



THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
**THE ROMANTIC
SUBLIME**

Edited by **Cian Duffy**



THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION
TO THE ROMANTIC SUBLIME

This is the only collection of its kind to focus on one of the most important aspects of the cultural history of the Romantic period, its sources, and its afterlives. Multidisciplinary in approach, the volume examines the variety of areas of inquiry and genres of cultural productivity in which the sublime played a substantial role during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. With impressive international scope, this *Companion* considers the Romantic sublime in both European and American contexts and features essays by leading scholars from a range of national backgrounds and subject specialisms, including state-of-the-art perspectives in digital and environmental humanities. An accessible, wide-ranging, and thorough introduction, aimed at researchers, students, and general readers alike, and including extensive suggestions for further reading, *The Cambridge Companion to the Romantic Sublime* is the go-to book on the subject.

Cian Duffy is Professor and Chair of English Literature at Lund University, Sweden. He has published on various aspects of the cultural life and intellectual history of Europe in the Romantic period, including work on the Shelley circle, on the sublime, and on Romanticism in the Nordic countries.

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EDITED BY
CIAN DUFFY
Lund University



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ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations and standard editions are used throughout this Companion.

<i>Byron</i>	George Gordon, Lord Byron, <i>A Critical Edition of the Major Works</i> , ed. Jerome J. McGann, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986.
<i>Coleridge</i>	Samuel Taylor Coleridge, <i>The Complete Poems</i> , ed. William Keach, London, Penguin, 1997.
<i>COPJ</i>	Immanuel Kant, <i>Critique of the Power of Judgment</i> (1790), trans. Paul Guyer and Paul Wood, volume 5 of <i>The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant</i> , Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000. All references are to the section number or General Remark (GR) and pagination of the Akademie der Wissenschaften edition of Kant's Complete Works.
<i>Costelloe</i>	Timothy M. Costelloe (ed.), <i>The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present</i> , Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015.
<i>Cultures</i>	Cian Duffy and Peter Howell (eds.), <i>Cultures of the Sublime: Selected Readings, 1700–1830</i> , London, Palgrave, 2011.
<i>Discourse</i>	Peter De Bolla, <i>The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject</i> , London, Blackwell, 1989.
<i>Doran</i>	Robert Doran, <i>The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant</i> , Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015.
<i>Enquiry</i>	Edmund Burke, <i>A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful</i> , London, 1757. All references are to part and section numbers.
<i>Hertz</i>	Neil Hertz, <i>The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime</i> , New York, Columbia University Press, 1985.
<i>Hipple</i>	Walter John Hipple, <i>The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory</i> , Carbondale, University of Illinois Press, 1957.
<i>Keats</i>	John Keats, <i>The Major Works</i> , ed. Elizabeth Cook, Oxford, Oxford World's Classics, 2001.
<i>Landscapes</i>	Cian Duffy, <i>The Landscapes of the Sublime, 1700–1830</i> , London, Palgrave, 2013.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- Longinus* *On the Sublime*, trans. William Smith, London, 1739.
- Monk* Samuel Holt Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1960.
- Nicolson* Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1959.
- Reader* Andrew Asfield and Peter De Bolla (eds.), *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Richardson* Alan Richardson, *The Neural Sublime: Cognitive Theories and Romantic Texts*, Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015.
- Shelley* Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Selected Poems and Prose*, ed. Jack Donovan and Cian Duffy, London, Penguin, 2016.
- Weiskel* Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*, Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- Wordsworth* William Wordsworth, *The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill, Oxford, Oxford World's Classics, 2000.

CIAN DUFFY

Introduction

The Romantic Sublime, Then and Now

In September 1846, Thomas De Quincey invited the readers of *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* to view 'the famous nebula in the constellation of Orion' through what was then the most powerful telescope in the world: 'Come', De Quincey says, 'and I will show you what is sublime!'¹ Scarcely less sublime than the 'frightful' nebula itself, De Quincey thought, was the 'almost awful telescope', the so-called Leviathan of Parsonstown, which had 'inaugurated' a 'new era for the human intellect' by making it possible to see 'effectively into the mighty depths of space', into 'the abyss of the heavenly wilderness' (403, 400). Published in a mainstream periodical well beyond the high tide of the Romantic period in Britain, De Quincey's claim for the twin 'magnitudes' of the night sky and human endeavour wouldn't have struck any of his readers as particularly original (403). As many as forty years earlier, as William Wordsworth records in his poem 'Star Gazers' (1807), 'Show men' in London's Leicester Square (and in other cities around Europe) had been charging passers-by to look through a telescope at the 'resplendent vault' of the 'heavens' or at 'the silver Moon with all her Vales, and Hills of mightiest fame' (lines 5, 7, 12, 15). What is significant about De Quincey's invitation is that it reveals how the sublime had become, over the course of the previous hundred years, a key component of an extraordinarily diverse range of areas of enquiry and genres of cultural productivity in Europe and America, from philosophical aesthetics to Gothic novels, and a key motivator of emergent cultural practices like commercial tourism and the kind of commodified popular science exemplified in De Quincey's own essay.²

This widespread engagement with the sublime first became the subject of sustained academic interest in the early twentieth century, when cultural historians in Europe and America began to speculate about its origins and to examine how it was manifested in philosophical aesthetics, in literature, in painting and in music. The most studied aspect of it remains the extensive theoretical speculation about the nature and causes of sublime experience in eighteenth-century philosophical aesthetics, what Peter De Bolla calls 'the

discourse on the sublime'.³ But it is undoubtedly the case that the engagement with the sublime remains (for better or for worse) a major emblem and archetype – arguably *the* emblem and archetype – of the wider cultural movement that scholars have called 'Romanticism'. The image that most often serves to represent Romanticism, and which provides the cover for this *Companion*, Caspar David Friedrich's *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (Wanderer above the Sea of Fog) (c. 1818), is an image of the sublime. Canons of national Romanticisms consistently foreground engagements with the sublime, whether it be Victor Frankenstein's encounter with his creature on the Mer de Glace; Thomas Cole's paintings of the American wilderness; the Gothic forests and mountains of Ann Radcliffe's novels and the plays and poems of Friedrich Schiller and Gottfried Bürger; Wordsworth's account of crossing the Alps in *The Prelude* (1805); the Italian vistas described by Madame De Staël, Ugo Foscolo and Giacomo Leopardi; the Swiss landscapes of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie* (1761) and Adam Mickiewicz's *Lausanne Lyrics* (c. 1839–40); the Nordic scenes from Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written during a Short Residence* (1796) and the paintings of Knud Baade and J. C. Dahl; the symphonic poems of Franz Liszt and the symphonies and concertos of Ludwig van Beethoven; or the apocalyptic canvases of John Martin, J. M. W. Turner and Joseph Wright. Historians of culture, too, still routinely use the development of interest in the sublime to describe a perceived transition from eighteenth-century Neoclassicism to Romanticism.

Hence, when Philip Shaw wrote that 'the sublime has a history', he might more properly have written that it has *two*.⁴ There is the history of the sublime as it was engaged, experienced, mediated and commodified during the eighteenth century and Romantic period; and then there is the much more recent history of the sublime as part of the wider academic study of Romanticism, the history of what scholars, following Thomas Weiskel's landmark study, have called 'the Romantic sublime'. Both these histories, and the complex and often contradictory relationship between them, are explored in this *Companion*.

Reapproaching 'the Romantic Sublime'

In his essay 'On Goethe' (1798), the German poet and philosopher Novalis argues that the idea of a 'classical literature', presented by his contemporaries as a gold standard to be imitated, is less a fact of history than an invention of modern scholarship. 'Classical literature', Novalis writes, 'is not a given, it is not there already, but it has first to be produced by us. We can bring a classical literature – which the ancients themselves did not

possess – into existence only by keen and intelligent study of the ancients.’⁵ *The Cambridge Companion to the Romantic Sublime* starts from a similar provocation: what has been called ‘the Romantic sublime’ is not a concrete historical phenomenon, of which Romantic-period writers and thinkers were purposively aware, but rather an academic *construct*: a conceptual tool formulated by historians of literature and culture in the twentieth century to describe various tropes and practices visible in cultural texts from across late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe and America.⁶

As a *construct*, the Romantic sublime has evolved to include four key assumptions. First: that it is actually possible to detect and to describe a uniform ‘Romantic’ configuration of the sublime in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century responses to a wide variety of different experiential contexts. Second: that this uniform Romantic sublime broadly coincides with the paradigm described by Immanuel Kant in the ‘Analytic of the Sublime’ from his *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790). Third: that discussions in (a few, supposedly key) works of eighteenth-century British and German philosophical aesthetics were the primary context for the generation and motivation of ideas about the sublime in the Romantic period, typically including Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757). Fourth: that explanations of ‘sublime’ experience should be sought primarily in psychology rather than in physiology or other embodied phenomena. Each of these assumptions is subjected to sustained criticism in *The Cambridge Companion to the Romantic Sublime*: a key aim of our essays is to question the extent to which the Romantic sublime as a construct is still adequate (if it ever was adequate) to describe the multifaceted engagement with the sublime during the late eighteenth century and Romantic period.

Two influential early studies of the history of the aesthetic in the eighteenth century laid the groundwork for the construct of a uniform Romantic sublime: Samuel Holt Monk’s *The Sublime* (1935, 1960) and, to a lesser but still significant extent, Marjorie Hope Nicolson’s *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory* (1959). Monk and Nicolson posit different, though not incompatible, hypotheses for what they see as the emergence of a new interest in the sublime in the eighteenth century and both identify the Romantic period as the culmination of that process. From different starting points, and for different reasons, both also argue that Romantic-period writers and thinkers agreed in understanding the sublime as a property and product of the human mind rather than of the external world, and therefore aligned with idealist rather than empiricist philosophies.

For Monk, the rediscovery and making available in French and English translations, in the early eighteenth century, of the first-century CE treatise *Peri hýpsous* (On the Sublime), attributed to Longinus, led to a renewed interest in how certain forms of language could generate an extreme affective response in the reader or listener, the so-called rhetorical sublime. From the ‘fountain-head’ of Longinus, Monk claims, the understanding of the sublime in British eighteenth-century philosophical aesthetics ‘slowly develops ... into a subjective or semi-subjective concept’; there is a ‘transition’, Monk says, from ‘the idea that sublimity in some way depends upon qualities residing in the object’ to a ‘psychological or even physiological investigation into the origin of aesthetic experience’ (Monk, 10, 4, 86). Monk points to certain works of philosophical aesthetics as especial motivators of this ‘transition’, notably including Burke’s *Enquiry*, which (in a now routinely quoted passage) insists on the centrality of the *vicarious* experience of ‘terror’ to the sublime:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*... When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful. (Enquiry I viii)

According to Monk, this teleological ‘growth’ of the aesthetics of the sublime ‘toward a subjective point of view reaches its fulness in Kant’ and his ‘Analytic of the Sublime’ (Monk, 9). Kant’s *Critique*, Monk says, is the ‘unconscious goal’ of eighteenth-century philosophical aesthetics, ‘the great document that coordinates and synthesises the aesthetic concepts which had been current throughout the eighteenth century’ by concluding that ‘sublimity as an aesthetic concept is ... entirely subjective’ (4, 8).

From a different starting point and using a different hypothesis, Nicolson outlines a similar trajectory towards a subjectivist aesthetics of the sublime reaching its apex in the Romantic period. According to Nicolson, a second revolution in astronomy, enabled by advances in optical technology in the late seventeenth century, started a cultural process by which the affective responses previously occasioned by the idea of a creator-god came progressively to be transferred to the most awe-inspiring phenomena of the natural world, now increasingly understood as manifestations of divine power, the so-called natural sublime. Like Monk, Nicolson points to certain texts as having had a decisive influence on this process, but while Monk focuses on works of philosophical aesthetics like *Peri hýpsous*, Burke’s *Enquiry*, and Kant’s *Critique*, Nicolson emphasizes, rather, the role of writings in natural

philosophy, particularly Thomas Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1681, 1684). 'Basic and radical changes' took place in 'theology, philosophy, geology, astronomy', Nicolson argues, in order to drive interest in and develop understanding of the sublime (Nicolson, 3).

From this broader cultural-historical perspective, then, Nicolson, reads *Peri hýpsous* less as a 'fountain-head' (Monk's word) for new attitudes than as providing a glossary of terms for describing those new attitudes. Monk and Nicolson agree, however, in reading William Wordsworth's account of crossing the Alps in Book VI of *The Prelude* (1805) as the 'apotheosis' of 'the experience that lay behind the eighteenth-century sublime', as Monk puts it (Monk, 231). Monk argues for 'a general similarity between the point of view of the *Critique of Judgement* and the *Prelude*' and uses this 'analogy' to bolster his reading of the *Critique* as 'the book' in which the discussion of the sublime in eighteenth-century philosophical aesthetics was 'refined and re-interpreted' (5, 10). Nicolson, as we have seen, downplays the significance of philosophical aesthetics – barely mentioning either Burke or Kant – but she, too, reads the engagement with the sublime in Book VI of *The Prelude* as 'the perfect expression' of what she calls 'the aesthetics of the infinite', an aesthetics predicated on an understanding of the sublime as evidence of the 'workings of one mind', be it divine or human.⁷

In *The Romantic Sublime* (1976), Thomas Weiskel followed Monk and Nicolson in reading Book VI of *The Prelude* as what he calls a 'set piece of the sublime' (Weiskel, 196). 'The essential claim of the sublime', so Weiskel begins, 'is that man can, in feeling and in speech, transcend the human' (3). Weiskel's subsequent interrogation of this 'claim' agrees with what he calls Monk's 'classic history of the sublime' and the 'precision' of its core argument that 'Kant established decisively the discrimination of the aesthetic boundary' while 'at the same time he located the judgements of the sublime and the beautiful in a network of a priori relations to the cognitive and ethical dimensions of the mind' (5, 13, 38). Reading from a psychological perspective, Weiskel adds post-Freudian ideas to the Kantian paradigm, a move later extended by Neil Hertz in *The End of the Line* (1985), arguing that 'the sublime moment recapitulates and thereby reestablishes the oedipus complex' and that both 'positive' and 'negative' versions of 'the Romantic sublime' are therefore visible in works like *Prelude VI*, involving successful or interrupted 'transcendence' of a subject-object/mind-world dichotomy (Weiskel, 94, 103, 135).

This supposed trajectory of engagements with the sublime during the eighteenth-century towards a uniform Romantic configuration of the experience, broadly consistent with the transcendental idealist paradigms of Kant's 'Analytic' and visible in an array of late eighteenth- and early

nineteenth-century cultural texts from various national contexts, is the 'history' of 'the sublime' to which Shaw points. And it has been a remarkably influential history, informing many engagements with the sublime after Weiskel, including single-author studies, wider-scale histories and surveys, and even works rightly critical of the biases implicit in the Romantic configuration of the sublime, such as Barbara Freeman's *The Feminine Sublime* (1995). As Adam Potkay puts it in his thoughtful essay on 'The British Romantic Sublime', which is not so well known as it should be, 'subsequent criticism on the Romantic and post-Romantic sublime has drawn heavily on [Weiskel's model], more often than not accepting its main points uncritically'.⁸ But from the outset, there have also been dissenting voices and those voices have grown louder in recent years. Not least amongst them is Potkay himself, who opens his essay with thought-provoking questions about the relationship between how 'the Romantics conceive[d] of the sublime' and how 'critics conceived of the Romantic sublime'.⁹

The Romantic Sublime and the Sublime in the Romantic Period

Let's pause, for a moment, to specify the precise nature of the problem here. The question is not whether the analysis of the sublime offered by Kant in his *Critique of the Power of Judgement* is accurate, which is irrelevant. The question is not the extent to which Kant's 'Analytic of the Sublime' influenced the subsequent history of the aesthetic in the global North, which is indisputable. The question is to what extent the critical construct of the Romantic sublime is useful, accurate or effective as a conceptual tool for describing the place of the sublime in the cultural history of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe. Or, to put that same question another way: To what extent has the construct of the Romantic sublime been imposed upon and distorted the discursive and experiential history of engagements with the sublime during the Romantic period?

As a representative case-in-point here we might consider the place of the sublime in the genre of 'Gothic' literature that emerged and flourished in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in the hands of influential, internationally known and commercially successful practitioners like Ann Radcliffe. Gothic writing is often indebted, explicitly or implicitly, to discussions in philosophical aesthetics, of the connection between terror and the sublime, of what Anna Aikin calls 'the Pleasure derived from Objects of Terror'.¹⁰ Gothic narratives frequently feature the kinds of landscapes and persons increasingly being denominated as 'sublime': mountains, forests, oceans, tyrants and monsters, the mentally ill. Gothic writing very often also engages with the link between sublime landscapes and religious experience,

theorized by philosophers like Archibald Alison and Thomas Reid. And yet Gothic literature – which, on account of its runaway popularity, was one of the most prominent and accessible cultural contexts in which sublime affects could be encountered – exhibits little of the Romantic Sublime, as that construct has been traditionally defined by academic histories. This is not, of course, to say that what scholars have called the Romantic configuration of the sublime played no part in the cultural history of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe. But it certainly does recommend caution about any claim that the Romantic Sublime was the primary or even a dominant contemporary mode of the sublime, supposedly spanning national traditions and borders.

The first scholar to question the ‘summary proposition’ of Monk’s narrative history of the sublime was Walter Hipple, who observes, in his unjustly neglected study *The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory* (1957) that ‘it seems doubtful that the intellectual history of any age can be viewed, without distortion, as a progression towards some one culmination’ (Hipple, 284). Accordingly, Hipple argues against the possibility of ‘narrative propositions’ about eighteenth-century philosophical aesthetics that ‘will neither conflict with the data nor be so vaguely general as to be nugatory’ (5). ‘Not finding a history in the subject, and not desiring to superimpose one’, Hipple focuses instead on ‘the analysis of texts, interposing historical conjectures only where clear-cut intellectual causes appear’ (6).

In *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory* (1996), Andrew Ashfield and Peter Bolla also critique the ‘scholarly tradition’, deriving from Monk, ‘that has repeatedly told a story about the beginning of aesthetics in eighteenth-century Britain in terms of a gradual shift towards the Kantian critique of judgement’ (Reader, 2). Ashfield and De Bolla outline two problems with this ‘tradition’. First: it distorts the relationship between investigations of the sublime in different national contexts around Europe by ‘explicitly casting the British discussion as a kind of dress rehearsal for the full-fledged philosophical aesthetics of Immanuel Kant and his heirs’ rather than considering the full variety of aesthetics across the continent (3). Second: in its emphasis on subjectivity, this ‘tradition’ also distorts and simplifies the British enquiry into the sublime. ‘While parts of the British tradition can be seen in terms of ... the gradual development of “subjectivism”’, Ashfield and De Bolla remark, ‘the vast bulk of discussion and debate is not exclusively concerned with “autonomous subjectivity” at all’ – and so, in histories like Monk’s, ‘much is left out or to one side’ (3).

Many of the essays in Timothy Costelloe’s collection *The Sublime: From Antiquity in the Present* (2012) also query what Costelloe calls in his

introduction, following Ashfield and De Bolla, the ‘common lore’ about the place of the sublime in the history of aesthetics (*Costelloe*, 2). Ashfield and De Bolla note how ‘the aesthetic, at least since Kant, has been understood as without political or ethical motivation since its *affective* registers are, according to the Kantian model, disinterested’ – although they also point out that this is partly a ‘misreading of the Kantian text, where the political and ethical constantly impress themselves’ (*Reader*, 2–3). In a similar vein, Adam Potkay’s essay in Costelloe’s collection notes how, in academic studies of the sublime, an emphasis on ‘the mind’s transcendence of a natural or social world’ and ‘the rigorous exclusion of ethics’ has obscured the extent to which ‘the sublime and morality’ are intertwined, not just in Kant’s text but also in a much wider range of British Romantic-period engagements with the sublime (*Costelloe*, 203, 207). ‘We need’, Potkay concludes, ‘to move beyond the way the Romantic sublime has been thought of in the past’ (*Costelloe*, 216).

Alan Richardson, in *The Neural Sublime* (2015), also takes issue with the dominance of Kantian paradigms in academic histories of the sublime following Monk and Weiskel, arguing: ‘We need to reconsider the competing accounts [of the sublime] of Burke and others in the British tradition not so much as stepping stones to Kant but as intriguing constructions in their own right that, after all, would have been more familiar to British Romantic-era writers than would have been Kant, then only known to a few’ (*Richardson*, 25). Doing so, Richardson writes, ‘disrupts teleological readings of the sublime tradition, such as Samuel Holt Monk’s, that trace the growing internalization or psychologizing of the sublime to its culmination in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*’ and allows us to recognize the more embodied configurations of the sublime in eighteenth-century philosophical aesthetics, notably including the physiological arguments of Burke’s *Enquiry*, which Kant (and Monk) dismissed, but which others, like Thomas Reid in Scotland and Johann Gottfried Herder in Germany, embraced (*Richardson*, 24–5; *Monk*, 96).

My own earlier work on the sublime – in *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime* (2005), *Cultures of the Sublime* (2011) and *The Landscapes of the Sublime, 1700–1830* (2013) – has likewise sought to examine how an ‘uncritical acceptance’ (to use Potkay’s phrase) of the idea of a uniform and essentially Kantian Romantic sublime has often obscured, if not altogether misrepresented, the place of the sublime in various aspects of the cultural history of the Romantic period, from the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley to the manifold literary and scientific responses triggered by dramatic natural phenomena in different cultural and geographical contexts. Most recently, in my chapter on ‘The Romantic Sublime’ in *The Cambridge*

History of European Romantic Literature (2023), I return again to the Gordian relationship between two histories of the sublime, between what I call there ‘the history of the sublime *at* the time’ and ‘the history of the sublime *since* the time’, and explore the extent to which the latter has been imposed upon the former and the consequences of this imposition for our understanding of the Romantic period.

In each of their various ways, the essays in *The Cambridge Companion to the Romantic Sublime* continue this reassessment of the Romantic sublime. The topics we cover by no means exhaust the extraordinary range, diversity and complexity of Romantic-period engagements with the sublime. But they do provide a good indication of the scope and significance of this cultural phenomenon and its subsequent legacy to some of today’s most pressing concerns about the relationship between humans and the non-human world.

Structure and Scope

The essays in *The Cambridge Companion to the Romantic Sublime* are grouped in three, loosely chronological parts, pitched before, during and after the Romantic period, broadly defined. But the essays themselves often challenge received teleologies and demarcations of period and national boundaries, mindful, like Hipple, of ‘not finding a history in the subject, and not desiring to superimpose one’ (Hipple, 6). This is especially true of the four essays in [Part 1](#), ‘The Sublime before Romanticism’, each of which not only refuses to conceptualize the sublime it describes as ‘pre-Romantic’, or intelligible only in relation to Romanticism, but also extends our understanding of the range of different ‘sublimes’ available to eighteenth-century and Romantic-period writers around Europe. In [Chapter 1](#), ‘The Classical Sublime’, Patrick Glauthier addresses what he sees as the overemphasis on Longinus in traditional histories of classical and eighteenth-century aesthetics, making clear that eighteenth-century and Romantic-period writers who were well versed in classical literature would have had access to a much greater diversity of engagements with the sublime than has usually been recognized by academic studies, following Monk, which assume Longinus to have been their primary interlocutor. In a similar move, Dawn Hollis, in [Chapter 2](#), ‘The Natural Sublime in the Seventeenth Century’, returns to Thomas Burnet’s *Theory of the Earth* (1681), which has often been read as ‘an early precursor to the Romantic Sublime’. Rereading Burnet alongside contemporaries like Athanasius Kircher and William Lithgow, however, Hollis argues that rather than viewing the natural sublime as an *invention* of the Romantic period, we should instead understand eighteenth-century and Romantic-period writers to have developed a new vocabulary and a new

conceptual framework for describing affective responses with a far longer history and a far wider visibility in seventeenth-century cultural texts. My own essay, [Chapter 3](#), ‘The Sublime in Eighteenth-Century English, Irish and Scottish Philosophy’, challenges the still influential narrative, deriving ultimately from Monk, which reads accounts of the sublime in eighteenth-century British and Irish philosophical aesthetics as moving progressively closer to the transcendental idealist paradigms set out by Kant in his *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. I map, instead, a thriving, empirical and associationist aesthetics that has often been left out of academic accounts of the Romantic sublime but which was much more immediately accessible to Romantic-period writers in Britain and Ireland than German philosophy. Lis Møller’s essay, [Chapter 4](#), ‘The Nordic Sublime’, brings [Part I](#) to a close. Møller explores the still relatively undocumented role of the ‘landscapes, climates, peoples and creatures of Norse myth’ – newly accessible outside Scandinavia through eighteenth-century antiquarian scholarship, through travel writing, and through classical and contemporary Nordic poetry circulating in translation across national and linguistic borders – as repertoires of sublime tropes, narratives and settings for an array of Romantic-period cultural texts from around Europe.

The essays in [Part II](#), ‘Romantic Sublimes’, explore a representative, though certainly not exhaustive, selection of themes and contexts that became major focal points for engagements with the sublime during the Romantic period. Some of these are very familiar; others are areas of historical significance to which scholars have only recently begun to turn their attention, armed with new understandings of the wider cultural history of Romantic-period Europe. Christoph Bode opens [Part II](#) with [Chapter 5](#), ‘German Romanticism and the Sublime’, and leads us on a grand tour through philosophy, literature, painting and music, from Goethe to Beethoven. In [Chapter 6](#), ‘The Romantic Sublime and Kant’s Critical Philosophy’, Timothy Costelloe keeps us in Germany with his reappraisal of the place of the sublime in Kant’s aesthetics, looking before and after, at Kant’s indebtedness to earlier eighteenth-century works of philosophical aesthetics and at responses to Kant’s ‘Analytic’ by writers like Coleridge, Ahrendt and Lyotard.

In [Chapter 7](#), ‘Alpine Sublimes’, Patrick Vincent takes us back to some of the most familiar landscapes of the Romantic sublime: the Alps. Vincent considers why the Alps became so central to interest in the sublime; offers fresh readings of key Romantic-period responses, such as Book VI of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*; and sketches the afterlife of the Alpine sublime in the later nineteenth century. While engagements with the sublime during the Romantic period have often been understood as concerned, primarily, with

non-human landscapes, Matthew Sangster, in [Chapter 8](#), ‘Urban Sublimes’, reminds us that cityscapes, too, were thought sublime. Concentrating on London, but glancing also at Paris and Rome, Sangster tests the notion of the Romantic sublime against some canonical and lesser-known Romantic-period writings about the city.

From the streets of Europe’s capitals, Simon Bainbridge leads us upwards once more, in [Chapter 9](#), ‘Highlands, Lakes, Wales’, to some of the most celebrated peaks of British Romanticism, exploring anew the connection between the mountain sublime and the rise of domestic tourism and showing how that link was represented in a range of letters, journals, notebooks and poems. Richard C. Sha, in [Chapter 10](#), ‘Science and the Sublime’, shows how ideas about the sublime were often integrally related to the theory and practice of science in the Romantic period, in various disciplines and national contexts – giving the lie to John Keats’ claim, in *Lamia* (1820), that ‘the mere touch of cold philosophy’ would ‘unweave’ the ‘awful rainbow’ (Part 2, lines 229–38). In [Chapter 11](#), ‘Musical Sublimes’, Miranda Stanyon surveys the complex relationship between music and the sublime during the Romantic period: her essay introduces the variety of music bound up with the sublime, from Covent Garden musicals to the symphonies of Beethoven, and outlines the centrality of music to debates in philosophical aesthetics and the broader cultural imaginary of the Romantic period.

In [Chapter 12](#), ‘The Arctic Sublime’, Robert W. Rix guides us on an expedition through the frozen wastes of the northern polar regions, showing how a discourse of the Arctic sublime, often cultivated by those who knew the landscapes only vicariously, emerged in parallel with attempts, motivated by scientific, political and commercial interests, to explore and map the Arctic wilderness. Moving from the icy to the corporeal, Norbert Lennartz’s essay, [Chapter 13](#), ‘The Body and the Sublime’, extends the attention recently shown by scholars such as Alan Richardson to how eighteenth-century thinkers addressed the embodied aspects of the experience. Lennartz documents how the body, in a range of European Romanticisms, is understood to be in a relentless transition from short-lived Promethean sublimity to abjection, or from fire to dust (as Byron would have it). In [Chapter 14](#), ‘The Sublime in Romantic Painting’, Nina Amstutz examines the influence of philosophical descriptions of the sublime, by thinkers like Burke and Kant, on theorists of visual art such as Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight, as well as on Romantic-period paintings of dramatic landscapes and natural phenomena, of animal violence, and of emergent industrialization. Andrew McInnes, in [Chapter 15](#), ‘From the Sublime to the Ridiculous’, uses the well-known aphorism, which has its roots in the Romantic-period, as the touchstone for examining the complex relationship between sublimity and

humour in a selection of English and German Romantic-period writings, with special focus on the German novelist and philosopher Jean Paul Richter. Cassandra Falke closes [Part II](#) with [Chapter 16](#), ‘The Sublime in American Romanticism’. Falke takes as her focus the nature writing of William Bartram, which she identifies not only as an influence on subsequent representations of the sublime in English and American Romanticisms but also as offering a philosophically distinctive model of sublime experiences in wild ecosystems.

[Part III](#), ‘Legacies’, explores the afterlife of engagements with the sublime during the Romantic period, new methodological approaches to those engagements, and the cultural impact of the Romantic sublime as a critical construct. In [Chapter 17](#), ‘The Victorian Chthonic Sublime’, Tatjana Jukić reads altered attitudes to the sublime as a key component of the Victorian response to Romanticism, arguing that a revision of Romantic-period ideas about the natural sublime was a necessary condition for the emergent modernity visible in some Victorian literature and painting. In [Chapter 18](#), ‘Mapping the Nineteenth-Century Sublime’, Joanna Taylor, Christopher Donaldson, and Ian Gregory use state-of-the-art methodologies in digital humanities to trace occurrences of the term ‘sublime’ in a corpus of 10,000 Anglophone texts from the 1890s; doing so allows them to map geographical hot-spots for the sublime at the end of the nineteenth century and also to chart correspondences and deviations from how and where ‘sublime’ was being used during the Romantic period. In [Chapter 19](#), ‘The Romantic Sublime and Environmental Crisis’, Tess Somervell brings our volume to a close on an urgent note. Noting how an aesthetics of the sublime continues to shape representations of, and responses to, environmental catastrophe in the global North, Somervell queries whether the concept of the Romantic sublime, based on Kantian paradigms of transcendence, is either possible or desirable in the current crisis. Understanding environmental catastrophe as in various ways the product of the early nineteenth century, Somervell’s essay looks again at Romantic-period engagements with the natural sublime to assess the role they might play in helping us to rethink our relationship to the non-human world.

NOTES

- 1 Thomas De Quincey, ‘System of the Heavens as Revealed by Lord Rosse’s Telescopes’ (1846), quoted from Grevel Lindop (gen. ed.), *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, 21 vols., London, Pickering & Chatto, 2000–3, vol. 15, 403.
- 2 For the sublime and popular science in De Quincey’s ‘System of the Heavens’, see *Landscapes*, 174–90.