnificence (*ogkos*), but never of sublimity (*hupsos*)."¹⁶ Heath then adds (in a footnote): "the adjective *hupsēlos* occurs three times." Cf. Monk (1960 [1935]) 20: the use of *sublime* as an "adjective" as applied to empirical objects or rhetorical styles was replaced, only after Boileau, by "the substantive *sublime* in its aesthetic connotation." Aullón de Haro (2006) reverses the timeline but not the prejudice: "la substantiva sublimidad platónica" (ch. 3) contrasts with the rhetorical, "adjectival" understanding of the sublime (ch. 4). The source of this view is Boileau, who champions "le Sublime" over "le stile sublime" (e.g., Boileau Despréaux (1674) Préface (n.p.) [p. viii]).

¹⁶ Grube (1957a) xi; Grube (1957b) 357; Russell (1964) xxxvii, and *passim*.

¹⁷ Grube (1957a) xi: "Longinus is not concerned with the grand or any other kind of style. What grandeur there is of conception, not of expression."

¹⁸ Russell (1964) xxx, a view that parallels his low estimation of the value of ancient rhetoric and criticism (Russell (1981a) 6; cf. 129), which Longinus promisingly transcends (he "transcend[s] its pedantry and limitations," *ibid.* 147; "he is able to transcend the conventional limits of Greek criticism," Russell (1965) xiii), in part by ceasing to count as a literary and rhetorical critic at all: his treatise is at bottom "a moral proterptic in the guise of literary criticism" (Russell (1981b) 85).

¹⁹ Scott-James (1930) 80: Longinus is "the first Romantic critic"; Abrams (1953) 74 on Longinus' "consonance with the familiar romantic tradition"; Russell (1964) xlvii: Longinus "helped to prepare the way for [the] characteristically Romantic point of view"; cf. Monk (1960 [1935]) 15. This

Aristotle, or a Hermogenes, let alone a writer on nature or the universe. The seeds of neglect lie here. A correction is urgently needed.²⁰

One of the most energetic exponents of this view in Classics is D. A. Russell, Longinus' modern editor, whose commentary (1964) has been hugely influential for half a century. Russell has done more than any other single philologist to help restore the profile of Longinus in recent memory. But his interpretation needs revisiting. According to Russell, the sublime is "a special effect, not a special style."²¹ Indicatively, the claim, which has become something of a slogan among specialists,²² is nowhere backed up by a reference to Longinus, who says no such thing. The reason is not far to seek. The language almost certainly derives from Samuel Monk, whose 1935 study on eighteenth-century theories of the sublime was by 1964 a classic (it was reprinted in 1960). For Monk, "the test of the sublime is in its effect" and not in the areas of "technique and style." Accordingly, the sublime can be said to lie "beyond the reach of rhetoric and her hand-maiden, the rules," all of which it completely "transcends," given that it is "independent" of these.²³ The underlying notion is not only highly contestable (the rigid dichotomy of rhetorical style and effect is an artificial and untenable requirement),²⁴ but it is also somewhat incoherent. If the

misprision is symptomatic. Abrams wrongly wants to see in the Neoplatonic theory of *phantasia* a forerunner of the Romantic view of imagination. See Sheppard (2014); Porter (2014a).

²⁰ No modern book-length study of Longinus exists (Tröger (1899) and (1900) are lexical studies; Mutschmann (1913) is dated), and there are very few comprehensive chapter or article-length studies either. Four recent exceptions are the chapters in Too (1998), Hunter (2009), Halliwell (2012), and Doran (2015). Nor do any full-length treatments of the sublime in antiquity exist aside from Kühn (1941), who looks no further back than Plato and who holds rhetorical sublimity in utter disdain (50), and two exceptional articles (each, however, no more than a sketch): Wehrli (1946) and Quadlbauer (1958). A number of inroads have been made in Roman literary studies, quietly challenging the *status quo* and starting with Lucretius. See Conte (1966); Michel (1969); Armisen-Marchetti (1989); Armisen-Marchetti (1990); Conte (1991b); Delarue (2000); Porter (2001a); Porter (2003); Schiesaro (2003) 22–5, 52–5, 127–35; Porter (2004); Schrijvers (2004); Delarue (2004); Dugan (2005) 251–332; Delarue (2006); Leigh (2006); Conte (2007); Porter (2007); Hardie (2009); Hutchinson (2011); Williams (2012); Day (2013).

²¹ Russell (1964) xxvii.

²² It is repeated verbatim by, e.g., Armisen-Marchetti (1990) 93; Conley (1990) 44; Innes (1995) 324; Innes (2002) 275; Dugan (2005) 318; Till (2006) 18; Shanzer (2010) 63; de Jonge (2012) 282 n. 35; 284; Gründler (2012) 89 n. 16; Day (2013) 34–5, 37. Restatements of the idea are found in Grube (n. 17 above); Richardson (1986) 398; Mazzucchi (2010) xvii; Halliwell (2012) 331 n. 9.

²³ Monk (1960 [1935]) 13–14; 20; 35. Monk seems to be adapting some of Edmund Burke's own language: "delightful horror . . . is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime" (Burke (1968 [1757; 1759]) 73; emphasis added) – with the difference that Burke traces this effect back to a number of "efficient causes" which he explores at some length (ibid. 129–60). As it happens, these causes are not rhetorical for Burke, but empirical and psychological. But then neither is Burke's attention limited to literature. Monk's most immediate influence, however, is not Burke but Boileau (see below).

²⁴ Elsewhere it is sensibly and effortlessly denied, or ignored, e.g., by Kaibel (1899) 117: "On the Sublime investigates in the first instance the sources of an undeniably real and palpable aesthetic

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sublime is a special effect, just what is it an effect of? The expected answer ought to be “rhetoric” or “style,” but these have been ruled out as a factor. “One’s nature” is equally unsatisfying as an answer: if sublimity in literature depends upon conception and not upon expression, why does Longinus bother to look for it in texts at all? How can it even be found? Causes and effects seem to be confused here. Longinus encourages this confusion, but he does not validate it.

The current consensus view gets things wrong several times over. Most immediately, it romanticizes the sublime, rendering it unlocatable and unanalyzable. But such a result flies in the face of Longinus’ own work. If Longinus has any critical program at all, it is to locate and to analyze instances of sublime right where they make themselves known, in texts. Secondly, the reigning view – let us call this the “non-rhetorical” or “post-rhetorical” view of the sublime – remains blind to the fact that the sublime in literature for Longinus *is* a matter of art and rhetoric and not an expression of unalloyed genius. Genius without adequate expression in some material medium cannot even get off the ground; and by adequate expression Longinus understands language that is organized by rhetorical principles. Thirdly, the consensus view is not that Longinus transcends only rhetoric; it is that he transcends antiquity altogether by ushering in a new kind of thinking, a theory of aesthetic experience that looks forward to the eighteenth century, to Kant, and then the Romantics. “To write on the sublime style is to write on rhetoric; to write on sublimity is to write on aesthetic” – so Monk,²⁵ whose view would be endorsed by others, from Romanticists like M. H. Abrams to French poststructuralists like Jean-François Lyotard, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Jean-Luc Nancy. The sublime on this account marks a radical break with antiquity from within antiquity itself, while Longinus juts out of antiquity as an inexplicable anomaly: presciently modern, he is not really a typical ancient at all.²⁶

effect, the sources of the sublime in style”; Kühn (1941) 60: “*megalphrosunē* [here, high thoughts directed towards cosmic grandeur in Philo] was the source of stylistic *hupsos*, but also . . . a synonym for spiritual [*seelische*] *hupsos*”; Shuger (1984) 10: “the total effect of style and content”; Hunter (2009) 136: “subject as well as style matters for the sublime” (also *ibid.* 149, 163). Historically speaking, the denial sets in almost immediately after Boileau (this is also noticed by Allen (1941) 63–4), but for whatever reason this line fails to become the dominant approach to the sublime. One of the rare later dissenters from Monk is Wood (1972), whom I discovered only at the last minute. After dismissing Monk’s distinction between rhetoric and “esthetic” (*viz.*, effect) as “specious” (19), he goes on to dismantle his arguments over the next several pages and to reclaim Longinus for rhetoric. Cronk (2002) 82–4 and 87 develops the counter-arguments further.

²⁵ Monk (1960 [1935]) 12.

²⁶ See Abrams (1953) 74 (to be discussed in Chapter 2 below); Lyotard (1994) 54: “We can call [Kant’s sublime] modern in the way that Rabelais or Hamlet is modern. I would even venture to say that . . .