

Longinus: On the Sublime

According to Longinus, sublimity is a certain loftiness and excellence in language. It is only through sublimity that the greatest poets and prose writers have derived their eminence and gained immortality. He further says that a lofty tone is inborn and it does not come by teaching: Nature is only master that can teach it. However, it must be remembered that nature needs the help of art to control its wide impulses. Because the expression of the sublime often needs the spur, but it also needs the curb which is put by art alone.

Longinus then distinguishes between the true sublime and the false sublime. The true sublime uplifts our soul. It arises from lofty ideas clothed in lofty language. It gives us joy and exalts our spirits. The more we read it the more we enjoy it. Every time it suggests new ideas and feelings. It never grows stale. In short, the true sublime “pleases all and pleases always”. The ‘false sublime’, on the other hand, consists merely of a gorgeous exterior which conceals nothing but emptiness. There is bombast of language. Affected, pompous language is used to clothe thoughts which are trivial and puerile. There is also cheap display of passion unwarranted by the subject.

The writer further put forward five sources of sublimity:

1. Grandeur of thought or the power of conceiving great thought- Great thought spring from great souls. It is only great minds that produce great literature. “Their words are full of sublimity whose thoughts are full of majesty”.
2. Strong and inspired passion and vigorous treatment of it- Longinus asserts that nothing contributes more to loftiness of tone in writing than genuine emotion.
3. The use of figures- (a) figures of thought, and (b) figure of language or expression- Longinus deals with those figures that give distinction to style. The figures treated are the rhetorical question, Asyndeton or the omission of conjunctions, Hyperbaton or inversion and periphrasis. In his view, the use of Figures must be psychological. Intimately connected with thought and emotion- and not merely mechanical.
4. Noble diction, including a proper choice and arrangement of words and handling of metaphor and other ornaments of diction.
5. Dignified, elevated and elaborate composition- By arrangement and composition he simply means a verbal order which is usually called rhythm. According to Longinus, the first two of these sources are inborn gifts of a genius; the others can acquire by art.