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The Ancient Sublime(s). A Review of *The Sublime in Antiquity*

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Abstract

The sublime plays an important role in recent publications on Greek and Latin literature. On the one hand, scholars try to make sense of ancient Greek theories of the sublime, both in Longinus' *On the Sublime* and in other rhetorical texts. On the other hand, the sublime, in its ancient and modern manifestations presented by thinkers from Longinus to Burke, Kant and Lyotard, has proved to be a productive tool for interpreting the works of Latin poets like Lucretius, Lucan and Seneca. But what is the sublime? And how does the Greek rhetorical sublime in Longinus relate to the Roman literary sublime in Lucretius and other poets? This article reviews James I. Porter, *The Sublime in Antiquity*: it evaluates Porter's innovative approach to the ancient sublime, and considers the ways in which it might change our understanding of an important, but somewhat enigmatic concept.

Keywords

sublime – rhetoric – aesthetics – style – Longinus

James I. Porter. *The Sublime in Antiquity*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016. xxii + 690 pp. Pr. € 133 (hb). ISBN 978-1-107-03747-2.

Recent years have witnessed an explosion of studies on the sublime in the ancient world. The sublime is now frequently used as a theoretical concept or lens of interpretation that opens up new perspectives on ancient literature.

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This approach has been especially successful in studies on Latin poetry, as we may see from a number of publications on the sublime in Lucretius, Virgil, Seneca, Silius Italicus, Lucan, and Statius.[1] Some scholars work with ancient theories of the sublime, mainly known to us through Longinus' *On the Sublime*, while others adopt modern versions of the sublime, as formulated by Boileau, Burke, Kant, and Lyotard; or they combine ancient and modern ideas on the sublime, while cherry-picking those elements that seem to be most helpful for the interpretation of a particular text. While the sublime is apparently a productive tool for interpreting literature, it also remains one of the most elusive categories in classical scholarship. What do we actually mean when we call something sublime? Porter's large, important and impressive book does not give a clear answer to this question. Rather, he presents a large number of different answers, as he believes that "sublimity is not one thing: it comes in different shades and hues, and it varies with its objects" (p. 54).

Porter's broad and flexible view of the sublime, which is described as, among other things, "a tarrying with other souls" (p. 99), "a sophism of rhetoric" (p. 104), and "just another name for grandeur" (p. 219), has one great advantage and one clear disadvantage. The advantage is that it allows Porter to draw numerous intriguing and thought-provoking connections between different ancient texts, ranging from Homer to Longinus, including Pindar, the tragedians, Aristophanes, the orators, Plato, Aristotle, Theophrastus, Demetrius, the Hellenistic euphonists, Caecilius, and Dionysius. His subtle readings of these texts deserve to be studied carefully by all students of rhetoric, aesthetics, and classical literature. The disadvantage is that the parallels that Porter finds between these texts are of rather different kinds, so that the reader keeps wondering whether we are in all cases indeed dealing with (the tradition of) 'the sublime'.

So what is the sublime? There is one extant text from antiquity that can help us to answer this question. It is the treatise *On the Sublime* (Περὶ ὕψους), the author of which we usually call Longinus. Porter's book, to be sure, is not a book about Longinus—one of his main claims is in fact that Longinus is not as 'central' to the tradition of the sublime as he is often thought to be (p. 24). But if we wish to understand the novelty of Porter's argument, it will be useful for us to remember the basic facts concerning the treatise *On the Sublime* and its

1 Porter 2007 on Lucretius; Conte 2007, 58-122 and Hardie 2009 on Virgil; Schiesaro 2003 and Gunderson 2015 on Seneca; Schrijvers 2006 on Silius Italicus; Day 2013 on Lucan; Lagière 2017 on Statius. For a review of Day 2013, see Ambühl and de Jonge 2016 in *Mnemosyne.* For Seneca, see also Wessels 2014, not mentioned in Porter's bibliography.

influence on modern thought.[2] The author of the text is unknown, and its date is debated. *On the Sublime* survives in a single manuscript of the tenth century AD, known as the Codex Parisinus 2036. The heading of the text in the manuscript is Διονυσίου Λογγίνου περὶ ὕψους, 'Dionysius Longinus *On the Sublime*'. The table of contents of the same manuscript, however, has Διονυσίου ἢ Λογγίνου περὶ ὕψους, that is, 'Dionysius or Longinus *On the Sublime*'. The manuscript thus provides us with three possible authors of the text. If we follow the first folio page, the author will be Dionysius Longinus, whom we do not know.[3] If we follow the table of contents, we will have two alternative guesses: a Byzantine scholar may have concluded that the treatise should be attributed either to Dionysius of Halicarnassus, the rhetorician, historian and literary critic who lived at the end of the first century BC, or to Cassius Longinus, the rhetorician and philosopher who lived in the third century AD. Most specialists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries believe that the author is neither Dionysius nor Cassius Longinus; they have dated the treatise to the first century AD, either in the Tiberian Age or at the end of the century; some scholars have favored an earlier date, in the Augustan Age. Malcolm Heath, on the other hand, has repeatedly argued for the authorship of Cassius Longinus (third century AD).[4] Porter, like many other scholars, calls the author simply Longinus; he holds no strong opinion on the date: "possibly mid- to late first century CE".[5]

What does Longinus tell us about the sublime? The author characterizes the sublime (τὰ ὕψη) as 'a kind of excellence and preeminence of speech and writing' (ἀκρότης καὶ ἐξοχή τις λόγων), which induces in hearers not 'persuasion' (πειθώ), but 'ecstasy' (ἐκστασις, *Subl.* 1.3-4). He distinguishes five sources (πηγαί) of the sublime (*Subl.* 8.1). Two of them are said to be 'for the most part innate' (κατὰ τὸ πλέον αὐθιγενεῖς): 'the power to conceive striking thoughts' (τὸ περὶ τὰς νοήσεις ἁδρεπήβολον) and 'vehement and inspired emotion' (τὸ σφοδρὸν καὶ ἐνθουσιαστικὸν πάθος). The remaining three are said to be the product of art (τέχνη): figures of thought and speech, noble diction, and dignified and elevated word arrangement. Longinus' systematic treatise, which contains numerous quotations of passages from such authors as Homer, Demosthenes, Plato and Sappho, presents itself as a polemical and didactic manual. Its addressee is a young man, an advanced student called Terentianus; the main target is the rhetorician Caecilius of Caleacte (Augustan Age), who wrote an earlier 'little

2 Important recent interpretations of Longinus' *On the Sublime* include Too 1998, 187-21; Hunter 2009, 128-168; Halliwell 2012, 327-367; and Heath 2012.

3 Mazzucchi 2010 adopts this solution in his edition.

4 Heath 1999 and Heath 2012.

5 Porter 2016, 4.

treatise' (συγγραμμάτιον) *On the Sublime*.[6] Longinus complains that Caecilius presented endless lists of examples, but forgot to explain how we can develop our own natures to a certain pitch of elevation (*Subl.* 1.1).[7]

Longinus' treatise was edited by Robortello (1554), Portus (1569-1570) and dalla Pietra (1612), and translated by Pizzimeni (1566) and others; but it became especially famous in Europe through the translation of Boileau (1674), whose interpretation emphasized a connection between the sublime and 'simplicity', taking his cue from Longinus' paraphrase of *Genesis* 1:3-9: 'God said—what?—"let there be light" and there was light; "let there be earth", and there was earth' (*Subl.* 9.9). In the modern era, Edmund Burke (1729-1797), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998) and other thinkers developed their own theories of the sublime, which they partly based on their readings of Longinus, partly also on their interpretations of Lucretius' *De rerum natura* and other ancient texts that seemed to support their own ideas.[8] The concept of the sublime now took on new dimensions. Modern developments included the sharp distinction between beauty and the sublime, and the close association of the sublime with the experience of pain and terror. To be sure, those readers who look for such connotations of the sublime will also find them in some of the literary examples cited in Longinus' treatise, but they are much more articulate in modern theories of the sublime. So far the traditional and more or less conventional history of the sublime—admittedly in an extremely condensed form.

The Sublime in Antiquity proposes a new approach to the ancient history of the sublime. Porter presents his argument in six (very long) chapters. Chapter 1 (pp. 1-56) formulates the aims of the project while attacking traditional and current views on the ancient sublime: I will discuss Porter's criticism of other scholars below. Chapter 2 (pp. 57-177) is a subtle and virtuoso interpretation of *On the Sublime*, which emphasizes not so much what Longinus says, but rather what he does not explicitly say. The focus is thus not on the five sources of the sublime, but on the thematic connections between the literary examples and on Longinus' citation strategies. While emphasizing that the sublime is a matter of art and rhetoric rather than a product of nature and thought, Porter offers fascinating readings of some of the most memorable sections of Longinus' treatise, including the silence of Ajax (*Subl.* 9.2:

6 Porter 2016, 4 and 185 points out that we do not know for sure that the works of Caecilius and Longinus were titled *On the Sublime* (Περὶ ὕψους).

7 There are three commentaries on Longinus' *On the Sublime*: Russell 1964, Bühler 1964 (which covers part of the text only) and Mazzucchi 2010.

8 Burke 1968 [1757]; Kant 2018 [1790]; Lyotard 1994. Doran 2015 presents the history of 'the theory' of the sublime from Longinus to Kant.

pp. 93-102) and the *Genesis* paraphrase (*Subl.* 9.9: pp. 107-116). Chapters 3 (pp. 178-282) and 4 (pp. 283-381) trace the sublime before Longinus in rhetoric, literary criticism and literature. Porter presents an overwhelming amount of material in reverse chronological order, starting from Longinus' predecessor Caecilius of Caleacte and concluding with 'the great ocean' Homer. In chapters 5 (pp. 382-536) and 6 (pp. 537-617), Porter offers a more systematic analysis of the ancient sublime, now distinguishing between the 'material sublime' and the 'immaterial sublime'—to be sure, this is a distinction that Longinus does not mention. Under the heading of the 'material sublime' (chapter 5), which lies in the harsh confrontation with matter, we find discussions of such authors as Empedocles, Lucretius and Manilius; under the heading of the 'immaterial sublime' (chapter 6), which draws human beings to the spiritual, superhuman realm, Porter examines passages from (again) Homer, Aeschylus, Aristotle, Plato and Plotinus.[9]

Porter makes several thought-provoking claims in this book. The three most important ones must be summarized and examined here, because they set the agenda for his project. First, Porter argues that the sublime existed long before Longinus, whose treatise is a late summary of traditional views rather than an innovative text (p. 32). Turning away from "Longino-centric" scholarship, Porter hopes to demonstrate and to analyze the presence of the sublime in other, earlier and later texts. Second, he rejects Boileau's interpretation of Longinus, parts of which are still frequently cited with approval by classical scholars. According to Porter, Boileau is not only wrong in denying that the sublime is a style, but also in associating the sublime with simplicity (p. 45). Third, Porter argues that in Greek texts the notion of the sublime is not just represented by the substantive ὕψος ('height, elevation'), but by various other terms, including μέγεθος ('grandeur'), δεινότης ('forcefulness'), and ἔκστασις ('displacement'), and that terminology should not be our (only) guide when we are looking for the sublime in classical literature. Other scholars have observed that terms like ὕψος and *sublimitas* start to be used in rhetoric and criticism in the late first century BC (Dionysius, Caecilius, and Horace, all active in the Augustan Age), which might seem a promising starting point for those who wish to reconstruct the intellectual context of *On the Sublime*. Porter however insists that the terminology of ὕψος was never a prerequisite for describing experiences of the sublime. He draws up a list of "logical and thematic markers of the sublime", which includes twenty-one items, including "immense heights", "gaps", "indefinability", "uncontainable forces", "unsurpassed qualities", "sharp collisions and contrasts", and "intense and vital danger, risk, and crisis"

9 On the material and the immaterial sublime, see also Porter 2012.

(pp. 51-53): this list is presented as a "rough typology" of the causes that "provoke" the sublime in Longinus, but also in other texts before and after him.

I believe that these three claims are basically correct. Porter's book is an important achievement because of its refusal to accept the uniqueness of Longinus in the history of the sublime, its rejection of views that are traditionally held to be true, and its recognition that the history of a concept is not the history of one specific term. At the same time, however, one can ask questions about the consequences that Porter draws from his valuable insights. While I agree with the starting points, I do not agree with all the conclusions.

To begin with the first claim, Porter is absolutely right that Longinus "is not leaping into some strange new world" (p. 11). Longinus himself frequently refers to the views of Caecilius of Caleacte (*Subl.* 1.1 and *passim*), but also to a certain Theodorus (*Subl.* 3.5), and some anonymous predecessors. Scholars have also noted the agreements between Longinus and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who uses the terms ὕψος and ὑψηλός in rhetorical and critical contexts that are very similar to those of *On the Sublime*.[10] Porter's third chapter examines these and other rhetoricians and literary critics. Having paid due attention to Caecilius and Dionysius, Porter casts a wider net, searching for Longinian material in the Hellenistic euphonists and in Demetrius' *On Style.* One intriguing suggestion is that the orator Aeschines may have been an important model of the sublime for Caecilius, although the little evidence is difficult to interpret.[11] The fourth chapter is even more innovative, as it explores manifestations of the sublime in earlier Greek rhetoric and literature, from Theophrastus, via Aristotle, oratory, comedy, tragedy and Pindar, all the way back to Homer.

This approach is not new in itself: Donald Russell, arguably the most influential interpreter of *On the Sublime* in recent times, has already pointed out that Longinus "represents a tradition".[12] The real question is this one: how far does that tradition stretch back and how much does it include? Many scholars will be willing to accept that the sublime was an important category in rhetoric and literary criticism well before Longinus. It is clear that Longinus knew the work of Caecilius, and few scholars will deny that he is somehow connected with Dionysius; it is also plausible that there were other Hellenistic critics and

10 De Jonge 2012a.

11 On Caecilius' views on the sublime, see also Innes 2002. For the fragments of Caecilius Porter uses the edition by Ofenloch 1907; unfortunately the new edition of the fragments by Woerther 2015, which is more cautious and far more restrictive than Ofenloch 1907, came too late for Porter's book.

12 Russell in Halliwell *et al.* 1995, 152.

rhetoricians who wrote about the sublime.[13] Pliny the Younger, who somewhat surprisingly does not figure prominently in Porter's book, also belongs to this tradition, as we may infer from his discussion of the sublime style produced by audacity (*Ep.* 9.26).[14] When we look beyond rhetorical theory and literary criticism, nobody will deny that Longinus was directly or indirectly influenced by Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics, by Gorgias' ideas on the enchanting and overwhelming power of language, by Hellenistic ideas on sound and euphony, by early poetic ideas on imagination and inspiration, and by the poetic passages in Homer, Pindar, Sappho, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides that he found inspiring. The question is, however, whether all these names and texts should be put together under the label of 'the sublime'; the answer will depend on one's understanding of that concept.

Let me give two examples. Demetrius, the author of *On Style,* shares with Longinus an interest in 'grandeur' (μέγεθος) and 'forcefulness' (δεινότης)—two out of a total of four styles that this rhetorician distinguishes. Does this mean that Demetrius' *On Style* is an "important if neglected way station in the history of the sublime", as Porter argues (p. 246), or does it mean that Demetrius and Longinus belong to one tradition of Greek rhetoric and literary criticism, and that both authors were interested in the impact of overwhelming language? The Hellenistic euphonists, like Longinus, are obsessed with sounds and word arrangement (σύνθεσις), and with poetic excellence resulting from brief moments of aesthetic euphony; does this mean that the euphonists (whom we know through Philodemus' *On Poems*) have a theory of the sublime, or does Longinus make effective use of Hellenistic ideas on composition, having observed that σύνθεσις can be one important source of sublimity? These questions are not easy to answer. Porter is inclined to interpret parallels between Longinus and earlier texts as evidence of the pre-Longinian sublime; in most cases he does not consider the possibility that such parallels result from the continuous ancient tradition of rhetoric and criticism rather than a common interest in the sublime.

We may now examine the second claim. Porter is surely right that Boileau oversimplified Longinus' treatise when he argued, first, that the sublime is not the same thing as "the sublime style" ("le stile sublime"), and then, that the sublime is nothing else than "the simple itself" ("le simple même"). Longinus

13 Among the direct predecessors of Longinus, I would include Gnaeus Pompeius Geminus, the addressee of one of Dionysius' letters, whose views on the hazardous nature of the sublime (D.H. *Pomp.* 2.13-16) are close to those of Longinus. Porter 2016, 236-237 (see n. 151) cites the passage but does not conclude that Pompeius is one of Longinus' colleagues (or predecessors) writing on the sublime.

14 See Armisen-Marchetti 1990; Porter 2016, 25.

never says that the sublime is simple; the treatise in fact contains many examples of complex hyperbatons and highly artistic word arrangements, which are far from 'simple'. Porter is also right to emphasize the highly rhetorical and technical aspects of Longinus' treatise. Romantic readings of the treatise have too often ignored the extensive chapters on figures, diction and word arrangement (*Subl.* 16-41): style is indeed central to Longinus' project. Nevertheless, two things can be said in defense of Boileau. Firstly, Longinus' first source of the sublime is, as we have seen, 'the power to conceive striking thoughts' (τὸ περὶ τὰς νοήσεις ἀδρεπήβολον): this source is said to be for the most part 'innate'. Porter argues at length that for Longinus the sublime is a matter of art and language, rather than of nature or thought (pp. 60-83): in his reading, even Ajax' silence (*Subl.* 9.2), Longinus' example of the sublimity of a bare idea 'without a spoken word', stemming from 'the greatness of mind itself' (αὐτὸ τὸ μεγαλόφρον), is ultimately a *textual* effect (p. 96), which could never exist without Homer and the critical tradition. This is a sharp observation, to be sure, but we should also acknowledge that Longinus explicitly distinguishes between the two 'innate' sources (great thoughts and emotion) and the three 'technical' sources of the sublime (figures, diction, and composition); and that he censures Caecilius for not having explained how human beings may 'develop their natures (φύσεις) to some degree of grandeur' (*Subl.* 1.1). It appears to me that Boileau rightly saw that there is more to the Longinian sublime than rhetorical instruments like diction, figures of speech, and word arrangement, important as these may be. Secondly, I agree with Porter that the sublime cannot be equated with 'simplicity', but I am not so sure that "the sublime is never simple and straightforward" (p. 106). Longinus admires not only 'a bare thought by itself and without a spoken word' (φωνῆς δίχα … ψιλὴ καθ᾽ ἑαυτὴν ἔννοια, *Subl.* 9.2), but also a sublime composition that is based on 'current vulgar words, which suggest nothing out of the common' (κοινοῖς καὶ δημώδεσι τοῖς ὀνόμασι καὶ οὐδὲν ἐπαγομένοις περιττόν, *Subl.* 40.2). In other words, the sublime is not the same thing as simplicity, but simple language can be material for sublime writing, if it is elevated by a great thought or by clever composition.[15]

Porter also criticizes Donald Russell's view, which has been repeated and rephrased by many classical scholars, that the sublime is "a special effect, not a special style".[16] Porter rightfully points out that Longinus "says no such thing" (p. 9), but that same argument could be used against his own attempts at defining the sublime, like "the sublime is nothing other than the very ecstasy of

15 The idea of the clever arrangement of common words connects Dionysius and Longinus: see de Jonge 2012b.

16 Russell 1964, xxxvii.

language, thought and experience in their day-to-day workings and in all their extraordinary contingency" (p. 56). Porter is right that Russell's brief formulation ignores the *cause* of sublimity and neglects the fact that stylistic tools may contribute to it as well. But Russell's notion of "a special effect, not a special style" should not altogether be rejected, for two reasons. First, it brings out that Longinus is not so much interested in the style of a lengthy text passage, but in short moments or 'highlights' that stand out from their contexts (Porter offers an excellent discussions of "the aesthetics of the καιρός" on pp. 141-147). Second, Longinus himself tends to describe the sublime indeed in terms of its effect on the audience (ἔκστασις, ἔκπληξις), suggesting a certain analogy between the inspired author, the sublime text, and the ecstatic audience.[17] To be sure, Russell's 'definition' does not tell everything about the sublime that there is to know, as it covers only part of its essence; but it is more in line with ancient discussions of the sublime than the definition that we encounter at the beginning of Porter's book, according to which the sublime is to be found wherever "a positive, material object [is] elevated to the status of [an] impossible Thing" (p. 5).[18] This remarkable formulation is so far removed from anything that Longinus—or anyone in antiquity—says, that it might confuse the readers who have just opened their copy of *The Sublime in Antiquity*.

Porter's third claim, again, is based on an important insight: the history of a concept is not the history of one term. It is true that, apart from ὕψος, Longinus uses many different terms to describe the sublime, its causes and its effects. Porter presents a useful "lexicon of the sublime" (pp. 180-183), which includes *hupsos*-words, *meg*-words, *dein*-words, *huper*-words, *ek*-words, *ogk*-words, and a number of additional terms. With the help of this lexicon and his list of "logical and thematic markers of the sublime", like gaps, limits, and indefinability (pp. 51-53: see above), he finds the sublime in many passages of Greek literature where the word ὕψος and its derivatives do not appear. On the one hand, this is clearly the right approach: we know that rhetoric existed before the first extant occurrence of the word ῥητορική, and Longinus writes indeed entire chapters without mentioning the word ὕψος; so we do not need ὕψος for the sublime. On the other hand, Porter's more inclusive approach to the sublime also raises questions—here are two of them.

Firstly, I am not sure that we should interpret Longinus' use of different categories as "indifference to terminology" (p. 182). To give just one example, the word μέγεθος ('grandeur, greatness') is a key term in *On the Sublime*, but it is clear from the comparison of Demosthenes and Cicero (*Subl.* 12.4-5) that

17 See de Jonge 2019.
18 Žižek 1989, 71.

μέγεθος and ὕψος are neither synonyms nor interchangeable terms: Longinus asserts that Demosthenes and Cicero differ in their grandeur (ἐν τοῖς μεγέθεσι), and goes on to explain that Demosthenes excels in ὕψος ('the sublime'), Cicero in χύσις ('diffusion'). Cicero, it appears, has grandeur without being sublime.[19] The stunning variety of rhetorical and critical terms in *On the Sublime* invites us to consider the precise connotations of each of these terms. Secondly, how many of Porter's lexicon items or thematic markers do we need in order to be able to identify the sublime? For example, while δεινότης ('skill, forcefulness, intensity') is a key concept in *On the Sublime*, not every instance of δεινότης will be sublime; so is it enough to have δεινότης together with μέγεθος, or do we need more, like a description of a gap or an immense height? Where can we draw the line? In practice that may not always be so easy, and it is perhaps for this reason that Porter himself, in his search for the sublime in Greek literature, often resorts to occurrences of ὕψος, ὑψηλός and related terms like ὑψίζυγος and ὑψιβρεμέτης: this results for example in fascinating readings of the sublime in Homer (pp. 360-381).

Porter's subtle interpretations consistently open up new perspectives, but some readers might be more willing than others to accept his discoveries of the sublime in authors as different as Aeschines, Alcidamas, Anaxagoras, and Aristophanes. If readers are hesitating, Porter is always happy to persuade them, by pointing out that the words of a Greek author could also have been written by Longinus: thus, Dionysius' comparison of Lysias and Isocrates "could have flowed directly from the pen of Longinus" (p. 216); Aristotle's instructions on hyperbole "might as well have been penned by Longinus" (p. 292); and Gorgias uses "Longinian expressions" (p. 317). The rhetorical climax comes when Porter asks: "Has Homer read Longinus? It often seems as if he had" (p. 368). This is a somewhat surprising argument for someone who believes that scholarship on the sublime has been wrongly "Longino-centric" (p. 18, p. 36). I personally would happily accept that Homer, Gorgias and Aristotle influenced Longinus, and also that the critic quotes, echoes and adapts their writings, but not necessarily that all these authors are connected by one concept of the sublime; a different way to explain the parallels would be to say that various aspects of the Longinian sublime are based on rhetorical notions that go back to Gorgias and Aristotle (and others). Aristotle's observation that there is a 'notorious defense for every hyperbole', i.e. that the speaker should 'reproach himself' (*Rh.* 3.7.9-10, 1408b1-5), for example, points to a tradition of rhetoric rather than a tradition of the sublime. Gorgias' well-known statement that 'speech is a powerful master' (λόγος δυνάστης μέγας ἐστίν, *Hel.* 8) has clearly influenced

19 See de Jonge and Nijk 2019.

Longinus (δυναστείαν, *Subl.* 1.4), as various scholars have observed, and the two rhetoricians have indeed similar ideas on the overwhelming enchantment of language. But again, does that mean that Gorgias knows the sublime—and if so, is that actually the same sublime that Longinus believes in?

Some readers might feel that by bringing all those different ancient authors together under the label of the sublime, which is not a "fixed entity", but a "moving target" (p. 55), Porter is somehow stretching the concept to a point at which it risks to become less meaningful. Porter seems to be confident that the sublime, although it has many different forms and shades, is really one and the same thing from Homer via Longinus to Lyotard: he asserts that Žižek's analysis of the sublime (quoted above, n. 18) "can be extended to antiquity without anachronism" (p. 5). While many readers will welcome this approach, alternative models for explaining these connections might also be considered. First, one might suppose that human ideas on what is impressive, inspiring or overwhelming change and develop over time, under the influence of historical, political and social circumstances. A history of beauty will show that the beauty standards of seventeenth century France were different from those of the United States in the twenty-first century. Likewise, a history of the sublime might demonstrate that Longinus' standards of the sublime were different from that of Burke; and that perhaps even Caecilius' sublimity was not identical to that of Longinus. Secondly, and more rigorously, a skeptical reader might argue that there is actually no such thing as the sublime: what exists, one could say, is a large number of separate ideas on inspiration, ecstasy, grandeur, impressive rhetoric, extraordinary nature, gods, heights, gaps, etc., which have been grouped together in the history of rhetoric, philosophy and literature, under the influence of some ancient and modern individuals, under the *name* of 'the sublime'. A discussion of these alternative models of explanation might have been helpful for those readers who feel that they are not exactly sure what the sublime is.

One side-effect of the vagueness of the sublime is that it tends to invite its adherents to postulate more and more subcategories. Kant developed the notions of the 'mathematical sublime' and the 'dynamical sublime'; later additions were, among others, the 'natural sublime', the 'Romantic sublime', the 'American sublime', the 'historical sublime', and the 'postmodern sublime'. Such subcategories, again, will attract some and chase away other readers. In this book a few new categories are born: apart from the 'material sublime' and the 'immaterial sublime', which are the subjects of the final two chapters, Porter also introduces the 'interstitial sublime' (p. 147). The latter term encapsulates one of the many valuable insights in Porter's reading of *On the Sublime* (pp. 147-171): Longinus weaves his work carefully together by juxtaposing

different quotations of classical authors and his own discussions, bringing them together in such a way that the different parts of his text start to resonate, thereby suggesting things that go beyond what the text itself explicitly states. Thus, Porter persuasively shows that Longinus' observation on the Homeric preposition ὑπέκ ("he has forced into combination uncompoundable prepositions against their nature", thereby expressing the danger of the shipwreck in the language itself, *Subl.* 10.6 on Hom. *Il.* 15.628) resonates with Longinus' own ideas on selection and composition (*Subl.* 10.1) as one road towards sublimity. Longinus' careful juxtaposition of literary examples shows that composition (σύνθεσις) is indeed more than just one source of the sublime: it is the one that 'closely connects all the sources preceding it' (συγκλείουσα τὰ πρὸ αὐτῆς ἅπαντα, *Subl.* 8.1), and by the composition of his own treatise Longinus shows how effective and meaningful skillful arrangement can be. Given the centrality of composition in *On the Sublime*, it would be worthwhile further to examine the close connections between Dionysius' *On Composition* and Longinus' discussion of σύνθεσις (*Subl.* 39-43). Another example of the subtle sequencing of examples is found in *On the Sublime* chapter 9: in Porter's reading this chapter is not concerned with great thoughts or with appearances of the divine. What connects the examples from Homer and Genesis is the idea of "cosmic intervals" (pp. 160-171). Mark Usher already noted that the Homeric lines on the sea 'parting in joy' (διίστατο *Subl.* 9.8, *Iliad* 13.27-29) are directly followed by the quotation from Moses on God's creation of light and earth (*Subl.* 9.9), thus silently evoking the parting waters of the Red Sea;[20] Porter shows that the theme of 'separation' (διάστασις) and gaps extends beyond these two examples, connecting in fact many passages not only in chapter 9 (note διάστασις in *Subl.* 9.6) but also elsewhere in the treatise (e.g. *Subl.* 40.2).

Porter's book is a treasure of illuminating readings of Greek literature. Let me give a final example from the chapter on Longinus (pp. 57-177), which concerns the interplay between quotation and mimicry. Porter, never afraid of bold statements, argues that "the sublime always appears in quotation marks" (p. 101). This is not just because Longinus' treatise is full of quotations of Homer, Plato, Demosthenes and others. There is much more to it: in the paraphrase of *Genesis* (*Subl.* 9.9), for example, Longinus somewhat annoyingly inserts the question particle τί ('what?') so that the sublime words of God are heard in quotation marks: 'God said—what?—"let there be light" and there was light', etc. Longinus tells us that Moses wrote these words 'right at the beginning of his *Laws*'. Porter observes that Longinus thereby presents Moses as 'mimicking' God: the start of the *Laws* echoes the start of the universe.

20 Usher 2007.

A similarly intriguing connection, in this case not between writer and character, but between critic and character, is suggested in the discussion of Ajax' silence (*Subl.* 9.2), which is 'more sublime than any words': in Homer's *Odyssey*, Ajax does not answer Odysseus' questions (*Od.* 11.563-565). Longinus, who is usually more than happy to give us another quotation, now suddenly refrains from citing the Homeric text, suppressing the relevant lines from the *Odyssey*. Porter astutely comments that Longinus' silence is a speech act that 'mimics' the silence of Ajax (p. 95).

The Sublime in Antiquity is an important book for three reasons. First, Porter's subtle readings of specific passages in Longinus, Dionysius, Demetrius, Homer, Plato, and many other writers are consistently illuminating and rewarding. One could say that this is in fact a book about Greek literature, with lots of intriguing observations—in that sense Porter is not unlike Longinus. Second, Porter's flexible understanding of the sublime, whether one agrees with it or not, opens new perspectives on the history of the concept, breaking away both from ongoing debates about the date and authorship of *On the Sublime* and from romantic views on the alleged 'uniqueness' of Longinus "who is himself the great sublime he draws" (Alexander Pope).

Finally, Porter, who lists 'gaps' and 'vast distances' among the thematic markers of the sublime, has, with this book, built a steady bridge over the enormous gap that seems to separate the Greek sublime from the Roman sublime in classical scholarship. While studies on the Greek sublime have focused on Longinus, Dionysius and Caecilius, on rhetoric and aesthetics, and on the ancient theory of the sublime, studies on the Roman sublime have in recent years dealt with Lucretius, Virgil, Lucan, Statius, Silius Italicus, with poetry and philosophy, terror and trauma, and with the application of ancient and modern theories of the sublime to literary texts. Most of the interpretations of the sublime in Latin poetry do not start from Longinus' five 'sources', but from implicit or explicit thematic markers of the sublime (like the ones that Porter presents in this book), taken from Longinus, Burke, Kant and others. So, on the one hand, we have the Greek sublime presented by scholars like Russell, Heath and Halliwell; on the other hand there is the Roman sublime interpreted in the works of such scholars as Conte, Hardie, and Schiesaro. *The Sublime in Antiquity* brings these two worlds together, by reinterpreting Longinus, by redefining the sublime, and by drawing a network of ancient texts with numerous sublime interactions. One highly valuable section is indeed the one on "Lucretius and Longinus" (pp. 450-454), which examines the intriguing connections between the two authors who had the most profound influence on later traditions of the sublime. Not all scholars will accept the multiform and chameleonic sublime that this book presents to us. But all will agree that this

same versatile and polymorphic category has enabled Porter to write a fascinating and monumental history of ancient rhetoric, criticism and literature.

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