

## The Sublime

### *A Short Introduction to a Long History*

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It is almost as fashionable in the history of philosophy to declare certain concepts dead and buried as it is, periodically at least, to announce the discipline itself to be at an “end.” “The sublime” seems to have undergone a similar fate in recent years, and one writer on the subject has even penned a “Farewell to the Sublime,” placing himself proudly in the company of other savants to declare, in their collective terminology, the sublime anemic, bourgeois, elitist, feeble, ideological, ineffective, irrelevant, irresponsible, nostalgic, poor, and weak – in a word, dead. Drawing on the concept, moreover, does not “do much philosophic work or result in much understanding,” readers are informed, and because the sublime is so clearly “damaged goods,” they might be willing to accept a “moratorium on the word” and replace it with others that are “fresh and exact.”<sup>1</sup> This is bad news indeed and, one has to admit, comes as something of a surprise.

To what, however, is one here saying farewell? What could it mean to declare the sublime dead or, at best, as the preceding litany of adjectives suggests, enervated and decadent? Fortunately, declarations of demise have a poor track record in philosophy, even when they come from the likes of Kant, Hegel, and Wittgenstein, and moratoriums imposed on the free spirit of philosophical thought tend to have the same traction as King Canute commanding the tide to stop. Hyperbole aside, such declarations can refer only to some inadequacy in the *philosophical concept* of the sublime, rather than signaling the disappearance of the *human experience* to which the concept refers or in some way delineates. These are two distinct spheres, but they are effectively elided when “sublime” is treated, as its naysayers apparently do, generically: “What could it mean to define the sublime, once and for all, when it has changed so much since the first appearance of the word – later taken to be the same as the eighteenth-century sublime – in a classical text by Longinus?”<sup>2</sup> Hegel is instructive in this context. Toward the end of the preface to the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, he reminds readers that philosophy comes late to subjects it treats, swooping, in his now famous image, like the Owl of Minerva in the gathering dusk of the day to paint its “grey in grey.”<sup>3</sup> Hegel provides a powerful way of framing the relationship between experience and the attempt to grasp, explain, and express it in philosophical terms. In particular, the metaphor highlights a gulf between the two realms and, in Hegel’s somewhat gloomy vision, the inability of mind to overcome the temporal and existential lag, the veritable rupture, between practice and its theoretical adumbration.

<sup>1</sup> James Elkins, “Against the Sublime,” in *Beyond the Finite: The Sublime in Art and Science*, ed. Roald Hoffman and Iain Boyd White (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 75–90. I quote from 75 and 88. Elkins cites Richard Rorty, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Terry Eagleton in support of his contention.

<sup>2</sup> Elkins, “Against the Sublime,” 79.

<sup>3</sup> See G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1821), trans. H. B. Nisbet; ed. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 23.

There is much here to aid reflection on the history of aesthetics, a discipline that, as common lore now teaches, was born at a particular time and place as an offspring of that complex of social, cultural, and political forces subsequently known as the Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup> The term “aesthetics” – from the Greek *αισθητικός* (*aisthetikos*, “sensitive” or “sentient”) – was first minted as philosophical coin in 1735 as a Germanized Latinism (*Ästhetik*) by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762),<sup>5</sup> and although across the Channel the Anglicized version was not widespread until the middle of the following century,<sup>6</sup> British writers like Lord Shaftesbury and Joseph Addison gave the currency value under the auspices of its equivalent, “taste.” Francis Hutcheson’s *Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1726) is heralded, retrospectively, as a handy presentiment of what the fledgling discipline would accomplish when pursued, as it has been ever since, in a systematic and focused way.<sup>7</sup> To the realm of affective experience (“the aesthetic”), then – as Hegel’s metaphor would have it – Minerva’s Owl came late indeed, and at one fell swoop, in the shape of a new science (“aesthetics”), and the same is true, *pari passu*, of the various questions raised and issues gathered under the discipline’s banner, *inter alia* the nature of beauty, art, and genius; the relationship between moral and aesthetic value; and – the focus of the present volume – the origin and defining features of the sublime.

To speak of the “birth” of the discipline and its desiderata, however, is to say little or nothing about the pleasure (or pain) people have long taken in the states they experience. This is certainly true of the sublime, which, at its etymological heart, carries the long history of the relationship between human beings and those aspects of their world that excite in them particular emotions, powerful enough to evoke transcendence, shock, awe, and terror. The term has its origins in the Greek noun *ὑψος* (*hupsos*) and its grammatical variations (*ὑψοθεῖν*, *ὑψοί*, *hupsothen*, *hupsoi*), meaning height, from high, from above, upwards, and, metaphorically, summit or crown.<sup>8</sup> The same range of meanings is found in the Latin equivalent, *sublimis*: high up, aloft, elevated, tall, or towering; of heavenly bodies and meteorological phenomena; denoting the sky of the Northern Hemisphere, or birds in flight; imposingly tall (of men and animals); exalted in

<sup>4</sup> On this latter point, see the editors’ introduction in Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla, eds., *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1–16. More detailed explorations along these lines are to be found in Peter de Bolla, *The Education of the Eye. Painting, Landscape, and Architecture in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), esp. Introduction and chap. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus/Philosophische Betrachtungen über einige Bedingungen des Gedichtes*, ed. Heinz Paetzold (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1983 [1735]); *Reflections on Poetry: Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus*, trans. Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954); and *Ästhetik*, Latin text edited with facing German translation by Dagmar Mirbach, 2 vols. (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2007 [1750/1758]). For useful overviews, see Paul Guyer, “Eighteenth Century German Aesthetics,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2007), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aesthetics-18th-german>, and Kai Hammermeister, *The German Aesthetic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Johnson does not include it in his *Dictionary* (1755), and only in the late 1830s does one find William Hamilton reporting (reluctantly) that the “term is now in general acceptance, not only in Germany, but throughout the other countries of Europe.” See *Works of Sir William Hamilton*, 7 vols. (London, 1859), 1:124.

<sup>7</sup> Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue in Two Treatises*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2004 [1726]). For an informative account of the early history of the discipline, see Paul Guyer, “The Origins of Modern Aesthetics: 1711–35,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, ed. Peter Kivy (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 15–44.

<sup>8</sup> See *Greek-English Lexicon, New Edition*, compiled by H. G. Liddell and R. Scott; rev. Henry Stuart Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 1910. For a useful overview of the term and its history in Greek literature, see the editor’s introduction to “*Longinus*” *On the Sublime*, ed. Donald A. Russell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), xxx–xlii. My thanks to William Hutton for advice on Greek and Latin sources and help with translations.

rank or position and thus illustrious or eminent; and said of those with lofty ambition, noble or heroic character, and of elevated style or sentiments.<sup>9</sup>

This variety reflects the complicated history of the word and the competing etymologies available.<sup>10</sup> The most straightforward (and the one given by the OED) derives the term from *sub* (up to) and *līmin/līmen* (lintel or threshold of a building); the related word “subliminal” has similar roots, but with the sense of “below the threshold” rather than “up to the lintel.” The other etymology, by contrast, suggested by A. Ernout and A. Meillet in their *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine, histoire des mots* (1967), involves the connection made over time between *sub* (under or at the bottom) and *super* (to raise, to bring to a standing position from below), and the postclassical confusion among three different words and, consequently, three possible roots from which it might arise: *līmen* (threshold or lintel), *līmes* (a road bordering and delimiting a field), and *līmus* (sidelong/oblique). Ernout and Meillet argue for *līmus*, rendering *sublīmis* as “moving upward from a position below: hence rising diagonally, or more specifically from below to above, along a diagonal path.”<sup>11</sup> “Sublime” and its relatives then entered the vernacular French and English, starting in the fourteenth century through the alchemical tradition meaning “to purify” (hence the verb “to sublime”), and was associated with fire, violence, and pure essence.<sup>12</sup> From there it developed its now-familiar range of figurative meanings: honor, promotion, and high rank; to set on high and lift up; of flight and architecture; religious and secular indications of loftiness and purification; and, toward the end of the century, style – that is, the expression of lofty ideas in an elevated manner and, eventually, those ideas themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Distinct from the etymology of the term and the natural history of experience it reflects, the sublime also has a tale to tell as a *philosophical* concept, and it is with the last of these figurative meanings – style – that, for all intents and purposes, the story begins. It does so in the shape of *περὶ ὑψους* (*Peri hupsous*), a treatise that survives in a single manuscript routinely ascribed to the author called Longinus, a rhetorician, literary scholar, and philosopher of the first or third century AD.<sup>14</sup> The text was clearly known in the ancient world but was essentially lost until reintroduced in the early modern period through three sixteenth-century versions published in

<sup>9</sup> See *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P. G. W. Glare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 1843.

<sup>10</sup> For the details of the etymology I am indebted to Jan Cohn and Thomas H. Miles, “The Sublime: In Alchemy, Aesthetics and Psychoanalysis,” *Modern Philology* 74, 3 (1977), 289–304.

<sup>11</sup> See Cohn and Miles, “The Sublime,” 290–2.

<sup>12</sup> German, Cohn and Miles point out, resisted the extension of the alchemical meaning of the term into figurative uses and employed native words instead to denote the same meaning: *erhöhen* (to increase), *veredeln* (to ennoble/enrich), and *erhaben* (to raise aloft/elevate); the latter yields the substantive, *das Erhabene*, which came to denote philosophically the equivalent to the English “sublime.”

<sup>13</sup> See Cohn and Miles, “The Sublime,” 294ff. In this shift from sublime style to sublime ideas, Cohn and Miles identify what they consider to be the corresponding philosophical shift from object to subject, and an increasing equation of sublimity with pain and (largely on the basis of Kant) moral imperatives: “The most important alteration of meaning, however, occurs when the *sublime* is used by English critics in the Longinian sense to describe not the external cause of a particular aesthetic state in the beholder, but that state itself; the sublime has moved from the object to the subject” (p. 296). As the chapters in Part One of the current volume show, this is a somewhat superficial gloss on a considerably more complicated and nuanced canvas.

<sup>14</sup> See Malcolm Heath, “Longinus and the Ancient Sublime,” chap. 1 of the current volume; and “Longinus *On Sublimity*,” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 45 (1999), 43–74; and Russell, “Longinus,” xxii–xxx. For details of the early editions of the work, I draw on Bernard Weinberg, “Translations and Commentaries of Longinus, *On the Sublime*, to 1600: A Bibliography,” *Modern Philology* 57, 3 (1950), 145–51, and Samuel Holt Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1935), chap. 1. Weinberg’s research updates and corrects Monk, who relies on A. Rosenberg, *Longinus in England bis zur Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Meyer und Müller, 1917), 1–19, and app. D, 247–61, in W. Rhys Roberts’s translation, *On the Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1899). A more recent treatment is to be found in the introduction to Karl Axelsson’s dissertation, published as *The Sublime: Precursors and British Eighteenth Century Conceptions* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007). Axelsson uncovers nothing new and effectively summarizes the research of Rosenberg et al.

the original Greek by Francesco Robortello (Basel, 1554), Paulus Manutius (Venice, 1555), and Franciscus Portus (Geneva, 1569–1570). The first translation into Latin by Domenico Pizzimenti appeared in 1566 (Napoli), followed by those of Petrus Paganus in 1572 and Gabriel de Petra in 1612; the earliest extant vernacular translation is into Italian by Niccolò da Falgano (Florence, 1575). As the titles of these and other editions show, the term *sublĭmis* was neither an obvious nor an automatic rendering of the Greek, with editors, translators, and commentators employing a variety of terminology: *de altitudine & granditate orationis* (undated, probably of the first half of the sixteenth century); *de grande, sive sublimi orationis* (Robortello); *de grandi orationis genere* (Pizzimenti), and *della altezza* (height/greatness) *del dire* (da Falgano). Other editions use “sublime” alone: *de sublimi genere* (Manutius); *de sublimi genere dicendi* (reprint of Pizzimenti edition 1644); *de sublimitate* ([Franciscus Portus] commentary 1581), and *de sublimi dicendi genere* (Paganus).

One thing these editions of *Peri hupsous* do have in common, however, is the emphasis that each puts on the sublime (great/elevated) *of* discourse rather than the sublime (great/elevated) *in* discourse. As Éva Madeleine Martin emphasizes in the current volume,<sup>15</sup> this distinction was central to and informed the most influential translation of the early modern period, Nicolas Boileau’s *Traité du sublime ou du merveilleux dans le discours, traduit de grec de Longin* (1674), which was responsible for the wide dissemination of the treatise throughout the European republic of letters. As Martin argues persuasively, the “prehistory” of the sublime in early modern France shows how deeply indebted was Boileau to an older tradition of translation and commentary, including Guez de Balzac (who used the term *sublimité* as early as in 1636 and again in 1644), Tanneguy Le Fèvre (who published a critical Latin edition of Longinus in 1663), and, intriguingly, an anonymous translator at the court of Louis XVI who produced the first French translation in 1644, “De la sublimité du discours.” There seems to have been an association of the term with rhetoric before Boileau (the *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue française* cites an example of 1212 in which sublime means “placed very high”),<sup>16</sup> but, as Martin points out, no doubt drawing on this extant tradition Boileau transforms the Latin evaluative qualifier *sublĭmis* into a substantive neologism – *sublime/sublimité* – to reflect the original Greek noun ὑψους, denoting it, in a conceptual sleight of hand, as an essence or independent existence expressed *in* and *through* language rather than *belonging to* or *of* language. Boileau insisted, in an oft-quoted passage from the preface to the *Traité*, that

par sublime, Longin n’entend pas ce que les orateurs appellent le style sublime, mais cet extraordinaire et ce merveilleux qui frappe dans le discours, et qui fait qu’un ouvrage enlève, ravit, transporte. Le style sublime veut toujours de grands mots; mais le sublime se peut trouver dans une seule pensée, dans une seule figure, dans un seul tour de paroles.<sup>17</sup>

by sublime, Longinus does not mean what the orators call sublime style, but this extraordinary and the marvelous that strikes in discourse, and what in a work elevates, ravishes, and transports. The sublime style always concerns elevated diction, but the Sublime can be found in a single thought, a single figure, a single turn of phrase. (translation mine)

Whether or not Boileau in fact drew on Balzac and colleagues, his choice of terminology effectively declared an allegiance to those who rejected the interpretation of Longinus’s text as a method for teaching *le stile sublime* in favor of understanding it to be an exploration of *le Sublime* in writing and, by extension, other kinds of arts as well. Boileau’s *Traité* thus marks a watershed in the philosophical concept of the sublime, although not due primarily to the *content*

<sup>15</sup> Éva Madeleine Martin, “The ‘Prehistory’ of the Sublime in Early Modern France: An Interdisciplinary Perspective,” chap. 6.

<sup>16</sup> See Cohn and Miles, “The Sublime,” 292.

<sup>17</sup> Nicolas Boileau Despréaux, *Traité du sublime ou du merveilleux dans le discours*, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 1837; Elibron Classics Replica, 2007), 316–48, p. 318.

of the treatise it translates – rhetorical style was of ancient lineage and *Peri hupsous* itself long in circulation and known by French and English critics alike – but because, as Samuel Monk urges, its “*interpretation* of Longinus ... was heretical.” Boileau recognized that the “greatest thought in simple language is the highest form of the sublime.” Monk observes,

since the thought operates directly and with no let or hindrance to the reader’s mind, filling it with awe and awakening emotions of a very intense kind. Thus at one blow the sublime is severed from rhetoric and becomes art, a matter of the revelation of a quality of thought and the emotions which that quality, vividly presented, evokes... Boileau’s terms ... indubitably tell us that the sublime apart from sublime style, must be a great thought and that it must awaken strong emotions in the reader of the audience. This is the new, the eighteenth-century, sublime for which Boileau is responsible.<sup>18</sup>

Expressed *linguistically*, then, Boileau bequeaths to the tradition a term of Gallicized Latin (*sublime/sublimité*), a neologism consisting of a Latin adjective (*sublimis*) to translate a Greek noun (ὑψους); expressed *philosophically*, however, he isolates a subject matter that not only occupies – as the tale is traditionally told – writers of the “age of taste” and first decades of the nineteenth century, but continues to fascinate up to and including those of the present day.

When the sublime became an object of interest for British writers during the early modern period, it was under the influence of this French tradition encapsulated in and purveyed by Boileau’s *Traité*. This is not say that the term did not have at least a marginal presence in Britain already: in addition to the extant sixteenth-century editions, a Latin translation by Gerard Langbaine had appeared at Oxford in 1636 – the first such publication by an Englishman printed at an English press – as well as an English translation by John Hall in 1652 with the title *Peri Hupsous, or Dionysius Longinus of the Height of Eloquence*.<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, moreover, had earlier spoken of “high style” and Herbert Spenser of “lofty style” – neither with any decipherable reference to Longinus – and “sublime” had been used in connection to style more generally as early as 1586 and even with a hint of its modern usage in 1638.<sup>20</sup> John Milton had also referred to Longinus, although only on a single occasion, ironic given that subsequent generations were to see his work as an example par excellence of sublime style.<sup>21</sup> Such intimations notwithstanding, only *after* Boileau’s *Traité* of 1674 does the influence of Longinus begin to be felt and the sublime take root as a feature of the British literary and philosophical landscape. Indeed, the second English translation of 1680 by J. Pulteney was not from the Greek but “out of the French” of Boileau,<sup>22</sup> and – even more telling – the first rendering of ὑψους with the

<sup>18</sup> Monk, *The Sublime*, 29 and 31–2. Cohn and Miles, “The Sublime,” 292, gloss the same point, remarking that Boileau was “careful to distinguish between the [extant] rhetorical sense and the new emotional-aesthetic meaning he gives to *sublime* in his translation of Longinus.” See also Meyer H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and Critical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 72ff.; Russell, “Longinus,” xlii–xlvi, and A. F. B. Clark, *Boileau and the French Classical Critics in England* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965 [1925]), esp. 369ff., all of whom draw a similar conclusion.

<sup>19</sup> *Peri Hupsous, or Dionysius Longinus of the Height of Eloquence Rendred out of the Originall by J[ohn] H[all]*. Esq. (London, 1652).

<sup>20</sup> On the former, see Monk, *The Sublime*, 18–19, and for latter the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which cites Sir Thomas Herbert (1606–1682), *Some Yeares Travels into Divers Parts of Asia and Afrique, Describing Especially the Two Famous Empires the Persian and Great Mogull Weaved with the History of These Later Time, &c.*, 2nd ed. (London, 1638 [1634]), 33: “The element grew dreadfull, ... the sea sublime and wrathfull.”

<sup>21</sup> In his essay “Of Education,” Milton refers to Longinus as one of the teachers of “a graceful and ornate rhetoric.” Quoted in Monk, *The Sublime*, 20. See in this context Addison’s papers on the “Divine Genius” of Milton, in *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 2, nos. 267, 273, 279, and 3, nos. 285, 291, 297, 303, 309, 315, 321, 327, 333, 339, 345, 351, 357, 363, 369. On Milton’s familiarity with Longinus, see Nigel Smith, *Is Milton Better than Shakespeare?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> *A Treatise of the Loftiness or Elegance of Speech. Written Originally in Greek by Longinus; and Now Translated out of the French by Mr. J. P[ulteney]* (London, 1680). See Cohn and Miles, “The Sublime,” who must be mistaken in citing Pulteney’s as one of the two translations “before Boileau’s work.” It is thus not quite true, as they suggest, that “after Boileau, all English titles used the world sublime” (293n9).



English equivalent of Boileau's neologism comes with an anonymous translation of 1698 – from the Greek but “compared with the French” – to produce a title close to its modern and now-familiar form: *An Essay on Sublime*.<sup>23</sup> This was solidified and established with William Smith's translation of 1739, *On the Sublime*, the standard edition for the rest of the century and the period in which Longinus's text reached the height of its fame and influence.<sup>24</sup> Smith's translation went to its fifth and final edition in 1800, and the intervening years saw two new editions of the Greek by J. Hudson (Oxford, 1710) and Z. Pearce (London, 1724), which were collectively reprinted some fourteen times; other translations were to follow.<sup>25</sup>

When Samuel Johnson wrote the entry under “sublime” in the first edition of his *Dictionary* (1755), then, the term had already seen a good deal of action and arrived with a substantial weight of conceptual baggage belied by his charmingly simple definition: “SUBLIME, n.s. The grand or lofty stile,” Johnson writes. “*The sublime* is a Gallicism, but now naturalized.”<sup>26</sup> What he reveals, no doubt unwittingly, is – no pun intended – a veritable sublimation in which Boileau is at once absorbed into the soil of the English language and simultaneously transformed at the hands of the eighteenth-century British philosophers who tilled it. Johnson follows the French and distinguishes the *nominal* from the *adjectival* form of “sublime,” tracing the latter, not the former, to *sublîmis*. To the English adjective Johnson thus attaches the same range of meanings encompassed by the Latin original and reserves the noun exclusively for Longinian style. His examples are Alexander Pope's now-famous lines from *An Essay on Criticism* (themselves a borrowing from Boileau):

Longinus strengthens all his laws,  
 And is himself the great *sublime* he draws<sup>27</sup>

and a remark by Addison: “The *sublime* rises from the nobleness of thoughts, the magnificence of the words, or the harmonious and livery turn of the phrase; the perfect *sublime* arises from all three together.”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *An Essay on the Sublime: Translated from the Greek of Dionysius Longinus Cassius the Rhetorician. Compared with the French of Sieur Despréaux Boileau* (Oxford, 1698).

<sup>24</sup> Dionysius Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans. from the Greek by William Smith (London: J. Watts, 1739).

<sup>25</sup> See Monk, *The Sublime*, 21.

<sup>26</sup> *A Dictionary of the English Language; in Which the Words Are Deduced from Their Originals and Illustrated in Their Different Significations by Examples from the Best Writers. To Which Are Prefixed, a History of the Language, and an English Grammar. By Samuel Johnson, A. M. In Two Volumes* (London, 1755). Dictionaries up to Johnson's did not include the term. See Theodore E. B. Wood, *The Word “Sublime” and Its Context, 1650–1760* (Den Haag: Mouton, 1972), app. 2, 214–16.

<sup>27</sup> Pope's lines in full read:

Thee, bold Longinus! All the Nine inspire,  
 And bless *their Critick* with a *Poet's Fire*.  
 An ardent *Judge*, who Jealous in his Trust,  
 With *Warmth* gives Sentence, yet is always *Just*;  
 Whose *own Example* strengthens all his Laws,  
 And *Is himself* that great *Sublime* he draws. (675–80)

Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, in *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, 6 vols. (London: Methuen, 1961), vol. 1, *Pastoral Poetry and An Essay on Criticism*, ed. E. Audra and Aubrey Williams, 1:316. The last line echoes Boileau: “Souvent il fait la figure qu'il enseigne, et, en parlant du sublime, il est lui-même très sublime” (Often he imitates that which he teaches, and, in speaking of the sublime, he is himself very sublime) (*Traité*, 316), although Russell (“*Longinus*,” xlii–xlii in 2) traces the sentiment back further to a Latin letter of Stephanus de Castrobello dated 1612: “Quid enim praeter ipsam sublimitatem ipso Longino sublimis? ... ipsum typum exemplar sublimis et grandis orationis expressissimum” (For what is sublime for Longinus himself beyond sublimity itself? ... The very model [is] the most distinct example of sublime and grand oratory) (translations mine).

<sup>28</sup> The quotation comes from the *Guardian*, July 25, 1713. I am indebted to Robert DeMaria for identification of the source. Addison routinely reserves “sublime” for literary style and effect and uses “grand” for what strikes as

Johnson's entry and examples reflect the Anglicized French – English *sublime/sublimity* from French *sublime/sublimité* – and thus take over the emphasis on *sublime dans le discours*, the sublime as an essence not *of* but expressed *in* language, reserving the nominative “sublime” for sublime style. This reflects the convention followed early in the century by the likes of John Dennis, Shaftesbury, and Addison, who employ the term in reference to Longinus and rhetorical effect and use “great” or “grand” to indicate what later writers mean by the term “sublime”: those features of objects (such as magnitude, height, and elevation) and the affective states (such as transcendence, awe, fear, and terror) they produce. Traces of this terminology are evident in David Hume and remain as late as Thomas Reid's “Of Beauty,” the final essay in *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785); Lord Kames distinguishes “grand” (size) from “sublime” (elevation) in his *Elements of Criticism* (1763), but neither refer to the sublime of style.<sup>29</sup> As the century progressed the terms became interchangeable and, in the wake of Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), and cemented by Immanuel Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1792), the Longinian sublime all but disappeared. Under the influence of Romanticism at the turn of the century, *sublime style* and *sublimity* were uncoupled conceptually once and for all.

It is clear then, to return to the question raised at the outset, that any farewell to the sublime can be little more than a rhetorical flourish in reference to the purported inadequacy of the philosophical concept, and even there, to invoke Hegel and Minerva's Owl once again, we should not be surprised to find reflection lagging behind its subject matter, which, strive as it might, it can never capture entirely. Granted, like its mother discipline, aesthetics, the sublime has undergone considerable change from its inception in Longinus, and subsequent birth and growth in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. As this short introduction to a long history shows, however, in the sublime we inherit a concept with a pedigree that only the breeding of many generations can bestow. In addition, the sublime has insinuated itself into a range of disciplines and has taken on a rich variety of perspectives, and through its various liaisons has undergone a process of change and maturity.

This fact is nowhere more evident than in the chapters that compose the current volume. Part One covers the philosophical history of the sublime, the range of theoretical treatments the concept has occasioned from Longinus in antiquity; through British, French, and German writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; to its place in contemporary postmodern thought. Part Two shows how amenable the sublime is to take on a range of adjectival qualifications that denote, variously, national predilections (Dutch and American), aesthetic sensibilities (British Romanticism), worldviews (the religious and the environmental), and different creative practices (the fine arts and architecture). The fifteen chapters have no pretension to be exhaustive – that would be to close prematurely a concept very much open – but together they offer in a humbler spirit a fascinating narrative, in the warp and weave of which one discerns the deep, rich colors of a concept alive and well. Indeed, the sublime can no more disappear than the experiences to which it refers; for that we should be grateful and wish it in return a long and healthy life.

a whole and surpasses the capacity of the imagination to contain. See Addison's papers on Milton (n21 above) and the eleven essays on “The Pleasures of the Imagination” written between June 21st and July 3rd, 1712, in *The Spectator* 3:535–82, nos. 409–21. I consider Addison's view in more detail in the following, Timothy M. Costelloe, “Imagination and Internal Sense: The Sublime in Shaftesbury, Reid, Addison, and Reynolds,” chap. 4 of the current volume.

<sup>29</sup> This goes hand in hand on the part of some – Hugh Blair, James Beattie, and James Mill, for example – who fault Longinus for being narrow and overly rhetorical. See Monk, *The Sublime*, 25.

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PART ONE

PHILOSOPHICAL HISTORY OF THE SUBLIME

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