The Scriblerian Sublime

CHRISTOPHER FANNING

The Sublime and the Pathetic are the two chief nerves of all genuine poesy. What is there transcendentally Sublime or Pathetic in Pope?

For Wit and Satire are transitory and perishable, but Nature and Passion are eternal.

—Joseph Warton, *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope*

Warton’s words, which appear in his 1756 attempt to unseat Alexander Pope as the most influential poet of the era, represent a critical commonplace about the nature of literary history in the mid- to late eighteenth century. As inscribed by William Wordsworth in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, this is the key distinction between the Romantics’ emphasis on feeling and the artifice of the previous age. The modern reception of English Augustan literature has still not recovered a full value for wit. This essay problematizes the easy categorization of literary modes employed by Warton and others in the eighteenth-century and Romantic periods by turning to the Scriblerians’ engagement with the ancient text that authorizes much of the “passion” of the age, Longinus’s treatise *Peri Hypsous*, or *On the Sublime*.

By defining a “Scriblerian sublime,” I am focusing the issues of the broader opposition outlined above, for not all satire is Scriblerian, nor is the sublime of Dionysius Longinus identical with the tradition that has come down to us through Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. Nevertheless, before offering focused definitions,

Christopher Fanning is assistant professor of English at Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario. He has published a number of articles on Laurence Sterne, and is working on a study of conjunctions of satire and the sublime over the long eighteenth century.
some general assumptions about the opposition between satire and the sublime should be briefly stated. Given the philosophical bent of much thinking on the sublime, satire has come to be defined, by contrast, as a rather more worldly pursuit. Satire and the sublime are generally considered mutually exclusive discourses, as different as low and high, one ironically distant and the other enthusiastically immediate. Satire is a leveling discourse and the sublime an elevating one. On the one hand, satire is thought to be pointed at the particular: it is aimed (according to John Dryden) at imparting “some one Precept of Moral Virtue” and warning “against some one particular Vice or Folly,” or it enumerates the grotesque physical details of a Thomas Shadwell or an Edmund Curll. This is not to confuse satire with lampoon, but to note that, no matter how general the application of the satire, its method is one of particularity. On the other hand, we expect the sublime to transcend toward the general. This is the assumption behind Samuel Johnson’s comment on the metaphysical poets’ failure to attain sublimity: “Their attempts were always analytick: they broke every image into fragments,” he writes: “[g]reat thoughts are always general, and consist in positions not limited by exceptions, and in descriptions not descending to minuteness.” A modern critic, Marshall Brown, who has written on the “urbane sublime,” summarizes these common assumptions: satire and the sublime are opposed as “the comic and the serious, the clever and the pompous, the critically detached and the uncritically self-involved.” The critical function of satire and the rhapsodic function of the sublime would seem to be irreconcilable, and apart from a few exceptions, this idea persists.

Scholarship on the period has often employed a version of the satire-sublime opposition to produce interpretations of its literature. W. K. Wimsatt’s definition of “the Augustan Mode” depends upon the opposition, even as the “heightened unreality” that characterizes this mode suggests the sublimity of parody: “Augustan poetry at its best . . . was the last stand of a classic mode of laughter against forces that were working for a sublime inflation of ideas and a luxury of sorry feeling.” Martin Price’s use of the order-energy dichotomy in To the Palace of Wisdom: Studies in Order and Energy from Dryden to Blake is clearer in its articulation of the possibilities of combined opposites. This study inaugurates a tradition of reading the Augustan period against the traditional expectations of decorum, restraint, “balance and moderation,” to stress “dialectical excess” and conflict within its literature. A more recent contribution to this vein of
scholarship is Margaret Anne Doody’s *The Daring Muse: Augustan Poetry Reconsidered*, which, within a wide-ranging study of various aesthetic movements, explicitly states that “the Burkean Sublime (like the sublime of Longinus) has more than a little in common with Pope’s anti-Sublime of Dulness.” More direct attempts to engage in a sustained manner the specific discourses of satire and the sublime are fewer. Brown’s chapter, “The Urbane Sublime,” argues “that the satiric and the sublime poets wrote on the basis of common stylistic presuppositions. They employed similar kinds of verbal artifice, entertained similar conceptions of formal organization, and envisioned similar purposes with respect to much the same audience.” However, Brown’s assimilation of satire and the sublime depends on his definition of satire as ironic distance, an emphasis distinct from that of this essay.

The two most direct attempts to think through the relationship of satire and the sublime in the eighteenth century are those of Jonathan Lamb and James Noggle. Lamb’s reading of Longinus in the context of Laurence Sterne’s work has drawn attention to the importance of the minute particulars that give rise to sublime effects. Although much of his work moves in a philosophical direction, Lamb’s conception of the sublime is grounded in the rhetorical provenance of Longinus’s text. In “The Comic Sublime and Sterne’s Fiction,” Lamb describes a hybrid mode, “relative sublimity,” employed by the likes of Michel Montaigne, Miguel de Cervantes, Pope, Henry Fielding, and Sterne, which consists of “mounting a higher idea upon a little circumstance or image in order to give a unified expression of a higher truth that has lower relations” (p. 138). The comic sublime, for Lamb, is a recognition of the mutual support of high and low elements in the mock genres characteristic of the early eighteenth century, something to which Longinus gives license. Noggle, drawing on Lamb’s various treatments of *On the Sublime*, aligns its characteristic forms of self-reflexivity and tautology, or its “logic of reversal,” with the skeptical tradition with which the Tory satirists engage.

The sublime failure of human epistemology to encompass the nature of Providence (as expressed in Pope’s *Essay on Man*) is both the object and method of conservative satire, resulting in something such as *The Dunciad in Four Books*, which ultimately submits itself to the forces of Dulness, while describing her triumph.

Neither of these considerations of satire and the sublime quite keeps the conjunction of the two modes of discourse fully in sight. Noggle’s study is ultimately an account of skepticism in the Restoration and early-eighteenth-century period. Lamb comes
much closer to the mark, although he himself acknowledges that his is an attempt to define, and name, a distinct mode, “the comic sublime” (p. 111). In this essay, I wish to consider the relationship as a convergence of two discourses, neither of which subsumes the other (as, I think, the sublime subsumes satire in Lamb’s account). My examination begins with the attitudes of Jonathan Swift and Pope toward the sublime in order to establish the qualities of Longinus’s *On the Sublime* that appealed to the Scriblerians for their satiric purposes. Key here is the Scriblerians’ sense of textuality as performative, which ultimately leads to a work such as Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, with its attention to questions of the material aspect of book production in the eighteenth century. It is my contention that satire and the sublime share a common element that is expressed best through the vivid use of typography by authors such as Swift, Pope, and Sterne.

Part of the problem presented in conceiving of satire and the sublime as either opposed or conjoined exists in the choice of what types of satire and the sublime we select as representative of the period. In his *Observations on the “Fairy Queen” of Spenser* (1762) Thomas Warton (brother to Joseph), attempts to historicize the assumed opposition of satire and the sublime, describing the onset of effeminate satiric wit after a bold age of Spenserian allegory:

> a poetry succeeded, in which imagination gave way to correctness, sublimity of description to delicacy of sentiment, and majestic imagery to conceit and epigram. Poets began now to be more attentive to words, than to things and objects. The nicer beauties of happy expression were preferred to the daring strokes of great conception. Satire, that bane of the sublime, was imported from France. The muses were debauched at court, and polite life, and familiar manners, became their only themes.¹⁴

This opposition sits easily with the canonical understanding of sublimity and satire and thus may raise no questions (even as it elides the Juvenalian tradition of *saeva indignatio*). However, the Burkean and Horatian values juxtaposed here (the obvious valorization of the masculine aesthetic of obscurity and greatness over the feminized particulars of ornamental style) do not represent the full range of satire or the sublime in this period. In order to rethink the assumed opposition, it is important to acknowledge that there is variety within the categories. For my purposes, I wish to identify the varieties of Scriblerian satire and the Longinian sublime within these larger traditions.
The Scriblerian mode can be distinguished from satire generally by its socio-cultural origins and the style that develops therefrom. Brean S. Hammond situates Scriblerian satire within the difficulties of the emergent modern condition:

It is born out of a period of transition in the economics of authorship, and at a particular historical moment when the status of writing itself was under active renegotiation. Questions about whether writing was an activity of the spirit (issuing, to be sure, in a set of marks on paper, but not reducible to these marks), or whether writing was a mechanical and material act which produced goods exchangeable for the wherewithal to buy necessities of life, are focused through this mode. The Scriblerian target is *homo mechanicus*, a species both produced by and producing the new scientific learning, but at a cost to fundamental humanity, to naturalness, and to good writing. “Scriblerian” satire inhabits many different kinds of writing, but in its early phase it employs as its “host” sub-literary kinds such as the biography or learned essay or critical treatise, because initially it works by parodying the kinds that seem to endanger “valuable” writing.

Thus, as a reaction to its cultural milieu, the self-reflexive attention to the status of writing—in its materiality and the question-able identities of its professionalized producers—is the central characteristic of Scriblerian satire. This makes for a deliberately difficult style, which Patricia Carr Brückmann describes in Brechtian terms: “An insistent demand for active involvement of readers in the action, a demand made in an even more consciously urgent way than art usually does, is the central force behind Scriblerian style, the feature from which all other aspects of it come . . . [R]eaders are consistently *made* by Scriblerian techniques to be disengaged, and thus necessarily and most centrally engaged with the text.” Thus, reader entrapment is a fundamental technique for the Scriblerians, which accounts for the strong element of parody in their satire.

These qualities (abstractly stated) explain the failure of the general notion of an opposition between satire and the sublime to describe either side of the satiric inversion of the sublime in Pope’s *Peri Bathous*, on “the art of sinking in poetry.” Pope’s duncical Martinus Scriblerus writes in this treatise:
If we search the Authors of Antiquity, we shall find as few to have been distinguish’d in the true Profund, as in the true Sublime. And the very same thing (as it appears from Longinus) had been imagin’d of that, as now of this: namely, that it was entirely the Gift of Nature. I grant that to excel in the Bathos a Genius is requisite; yet the Rules of Art must be allow’d so far useful, as to add weight, or as I may say, hang on lead, to facilitate and enforce our descent, to guide us to the most advantageous declivities, and habituate our imagination to a depth of thinking. Many there are that can fall, but few can arrive at the felicity of falling gracefully; much more for a man who is amongst the lowest of the creation, at the very bottom of the Atmosphere, to descend beneath himself, is not so easy a task unless he calls in Art to his assistance.¹⁸

What Pope sees in Longinus is not altogether Burkean; nor is the way he makes fun of it Horatian. Burke uses the language of height and depth, but he means it much more literally, in accordance with his well-known physiologically based sensationism. For Pope, in addition to the license offered by Longinus’s observation that “our Excellencies and Defects flow almost from the same common Source,”¹⁹ it is the perplexing combinations of Art and Nature in relation to elevated discourse in On the Sublime that are most important here: “Art may then be termed perfect and consummate, when it seems to be Nature; and Nature then succeeds best, when she conceals what Assistance she receives from Art” (p. 58, sect. 22). Longinus here plays on paradox in a theoretical way, subverting the Platonic relationship of art to nature as that of “three removes from nature”²⁰ so that Art becomes primary: Nature/reality exists only in its being perceived (through art). (In other words, “Art may then be termed perfect and consummate, when it seems to be . . . Art.”)²¹ Similarly, the satire in Peri Bathous is one of parodic mimicry that wraps in upon itself. It therefore lacks the delicate derision of Horace, which is the product of a well-defined ironic distance from the object of criticism implied in the mutual understanding of authorial voice and audience, especially in the urbanity of the Epistles.²²

But more important than the differing varieties of satire and the sublime to which such a passage attests is the way in which the rhetoric of the Longinian sublime and Scriblerian parody are mutually compatible. Therefore, I want to refocus the terms of comparison between satire and the sublime away from Thomas
Warton’s easy generalization and toward a rhetorical examination. For my purposes, it is important to recognize that the Longinian sublime is an exploratory discourse, pushing the frontiers of neoclassical rhetoric while remaining within traditional purviews. It is essential to examine Longinus without a teleological bias that anticipates Burke and Kant and thus demands an over-theorized aesthetic. Furthermore, to see the relationship between satire and the sublime as solely one of inversion in which satire exposes (and reduces) the metaphors upon which the sublime depends is an oversimplification. A closer look at the practice of Scriblerian satire and some of the critical engagements of Swift and Pope with Longinus suggests that at the rhetorical level (and beneath this a structuring psychological or perceptual level), satire and the sublime converge in a common methodology.

In order to clarify the convergence of satire and the sublime in this fashion, we need to characterize the eighteenth century’s two Longinuses, which I will call the neoclassical and the parodic. The first Longinus, if not strictly neoclassical, is at least the one most amenable to neoclassicism. For the early-eighteenth-century writer, Longinus was often a liberating figure, a classical authority allowing poets to “snatch a Grace beyond the Reach of Art.” Longinus offered poets the chance to be daring, authorizing greatness at the expense of minute accuracy: “What is correct and faultless comes off barely without Censure, but the Grand and the Lofty Command Admiration. What can I add further? One exalted and sublime Sentiment in those noble Authors makes ample Amends for all their Defects” (p. 86, sect. 36). This grand gesture is aligned with Longinus’s sense of decorum: “In the Sublime, we ought never to take up with sordid and blemished Terms, unless reduced to it by the most urgent necessity. The Dignity of our Words ought always to be proportion’d to the Dignity of our Sentiments” (p. 101, sect. 43). This fit well with neoclassical biases toward the general over the particular, as has already been seen in Johnson’s statement on the Metaphysical poets. Pope himself uses Longinus in this traditional fashion in his translation of The Iliad, which, as Steven Shankman has demonstrated, always chooses to generalize Homer’s low and particular images. In a note to The Iliad, Pope writes: “it must be observ’d in general, that little Exactnesses are what we should not look for in Homer; the Genius of his Age was too incorrect, and his own too fiery to regard them,” and later, as we will see below, Pope will concern himself with the greater difficulty of translating the “little circumstances” of The Odyssey, while maintaining a suitably sublime style.
This conception of sublimity as general and tainted by particular details lends itself to satiric inversion, as many of the examples in *Peri Bathous* attest. Chapter 8, for example, treats “Of the Profund, consisting in the Circumstances,” and includes the following “inimitably circumstantial” description of a war horse: “His eye-balls burn, he wounds the smoaking plain, / And knots of scarlet ribbond deck his mane” (p. 201). Chapter 5 lists inappropriate analogies for God to prove that “nothing is so great which a marvellous genius . . . is not able to lessen; hear how the most sublime of all Beings is represented in the following images,” which include God as painter, chemist, wrestler, recruiting officer, guarantee, attorney, goldbeater, fuller, mercer or packer, butler, and baker (pp. 194–5).

Yet, in addition to this conservative ideal of the high style, *On the Sublime* also provides a particular brand of self-reflexivity in its description of the effects of sublimity. Longinus’s rapture over Homer’s sublime passages is well-known and imitated by Pope in his preface to *The Iliad*, where the opening paragraphs offer Longinian praise of Homer’s genius and invention, “that unequal’d Fire and Rapture, which is so forcible in Homer, that no Man of a true Poetical Spirit is Master of himself while he reads him . . . [T]he Reader is hurry’d out of himself by the Force of the Poet’s Imagination, and turns in one place to a Hearer, in another to a Spectator.”27 The interest in the aesthetic process—the psychological reception of the work—described in the language of a power that threatens identity and the distinctions between poet and reader are classically Longinian. The famous lines from Pope’s *Essay on Criticism* codify Longinus’s power to elide distinctions, here between the critic’s descriptive and the poet’s creative or performative capacity:

Thee, bold Longinus! all the Nine inspire,  
And bless their Critick with a Poet’s Fire.  
An ardent Judge, who Zealous in his Trust,  
With Warmth gives Sentence, yet is always Just;  
Whose own Example strengthens all his Laws,  
And Is himself that great Sublime he draws.28

This is a standard assessment of Longinus, deriving from Nicolas Boileau (see the editors’ note to line 680). However, emerging from this neoclassical portrait of Longinus we can also detect the second, parodic Longinus. As the passage moves from the balanced Augustan antithesis of “Critick” and “Poet,” of “ardent” (taken
from the poet’s “Fire”) and “Judge,” of “Warmth” and “Just,” to the repeated self-reference of the final couplet, I think we can see the special attraction of Longinus to the satirist whose parodic mode wraps in upon itself as he reveals his own involvement in the target of his criticism. This is how a satirist might use Longinus in a positive fashion (rather than an inverting one).

The discriminating aims of Scriblerian satire need to cope with power relations akin to those implicit in the sublime moment—the threat to the stabilizing categories of identity and difference. The sublime moment is marked by the collapse of boundaries between subject and object: “the Mind is naturally elevated by the true Sublime, and so sensibly affected with its lively Strokes, that it swells in Transport and an inward Pride, as if what was only heard had been the Product of its own Invention” (Longinus, p. 14, sect. 7). This process depends, of course, on a sense of the distinction to be erased. I wish to suggest that if the sublime is constituted by such power relations that threaten a perceiver’s identity and certainty of difference (necessary to perceive such relations), satire insists upon a very similar structure. The doggerel rhymes in Swift’s poetry or the Scriblerian reification of metaphor insists upon distinctions by conspicuously collapsing them into difficult alliances. Satire’s foregrounding of difficulty does seem to be an inversion of the sublime’s apparently more subtle erasure of distinction, where the conspicuous undetectability of the artifice is at a premium: as Longinus phrases it, “a Figure is . . . most dextrously applied, when it cannot be discerned that it is a Figure” (p. 51, sect. 17). However, as Longinus’s rhetorical advice reveals, no such subtle effects can be achieved without the employment of artifice to achieve a “natural” effect (for example, the careful manipulation of word order). Thus it is in the orchestration of the juxtapositions to create effects that satire and the sublime converge. Both satire and the sublime function around an implied norm and its violation. In satire this norm may be social or moral, in the sublime it may be psychological, but the methodology is markedly similar.

To take the case of The Dunciad, Scriblerian satire may be said to consist of the perception and expression of the sublimity of modern folly. If this is so, satire and the sublime are not at odds when faced with the immensity of such a subject. The Scriblerians’ obsessive concern with the detrimental impact of print culture confronts them with a sublime object, which can only be treated accordingly. The difficulty of perceiving this for those such as the Warton brothers seems to arise because the sublime
moment is created by means of sinking, when the universal darkness of Dulness buries all, for example. What is more important than rising or sinking, however, is the vertical axis itself. As Pope has Martinus Scriblerus observe, “The Latins . . . make use of the word _Altitudo_, which implies equally height and depth” ( _Peri Bathous_ , p. 186). Thus, both satire and the sublime are relational discourses. As such, both discourses have a modal quality that transcends genre, allowing for any variety of aesthetic experience to have a satiric or sublime quality or, as I am arguing, to have both simultaneously.

Longinus famously pays no heed to the generic rules that separate tragedy from epic, _The Iliad_ from _The Odyssey_, or Demosthenes from Moses. It is this apparent indifference to generic difference that offered such a thrill to the neoclassical age that used Longinus as an authority. It is, of course, this same modal quality, undetermined by genre, that allows the sublime to apply to satire itself—something Pope is aware of both in his satiric practice, as well as in his critical statements. As an example of the latter, consider Pope’s “Postscript” to _The Odyssey_, a direct engagement with Longinus, which mounts a defense of _The Odyssey_ against what critical tradition had perceived as Longinus’s severe criticism of Homer’s attention to “little circumstances” in _The Odyssey_. Pope runs through the conventional distinction between the comic nature of _The Odyssey_ (aligned with Horace) and the heroic nature of _The Iliad_ (aligned with Longinus)—very much in the way that Thomas Warton would make distinctions between his view of the “Augustan” age and his preferred Gothicism. However, Pope suggests that it is wrong to ask _The Odyssey_ to be sublime in the way that _The Iliad_ is sublime. This does not, however, mean that _The Odyssey_ completely lacks sublimity. Rather, it implies that sublimity is a floating quality that manifests itself differently in works of essentially different natures. This leads Pope into an important remark for the subject of relations between satire and the sublime: “The use of pompous expression for low actions or thoughts is the _true Sublime_ of _Don Quixote_. How far unfit it is for Epic Poetry, appears in its being the perfection of the Mock-Epick. It is so far from being the Sublime of _Tragedy_, that it is the cause of all _Bombaste_; when Poets instead of being (as they imagine) constantly lofty, only preserve throughout a painful equality of fustian.”32 The latter bathetic poets are neither sublime nor satiric. _Don Quixote_ is both: the difference lies in awareness of difference, by which I mean the self-conscious orchestration of juxtapositions—whether it is the conspicuously elided distinction
between art and nature in Longinus or the ironic use of pompous expression for low action in Cervantes. In the “Postscript” to The Odyssey, Pope reinscribes the sublime in accordance with both of the eighteenth century's Longinuses: for the neoclassical Longinus there is the notion of decorum—“From the Nature of the Poem, we shall form an Idea of the Style”—but for the parodic Longinus, there is “the true sublime of Don Quixote,” which achieves its decorum by violating decorum in a fashion appropriate to the mock genre.\textsuperscript{33} With this preeminently Longinian technique—a tautological definition that enacts its sense—Pope legitimates the sublimity of satire, as both modes converge in their self-reflexive awareness of their own projects.

Such a theoretical basis for similarities between satire and the sublime manifests itself in the details of satiric practice. Swift's “On Poetry: A Rapsody” demonstrates an acute awareness of the relationships between satire and the sublime, as well as insight into the rhetoric of the parodic Longinus:

A forward Critick often dupes us
With sham Quotations Peri Hupsous:
And if we have not read Longinus,
Will magisterially out-shine us.
Then, lest with Greek he over-run ye,
Procure the Book for Love or Money,
Translated from Boileau's Translation,
And quote Quotation on Quotation.\textsuperscript{34}

This is clearly a criticism of the easy currency of Longinus's ideas at the time (a function of the ready availability of print—very much the subject of this poem), but it is noteworthy that this passage identifies and engages in the sublime redundancy that moves toward the repetitions of the concluding couplet, which imply differences that have collapsed. This is one key to understanding the coexistence of satire and the sublime in the eighteenth century. Both discourses function by means of rhetorical juxtapositions; whether they are transporting or deflating, the method is the same, and when the poet or rhetor is aware of this manipulation of difference, he has achieved the true sublime.

I have already suggested one way in which we can see how the culture that produced such satires could also be attracted to the sublime, with its potential for a self-reflexive parodic mode, free from generic prejudices. Importantly, this is also the period in
which the print medium comes to be employed to manifest such self-reflexivity in texts that combine satire and the sublime. It is unsurprising, yet important, to note how the printed presentation of *A Tale of a Tub* and *The Dunciad* reveals that the embodiment of thought in language has an effect on thought. In this period of flourishing print culture, the Scriblerians (and, later in the century, their inheritor Sterne) are acutely aware that their texts are less than “ideal”: they are physical things, books. These books, so insistent on their material status, are reified demonstrations of the satiric device of the literalized metaphor, revealing the un-transcendable nature of all language in its metaphoric structure. Swift’s “Battle of the Books,” which reduces the quarrel of the ancients and moderns to a mess of torn pages and spilled ink, draws attention to the physical embodiment of thought in print. “The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit” goes a step further, not only reducing enthusiasm to flatulence, but also self-consciously existing in a material form which its author insists should be burned. Eighteenth-century Menippean satires draw attention to the problem of the lack of transcendence in written and especially printed communication: “Prologues into Prefaces decay, / And these to Notes are fritter’d quite away,” as *The Dunciad* tells us. But it does not merely tell us this. The heavily annotated text of *The Dunciad* itself or the many supposed lacunae of *A Tale of a Tub* make nonverbal gestures with their printed pages, visually demonstrating problems of transmission, pointing out the lack of connection between an author’s thoughts and his printed expression. The very texts themselves are making this statement in a performative fashion.

The combination of satire and the sublime already suggested at a theoretical level can here be seen to occur at the level of a performative rhetoric, which the eighteenth century demonstrated best in its printed texts. We may begin by noting the emphasis on a concrete figurativity in the Longinian sublime, a phenomenon best elucidated by Lamb in his description of a comic or Shan-dean sublime. For Lamb, the traditions I have described as the neoclassical and the parodic Longinus correspond to the distinction between the general and the particular in eighteenth-century thinking about the sublime. Orthodox, generalist thinking about the sublime stresses “a disappearance into the immensity of the thing itself” whereas the heterodox school stresses the “little circumstances,” which do not allow such a disappearance. Rather, they cause the mind to oscillate between original and copy, creating a sublime founded upon the defects in representation, which
allow for the self-reflexive figuration that marks the Longinian sublime. Longinus’s famous “criticism-by-enactment”—“[He] Is himself that great Sublime he draws”—is the fundamental condition of such a figurative sublime. It is by the insistence upon the “little circumstances” and the concomitant mental overdrive necessitated by the constant recourse to figures, which prevents total absorption, that the sublime moment is produced.

And this is where the connection with satiric practice, especially as made manifest in print, is to be found, as the constant mounting of particulars draws attention to material concerns. The figurativity of the parodic Longinus is a rhetorical mode involving the calculated mounting of minute details to a point of excess, as with the figure of “collections”: “when [the orator] instead of the Whole of a thing . . . numbers up all its Particulars,” or the use of plurals: “When the Words are thus confusedly thrown into Multitudes, one upon another, they excite in us greater and more elevated Ideas of things” (p. 62, sect. 23). These are the specific rhetorical devices that lead to the crossover moments of subject and object for which the sublime is known.

A result of Longinus’s insistence upon the effect of words in such arrangements is a revivification of his physical and even bodily metaphors for sublime experience: “That . . . is grand and lofty . . . whose Force we cannot possibly withstand; which immediately sinks deep, and makes such Impressions on the Mind as cannot be easily worn out or effaced” (p. 15, sect. 7). A later analogy with music is even more explicitly bodily: musical notes “fill the Breast . . . and lift up the Heart . . . The very Limbs receive Motion from the Notes, and the Hearer . . . is sensible . . . that all its Turns make a strong Impression on his Body and Mind” (p. 92, sect. 39). The very metaphoric nature of “moving” the reader, the language of rising and sinking, indicates the essentially embodied nature of the sublime experience.

Such metaphors are easy fodder for satirists, as “The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit” or many passages in Peri Bathous (to name just two) suggest. However, these metaphors carry over into the fundamental conception of Longinus’s sublime and his manner of demonstrating it. First, the concept of the sublime is embodied in an explicitly rhetorical treatise, which somewhat contradictorily insists upon “the daring strokes of great conception” (to use Thomas Warton’s phrase) as well as the artificial tropes and figures that represent them. The sublime, with its emphasis on representing the unrepresentable, its insistence on transcendence, is a discourse that self-consciously draws atten-
tion to the problems of language and the need for rhetoric. Some of Longinus’s famous statements make this point in a circular rhetoric that is itself sublime. For example, “there is a Force in Eloquence, which depends not upon, nor can be learn’d by Rule, yet even this could not be known without that Light which we receive from Art” (p. 5, sect. 2); or, as previously quoted, “a Figure is . . . most dextrously applied, when it cannot be discerned that it is a Figure.” The eighteenth century recognized this self-reflexivity, as Pope’s already cited lines from An Essay on Criticism show. As I have argued here, the inaccessible self-reflexivity of these statements is simultaneously what makes them sublime and susceptible to parody. Longinus himself says, “those Vices . . . border so near upon, and are so easily blended with the true Sublime” (p. 13, sect. 5).

Pope’s Peri Bathous latches firmly onto such moments, revealing not only that the sublime is subject to parody because it shares with satire a common ground in the physical, wherein notions of rising and sinking have meaning, but also that satire and the sublime are both self-reflexive modes of writing. In chapter 7 of Peri Bathous, Scriblerus quotes a series of lines dangerously parallel to Pope’s couplet in praise of Longinus, such as Theobald’s “None but Himself can be his Parallel,” or Pope’s own juvenile lines: “Venus beheld her, ’midst her crowd of slaves, / And thought herself just risen from the waves” (pp. 199, 198). This latter quotation is followed by the parodic, yet accurate commentary on the salient feature of the couplet: “How much out of the way of common sense is this reflection of Venus, not knowing herself from the lady?” (p. 198). This comment points out the lack of epistemological clarity found not only in the bathos, but also in the true sublime, which functions by means of obscurity or cognitive overload. At the same time, Scriblerus draws attention to the exchange of subject and object, a traditional problematic in the discourse of the sublime. What is important here is the continuity of the satiric and sublime modes: just as the adjective “sublime” describes both the object perceived as well as the experience of the subject-perceiver, so does satire examine in a subversive light both the satirical object and the satirical subject: Pope mocks his own lines; in A Tale of a Tub Swift revels in the guise of the hack; and both the Tale and The Dunciad function by sharing the printed trappings of their satiric targets.

Despite its attention to “little circumstances,” Longinus’s text still appears a long way from such performative textuality. A more important indicator of textual similarities with satire is the
way in which Longinus’s insistence on the necessity of rhetorical figures for the creation of sublime effect derives from his penchant for close verbal analysis, making him highly aware of textuality in a way that later aestheticians of the Kantian tradition are not. As his metaphors imply, Longinus, like the satirists, is aware of the need to embody thought in effective language in order to make it heard. This is a reading of the sublime that takes its rhetorical provenance to heart. Attention to rhetoric is a critical function that in many ways depends on textuality for the purposes of analysis. A concrete sense of language permeates Longinus’s thinking and enables much of his analysis. His account of Homer’s $hupektanatoio$ (which describes some sailors’ terrifying escape “out-of-under death”) is a case in point, depending upon a sense of language as literally performative: “[Homer] has forcibly united some Prepositions that are naturally averse to Union, and heaped them one upon another, $hupektanatoio$. By this means the Danger is discern’d in the very Hurry and Confusion of the Words, the Verses are toss’d up and down with the Ship, the Harshness and Jarring of the Syllables give us a lively Image of the Storm, and the whole Description is in itself a terrible and furious Tempest.” At this level of analysis, words gain the status of aesthetic objects with a presence of their own, apart from the sounds they represent.

This is the classic logocentric dilemma. In his discussions of oratory, Longinus longs to re-create the presence of Demosthenes’s spoken discourse, which is, of course, necessarily absent as we read about it on the page. More importantly, this presence can only be re-created by textual means: the analysis Longinus performs upon the speeches of Demosthenes depends upon the fact that they are texts he can manipulate and reiterate in his own text. In his analysis of Demosthenes’ speech to the Athenians, Longinus paraphrases, interrupts, and restates, employing textual repetition that depends on visual comparisons for its effectiveness (pp. 46–50, sect. 16). Demosthenes’ speech is given new life in Longinus’s text only through the very textual process that simultaneously presupposes, negates, and supplies the speaker’s presence (in the manner of Jacques Derrida’s supplement).

The active textuality in Longinus—the sense of the text as a problematic presence in itself—finds its strongest demonstration in the tradition of print-based satire beginning with the Scriblerians’ deep distrust of print’s potential to replace authorial agency: “[W]hatever word or Sentence is Printed in a different Character, shall be judged to contain something extraordinary
either of Wit or Sublime,” writes the hack of A Tale of a Tub, a figure of an author who has lost control of his text and yet is wholly comfortable with this, planning an “Experiment very frequent among Modern Authors; which is, to write upon Nothing; When the Subject is utterly exhausted, to let the Pen still move on.”47 This tradition culminates in Sterne’s Tristram Shandy, that quintessentially performative text of the eighteenth century that achieves a somewhat warmer embrace of the material text than A Tale of a Tub. It is Sterne who crystallizes at midcentury the possibilities of print by creating an unavoidable textual presence supplementary to the supposed referents of the printed words. Tristram Shandy draws attention to this uniquely eighteenth-century twist on the traditional rhetorical concern with problems of expression (res et verba). It presents a highly animated sense of text as performative expression, manifested in such printerly devices as asterisks, dashes, and blank, black, and marbled pages. What is most important for my argument is the fact that Sterne’s awareness of such textual effects at midcentury is accompanied by open declarations of allegiance to both satiric traditions and Longinus: for example, “——By the tomb stone of Lucian——if it is in being,—if not, why then, by his ashes! by the ashes of my dear Rabelais, and dearer Cervantes,—” and “—you must read Longinus—read away—if you are not a jot the wiser by reading him the first time over—never fear—read him again—.”48 By acknowledgment an extension of the work of Sterne’s satiric precursors, the Scriblerians,49 Tristram Shandy is obviously satiric in its detailed particulars designed to reduce Sterne’s various philosophi gloriosi. However, it is also concerned with the sublime theme of ineffability—the inexpressible nature of experience—something derived from Longinus. Let us not forget that Longinus’s image of the sublime orator is virtually a description of what we may have thought satiric in Tristram Shandy: “he gives his Audience a kind of Anxiety, as if he had lost his Subject, and forgot what he was about; and so strongly engages their Concern, that they tremble for and bear their Share in the Dangers of the Speaker” (p. 60, sect. 22).50

After Tristram Shandy, the parodic Longinus I have identified in the first half of my argument should be clear. A Shandean reading of the sublime is made possible by the groundwork laid by the Scriblerians’ use of Longinus. Through the self-reflexivity of satire, we can see anew how Longinus directs our attention to rhetoric, to the performative nature of the sublime, located in the minutiae of language as well as in nonlinguistic elements, such as
the famous silence of Ajax (p. 23, sect. 9). It is noteworthy that, unlike a rhetorician such as Quintilian, who codifies the orator’s bodily gestures, the gestures of Longinus’s rhetoric are strictly at the verbal level, where figures of grammar and syntax, as well as silence, are registered. Through his satiric sensibility, Sterne identifies a textual embodiment of rhetoric that registers oratorical gesture on the printed page. This begins with Longinus’s sense of animated, performative language and then takes advantage of printed satiric textual gestures, to result in the textual effects of a sublime satire such as *Tristram Shandy*. Ultimately, the presence of the satiric text forces the reader’s sublime recognition of the inadequacy of language to convey thought or represent the world. Therefore, *Tristram Shandy*, published at the same time as midcentury oppositions of satire and the sublime, is an interesting counterpoint to this canonizing insistence on distinction, suggesting that, in their treatment of problems of expression, a theoretical connection exists between the two discourses.

NOTES


2 I hope that William Wordsworth’s preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800/02) is sufficiently well-known to need no explication here. See William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones, 2d edn. (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 241-72. I have in mind Wordsworth’s definition of “all good poetry” as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (p. 246) in contrast to his attack on artificial “poetic diction” (pp. 250–3). In the “Advertisement” to his *Odes on Various Subjects* (1746), Joseph Warton provides an early elaboration of the reformulation of the criteria for canonical status, which the Romantic poets would take up in the early nineteenth century:

The Public has been so much accustom’d of late to didactic Poetry alone, and Essays on moral Subjects, that any work where the imagination is much indulged, will perhaps not be relished or regarded. The author therefore of these pieces is in some pain least certain austere critics should think them too fanciful and descriptive. But as he is convinced that the fashion of moralizing in verse has been carried too far, and as he looks upon Invention and Imagination to be the chief faculties of a Poet, so he will be happy if the following Odes may be look’d upon as an attempt to bring back Poetry into its right channel.
The long “f” and “s” have been silently updated in this quotation. For an interesting argument that Romanticism’s canonical status “was achieved by defining it as countersatiric writing,” see Steven E. Jones, *Satire and Romanticism* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), esp. p. 12.


15 It is worth noting that this should not limit the notion of Scriblerian satire to the practices of original members of the Scriblerus Club. Both Brean S. Hammond and especially Patricia Carr Brückmann (cited below) indicate that it has a tradition of its own, from contemporaries such as Samuel Garth through immediate successors such as Henry Fielding and Laurence Sterne, continuing into the twentieth century with the likes of Samuel Beckett, Jorge Luis Borges, and Vladimir Nabokov.


19 Dionysius Longinus, *Longinus “On the Sublime”: The “Peri Hupsous” in Translations by Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (1674) and William Smith (1739)* (Delmar NY: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1975), p. 13, sect. 5. The long “f” and “s” have been silently updated in these quotations. Subsequent references will be to Smith’s translation in this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text by page and section numbers.


21 Burke’s suspicious treatment of the pleasures arising from artificial “imitation” as a social phenomenon (aligned with feminized beauty) as opposed to the immediacy of the sublime remove him from such self-conscious paradoxes (Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. J. T. Boulton [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1958], p. 49). Part 6, on words, strives to avoid the mimetic nature of language by insisting upon the objective, material nature of words, interested as he is in the obscurity created in the process (pp. 163–77). Although Burke is not my subject here, we should note the Scriblerian quality of this view of language as material.

22 Horace’s characteristic self-deprecation in removing himself from the list of true poets, is, of course, an important weapon for writers such as Joseph Warton, who quotes the relevant passage (*Satires* 1.4.38) in the dedication to his *Essay on Pope* (p. viii).


29 See Noggle’s cogent summary of interpretations of the power relations of the sublime, stressing the undetermined positions of the tradition before Burke and Immanuel Kant (*Skeptical Sublime*, pp. 8–11).

30 Fredric V. Bogel’s *The Difference Satire Makes: Rhetoric and Reading from Jonson to Byron* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 2001) argues by analogy with anthropological theory that the creation of difference where there is a threat of similarity is what constitutes satiric discourse (see especially chap. 2, pp. 41–83). From the perspective of genre theory, Charles A. Knight identifies the self-reflexive differentiation of satire in complementary terms: satire “imitates imitation itself. It imitates either appearance or art in order to criticize; it deliberately distorts its model to expose it or to distance its readers from it. It may imitate fictive discourse in a way that restores the context where fictive discourse excludes, and the inclusion of context (the satirist claims) reveals the imitated discourse as unnatural” (“Satire, Speech, and Genre,” *CL* 44, 1 [Winter 1992]: 22–41, 27–8).


35 This is taken up in greater detail in a survey of attitudes toward textuality in the tradition of Menippean satire in Christopher Fanning, “Small Particles of Eloquence: Sterne and the Scriblerian Text,” *MP* 100, 3 (February 2003): 360–92.


41 The first phrase is Lamb’s (*Sterne’s Fiction*, p. 135).
42 This definition is taken from a note to Longinus (p. 60, sect. 23), by Dr. Pearce (Longinus, p. 160).
43 Although we should note that, for all modern readers since the first Renaissance edition in 1554, *Peri Hypsous* appears with the scholarly trappings of annotated editions or translations.
45 Longinus, pp. 30–1, sect. 10. I have restored the first sentence, and the beginning of the next, from the translator’s notes (p. 140), and transliterated the original Greek.
46 Jacques Derrida has attempted to show that writing is not merely supplemental in the sense of a superfluous addition, but rather a constitutive supplement, fulfilling a fundamental lack in language. That is, writing is a third-level supplement to speech, but also something in itself: it is so constitutive of the system that no simple replacement of signifier with signified is possible without destroying the system of signification itself (*Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak [Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976], pp. 141–64, especially pp. 144–5).
49 One of Sterne’s letters proudly quotes Lord Bathurst’s invitation to dinner as an indication of his membership in the Scriblerian tradition: “I have lived my life with geniuses of that cast [i.e., Pope and Swift]; but have survived them; and, despairing ever to find their equals, it is some years since I have closed my accounts, and shut up my books, with thoughts of never opening them again: but you have kindled a desire in me of opening them once more before I die; which I now do; so go home and dine with me” (Sterne to Mrs. Daniel Draper, March 1767, *Letters of Laurence Sterne*, ed. Lewis Perry Curtis [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935], p. 305).
50 Similarly, when Burke describes *Tristram Shandy* in a review, we are not surprised to detect the physiological language of the *Enquiry*’s theory of the sublime: “The author perpetually digresses; or rather having no determined end in view, he runs from object to object, as they happen to strike a very lively and very irregular imagination. These digressions so frequently repeated, instead of relieving the reader, become at length tiresome. The book is a perpetual series of disappointments” (qtd. in *Sterne: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Alan B. Howes [Boston and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974], pp. 106).