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978-1-107-10153-1 - The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant

Robert Doran

Excerpt

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We are reasserting man's natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship with absolute emotions.

– Barnett Newman, “The Sublime Is Now” (1948)¹

We also speak of the beauty of Newton's unification of the movements of the planets and the movements of projectiles. We saw the discovery of DNA offers us a “beautiful” way to explain processes of biological evolution. The sublime, by contrast, neither integrates nor unifies. It transcends.

– Richard Rorty²

The sublime is one of the most important and often-discussed concepts in philosophical aesthetics, literary theory, and art history. Meaning “loftiness,” “height,” or “elevation” and typically associated with notions of ecstasy, grandeur, terror, awe, astonishment, wonder, and admiration, the sublime refers at once to a specific *discourse*, the *theory* of sublimity, and to an *experience*,³ that of *transcendence*, which has its origins in religious belief and practice.⁴ As this study will contend, it is the tension between a literary-aesthetic concept and an experience with mystical-religious resonances that motivates the critical concept of sublimity, creating multilayered nexuses between religion, art, nature, and society.

This study starts from the presupposition that the critical horizon and reception of the sublime is framed in large measure by three classic or

¹ Newman, *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, 173.

² *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty*, ed. Eduardo Mendicta, 70.

³ Of course, “experience” has its own discursive norms, which will be elucidated herein. However, unlike the mystic’s experiences, which are esoteric, aesthetic experience is shared.

⁴ As Baldine Saint Girons notes, “the ‘first men’ no doubt had no reason to distinguish aesthetic values from religious values” (*Fiat Lux: Une philosophie du sublime*, 25, my translation).

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foundational theories, those of Longinus, Edmund Burke, and Immanuel Kant,⁵ and that a searching exploration of these and two other key or pivotal theories, those of Nicolas Boileau and John Dennis, will allow for a deeper understanding of a fundamental question: how did a term discussed in an obscure Greek fragment become one of the most important and consequential concepts in modern thought? The historical approach to the topic, as exemplified in Samuel Holt Monk's seminal 1935 monograph *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England*, has given us valuable insights.⁶ The present study contends, however, that such a question requires a systematic treatment of the sublime as a unified discourse.

The twofold aim of this book is to provide a detailed and analytical treatment of the key theories of sublimity, the first such comprehensive account in a single volume,⁷ while at the same time elucidating what it was about this concept that allowed it to play an outsized role in modern thought. Thus, although this book builds on the rich literature on the topic, it also departs from the typological or more localized approach that characterizes much of the scholarly engagement with the sublime, namely the taking of a particular period, aesthetic movement, author, or theme as a starting point (for example, the neoclassical sublime, the eighteenth-century sublime, the Romantic sublime, the natural sublime, the religious sublime, the rhetorical sublime, the aesthetic sublime, the Kantian

⁵ Even a cursory look at how the subject is taught in university courses reveals that these theories are considered essential.

⁶ Although the title would appear to limit this book to English sources of the eighteenth-century, Monk's inclusion of chapters on Longinus and Boileau and of a substantial summary of Kant's theory of sublimity lent the work an aura of comprehensiveness and authority that has yet to be surpassed. Defining "the sublime" as a distinct area of inquiry, with its own history and rationale, this pioneering effort effectively shaped all subsequent attempts to characterize the concept's origins and significance. Monk's legacy is, however, ambiguous: on the one hand, he endowed the discourse of sublimity with a certain coherence; but, on the other, he endorsed or established the division that has been the greatest obstacle to a unified conception of sublimity, namely that between the so-called *rhetorical* sublime and the *aesthetic* sublime: between Longinus's treatise and the literary criticism directly inspired by him, on one side, and, on the other, the philosophical aesthetics that developed in the eighteenth century and that seized on the sublime as a counterpoint to the beautiful. I address this in detail below. For more recent historical approaches to the topic, see Dietmar Till, *Das doppelte Erhabene* (2006) and the forthcoming book by James Porter, *The Sublime in Antiquity* (I have seen only the table of contents of this work, which indicates some areas of contact with the present study). Historical theorists such as Hayden White (in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* [1986]) and F. R. Ankersmit (in *Sublime Historical Experience* [2005]) have also contributed to the debate about the modern significance of the sublime.

⁷ I am thus distinguishing my study from the survey accounts, which treat a wider range of theories, but in a more disparate, less focused manner, and also from the monograph accounts of a single author (such as Burke and Kant), which obviously have more scope for greater detail.

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sublime, and so on).⁸ Such an approach is partly a function of the interests and competencies of individual scholars and theorists; but it is also a reflection of the widely held view that the historical vicissitudes of the sublime, coupled with the sheer range and multiplicity of its uses, argue against the feasibility or even the possibility of an overarching or systematic account, as if coherence in more limited contexts was all that could be hoped for. One critic speaks, for example, of the “multifariousness of the concept of sublimity.”⁹ Indeed, over its long history, and particularly in more recent criticism, the sublime has often been seen as torn between mutually opposed categories: ancient/modern, classical/Romantic, rational/irrational, empirical/transcendental, material/metaphysical, ethical/aesthetic, textual/psychological. What commonality justifies the use of a single term across such divergent viewpoints and discursive contexts? But the question can also be reversed: what is it about the concept of the sublime that inspired some of Europe’s most important and influential critics and philosophers to devote considerable effort to its elucidation and theorization?

This study also differs from efforts to introduce coherence into the discourse of sublimity via an extrinsic theory, namely psychoanalysis or poststructuralism.¹⁰ Instead, it contends that the sublime possesses an intrinsic critical function, and that an argument for its unity can be launched from the perspective of the theory of sublimity itself. This approach has the advantage of permitting a broad appreciation of the multiple functions and dimensions of this concept, in particular as these relate to the “subjective turn” of modern thought.

⁸ See, for example: T. R. Henn, *Longinus and English Criticism* (1934); Jules Brody, *Boileau and Longinus* (1958); Théodore Litman, *Le Sublime en France: 1660–1714* (1971); David B. Morris, *The Religious Sublime: Christian Poetry and the Critical Tradition* (1972); Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (1976); Paul Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art* (1989); Suzanne Guerlac, *The Impersonal Sublime: Hugo, Baudelaire, Lautreamont* (1990); Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (1992); Dominique Peyrache-Leborgne, *La poétique du sublime: de la fin des Lumières au Romantisme* (1997); Robert R. Clewis, *The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom* (2009).

⁹ David Morris, *The Religious Sublime*, 8. Jean Bessière speaks of the “difficulté de la cohérence” of the discourse of sublimity (“Le Sublime aujourd’hui: D’un discours sur le pouvoir de l’art et de la littérature, et de sa possible réécriture,” 420). Some have even wondered if a theory of the sublime is possible. See Jane Forsey, “Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?” and Guy Sircello, “How Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?”

¹⁰ For a psychoanalytic account, see Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (1976) and Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973); for a poststructuralist approach, see Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics, and the Subject* (1989) and Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (1992). Ferguson describes her account as “sympathetic to deconstruction” (*Solitude and the Sublime*, 9).

Indeed, it is the relation between the sublime and modern subjectivity that is at the heart of this work. For I argue that what unites the key theories of sublimity, such as they were understood and articulated during the early modern period (1674–1790),¹¹ is a common structure – the paradoxical experience of being at once *overwhelmed* and *exalted* – and a common concern: the preservation of a notion of transcendence in the face of the secularization of modern culture. While it may be a commonplace that the sublime denotes a kind of transcendence (the literal translation of Longinus’s term *hypsos* is “elevation”), what has not been adequately explored is the relation between transcendence and the power of the mind in the sublime. Indeed, it is this connection that allows the sublime to play a constitutive role in the development of modern subjectivity. Thus, by tracing in a systematic and focused manner the transcendence-structure of sublimity (defined in more detail below), following its developments, transformations, and dispersals across a variety of intellectual contexts, this study aims to bring out its multilayered significance – historical, religious, sociological, psychological, political, semantic, and anthropological – for modern thought.¹² While some of these aspects have formed the basis for various theses regarding the discourse of sublimity, this examination regards them in terms of effects or extensions of a common transcendence-structure.

Due to space constraints, this study concentrates on the origins and establishing of the critical concept of sublimity, beginning with the ancient Greek fragment *On the Sublime*, attributed to “Longinus,” and its reinterpretation in neoclassical and baroque poetics, to the seminal theories of Burke and Kant, the latter of whom is generally considered to be the most important and consequential theorist of the sublime. Although for a long time neglected by scholars and philosophers,¹³ Kant’s theory of sublimity has become, over the past forty years or so, the subject of a veritable avalanche of critical reexamination, both in Continental and

¹¹ That is, from the publication of Boileau’s translation of Longinus in 1674 to the appearance of Kant’s third *Critique* in 1790.

¹² Perhaps the closest analog to what I endeavor to do in this book is Stephen Halliwell’s magisterial *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (2002), which discusses the Western tradition of mimesis in terms of an oscillation between the poles of “world-reflective” and “world-creating” mimeticism.

¹³ Paul Guyer recounts: “In *Kant and the Claims of Taste* [1979], I argued that Kant’s analysis of the sublime does not materially add to his argument for the intersubjective validity of aesthetic judgments, and, narrowing speaking, that may be true. But more broadly, I wrote that Kant’s analysis of the sublime ‘will not be of much interest to modern sensibilities, and thus . . . most of what we can or will learn from Kant must come from his discussion of judgments of beauty.’ No statement in that book has come in for more criticism than this remark, and justifiably so. By way of

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Anglo-American thought. Indeed, recent reassessments of Kant's third *Critique* have led to a great revival of philosophical interest in the sublime, first in French thought, in works by Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard published in the 1970s and 1980s,¹⁴ and then in Anglophone philosophy and intellectual history, beginning in 1989 with Paul Crowther's pioneering *The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art*, and followed, most notably, by John Zammito (1992), Paul Guyer (1993), and Henry Allison (2001).¹⁵ This revival can be said to have reached a fever pitch in the late 1980s, with the almost simultaneous publication of several collective volumes in the United States, France, and Germany.¹⁶ The stream of commentary on Kant's theory of sublimity has continued well into the first two decades of the 2000s and shows no signs of abating.¹⁷

The exploration of Kant's theory offered in Part III of this volume is informed by an integral reading of Kant's oeuvre, including his pre-Critical writings, his lectures on anthropology, his moral philosophy, and, of course, the third of his great *Critiques*, to which multiple chapters are devoted. Examining Kant's place in the discourse of sublimity and aesthetic thought more generally, this study highlights the specifically subjective meaning of Kant's account. For what both Anglophone and French writing on Kant's concept of sublimity have either ignored or not sufficiently emphasized, in my view, is the importance of the idea of

mitigating circumstances, I can only plead that my dismissal of the sublime accurately reflected, not its centrality in Kant's own thought, but at least the prevailing attitude in the analytical aesthetics of the preceding two decades" (*Kant and the Experience of Freedom*, 187). This antisublime sentiment seemed in fact to be the norm as late as the 1991 collection *Kant's Aesthetics*, edited by Ralf Meerbote and published by the North American Kant Society, in which there is no discussion of the sublime.

¹⁴ See Jacques Derrida, *La vérité en peinture* (1978, translated as *The Truth in Painting*, 1987) and Jean-François Lyotard, *Leçons sur l'analytique du sublime* (1991, translated as *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, 1994). In this vein, see also, Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* (1996).

¹⁵ See John Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgment* (1992); Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom* (1993); Henry Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste* (2001). Prior to Crowther's 1989 study, there are no monographs on the Kantian sublime in English; after 1989 (according to the Harvard Library Hollis Catalog), a study or studies devoted wholly or in part to the Kantian sublime appear virtually every year until the present.

¹⁶ See Jean-François Courtine, Michel Deguy, Eliane Escoubas, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-François Lyotard, Louis Marin, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Jacob Rogozinski, *Du Sublime* (1988) (English translation: *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question* [1993]); *New Literary History* (The Sublime and the Beautiful: Reconsiderations) 16.2 (1985); *Merkur* (Die Sprache des Erhabene. Das Bild des Erhabenen. Die erhabene Tat.) 487–488 (1989); and *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France* (Le Sublime) 68.1 (1986).

¹⁷ I could mention Kirk Pillow's *Sublime Understanding: Aesthetic Reflection in Kant and Hegel* (2000), Rodolphe Gasché's *The Idea of Form, Rethinking Kant's Aesthetics* (2003), F. R. Ankersmit's *Sublime Historical Experience* (2005), Robert Clewis's *The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom* (2009), Sanford Budick's *Kant and Milton* (2010), and Emily Brady's *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature* (2013).

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sublimity of mind – aesthetic high-mindedness, heroic subjectivity – an idea inherited from Longinus (his concept of *megalophrosynê*). Kant notes that “it is the *disposition of the mind* [*Geistesstimmung*] resulting from a certain representation occupying the reflective judgment, but not the object, which is to be called sublime” (CPJ, 5:250, my emphasis).¹⁸

My choice of figures to include as the “key” theorists of sublimity (insofar as the emergence of this notion in modern thought is concerned) may strike some as arbitrary. While few readers will quarrel with the multi-chapter treatments of Longinus and Kant, or with the substantial chapter on Burke, the inclusion of chapters on Nicolas Boileau (1636–1711) and the somewhat obscure English writer and critic John Dennis (1657–1734) requires some justification. While Boileau is well known as the popularizer of Longinus as well as of the concept of the sublime, he is not generally seen as having contributed much of substance to the theory of sublimity – hence the slight attention accorded to him, even in the surveys or monographs on the sublime.¹⁹ I argue, however, that Boileau’s role in the development of the theory of sublimity has been vastly underappreciated by recent criticism and that the modern interpretation of sublimity owes a great deal to Boileau’s efforts.²⁰

John Dennis’s role in the development of the theory of sublimity, while less public than Boileau’s, is no less important. For it is Dennis’s literary criticism – in particular his highlighting of the role of emotion in Longinus’s theory of sublimity and formulation of a notion of complex pleasure (“delightful horror”) more than twenty years before Joseph Addison²¹ – that creates the conditions under which the transition to the “aesthetic” apprehension of sublimity in philosophical aesthetics becomes possible. As Monk observes, “the presence of emotion in art is the point of departure for the eighteenth-century sublime.”²² Breaking with

¹⁸ It should also be noted that many see Kant’s idea of sublimity as a term that exclusively applies to the mind and its products to be highly problematic. Most recently (2013), Brady has observed how “it might appear that the Kantian sublime is too humanistic, and perhaps too anthropocentric, to serve as a plausible theory for understanding aesthetic appreciation of nature” (*The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, 92).

¹⁹ For example, Philip Shaw’s survey *The Sublime* refers to Boileau only once and in passing. Boileau is mentioned three times in a cursory manner in Weiskel (1976) and is completely absent from Ferguson (1992). Admittedly, these last two focus mostly on British Romanticism, but they also aspire to treat the “theory of the sublime” more generally.

²⁰ However, I simultaneously argue against those who see the Longinian sublime as an “invention of Boileau.” Boileau is rather the first interpreter to truly understand Longinus’s theory of sublimity.

²¹ Addison simply repeats Dennis when he speaks of a “pleasing kind of horror” in his *Spectator* articles of 1712 (see Addison, *Critical Essays from the Spectator*, No. 419).

²² Monk, *The Sublime*, 14. Monk does indeed devote a chapter to Dennis in his study, and Dennis plays an outsized role in Morris’s *The Religious Sublime*. Most recently, Emily Brady’s *The Sublime*

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neoclassical aesthetics, Dennis's singular emphasis on violent emotion represents the beginning of a bifurcation in the theory of the sublime, with one strand orientated toward the *pathetic* (terror, the irrational, the sensational) and the other toward the *noetic* (the mental, the intellectual, the rational), Burke being the primary exponent of the first and Kant of the second.²³ Indeed, Burke's theory of sublimity would have been quite impossible without Dennis's emphasis on sacred terror, and Kant's association of sublimity with reason was in large part an effort to reclaim a viable idea of transcendence from irrationalism. Finally, Dennis's explicitly religious orientation helps to clarify how the sublime can mediate between secular and religious attitudes. Thus, while not a "major" theorist of sublimity, I nevertheless consider Dennis to be, like Boileau, "pivotal" with regard to the architectonics of this study.

Given that this is not a survey,²⁴ the limitations of a single volume, coupled with the structural unity this study endeavors to articulate, have made it impossible to include substantial discussions of less important theories or treatments, as interesting as these might be, and as a more properly historical approach might be inclined to include.²⁵ Thus Boileau's French contemporaries (Rapin, Bouhours, Saint-Evremond),²⁶ the pre-Burkean English critics (Addison, Shaftesbury, Baillie),²⁷ as well as the eighteenth-century German aestheticians (Baumgarten, Meier, Mendelssohn, Lessing, Herder)²⁸ receive only cursory mention. The rich post-Kantian tradition of sublimity – in the thought of Friedrich Schiller, Arthur Schopenhauer, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, G. W. F. Hegel, and to

in *Modern Philosophy* (2013) includes a short subsection entitled "Sublime Style: Longinus and Dennis" (12–15).

²³ Both can be found in Longinus, however, in his first two sources of sublimity: grand conceptions (*noêseis*) and strong emotion (*pathos*).

²⁴ Surveys include: Pierre Hartmann, *Du Sublime: Boileau à Schiller* (1997); Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (The New Critical Idiom) (2005); James Kirwan, *Sublimity: The Non-Rational and the Rational in the History of Aesthetics* (2005); and Baldine Saint Girons, *Le sublime de l'antiquité à nos jours* (2005). Multiauthor anthologies include: *La littérature et le sublime*, ed. Partick Marot (2007) and *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Timothy M. Costelloe (2012). The latter includes a survey of the theories of the sublime (Part I); pages 11–49 treat the figures studied in this volume.

²⁵ Perhaps the most exhaustive study of the sublime is Baldine Saint Girons's magisterial *Fiat Lux: Une philosophie du sublime*. This work favors a synchronic perspective, dispersing the sublime over a number of thematic categories, according to various "risks": of "obscurity," "simplicity," "power," "testimony," "passion," and "virtue."

²⁶ See Théodore Litman, *Le Sublime en France (1660–1714)*.

²⁷ See Samuel Monk's *The Sublime* and the anthology *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla.

²⁸ See Lewis White Beck's *Early German Philosophy: Kant and His Predecessors*.

some extent in Friedrich Nietzsche (in his concept of the Dionysian) – would require a volume of its own.²⁹

The experience of transcendence and the dual structure of sublimity

As mentioned above, the discourse of the sublime has its origins in a first- or third-century Greek fragment entitled *Peri hypsous* (*On the Sublime*), attributed to “Longinus.” Apparently unknown in antiquity – it is not referenced in any extant sources, and its manuscript came to light only in 1554 – the treatise aroused little critical interest until it was translated into French by Boileau in 1674. Through the influence of Boileau’s Preface to his edition, the putative subject of the treatise, *hypsos*, subsequently translated by most languages with the Latinate “sublime,” following Boileau’s lead, quickly acquired a currency in the literary criticism of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, achieving in a few years a European-wide fame. As the eighteenth century progressed, the sublime was increasingly detached from its reference to Longinus and Boileau, emerging as one of the leading concepts in the new field of what is now called “aesthetics,” where it was often contrasted with the beautiful. The term was codified, most notably, in Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757/1759) and then, most remarkably, by Kant in the last of his *Critiques*, which deals with aesthetic judgment (1790).

As this brief aperçu suggests, it is difficult to imagine how the notion of the sublime could have ever become a topic in literary criticism or aesthetics if Longinus’s fragment had been lost or if Boileau had never drawn attention to it. Unlike the concept of the beautiful – a perennial topic of the philosophy of art and aesthetics, the “theory” of which is quite diffuse – the very existence of the sublime as a critical notion is dependent on its specific theorization in a few key texts. That is to say, if experiences of overpowering awe, emotional transport, sacred terror, and so forth had not been subsumed under a unifying term such as “the sublime,” there would have been no *discourse* for the theories of Burke and Kant to build upon;³⁰ for despite their reputation for innovation, these accounts are in

²⁹ See the recent monographs by Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy* (2013), which treats the post-Kantian sublime extensively, and Sophia Vasalou, *Schopenhauer and the Aesthetic Standpoint: Philosophy as a Practice of the Sublime* (2013). See also the recent essays by Paul Guyer, “The German Sublime After Kant” (2012) and Sandra Shapshay, “Schopenhauer’s Transformation of the Kantian Sublime” (2012).

³⁰ And if Longinus’s *hypsos* had been translated systematically as “elevation” or “loftiness” rather than as “the sublime” it might not have had the same impact in modern thought.

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fact based on established conventions.³¹ The seeming heterogeneity of the major theories of sublimity is thus restrained by, on the one hand, the term's conventionality, and, on the other, the assumption that these are attempting to describe *the same basic experience* – that of transcendence conceived aesthetically – even if the critical frameworks used to account for it are radically divergent.³²

Certainly the largest hurdle to understanding the sublime as a coherent discourse is the gulf that supposedly separates the “rhetorical sublime” of Longinus and Boileau from the “aesthetic sublime” of Burke and Kant. This study is thus at odds with the widely accepted view that, while Longinus's treatise was instrumental in introducing the concept of sublimity into modern critical discourse (via Boileau), its importance is restricted to a generative function, with no lasting substantive or theoretical influence.³³ Instead, this study views Longinus's treatise as having a *structuring effect* on the modern discourse of sublimity insofar as it sets a basic pattern, which is then revised and developed by later writers, without ever truly escaping the basic Longinian insight (transcendence conceived aesthetically).³⁴

This is most apparent in the characterization of the experience of sublimity, namely as overpowering astonishment and awe, and as an elevation of the mind above its normal state. As Longinus expresses it at the beginning of his treatise:

Sublimity [*hypsos*] is the source of the distinction of the very greatest poets and prose writers and the means by which they have given eternal life to their own fame. For grandeur produces ecstasy (*ekstasis*) rather than

³¹ Zammito notes that “in the *Third Critique*, Kant drew certain features and illustrations from the conventional wisdom. He accepted the association, starting with Longinus, of the sublime with the grand – indeed, even the infinite – and within that framework, with such ideas as formlessness and unboundedness. He also accepted the complex psychological account of the experience of the sublime, which had been articulated first for the eighteenth century by Addison” (*The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgment*, 277). However, I contend (in Chapter 5) that Dennis, not Addison, is responsible for the “complex psychological account of the experience of the sublime.”

³² Suzanne Guerlac perceptively notes that “the key texts on the sublime of Longinus (and Boileau), Burke, and Kant appear at turning points in the history of philosophy. They belong to different discursive horizons – a premetaphysical one with Longinus, a Cartesian one with Boileau, an empiricist one with Burke, and, of course, a critical or idealist one with Kant. The relative stability of the operations of the sublime throughout these various elaborations is impressive” (*The Impersonal Sublime*, 1). Indeed, it is this “stability” that this study seeks to elucidate.

³³ I thus argue against the widespread idea that, as D. A. Russell expresses it, “the main contentions of Burke's essay on ‘The Sublime and the Beautiful’ . . . owes little or nothing to L[onginus] or even to Boileau except the initial impetus to discussion” (“Introduction,” in Russell, *Longinus' On the Sublime*, xlv).

³⁴ Thus this book could not be characterized as an “influence study,” since it involves the tracing of the structural elements of which later authors may or may not be consciously aware.

persuasion in the hearer; and the combination of wonder (*thaumasion*) and astonishment (*ekplêxis*) always proves superior to the merely persuasive and pleasant. This is because persuasion is on the whole something we can control, whereas amazement (*ekplêxis*) and wonder (*thaumasion*) exert invincible power and force and get the better of every hearer. (1.4)

Although Longinus is speaking here about the verbal arts, the *subjective* import of his characterization of the sublime experience is easily detachable from the medium of its cause. The fact that this feeling of ecstasy is produced more paradigmatically – but not exclusively – by nature in Burke’s and Kant’s theories does not thereby negate the real continuity between Longinus and modern aesthetics.³⁵ Longinus’s description of an *intensity of effect/affect* allows eighteenth-century thinkers to account for experiences that do not comport with the category of the beautiful (or taste), but can nevertheless be considered aesthetic. Indeed, the specific language Longinus employs to describe the effect of sublimity – awe, astonishment, amazement, wonder, admiration, and so on – will be echoed by every major theory, whether from the vantage point of literary criticism (Boileau, Dennis), empirical psychology (Burke), or transcendental philosophy (Kant). Even more important, however, is the particular nature of this experience of affective intensity, the specific *structure of experience* that Longinus outlines in his treatise.³⁶ This structure is already apparent in the above-cited passage: that of a *dual* structure of being *overwhelmed* or *overawed* – as indicated by the Greek terms *thaumasion* (wonder, awe, admiration) and *ekplêxis* (astonishment, amazement, stupor) – coupled with the idea of being *exalted* or *elevated* – as expressed in the notion of *ekstasis* (literally: a going outside or beyond oneself, self-transcendence, rapture). Thus, according to Longinus, the sublime exerts an “invincible power and force” (1.4), “tears everything up like a whirlwind, and exhibits the orator’s whole power [*dynamis*] at a single blow” (1.4), and holds “complete domination over our minds” (39.3); but also: “It is our nature to be elevated and exalted by true sublimity [*hypsos*]” (7.2). This dual structure of sublimity is also paradoxical: on the one hand, being overwhelmed/dominated by the encounter with the transcendent in art or nature induces a feeling of *inferiority* or *submission*; on the other, it is precisely by being overpowered that a high-minded feeling of *superiority* or *nobility of soul* (mental expansiveness, heroic sensibility) is attained. The

³⁵ See Chapter 12 for a discussion of Kant’s view of sublimity in art.

³⁶ Weiskel claims to have found “a structure that is immanent in a vast and eclectic theory” (*The Romantic Sublime*, 5), but it is only via an extrinsic theory (psychoanalysis) that this putatively “immanent” structure becomes apparent.