

Longinus' Views on the Sublime

MA Leonora Bruçaj

PhD Candidate at University of Prishtina "Hasan Prishtina"

Longinus' treatise deals with the elements that make the style sublime in literary creations and rhetorical discourses, and as such he singles out five elements (capacity of forming great conceptions, vehement and inspired passion, due formation of figures, noble diction, and dignified and elevated language composition) about which further discussion takes place, providing numerous examples from the literature, which help to reach the necessary conclusions.

Although Longinus is considered the first to deal with the sublime, from the introduction of the work, he informs us that this issue was quite discussed in his time, moreover, there have even been other writings on this, such as Cecil's booklet, or also any other writings which have failed to transcend the barriers of time and enter into dialogue with scholars of later generations.

As much as the lack of natural talent, the sublime is hindered by the lack of inspiration or passion, therefore even the writings with pretended inspiration never achieve the right effect on the readers, an element that is very much favoured by Longinus, because he sees the effectiveness of the work closely linked to the beauty of style, sublime and pleasure.

Among the factors that affect style damage, Longinus mentions lack of inspiration, excessive amplification, but also broken pace of discourse, excessive concentration of phrase, carelessness of language and anything else that goes against those that elevate style.

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1. Introduction

Theoretical writings on literature originating from the ancient period, with their depth and extent of problem-solving have become the foundations of later theories that have aimed to explain the essence of literature. Created as a result of the rapid development of knowledge, thought and culture, these theories continue to have an impact even nowadays on various writings, treatises, studies and treaties on literature. In addition to the well-known writings of Plato and Aristotle, Longinus' treatise from Greek antiquity has reached our time and *Peri hypsous* (On the Sublime) where for the first time the sublime is mentioned, as an aesthetic category, which Longinus defines as a feature of art that causes not only excitement but also ecstasy to the reader.

Longinus' treatise deals with the elements that make the style sublime in literary creations and rhetorical discourses, and as such he singles out five elements (capacity of forming great conceptions, vehement and inspired passion, due formation of figures, noble diction, and dignified and elevated language composition) about which further discussion takes place, providing numerous examples from the literature, which help to reach the necessary conclusions. Longinus leaves an important place in his work to issues that damage the style and always takes as a point of reference the influence that certain writings have on the reader,

thus laying the foundations of the reception theory.

Although, the work of Longinus *On the Sublime*, has exerted tremendous influence in later periods, and in particular in the theory of classicism and philosophical considerations of the sublime as an aesthetic category, this work although claiming to be a systematic study fails to take the place of a precise rhetorical treatise, as for instance *Poetics* of Aristotle does. In addition, numerous dilemmas and discussions about the authorship of this text are known with evidence that Longinus lived in the third century whereas the treatise is of the first century, while Ernst Robert Curtius questions the very title of the book, on the grounds that it does deal with the sublime but with the height of style, respectively high literature. However, in the absence of accurate data, we will continue to treat *On the Sublime* as Longinus' work and as an important theoretical writing, because the issues it deals with and the way it deals with them express a high degree of knowledge that the author had in the field of literature, rhetoric and philosophy, where moreover with a quote from the book of Genesis (The Old Testament) it also presents knowledge from the field of the Jewish religion, which is not common for the scholars of ancient Greece. This fact also served as a pretext for Longinus to sometimes be considered a Hellenized Jew.

The sublime according to Longinus

Although Longinus is considered the first to deal with the sublime, from the introduction of the work, he informs us that this issue was quite discussed in his time, moreover, there have even been other writings on this, such as Cecil's booklet, or also any other writings which have failed to transcend the barriers of time and enter into dialogue with scholars of later generations. Longinus' work *On the Sublime* is built in the form of conversation with the Roman Postum Terencian, who as mentioned by the author himself gave him the impetus for the collection of his notes on the issue, so that they may be provided to the reader of the time.

At the beginning of his writing, Longinus first gives a definition of sublime by saying that: Sublime is an eminence or excellence of discourse that arouses our admiration, - specifying for the reader the object of his interest, which will be the most sublime in the literary work, in prose and poetry and the way it can be achieved. This even makes Longinus' treatise special and opens the possibility of its use in the evaluation of the literary work, especially in relation to the later writings on the sublime, which were dealt with by Schelling, Henry Home, Kant, Hegel and Hartmann who approach it from different perspectives. Definitions such as: The sublime has a more serious character and includes all human attention, therefore its experience has the character of totality (Henry Home), The sublime is anything that not only pleases, but also causes shudder (Kant), The sublime in its absoluteness encompasses the beautiful, just as the beautiful that in its absoluteness encompasses the sublime (Schelling), and many more are the result of the definition of the sublime as a general aesthetic category and the attempt to distinguish it from the beautiful. They can also be applied in determining the aesthetic values of literary creations but do not provide the details that can elevate the style of writing, the factors that influence in this direction and those that damage the high style, as Longinus does in his writing, with which he presents his more literary than philosophical tendencies.

There are two innate factors that influence high style, according to Longinus, the ability for grand conceptions and strong passion. Saying to others that sublime is innate and cannot be taught, and that the only technique for it is the possession of natural talents, Longinus adds to

his opinion that method is also necessary for the determination of order because talents need a spur or a curb. In this way he creates a close connection between natural talent and the need to process it, but always supporting the idea that sublime is one echo of a great soul. As much as the lack of natural talent, the sublime is hindered by the lack of inspiration or passion, therefore even the writings with pretended inspiration never achieve the right effect on the readers, an element that is very much favoured by Longinus, because he sees the effectiveness of the work closely linked to the beauty of style, sublime and pleasure. When discussing the pure consciousness of the sublime, Longinus mentions that it is especially needed by the creator, while in the soul of the reader it is natural to have the ability to be exalted in the presence of sublime and this happens to all people regardless of profession, age, taste, cultural status etc. Longinus brings numerous examples of the ability for sublime conceptions from Homer, moreover from him derives the well-known opinion that *Iliad* is the work of Homer's youth, where drama dominates while *Odyssey* is the work of old age, therefore it is dominated by narrative. In these two works, Longinus compares Homer to the sun, but in the second he is like the sun in sunset.

Among the elements that elevate the style and that can be learned Longinus mentions the ability to use stylistic figures, noble style and the organization or composition of the work. Among the figures used for the elevation of the style are mentioned: amplification, apostrophe, anaphora, asyndeton, polysyndeton, hyperbaton, enumerations, polyptotes, climax, paraphrases, hyperboles, metaphors, similarities, comparisons, and so on, but always insisting and repeating that they should not be used excessively and especially that they should not look like figures. But what does Longinus mean when he seeks and insists on this fact, and if he lists the use of figures in the elements of style elevation that can be learned, then how can a creator learn what the proper measure of using figures is? Deeply convinced that it is not the use of stylistic figures that in itself makes a high style, Longinus insists on this fact, but the very extent of their use risks to include this element in the group of innate factors that enable high style. The fact that the existence of the sublime literary works of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and so on, are examples, among other things, of the use of stylistic figures, does not guarantee young creators an absolute model of writing and a sure support to elevate the style, which makes us believe that even the ability to use figures correctly is an innate gift, rather than learned technique. While the other requirement which has to do with the invisibility of the figures has the meaning of insertion and natural interconnection with the matter of the work, and by no means that they should be placed artificially. Among other things, on the formal side, Longinus introduces the use of singular and plural shifts, person-shifting, and so on as elements that provide the elevation of style.

Among the factors that affect style damage, Longinus mentions lack of inspiration, excessive amplification, but also broken pace of discourse, excessive concentration of phrase, carelessness of language and anything else that goes against those that elevate style.

The many examples with which he illustrates and argues his theses are mainly from the works of the giants of literature and rhetoric, besides Homer, he brings quotations from the works of Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides, Plato, Sappho, Alcinous, Demosthenes, Cicero and many others and there are cases when they are even mentioned not in the superlative but also to indicate their mistakes. Longinus is aware that the creations that have managed to become masterpieces are not completely perfect, without any flaws, but the sublime in them appears

in the entirety of the work, whereas there are many second-hand works that do not have those flaws that are found in the masterpieces. Like many other scholars, Longinus claims that Homer's work is also flawed but every creator prefers to be Homer, Plato, or Demosthenes who errs, rather than a lesser but infallible creator, because, he who does not err avoids criticism, but he who is sublime is also worshiped. The fairest judges and evaluators of Longinus' works are the descendants, because their judgment is objective and not hindered by the envy and jealousy that often hinder the appreciation of contemporaries.

The issue with which Longinus' treatise ends is the concern for the path in which his compatriots have entered; he is tormented by the lack of inclination to appreciate sublime things and the unnecessary care for anti-values, for wealth, but also the greed that more and more takes the place of the values, and among them also the place of art, literature, sublime. Such a concern of Longinus, manifested since the first century AD, makes us think that a similar situation which exists today, has always followed humanity and all people cannot have the talent to appreciate art but only elevated spirits that have innate aesthetic taste.

The influence of Longinus' views on classical theory

Longinus' theory had an impact on later periods and in particular on classical theory in France in the seventeenth century. His work was translated by Nicolas Boileau who with his work *L'Art poétique* (On Poetic Art), written under the influence of Longinus' work, is known as the codifier of this literary direction. It seems that some of the issues on which Boileau relies, not that they do not occupy an important place with Longinus, but their application is not insistently required, in the way the classicists have applied them. Such is for instance the issue of imitation of ancient writers. When requiring for such a thing, Longinus does not think about blind imitation starting from metrics, verse, figure, content and so on but aims at an imitation where only patterns of creation could be exploited, as does Plato who extracts innumerable streams from Homer's sublime fountain, but it is known that Plato did not write any epic work, or as Aeschylus himself claims that Greek tragedies are nothing but crumbs from Homer's feast in the sense that they have exploited themes posed by Homer, which have further been expanded and enriched by others. In addition, the classicists also insist on adhering to the rigid rules of creation, which Longinus opposes several times within his treatise.

On the other hand, Longinus' attention to the impact of the work on the reader, as mentioned above, is an anticipation in later reception theory. The impression that a work leaves on the reader is one of the most important factors that determine the presence of the sublime, while the reader of later times, as we mentioned, is considered as a motivator of high style: If I write this, how will the descendants anticipate it? In addition, Longinus' treatise has many elements with which he anticipates in the form of an essay, which will later come from Michel de Montaigne.

With all the issues that are intertwined within it, with the philosophical, critical and oratorical approach, the Longinus treatise *On the Sublime* occupies an important and influential place in later periods of human thought.

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