



LONGINUS VIEWS ON THE SUBLIME LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Longinus sometimes referred as a Pseudo-Longinus because his real name is unknown. He was a Greek teacher of rhetoric or a literary critic. He is known only for his treatise 'On the sublime' which is very valuable work of literary criticism. His 'treatise on the sublime' is a work which focuses on the effect of good writing. Longinus as a proffered rhetorician had studied grammar, composition, rules of art, proper use of words, meter, figures of speech etc. Transport and ecstasy is only possible through the sublime literature.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetic, Homer, Greek culture, Genesis, Sublime.

INTRODUCTION:

Cassius Longinus is the conventional name of the author who may live in the first or third century AD was the first romantic critic. Longinus sometimes referred as a Pseudo-Longinus because his real name is unknown. He was a Greek teacher of rhetoric or a literary critic. He is known only for his treatise 'On the sublime' which is very valuable work of literary criticism. His 'treatise on the sublime' is a work which focuses on the effect of good writing. Longinus as a proffered rhetorician had studied grammar, composition, rules of art, proper use of words, meter, figures of speech etc. Before Longinus, it was believed that the function of poetry was to instruct and to delight and that of prose "to persuade". Longinus emphasized the power of poetry to move our passions, give us pleasure and lift us out of ourselves. Passion, ecstasy and transport are received by Longinus. Transport or ecstasy is only possible through the sublime literature. For Longinus, sublime in literature was essentially the echo of great soul of a lofty mind; it is the product of a great and noble mind.

Sublimity is the Echo of a Noble Mind:

Longinus says, "Great utterance is the echo of greatness of the soul". It is impossible that those whose thoughts are trivial and servile should flash out anything wonderful and worthy of immortality. Great literature is thus the creation of instinctive genius. Thoughts that are lofty and awe-inspiring find their natural expression in exalted phrase. Such loftiness of thought is normally a gift of nature rather than an acquired quality. But art can help in putting a curb on the wild tendencies of nature. Longinus says, "Fine writing needs the spur as well as curb". Both nature and art are, therefore, necessary for the creation of the Sublime in literature.

Great thoughts spring from great souls. The truly eloquent must be free from low and mean thoughts. Men with mean and servile ideas cannot produce immortal literature. It is only great minds that produce great literature. So the first source of the sublime is that of grasping great thoughts. Sublimity is the image of the soul. A thought, even when it is not uttered, is at times sublime. Such is the silence of Ajax in Odyssey. But what does actually the sublime consist of? Longinus tries to answer the question at the very outset of his treatise:

"The Sublime consists in certain loftiness and of language, and it is by this and this only that the greatest poets and prose writers have won preeminence and lasting fame"(Longinus, web)

The function of literature, before Longinus, if it was poetry, was to instruct or to delight or to do both and, if it was prose, to persuade the reader. Longinus found this three word formula wanting. He discovered that the masterpieces of Greek classical literature — epics of Homer, the lyrics of Sappho and Pindar were great for a different reason altogether — their sublimity. So instruction or delight or persuasion, therefore is not the test of ecstasy caused by an irresistible magic of speech. If he is spellbound by what the writer says, the work has the quality of the Sublime. According to Longinus, sublimity is always an eminence and excellence in English. Sublimity is the not that rings from a great mind.

His advocacy for "the quality of transport or ecstasy is the greatest proof of his being romantic critic. Saints bury calls Longinus "the first romantic critics" because of his too much emphasis on imagination ecstasy and transport.

"Longinus has marked out grounds of criticism very far from those of the ancient period generally, further still from those which were occupied by

any critic of the Middle Ages and the classical revival, and close to, if not in all cases, overlapping the territory of the modern romantic criticism itself."

The Sublime, with which he concerns himself, is "a certain loftiness and excellence of language," which "takes the reader out of himself.... The Sublime, acting with an imperious and irresistible force, sways every reader whether he will or no." In its own sphere the Sublime does what "natural magic" does in the poetical rendering of nature, and perhaps in the same scarcely-to-be-analyzed fashion. Whether this art can be taught or not is a question which the author treats with modesty.

Longinus critically applauds and condemns certain literary works as examples of good or bad styles of writing. Longinus 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".

Five Sources of Sublimity:

Finally, Longinus sets out five sources of sublimity: "great thoughts, strong emotions, certain figures of thought and speech, noble diction, and dignified word arrangement"

1. **Grandeur of thought:** Grandeur of thought holds the foremost rank among them all because "sublimity" is the echo of a great soul. A mean and ignoble person cannot produce a sublime work because his thoughts cannot be sublime. Transport or exhalation is caused by the noblest thought finding their natural expressions in the noblest language. It is whole- some because literature of power that moves us is based on whatever is noble and sublime in life and literature. It elevates us both morally and artistically though. Longinus does not say explicitly whether ecstasy is morally good or bad. He simply mentions ecstasy and delight out of great literature but we should note that great literature lifts us morally.

To quote Longinus,

"It is impossible for those whose lives are full of mean and servile ideas and habits, to produce anything that is admirable and worthy of an immortal life. It is only natural that great accents should fall from the lips of those whose thoughts have always been deep and full of majesty. Stately thoughts belong to stately minds. They are natural but can also be acquired by constant willingness on whatever is noble and sublime and by immolating the examples of great master. (History and Principles of Criticism, 108)

2. **Capacity for strong emotions:** At the end of his treatise on sublime, Longinus promised to deal with this subject in a separate book. But the second book is lost even then we can form an ideal of 'Longinus' view about strong emotions from his book on the sublime. The scattered remarks about the passions in this treatise leave us in no doubt of what he thought about strong emotions as an important factor in sublimity.

In spite of his emphasis on emotions, he admits that there are some emotions such as fear, grief and pity which are far removed from the sublime. A writer who indulges in evoking these inferior types of emotions falls below the stan-

dard of excellence. In this way Longinus distinguishes between true emotions and false emotions.

3. **Appropriate use of figures of speech:** Longinus particularly demands that the author should be carefully in the matter of choice of words, skill in the use of figures of speech and other ornaments of language. He observes that figures help in producing the sublime effect and on their part derive support from it in a wonderful way.

A figure is effective only when it appears in disguise. A figure is at its best when the very fact that it figure escapes attention. Longinus also discusses the artistic use of many important figures as an instrument for producing the sublime effect. But the main emphasis is always on the concealment of figures.

'sometimes of breathless vehemence, the studied disorder and the air of unpremeditation characteristic of impassioned utterance' (J.W.H Atkins, 108)

4. **Dignity of composition:** Longinus says that the proper arrangement of words is not only a natural source of persuasion and pleasure among men but also lends dignity to composition. A harmonious arrangement of words often makes up for the deficiency of the other elements. Here a writer should blend properly thought, emotions, figures and words into a harmonious whole.
5. **Nobility of diction:** Like other rhetoricians of the time Longinus discusses the problem of his diction which comprises the proper use of words and the use of metaphors and ornamental language. Beautiful words are the peculiar light of thought. But it should be noted that imposing language is not suitable for every occasion.

Longinus then distinguished between the true sublime and false sublime. The true sublime uplifts our soul. It arises from lofty ideas clothes in a lofty language. It gives us a joy and exalts our spirit. The more we read it, the more we enjoy it. Every time it suggest new ideas and feelings, it never goes tell in short the true sublime, "Please all, and please always." The 'false sublime' on the other hand consist nothing but emptiness and bombast of a language. There is also cheap display of passion unwarranted by the subject.

According to Witsmatt and Brooks,

"The view of Longinus is that it is only strong and timely passions which can make us swallow a farfetched metaphor or a violent." (History and Principal of literary criticism, 109)

The False Sublime:

1. **The decay of rhetoric:** The author speaks also about the decay of oratory, as arising not only from absence of personal freedom but also from the corruption of morals, which together destroy that high spirit which generates the Sublime. Thus the treatise is clearly centred in the burning controversy which raged in the 1st century A.D. in Latin literature. If Petronius pointed out excess of rhetoric and the pompous, unnatural techniques of the schools of eloquence as the causes of decay, Tacitus was nearer to Longinus in thinking that the root of this decadence was the establishment of Principedom, or Empire, which, though it brought stability and peace, also gave rise to censorship and brought an end to freedom of speech. Thus oratory became merely an exercise in style.
2. **Misleading translations and lost data:** Translators have been unable to clearly interpret the text, including the title itself. The "sublime" in the title has been translated in various ways, to include senses of elevation and excellent style. The word sublime, argues Rhys Roberts, is misleading, since Longinus' objective broadly concerns "the essentials of a noble and impressive style" than anything more narrow and specific. Moreover, about one-third of the treatise is missing; Longinus on similes, for instance, has only a few words remaining. Matters are segm further complicated in realizing that ancient writers, Longinus' contemporaries, do not quote or mention the treatise in any way,
3. **Limitations of the writing:** Despite Longinus' critical acclaim, his writing is far from perfect. Longinus' occasional enthusiasm becomes "carried away" and creates some confusion as to the meaning of his text. Furthermore, 18th-century critic Edward Burnaby Greene finds Longinus, at times, to be "too refined". Greene also claims that Longinus' focus on hyperbolic descriptions is "particularly weak, and misapplied." Occasionally, Longinus also falls into a sort of "tediousness" in treating his subjects. The treatise is also limited in its concentration on spiritual transcendence and lack of focus on the way in which language structures determine the feelings and thoughts of writers. Finally, Longinus' treatise is difficult to explain in an academic setting, given the difficulty of the text.

Writing style and rhetoric:

Despite its faults, the treatise remains critically successful because of its "noble

tone," "apt precepts," "judicious attitude," and "historical interests". One of the reasons why it is so unlikely that known ancient critics wrote on the sublime is because the treatise is composed so differently from any other work. Since Longinus's rhetorical formula avoids dominating his work, lite. The literature remains "personal and fresh," unique in its originality. Longinus rebels against the popular rhetoric of the time by implicitly attacking ancient diary in its focus on a detailed criticism of words, metaphors, and figures. More explicitly, in refusing to judge tropes as entities unto themselves, Longinus promotes the appreciation of literary devices as they relate to passages as a whole. Essentially, Longinus, rare for a critic of his time, focuses more on greatness of style" than "technical rules." Despite his criticism of ancient texts, Longinus remains a "master of candor and good-nature". Moreover, the author invents striking images and metaphors, writing almost lyrically at times. In general, Longinus appreciates, and makes use of, simple diction and bold images.

Influences:

In reading *On the Sublime*, critics have determined that the ancient philosopher and writer Plato is a "great hero" to Longinus. Not only does Longinus come to Plato's defense, but he also attempts to raise his literary standing in opposition to current criticisms. Another influence on the treatise can be found in Longinus' rhetorical figures, which draw from theories by a 1st century BCE writer, Caecilius of Calacte.

In Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Criticism*,

"Things are learned by human nature sometimes there are things of importance that cannot be taught, but you must learn from experience. Ancients can set rules on how to write but rules are rules and they are always intended." (Pope, Web)

I have already said that of all these five conditions of the Sublime the most important is the first, that is, a certain lofty cast of mind. Therefore, although this is a faculty rather natural than acquired, nevertheless it will be well for us in this instance also to train up our souls to sublimity, and make them as it were ever big with noble thoughts. How, it may be asked, is this to be done? I have hinted elsewhere in my writings that sublimity is, so to say, the Image Of greatness of soul. Hence a thought in its naked simplicity, even though unuttered, is sometimes admirable by the sheer force of its sublimity; for instance, the silence of Ajax in the eleventh *Odyssey* is great, and grander than anything he could have said. It is absolutely essential, then, first of all to settle the question whence this grandeur of conception arises; and the answer is that true eloquence can be found only in those whose spirit is generous and aspiring. For those whose whole lives are wasted in paltry and illiberal thoughts and habits cannot possibly produce any work worthy of the lasting reverence of mankind. It is only natural that their words should be full of sublimity whose thoughts are full lime thoughts belong properly to the loftiest minds of majesty.

Contribution of Longinus:

Longinus is the first romantic critic. He is a pioneer in the field of literary appreciation. "On the Sublime" is the first and a unique treatise on style. His prescriptions for sublimity are universal.

He asks quite different questions about literature from those asked by Plato and Aristotle. His vision is broad. He constantly views poetry in relation to the author and the time of the author. He makes use of both the historical and thought provoking comments. His mind is free from prejudice. A great deal of his work is original and illuminating and is of permanent or universal significance. He attaches importance to emotion, imagination and beauty of words.

He is a romantic critic because he believes in the romantic function of literature and discards the moral function of literature. But he joins romanticism with classicism. On the one side, there is importance for grandeur. He is subjective rather than objective. He is an enthusiast rather than analyst. He is better fitted to fire the young than to convince the skeptical.

Longinus is the most modern of the ancient critics. Horace was very much influenced by Longinus. He classified certain important matters like the moderns. He talks sense. After Aristotle, he is the greatest critic among the Greeks. He represented the last romanticism and classicism. He gave an effective theory of literature. He drew upon a number of literatures. Style for him was the life and blood, the very spirit of the work and the personality of its author. He was the first to assert that "Style" is the man. "On the Sublime" is a classic gift of Longinus. It is a fragmentary treatise. It is not yet known who Longinus really was. It is a bright essay on style.

According to Longinus, the purpose of the greatest writers has been to introduce, to delight and to persuade. But their greatness lies in sublimity. Sublimity is the echo of a great soul, of a lofty mind; it is not merely an excellence in language. It is the note that rings from a great mind. A work of a genius must aim at ecstasy. In Indian terms, it is the combination of Satyam, Shivamand Sundaram (the true, the good and the beautiful) that makes a work sublime.

Figures of speech are the artistic aids to sublimity. The chief figures are the rhetoric questions, hyperbaton, apostrophe and periphrasis. The figures of speech

should be carefully used. Verbal magic has its own effect. Diction relates to style. Style is the wise and systematic selection of the most important elements, events or passions into a single whole. The use of questions and answers makes the speeches more effective and impressive.

Longinus writes;

"For a work of genius does not aim at persuasion, but ecstasy or lifting the reader out of himself. The sublime effect of literature depends on ecstasy, the transport and is achieved not by argument but by revelation or illumination. It appeals not through reason but through imagination and it appeals not once or twice but every time the reader reads." (Longinus, web)

A work of art should be harmonious and complete. For this, it should have a dignified and elaborate composition. It should have sufficient length. Words must be harmoniously set, for the resulting harmony is a natural instrument, not only of persuasion and pleasure but also of lofty emotion.

Such a harmonious combination of words appeals to the soul and enables the reader to share in the emotions of the author. At least, Longinus warns against extreme conciseness of expression because it cramps and cripples the thought. Science only tells us what is possible, not what is right. Every one minute you spend worrying about failing is just one minute that you have failed to prepare for success.

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