

'LONGINUS' ON THE SUBLIME (1st Century CE?)

'Longinus.' "On the Sublime." Trans. W. Rhys Roberts. Critical Theory Since Plato. Ed. Hazard Adams. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971. 76-98.

Please focus on chapters I, II, VII, VIII, IX (1-4), XVI, XXX, XXXIX, XL.

Chapter I

'Longinus' (the name is in inverted commas because the author of this at times long-winded treatise is unknown) states his goals in this essay, which are two-fold: to provide a "statement of the subject" (76) and an "indication of the methods by which we may attain our end" (76), that is, a "consideration of the means by which we [as writers] can succeed in raising our capacities to a certain pitch of elevation" (76). He defines "sublimity" (76) (or the 'sublime') in literature as a "certain distinction and excellence in expression" (76) or "elevated language" (76). He argues that "it is from no other source than this that the greatest poets and writers have derived their eminence and gained an immortality of renown" (76). The sublime is a mark of distinction among writers. He distinguishes between "skill in invention, and due order and arrangement of matter" (76), which are the "hard-won result . . . of the whole texture of the composition" (76) and the product, in other words, of carefully crafting the work of art, and sublimity per se which, "flashing forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt" (76) and thereby "displays the power of the orator in its plenitude" (76). From this perspective, the sublime is something akin to the quasi-mythical stroke of genius that separates truly great works from their lesser rivals.

'Longinus' also argues here that the sublime may be measured by its *effect* on the audience which is "not persuasion but transport" (76). By 'transport,' he means that the audience is carried away *emotionally*, enchanted even, by such works of art that contain this magical ingredient as opposed to assenting *intellectually* to the propositions put forth therein. Evidently taking aim at Plato and, later, Horace who both argue that poetry ought to be 'utile et dulce' (morally useful and pleasing), 'Longinus' argues that "imposing speech, with the spell it throws over us, prevails over that which aims at persuasion and gratification" (76). This is because our "persuasions we can usually control, but the influences of the sublime bring power and irresistible might to bear, and reign supreme over the hearer" (76).

Chapter II

Here, 'Longinus' turns his attention to the source of the sublime in literature. His first point in this regard is that the sublime is the product in part of nature, in part of nurture. Some argue, he points out, that the "lofty tone" (76) associated with the sublime is "innate, and does not come by teaching; nature is the only art that can encompass it" (76). 'Longinus' argues, however, that

while nature as a rule is free and independent of matters of passion and elevation, yet is she wont not to act at random and utterly without system. Further, nature is the original and vital underlying principle in all cases, but system can define limits and fitting seasons, and can also contribute the safest rules for use and practice. Moreover, the expression of the sublime is more exposed to danger when it goes its own way without the guidance of knowledge. (76)

Indeed, he argues, the “very fact that there are some elements of expression which are in the hands of nature alone, can be learnt from no other source than art” (77). In other words, nature must be supplemented by nurture. ‘Longinus’ contrasts with the ‘truly sublime’ what he calls the “pseudo-tragic” (77) and “frigidity” (77).

Chapter VII

Here, ‘Longinus’ delves more deeply into the effect on us of what he calls the “true sublime” (78). Our soul is instinctively “uplifted by the true sublime; it takes proud flight, and is filled with joy and vaunting, as though it had itself produced what it has heard” (78). In other words, the sublime has a beneficial spiritual impact upon the audience: its “effect is . . . to dispose the soul to high thoughts” (78) and to “leave in the mind more food for reflection than the words seem to convey” (79). This is linked, Longinus argues, to our sense of the majestic and the superlative in the world.

‘Longinus’ also argues that “true sublimity” (79) is timeless and universal in appeal and, as such, “bears a repeated examination” (79). Examples of the true sublime please all and at all times. For when men of different pursuits, lives, ambitions, ages, languages, hold identical views on one and the same subject, then that verdict which results . . . from a concert of discordant elements makes our faith in the object of admiration strong and unassailable. (79)

In other words, there is nothing arbitrary about the sublime: it is something about which all men can agree. It is a quality objectively present in some works, the proof of which is that people from different places and times acknowledge this to be the case.

Chapter VIII

Here, ‘Longinus’ identifies the “five principal sources of elevated language” (79), the “common foundation” (79) of all five being, at least in part, the “gift of discourse” (79), that is, an innate ability to express oneself.

- The “first and most important” (79) source of the sublime is what ‘Longinus’ describes as the poet’s “power of forming great conceptions” (79). Sublimity is, he writes, the “echo of a great soul” (79) as a result of which a “bare idea, by itself and without a spoken word, sometimes excites admiration just because of the greatness of soul implied” (79). ‘Longinus’ would seem to have in mind a writer’s great intellectual capacity.
- The second source is the poet’s “vehement and inspired passion” (79), that is, a great emotional capacity. ‘Longinus’ is at pains to argue that “sublimity and passion” (79) are not a “unity” (79) because “some passions are found which are far removed from sublimity and are of a low order, such as pity, grief and fear” (79). However, it would be wrong, he argues, to believe that “passion never contributes at all to sublimity” (79): “there is no tone so lofty as that of genuine passion, in its right place, when it bursts out in a mad enthusiasm and as it were fills the speaker’s words with frenzy” (79).

These “two components of the sublime are for the most part innate” (79) (i.e. a given of nature). The source of the sublime is to be found, in other words, at least in part in the nature of the poet who produced the writing in question. Poets are either born with these two qualities or not.

The other three sources of the sublime are at least “partly the product of art” (79), that is, they are learned by the poet in the course of his education and exposure to other

sublime writing (i.e. they are a function of nurture). In what follows, 'Longinus' has in mind the learned use of various rhetorical devices. The cornerstone of the art of the rhetor and poet consists in the "due formation of figures" (79) of speech which each consist of two elements: the "thought" (79) (i.e. the idea in question) and the "expression" (79) (i.e. the choice of words by which we express the idea in question). The manner of expression takes two principal forms: the use of "noble diction which in turn comprises choice of words, and use of metaphors, and elaboration of language" (79) (this is what in rhetoric is referred to as 'tropes,' that is, the artful deviation from the ordinary meaning of a word); and the use of "dignified and elevated composition" (79) which is the "fitting conclusion of all that have preceded it" (79) (what in rhetoric is referred to as the 'schemas,' the artful deviation from the ordinary order of words). 'Longinus' expands upon each of these points in the following chapters.

Chapter IX

Here, 'Longinus' equates the 'power of forming great conceptions' with "elevation of mind" (79). Although this has more to do with an "endowment than with an acquirement" (79), he urges us to "nurture our souls . . . to thoughts sublime" (79) and to "make them always pregnant . . . with noble inspiration" (79). To be "truly eloquent" (79), one must be free of "low and ignoble thoughts" (79), as a result of which it is impossible that "men of mean and servile ideas . . . should produce anything that is admirable and worthy of immortality. Great accents we expect to fall from the lips of those whose thoughts are deep and grave" (79).

In the following chapters, 'Longinus' identifies several ways in which the normal arrangement of words can be disrupted for rhetorical effect (schemas). These include:

- the "systematic selection of the most important elements, and the power of forming, by their mutual combination, what may be called one body" (81). The former attracts the hearer by the "choice of ideas" (81) while the latter does so by the "aggregation of those chosen" (81) (Chapter X);
- "amplification" (82) whereby "elevated expressions follow, one after the other, in an unbroken succession and an ascending order" (82) (Chapter XI);
- 'Longinus' points out, however, that where amplification is normally associated with a "certain magnitude and abundance" (83), sublimity is "often comprised in a single thought" (83) (Chapter XII);
- the "emulation of previous great poets and writers" (83) (Chapters XIII-XIV); and
- the use of effective images designed to enthrall by stirring the "passions and emotions" (84) (Chapter XV).

He also mentions: "questions and interrogations" (87), the "impression of agitation" (87) and "impetuosity" (87) via the "omission of conjunctions" (87), asyndeton, anaphora, diatyposis, inversions and other departures in the order of expressions or ideas from the natural sequence" (88) as a result of which the passage bears the "very stamp and impress of vehement emotion" (88), "polyptota – accumulations, and variations, and climaxes" (88), "changes of cases, tenses, persons, numbers, genders" (88), turning the plural into the singular, the past into the present, one person into the other, conversion from the third to the first person, and periphrasis (Chapters XVIII-XXIII).

Chapter XXX

Here, 'Longinus' turns his attention specifically to the question of diction (tropes). He argues that the "choice of proper and striking words wonderfully attracts and enthralls the hearer" (91). It is the "direct agency which ensures the presence in writings . . . of the perfection of grandeur, beauty, mellowness, dignity, force, power, and any other high qualities there may be, and breathes into dead things a kind of living voice" (91). He argues that "beautiful words are in very truth the peculiar light of thought" (91). Metaphors and figurative language in general are a key ingredient in this regard.

Chapter XXXV

Here, 'Longinus' compares (in a way that would prove very influential upon nineteenth century and much subsequent critical thought) sublime poets to "demigods" (93), creatures "of no mean or ignoble quality" (93), that is, special men whose personal natures are set apart from those of ordinary folk. Such poets are "writers of genius" (93) who are not above the occasional error or human failing but redeem these failings with flashes of genius. He argues that nature "from the first breathed into our hearts an unconquerable passion for whatever is great and more divine than ourselves" (153); our "powers of contemplation and thought" (154) yearn for the "extraordinary, the great, the beautiful" (93). Taking aim once again at both Plato and Horace, 'Longinus' stresses that "what is useful and indeed necessary is cheap enough; it is always the unusual which wins our wonder" (93).

Chapter XXXVI

Here, 'Longinus' argues that

[o]ther qualities prove their possessors men, sublimity lifts them near the mighty mind of God. Correctness escapes censure: greatness earns admiration as well. . . . [E]ach of these great men again and again redeems all his mistakes by a single touch of sublimity and true excellence. (94)

In short, such genius would seem to be, at least in part, innate, a given, a quality of our immortal souls.

Chapter XXXIX

Here, 'Longinus' returns to the question of word order and explains what exactly he means by the phrase: "dignified and elevated composition" (79). Here, he equates it with the "arrangement of the words in a certain order" (95), that is, to achieve a certain rhythm and rhyme scheme. He argues that "harmonious arrangement is not only a natural source of persuasion and pleasure among men but also a wonderful instrument of lofty utterance and of passion" (95). Harmony is based upon that which is "implanted by nature in man" (95) and "appeals not to the hearing only but to the soul itself" (95). By means of it, the poet "seeks to introduce into the minds of those who are present the emotion which affects the speaker" (95). Harmony "allures us and invariably disposes us to stateliness and dignity and elevation and every emotion which it contains within itself, gaining absolute mastery over our minds" (95).

Very important in this regard for 'Longinus' is what he terms 'organic unity,' one of the most important sources of sublimity:

as in the structure of the human body, is the collocation of members, a single one of which if severed from another possesses in itself nothing

remarkable, but all united together make a full and perfect organism. So the constituents of grandeur, when separated from one another, carry with them sublimity . . . but when formed into a body by association and when further encircled in a chain of harmony they become sonorous by their very rotundity. (95-96)

Coleridge, for example, would make use of the notion of organic unity in his own theories of literature.

Chapter XLI

Here, 'Longinus' argues that one factor which contributes to a lack of sublimity is too much rhythm.

Chapter XLII

Another factor which militates against sublimity is "excessive concision" (96).

Chapter XLIII

Here, 'Longinus' cites "triviality of expression" (96) as another impediment to the attainment of sublimity.