

**ON THE SUBLIME**  
**GUEST EDITORS: ÉVA ANTAL AND ZOLTÁN CORA**

**Introduction**

The encounter with sublimity, whether sensual or verbal, has been accompanied by the experience of strong emotions ever since the term appeared in critical discourse. The rhetoric of the sublime was first examined in the classical handbook of Longinus, *Peri Hypsous* (“On the Sublime”), while during the time of its re-discovery, in the long eighteenth century, different interpretations attempted to characterize and analyze its features. “The great,” “the highest,” “the majestic”—these are only a few of the synonyms one can come across in the theoretical works of John Dennis, Joseph Addison, and, later, for instance, William Wordsworth (Hipple 16-17).<sup>1</sup> In addition to works of literary criticism, numerous texts have discussed the philosophical, moral, and aesthetic implications of the term, from Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry*, through Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* to twentieth-century modern and postmodern approaches (cf. Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jacques Derrida). The common denominator in all these discussions is that the tension between the knowable, familiar world and the constant pressure of the unknown, the incomprehensible and uncontrollable, remains a significant attribute of the sublime experience, while the loss of a meaningful relation between words and the intensity of the individual experience of reality permeates the aesthetics of the sublime from romantic to postmodern art.

The dynamic ambiguity of the sublime presents an inescapable puzzlement to the reader. The Latin roots of the word “sublime,” *sublimis*, suggest the state of “-lime/-liminal” both in the sense of threshold (*limen*) and that of boundary (*limes*), while the prefix “sub” means “below,” “under,” and “up from underneath.” The term itself refers to a movement that leads vertically “up to a threshold” and horizontally “out to the margin,” thus, the study of the sublime, by definition, entails a spatial progress aiming at the confines of interpretation and even beyond them. As James Twitchell points out, the understanding of the sublime involves “the process of physically transcending external limits while simultaneously crossing the psychological boundary of consciousness” (3).<sup>2</sup>

This special section presents various interpretations of the sublime. The three papers intend to transcend the classical-rhetorical tradition of the sublime that largely dominated the eighteenth-century literary context, and, instead, thematize the romantic, the natural, the heroic, and even the masculine vs. feminine features of the sublime in nineteenth-century English literary works. The three authors—joined by several other colleagues—first

held a seminar entitled “The Sublime Rhetoric and the Rhetoric of the Sublime in British Literature since the 18<sup>th</sup> Century” at the 13<sup>th</sup> ESSE Conference, held at the National University of Ireland (NUI), Galway in 2016.<sup>3</sup> During the seminar, eight scholars and teachers of English literature from different European universities came together to debate the concepts of the sublime. The idea of the “sublime seminar” had been initiated by Kamila Vranková, and the two of us undertook the task of organizing two sessions as co-convenors. Due to the fruitful discussions that followed the presentations in Galway, we agreed to organize another scholarly meeting, which took place in January 2017, when, at the 13<sup>th</sup> HUSSE Conference in Eger, Hungary, six members of the previous “sublime group” came together at a “sublime seminar reloaded.”

Zoltán Cora (University of Szeged, Hungary) dealt with the early eighteenth-century British literary aesthetics of the sublime, focusing primarily on Dennis’s interpretation, while Antonella Braida (Université de Lorraine, Nancy, France) questioned the relevance of the originally male sublime using Mary Shelley’s female and natural reading of the concept through a parallel interpretation of her two novels. Alice Sukdlová (University of South Bohemia, Czech Republic) elaborated on the special features of sublimity in Victorian Gothic fiction, exemplified by Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, while Vranková (University of South Bohemia, Czech Republic) discussed the ethical aspects of the sublime in contemporary English fantasy fiction. Nataliya Novikova (Moscow Lomonosov State University, Russia) analyzed Thomas Carlyle’s ironic and sublime reading of heroism, while Éva Antal (Eszterházy Károly University, Hungary) addressed the connections between the Burkean and Blakean sublime.

Three of the authors participating in the panel on the sublime in Eger are represented here with the results of their recent research. In each case, the seminar discussions have greatly helped them develop their interpretations of the selected works. The arrangement of the papers follows a chronological order. Antal’s paper on the Burkean and Blakean sublime emphasizes the imaginative potentialities of the liminal state in artistic creation, and presents Burke’s and Blake’s readings of John Milton along a spiral line. In her paper on Mary Shelley’s travel writings, Braida highlights the differences between the male and female modes of the sublime of the Shelleys, along with a discussion of their possible relations to the Wordsworthian version of the concept. Novikova contrasts the sublime and the ironic by placing Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* and *Lectures on Heroes* side by side, and shows how, in the former, the discursive claim that heroes are able to reveal the awful truth about the

world in their visions is destabilized by textual parody and an unreliable narrator.

Being one of the guest editors, I wish to thank my fellow guest editor, Cora Zoltán, for his active contribution to all the discussions of the sublime and his assistance in editing the papers. The two of us also owe a debt of gratitude to Marianna Gula, the general editor of the issue, who, until the end of our cooperation, shared with us the agonizing complexity of sublimity. As the last word of my short introduction, let me quote Vincent de Luca's observation concerning the efforts expected from the reader trying to comprehend the often complicated writings on the sublime: "The sublime is never achieved in the aggrandizement of the defensive, imperial self, but rather in the uncovering and identification of the intellectual self—and this is accomplished by risky leaps of desire or love on both sides of the reader-text divide" (101).

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For further details, see Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla, eds. *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*.

<sup>2</sup> On the liminality of the sublime, see Vranková's "The Ethical Aspects of the Sublime in Modern English Fantasy (Rowling, Pullman, Higgins)."

<sup>3</sup> The seminar proposal is available in *The European English Messenger*, Vol. 24.2 (2015), 18-19 (essenglish.org).

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