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“The forms of things unknown”:
English Authorship and the Early Modern Sublime

Patrick Cheney

During the late sixteenth century, a new form of authorship emerges. This authorship eschews the ethical paradigm of patriotic nationalism leading to eternity on which recent criticism depends. Instead, the new form of authorship *fictionalizes literary greatness*. The premier theorist is Longinus, whose *On Sublimity* is printed in 1554. The sublime is Longinus’ counter-national principle that replaces goodness with greatness, equilibrium with ecstasy, and self-regulated passion with heightened emotion. For Longinus, the sublime is an emotional principle of authorship, written in the grand style, in imitation of great works, and aiming for fame. Under the spell of sublimity, the author tells a story about the making of a great literary work. By centering the story on the “interval between earth and heaven” (9.5: 150), a sublime work produces either terror or rapture, leaving the human in the exalted condition of the gods. Poems and plays by Shakespeare and colleagues help build a bridge from Chaucer to Milton to form an early modern sublime. The key bridging figure is Spenser, whose canon betrays an entry into Longinian *ekstasis*. Playing a centralizing role in the advent of modern English authorship, the early modern sublime becomes a catalyst in the formation of an English canon.

In this essay, I would like to yoke together two topics typically kept separate in literary criticism: “The Author” and “The Sublime.” These are titles to two New Critical Idiom volumes, both published by Routledge in 2005: *The Author*, by Andrew Bennett; and *The Sublime*, by Philip Shaw. While Shaw never refers to the category of “the author” directly, Bennett mentions “the sublime” twice in passing (60, 66), opening up a possibility that I suggest is important to the present volume: the connection between authorship and sublimity.

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Bennett and Shaw write their books for the Routledge series because “the author” and “the sublime” constitute two major terms of modern critical theory. An important body of criticism addresses “the author.” Bennett goes so far as to write:

The history of literary criticism from the earliest times may in fact be said to be organized around conceptions of the author [. . .]: the problem of criticism, the problem of reading, *is* in the end the problem of authorship.

(4, 112)

In early modern studies, recent criticism has made authorship a major topic, and the same could be said of other periods.

Similarly, an important body of criticism addresses the sublime, though I suspect it is not as much on our critical radar. In another 2005 book, *Sublimity and Skepticism in Montaigne and Milton*, David Sedley calls the sublime “the preeminent modern aesthetic category” (153). Shaw’s *Critical Idiom* volume explains why: from Burke and Kant to Lyotard and Žižek – Coleridge, Nietzsche, Freud, Lacan, and Derrida – philosophers, theorists, and literary critics have plumbed the depths (or heights) of this intriguing concept. In early modern studies, recent books by David Norbrook on Milton, Richard Halpern on Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, Paul Cefalu on the Metaphysical Poets, and one Patrick Cheney on Marlowe join Erich Auerbach on St Augustine and Piero Boitani on Dante to bring the topic into the limelight.

Critics have not yet noticed that the invention of the modern notion of the author is coterminous with the recovery of the classical sublime as an aesthetic category (Bennett 49, Sedley 8). In separate lines of research, critics have traced the modern idea of authorship in England to the late sixteenth century. As Wendy Wall puts it in an overview,

Scholars have long recognized the sixteenth century as a time when definitions of authorship were being transformed, but had not yet crystallized into the modern meaning that would arise in the late eighteenth century: the author as the ultimate origin and governing force for a text [. . .]. When Spenser and Jonson used the book format to generate the author’s laureate status, [. . .] they produced more modern and familiar images of literary authority – classically authorized writers who serve as the origin and arbiter of a literary monument. (64-65, 86)

While many might accept Wall’s formulation, I have just benefited from some recent criticism to push the Spenserian laureate project back, through the Earl of Surrey and Sir Thomas Wyatt, to John Skelton and

the emergence of modern English (acknowledging forerunners in the Middle English of John Lydgate, John Gower, and Geoffrey Chaucer).¹

Similarly, critics have traced the modern English emergence of the sublime to the sixteenth century. According to Shaw, the word “sublime” means “The highest of the high; that which is without comparison; the awe-inspiring or overpowering; the unbounded and the undetermined” (156). Yet *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* recalls that the word derives from the Latin *sublimitas*, and comes to mean “that quality of genius in great literary works which irresistibly delights, inspires, and overwhelms the reader” (Hornblower and Spawforth 1,450). Fortunately, the *OED*’s first recorded example appears under Definition 6, “Of language, style, or a writer: Expressing lofty ideas in a grand and elevated manner,” when Angel Day in his 1586 *English Secretary* discusses the three styles of rhetoric: low, middle, and high or “sublime” style. The sublime style, Day says, is

the highest and stateliest maner, and loftiest deliverance of any thing that maie bee, expressing the heroicall and mightie actions of Kinges, Princes, and other honourable personages, the stile whereof is said to be tragicall swelling in choice, and those the most haughtiest termes. (10)

One of the sticking points of criticism is whether authors in sixteenth-century England understand the sublime merely as a “style,” or whether it accrues the kind of “thought” to which Enlightenment figures like Kant lend to it. Day makes plain that he talks about the sublime style by expressing its content: it is a heightened style designed to depict the most elevated of topics, the politics of kings, within the high genres of epic and tragedy. As so often, the *OED* date of 1586 needs to be pushed back, at least to 1567, when Matthew Parker uses the word “sublime.” Thereafter, the word recurs throughout the sixteenth century.²

¹ See Cheney, *Reading Sixteenth-Century Poetry*, which is indebted to Helgerson on the “self-crowned laureate” (book title), Griffiths on Skelton, and Walker on Wyatt and Surrey.

² On the new English word “sublime,” see the following:

1. Matthew Parker, “To the Reader,” *The Whole Psalter Translated into English Metre* (1567):

Accent in place: your voyce as needth,

note number, poynte, and time:

Both lyfe and grace: good reading breedth,

flat verse it reysth SUBLIME. (sig. A2r)

2. Roger Ascham, *The Scholmaster* (1570):

Discussing the three styles, “Humile,” “Mediocre,” and “Sublime,” Ascham finds the sublime “excellentie handled” in “*Ciceroes Orations*” (sig. R2r).

3. Thomas Newton, Dedicatory Epistle, *Seneca his tenne tragedies* (1581):

Moreover, as Bernard Weinberg has shown, the first known edition of the primary treatise on the concept, *On Sublimity*, written in Greek by the literary critic known as Longinus, was printed in 1554 by Franciscus Robortello, while another edition appears in 1555, and still another in 1569-70. Two lost Latin translations date to 1554 and 1560, while the first extant Latin edition dates to 1566, and another appears in 1572. That makes seven sixteenth-century Continental editions. The first English edition does not appear until 1636, a combined Greek and Latin text, while the first English translation, by John Hall, needs to wait until 1652.

This publishing history helps explain why many today mistakenly think that the sublime becomes a significant topic in England only in the late seventeenth century. Yet the printing of Longinus on the Continent during the sixteenth century and the sixteenth-century use of the new word “sublime” suggest that something was in the water much earlier. Although no one has yet determined whether Robortello and Company migrated to sixteenth-century England, some evidence exists that they

For it may not [. . .] be thought and deemed the direct meaning of SENECA himselfe, whose whole wrytinges (penned with a peerelesse SUBLIME and loftinesse of Style, are so farre from countenauncing Vice, that I doubt whether there bee any amonge all the Catalogue of Heathen wryters, that with more gratuity of Philosophicall sentences, more waightynes of sappy words, or greater authority of sound matter beateth down sinne, loose lyfe, dissolute dealinge, and unbrydled sensuality. (A3v-A4r)

4. Robert Greene, “To the Gentlemen Readers,” *Menaphon* (1589):

If [. . .] you finde my stile either *magis humile* in some place, or more SUBLIME in another, if you finde darke Ænigmaes [...] as if *Sphinx* on the one side, and *Roscius* on the other were playing the waggis; thinke the metaphors are well ment. (sig. *2v)

5. Sir Philip Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella* (1591):

Those words which do SUBLIME the quintessence of bliss. (Sonnet 77.8)

6. King James, “The Translators Invocation,” *His Maiesties poeticall exercises at vacant houres* (1591):

Thou that mightilie does toone

My warbling holie Harpe,

And does SUBLIME my Poëmes als. (sig. A4r)

7. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* 5.8.30 (1596 [The Soldan and Prince Arthur]):

Thus goe they both together to their geare,

With like fierce minds, but meanings different:

For the proud Souldan with presumptuous cheare,

And countenance SUBLIME and insolent,

Sought onely slaughter and avengement:

But the brave Prince for honour and for right,

Gainst tortious powre and lawlesse regiment,

In the behalfe of wronged weake did fight.

More in his causes truth he trusted then in might.

did. In a personal communication, the past Deputy Keeper of the Cambridge University Archives, Elisabeth Leedham-Green, writes:

On the face of it, i.e., in terms of recorded ownership, Longinus was more or less unknown in sixteenth-century Cambridge and Oxford. [. . .] However, Longinus is found in Franciscus Portus (ed.), οἱ ἐν τῇ ῥητορικῇ τέχνῃ κορυφαῖοι, 1569 . . . and this is very probably the book in the stock of John Denys, French bookseller in Cambridge, d. 1578, listed as “2 hermogenes Aptonius et alij Rethorici greci genevae vetus <80>.” So, if I am right, [there are] two copies in a Cambridge bookshop in 1578.

I am also buoyed by Brian Vickers, who reports that Longinus “was just beginning to be known in the late sixteenth century” (25). In particular, I speculate that one author whom I have discovered to be committed to the sublime, George Chapman, might not have waited to read Longinus until 1614, when he discusses *On Sublimity* in his dedicatory epistle to *The Whole Works of Homer* (Vickers 522-23).³

I want to argue, broadly, that two historical phenomena emerging during the sixteenth century – the modern author and the classical sublime – are interconnected. Specifically, I argue that the resurfacing of the classical sublime serves as a catalyst to the formation of the modern author; and that, in turn, the emergence of the modern author lends impetus to the rediscovery of the classical sublime. Something unusual is happening during the sixteenth century. At the same time, I have intimated that the historical interchange between authorship and sublimity grows out of medieval culture, and finally classical culture. A fuller literary history would account for a long spectrum of literary time, continuities and ruptures.

What authorship and sublimity share, I suggest, is a commitment to the project of *literary greatness*. Both authorship and sublimity are produced through imitation of preceding authors; they are written primarily in the grand style (occasionally in the plain style); they proceed through elevated figuration; they represent our most serious cultural ideas; and they aim for artistic immortality. This model might help us revise our understanding of both authorship and sublimity, but it aims rather to chart the new historical phenomenon that is my subject here: *English authorship of the early modern sublime*.

What makes early modern authorship historically important, I am trying to suggest, is the early modern sublime. The reason is that be-

³ On Longinus in sixteenth-century Italy, see Logan, 532-34, and in France, 533-39. Like Sedley, Logan singles out Montaigne as an intriguing case, because we have no evidence that he knew Longinus, yet “three passages in the *Essais* echo the distinction Longinus makes in 1.4 between pleasure and transport or ecstasy” (535).

tween Dante and Milton the sublime becomes the concept that authors inscript to register their own literary greatness. Without the sublime, then, we cannot accurately tell the story of authorship between the thirteenth and the seventeenth centuries. For instance, Boitani helps us see that Dante *ends* the *Divine Comedy* with the sublime. First, Boitani traces St Bernard's prayer to the Virgin (177-278) to 2 Corinthians 12, St Paul's rapt vision of God (207), and then he tracks imitations by Petrarch in *Rime sparse* 362-65 (197-205) and Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the Prologues to "The Prioress's" and "Second Nun's Tale" (205-22). For Boitani, the "Dantean sublime" (250) is about the medieval poetic imagination writing a poetics of "wonder," featuring "an artist who is reaching [. . .] his utmost" (273).

In contrast to Dante, Milton *opens Paradise Lost* with the sublime:

I thence
 Invoke thy aid to my advent'rous Song,
 That with no middle flight intends to soar
 Above th' Aonian Mount, while it pursues
 Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhyme. (1.12-16)

Milton uses the sublime to mark the singularity of his authorship and to claim elevated status as a Christian poet. Specifically, he claims that his Christian subject *overgoes* the secularism of Parnassus epicists from classical culture, such as Homer and Virgil, and Renaissance culture, such as Ariosto and Spenser. In the Miltonic sublime, the Christian poet's divine word elevates author and reader alike above the pagan to "make or unmake a world," as Shaw puts it (33).

We know that Milton read authorship carefully from Homer to Spenser, but I am suggesting that it is his epic discourse of the sublime that allows him to highlight what has been at stake all along. Through the sublime, Milton sets the terms of the debate over authorship for the centuries to come. Is the author an inspired "genius" of singular autonomy; or is the author swept along in "social energy" (Greenblatt 165)? According to Bennett, "recent discussions of authorship may be reduced [. . .] to two different kinds of concerns": "On the one hand there is a series of problems to do with [. . .] intention [. . .]. On the other hand, there is a more historically, socially, and institutionally involved set of issues surrounding [. . .] authority" (4-5). This debate owes to the competing projects of Harold Bloom and Roland Barthes: "the anxiety of influence" versus "the death of the author." Bloom and Barthes constitute a binary not just of authorship – "influence" versus "intertextuality" – but also of aesthetics: the sublime versus a *counter-sublime*. For Mil-

ton's part, *Paradise Lost* makes it clear that the sublime author jumps the gap: he soars ethereally above the Aonian Mount because the Aonian Mount remains so solidly material below. John Milton's sublime authorship is singular because it is intertextual; his inspired genius emerges out of social energy.

Since our histories of the sublime tend to jump from Dante to Milton, on their way to the Enlightenment and modernity, I seek to argue for the importance of the blank between Dante and Milton. In particular, I propose to sketch out an authorship of the early modern sublime through a two-part structure. First, I will locate my model of sublime authorship within what I hope will be a fresh reading of Longinus, including his idiosyncratic contribution to a history of the sublime, largely forgotten by those enamored of the Kantian tradition. Second, I will inventory the early modern sublime itself, but then feature Spenser and Shakespeare. In a conclusion, I will speculate on the significance of this project for early modern authorship.

Admittedly, a study of sublime authorship is hobbled at the outset. First, we do not know who Longinus was, when he wrote *On Sublimity*, what the full contents of his treatise were, or even what the treatise's reception history looks like up to the mid-seventeenth century. Acknowledging these difficulties, scholars think that Longinus was a Greek who wrote during the first century AD. The earliest and most reliable of eleven extant manuscripts dates to a Paris codex of the tenth century (MS 2036), even though one-third is missing (Macksey). Still, enough exists for Vickers to call *On Sublimity* "one of the most intelligent works of literary criticism ever produced" (25). Yet, not a single reference to Longinus comes out of antiquity, and I can find none in England till Chapman early in the seventeenth century.

Second, no one agrees about how to define the sublime. As Shaw wryly puts it, "We are never certain of the sublime" (11). Bloom is even more emphatic: "the literary sublime can be exemplified but not defined" (*Sublime* xv). For me, this conundrum is half the fun. The conundrum is compounded because, according to Sedley, in the sixteenth century the sublime "was just one among a cluster of similar concepts" in "a vein of interest in aesthetic extremes." He singles out "wonder" but adds Neoplatonic "*furore*" and "Christian ecstasy" (9, 157n17). These are difficult to distinguish from sublimity, not least because Longinus uses

“wonder” and “ecstasy” as descriptors of the sublime, and he sees Plato as a major sublime author.⁴

According to the *OED*, the word “sublime” combines the Latin *sub* (up to) with *limen* (lintel, the top beam of a door), meaning *up to the lintel*. This etymology speaks to something vital: ascendant motion within architectural space, which helps explain why images of both height and flight become central to it. The sublime is that special space and place where the transcendent and the immanent meet (Shaw 3). Longinus calls it “the interval between earth and heaven” (9.5: 150). Unsurprisingly, the meaning changes between Longinus and Lyotard.

The first phase to a history of the sublime, represented by Longinus in antiquity, I call *literary*: here the sublime is a discursive tool of language, exemplified in literary works like Homer’s *Iliad* and Sappho’s lyrics, and aims to arouse strong emotion in the reader about the terrifying or rapturous powers of the divine. The second phase, represented by Thomas Burnet’s 1684-89 *Sacred Theory of the Earth*, is *naturalist*: here the sublime is located in objects from the natural world, notably majestic mountains and swirling oceans, and signals a “darker meditation [. . .] on the nature of the self and relations with the external world” (Shaw 5). The third phase, represented by Burke’s 1756 *Philosophical Enquiry*, introduces an *empiricist* understanding: the sublime becomes primarily a psychological and secular phenomenon of the mind as it fixes on the terrible in nature to produce an exalted emotional state of alienating pleasure (Shaw 53-54). The fourth phase, represented by Kant’s 1790 *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, is *rationalist*: the sublime becomes a cognitive site of consciousness that demonstrates “the ascendancy of the rational over the real,” so that “the mind of man [. . .] is greater than anything [. . .] in nature” (Shaw 6). The fifth and current phase, represented by such

⁴ It would take a separate essay to discriminate *sublimity* from *wonder*, *furor*, and *ecstasy*, in part because the sublime includes components of all three. In aesthetic terms, *wonder* is *admiratio*, and expresses an optimistic awe at grandeur, at once something in the text and the reader’s reaction to it; it speaks to the mind’s power to apprehend mysteries confidently (Sedley 7, 9, 11; see Bishop). *Furor* is specifically a Neoplatonic concept of divine inspiration, “poetic frenzy” (*furor poeticus*), a poetic state of mind beyond the human and the rational (Sedley 21, 68-71; see Allen). *Ecstasy* is a spiritual experience (Platonic, Neoplatonic, and Christian) of the kind Donne presents in “The Ecstasy,” wherein the soul is transported out of the body to experience exhilarating bliss. Only the Longinian sublime is a full and formal aesthetic theory, and only the sublime operates via philosophical skepticism (a theory of doubt), as Sedley demonstrates; for instance: “Whereas the wonderful reaches the frontier of understanding, the sublime plunges the mind into confusion. Knowledge inspires wonder; sublimity thrives on ignorance, the only inspiration available in the modern age of skepticism” (11). Importantly, the early modern period is significant because at this time “wonder ceded prestige to sublimity as the way that one was supposed to move and be moved” (9).

“poststructuralist theorists” as Lyotard, remains skeptical of the Kantian sublime, while operating within it: whether understood as literary, naturalist, empiricist, or rationalist, the sublime is fundamentally “paradoxical, unfulfilled, or self-baffling” (Shaw 8).

Considering this long history, Shaw defines the sublime as follows:

Sublimity [. . .] refers to the moment when the ability to apprehend, to know, and to express a thought or sensation is defeated. Yet through this very defeat, the mind gets a feeling for that which lies beyond thought and language. (2-3)

This definition is helpful, but I want to emphasize how un-Longinian it is. For Shaw defines the sublime in post-Longinian terms, viewing it as primarily *epistemological*.

In contrast, Longinus defines the sublime as *literary*:

Sublimity is a kind of eminence or excellence of discourse. It 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 rather than persuasion in the hearer; and the combination of wonder and astonishment always proves superior to the merely persuasive and pleasant. (1.3-4: 143)

I take Longinus’ cue to define the sublime as fundamentally a counter-rhetorical mode of “discourse” – a form of language, the *expression* of emotional and cognitive “experience” – and further, to emphasize the linguistic form of the sublime as literary, exemplified by “the very greatest poets.” Above all, *On Sublimity* does not advance philosophy but poetics.

Longinus’ treatise joins Plato’s dialogues, Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and Horace’s *Ars poetica* as the major treatises on poetry to emerge from antiquity (see Cronk). Yet Longinus differs from all three. Plato, Aristotle, and Horace themselves differ, but they share a baseline rooted in the ethical principle of *goodness*; they just line up on different sides. In *The Republic*, Plato rejects poetry as dangerous to the ideal state, whereas Aristotle and Horace argue for its importance to individual health within and utility to the state. Longinus’ master stroke is to replace philosophical “goodness” with literary “greatness.” He is the first literary critic to theorize a form of authorship that gives Plato, Aristotle, and Horace the slip. Critics have been scrambling to theorize such an authorship since the heyday of “harmony” during the 1960s and ’70s gave way to New Historicist “contradiction” (Greenblatt 168). “Sublimity,” says Longi-

nus, “produced at the right moment, tears everything up like a whirlwind” (1.4: 144).

The structure of *On Sublimity* suggests that Longinus understands the sublime as an aesthetics of authorship. Accordingly, he organizes the concept around “five sources”:

1. “the power to conceive great thoughts”;
2. “strong and inspired emotion”;
3. elevated “figures of thought and figures of speech”;
4. “Noble diction”; and
5. “dignified and elevated word-arrangement.” (8.1: 149)

Longinus calls the first two “natural” and the last three “art[istic]” (8.1: 149). To us, thought and emotion are subjective, while figuration, diction, and syntax are textual. This distinction directs us to a process that is fundamentally literary, relating author and reader to work and its afterlife.

The process has four phases. The first pertains to the author, who has “the power to conceive great thoughts” and possesses “inspired emotion,” which he generates, significantly, through “imitation [. . .] of great writers of the past” (13.2: 158). In other words, the process originates in textuality, and through intertextuality becomes cognitive, with the author relying on previous texts to form his own intellectual and emotional subjectivity. The second phase pertains to the author’s style: relying on “figures,” “diction,” and “word-arrangement” (8.1: 149), the author composes a sublime literary representation. The third phase pertains to the effect of the author’s sublime style on the reader: “amazement and wonder exert invincible power and force and get the better of every hearer” (1.4: 143). The fourth and final phase pertains to the consequence of the reader’s exalted condition for the author himself: he acquires “posthumous fame” (14.3: 159). Hence, Longinus designs the complete literary process of sublimity to be immortalizing.

One specific technique of the immortalizing process helps pinpoint the sublime as a form of authorship. Longinus says that the sublime “poet is accustomed to enter into the greatness of his heroes” (9.10: 152). He quotes Euripides’ Orestes, when the young man spies the Furies: “O! O! She’ll kill me. Where shall I escape?” According to Longinus, “The poet himself saw the Erinyes, and has as good as made his audience see what he imagined” (15.2: 159).⁵ This feature of the sublime

⁵ In a famous essay, Hertz focuses on what he calls “the sublime turn – the moment [. . .] that fascinates Longinus, the point of the near-fatal stress of passion [. . .] tum[s] into [. . .]”

uncovers the authorial expression of a character's experience: the character expresses the moment in the work when the author speaks to the reader in his or her own voice.⁶

Intriguingly, Longinus discovers a myth for the author not where Horace and early modern heirs like Sir Philip Sidney and George Puttenham do, in the civic-building figure of Orpheus (or Amphion), but rather in the ancient story of "the Pythia at Delphi" (14.2: 158):

She is in contact with the tripod near the cleft in the ground which (so they say) exhales a divine vapour, and she is thereupon made pregnant by the supernatural power and forthwith prophesies as one inspired. Similarly, the genius of the ancients acts as a kind of oracular cavern, and effluences flow from it into the minds of their imitators. (14.2: 158)

Longinus interprets the story of Apollo and the priestess at Delphi as an allegory of the author's eternizing experience of an intertextual sublime. The work of an earlier writer functions as a womblike "oracular cavern" of invention, from which mystically sacred "effluences" flow into the "mind" of the imitating author, impregnating him with "supernatural power," the power of the sublime. Instead of Orpheus civilizing nature, or Amphion building Thebes, Longinus figures the sublime in the priestess at Delphi, ravished by the god.

Longinus does not mention Orpheus, because, shockingly, his sublime model of the author operates independently of a civic-building project of social utility. Longinus does not ignore utility but opens his treatise by considering whether the sublime "may be thought useful to public men" (1.2: 143); and later he says that "grandeur is not divorced from service and utility" (36.1: 178). Yet he never equates utility with what is so important to Kant: ethics (*Observations* 57). Rather, Longinus says that "in poetry, the aim is astonishment" (15.2: 159). Although he notes that "sublimity is the echo of a noble mind" (9.2: 150), he never says that sublime astonishment creates delight, instruction, or virtue. Sublimity,

the energy that is constituting the poem" (583), the transfer of power from the fictional world of the character to "poetic activity itself" (584).

⁶ On the Longinian author *speaking through* character, see the following:

1. "[T]he poet is accustomed to enter into the greatness of his heroes" (9.10: 152).
2. "May one not say that the writer's soul has mounted the chariot [of Euripides' Phaethon], has taken wing with the horses and shares the danger" (15.4: 160).
3. "[S]ometimes a writer, in the course of a narrative in the third person, makes a sudden change and speaks in the person of his character" (27.1: 170).

rather, is “that bursting forth of the divine spirit which is so hard to bring under the rule of law” (33.4: 176).⁷

Longinus can speak of the sublime as *above* “the [. . .] law” because the utility he imagines looks to the “divine” rather than the “human” – the human transmogrifying into the divine. This explains why his most famous metaphors for the sublime are the *whirlwind* and the *thunderbolt*, natural images that have a seemingly godlike origin. The “divine gifts” of a “sublime genius” like Demosthenes, he says, are “almost blasphemous to call [. . .] human [. . .]. The crash of his thunder, the brilliance of his lightning make all other orators [. . .] insignificant” (34.4: 177). Here Longinus betrays his real problem; it is the human, the default that sublimity overgoes: “great geniuses in literature,” he writes, “tower far above mortal stature. Other literary qualities prove their users to be human; sublimity raises us toward the spiritual greatness of god” (36.1: 178).

The word “toward” is crucial, for it is Longinus’ commitment to the *capacity of the human for divinity* that leads him to abandon Plato’s, Aristotle’s, and Horace’s rational principle of moderation for an emotional principle of ecstasy: “emotion,” he says, is “essential” to “sublimity” (30.1: 172). Instead of self-regulated or tempered passion, so important in today’s criticism, Longinus celebrates unfettered, heightened emotion.⁸ For Longinus, then, the sublime is not a Kantian principle of the mind’s confrontation with the ineffable, but an emotional principle of *counter-national authorship*.⁹ Under the spell of sublimity, the author tells a story about the making of a great literary work. The purpose of a great literary work is to move the human “*toward* the spiritual greatness of god,” whether the lucid state of terror, as with Oedipus, or the intoxicating burn of rapture, as with Sappho. Longinus is our great critic of the interstice; his authorial sublime is an interstitial phenomenon.

Although Longinus gestures towards divinity, he ends his treatise with an “appendix” on “the politics of the sublime” (cf. Shaw 86-88). He recalls how an unnamed philosopher says that “democracy nurtures greatness, and that great writers flourished with democracy.” “Freedom,” the philosopher continues, “nourishes and encourages the thoughts of the great [. . .] [T]hey shine forth, free in a free world”; and he ends by referring to “that fair and fecund spring of literature, free-

⁷ Cf. Shaw on the “social function” of the sublime: “the true sublime is on the side of morality” (18).

⁸ For a model of self-regulation, see Schoenfeldt. For a model of tempered passion, see Rowe. Paster’s model of the “body embarrassed” also cannot account for the Longinian model.

⁹ By this phrase, I mean an authorship that responds to the writing of nationhood by eschewing the patriotic, civic-building goals of literature.

dom” (44.2-3: 185-86). Yet neither the philosopher nor Longinus says that the author of the sublime civilizes a democracy; instead, a democracy houses the sublime author. In early modern England, it will take Longinus’ first English translator, Milton’s disciple John Hall, to turn this around, and appropriate the sublime for a free English republic (Norbrook 212-21), as Milton does in *Paradise Lost*. Hence, we need not see early modern sublime authorship as opposed to a republican politics of freedom but rather as its greatest artistic expression.

In the second part of my essay, I suggest that the Longinian authorial sublime better theorizes much early modern literature than does Aristotle, Horace, or Sidney. Critics often note the gap between theory and practice in the English Renaissance, including in Sidney himself. During the past few decades, we have spilt much ink trying either to make the practice conform to the theory or to exult in the gap. Like Sidney, Marlowe and Shakespeare rarely square with Aristotle, Horace, and *The Defence of Poesie*. Spenser is a test case, since he avows in the Proem to *Faerie Queene* 1 to “moralize” his “song” (1.Proem.1.9), while the song itself chronically escapes the stricture, as much criticism testifies. Camille Paglia, for instance, says that Spenser’s “wanton voice” usurps his “ethical voice” (190). What has been missing in this conversation is recognition of the one theory coming out of antiquity that licenses this project: the Longinian authorial sublime.

We may not know whether Longinus was being read during the Elizabethan era, but it hardly makes much difference. Longinus did not invent the sublime; he theorized it. The sublime was there “in the beginning,” and quite technically so, since Longinus quotes Genesis 1.3, “‘God said’ [. . .] ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (9.9: 152) – discussed by Auerbach as the fount of the Christian sublime, which uses the humble style to represent the high “mystery” of unity between “man and God” (51, 41). Yet the sublime is there also in our first classical work, the *Iliad*. Longinus is simply the first to articulate a theory of literature innate to literature itself. Authors like Spenser and Shakespeare need not have read Longinus to produce such sublime masterpieces as *The Faerie Queene* or *Hamlet*. Rather, they need only have read classical and biblical works that write the sublime, and then attempted to imitate them on page and stage.

In some cases, authors need only have translated classical literature. For much of the sixteenth-century translation movement *Englishes* the classical sublime, as discussed recently by classicists. For instance, in

Lucretian Receptions: History, the Sublime, Knowledge, Philip Hardie locates the mainstream of the classical sublime in Lucretius, and sees responses by Virgil, Ovid, and Horace creating an “early imperial aesthetic of the sublime” (8). For Hardie, the sublime is a principle of “literary aspiration”: the “history” of the sublime, he says, “carries with it [. . .] [a] combination of literary aspiration and deflation” (201), while the image of “the poetic fall” in Icarus and Phaethon becomes “a semi-technical term for the hazards of aspiring to the sublime” (215). Through Hardie, we can see how sixteenth-century translators write the sublime. Major instances important to Hardie would include Surrey’s Fama from Virgil’s *Aeneid* 4 and Arthur Golding’s Speech of Pythagoras from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 15. We could add Marlowe’s Caesar overtopping the Alps in *Lucan’s First Book* and Chapman’s Achilles in the *Iliad*.

Certain generic groups seem to operate from the principle of sublime authorship. Longinus makes no substantive contribution to genre theory, but he cites examples from epic, tragedy, and love lyric, and he distinguishes “poetry” from “prose” (33.1: 175), and “lyric poetry” from “tragedy” (33.4: 176). Specifically, he observes that “tragedy” is “a genre which is naturally magniloquent” (3.1: 145), and in my first group are tragedies that critics have independently identified as seeming to be about, finally, the making of a great tragedy:

- Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy* (“where’s the author of this endless woe” [2.5.39]);¹⁰
- Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus* (“burned is Apollo’s laurel bough” [Ep.2]);
- William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (“tell my story” [5.2.349]);
- Thomas Middleton, *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (“When thunder claps, heaven likes the tragedy” [5.3.50]);
- John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* (“behold my tragedy” [4.2.36]);
- John Ford, *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore* (“A wretched, woeful woman’s tragedy” [5.1.8]).

Ford’s *’Tis Pity* might be the most glaring instance of the Longinian sublime in English Renaissance drama. Ford presents a nominal world, the city of Parma, filled with incest between brother and sister; but he also presents a second world, superimposed onto the first and visible to most readers: the world of Ford’s literary imagination, the author making his drama out of the works of previous authors, especially Shakespeare, Marlowe, Kyd, and Middleton (see Bartels). In this regard, perhaps, “incest” accrues added resonance. Giovanni is Ford’s figure of the

¹⁰ All quotations from Renaissance tragedy come from Bevington. Shakespeare quotations come from the *Riverside* edition, and Spenser quotations come from Hamilton.

sublime Marlovian superhero who enters the divine through sublimity: "I hold Fate / Clasped in my fist, and could command the course / Of Time's eternal motion" (5.5.11-13). Ford's literalizing of metaphor in the image of Annabella's "heart" on Giovanni's "dagger" (5.6.9) is arguably the crown of the early modern sublime on the cusp of Milton: "Here, here, [. . .] trimmed in reeking blood / That triumphs over death [. . .] / [. . .] Fate, or all the powers / That guide the motions of immortal souls, / Could not prevent me" (5.6.101-04).

Northrop Frye (66-67, 93-94), Ernst Robert Curtius (398-99), and recently John Drakakis and Naomi Conn Liebler (6) have all drawn attention to a fundamental opposition between *Aristotelian catharsis* and *Longinian exstasis*, the one purging the emotions of pity and fear, the other producing them. While critics have tried to make English Renaissance tragedy conform to catharsis, I suggest that sublimity alone can explain the terrifying exaltation we experience at the end of *King Lear*.

The same could be said of the rapturous exaltation featured in most Ovidian epyllia, including by Marlowe, Shakespeare, Chapman, and Michael Drayton.¹¹

In a third generic group of authorial sublimity are epics. Angus Fletcher once called Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* "one of the most comprehensive and powerful of English sublime poems," joining *The Faerie Queene* and *Paradise Lost* (236n24). For Fletcher, *The Faerie Queene* is a "sublime poem" because it meets the following criteria: it "is extraordinarily spacious and grand in design; it is enigmatic; it challenges all our powers of imagination and speculation; it 'proves, in a peremptory manner our moral independence'; it further is marked by ambivalence of attitude toward moral dichotomies" (269).

Let us look at a single instance of the Spenserian sublime, one that represents rapture. At the close of Book 1 of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser narrates the betrothal ceremony of the Redcrosse Knight and Una. The guests are listening to "sweete Musicke" in order "To drive away the dull Melancholy," while "one sung a song of love and jollity." Listening to this inset-epithalamium, the guests suddenly hear a second form of music:

¹¹ On sublimity in Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, in particular, see Cheney, *Marlowe's Republican Authorship*, 71-75.

During the which there was an heavenly noise
 Heard sownd through all the Pallace pleasantly,
 Like as it had bene many an Angels voice,
 Singing before th'eternall maiesty,
 In their trinall triplicities on hye;
 Yet wist no creature, whence that heauenly sweet
 Proceeded, yet eachone felt secretly
 Himselfe thereby reft of his senses meet,
 And rauished with rare impression in his sprite. (1.12.39)

Instead of moralizing his song, Spenser lets his allegory lapse into fiction. The guests inside a "Pallace" hear a "noise" that sounds to the poet like the "voice" of angels but that the guests themselves cannot fathom, although "eachone" experiences an individuation that transports him to a state of ecstasy. Spenser may liken the heavenly noise to angelic music, but the guests do not know where "that heavenly sweet" came from. Instead, each "secretly" rests content. Whatever is happening to these "creature[s]," they enjoy what they cannot know. Reft of their senses meet, ravished with rare impression in their spright, they become unwitting humans experiencing a baffling godhead.¹²

The guests' experience constitutes a Spenserian version of what Kant means by the sublime. For Kant, the sublime is a mental state of dizzying consciousness, beyond the senses, characterized by terror and brought about when the mind comes up against the limits of human knowledge, a state that Kant uses (paradoxically) to prove the mind's divinity. The Spenserian sublime shares with the Kantian sublime an emphasis on the failure of reason to grasp what lies beyond it, as well as a judgment about the divine nature of the experience, but also the yoking of sweetness and ravishment.¹³ Yet the Spenserian sublime differs from the Kantian in three respects.

First, rather than a rational process of horror proving the mind's divinity, Spenser emphasizes a spiritual process of harmony exhibiting Protestant grace. Second, instead of a private experience by one Immanuel Kant, Spenser presents a public experience occurring in a "Pallace." The secret, individualizing character of the public ritual is arguably its defining feature, with each "creature" feeling what happens to everyone collectively. Third, rather than describing a theory of knowledge, Spenser represents a theory of art. The transposition from a human wedding song to a divine song associated with angels makes the passage

¹² Cf. Lyotard, "Presenting the Unpresentable": "one cannot represent the absolute, but one can demonstrate that the absolute exists" (68).

¹³ Kant's words are "pain and pleasure"; hence, he speaks of "negative pleasure" (quoted Shaw 78).

self-consciously *about* “sweete Musicke” – about poetry. As editors note, Spenser’s epic alludes to two forms of poetry vital to his literary career, with origins in Scripture and Greco-Roman poetry: *Epithalamion* and *Fowre Hymnes* (Hamilton 154-55). Spenser may conceal the divine ordination of the “heavenly noise,” but in the background of the “Angels voice” is the authorial voice of Edmund Spenser. The self-allusions suggest a self-advertisement for England’s laureate, the sublime author of divinely sanctioned marriage poetry on behalf of the nation in the context of eternity.

In contrast to Spenser, Shakespeare is a counter-laureate author of the sublime, because he uses his canon of poems and plays to respond to Spenser, concealing rather than revealing his authorship. According to Bloom, “Shakespeare’s sublimity is the richest and most varied in all literary history” (*Sublime* xv). Let us look briefly at *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, when Theseus compares “the poet” with the “lover” and “the lunatic” (5.1.7-8):

The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to aery nothing
A local habitation and a name.¹⁴ (5.1.12-17)

Theseus is critical of the poet because he commits himself to falsehood, but, as readers report, Shakespeare is critical of Theseus, and the speech constitutes one of the most renowned fictions of poetry in English literature. “[T]here are two voices here” (Bloom, *Invention* 169): a character’s and the author’s. Longinus articulates the principle, for Shakespeare *speaks through* Theseus. If, as editors determine, the author revised the speech to include the part about “the poet” (Holland 257-65), we witness here a remarkable exposure of the rib of Shakespeare’s sublime authorship.

Theseus is speaking to Hippolyta, and doubting the story that Hermia, Lysander, Helena, and Demetrius have told about their experience in the forest. Whereas Hippolyta finds the story “strange,” Theseus finds it “More strange than true”: “I never may believe / These antic fables, nor these fairy toys,” since “such shaping fantasies [. . .] apprehend / More than cool reason ever comprehends” (5.1.1-6). As a politi-

¹⁴ Effectively, Shakespeare’s “poet” *reverses* the Kantian process, since he starts with the formless, the unbounded, and gives it “a local habitation and a name.” The Shakespearean author has *agency*.

cal leader of the state, Theseus values “reason” as the arbiter of truth, but his bride expresses sympathy for “imagination” – and for poets, lunatics, and lovers:

But all the story of the night told over,
And all their minds transfigur'd so together,
More witnesseth than fancy's images,
And grows to something of great constancy;
But howsoever, strange and admirable. (5.1.23-27)

In “the story of the night,” Hippolyta sees more than “fancy’s images.” The evidence of “all their minds transfigur’d so together” witnesses an uncanny truth: four separate minds experience a single transfiguration, creating a “great constancy,” at once “strange and admirable.” Whereas Theseus sees the story as a figment of the lovers’ imaginations, Hippolyta believes that a collective imagination has singularly “apprehend[ed]” a mystical truth, which the audience alone sees. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* moves to center stage an irrational idea that drives the Shakespearean canon: the poet’s sublime imagination can use an “antic fable” and “fairy toy” to transfigure our perception, change the world.

As scholars suggest, Shakespeare presents Theseus alluding to *The Faerie Queene*, for “antic fables” and “fairy toys” become Spenser’s two primary mimetic terms for his epic (Bednarz 88). While Shakespeare lets Theseus poke fun at Spenser, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* brings to the London theater the “fairy toys” of “antic fables” more sublimely than any work in English literature. In this romantic comedy, Shakespeare uses the register of the sublime to stage a fiction of authorship about the making of modern English poetry.

By way of conclusion, I might suggest that we work in a post-revisionist phase of authorship. This phase reconciles “traditional” and “revisionist” methodologies: *agency*, *influence*, and *form* cohere and jostle with *culture*, *intertextuality*, and *context*. In this climate, what makes sixteenth-century England unique *is* its new institution of authorship. This institution combines the new commercial theater with an emergent print technology, poems as well as plays. I call the new author working within this institution a *literary poet-playwright*, exhibited in the pioneering roles of Marlowe and Shakespeare, who both respond to the laureate career of Spenser, whom Gabriel Harvey claimed wrote not merely *The Faerie Queene* but also *Nine Comedies* (Smith 1: 115-16). In this new model, the

English author produces poems and plays out of the social energy of print and playhouse.

Until recently, I never used the word “sublime,” despite writing a book called *Spenser’s Famous Flight*. The phrase “famous flight” derives from the *October* eclogue of the 1579 *Shepheardes Calender*, where Cuddie says that Colin Clout would “sing as soote as Swanne” if his love for Rosalinde did not ground him (88-90). Colin’s swanlike aspiration *is* the famous flight to sublimity. By the end of the sixteenth century, authors writing modern English discover both rapture and terror as defining features of their art, in ways I cannot find earlier in the century. They plot sublimity in “the interval between earth and heaven,” and they chart that interval through imitation and intertextuality, using heightened language to produce elevated emotion and great thought along the path to fame.

Modern English literature, then, could not come into being until the gap between the classical sublime and the modern author had been bridged: until authorship and sublimity were wed, and the English author became sublime. If, as Bennett says, “critical interest in literature is driven by an uncertainty about the author, about what the author is” (127), then the sixteenth century solved the problem through the sublime, the Western principle of literary greatness. If, as Shaw suggests, the “Kantian legacy” lies in the “subject of the sublime [. . .] wanting what it cannot have [. . .] locked in melancholia, divorced for ever from the object of its desire” (151), then the quest for literary greatness could not be completed without baffling costs. When Colin Clout says in the *June* eclogue, “I play to please my selfe” (72), he might mean it.

As Colin’s arresting comment intimates, the Longinian authorial sublime can be significant to authorship studies, because it helps revise some popular ideas: in Spenser studies, for instance, the most important idea about the national poet, that Spenser became disillusioned with his public poetry in the 1590s. Rather, I suggest, Spenser plays a powerful bridging role in a history of the sublime from Dante to Milton, because in a canon vowing to *moralize song*, the author betrays a profound entry into the Longinian model of *ekstasis*, illustrated in the secluded raptures of Colin Clout, from the dales of Kent to the heights of Mt Acidale; but also in the ghostly terror that the author discovers stalking Alcyon in *Daphnaïda* (Cheney, “Daphne”). Spenser does not become disillusioned with his public poetry but discovers that the center of public poetry may lie *beyond* “the generall end of all the book,” which was “to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline” (737).

Written in the sublime style, the works of Spenser and his colleagues – above all Shakespeare but also Marlowe – alter the institution of English authorship forever. The result is a new standard of authorship, lo-

cated not simply in rational, patriotic paradigms of classical or Christian goodness, but also in the eternizing greatness of the author's literary work: free, heightened, ecstatic, outside the pale of unitary truth, *in the interval*. Playing a centralizing role in the advent of modern English authorship, the early modern sublime becomes a key catalyst in the formation of an English canon.

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