

Robert Doran, *The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015. Pp. 313. £64.99. US \$ 99.99. ISBN 9781107499157

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The sublime: a word which has been used as both noun and adjective; a term that has been employed to describe a form of rhetoric, a category of aesthetics, a quality of greatness, a sphere of elevated thought; a state of overwhelming emotion; an awe-inspiring quality in art or nature; a characteristic of spiritual or moral excellence—and many other things besides. It is, in short, a word which has been adopted and adapted in a multitude of different ways over two millennia.

As such, the task of offering a comprehensive and coherent overview of the theory of the sublime in a single volume—while, of course, needing to acknowledge the nuances specific to each theory of the sublime, as well as the complexity of the subject matter—is no mean feat. Yet, Doran’s *The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant* certainly meets the challenge.

Though Doran is not the first to attempt such an endeavour, following works such as Samuel Holt Monk’s seminal *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (1935) and Philip Shaw’s more recent *The Sublime* (2006), Doran rightfully asserts that his own study sets out to do something rather different from the studies of his critical predecessors.

Many studies of the sublime have distinguished between various conceptions of sublimity—those I introduced at the beginning of this piece, for instance—as though they are, in some way, disparate or, at the very least, separate schools of thought. Doran points out, for example, that Monk’s legacy is ambiguous, for “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” (2n6). The main distinction that Doran seems to take issue with is the one which has traditionally been drawn by academics between “the so-called *rhetorical* sublime and the *aesthetic* sublime” (2n6).

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Furthermore, Doran emphasises that his study is different from those which take 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 Kantian sublime, and so on)” (2-3). Nor is Doran’s intention to “introduce coherence into the discourse of sublimity via an extrinsic theory, namely psychoanalysis or poststructuralism” (3). Rather, Doran’s study of the sublime is innovative in that 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. (3)

This extract foregrounds another of Doran’s key critical concerns: “the relation between the sublime and modern subjectivity that is at the heart of this work” (4).

What follows an impressively lucid, thorough and accessible introduction is a work which boasts a sophisticated structure. Doran’s study comprises twelve chapters, consecutively focused upon five main thinkers—Longinus, Nicolas Boileau, John Dennis, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant—and grouped, as chapters, into three main, wider parts: Part I—Longinus’s Theory of Sublimity (Chapters 1-3); Part II—Sublimity and Modernity (Chapters 4-6); Part III—The Sublimity of the Mind: Kant (Chapters 7-12).

Given that the majority of the study concentrates on 1674-1790—on “the major and key theories of sublimity during the period of its initial flourishing” (286)—it seems fitting that the first of the three sections should afford attention to Longinus alone. Engaging with carefully chosen sections from the Greek fragment *Peri hypsous* (*On the Sublime*), Doran considers, and clearly defines, key terms associated with Longinus’ conception of sublimity—one of which is the term *hypsos* itself. Associated with terms such as *logoi* (“a kind of eminence or excellence of discourse”) (33) and *lexis* (diction), Doran responds to the “controversy surrounding whether *hypsos* is primarily a philosophical (protoaesthetic) or a stylistic (technical-rhetorical) notion” (33) in depth, taking pains to emphasise the various other terms and ideas with

which Longinus' *hypsos* ought to be linked in order to comprehend it: *ekstasis* (ecstasy), *thaumasion* (awe) and *ekplêxis* (astonishment), *kairos* (the moment), *megethos* (grandeur), *technê* (art), *dianoia* (thought), *noêsis* (grandeur of conception), *pathos* (strong emotion) and *enthousiastikon pathos* (vehement emotion).

Indeed, Doran's shrewd exploration of the philosophical facets of Longinus' term *hypsos* in the first part of his study sets the stage for the culmination of one of his main arguments in the final part: the matter of the intrinsic sublimity of the human mind. Doran posits that

what both Anglophone and French writing on Kant's concept of sublimity have either ignored or not sufficiently emphasized . . . is the importance of the idea of 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 judgement, but not the object, which is to be called sublime” . . . (5-6)

This quotation serves to illustrate another of Doran's strengths in this study: his ability to artfully focus upon each of his five thinkers individually, and in depth, while placing them in dialogue with one another. Doran's decision to include Boileau and Dennis, for instance, is a laudable one; neither of them have received as much critical attention or acknowledgement as Longinus, Burke or Kant in scholarship on the sublime hitherto.

Yet, as Doran proves, both are integral to understanding it. Boileau is, after all, “well known as the popularizer of Longinus” (6) and, “by arguing that Longinus's *hypsos* is a matter of transcendence, not style, [he] emancipates it from the rhetorical conception of the grand style, thereby establishing ‘the sublime’ (*le sublime*) for the first time as a critical concept” (97-98). Equally, by “highlighting . . . the role of emotion in Longinus's theory of sublimity and [through] his formulation of a notion of complex pleasure (‘delightful horror’) more than twenty years before Joseph Addison” (6), Dennis—Doran insists—deserves significant critical attention for creating “the conditions under which the transition to the ‘aesthetic’ apprehension of sublimity in philosophical aesthetics becomes possible” (6).

Doran's concluding claim—that, “by displacing religious experience into art and the aesthetic experience of nature, the sublime represents a form of resistance to the secularizing tendencies of modern culture” (286)—is one that would be fascinating to explore further in the form of case studies: of literature, of visual art, of music, of film. It is a shame that we could not see Doran's theory applied to works of art and literature within this volume—though it is, of course, entirely understandable, given the focus of this study and the breadth of materials with which it already engages. Given the invaluable insights that *The Theory of the Sublime* affords, this could, perhaps, be the focus of a subsequent volume: the practice of the sublime.