

# THE PYGMIES IN THE CAGE: THE FUNCTION OF THE SUBLIME IN LONGINUS

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*In memory of Robert F. Goheen*

THE EDITORS OF THIS VOLUME have posed powerful questions, ones that go to the heart of the experience of reading and teaching literature. Are those experiences so “sublime” that they are beyond systematic analysis? Are they “*ineffable*?”

The author of the ancient treatise *On the Sublime* took a strong stance on such questions, stronger, perhaps, than has been recognized. In what purports at first to be a handbook on rhetoric, Longinus gradually makes the case that the literary experience of the sublime has profoundly enriching and liberating effects on the individual. Without such experience, the soul shrinks and withers, never attaining its true greatness. The sublime, moreover, is not “*ineffable*”; it can be recognized and analyzed, and perhaps given expression in new literature, using the techniques illustrated in the treatise.

Thus, below the surface of this ostensibly circumscribed treatise is an implicit educational theory that speaks both to Imperial Rome and to our own age.

## **Freak Show and Genre**

A few pages before the manuscripts of *On the Sublime*, ascribed to one Longinus, break off, there is a haunting image drawn from contemporary Roman society—its circuses, its freak shows, its taste for the exotic and the bizarre, its appetite for entertainment no matter what the cost in human degradation and suffering. The reader suddenly stands before a cage in which are locked small human beings from Africa:

And so ... if what I hear is true ... not only do the cages in which they keep the pygmies or dwarfs, as they are called, stunt the growth of the prisoners, but their bodies even shrink in close confinement. (44.5, Fyfe’s translation, modified)<sup>1</sup>

The savagery of the practice is even more shocking in the Greek, for the word translated as “close confinement” is literally a “sack for holding the tongues,”

and the “tongues” are the thin reeds that make the overpowering sound that came from the ancient relative of the oboe, the *aulos*. The pygmies, in other words, are confined in a tiny container, where their natural vocal capacity, as well as room to stretch and grow, is denied them. Although later the author refers to this place of captivity as a prison (*desmoterion*), the image he prefers is that of this small pouch (*glossokomeion*) and the voiceless “tongues” within. The enslaved and confined pygmies have, in effect, been reduced to mute instruments of amusement for an entertainment-hungry populace. The image of such confinement leads to a powerful critique of slavery: “on the same principle all slavery, however equitable it may be, might be described as a cage for the human soul, a common prison house” (44.5). This is a “common prison,” that is, one in which all are confined, the captives hauled to Rome from remotest Africa, their keepers, and all who are drawn into the spectacle.

To be sure, Longinus does not claim as his own the powerful image of the captives in their confinement; indeed it comes, he says, from an unnamed philosopher whose views he does not find convincing (44.1). The image, however, draws on ideas of enslavement and liberation already developed in the treatise and leads to Longinus’ own explanation of the absence of truly sublime talent in his day. But what, one wonders, does this image and the debate within which it occurs have to do with the literary quality of the sublime (*hypsos*) to which the work is devoted? As we look more closely at the literary form of the work, these features become all the more surprising. What, we ask, are the mistreated pygmies doing in a treatise of this sort? To answer this question, we will have to look more closely at the literary form of Longinus’ work.

Although the work is filled with astute observations and close readings of literary texts, it cannot usefully be approached as “literary criticism” in the modern sense of that term. Its primary aim is not literary analysis or private delectation, but something “useful” (*chresimon*) for people in civic life (*andrasī politikois*) (1.2). No wonder, then, that Longinus pays special attention to oratory, the literary form of greatest interest to those involved in public life. (Oratory in both Greek and Roman antiquity was regarded as a major literary form, whose techniques helped shape both poetry and other types of prose literature.) No wonder then that the treatise often cites and explicates the canonical orators, not least, *the orator*, Demosthenes. Other passages, including those from Homer—and other poets—are examined for what they can teach the aspiring orator. In chapter 15, for example, he draws on the great poets to illustrate the power that comes from the skillful use of images.

A better approach to the treatise, though still imperfect, is to recognize it as an extension of traditional rhetorical training manuals, the so-called “arts” of rhetoric. (“Art” in this sense is simply a reflection of the translation of Greek *technē* into Latin *ars*. The *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* [“Rhetoric for Alexander”] preserved among the works of Aristotle, is a good example of such *technai* and is still one of the best introductions to ancient rhetoric.)

At the outset of the treatise, Longinus indicates he is writing within the tradition of *technologiai*, that is, treatises about a craft or skill (1.1).<sup>2</sup> The work thus carries on the tradition of rhetorical how-to-do-it treatises that

began in the fifth century before our era, with the shadowy Corax and Tisias, and those that, thanks to the criticisms of Plato, are far better known—teachers of rhetoric such as Protagoras, Hippias, Gorgias, and other “Sophists.” (As is well known, the word *sophists* in ancient Greek need not imply deception; it simply denotes a professional teacher of rhetoric, whose services were much in demand in ancient Athens and other democratic cities.<sup>3</sup>) The tradition continued through the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods. It was still flourishing in the tenth century of our era when the earliest and best of the surviving manuscripts of *On the Sublime*, Paris 2036, was copied.

Longinus, it is clear, is well aware of this tradition. He may even have written such a manual himself.<sup>4</sup> The first few pages of *On the Sublime*, moreover, speak in practical, utilitarian terms, and identify the treatise as a *technologia*. Only gradually does it move beyond the limits of such treatises. At the outset, it asks to be approached in part as a “technology of the sublime” (2.1 f), that is, as a practical guide designed to show the aspiring orator or writer how to launch thunderbolts that will stun his audience into earnest submission. This technology is built on the conventional foundation for oratorical achievement, the capacity for powerful speech (8.1). It uses, moreover, the specialized vocabulary and analytical techniques of ancient rhetoric—for example, “amplification” (*auxesis*) in chapters 11 and 12. It may then be viewed as an effort to build on this tradition by developing the idea of “the sublime” already brought into circulation by Longinus’ predecessor, Caecilius of Calacte (1.1).

By casting his discussion of the sublime in the mold of a rhetorical treatise, Longinus does two things. First, he establishes the tension or paradox that underlies the whole treatise—the idea that something that appears transcendent can be realized through mundane means. Second, he emphasizes that the importance of the sublime is in the first instance rhetorical; it helps the orator achieve a moment that “scatter[s] everything before it like a bolt of lightning and reveal[s] the full power of the speaker at a single stroke” (2.4). For this purpose, the treatise provides examples both of passages that achieve this effect and of those that attempt it but fall short.

### **The Sublime as Philosophy**

The writing of a rhetorical *techné* was still a fully respectable undertaking in the Roman Empire when, whatever its exact date, this treatise was composed. At the end of the day, anyone who could expand this venerable tradition with a richer vocabulary or new techniques could leave the study feeling pride and accomplishment. But in the middle of the night, doubts or cultural warfare might trouble the sleep. Rhetoric had long been subjected to powerful scrutiny, not least by Plato and his followers. His criticism of rhetoric, perhaps most powerfully articulated in the *Gorgias*, can be generalized to any technology. Since rhetoric, the speaker’s technology, can be used for either good or ill, it is not, in Plato’s view, an end in itself, but must be subordinated to moral principles.

Teachers and theorists of rhetoric have tried to find a satisfactory resolution to the tension between rhetoric and philosophy, or at a more general level between power and morality, beginning as early as Plato's *Republic* and his contemporary Isocrates, and continuing through Quintilian's reaffirmation of a dictum of Cato the Elder, that the good orator must be a *vir bonus dicendi peritus* (qtd. in Quintilian 12.1), that is, someone both morally good and skilled in speaking.

Where does Longinus stand in this contention between the rhetoricians and the philosophers? If the Platonic criticism had validity against older forms of rhetoric, it would apply *a fortiori* to the even more powerful technology, the art of the sublime, which Longinus was developing. We might expect him then to be defensive, or perhaps to turn his back on this debate as some writers of *technai* did, but not Longinus. Every now and then, philosophy breaks through the technological surface of the treatise. However, it is not the unregenerated philosophical critique of rhetoric propounded by Plato and Socrates, but the significantly modified philosophy of the Roman Empire. By the time this treatise was written, "philosophy" had come to mean in common parlance not logic, metaphysics, or cosmology, but detachment from conventional values of power, wealth, prestige and, not least, from the ravenous appetite for amusement and entertainment. Although the various philosophical schools—Academics, Stoics, Epicureans, Neo-Platonists and so on—often differed with one another, they shared a wariness about the dominant cultural values of their time. "To disdain" or, literally, "to think down" (*to kataphronein*), was an identifying mark of the philosopher, for "philosophy" had become essentially counter-cultural, a steady critique, often associated with bearded ascetics, of what we might call "the Roman way of life."

It is the philosopher's voice that speaks in passages such as this:

... it is a mark of greatness to look down upon (*kataphronein*) ... wealth, status, reputation, unlimited power and everything else that has great external and theatrical appeal; to no sensible man would these appear to be high up on the scale of goodness, since it is no mean good to think one's way around these things. (7.1, my translation)

At the very outset of the work, Longinus has made an even more dramatic move away from conventional rhetoric.

... the sublime consists in a consummate excellence and distinction of language, and ... this alone gave to the greatest poets and prose writers their pre-eminence and clothed them with immortal fame. For what surpasses natural ability leads listeners not to persuasion (*peitho*) but to *ekstasis* (1.3, Fyfe's translation, modified).

But what does he mean by this extraordinary assertion? What does he mean by *ekstasis*?

## Ecstasy and Enthusiasm

The art of rhetoric, Longinus implies, puts us in control of things; the sublime, on the other hand, cannot be resisted:

Everything that startles us and makes us marvel constantly forces us beyond the persuasive and the enjoyable. The persuasive indeed is for the most part within our control, but these things establish a tyrannical hold and irresistible force over every listener. (1.4, my translation)

From *ekstasis*, we derive English “ecstasy,” a drug, a kind of euphoria, a hyperbole for pleasure and excitement. For the ancients, the word pointed in quite different directions. While the word has technical uses in medicine and other fields, its etymological sense, “standing away from something,” often comes to the fore in discussions of extreme varieties of physical or religious experience. In such cases, it was commonly thought that a person’s own breath or spirit (*pneuma*) had gone out from him or her. The next stage might be that some other spirit entered in. This state is now commonly referred to as “possession,” that is, a state in which a person feels that he or she has been taken over by a divinity who may use that person’s body to speak or act. The entrance of the divinity might also be called by a counterpart term, *enthousiasmos*, from which the English “enthusiasm” is a pale derivative. The Greek term is a combination of *en*, in, and *theos*, god.

The entrance of the divinity might involve spasms, frothing at the mouth, seizures similar to those in epilepsy, known in antiquity as the “sacred disease.” Sometimes the possessed person would deliver prophecies, in prose or even in verse. This is perhaps the best way of approaching the prophecies emanating from the prophetess at Delphi, and from the Cumaean Sibyl and other famous and frequently consulted oracles in antiquity. The most familiar modern analogy may be the speaking in tongues by Pentecostals and others.

*Ekstasis* and *enthousiasmos* in Longinus both allude to this pattern of religious possession. The terms are counterparts. Etymology shows the relationship between the two terms, the one beginning with the word for “out,” *ek*, the other with the word for “in,” *en*. Longinus uses this vocabulary to talk about an otherwise difficult-to-articulate effect of the sublime. It is still not easy. Longinus gropes for terms, stretches syntax to the extreme, forces one metaphor within another. We can understand some of what Longinus is trying to express because we know that literature can sometimes “take our breath away,” but that catches only part of what he has in mind. He recognizes the power of sublime passages to shock and awe an audience, but is no less interested in the possession that accompanies such *ekstasis*. Here, for example, is what Longinus says about one of the techniques he recommends, the direct expression of emotion—it must be genuine emotion—at the proper moment in a speech or text. Some of his comments on the matter are a good illustration of what we have just noted about the complexity of his style. The following translation is as literal as possible in order to catch the metaphors:

... as if, under the influence of some frenzy (*manias*) and breath (*pneumatōs*), to let in the divinity as one lets out one's breath (*ent-housiastikos ekpneon*), and, as it were, to be possessed by Phoebus [Apollo]. (8.4, my translation)

The expression of intense emotion, in other words, brings listeners to a state analogous to possession in a religious cult. They experience something similar to what Pentecostals today might call the Holy Spirit. The metaphors in each case are not about some attenuated "spirituality," but an intense physicality. Participants feel the breath of a divinity. It fills them as they let out their own breath and let in the divine.

The language of religious possession recurs throughout the treatise. In chapter 10.3, for example, Longinus extrapolates from the language of a poem by Sappho that the poetess was inspired as if possessed by Apollo (*phoibatai*).<sup>5</sup> A little later, in discussing Demosthenes' speech, *On the Crown*, Longinus uses a related word as he imagines the orator: "... as it were suddenly inspired by a divinity and, in effect, seized by Apollo (*phoibleptos*)" (16.2). But again three little syllables, "as it were" (*kathaper*), draw the line between what Longinus sees in Demosthenes and true religious frenzy. Longinus is not suggesting that the effect of sublime literature is to create a moment of religious ecstasy in either speaker or audience. Rather, metaphors drawn from religious possession provide him with a discourse that was not available in the traditional technical vocabulary of rhetorical instruction.

### Soul Talk

Vocabulary drawn from ancient religion provides an instrument of great value to Longinus in his discussion of the ability of well-crafted language to astonish and overpower an audience. But religious-like terminology in *On the Sublime* is not limited to this purpose. In the form of "soul talk," it reaches more broadly and more deeply. It allows Longinus to begin an exploration of the effects of sublime language in the deepest parts of our being.

Note, for example, how in discussing the arrangement of words, Longinus extends an analogy between oratory and melody in music. He alludes at first to an instrument widely thought to induce frenzy, the *aulos* (the reed instrument, similar to the oboe, mentioned at the beginning of this essay): "Does not the *aulos* ... induce certain emotions in those who hear it? Does it not seem to carry them away and fill them with divine frenzy?" (39.2). Longinus then uses the example of the *aulos* to suggest that skillfully arranged language in a speech—"which is a kind of melody in words"—can "take hold not of the listener's ears alone but of his very soul" (39.3). The effect reaches far beyond persuasion. It is like a spell cast upon us. But this is white magic, not black, for it turns us towards what is "weighty, deserving of respect, and sublime" (39.3).

Longinus' "soul talk" often seems to embarrass his translators. They squirm to find other translations for the word *psyche* and its relatives—"heart,"

“our thoughts,” or simply “us” (8.4, my translation). Longinus, however, has few hesitations about using the term. In fact, the little qualifying words that mark most of his religious terminology as metaphor or analogy are usually absent when he speaks of the soul. For him, the soul is not a metaphor but a reality without which the body is limp and empty (11.2). It may be the locus of the emotions but it is also profoundly affected by them. Indeed an emotion may be defined as a “movement and upheaval of the soul” (20.2). Thus, it can be deeply affected by the sublime:

For by its very nature our soul is somehow lifted up (*epairetai*) by the truly sublime, and having acquired a certain pride and loftiness, is filled with joy and great self confidence (*megalachia*), as if the soul itself had created what it heard. (7.2, my translation)

This ability of the sublime to lift up the soul can even bring mortals close to the divine, as Longinus indicates in chapter 36.1, “The sublime raises one up close to the lofty mindedness (*megalophrosune*) of God” (my translation).

Here, as so often, Longinus’ discussion of the soul turns on a central axis in the work, a polarity at one end of which is greatness or height and at the other meanness and lowness. Since in Greek, words compounded from *mega* can convey height as well as mass, “soul talk” is height talk. These words are part of a metaphorical nexus that ties together images of elevation, verbs of lifting up, and, of course, the sublime itself; hence the translation “lofty mindedness” just used for *megalophrosyne*. This nexus can easily be obscured by translations that speak blandly of “greatness” or “great writing” when the treatise is concerned with ideas of reaching upward, tallness, loftiness. The sublime (*to hupsos*) is, after all, a word for height, not mass.

Longinus’ thinking about the soul becomes clear when the vocabulary and imagery of height are kept in view. In discussing Euripides, for example, Longinus concedes at the outset that the tragic poet was not *megalophues* (5.3)—he lacked a natural inclination toward the grand and lofty—but rather, suggests that Euripides successfully forced himself toward such qualities. Longinus then supports this view by citing several passages, including one from the lost play, *The Phaethon*. In this play, Helios allows his son to drive the chariot of the sun—with catastrophic results. Longinus asserts that the soul of Euripides shared the perilous flight of those winged horses. “It could never have imagined such things if it had not run neck and neck with those heavenly doings” (15.4). The emphasis on the soul in this passage is doubly interesting. Longinus clearly thinks that it is the soul that makes it possible to imagine the situation. In addition, the image of the soul reaching up to heaven is not a new thought injected at the end of the analysis of Euripides, but is implicit in the “greatness or loftiness” language of the term *megalophues*, used at the very outset of the discussion.

### **An Educational Theory**

The “soul talk” in the treatise points toward an educational theory. To be

sure, the full scope of the theory is left implicit for the most part, and is largely eclipsed by the concentration on rhetoric. Rhetorical training was a central part of Greek and Roman education for two millennia, from Classical Athens to the fall of the Byzantine Empire.

Indeed in late antiquity and the early Byzantine period, Greek education by and large avoided the relegation common in Western Europe, of rhetoric to one of three preliminary educational roads (the *trivium*, consisting of grammar, rhetoric, and logic). It was rather one of the most prominent of a range of skills (*technai*) widely regarded as important for the society. In 425, for example, when Theodosius established in Constantinople a *pandidakterion*, the first “university” in Europe, there were thirty-one chairs: ten each in Greek and Latin grammar, two in law, one in philosophy, and eight in rhetoric.<sup>6</sup> There were, apparently, no chairs in medicine or theology, nor in what in the West became the *quadrivium*, that is, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and harmony. The *quadrivium* and *trivium*, as their Latin names suggest, were developed in the West, probably in the fifth century of our era, flimsy, one might suspect, against the flood of barbarism, which rose more swiftly and more disastrously in the West than in the East. In the Greek-speaking East, after grammar, rhetoric ruled supreme.

While Greek culture was always deeply concerned with *paideia*, that is, education in all its aspects, very few works dedicated to that subject were composed. The art of rhetoric, by contrast, was the subject of many treatises and discussions. Against this background, a few comments in *On the Sublime* stand out in high relief. While Longinus shares the adulation of rhetoric so widespread among his fellow Greek speakers, he hints at the outset of his work that he intends to address the topic of education more broadly. Longinus criticizes his predecessor, Caecilius of Calacte, for failing to “deal with the means by which we might be empowered to lead our natural capacities toward some significant progress in greatness and loftiness” (*eis posen megethous epidosisin*) (1.1, my translation). He drops the topic for the time being, perhaps because he needs first to clarify what he means by “greatness and loftiness,” which, as we have seen, is closely linked to the sublime. That clarification emerges in part through his discussion of how Euripides forced (*prosenagkasen*) his nature “into the tragic mould” (15.3). Borrowing a term often used for heroes and others who undergo great labors, Longinus calls Euripides *philoponotatos*, “the greatest lover of toil” (15.3).

But hard work cannot be the whole basis of education. Nor is it simply exposure to, or analysis of, the passages he considers sublime. That is too passive and too easy. Plato, he notes, points in a different direction—to an active process, and a competitive one as well, involving two crucial components—imitation (*mimesis*) and rivalry (*zelosis*): “What is this road and what is it like? It is imitation and rivalry of the great prose writers and poets of the past” (13.2, my translation). *Mimesis* is frequently used in ancient discussions of literature to describe the relationship between writer and subject matter or writer and a tradition on which he or she draws. It is clear that for the Greeks, such imitation was not an attempt at exact replication, but adaptation—creative restatement. But what of *zelosis*, the word from which English derives both “zeal”

and (in all probability) “jealousy”? The translation “rivalry” catches only part of the meaning since the Greek term reflects the motivation behind *mimesis*—driving ambition, competition, and sometimes envy as well.

The importance of *zēlosis* in Longinus’ thought is evident in a difficult, but crucial passage, another analogy drawn from Greek religion. After relating the familiar story that the prophetess of Apollo at Delphi was inspired by breathing vapors coming from a cleft in the bedrock, Longinus draws an analogy to the inspiration (in the literal sense of breathing in) that comes from great writers:

Thus, from the grand and lofty nature of those of long ago a kind of outpouring is brought into the souls of those who aspire to rival them (*zēlounton*), as if from the mouths of the sacred.  
(13.2, my translation)

What does it mean to be a “rival” of one of the great writers of the past? Longinus means—as do many ancient authors who use these terms—surpassing the classics, outdoing models of acknowledged eloquence and wisdom. Longinus’ purpose, we see once again, is not to write “literary criticism” but to help others—his contemporaries, his students perhaps—to write and speak at the highest possible level. In today’s world, he might feel more comfortable in a creative writing or perhaps even communications program, rather than in English, comparative literature, or classics. He would not, if I read him correctly, be satisfied if a student wrote a fine critical essay; he would want to hear words that thunder louder than Demosthenes, or to read a passage even grander than Homer.

So the student, in this view of education, cannot be a passive admirer of past greatness; he or she must *compete* with it and try to surpass it. This becomes clear in one of the most powerful—or sublime—passages in the work: the analogy it draws between human life and the great Greek national festivals (*panegyreis*) of which the Olympic games are the best known example. It is part of our very nature, Longinus asserts, to stride forward into competition, just as contestants do in festival games:

For nature (*physis*) has not decided that human beings are lowly or ignoble creatures, but has led us into life and into the whole universe as if we were going to be spectators (*theatai*) of all of it in some great festival—or rather contestants (*agonistai*) eager for honor. Nature has lost no time in inspiring (*enephusen*) our souls with an irresistible passion (*erota*) for whatever is great and, by comparison to ourselves, more divine. (35.2, my translation)

In this passage, in fine rhetorical fashion, Longinus corrects himself, saying we are not onlookers but contenders, competitors in the games, seeking to be honored. That impulse is built into us. It is part of our souls. Implicitly it makes us admirers and rivals of the achievements of other contenders, past and present.

Longinus is not alone in drawing his imagery, and perhaps his theory, from athletics. Theon of Alexandria in the first century of our era developed rhetorical instruction based on *progymnasmata*—exercises requiring the pupil to produce speeches of various types on subjects drawn from history and mythology. Later Aphthonios of Antioch developed a textbook with exercises in fourteen different categories such as encomium, fable, maxim, confirmation, refutation, *ekphrasis*, and invective.<sup>7</sup> The athletic imagery in Longinus parallels that of *progymnasmata* and evokes further questions. What happens, after all, to the contestant in such a setting? The body is stretched and strengthened; it grows stronger, taller, more muscular, and more vigorous. By analogy, we might expect, the soul when it imitates, and then surpasses its models, should be ever more vigorous and reach ever higher. Ultimately, this kind of athlete becomes a person of true loftiness of spirit (*megalopsychos*).

One can readily imagine the treatise concluding not long after the image of the competitor striding into one of the great pan-Hellenic festivals. One part at least of a powerful, ambitious, educational theory is now before us. The student must not get away with recognizing, analyzing, praising great writing. Even *mimesis*, creative adaptation, by itself is not sufficient. One must surpass the past.

To stop at this point, however, would be to avoid difficult questions. What prevents such *zēlosis*? Why is it so rare? The answer to that question requires us to look at the other end of the axis around which the treatise turns—the downward tendency toward corruption and the wasting away of the soul.

### The Pygmies

In its final pages, having moved from the modest genre of rhetorical handbooks to a powerful and evocative image of the pan-Hellenic festival, the treatise metamorphoses again, this time into a dialogue or debate. An interlocutor steps in, an unnamed philosophical friend of the author. Although such antilogies are a well-attested feature of ancient debates, they are not the way rhetorical handbooks went about presenting their material. They belong, in other words, to a different genre. And in *On the Sublime*, as the genre changes, so does the thrust of the argument. Longinus now confronts a problem in the theory behind the first part of the treatise. How are we to explain the absence of truly sublime literature in the present age?

We find natures that are supremely persuasive ... and especially rich in literary charm, yet really sublime (*hupselai*) and transcendent (*hypermegetheis*) natures are no longer, or only very rarely, now produced. (44.1)

The observation restates the question raised by our analysis of Longinus' educational theory: what keeps us from *zēlosis*? Both Longinus and his philosophical interlocutor, who now enters the discussion, agree on the point that the age in which they live is deficient in the truly sublime. Both use metaphors of

enslavement. But they have very different views on how the sorry state of contemporary culture is to be explained. The interlocutor adduces his explanation with some diffidence. He knows, surely, that since the Roman Empire does not allow true democratic freedom, his theory will seem out of date and irrelevant, but he propounds nonetheless “the hackneyed view that democracy is the kindly nurse of genius” (44.2). He suggests that only political freedom has the ability to nurture the thoughts of great intellects. But now “we seem to be schooled in an equitable slavery” (44.3) and do not even taste the true source of great oratory—freedom. It is here that the interlocutor introduces the image to which the title of this essay alludes:

“And so,” my friend added, “if what I hear is true that not only do the cages in which they keep the pygmies or dwarfs, as they are called, stunt the growth of their prisoners, but their bodies even shrink in close confinement, on the same principle all slavery, however equitable it may be, might well be deemed as a cage for the human soul, a common prison.” (44.5)

The anonymous philosopher’s conclusion is clear—all slavery imprisons our souls. No wonder then, since all are entrapped in the benign autocracy of the Roman Empire, that no truly sublime literature results.

The image of the stunted pygmies is perfect for the thematics of the treatise. We have glimpsed grandeur and loftiness of soul, now we see its opposite. Yet the image is presented through the voice of the interlocutor, not of the author himself. The author distances himself from this socio-political explanation in favor of a highly moralistic one. He is willing to accept the idea that in this world everyone is enslaved, and even that such enslavement prevents sublime literary expression. But he reverses the interlocutor’s critique of the loss of freedom under the *Pax Romana*, pointing instead to a perpetual but inward warfare:

But consider. Perhaps it is not the world’s peace that corrupts great natures but much rather this endless warfare which besets our desires (*epithumias*), yes, and the passions that garrison our lives in these days, and make utter havoc of them. It is the love of money, that insatiable sickness from which we all now suffer, and the love of pleasure that enslave us, or rather, one might say, sink our lives, “with crew and all” into the depths (*katabuthizousin*). (44.6)

The image of the sinking ship replaces that of the caged pygmies, and drives home Longinus’ own critique. His well-heeled, well-educated readers—not some captives from a far off land—are the true slaves and the ones who are pressed downward. And we are ourselves (for Longinus uses the first person, not the third) the cause of our misery since we have chosen a life of pleasure and greed. Not content to rely on the image of the shipwreck, Longinus launches a whole fleet of new metaphors. Greed is a sickness, and not just any

sickness but one that makes its victims shrink and wither (*nosema mikropoion*); we waste away, malnourished, because of it. Greed inverts the proper relation of man and god. No longer does a divinity come inside us and inspire us; rather we go out and make gods (*ektheiasantas*) of the evil that descend from wealth. These evils, among them personified Extravagance, march into our cities and our homes, once Wealth has opened the gates for them. They nest there, like noxious birds, and breed their nestlings, Swagger (*alazoneia*), and Delusion (*tuphos*) and Luxury (*truphe*). These in turn, if they reach maturity, breed Hybris, Transgression (*paranomia*), and Shamelessness (*anaischyntia*), the inexorable masters of our enslaved souls (44.7).

And what is the end of this? Greatness of soul withers and starves to death (*phthinein de kai katamarainesthai ta psychika megethe*) (44.8). Under such circumstances the soul can not reach to the sublime nor can greatness flourish.

Is, then, the experience of the sublime and of its results, greatness of soul and sublime writing, impossible in an age enslaved by wealth and pleasure? Longinus holds out little hope: “This must inevitably ... happen ...” (44.8); “... the whole life of each one of us is now governed wholly by bribery ... we have sold our souls for profit ...” (44.9). Amid all this—if we still possess any grandeur of soul—it loses its zeal (*azela ginesthai*) (44.8). And although the castigation becomes slightly less universal, applying to “all but a few of us” in 44.11, there is no hint that studying great literature, or experiencing the sublime, will free us from our slavery to wealth and pleasure. Indeed the relationship between freedom and education seems just the opposite: we must first free ourselves from addiction to wealth and pleasure for *then*, and only then, is there some chance that *mimesis* and *zēlosis* will do their work and we might achieve, even in the present dismal age, some grandeur and loftiness of soul.

Is even that too optimistic? Are we, ancient Romans and contemporary Americans alike, hopelessly enslaved by “the emotions (*ta pathe*) that garrison our lives?” (44.6). Longinus’ answer depends on his understanding of the emotions, and perhaps, of the effect that the experience of the sublime has on the audience, even in adverse cultural circumstances. When the sublime induces *ekstasis*, for example, are we temporarily freed from emotions that might otherwise drag us to lower levels of experience, expression and action? Can the Socratic cross-examination, the Platonic dialectic liberate us from base emotions if used consistently and forcefully enough early in an education? My suspicion is that the treatise went on to discuss the emotions along the lines suggested, but after promising a discussion of the emotions, the manuscripts end in mid-sentence.

### Longinus on Trial

Much remains to be resolved when the manuscripts of *On the Sublime* break off, but clearly its author has answered at least some of the questions the editors of this collection have put to him. In his view, even the most sublime passages of literature are capable of identification, explication, and evaluation. Longinus not only implies, he *demonstrates*, that there is nothing “ineffable” about the sublime.

But when viewed as an educational theory, his treatise is polemical, deeply counter-cultural and likely to provoke anger, then and now. It is easy to imagine his critics linking arms to demand Longinus' condemnation. One might imagine the proceedings to be of the following sort:

**Prosecutor:** Your honor, I charge the defendant, Longinus, author of the scurrilous tract *On the Sublime*, with fraud, and the corruption of the young. He has misrepresented his work as a handbook of rhetorical instruction when it is in fact an attack on our culture and its most deeply held values. It turns out to be a manifesto that will mislead all who read it, not least our young people.

**Judge:** How plead you, Longinus?

**Longinus:** Proudly guilty as charged, your honor. I contrived a treatise that looked like a rhetorical handbook and transformed it into something much more interesting and important. If this is fraud or misrepresentation, I am guilty. If its effect is to displace an education based on self-gratification, and avarice, then I will happily pay the penalty.

**Judge:** And, Mr. Prosecutor, what penalty do you seek?

**Prosecutor:** Exile, your honor. Exclusion from the company of all who teach and all who learn.

**Judge:** The court will need to determine whether there was intent to deceive.

**Longinus:** Objection, your honor. Deception has not been established.

**Prosecutor:** Longinus has himself admitted that he "transformed" his treatise into something quite different. It turns into a diatribe against the existing social order. Only malice aforethought can account for such a vicious attack on our society.

**Longinus:** I transformed the literary form of my writing because my purpose is transformation—the transformation of those who read my work.

**Prosecutor:** Transformation? I submit, your honor, that the only transformation he had in view was the transformation of his bank balance. But, as your honor has no doubt noticed, the defendant has admitted his deception, and its intended effects on his readers. I therefore, ask for a directed verdict of guilty.

**Judge:** Lest anyone accuse us of being prejudiced or peremptory, the court will overlook the defendant's admission and enter a plea of "not guilty" on his behalf. The prosecution may present its case.

**Prosecutor:** The case is quite simple, your honor, but not as simple as the defendant's claims in this absurd pamphlet. In order to sell copies of it, the defendant has made repeated fraudulent claims about the study of literature. He contends that the purpose of such study is to encounter the sublime or the ineffable, when everyone knows the purpose of literature is entertainment.

**Longinus:** I admit that I believe that literature has a higher purpose than entertainment. I also admit that in my writings I have used words to speak about words. I notice, however, that the prosecution also uses words to show what may or may not properly be said about literature. Clearly then literature is not ineffable, nor incapable of being analyzed.

**Prosecutor:** Objection your honor. Double negatives should be banned from the courtroom as unnecessarily confusing.

**Longinus:** A mere litotes, your honor.

**Judge:** Objection sustained. The defendant will avoid rhetorical figures and confine himself to language simple enough to be understood by the prosecution.

**Longinus:** Then let me state that I have never said the sublime was “ineffable.” In fact, I think such language deserves no place in the study of literature. In fact, since the term applies properly only to God and his works, your honor, may I bring a charge of blasphemy against the prosecutor?

**Judge:** The court does not recognize such an accusation. Return to the case at hand.

**Prosecutor:** I will allow the matter of the sublime and the ineffable to pass. No one cares in any event about such pedantic distinctions. The point is not whether sublime passages can be identified, explicated and analyzed using the flimsy and implausible techniques promulgated in this pamphlet. That is not the issue.

**Judge:** Perhaps the prosecution will explain to us, then, what *is* the issue. But may I remind you, counselor, that the prosecution must show that someone has been or will be harmed by the defendant’s conduct.

**Prosecutor:** Of course, your honor. The defendant’s conduct has the effect of wasting time and energy on the study of literature. Follow Longinus’ course and you—that is our society, not you personally your honor—will end up displacing a truly practical education, one based on the three F’s: facts, figures and formulae.

**Judge:** If I follow you correctly, counselor, all studies that are not based on these three F’s should be prohibited—not just Longinus’ approach to rhetoric but philosophy, history, music, and the other arts. Would that include the study of law?

**Prosecutor:** With all due respect, your honor, I had hoped that it would be clear that my claim is much narrower. I only claim that Longinus’ approach to literature and to education puts the student on a slippery slope. A few innocent sounding observations about Homer, Demosthenes or some other deservedly obscure author lead to diletantism, and the waste of time and resources. These are drawn away from other more practical instruction and from the profit motive that has made our society great and prosperous. Those who follow Longinus will end up unemployed, alienated, and impoverished, with

heads in the clouds and purses empty.

**Longinus:** Bravo! Well spoken! You show a fine capacity for lofty oratory, Mr. Prosecutor. I am honored to be accused by you.

**Judge:** Silence. I warn you, Mr. Longinus, against further interruptions. Do you wish to call any witnesses, counselor?

**Prosecutor:** None is needed, your honor. I myself provide the necessary proof of the fraudulence of the treatise. In it the accused contends that by contemplating and analyzing certain passages one can experience the sublime and thereby become a more effective orator or writer. Yet in my reading of widely appreciated and highly successful authors of the present day I have never encountered passages that could conceivably be called “sublime,” nor has such reading ever provided me with any practical benefit apart from entertainment. Many distinguished literary critics have written to confirm my judgment. On this basis, the prosecution rests its case.

**Judge:** Your argument cuts to the heart of the matter, counselor. I am impressed by how little you have learned from the study of literature.

**Prosecutor:** Many others have studied more intensely and gained even less than I have.

**Judge:** I congratulate you for your modesty, counselor. But let us see now what response the defendant will make, unless, of course, he is dumbfounded by the sublimity of the prosecution’s argument.

**Longinus:** On the contrary, I am always inspired by true eloquence. You see, I believe, that sublime literature can bring our souls very close to the grandeur of God.

**Prosecutor:** “Souls!” Your honor, you have heard it from his own mouth—the defendant has violated yet another legal principle—the constitutional separation of soul talk and literature. By asking one further question I will show how seriously this aggravates the defendant’s misconduct.

**Judge:** Proceed.

**Prosecutor:** Do you have a valid license to use the word “soul”? I point out to the court that all such licenses expired two hundred years ago and have not been renewed.

**Longinus:** Guilty again. I have no such license, nor would I ever apply for one. But in turn I ask you, distinguished prosecutor, one question: can you show that two hundred years without “soul talk” have enriched the understanding of literature, or our lives?

**Prosecutor:** It has freed us from all sorts of error, notably religious dogma and what you call inspiration and enthusiasm.

**Longinus:** And in doing so it has, I submit, depleted the understanding of why literature should be studied. This impoverishment of language has debased the education of our young people. It locks both teacher and student into low and narrow linguistic cages. Such confinement stunts intellectual and personal growth. It is criminal to

defraud people by calling such impoverishment “education.”

**Judge:** I must remind the defendant that it is he who is on trial here, not the prosecutor. You may respond to the defendant’s comments if you choose, counselor, but you are under no obligation to do so.

**Prosecutor:** Thank you, your honor. I will simply ask one further question, one that brings us to the core of the matter, and to our reason for bringing this case in the first place. You said, Mr. Longinus, that sublime literature can bring us close to the grandeur of God. Do you believe that one can *measure* how close one has thereby come to this “God” of yours?

**Longinus:** By no means, but ...

**Prosecutor:** Aha! You admit then that all this “soul talk” is vague and immeasurable. Head in the clouds again, eh, Mr. Longinus?

**Longinus:** I have no way to measure closeness to the divinity, but I believe we know some of the steps that can bring a person closer to such experience and can determine whether those steps are being taken or not.

**Prosecutor:** I presume that such steps include reading sublime literature and talking about what makes it sublime. A waste of time, to be sure, but even worse, tell me this, how could one possibly *know* whether these steps lead anywhere?

**Longinus:** Here is one way. You might ask how often there are sublime passages in your own work, or that of students who have studied with you. This will not let you measure your distance from the grandeur of God, but you will in that way have some indication of whether the experience of the sublime is bearing fruit.

**Prosecutor:** We are talking about the study of literature, not creative writing.

**Longinus:** If those two are to be detached from one another, you might prefer I told you another way?

**Prosecutor:** Another way?

**Longinus:** Yes, the really important one. The reason we value the sublime is that it nurtures a loftiness and grandeur of soul—what we call *megalopsychia*. When the study of literature no longer had the soul in view, this term went out of circulation. But I am sure that you, learned counselor, understand what is meant by it.

**Prosecutor:** Of course I do. It comprises generosity, courage, boldness and ...

**Longinus:** And?

**Prosecutor:** And much, much more.

**Longinus:** Look around you, then. Is generosity and courage and boldness and “much, much more” what you see? Are these the qualities you find among your colleagues? When you sit in the company of the most learned or the richest or the most powerful do you find *megalopsychia*, or pettiness, meanness, narrow mindedness, pedantry, greed? Which is it? The sublime, you see, nurtures grandeur of spirit and lifts

us up; it helps us free ourselves from enslavement to delusionary pleasures and desires. You might say that sublime literature, properly studied, is an instrument for a truly *liberating* education. That is the kind of transformation I had in view in writing the treatise.

**Prosecutor:** Your Honor, the defendant has several times admitted his guilt. We do not need to listen to his sermonizing. He has clearly violated the protocols of literary study and perpetrated a theory of education that will do great harm to young and old alike. I ask for a directed verdict of guilty as charged.

## Epilogue

The judge found this a difficult case. After re-reading *On the Sublime* he concluded that Longinus had made grand and unverifiable claims. On that basis he found him guilty of fraud. He was also troubled by the author's evident hostility to the imperial regime and to the values of an affluent and pleasure-seeking society. But he doubted that Longinus' critique would truly corrupt the young. In lieu of exile he sentenced him to many years of community service as night watchman in the local library. Even now late at night one can sometimes hear exclamations of delight, when in the intervals between his solitary rounds he finds yet another example of the sublime.

## NOTES

- 1 Unless otherwise indicated, I use the translation of W. Hamilton Fyfe in the Loeb Classical Library.
- 2 Cf. 12.1.
- 3 The evidence about such treatises was gathered by Ludwig Radermacher, *Artium Scriptores* (9-10).
- 4 The surviving portion of an *ars rhetorica* ascribed to a Longinus is now accessible in Patillon and Brisson, fr. 48.
- 5 This reading is based on a conjecture, an inspired one, by Rothstein, for the bland and inappropriate manuscript reading, "she was frightened."
- 6 The "Byzantine University" entry in Wikipedia provides a useful discussion.
- 7 See the "Aelius Theon" entry in Wikipedia and the "Aphthonios of Antioch" entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* for more information.

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## BIOGRAPHY

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