

(Religious) Language and the Decentering Process: McNamara and *De Sublimitate* on the Ecstatic Effect of Language

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Abstract: This article outlines how the perspective of *De Sublimitate* concerning the effect of great literature resembles ancient and modern notions of religious experience. To demonstrate this similarity, the article draws on McNamara's concept of the decentering process in religious experience. This concept of the decentering process serves as a framework for understanding how an encounter with writing that the author deems to be *hupsos* ("sublime" or "elevated") has similar decentering effects. The article engages, but also moves slightly beyond, McNamara's understanding of the role of language in the decentering process. The first part of the article provides an overview of McNamara's concept of decentering. In particular, it highlights four aspects of the decentering process: (1) the loss of agency; (2) the experience of ecstasy; (3) the role of the emotions; and (4) the cognitive changes that occur during and after the process. The second part of the article demonstrates the presence of similar ideas in *De Sublimitate*'s discussion of the effects of encountering literature that is characterized as *hupsos*. The concluding section considers how this reading of *De Sublimitate* aids in an understanding of the relationship between religious texts and religious experience, drawing a connection with Celia Deutsch's concept of "text work" as religious experience.

Keywords: decentering; ecstasy; religious experience; religious language; sublime.

"Language, therefore, is shaped by and shapes the decentering process" – Patrick McNamara (2009: 210)

"For the effect of genius is not to persuade (*εἰς πείθω*) the audience but rather to transport them out of themselves (*ἀλλ’ εἰς ἔκστασιν ἔγειται*). Invariably what inspires wonder (*τό θαυμάσιον*) casts a spell upon us and is always superior to

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what is merely convincing and pleasing. For our convictions are usually under our own control, while such passages exercise an irresistible power of mastery (*δύναστεία*) and get the upper hand with every member of the audience” – *De Sublimitate* 1.4.²

The purpose of this article is to outline how the perspective of *De Sublimitate* concerning the *effect* of great literature resembles ancient and modern notions of religious experience. To do so, I propose taking up McNamara’s concept of the decentering process as a framework for understanding the *effects* of reading or hearing literature that is characterized as ὕψος in the treatise *De Sublimitate*. I hope to engage, but also move somewhat beyond, McNamara’s understanding of the role of language in the decentering process. In the first part of the article, I summarize McNamara’s concept of decentering, drawing attention to the loss of agency, the experience of ecstasy, the role of the emotions, and the cognitive changes that occur during and after the process. In the second part of the article, I demonstrate the manner in which each of these features has analogues in *De Sublimitate*’s discussion of the effects of encountering literature that is characterized by ὕψος. In the conclusion, I consider how this reading of *De Sublimitate* may aid our understanding of religious texts and religious experience.

McNamara’s Concept of Decentering

McNamara argues that one of the major effects or functions of religious experience as a whole is taking the self “off-line” through a decentering process (McNamara 2009: xii). Elsewhere, he likens this decentering process to a general form of “ecstasy” whereby “you are taken outside of yourself” (McNamara 2009: 55). In the decentering process, the executive Self experiences a temporary suspension of agency, i.e. it goes “off-line” or is “taken outside” of itself. This may occur involuntarily, such as through some psychological or physical problem. Or suspension of agency may occur voluntarily by means of religious practices. Among these religious practices, McNamara includes “ascetical techniques” like fasting, sleep deprivation, and ritual performance (McNamara 2009: 50).

After being taken “off-line”, an individual enters into a “suppositional space” that McNamara names the “possible worlds box” (McNamara 2009: 50). This “possible worlds box” facilitates the search for an ideal notion of Self, which helps resolve the psychological or physical problem facing the

2. Text and translation for *De Sublimitate* are from “Longinus” 1927.

individual. The new Self that emerges from the decentering process has “access to a wider range of neurocognitive capacities” and experiences an increased “control over decision-making capacities, attentional resources, and behavior” (McNamara 2009: 52). The Self that emerges from the decentering process, in other words, has experienced a shift in the cognitive structures by which he or she views the world and one’s place in the world.

For the purpose of this article, three additional aspects of the decentering process deserve further attention: the emotions involved in the decentering process; McNamara’s understanding of ecstasy; and the role of religious language in the decentering process.

First, what emotions are experienced in the decentering process and what role do they play in the process? McNamara includes several emotions among the so-called “religious emotions,” including “gratitude, awe, ‘elevation’, joy, and ecstasy” (McNamara 2009: 53). He locates the experience of these emotions at the conclusion of the decentering process: they occur when the new Self has “linked up” with the ideal Self mediated through the decentering process. These “religious emotions” are, in other words, not the *cause* of decentering, but the *result* or *outcome* of the “link up” at the end of the decentering process.

Next, McNamara provides a relatively narrow definition of ecstasy. He suggests that ecstasy is a “joy so intense that you are taken outside of yourself so that your identity extends beyond your old conception of Self” (McNamara 2009: 55). He then adds nuance to this definition with two quotations from Malinar and Basu’s 2008 entry in the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion* (Malinar and Basu 2008: 241–58). Their entry provides the following additional details to McNamara’s understanding of ecstasy: (1) it differs from possession, hypnosis, or trance because it is based on awareness; (2) the ecstatic experience is reserved for the “adept;” (3) ecstasy is a bridge that provides temporal contact with the “absolute, divine, and transcendent entity, realm, or state;” (4) ecstatic experience takes several forms, e.g., as direct experience, immersion, release of the self from the body, or an experience of “blissful emptiness” (McNamara 2009: 55–56). McNamara’s emphasis that ecstasy takes one outside of one’s self is helpful, but other aspects present problems. Is joy the only emotion that produces or characterizes ecstasy? Can there be something like an ecstatic experience with little or no personal initiative that is nevertheless based in a state of awareness? Finally, is ecstasy reserved only for the “adept” and if so, what constitutes “adeptness”?

Finally, what is the role of language in the decentering process? It is necessary to point out that it is only “religious language”, not language in general, that McNamara considers. Despite this narrow focus, however,

McNamara argues that religious language plays an important role in taking the practitioner “outside” of one’s self. McNamara focuses especially on the role of religious language in “prayer or ritual celebration” (McNamara 2009: 208). Such language is characterized by a more formalized style (McNamara 2009: 206, 208). In addition to prayer and ritual celebration, McNamara also includes God’s speech and the experience of glossolalia (speech in tongues). Finally, he calls attention to the “performative” nature of religious language, following the speech-act theory of Austin (Austin 1975). Whatever its form, religious language works in the decentering process because it enables the individual to “set aside his or her own identity to interact with or participate in the identity of the spirit or God” (McNamara 2009: 208).

To summarize, then, McNamara calls attention to the role and function of the decentering process in religious experience. In the decentering process, a person first experiences a temporary suspension of agency – whether physically, psychologically, or through certain religious practices. The suspension of agency takes the Self “off-line”. One form of being taken “off line” emerges through an ecstatic experience, which takes an individual outside of one’s self. Religious language helps facilitate the decentering process. While off-line, the individual searches for an ideal form of the Self that can better handle internal and external problems. This ideal Self is then linked up with the old Self, which often results in the experience of certain religious emotions. In addition to the experience of these emotions, the decentering process results in a new conception of the Self, especially as it relates to cognitive structures and decision-making abilities.

Several aspects of McNamara’s theory of religious experience will undergird my analysis of *De Sublimitate*. To focus my discussion, I will call attention to how *De Sublimitate* describes an encounter with “sublime texts” with four aspects of McNamara’s decentering process: (1) the suspension of agency; (2) ecstatic experience; (3) the experience of powerful emotions; and, (4) cognitive restructuring. Like McNamara, the author of *De Sublimitate* lends to language a decentering and performative function. But, unlike McNamara, *De Sublimitate* highlights the process of reading or encountering sublime texts which are not necessarily religious and the role of the imagination in the decentering process.

***De Sublimitate* and Religious Experience**

Before analysing the presence of these four aspects of the decentering process in *De Sublimitate*, a brief word of introduction about the nature of the treatise is in order.

The anonymous treatise *De Sublimitate* likely dates from the first or second century CE.³ The treatise draws from ancient literary and rhetorical traditions to describe the nature and effect of distinct moments in literature that the author deems to be characterized by ὕψος, “sublimity” or “elevation”.⁴ Earlier, I used the phrase “sublime texts” in reference to these moments; though this does not fit the author’s perspective perfectly, it offers a succinct and useful heuristic. Drawing from examples both positive and negative, the treatise identifies five sources of ὕψος: (1) the conception of impressive thoughts; (2) the use of strong emotion; (3) the proper construction of figures of thought and speech; (4) nobility of diction; and (5) superior sentence composition (*[Subl.] 8*). One of the most striking characteristics of the treatise, moreover, is its view of how sublime texts relate to πειθό, “persuasion”. In the first chapter of the treatise, the author declares that “the effect of genius is not to persuade the audience but rather to transport them outside of themselves” (1.4). Fyfe’s English translation – “to transport them outside of themselves” – can more literally be understood as “leads to ecstasy” (*εἰς ἔκστασιν ἄγει*). In either case, it signals the affinity between sublime texts and McNamara’s decentering process.

Unlike the works of other ancient theorists (e.g., Plutarch, *On the Reading of Poetry*), *De Sublimitate* does not view this ecstatic effect of sublime texts as an escape from everyday realities nor is it portrayed as a threat to moral living. Rather, as I will show below, the author suggests just the opposite: the treatise presents the effect of an encounter with a sublime text as an antidote for moral apathy.

Throughout the treatise, the author’s emphasis on the *ecstatic* effect of an encounter with sublime texts resembles McNamara’s theory of decentering. The classicist Stephen Halliwell has written perceptively about the concept of “poetic ecstasy” in antiquity, which he suggests is especially present in *De Sublimitate* and tied to sublime texts. According to him, poetic ecstasy functions as a “medium of truth-bearing shafts [sic] in insight”. What is more, poetic ecstasy imaginatively transports the hearer “into the lives of others” and “out of one’s own existence yet somehow leaves one with an altered perception of one’s own life” (Halliwell 2011: 9). We can translate Halliwell’s understanding of poetic ecstasy into the terms used to describe the decentering process: poetic ecstasy is able to take the self “off-line” by

3. For an overview of authorship and date, see Russell (1964: xxii–xxx).

4. For the possible meanings of ὕψος, see Russell (1964: xxx–xl). Russell suggests that the term refers not to a manner or style of writing, but to an effect (1964: xliii). Cf. Grube (1957: 355–74), who prefers to think of the term as “great writing”; also, Hill (1966: 265–74), who emphasizes the dimensions of height and light associated with the term.

taking one “out of one’s existence” and results in cognitive restructuring evidenced by an “altered perception of one’s own life”.

With these general comments in mind, we may look more closely at those places that suggest that the nature and effect of an encounter with sublime texts is analogous to the effect of the decentering process and ecstasy in McNamara’s theory of religious experience. As mentioned earlier in the article, I am particularly interested in the overlap between the perspective of *De Sublimitate* and McNamara’s theory under four topics: (1) the suspension of agency; (2) decentering and ecstasy; (3) the role of the emotions; and, (4) cognitive restructuring.

Suspension of Agency in *De Sublimitate*

One of the striking characteristics of sublime texts is their overpowering effect on the hearer. A few brief examples demonstrate this. In one place, the author notes that the imitation (*μίμησις*) of great historians and poets leads an author to be “carried away by the inspiration of another” just like the Pythian priestess is “impregnated with the divine power and is at once inspired to utter oracles” (14.2). Like the Pythian priestess, those would-be writers lose themselves by imitating authors of old. Not only in the composition of literature, but also in the reading or hearing of literature, sublime texts lead to the loss of personal agency. Imagination, along with emotion and argumentation, not only convinces the audience, it “positively masters them” (15.9). In the treatise’s introductory comment on the nature of sublime texts, the author notes that sublime texts cast a spell on the hearer and thus exercise an “irresistible power of mastery” (1.4).

The author of the treatise, like McNamara, notes the distinctive style of certain texts that lead to a decentering effect. Unlike McNamara, however, the author provides a much more thorough discussion of the style and form of sublime texts. Take, for example, the author’s view of sentence composition. He says that proper sentence composition “casts a spell on us and always turns our thoughts toward what is majestic and dignified and sublime and all else it embraces, winning complete mastery over our minds” (39.3). The author uses the metaphors of slavery (*δουλόω*), magic (*κηλέω*), and military victory (*ἐπικρατέω*) to denote the manner in which sublime texts reduce the agency of its hearers.

Decentering and Ecstasy in *De Sublimitate*

De Sublimitate provides an equally compelling picture of the decentering power of great literature. It is the nature of this literature, we recall, to “transport [the audience] outside of themselves” ([*Subl.*] 1.4). Sublime texts

are able to elevate (*ἐπαιρόω*) the human soul (7.3). Through the power of the imagination, great literature transports the audience to the scene or location described by the author (15). For example, the strength of Euripides writing is that it has the power to compel the audience to see what he imagines (15.2). Again, the author locates the effect of sublime texts even with the form of the text itself. A seemingly simple change in verb tense results in making a past event a “vivid actuality” in the present moment of reading (25.1); seemingly minor stylistic and grammatical modifications turn “hearing into sight” (25.2). The great Greek orator Demosthenes, through his use of the figure of apostrophe in *De corona* 206, is said to “carry (*συναρπάσας*) the audience away with him” (16.2). Finally, sublime texts have an effect similar to McNamara’s “possible world box.” The author avers that effective mimesis “will bring those great characters before our eyes, and like guiding stars they will lead our thoughts to the ideal standards of perfection” (14.2).

Though many of the notes above have already made this clear, it is worth emphasizing that for *De Sublimitate* it is language itself or the proper form of language that stimulates the “decentering process.” As one reads further into the treatise, it is striking how mundane, even mechanical some of the author’s observations about the nature of sublime texts are. In his discussion of proper word choice, for example, the author likens melody to the entrancing power of music. The proper selection of words is said to have a similar effect to that of flute, which leads one to experience “divine frenzy” (*κορυβαντιασμοῦ*) (36.2). The author continues:

We hold, then, that composition, which is a kind of melody in words – words which are part of man’s nature and reach not his ears only but his very soul – stirring as it does myriad ideas of words, thoughts, things, beauty, musical charm, all which are born and bred in us ... and by piling phrase on phrase builds up one majestic whole – we hold, I say, that by these very means it casts a spell on us and always turns our thoughts towards what is majestic and dignified and sublime and all else that it embraces, winning a complete mastery over our minds. (39.3)

Whether presented as an entrancing musical instrument or a sudden experience of inspiration, *De Sublimitate* presents the effect of sublime texts as an analogy to or even replacement of standard forms of religious experience in antiquity: rather than the priest or temple, sublime texts provides the medium for an encounter with divinity; in place of initiation rites or religious ritual, an encounter with moments of great literature leads the hearers outside of themselves.

The Role of the Emotions

Although the perspective of *De Sublimitate* has suggested relatively close analogies with McNamara's theory of decentering, the treatise presents a slightly different perspective with regard to the role of the emotions. For McNamara, the emotions represent the consequence or end of religious experience: a person experiences joy or awe because the ideal Self and the new Self link up. In *De Sublimitate*, in contrast, the emotions play a vital role in *facilitating* what McNamara calls the decentering process.

The author of the treatise lists “the inspiration of vehement emotion” as the second source of sublime texts (8.1). The extant treatise, however, retains only a haphazard treatment of the role of the emotions. As it stands, the final sentence of the treatise indicates a turn to the “next question” which treats the emotions, but the manuscript tradition breaks off at this point (44.12). We learn, however, that the author has written previously a “separate treatise” on the emotions (44.12). Further, his predecessor in discussing the nature and effect of ὕψος, Cecilius, had omitted any discussion of the emotions (9.1). The author of *De Sublimitate*, in contrast, insists that genuine emotion in the right place is particularly tied to the effect of sublime texts. In fact, emotion lends to sublime texts some of their religious overtones discussed above. The author declares that emotion “inspires the words as it were with a fine frenzy and fills them with divine afflatus” (8.4).

The treatise highlights the role of terror or awe that results from an encounter with sublime texts. In several places, the author points out the faults of certain writers who fail to attain to a terrifying or awe-inspiring form of writing, although they try. Aeschylus, for example, is said to use imagery that is not terrifying ($\delta\epsilon\delta\epsilon\iota\omega\tau\alpha\iota$) but confusing (3.1); the images move from the terrible ($\mathfrak{\epsilon}\kappa\tau\omega\phi\beta\epsilon\omega\tau\omega$) to the ridiculous ($\mathfrak{t}\omega\epsilon\kappa\kappa\alpha\tau\omega\phi\beta\omega\tau\omega$) (3.2). Similarly, Hesiod's depiction of gloom results in an offensive image, not a terrible one (9.5). Lines from *Arimaspeia*, though intended to be awe-inspiring ($\delta\epsilon\iota\omega\alpha$), turn out to be flowery ($\mathfrak{v}\theta\omega\zeta$) rather than fearful ($\delta\epsilon\omega\zeta$) (10.4). Aratus's attempt to evoke the terror of being at sea during a storm makes it elegant rather than awe-inspiring ($\phi\beta\epsilon\omega\zeta$) (10.6).

Homer, in contrast, is presented as an author particularly adept at correctly representing events that facilitate an awe-inspiring or terrifying experience in the reader. The author holds up his description of the fury at sea as a positive counterpart to Aratus's failed attempt mentioned above (10.5). Homer is more effective, not only because he presents the sailors always “on the very brink of death,” but also because of his “abnormal” use of prepositions that fit his language with the disaster being described (10.6). Homer succeeds, in other words, because the form of his writing (i.e. his use of

prepositions) aligns with his content. Further, Homer's depiction of the events in his *theomachia* effectively convey an experience of terror (φοβητός) (9.6). Finally, the author lauds Demosthenes for his capacity to achieve the effect of ὕψος, this time in relation to the emotion of fear. Demosthenes's power is likened to a "flash of lightning or a thunder bold;" his rhetorical power stems from his intensity (δεινώσεσι) and vehement emotion (12.4–5).

The form of the treatise that has come down to us unfortunately lacks the author's more extended discussion of the emotions. What remains, nevertheless, suggests the author's positive correlation between the effect of sublime texts and the emotions, especially the emotion of fear or awe. Identifying the emotions as one of the five sources of the effect of sublime texts, moreover, *De Sublimitate* suggests an instrumental role of the emotions in an experience of ὕψος. In other words, the emotions help to facilitate McNamara's "decentering process;" they are not simply the outcome of such a process.

Cognitive Restructuring

To this point in my article, I have discussed those places of correspondence between *De Sublimitate*'s view of the effects of great literature and McNamara's concept of decentering. My observations suggest how *De Sublimitate* might be used to analyse how literature and language facilitate experiences similar to those of religious experience. I now consider what McNamara identifies as the result of the decentering process: the restructuring of cognitive structures.

It will be helpful to recall how McNamara grounds religious experience as a sub-type of what Wildman and Brothers speak of as "ultimate experiences" (Wildman and Brothers 1999: 347–418). According to their theory, ultimate experiences begin with "specific cognitive content in the form of enhanced levels of imagery and also with negative effect" (McNamara 2009: 151). In other words, ultimate experiences employ the imagination and the emotions. Both of these cognitive functions are discussed in *De Sublimitate* as factors of an encounter with sublime texts. In addition, the effects of an encounter with such texts align with the effects of "ultimate experiences." In the short term, ultimate experiences result in "sensory alterations, self-alterations, a sense of supernatural presence, and cognitive and emotional changes." In the long term, ultimate experiences result in "existential potency, social engagement, the transformation of character, and the transformation of beliefs" (McNamara 2009: 149). In other words, ultimate experiences transform how people see the world and how they see their place in the world.

The presence in *De Sublimitate* of the three aspects of McNamara's decentering process discussed so far – the loss of agency, moving outside of oneself, and the role of the emotions – all resemble the "short term" effects of ultimate experiences. But can an encounter with sublime texts have the "long term" effects of ultimate experiences as well? Can an encounter with sublime texts lead to the transformation of the self and the restructuring of cognition? There are several indications in the treatise that such an encounter does, in fact, have these effects. Or to put it in Halliwell's terms again, such an encounter results in an "altered perception" of reality.

In the first place, the "uplifting" nature of an encounter with sublime texts highlights the long-term effect of such an experience. Sublime texts, we are told, awaken the human soul to "powers of contemplation and thought that even the whole universe cannot satisfy"; it leads human thought to "pass beyond the limits that enring us" (35.3). Experiencing the writing of authors like Demosthenes and Plato is said to lead "our thoughts to the ideal standards of perfection" (14.2). It is not only that sublime texts lead one outside one's self, but also that such an experience allows one to view oneself and one's world from the "ideal standards of perfection."

The final chapter of the treatise emphasizes the moral and cognitive transformation that occurs through the "uplifting" effect of sublime texts. There, the author recounts a conversation that he had with an unnamed philosopher. The two offer different reasons for the decline in creative genius among their generation. For the philosopher, the cause is political imperialism that stifles the creative process. For the author of the treatise, though, the *real* cause of such decline is moral in nature. Moral vice keeps people from looking "upward" and consequently their "greatness of soul wastes away" (44.8). The love of money is said to "sink our lives, soul and all, into the depths" (44.6). The author diagnoses the problem more generally in terms of a pervasive apathy or sluggishness (*ραθυμία*) (44.11). The author's discussion of the negative effect of the love of money, love of pleasure, and a general state of moral apathy on the individual is, in McNamara's terms, the opposite of the ideal Self.

Seen in light of this final chapter, much of the author's description of the nature and effect of sublime texts appears as an antidote to this state of moral apathy. Sublime texts uplift the soul (7.3), which the final chapters suggests is in grave danger of sinking lower because of moral apathy. More importantly, sublime texts are said to lift people "near the mighty mind of God" (36.2). Even the proper composition of words and phrases leads one to gaze upward again and consider "what is majestic and dignified and sublime and all else that it embraces" (39.3). Sublime texts, in other words, help restore one's "greatness of soul." In McNamara's terms, they enable

an individual to “link up” to an ideal notion of Self. Through emotion and imagination, imitation and sentence construction, sublime texts move the audience outside of themselves. They allow the audience to *transcend* their world for a moment, so that they can *exist* in that world more effectively.

Conclusion

How does all of this relate to religious experience in antiquity? In the first place, McNamara’s theory of religious experience, especially his concept of the decentering process, provides a plausible framework for understanding the treatise *De Sublimitate*. Though scholars have long debated the meaning and nature of ὑψος in the treatise, the preceding sketch has drawn attention to those effects of ὑψος that resemble the effects of religious experience. By adopting McNamara’s framework, we see more clearly the author’s emphasis on what ὑψος *does*, rather than what ὑψος *is* in any ontological sense. Consequently, the perspective of the treatise provides greater emphasis on the *effects* of sublime texts than on the *nature* of sublimity, which later Romantic thinkers and aesthetic theorists emphasize.

Equally important, moreover, is how *De Sublimitate* may inform our own understanding of what texts, religious and otherwise, *do*. Many scholars study texts for a living. There are several avenues for getting at the religious effects that have produced these texts or that these texts might produce. One of the most popular is to focus on religious ideas or concepts in the text and deduce related religious experiences or practices from these ideas or concepts. This ideational focus, however, leads to significant problems when trying to identify the religious experience that may be related to them. For example, texts with little evidence of the practices associated with later mystical traditions are said to be the result of, or stimulant to, a mystical experience simply because they share similar religious ideas. Similarly, although they do not resemble the form of apocalyptic or prophetic vision accounts, certain texts are thought to emerge from a “visionary” experience that led to the imagery found within them.

Adopting the perspective of *De Sublimitate* on the effects of an encounter with sublime texts sketched above, in contrast, provides a different route. First, it focuses on the form of the texts themselves, not just the religious ideas found in them. Second, it enables us to speak about a number of factors that have significant effects on an audience or reader, such as how a text sounds, how it is constructed, how it might stimulate the emotions, and even how creative mimesis of older texts functions in it. Third, it calls for a greater appreciation for the creative and powerful effects that result from certain texts engaging the imagination. Though some text-based theorists

of religious experience are reticent to discuss the role of the imagination in religious texts, *De Sublimitate* devotes an entire chapter to the function of the imagination in an encounter with sublime texts. The perspective found in *De Sublimitate* suggests that the dichotomy between a “real” encounter and an “imagined” or “literary” one is often overemphasized.

Finally, viewing the effects of an encounter with sublime texts as they are described by *De Sublimitate* as a form of religious, or perhaps better, “ultimate” experience, aligns with previous attempts to trace the relationship between texts and religious experience. Here I have in mind especially the work of Celia Deutsch (see her contributions in Flannery *et al.* 2008: 83–103; and Deconick 2006: 1–24). Deutsch has suggested the phrase “text-work” as a way of describing how reading leads to certain forms of religious experience. For the most part, her work has centered on how Philo of Alexandria and Clement of Alexandria view the effects of reading religious texts. *De Sublimitate* suggests that similar effects are produced by an encounter with sublime texts, religious and otherwise. In addition, *De Sublimitate* provides an ancient perspective on the ins-and-outs of the (religious) experience that emerges from such “text work”.

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