

longinus – on the sublime essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Longinus, like Horace, takes a pragmatic position. His central question is, what is good writing, and how may it be achieved? His first answer is that good writing partakes of what he calls the “sublime.” OK, so far that isn’t terribly helpful. Good writing takes part of the good. TAUTOLOGY ALERT! TAKE COVER UNDER THE NEAREST COPY OF THE O. E. D.! What is the sublime?

“Sublimity is a certain distinction and excellence in expression.” Well . . . that’s a little better, but not much. The “elevated language” of the sublime aims to cast a spell over the audience, not merely persuading but transporting the audience in an enthralling and delightful manner to the conclusion desired by the writer. So what we have seems to boil down to this: good writing partakes of the sublime, and the sublime is comprised of elevated language which takes the audience out of itself and into someplace the writer has in mind. This is still somewhat nebulous, but it gets clearer along the way. Longinus identifies three pitfalls to avoid on the quest for sublimity:

- 1) Tumidity;
- 2) Puerility;
- 3) Parenthyrsus.

Tumidity tries to “transcend the limits of the sublime” through false elevation and overblown language. Puerility (from the Latin *puer*-boy) is the fault Longinus associates with pedants: it is comprised of “learned trifling,” a hair-splitting (often seen in the pages of College English, and anything coming out of an MLA convention) which becomes “tawdry and affected.” Parenthyrsus is the expression of false, empty, or out-of-place passion, a

kind of mawkish, tear-jerker sentimentality of the lowest-common-denominator sort. Longinus identifies as the source of these “ ugly and parasitical growths in literature” the “ pursuit of novelty in the expression of ideas.”

Longinus goes on to identify five elements of the sublime:

- 1) “ the power of forming great conceptions”;
- 2) “ vehement and inspired passion”;
- 3) “ the due formation of figures”;
- 4) “ noble diction”; and
- 5) “ dignified and elevated composition.”

He recognizes great art by the presence of great ideas; great ideas, in turn, are conceived of by great men: “ 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 emotions of parenthesis. 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 language which is transparent to the transcendent-to borrow one of Joseph Campbell’s favorite phrases. “ Dignified and elevated composition” is that which forms important

elements into an organic unity. There are, according to Longinus, six types of “ figures”:

- 1) amplification
- 2) inversions of word order
- 3) polyptota-accumulations, variations, and climaxes
- 4) particulars combined from the plural to the singular
- 5) interchange of persons-addressing the audience as “ you”
- 6) periphrasis (circumlocution)-wordiness, circling around the issue rather than going straight to it; Longinus considers this especially dangerous.

Longinus seems to fit squarely into the critical school described by T. S. Eliot’s “ Tradition and the Individual Talent.” He recommends, as a way to the sublime, “ the imitation and emulation 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 3x removed from reality). He treats poetry as an agonistic process-anticipating Bloom’s anxiety of influence-speaking of Plato struggling “ with Homer for the 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?”