

Proceedings of the Kent State University May 4th Philosophy Graduate Student Conference

No. 005007 (2008) | ISSN: 1546-6663

Longinus' *Peri Hypsous*: Third Century Catalyst of *Je Ne Sais Quois*

Keith Martel

Duquesne University

The phenomenon of the sublime is often traced from Edmund Burke's *Inquiry into the Beautiful and the Sublime* to Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and into the contemporary era with, most notably, the work of Jean-François Lyotard. Yet, the seed of the sublime was planted nearly two centuries preceding these in *Peri Hypsous*, a third century Greek text written by an author known to us as Longinus.^[1] The intent of this paper is to illustrate the ways in which this text was a radical break from the ancient conception of the arts and how it served as the catalyst of modern and contemporary aesthetic principles.

For Longinus's predecessors success was based upon the mastery of the technique in regards to the specific piece fashioned. For instance, Plato, in *Timaeus*, writes: "The good, of course, is always beautiful, and the beautiful never lacks proportion."^[2] It is proportionality and structure that makes a thing superior. Similarly, in

the *Sophista*, 'The maintenance of measure is always beautiful?the absence of measure is ugly.'^[3]

Eyolf Ostrem argues that art as 'technique' was the dominant principle for over 2000 years.^[4] This standard of beauty through the structure of mathematical proportion was not only a Greek notion, but Ostrem also exhibits how this theme is used in the Old and New Testaments and correspondingly in Augustine's work of the Medieval epoch. He quotes Augustine, 'We cannot love anything but the beautiful?and these beautiful things please us because of their number.'^[5]

Within this 2000-year reign of technical beauty as the measure of the arts we find a normative rupture in the third century CE in the writing of Longinus. The rhetorician has a self-proclaimed end of correcting errors of Cecillius, one of his contemporaries. Although this is the explicitly stated goal of Longinus, I would suggest that implicitly *Peri Hypsous* is more than that. The brushstrokes of Longinus are far too broad to simply be a reply to a writer.

Rather, I would like to suggest that this text is an attempt to critique the ancient conception of *techne*. Longinus' work culminates with a subversive metaphor that calls artists of manifold stripes to the breaking of the bonds of the ancient tyranny through the pursuit of the sublime. While breaking from the bondage of form and proportion, Longinus encourages the pursuit of movement without borders, a pursuit of the *je nai sai quois*.

Akin to Aristotle's *On Rhetoric*, on the surface *Peri Hypsous* appears as though it were a manual for the burgeoning orator. Yet, within the subtleties of the text one may find reason to believe that Longinus is more than merely a teacher of rhetoric, but also an early, pre-Romantic aesthetical activist.

As well as correcting Cecillius, Longinus hopes to 'see if we can find anything that may be useful to an

Orator.?[6] This statement may seem inconsequential, but it is important. Longinus is standing in the long shadows of an ancient discipline that had been developed through previous centuries by some of the greatest philosophers. In the wake of Aristotle and Cicero, the Isocratean and Gorgianic traditions, Longinus inquires: ? what may be found?? Rhetoric was an art that had evidently reached its apex and at Longinus? time was on the decline. This brief statement suggests that within the text there is the pursuit of novelty?something helpful that may not have been taught in the volumes past; not simply a correction of an obscure rhetorician.

For Longinus, the end of rhetoric is not merely persuasion, but the ability to lead an audience into the experience of the sublime. He writes:

For great and lofty Thoughts do not persuade, as charm and throw us into Rapture.

This statement seems to be directed toward Aristotle?s ancient definition of the art of rhetoric. In *On Rhetoric*, Aristotle defines the art as ?an ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion.?[7] The ideal rhetorician, for Aristotle, is one that is able to understand the context in which he speaks and to know the available means for persuading the particular audience.

For Longinus, persuasion alone is not the goal of rhetoric, but elevation of the soul, a lifting up, an affect within the listener. The sublime?s results are not measurable in terms of proportion or size. The sublime, instead, is determined intuitively and experientially. One cannot point to where the sublime lies, but can only bear witness to its effects. Longinus notes, ?For that which is truly *Sublime* has this Quality, That it raises the Soul to an exalted pitch, when it hears it; and makes it conceive a higher Idea of itself, filling it with Joy, and I know not what, a kind of Ambition, when it hears it, as it had created it.?[8] Even here within the text Longinus searches for the words through which to explain and describe the sublime. Yet, at last he is unable. The soul is raised,

immense joy is felt, and a certain ambition is experienced. The sublime piece creates a longing for something different, for action, for movement.

Here, directly within the text, Longinus uses the phrase that has become familiar to modern ears. The sublime creates "I know not what?" it develops the *je ne sais quoi*. It is impossible to quantify the sublime. There is no formulaic means of determining the achievement of such a state, but there is something consensual in its manifestation.

While Aristotle's goal of rhetoric is the use of enthymemes and endoxa for the end of rational persuasion, Longinus instructs the orator to pursue ecstasy, to drive the listener beyond logic and to develop affections of the *pathos*. O'Gorman explains that, "Aristotle condescendingly puts *ekstasis* among the "barbaric" modes of honor."^[9] Ecstasy was considered a vice that was beyond *logos*. The ecstatic then was something to be avoided.

For Aristotle, the rhetorical piece itself becomes a tool fashioned for the sake of convincing an audience. O'Gorman explains that Aristotle, "Does not call rhetoric a *telos*. Instead, he speaks of the *teloi* of rhetoric, the particular ends of its various modes."^[10] In the Longinian framework the art of oratory is not something that is utilized to change opinion alone. The grand oration is not only valuable for the persuasive affect that it produces, but it may also be appreciated, valued, and conceived of as an end in itself. This may explain why although the subject of the text is rhetoric, Longinus uses significantly more examples from the works of Horace, Homer, and other poets than examples from rhetoricians. If the oration can be viewed as valuable *in se* then it is conceivable to connect works of rhetoric with those of the poets. Rhetoric becomes like poetry in that each can be appreciated in itself, not merely for its effect.

It is the twenty-second chapter of the essay that is itself possibly the most significant bridge to the Kantian aesthetic and Lyotard's application of the Kantian sublime on postmodern arts. Here Longinus attempts to answer the question, what is more important in the art of rhetoric, the masterful use of technique in a flawless exhibition of form or a piece that may contain flaws, yet still manages to achieve the effects of sublimity? For Longinus, clearly the latter is superior. He writes, "Excellence in any other part of the Discourse, shews the writer to be advanced only to the highest standard of Humanity; but the *Sublime* raises him up, till it has exalted him to be a kind of a God. To be without faults, makes an Author no other than unblameable, but the *Sublime* renders him the object of universal wonder."[\[11\]](#)

Further he writes, "But I do not design to impose my thoughts, as infallible rules, let every one abound in his own fence."[\[12\]](#) Here we find the lynch pin of Longinus' work as a rupture of the ancient perspective on the arts—the latter valorizes form and proportion, the former refuses to create boundaries. Longinus issues this refusal of definition of the rules because he argues that there are no rules. He is one who is able to provide a way that will allow the technician to move toward the heights of the sublime. Furthermore, the ancient critics claimed that the end of art was to reflect the divine through its use of proportion. Longinus offers a way for the artist to virtually transcend to the position of divine by being the source of elevation, by becoming himself "the object of universal wonder."[\[13\]](#)

Peri Hypsous comes to a conclusion with a peculiar dialogue between Longinus and an unnamed philosopher. The philosopher extends to Longinus a question regarding why, in a time when there are many great orators who have mastered the art of persuasion, do we "very seldom see any one come on the stage, whose genius is *Sublime* and elevate."[\[14\]](#) The answer the philosopher offers Longinus is that the lack of civil liberty suppresses

artistic expression.

Longinus responds to the philosopher claiming that it is not the tyrannical rule of the Empire that quenches the sublime, but the cravings of the contemporary Greek culture. He writes, "The eager desire of Riches, which is a disease we are ill of, and the love of Pleasure, enslaves us, or rather drowns us, and all our excellencies in a bottomless deep. For Avarice is the basest, and Pleasure the most unmanly distemper of the Soul." (90)

This conclusion of the text is regularly treated as a literal dialogue between Longinus and a philosopher regarding the reasons for the decline in the art of rhetoric and even more so for the impetus for the loss of elevative speech. Yet, I would propose something different. I would suggest that the dialogue with the unnamed philosopher may, in fact, be a subversive metaphor comparing the status of the Greek lifestyle with the tyranny of the ancient valorization of form and proportion. Longinus is suggesting that the history of the discipline has created static boundaries and fence lines that the artist cannot climb. It is the tyrannical captivity of *techne* within the confines of technique that has caused the inhibition of rhetoric and hence the lack of the attainment of the sublime.

Longinus' explanation of the loss of rhetoric due to the moral decline of Greece is a curious one if it is to be taken literally. Moral ambiguity and licentious behavior was no novelty in third century Greece. Innes points to this in a comparison of this concluding passage of *Peri Hypsous* with texts of Plato. He writes,

The passage recalls Plato in spirit and in style: compare *Laws* 831-2, similarly explaining the decline of society by love of wealth and corrupt political constitution, and *Republic* 8 and 9? extravagance and wealth are the true parents of ambition, vanity and luxury, which in turn give birth to insolence, lawlessness and shamelessness.[\[15\]](#)

If Innes is correct, and Longinus is harkening back to the Platonic dialogues, then it is evident that Longinus is well aware that this moral climate that he describes is nothing new. Longinus would not then be using moral decline as the reason for the 'new' loss of rhetoric. We must find a different explanation.[16]

The artist is not only imprisoned by form and proportion, but also through satisfaction with the beautiful. Just as when one has the *telos* of riches and pleasure he no longer pursues the virtuous, when one has the end of persuasion and formulaic beauty as his goal he would not pursue the sublime. It is pleasurable to be able to rise to the heights of humanity by creating a work that is hailed as beautiful through the lenses of the ancient critic, yet, to Longinus, it is near divine to transcend this greatness by jettisoning beauty for the sake of the sublime. The beautiful and the formulaic, for the artist, have a cathartic effect on the one who achieves it—he gains satisfaction through the realization of a beautiful work. As Longinus writes, traditional arguments, 'Do not only persuade, but subdue and as it were bring down the stomach of the audience.' [17] It is a catharsis that keeps one from the greater pursuits of the sublime.

The sublime is an anti-cathartic experience. It does not quench, assuage, or simply persuade, but it creates the effect of radical transformation. The transformation is not only one that changes the audience's opinion, but it is one that changes their being, it reaches beyond the mind and changes the soul. Longinus' message of captivity of art within the ancient form is then hidden within the metaphor.

What then is the consequence of the Longinian text? In Ned O'Gorman's words, 'The result of *Peri Hypsous* is that Longinus moves rhetoric beyond the traditions of character and persuasion, traditions which directly or indirectly bind rhetoric to external criteria for judgment, and brings rhetoric to autonomy.' [18] The resultant effect then of *Peri Hypsous* is a freeing of rhetoric from the shackles of ancient legitimation. In the Longinian

paradigm, boundaries are demolished and the yardstick of art is transformed. Longinus' words were prophetic of a movement within art criticism that lay far in the future. His phenomenon of the aesthetic of the sublime gained little esteem until after its 17th century translation into French by Nicholas Boileau. It was not for nearly another century that Edmund Burke's *An Inquiry into the Beautiful and the Sublime* emerged, which focused on the psychological aspects of the sublime.

Burke's *Inquiry* paved the way for works in manifold disciplines. These works reached what was possibly its modern apex in Immanuel Kant's *Critique on Judgment*.

The influence of the Longinian text stretches from the Kantian sublime to its postmodern reinvigoration in Jean Fran?ois Lyotard's postmodern critique of the realist perspective of art criticism. In "What is Postmodernism?" Lyotard approaches the topic of art criticism in the modern world and attacks its "need" for legitimation through the capitalist demands of the market. In language reminiscent of Longinus he writes, "A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work."[\[19\]](#)

Here, in brief, we can see the fruition of the Longinian project as being directly influential not only on the Kant, but we also find the culminating effects of the third century Greek rhetorician who dared to question the established norms of *techne*, to redefine the arts and who called upon the culture, in Lyotard's words, to "wage a war on totality; [to] be witnesses to the unrepresentable; [to] activate the difference and save the honor of the name."[\[20\]](#)

[1] Scholars agree that the original author of text is unknown. The author of *peri Hypsous* is often referred to as Pseudo-Longinus. For the sake of tradition and convenience the author will be referred to throughout this paper as simply Longinus.

[2] Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, trans. Desmond Lee (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 87c.

[3] Plato, *Sophista*, 228a as quoted in Eyolf Ostrem, "The Ineffable: Affinities between Christian and Secular Concepts of Art," Available Online, http://www.teol.ku.dk/ckk/conf/S5/session_5b.htm; accessed June 2005.

[4] Eyolf Ostrem

[5] Ibid.

[6] Cassius Longinus. *An Essay Upon the Sublime*. Trans. Despreux Boileau, (Oxford: Leon. Litchfield, 1698), 2.

[7] Aristotle. *On Rhetoric*. Trans. George A. Kennedy, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 36.

[8] Longinus, 13-14.

[9] Ned O'Gorman. "Longinus's Sublime Rhetoric, or How Rhetoric Came into Its Own," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, Spring 2004, Accessed June 2005 <http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa4142/is_200404/ai_n9390109>.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid, 76.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid, 88.

[15] D.C. Innes. "Longinus and Caecilius: Models of the Sublime." *Mnemosyne* Vol. LV, Fasc. 3 (2002): 269.

[16] Although Innes compares Longinus's statement with Plato, he does not take this next step that I am proposing in the paper, i.e. Longinus is speaking metaphorically about this licentious status of Greek culture.

[17] Longinus, 40.

[18] O?Gorman

[19] Jean-Fran?ois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 81. Emphasis mine.

[20] Ibid, 82.

§§§
Proceedings of the Kent State University
May 4th Philosophy Graduate Student Conference
No. 005007 (2008)

<http://philosophy.kent.edu/journal/>

© 2008 Keith Martel

© 2008 Kent State University Department of Philosophy