BOOK REVIEW

The Sublime in Antiquity. By JAMES I. PORTER. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. xxii +690. Hardcover, $160.00. ISBN 978-1-107-03747-2.

This book argues, against a long-held consensus, that sublimity (*hypsos*, "height") is an important concept throughout the ancient literary, philosophical, and critical traditions. Although it was treated at length by an author we call Longinus, the term itself has little lasting impact until the Renaissance, so that even Classicists have viewed it as more representative of modern than of ancient aesthetic thought. Porter argues, however, that we miss a robust ancient tradition of sublime thought by focusing too much on Longinus and the specific term *hypsos*, which not even Longinus uses exclusively. Sublimity lies at the very edge of human comprehension and expressive capacity, so Porter looks instead for patterns of thought and expression associated with the confrontation of these limits (heights, depths, gaps, etc.). This constellation of ideas marks a tradition of sublime writing, thinking, and criticism that is at the center of the ancient tradition from Homer into the Middle Ages.

Chapters 1 and 2 examine Longinus's treatise and its distortion in the early modern tradition. *Pace* Boileau (1674), who polemically minimized its rhetorical elements, *Peri Hypsous* is a rhetorical handbook visibly engaged in important critical issues, like art vs. nature and the grand vs. plain style. Its own polemical position on style is responsible for its apparent uniqueness, since it concentrates on the achievement of majestic grandeur to the exclusion of the middle and plain styles. Sublimity entails more than just the grand style, but set in this context it is at least comparable to the high end(s) of every ancient stylistic taxonomy. And although *hypsos* may be the "echo of a noble mind" (9.2), this natural grandeur can be both cultivated and mimicked by artistic effects like figures, diction, and word arrangement; and sublimity can mask the appearance of rhetoric.

After this reading of Longinus and his tradition, Porter spends the rest of the book reconstructing the tradition of *hypsos* that Longinus culminates. Chapters 3 and 4, which focus on rhetoric and literary criticism, are a highlight of the book. He tracks not only the appearance of *hypsos* and its synonyms (e.g. *meg-* words, *dein-* words, *ek-* words), but also allusions to shared critical topoi, unearthing the bones of a conversation that runs from near contemporaries, like Caecilius and Dionysus

Halicarnassus, back to the beginnings of Greek rhetoric and literary criticism. In this broader context, *hypsos* is nothing less than the Gorgianic power of language to move, rather than persuade, a listener (*psychagōgia*). It is irrational and un-Aristotelian, but it is an obvious concern of early literary criticism (e.g. Aristophanes' *Frogs*), which draws its terms from the sublime themes of the poets themselves (tragedy, Pindar, Homer).

This connection between sublime criticism and sublime content is central to Porter's argument, which sees the sublime as a main current in Greek and Roman thought. Chapters 5 and 6 explore two sub-traditions of sublime content, which diverge from an early sense of wonder at the divine and at powerful forces of nature. These two are unified in Homer and Hesiod, but when the Presocratics rationalize natural phenomena, their descriptions of matter itself—potentially infinite or infinitesimal—preserve the emotional power previously associated with divinity. This is the "material sublime," which elevates literature about natural philosophy (e.g. Lucretius, Manilius, the *Aetna*) and becomes a source of rhetorical power as early as Pericles. Opposed is a tradition of the "immaterial sublime," which locates sublimity in god and heavens or, in the Platonic tradition, in transcendent Beauty and the Forms. The sublime is found at the limits of man's understanding—wherever that is—and these two sub-traditions track broadly with the trends of ancient thought about divinity and natural philosophy.

This is an important book with implications for scholars in many disciplines. As a work of intellectual history, it not only contextualizes Longinus and the sublime but sheds light on the entire critical tradition. And it has practical value for scholars of Roman poetry, where sublimity is a visibly influential concept. It is also challenging in ways that reflect its huge range: most chapters are 100+ pages and the lines of its argument are sometimes obscured by the task of engaging so many disparate sources. One sometimes wishes for pithier claims (although the sublime itself defies these), but Porter does supply two invaluable catalogues, of synonyms and of logical/thematic markers of sublimity. In general, the book's flaws stem directly from its success at discovering *hypsos* where none had been seen before. Porter accomplishes a huge task by connecting the apparent "bubble of *hypsos*" in Augustan and early Imperial Rome with the wellsprings of ancient rhetorical and critical thought. His book makes the sublime itself less ineffable and will make it easier to use ancient literary criticism in the scholarship of ancient literature.

JOHN HENKEL

Georgetown College, John_Henkel@georgetowncollege.edu