

## LONGINUS AND HIS 'ON THE SUBLIME': A HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL OVERVIEW

*Dr. M. Rameshwar Singh, Assistant Professor, P.G. Department of English,  
D. M. College of Arts, DMU, Imphal, Manipur*

### **Abstract:**

*'On the Sublime' has been an influential model of close reading and the notion of organic unity, a hallmark of Longinian criticism which has greatly influenced 20<sup>th</sup> century critics of literature. Allan H. Gilbert has stated in *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden* (1940) that 'the method of the book has entered into all our judicial criticism of the details of literature'. If Aristotle may be said to have determined our view of the structure of a literary work, Longinus has shown us how to approach an individual passage. Longinus emphasizes the felt effects induced by great mental conceptions or figures of speech or well-chosen diction. Such an emphasis produces a subtle and illuminating close reading of lines and phrases. It is regarded as a classic work on aesthetics and the effects of good writing. The treatise highlights examples of good and bad writing from the previous millennium, focusing particularly on what may lead to the sublime. It is both a treatise on aesthetics and a work of literary criticism. Scott James, Sainsbury and other scholars, however, have called Longinus the first romantic critic because of his aestheticism, his love for subjectivism, emphasis on emotion, fresh insights which are different from those of Aristotle and Plato. The current study attempts to present a critical and comprehensive overview of the text.*

**Key words:** *Sublime, aesthetics, literary criticism, subjectivism, good and bad writing.*

### **Historical Background:**

*On the Sublime* is a Roman-era Greek work of literary criticism dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. Its author is unknown, but it is conventionally referred to as Longinus or Pseudo-Longinus. The author's identity has been debated for centuries. The oldest surviving manuscript from the 10<sup>th</sup> century indicates the original author was named Dionysius or Longinus, which was later misread as Dionysius Longinus. Subsequent interpretations have attributed the work to Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1<sup>st</sup> century) or Cassius Longinus (213-273 AD), though neither is now widely accepted. Credited with writing a number of literary works, Longinus was a disciple of Plotinus, and considered 'the most distinguished scholar of his day.' He received his education at Alexandria and then went to Athens to teach. He later moved to Asia Minor, where he achieved the position of advisor to Zenobia, the queen of Palmyra. Cassius is a dubious possibility for author of the treatise because he wrote in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, and no literature later than the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD is mentioned and the work is now usually dated to the early 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. The work ends with a dissertation on the decay of oratory, a typical subject for the time when authors such as Tacitus, Petronius and Quintilian, who also dealt with the subject, were alive. Cassius was executed by Aurelian, the Roman emperor on the charges of conspiring against the Roman state.

### **Longinus as the first Romantic critic:**

Scott James calls Longinus 'the first Romantic critic' because of his insistence on passion, ecstasy, transport, imagination, intensity and exaltation. There are the romantic traits breathed by Longinus in the aesthetic criticism of the classical age. Before Longinus the Greek and the Roman critics judged a work of art in accordance with the set rules, or considered it either from the pragmatic or the ethical stand point. Longinus dispensed with all these standards. He judged a work more by its essence than by its form. He

advanced his theory of sublimity and insisted that the reader or hearer should be carried away, transported and moved to ecstasy by the grandeur and the passion of work. However, we should observe that he was not a thorough romantic critic. He tempers romanticism 'with what is sanest in classicism.' He says, "Classicism was touched with romance, but not darkened." His romanticism was sane and bright by dint of contact with the classical order. He knows that emotion and passion should be guided by some rules. "Mere grandeur", he says, "is exposed to danger when left without the control of reason and the ballast of scientific method." It can be said that Longinus is the first romantic critic who maintained his affiliation with classicism.

Scott James, Sainsbury and other scholars also have called Longinus the first romantic critic because of his aestheticism, his love for subjectivism, emphasis on emotion, fresh insights different from those of Aristotle and Plato. He rejected the ethical point and emphasis on rules of the classicists. He is romantic in his theory of sublimity. He recommends judging a work of art on the basis of its power to carry away, transport and moving to ecstasy by its grandeur and passion. Longinus is a romantic critic in some other ways too. He opposed the classical view that not more than two metaphors at a time should be used in a work, especially because he was gifted with a genuine romantic temper. He was a romantic critic as Rhys Robert says, "He is subjective rather than objective. He is an enthusiast rather than an analyst. He is better fitted to fire the young than to convince the maturely sceptical. He speaks rather of 'transport or inspiration' than of purgation or universal."

However, Professor Atkins disagrees with Scott James and admires Longinus as a true classical critic. The classical qualities of Longinus are quite obvious. He shows great reverence for the ancient Greek models for tradition and advocates this initiation. He does not believe that a genius is a law unto himself. He wants to put some curb and restrain on wayward genius. He stands for fitness, correctness, selection and balance. He is blind to the romance in Homer's *Odyssey*. He believes in rules and regulations and stands for the use of refined and cultivated poetic style. Throughout, he is concerned mainly with ancient Greek modes 'while his theory is solely based on the conception of art as the product of principles deduced from the practical of the past.' He is classical also in the balance he maintains between genius and unimpassioned hard work.

Longinus is a classicist in curbing the license of the artist, in his emphasis on order and grandeur of thought and language. He likes inspiration but does not ignore perspiration of a classicist because he shows great relevance for the ancients. He stands for restraint, fitness, correctness, selection and balance. Longinus is also considered 'the most modern of the ancient critics.' His chief claim to modernity rests on his conception of inspiration and ecstasy especially on this sentence "For it is not to persuasion but to ecstasy that passages of extraordinary genius carry the hearer." He is a modern in his concern with the tense rather than with the form of literature, in his understanding the past played to imagination, his efforts at literary interpretation and appreciation, in his widening outlook and the variety of his judicial methods, in his conception of inspiration and ecstasy. In fact, the passion of the romantic, the classical and modern strains in Longinus is the real key to his greatness, originality and relevance. He has an appeal to the romanticists as well as classicists and also to some extent to the moderns.

*On the Sublime* is regarded as a classic work on aesthetics and the effects of good writing. The treatise highlights examples of good and bad writing from the previous millennium, focusing particularly on what may lead to the sublime. It is both a treatise on aesthetics and a work of literary criticism. It was written in an epistolary form and then the final part, possibly dealing with public speaking, has been lost. The treatise is dedicated to Posthumus Terentianus, a cultured Roman and public figure. *On the Sublime* is a compendium of literary exemplars, with about 50 authors spanning 1,000 years mentioned or quoted. Along with the expected examples from Homer and other figures of Greek culture, Longinus refers to a passage from *Genesis*, which is quite unusual for the 1<sup>st</sup> century:

*A similar effect was achieved by the lawgiver of the Jews no mean genius, for he both understood*

and gave expression to the power of the divinity as it deserved when he wrote at the very beginning of his laws, and I quote his words: "God said," what was it? "Let there be light, and there was. Let there be earth, and there was." (*On the Sublime*, 9.9).

Given his positive reference to Genesis, Longinus has been assumed to be either a Hellenized Jew, or readily familiar with the Jewish culture. Longinus emphasizes that to be truly great writer, authors must have 'moral excellence'. In fact, critics speculate that Longinus avoided publication in the ancient world 'either by modesty or by prudential motives'. Moreover, Longinus stresses the transgressive writers are not necessarily shameless fools, even if they take literary risks that seem 'bold, lawless, and original'. As for social subjectivity, Longinus acknowledges that complete liberty promotes spirit and hope. According to Longinus, "Never did a slave become an orator". On the other hand, too much luxury and wealth leads to decay in eloquence eloquence being the goal of the sublime writer.

### **Contents: 5 Principal sources of sublimity:**

The term 'sublime' means 'elevation' or 'loftiness', a certain distinction and excellence in composition. Longinus says, "Both nature and art contribute to sublimity in literature. Art is perfect when it seems to be nature, and nature hits the mark when she contains art hidden within her." He critically applauds and condemns certain literary works as examples of good or bad styles of writing. He ultimately promotes an 'elevation of style' and an essence of 'simplicity'. To quote this famous author, 'the first and most important source of sublimity is the power of forming great conceptions.' The concept of the sublime is generally accepted to refer to a style of writing that elevates itself above the ordinary. Longinus also sets out five principal sources of sublimity: grandeur of thoughts, capacity for strong emotions, certain figures of thought and speech and their appropriate use, nobility of diction, and dignified word arrangement. Of the five principal sources of the sublime, the first two are largely the gifts of nature and the remaining three the gifts of art. The following are the five basic source of sublimity:

#### **Grandeur of thought:**

According to Longinus, stately thoughts belong to the loftiest minds. Nobody can produce a sublime work unless his thoughts are sublime because sublimity is an echo of a greatness of soul. It is only natural that great accounts should fall from the lips of those whose thoughts have always been deep and full of majesty. Great thoughts spring from great souls. Men with mean and servile ideas cannot attain sublimity. Their words are full of sublimity whose thoughts are full of majesty. Longinus says that lofty thoughts are sent into the lofty souls from the height and then results a sublime literature. He is of the view that if any mean and ignoble person produces a sublime piece, it is not his own creation and thought but he has stolen these lofty thoughts from a lofty soul. He emphasizes that sublime literature cannot be produced without the lofty soul in man. Sublimity is attained not by but argumentation, revelation or illumination.

#### **Capacity for strong emotion:**

The second source of the sublime is vehement and inspired passion. Longinus asserts that nothing contributes so to loftiness of tone in writing than genuine emotion. At one place, for instance, he says, "I would confidently affirm that nothing makes so much for grandeur as true emotion in the right place, for it inspires the words, as it were, with a wild gust of mad enthusiasm and fills them with divine frenzy." It is for this reason that he prefers the *Illiad* to the *Odessey* and Demosthenes to Cicero. But the emotions have to be 'true emotions' and 'in the right place'. He thus justifies emotions more artistically than Aristotle. However, the subject of emotions has not been dealt with in detail. The author declares his intention of dealing with it in a second treatise, which unfortunately has not come down to us.

#### **Appropriate use of symbols and figures of speech:**

The third source of attaining excellence of style is the use of figures of speech which he considers very important, and so devotes nearly one third of his work to it. He emphasizes that figures of speech should not be used mechanically; rather they must be rooted in genuine emotion and if used naturally, they impart elevation to style. The grandeur of any figure will depend on its being employed in the right place

and the right manner, on the right occasion and with the right motive. The chief figures that make for sublimity are asyndeton (omission or absence of conjunction between parts of a sentence, syntactically unmarked but semantically connected, e.g. *I came, I saw, I conquered.*), hyperbaton (an inversion of the normal order of words, especially for the sake of emphasis, e.g. *This* I must see.) and periphrasis (use of a longer phrasing in place of a possible shorter form of expression or use of indirect and circumlocutory speech or writing). It strengthens the sublime and sublime supports it. We need the figures only when the nature of the theme makes it allowable to amplify, to multiply or to speak in the tones of exaggeration of passion. To overlay every sentence with ornament is very pedantic; when the figure is unrelated to passion, it creates a suspicion of dishonesty and is divorced from sublimity. The chief figures that make for sublimity are the rhetorical question, asyndeton, hyperbaton, and periphrasis. A figure is most effective when it is concealed by his style. Longinus believes that art is perfect when it seems to be nature and nature when she contains art hidden within her. In short, the use of figures must be psychological, intimately connected with the thought and emotion and not merely mechanical.

#### **Nobility of diction:**

The fourth source of the sublime is diction which includes choice and arrangement of words and the use of metaphors and ornamental language. The discussion of diction is incomplete because four leaves of this part of the book are unfortunately lost. Nevertheless, words, when suitable and striking, he says, have "a moving and seductive effect" upon the reader and are the first things in a style to lend it 'grandeur, beauty and mellowness, dignity, force, power, and a sort of glittering charm.' It is they that breathe voice into dead things. They are 'the very light of thought' a radiance that illumines the innermost recesses of the writer's mind. But it should be noted that imposing language is not suitable for every occasion. When the object is trivial, to invest it with grand and stately words would have the same effect as putting a full-sized tragic mask on the head of a little child. This necessitates the use of common words which, when in elegant, make up for it by their raciness and forceful. Among the ornaments of speech Longinus considers metaphor and hyperbole very important.

#### **Dignity of composition:**

The fifth source of the sublime is the dignity of composition or happy blend of the preceding four elements or the arrangement of the words. It should be one that blends thought, emotion, figures and words themselves into a harmonious whole. Such arrangement has not only a natural power of persuasion and of giving pleasure but also the marvellous power of exalting the soul and swaying the heart of men. It makes the hearer or reader share the emotion of the speaker. A harmonious composition alone sometimes makes up for the deficiency of the other elements. A proper rhythm is one of the elements of harmony. Extremely concise or unduly prolix composition will spoil the sublimity: the one cripples the thought and the other overextends it. Sublimity in a work of art is the result of a happy blending of lofty thought, strong and genuine emotion, appropriate use of figures of speech and suitable words. Elements of grandeur cannot be separated from each other. Longinus says, "Great utterance is the echo of greatness of the soul." It may be mentioned here that Longinus was the first to assert that 'style' is the man.

Longinus also seems to fit into the critical school described by T.S. Eliot's *Tradition and Individual Talent*. He recommends that as a way to the sublime, the imitation and emulation (effort to match or surpass a person or achievement, typically by imitation) of previous great poets and writers (a move which puts him more clearly into alignment with the Aristotelian view of poetry as an object-in-itself than to the Platonic view of poetry and any other mimetic art as thrice removed from reality). He treats poetry as an agonistic (combative, conflicting) process anticipating Harold Bloom's 'Anxiety of Influence', like speaking of Plato struggling with Homer for primacy. The poet, in evaluating his work, should ask "How would Homer and the other greats have expressed this or that matter? What would they think of my work? How will succeeding ages view my work?" Both nature and art, says Longinus, contribute to sublimity in literature. According to Longinus, "Art is perfect when it seems to be nature, and nature hits the mark when

she contains art hidden within her.”

Longinus recognizes great art by the presence of great ideas; great ideas, in turn, are conceived of by great men. He says, “It is not possible that men with mean and servile ideas and aims prevailing throughout their lives 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.” These great men capable of great ideas will also be capable of deep and sincere feeling which transcends the mawkish (sentimental in an exaggerated or false way). The vehement and inspired passion required for the sublime will, like great ideas, spring only from those without 'mean and servile ideas.' The due formation of figures concerns those ways in which elevated thought and feeling may be best expressed: “a figure is at its best when the very fact that it is a figure escapes attention.” Noble language is that which transports the audience without distracting the audience. It is a language which is transparent to the transcendent (to borrow one of Joseph Campbell's favourite phrases). Dignified and elevated composition is that which forms important elements into an organic unity.

### **The false and the true sublime:**

Making a distinction between the false and true sublime, Longinus says that the false sublime is characterised by first by timidity or bombast (inflated, high sounding but with little meaning) of language, which is a great evil as swelling in the body. It is drier than dropsy. Secondly, the false sublime is characterised by puerility (childishness and immaturity), which is a parade and pomp (procession and spectacle) of language, tawdry (showy but cheap and of poor quality) and affected (pretentious) and so frigid (abnormal or disorder). Thirdly, the false sublime results when there is a cheap display of passion when it is not justified by the occasion, and so it is wearisome (fatiguing). True sublime, on the other hand, pleases all and 'pleases always', for it expresses thoughts of universal validity, thoughts common to man of all ages and centuries, in a language which instinctively uplifts our souls.

### **Critical assessment of the text *On the Sublime*:**

The text *On the Sublime* is in a fragmentary state. However, even with the fragmentary condition, the careful and attentive reader will find a strong measure of coherence and integrity. It is here worth mentionable that editors of *On the Sublime* since the 16<sup>th</sup> century have divided the text into 44 chapters. Longinus skilfully dramatizes the rhetorical situation of *On the Sublime* at the outset of the work, where he pitches the text as an epistolary address that involves an extended set of meditations directed to a friend saluted as 'my dear friend'. Longinus adopts a rather amiable, intimate, yet soberly critical attitude here and views his inquiry into the nature of the sublime or greatness in writing as a collaborative enterprise. His work appears to originate in a scene of collaborative critical reading and it also appeals to an act of critical reading as the measure of its success. In his letter to his friend and critical interlocutor, Longinus rehearses the form of an expository argument, replete with a careful posing of the problem to be studied, possible methods of study, and a clearly segmented exposition of the stages of his thought.

In the first stage, Longinus poses the rhetorical situation from which his work departs, yet he also succinctly limns his own position on what constitutes greatness in writing. Longinus quickly concedes the *topos* (traditional theme or formula in literature) that “great passages have a high distinction of thought and expression to which great writers owe their supremacy and their lasting renown.” For Longinus great writing does not persuade; it takes the reader out of himself. The startling and amazing is more powerful than the charming and persuasive, ... greatness appears suddenly; like a thunderbolt it carries all before it and reveals the writer's full power in a flash.” In offering his definition of great writing, Longinus departs dramatically from the rhetorician's usual concern with skilful invention, careful arrangement, and decorum.

The second stage of the rhetorical structure of *On the Sublime* issues sharply from his characterization of great writing. In the next 5 chapters of his work Longinus addresses the question: “Can greatness in writing be a matter of art?” He refrains from the view that greatness, sudden and forceful and

miraculous as it is, remains opaque to study and critical understanding. In a passage that became important to neoclassical writers, Longinus contends that 'natural talent, though generally a law unto itself in passionate and distinguished passages, is not usually random or altogether devoid of method.' Greatness involves 'a matter of art' because method or study trains talent to make the most of itself. The neoclassical ideal of balance, of the judicious harmonizing talent and method, nature and art, genius and critical knowledge, finds an important pretext here in Longinus's qualification of the potential unruliness of his sense of great expressive power. Longinus also points several of the errors and faults that occur in writing that fails to achieve greatness, gleaning passages that illustrate turgidity, puerility, false enthusiasm and frigidity in discourse. He tries to exemplify several ways that an apparently artistic method has failed to nurture talent and yielded hollow, tawdry, even unseemly rhetoric instead. Longinus counsels the careful study of artistic expression. He argues that 'clear knowledge and critical judgement of what is truly great' allows the discerning writer and reader to make and to understand effective rhetorical choices.

In the third stage of argument, Longinus considers the pragmatic tests for and possible sources of great expressive power. The first offers three experientially oriented tests for the presence of greatness and then classifies 'five sources' that are most productive of great writing. Longinus argues that social value, psychological impact and canonical or institutional authority offer distinct ways in which to probe for and recognize great writing. Social value is implicated in the discerning judgement of great writing because a sound pragmatic test for greatness follows a socially focused measure of moral value: 'nothing is noble which it is noble to despise.' Sheer wealth, social status and political power, for Longinus, do not embody greatness because 'men admire those great souls who could possess them but in fact disdain them.' Besides, Longinus advocates a second pragmatic test for greatness or sublimity in writing. Whatever is memorable, whatever makes an enduring psychological impact upon a hearer or reader, constitute great writing. In addition to the test of memory, Longinus espouses a third pragmatic test – the long-standing consensual agreement that tends to canonize or institutionalize writing as great. Greatness in writing purportedly 'satisfies all men at all times' and 'the agreed verdict... acquires an authority so strong that the object of its admiration is beyond dispute.'

Longinus then classifies and justifies briefly five sources that produce sublimity or greatness in writing. The first two sources are attributed to innate dispositions and they involve vigor of mental conception and strong and inspired emotion. Longinus does not discuss emotions further; his treatise ends just at the point where he turns to consider the topic of the passions. He stated, "Nothing contributes to greatness as much as noble passion in the right place; it breathes the frenzied spirit of its inspiration upon the words and makes them, as it were, prophetic." This passage becomes a touchstone for the Romantic conception of sublimity as inspired diction and as a quality that is transcendental in import. The three other sources of great writing for Longinus involve 'artistic training' rather than an innate temperament. All three also owe greatly to the sorts of categories often discussed by classical rhetoricians. For Longinus 'adequate fashioning of figures', 'nobility of diction' and 'dignified and distinguished word arrangement' all yield significant sources for the production of sublime writing.

The fourth stage of his arrangement is the largest one, sometimes rather gap ridden, comprising sequential analyses of four of the sources of great writing that Longinus has classified in chapter 8. Longinus does not treat emotion, but the other four receive substantial discussion. These four sources include (i) mental conception, (ii) fashioning of figures, (iii) diction, and (iv) music, rhythm and word arrangement. Chapters 33 through 36 are a digression on the question of how great but flawed writing can and should be recognized as superior to flawless yet moderate or humble writing. As noted before, Longinus believes that "Great writing does not persuade; it takes the reader out of himself." He emphasizes the experience of the sublime as a felt effect and as a show of great power from without, from beyond the realm of the audience. However, Longinus also indicates the lineaments of the particular kind of ecstasy and mastery that characterize the experience of the sublime. The experience of great writing involves a

sudden, ecstatic transport of the hearer or reader. One who undergoes the experience of greatness is moved and uplifted as if he or she has spoken or written the words that transported, as if he or she were the creator of the words that are read or heard.

A good deal of Longinus's commentary upon and appraisal of his chosen examples throughout chapters 9 through 43 reflects this psychologically intricate conception of the experience of sublimity. For instance, in discussing the use of well-conceived and vivid images in two passages from Euripides, Longinus comments that 'the poet himself sees the Furies, and very nearly compels his audience to see what he has imagined.' Longinus insists that Demosthenes' imaginative conceptions seek to compel an audience to see and feel 'an imaginative picture which conceals the actual argument by its own brilliance.' Then Longinus says of Demosthenes' oratory, 'when two things are joined into one, the stronger diverts to itself the power of the weaker.' There is a sudden fusion and subtle exchange of roles in the felt experience of great expressive power.

When Longinus turns to consider the same psychological model of the experience of the sublime in his discussion of figures or tropes and rhythmic composition as sources of greatness in writing, he stresses the manner in which Demosthenes' figures of speech impact 'upon the minds of his hearers.' Through his effective and inspired choice of tropes, Demosthenes 'grips his audience and carries it along with him.' Similarly, the notion of sudden, ecstatic transport 'often makes the reader feel himself in the midst of the dangers described.' As he quickly places his reader in the midst of three passages that dramatically exemplify his point, Longinus addresses the reader; "Do you see, my friend, how he (Herodotus) gets a hold on your mind and leads it through these places and makes you see what you only hear? Such passages, by addressing the reader directly, place him in the middle of the action." Similarly, about metaphors he notes that their 'swift onrush naturally drives and sweeps everything before them; they make the comparisons appear quite inevitable; and the hearer who shares the inspiration of the speaker is not given time to examine the number of metaphors.'

The fifth and the final source of great writing also share in the same model of the experience of sublimity. The skilful and rhythmical arrangement of words, according to Longinus, 'appeals not to the ear only but to the mind itself' and in so doing 'instils the speaker's feelings, by the blended variety of its sounds, into the hearts of those near him so that they share his passions.'

Longinus's accounts of the various sources of greatness in writing and the underlying qualities of the experience of sublimity also betray his sense of the violence or uncompromising affective force of truly great writing. Quite often Longinus speaks of superb figural language as being engaged in an assault upon the readers or hearers. Longinus portrays the sort of affective stylistics involved in the experience of great writing as one of the continual assault by the writer or orator upon the emotions and expectations of the audience. In chapter 34 he delights in the violent effects that Demosthenes achieves with rhetorical inversions or hyperbata. However, the question remains: why does Longinus employ terms of violent assault upon the emotions and expectations of a reader or an auditor, and how does this characterisation link up with the psychology of the sublime experience? An answer may lie within the hidden art and thematics of Longinus's own choice of tropes or figures for expressing the power of greatness. Time and again he selects and skilfully forces upon his reader similes, images, and metaphors that surreptitiously suggest his desire to naturalize the experience of the sublime.

In the impassioned metaphors of chapter 34, the awesome power of Demosthenes' oratory is likened not only to the intimidating din of thunder but also to the power of the sun. The passage places the scale of oratorical power among the most startling and violent of nature's displays. Elsewhere rhetorical and poetical greatness is likened to a flood, to underground vapors, to a river, and to the 'gusts of a hurricane.' The hidden art of Longinus's subtle weaving of similes, images, and metaphors seems to suggest that the writer or orator is to his or her audience what nature is to the whole of mankind. Both the nature and the creator of great writing, and mastery over the perilous and exhilarating effects unleash

energy and light. The natural sublime of Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, William Wordsworth and the Romantics finds its source in this Longinian conception of the experience of greatness.

The experience of great writing may be likened to the awesome and violent displays of nature's power, but the bearing of this concealed thematics upon the purported psychology of the sublime may not be clear. With regularity Longinus characterizes the 'noble exaltation', 'dignity of mind', and 'high spirit' of the authors of great works, and he considers a great work 'the echo of a noble mind' and the 'outpouring of divine spirit.' Indeed, the expressive power and passion commanded by such a speaker as Demosthenes appears 'like dread gifts from the Gods (for they cannot be called human).' The sudden, ecstatic transport into which the work of a noble mind can propel an audience also achieves a sense of greatness and transcendence that goes beyond the usual orbit of experience. The experience of the sublime allows, demands, imposes with sudden awesomeness a sense of one's fusion and intimate interconnection with the greatness outside as well as potentially within oneself.

The very nature of the individual, for Longinus, moves him or her to witness the great performances not only of the natural world but also of those 'most ambitious actors' such as Homer, Plato or Demosthenes, who summon individuals time and again to answer to that 'invincible love' of transcendence that is the natural proclivity of a human being. Longinus expands this idea by writing:

Anyone who looks at life in all its aspects will see how far the remarkable, the great, and the beautiful predominate in all things, and he will soon understand to what end we have been born. That is why, somehow, we are by nature led to marvel, not, indeed, at little streams, clear and useful though they be, but at the Nile, the Danube, or the Rhine, and still more at the Ocean. . . . We may say of all such matters that man can easily understand what is useful or necessary, but he admires what passes his understanding.

This analysis leads to the fifth and final stage, presented in chapter 44, which is Longinus's much-discussed rhetorical set piece on the causes of the decline of rhetoric and great writing. In responding to the view that a 'world-wide sterility of utterance' has descended upon the Roman Empire because democracy and freedom no longer flourish, Longinus asserts: Perhaps it is not the peace of the world which destroys great talents, but much more so this endless war which occupies our passions and, beyond that, the desires which surely rule our present world like an army of occupation and drive everything absolutely before them. The tyranny that conquers and subdues greatness is not necessarily imperial Rome; yet the imperial presence nonetheless dictates the metaphors and similes through which Longinus names the tyrannies that block or destroys greatness. The 'endless war' of the struggle for material gain and the 'army of occupation' that people's mundane desires have become do more to sterilize greatness than the Roman legions now stationed in lands once plentiful with political diversity. Instead of yielding to the tyranny of one's own self-involved desires, Longinus seems to suggest that human beings need to be open to the liberating force of sublimity or greatness. The experience of the sublime feeds the soul with a sense of what goes beyond the mortal and the mundane. It reveals an unexpected pathway leading outward from the prison of selfhood. Nature's, the poet's or even the orator's sublime violence intrudes as a self-annihilating liberation of the soul to greatness. On the sublime seems not to posit an 'Oedipal structure' between quotation and commentary, prior author and refiguring critic, as Neil Hertz argues in his essay "A Reading of Longinus" or to project a dispersion of the subject as Suzanne Guerlac maintains in "Longinus and the Subject of the Sublime" (1985).

Longinus appears to espouse a Stoic view of the self and the world. He castigates decadence, servile-self-contentment, and self-enslavement. He laments the self-centered blockage of higher aspirations and 'great qualities of soul' that might otherwise release themselves toward self-transcendence and greatness. Indeed, the phrase 'the growth of the immortal' faintly echoes the conception of the soul and its immortality spun out by the figure of Socrates in Plato's *Phaedrus*. Instead of Socrates' myth of the soul and the growth of the wings of immortality through philosophical discourse and love, Longinus in *On the*



*Sublime* advances the view that the experience of greatness is an avenue of access to that which passes understanding. The sublime, for Longinus, is in several respects an intriguing literary and psychological re-conception of Plato's philosophic rhetoric and Socrates' myth about the soul.

**Legacy and influence of Longinus and *On the Sublime*:**

*On the sublime* is not mentioned or discussed by any Greco-Roman writer or later Latin scholar through the Latin Middle Ages. This strange lack of circulation and reception speaks incontrovertibly about the highly marginal status of the treatise's ideas during the 15<sup>th</sup> century following its probable date of composition. The first modern edition of *On the Sublime* appeared in Europe in 1554, and handful of other editions emerged during the next hundred years. The reading and critical understanding of this masterwork of antiquity was fundamentally a product of the modern writers and critics who recognized the intellectual energy of this subtle, iconoclastic work. The text has been an influential model of close reading and the notion of organic unity, hallmarks of Longinian criticism that are evident throughout chapters 9 through 43, which have greatly influenced 20<sup>th</sup> century critics of literature. Allan H. Gilbert has stated in *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden* (1940) that 'the method of the book has entered into all our judicial criticism of the details of literature'. If Aristotle may be said to have determined our view of the structure of a literary work, Longinus has shown us how to approach an individual passage. Longinus emphasizes the felt effects induced by great mental conceptions or figures of speech or well-chosen diction. Frequently such an emphasis produces a subtle and illuminating close reading of lines and phrases.

Regarding the legacy of Longinus, the English poet John Milton may well have been familiar both with Gerard Langbaine's Latin version of the text, an edition issued in 1636 at Oxford, and the first publication of Longinus in England. Milton cited Longinus as one of several classical authorities on the matter of style in his 1644 treatise of education. However, it was the publication of Nicolas Boileau's French translation and edition of *On the Sublime* in 1674 that galvanized widespread interest in Longinus and his analysis of the nature of sublimity. With Boileau the first modern reading and first critical appropriation of Longinus commences. Boileau emphasized and paraphrased what Longinus meant by the idea of the sublime: 'it is the extraordinary and the marvellous which strikes us in terms of language, and causes a work to carry away, ravish, and transport us.' This characterization of the kind of eloquence that Longinus celebrates became a significant formulation for succeeding neoclassical authors. In the wake of Boileau, Longinus's ideas about the powers of sublimity became a counterpoint to and balance for the prevailing critical emphasis upon the rhetorical treatises by Aristotle and Horace.

Neoclassical criticism in England often honoured Longinus as one of the most astute classical preceptors. For instance, Joseph Addison relied upon *On the Sublime* to account for the grandeur and sublimity of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), and Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Criticism* (1711), echoed Boileau's formulations in praising Longinus as one of the model critics of antiquity. Longinus also figured prominently in the work of such less well known neoclassical writers as Robert Lowth, who engaged in an extensive and influential study of the elevated style and sublimity of the poetry of the Hebrew Bible, and Edward Young, who in his *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759) pitted genius against slavish imitation and strict adherence to the rules of artistic composition.

The neoclassical writer John Dennis was the first English critic to produce a general theory of the sublime on the basis of the work of Longinus. Later 18<sup>th</sup> century writers such as Edmund Burke in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the beautiful and the Sublime* (1757) and Immanuel Kant in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790; translated as *Critique of Judgement*) developed more significant and influential philosophical critiques of sublimity. Both writers contrasted the well-formed and tasteful features of what might be called the merely beautiful or aesthetic with the astonishing and unsettling nature of the experience of the sublime. Though Burke privileges the idea of the sublime in his philosophical aesthetics and Kant seems to favour the beautiful in his philosophy of aesthetic judgement, both thinkers draw deeply upon the sense of greatness or sublimity found in *On the Sublime*. Both writers also favour

Longinus's pragmatic critical orientation, one that focuses on the one who experience it, the perceiver, the reader of the passages that demonstrate sublimity.

Longinus continued to be read and appropriated during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in which his historical identity was put in question. For the Romantics, Longinus was principally important for his attempts to discover the singular quality that infuses the greatest poetry. For such poets as William Wordsworth and P.B. Shelley, and especially for many of their critics and readers, the sublime was the quality that marked supreme poetic diction and prompted correspondingly grand emotion in the presence of inspired eloquence. From the later-half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *On the Sublime* continued to influence the theory and practice of modern literary criticism. In *The Study of Poetry* (1880) Mathew Arnold recommends the choosing and use of literary 'touchstones' for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality, in all other poetry which we may place beside them. This method owes much to the critical practice of Longinus, who detects the presence or absence of sublimity by garnering a selection of passages and testing them against one another. This close attention to textual passages and their qualities also carries over into the critical practice of the American "New Critics" and the Chicago "Neo-Aristotelians" of the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as Elder Olson. Longinus has been variously read by these groups as exemplifying ways that critical readers can and should attend to the features and qualities of style in lyric poetry.

### **Conclusion:**

Longinus' preoccupation with the notion of sublime might be seen as a call for spiritual reorientation, a movement away from rationality and merely technical competence, itself a reflex of materialist and pragmatic thinking, toward acknowledgement of a profounder and more authentic strain in human nature that, through its exercise of emotion and imagination, sees itself not in isolation but as part of a vast and divine scheme. This call has been repeated endlessly in numerous guises in various literary periods. The themes raised by Longinus and many of his modes of treating them persist into our own day in the realms of literature, politics, law and the media: the idea that poetry or prose can emotionally transport, rather than merely persuade a listener or reader; the idea of organic unity and totality; the nature of imitation; the connection between reason and imagination, reason and emotion, beauty and utility, art and genius, art and nature; and most importantly, a recognition of the power of language, founded on grandeur of thought and the skilful use of figures to attain sublimity, thereby transforming our perception of the world.

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