THE SUBLIME IN ANTIQUITY

Current understandings of the sublime are focused by a single word ("sublimity") and by a single author ("Longinus"). The sublime is not a word: it is a concept and an experience, or rather a whole range of ideas, meanings, and experiences that are embedded in conceptual and experiential patterns. Once we train our sights on these patterns a radically different prospect on the sublime in antiquity comes to light, one that touches everything from its range of expressions to its dates of emergence, evolution, role in the cultures of antiquity as a whole, and later reception. This book is the first to outline a comprehensive account of the sublime in Greek and Roman poetry, philosophy, and the sciences, in addition to rhetoric and literary criticism. It offers new readings of Longinus with an eye to situating him in a much larger context of reflection on the sublime in antiquity.

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CAMBRIDGE
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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107037472

First published 2016

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Porter, James I., 1954– author.
The sublime in antiquity / James I. Porter.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-107-03747-2 (Hardback)
1. Sublime, The. 2. Greece–Antiquities. 3. Rome–Antiquities. I. Title.
BH301.S7P67 2015
111′.850938–dc23 2015024702

ISBN 978-1-107-03747-2 Hardback

To someone truly sublime

ἔρανός ἐστι πλήθους τὰ μεγέθη
Longinus, *On the Sublime* 40.1

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Acknowledgements

Some time ago I began an inquiry into aesthetic thought and experience in the Greco-Roman world, which has since taken the shape of a trilogy. The first volume, *The Origins of Aesthetic Thought in Ancient Greece: Matter, Sensation, and Experience* (2010), broached the foundational role of the senses and of matter in aesthetic experience broadly conceived. The third installment, still in progress, will cover developments in literary aesthetics after Aristotle and down to the age of Augustus. The present volume investigates the sublime in criticism and literature, in rhetoric and philosophy, and in science before and after Longinus. Given the scope and complexity of the material, only a selective approach was possible. As a result, certain aspects of the sublime, especially as it appears in other media (for example, sculpture, painting, and music), had to be left largely to one side.

Where the first volume was intended as a multi-faceted suggestion, *The Sublime in Antiquity* is conceived as a focused argument, albeit one with broad implications of its own. For a variety of reasons to be discussed below, the sublime has been something of an unwelcome presence in Classics until most recently, although it was never this outside the field. As a result, the sublime was deemed to be either unapproachable or simply off-limits, particularly once one strayed from Longinus' text. This is a shame. The sublime is a vast and difficult topic, but also an immensely exhilarating one to work on. My hope is that the present book will not only call attention to the problems that the sublime poses to our field, but that it will also embolden readers to feel licensed to examine the category and its manifestations, whether in the areas just listed or in others that I have neglected to name. If nothing else, I will be happy if readers come away from this book with a greater appreciation of the depth and ingenuity of ancient authors and the inexhaustible riches they left behind.

For comments on different parts of the manuscript and on questions related to it I wish to thank Ian Balfour, David Blank, Paul Bové, Shane

Butler, Patrick Cheney, Pierre Chiron, Casper de Jonge, Eric Downing, Kathy Eden, Mark Griffith, Philip Hardie, Brooke Holmes, Richard Hunter, Joshua Katz, Donald Mastronarde, Andrea Nightingale, René Nünlist, Maria Pantelia, Ralph Rosen, Ian Rutherford, Kirk Sanders, Anne Sheppard, Deborah Shuger, Suzanne Stern-Gillet, Mario Telò, Katherina Volk, Tim Whitmarsh, Gareth Williams, and two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press. I am especially grateful to Michael Sharp for his terrific support of my project on ancient aesthetics at each new turn. The editorial and production teams at Cambridge University Press, led by Liz Hanlon and Charlotte Thomas, somehow turned my digital files into a book. Martin Thacker, my copy-editor, saved me from a number of infelicities. Doreen Kunze kindly checked my quotations of German material. Chris Edmonston and Kevin Batton heroically encoded the indexes and detected further corrigenda in the process. Any errors that remain are of course my own. The book has benefited greatly from audiences at Berkeley, Cambridge, Columbia, Harvard, Heidelberg, Leiden, McGill, Santa Barbara, Toronto, and the University of Pennsylvania, as well as from two graduate seminars held at UC Irvine and UCLA in 2011 and 2014 respectively. A few segments of the book were published in an earlier form, and these are listed in the bibliography.

Abbreviations

Abbreviations for ancient authors and works follow S. Hornblower, A. Spawforth, and E. Eidinow (eds.) (2012) *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th edn. Oxford; P. G. W. Glare (ed.) (1996) *The Oxford Latin Dictionary*. Oxford; and the *Diccionario Griego-Español* (2010, online), Listas I–IV: Abreviaturas (http://dge.cchs.csic.es/lst/2lst-int.htm). Journal abbreviations follow *L'Année philologique*. More frequently cited works are abbreviated as follows:

Ak.	I. Kant (1902 –) *Gesammelte Schriften*, 29 vols. Berlin. (= "Akademie" ed.)
CAG	H. Diels (ed.) (1882–1909) *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca*, 23 vols. Berlin.
CJ	I. Kant (1952) *The Critique of Judgement*. Trans. J. C. Meredith. Oxford. (Repr. 1982); or Paul Guyer (ed.) (2000) *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Trans. P. Guyer and E. Matthews. Cambridge. (= Ak. V:167–485)
CPR	I. Kant (1998) *The Critique of Pure Reason*. P. Guyer and A. W. Wood (eds.) Trans. P. Guyer and A. W. Wood. Cambridge.
DK	H. Diels and W. Kranz (eds.) (1951–52) *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker, griechisch und deutsch*, 3 vols. 6th edn. Berlin.
FGE	D. Page (ed.) (1981) *Further Greek Epigrams*. Cambridge.
FGrH	F. Jacoby, et al. (ed.) (1923 –) *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker.* Berlin and Leiden.
FHS&G	W. W. Fortenbaugh, P. M. Huby, R. W. Sharples, and D. Gutas, et al. (eds.) (1992) *Theophrastus of Eresus: Sources for his Life, Writings, Thought, and Influence*, 2 vols. Leiden.
GG	G. Uhlig, A. Hilgard, H. Schneider, and A. Lentz (eds.) (1867–1910) *Grammatici Graeci recogniti et apparatu critico instructi*, 4 vols. in 6. Leipzig. (Repr. Hildesheim, 1979.)

K-A	R. Kassel and C. Austin (eds.) (1983–2001) *Poetae Comici Graeci*, 8 vols. in 10. Berlin and New York.
K-R-S	G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield (1983) *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts*, 2nd edn. Cambridge.
LfgrE	B. Snell, H. J. Mette, et al. (eds.) (1955–2010) *Lexikon des frühgriechischen Epos*, 4 vols. Göttingen.
LSJ	H. G. Liddell and R. Scott (eds.), rev. H. S. Jones and R. Mackenzie, with rev. suppl. by P. G. W. Glare and A. A. Thompson (1996) *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th edn. Oxford.
OCT	Oxford Classical Texts.
OLD	P. G. W. Glare (ed.) (1996) *The Oxford Latin Dictionary*. Oxford.
PL	J.-P. Migne (ed.) (1844–55) *Patrologia Latina*, 221 vols. Paris.
Spengel	L. von Spengel (ed.) (1853) *Rhetores graeci*, 3 vols. Leipzig. (Repr. 1966.)
TLG	*Thesaurus Linguae Graecae®*. Digital Library. Ed. Maria C. Pantelia. University of California, Irvine. www.tlg.uci.edu
TrGF	B. Snell, R. Kannicht, and S. Radt (eds.) (1971–2004) *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, 5 vols. Göttingen.
U-R	H. Usener and L. Radermacher (eds.) (1899–1904) *Dionysii Halicarnasei quae exstant opuscula*, 2 vols. Stuttgart. (Repr. 1985; 1997.)

Note on translations

Where translators are given by name only, translations are drawn either from the editions listed above or from the following sources: J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (eds.) (1997) Plato, *Complete Works*. Indianapolis; J. Barnes (ed.) (1984) *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*. Princeton; A. H. Sommerstein (ed.) (1980–2001) *The Comedies of Aristophanes*. 11 vols. Warminster; and the Loeb Classical Library. Further sources are noted below. Unless otherwise noted all remaining translations are mine.

Preface

The sublime is a perennial source of fascination. Studies abound, and so do appeals to the concept it stands for – that ever-alluring and elusive entity which proves so difficult to describe or define with any precision, and which the early modern period baptized as the *je ne sais quoi*, or "I haven't got a clue," reflecting either a sense of its ineffability or else the sheer frustration of trying to pin down its ancient and modern meanings. Yet as widely as the concept of the sublime is used today, its roots, which reach in good part back to ancient Greece and Rome, have surprisingly never been the subject of a comprehensive study.

The reasons for this deficiency are complex, but the most basic of these has to do with the seeming paucity of our evidence rather than the elusiveness of sublimity itself. The only surviving work on the topic from Greek and Roman antiquity, known as *Peri hupsous* (*On Height,* or *On the Sublime*), is a curious one-off with no clear date or author (guesses put it somewhere between the first and third centuries CE; its author is generally called Longinus as a convenience), and with no clear precedents, apart from one, a treatise by the Sicilian critic and rhetorician Caecilius of Caleacte, who was active in Rome during the last third of the first century BCE and whose work may or may not have also been entitled *On the Sublime* (his essay is lost and known only through Longinus). The reigning assumption today is that the formal concept of the sublime cannot have pre-existed Longinus or Caecilius, who together seem to have canonized, if not coined, the critical term for the sublime: *hupsos*. Given the word's relative absence prior to Caecilius (it is meagerly attested in the relevant senses), the concept must have been missing as well.

I believe that this chronology and its underlying logic are wrong – as does Longinus, who locates the sublime in Homer, Sappho, tragedy, Plato, Demosthenes, and in a long list of other classical authors in various genres. This is not to say that these authors hold anything like a theory of the sublime in Longinus' eyes, but only that they are intentionally *seeking*

to be sublime writers in addition to *being* naturally sublime minds or spirits. In other words, they are (he would say) sublime both by art and by nature, as any sublime writer should be. And they are this according to criteria that both he and they would have shared.

Longinus can be confident of this assumption for any number of reasons, but primarily because he is aware, in ways that few scholars allow today, that he was by no means an innovator in his conceptions about the sublime, for the simple reason that he was inserting himself in a set of ancient and venerable traditions. Longinus presupposes the currency of the sublime as a recognizable concept and as a standard part of the curriculum. What is more, his essay is not just an exposition of the sublime; it engages with a long line of predecessors mainly in the theory and criticism of rhetoric, literature, and art, endorsing some of these and polemically taking issue with others. These writers are mostly anonymous, apart from Caecilius, who himself appears to have been engaged in the same kind of bitter polemics. Such was the life of a rhetorician in the ancient world – pretty much like academics today. Finally, Longinus is well aware that sublimity is not limited to literary phenomena: it includes reflection on the heavens, the vast plethora of sensations in the world, non-literary art forms, and the highest potentials imaginable (if not attainable) by humankind. And in all these areas Longinus knows that he is but a tardy symptom and scarcely an innovator. We have simply lost the thread of these earlier conversations and the intimate connection they share with many of the concerns of Longinus' essay. Contrary to contemporary views, then, the sublime does not suddenly appear out of the blue in the first century BCE as a usable concept. The sublime pervades much of antiquity; it has simply been hiding in the light. Longinus is a key to understanding this inheritance – though hardly the solution to the problem.

Longinus provisionally defines the sublime as "a kind of excellence and pre-eminence of discourse." But he quickly goes on to violate his own terms in every possible way by stretching the definition to cover far more than discourse would seem to allow for. Longinus locates the sublime in an astonishing range of areas, from thought to one's own nature to political rhetoric, literature, silence, the emotions, statues and paintings, the gods, natural phenomena, and even natural inquiry. The very promiscuousness of the sublime in Longinus – its sheer applicability – tells us much more about its nature than any single definition ever could. The sublime is indeed a transgressive phenomenon that knows no limits. The seemingly endless array of sublime objects in Longinus provides us with a valuable clue to his sources, and to the porosity of conceptual boundaries in

antiquity both within and outside of aesthetic inquiry. To read Longinus is to listen in on the tail end of a number of older and still ongoing conversations about the world, and not only about the word.

Longinus invites us to look back to the beginnings of Greek literature and then forward again past his own treatise. By extrapolating from his work it is possible to arrive at a long list of authors and genres of inquiry that are not normally associated with the sublime, as well as a list of criteria that can be used to pinpoint the presence of the sublime even when the experience that it stands for is not being explicitly named. To be sure, the sublime, when it occurs, appears in flashes and at moments rather than being a consistent feature of works and authors, which makes it all the harder to detect. But this peculiar feature of the sublime merely extends the reach of the experience it captures, which can be found in thought about nature (earthbound and celestial), in speculation about divinity, in cosmogony and cosmology, in ethics, and in the realm of paradoxography or natural wonders, and in poetic and rhetorical criticism, from the first glimmerings of these inquiries down into later antiquity. All of these areas naturally attracted the very sort of theorizing that we find in Longinus' treatise.

Despite their apparently disparate origins, the various components of this body of thought share a number of features, many of which indicate a common genealogy and a shared set of assumptions – the language of elevation, shows of extraordinary and exalted emotion, appeals to the heavens, to physical grandeur, and to the gods. The writers in these traditions not only use the language of the sublime that is familiar to Longinus, they also apply it to the very same kinds of objects as are capable, in his mind, of inspiring sublimity in us (the universe, Homer, impassioned moments of rhetoric, excessiveness of various kinds, the breaching of limits, and so on). Far from being a principle of rhetorical and literary criticism that emerged late in the day, the sublime proves to have been widely available as a category of aesthetic and non-aesthetic judgment, experience, and value, one that helped to shape Greek and Roman thought from its earliest beginnings to its final appearances, and from there passed on to modernity.

Such a prospect is more or less forbidden on the assumptions that govern the understanding of the sublime today. The current conception of sublimity, both in Classics and in modern fields of study, might be fairly called Longino-centric. It is all too focused by Longinus and, for the same reason, by a pair of terms: *hupsos* in Greek, *sublimitas* in Latin. Terms alone are, however, a singularly poor index to ideas. And while *hupsos* and

sublimitas can be valuable indices to the presence of sublimity, they are not all there is to the sublime. The problem is that the sublime is not a word. It is a concept and an experience, or rather a whole range of ideas, meanings and experiences that are embedded in conceptual and experiential patterns. Once we train our sights on these patterns, a radically different prospect on the sublime in antiquity comes to light, one that touches everything from its range of expressions to its dates of emergence, its evolution, its role in the cultures of antiquity as a whole, and its later reception.

The aim of this book is to make a first stab at such a study – not a rigorously comprehensive account, but a sketch of a possible alternative account of the sublime in Greek and Roman poetry, philosophy, the sciences, and, of course, rhetoric and literary criticism. The justification for an account like this does not lie in its corrective value but in what we stand to gain from it. The sublime is not a rare and isolated element of literary criticism in antiquity, and it is not even in the first instance an aesthetic category, let alone a singular or simple concept of thought. On the contrary, it is a phenomenon that accompanies different ways of experiencing and construing the world at the very limits of thought and representation. Viewed in this broadest light and from our own perspective, the sublime turns out to be an essential way of comprehending Greek and Roman thought and experience at their most exuberant and searching moments.

The plan of this book

Because this book has a somewhat unusual organization, a brief word on its structure and underlying argument is in order. Chapter 1, a historical introduction, sets out to explain how a partial and incomplete understanding of the sublime has come to be the status quo today. The sublime not only had a prehistory prior to Longinus, but it also continued to evolve after his treatise fell off the map throughout the whole of later antiquity and then into the Renaissance. This history was utterly eclipsed by Boileau in the seventeenth century, who made Longinus synonymous with the sublime while also further narrowing its scope. Once the facts are reassembled into a fuller picture, an alternative view of the sublime can emerge, one that does not put either Longinus or Boileau at its center.

Chapter 2 is an in-depth study of Longinus conducted through close readings of his work. Because Longinus approaches his materials as much like an artist as a rhetorician, appreciating his readings in all their native subtlety and intricacy can teach us far more about what he believes

the sublime is than any definitions proper (his or ours). Longinus notoriously avoids offering a single useful definition of the sublime in his treatise. In the place of definitions, he offers us analogues of the experience of sublimity: he encourages his readers to feel what it is to approach the sublime when they read a bit of Sappho or Euripides, and then he offers an explanation, grounded in the ancient traditions of rhetorical criticism, of what it is they have just undergone. Longinus has a number of reasons for this reticence towards defining the sublime, which we might call a theoretical resistance to defining the object of his study, though his stance is actually more complex than definitions allow for, and much of his teaching is conveyed between the lines rather than overtly: it is here, in his readings and in the way he passes from one reading to the next, that he lays out the actual logic of the sublime, a logic that does not obey simple or prefabricated labels. All of this has merely made Longinus that much harder to read and to grasp, but also more alluring and seminal as writer and thinker.

Chapters 3 and 4 begin a backwards search for what one might call forensic evidence of the sublime, starting with the rhetorical tradition (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Demetrius, Theophrastus, Aristotle, Demosthenes, Aeschines, Alcidamas, Gorgias), and then gradually broadening the scope to include other, poetic sources from the fifth century to Homer (Chapter 4). The only obstacle to viewing many of these writers and texts as antecedents to Longinus is the premise that he has none. Once this premise is removed, a clearer picture emerges. A further benefit of this approach is that, in working back from Longinus and by extracting a sufficiently generic set of conditions for sublimity from his work, it is possible to extrapolate these to contexts beyond Longinus (both before and after him), and in this way to build up a fairly representative picture of the ancient traditions of the sublime.

Chapters 5 and 6 offer an alternative mapping of the sublime in antiquity along two axes that can converge and diverge – what I call the material and immaterial sublimes. The sublime is a large and expansive category that branches out in two directions simultaneously, the one grounded in nature, physics, and the senses, the other spiritualizing and transcendental. The first of these tendencies is encountered in the pursuit of the materiality of objects, the second in the flight from matter and materiality. Both strands are detectable in Longinus, and they frequently converge outside of him as well. While these two sublimities are best seen as rough approximations with a primarily heuristic value, each of them nevertheless comprises a distinct tendency, and each is accompanied by its own set of aesthetic and other preferences.

Chapter 5 takes up the first of these two vectors of the sublime, starting with Longinus, whose views of language and nature betray a strong fascination with materiality and the material sublime. The origins of this fascination tell us much about the traditions out of which it emerged – namely, those of the natural and cosmological sublimes as they are found in the Presocratics to Lucretius, Manilius, and other, later Roman and imperial texts. These are genuine traditions in which authors refer back to one another. Viewing them in the light of Longinus illuminates them all.

Chapter 6 retraces the other, immaterial face of the sublime, a phenomenon that is widely attested, including among many of those who promote the interests of the material sublime. For the purposes of presentation, I have chosen to illustrate this tendency in two representative clusters of thought that happen to be closely related: first, in the challenges that are involved in picturing god in Homer, the Presocratics, Aristotle, and Longinus, and then in the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition of the transcendence of the material world – which, as it happens, lies at the root of most readings of Longinus today. But while Longinus inherits this non-materialist tradition, it is not the only one he knows, nor is it the only way in which the multiform sublime was conceived in antiquity. But now to the book proper.