

***ACTIVE 1ST
CENTURY
LONGINUS***



ON THE SUBLIME

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INTRODUCTION

TREATISE ON THE SUBLIME

Boileau, in his introduction to his version of the ancient Treatise on the Sublime, says that he is making no valueless present to his age. Not valueless, to a generation which talks much about style and method in literature, should be this new rendering of the noble fragment, long attributed to Longinus, the Greek tutor and political adviser of Zenobia. There is, indeed, a modern English version by Spurden,[1.1](#) but that is now rare, and seldom comes into the market. Rare, too, is Vaucher's critical essay (1854), which is unlucky, as the French and English books both contain valuable disquisitions on the age of the author of the Treatise. This excellent work has had curious fortunes. It is never quoted nor referred to by any extant classical writer, and, among the many books attributed by Suidas to Longinus, it is not mentioned. Decidedly the old world has left no more noble relic of criticism. Yet the date of the book is obscure, and it did not come into the hands of the learned in modern Europe till Robertelli and Manutius each published editions in 1544. From that time the Treatise has often been printed, edited, translated; but opinion still floats undecided about its origin and period. Does it belong to the age of Augustus, or to the age of Aurelian? Is the author the historical Longinus—the friend of Plotinus, the tutor of Porphyry, the victim of Aurelian,—or have we here a work by an unknown hand more than two centuries earlier? Manuscripts and traditions are here of little service. The

oldest manuscript, that of Paris, is regarded as the parent of the rest. It is a small quarto of 414 pages, whereof 335 are occupied by the "Problems" of Aristotle. Several leaves have been lost, hence the fragmentary character of the essay. The Paris MS. has an index, first mentioning the "Problems," and then ΔΙΟΝΥΣΙΟΥ Η ΛΟΓΓΙΝΟΥ ΠΕΡΙ ΥΨΟΥΣ, that is, "The work of Dionysius, or of Longinus, about the Sublime."

On this showing the transcriber of the MS. considered its authorship dubious. Supposing that the author was Dionysius, which of the many writers of that name was he? Again, if he was Longinus, how far does his work tally with the characteristics ascribed to that late critic, and peculiar to his age?

About this Longinus, while much is written, little is certainly known. Was he a descendant of a freedman of one of the Cassii Longini, or of an eastern family with a mixture of Greek and Roman blood? The author of the Treatise avows himself a Greek, and apologises, as a Greek, for attempting an estimate of Cicero. Longinus himself was the nephew and heir of Fronto, a Syrian rhetorician of Emesa. Whether Longinus was born there or not, and when he was born, are things uncertain. Porphyry, born in 233 A.D., was his pupil: granting that Longinus was twenty years Porphyry's senior, he must have come into the world about 213 A.D. He travelled much, studied in many cities, and was the friend of the mystic Neoplatonists, Plotinus and Ammonius. The former called him "a philologist, not a philosopher." Porphyry shows us Longinus at a supper where the plagiarisms of Greek writers are discussed—a topic dear to trivial or spiteful mediocrity. He is best known by his

death. As the Greek secretary of Zenobia he inspired a haughty answer from the queen to Aurelian, who therefore put him to death. Many rhetorical and philosophic treatises are ascribed to him, whereof only fragments survive. Did he write the Treatise on the Sublime? Modern students prefer to believe that the famous essay is, if not by Plutarch, as some hold, at least by some author of his age, the age of the early Caesars.

The arguments for depriving Longinus, Zenobia's tutor, of the credit of the Treatise lie on the surface, and may be briefly stated. He addresses his work as a letter to a friend, probably a Roman pupil, Terentianus, with whom he has been reading a work on the Sublime by Caecilius. Now Caecilius, a voluminous critic, certainly lived not later than Plutarch, who speaks of him with a sneer. It is unlikely then that an author, two centuries later, would make the old book of Caecilius the starting-point of his own. He would probably have selected some recent or even contemporary rhetorician. Once more, the writer of the Treatise of the Sublime quotes no authors later than the Augustan period. Had he lived as late as the historical Longinus he would surely have sought examples of bad style, if not of good, from the works of the Silver Age. Perhaps he would hardly have resisted the malicious pleasure of censuring the failures among whom he lived. On the other hand, if he cites no late author, no classical author cites him, in spite of the excellence of his book. But we can hardly draw the inference that he was of late date from this purely negative evidence.

Again, he describes, in a very interesting and earnest manner, the characteristics of his own period (Translation,

pp. 82-86). Why, he is asked, has genius become so rare? There are many clever men, but scarce any highly exalted and wide-reaching genius. Has eloquence died with liberty? "We have learned the lesson of a benignant despotism, and have never tasted freedom." The author answers that it is easy and characteristic of men to blame the present times. Genius may have been corrupted, not by a world-wide peace, but by love of gain and pleasure, passions so strong that "I fear, for such men as we are it is better to serve than to be free. If our appetites were let loose altogether against our neighbours, they would be like wild beasts uncaged, and bring a deluge of calamity on the whole civilised world." Melancholy words, and appropriate to our own age, when cleverness is almost universal, and genius rare indeed, and the choice between liberty and servitude hard to make, were the choice within our power.

But these words assuredly apply closely to the peaceful period of Augustus, when Virgil and Horace "praising their tyrant sang," not to the confused age of the historical Longinus. Much has been said of the allusion to "the Lawgiver of the Jews" as "no ordinary person," but that remark might have been made by a heathen acquainted with the Septuagint, at either of the disputed dates. On the other hand, our author (Section XIII) quotes the critical ideas of "Ammonius and his school," as to the debt of Plato to Homer. Now the historical Longinus was a friend of the Neoplatonist teacher (not writer), Ammonius Saccas. If we could be sure that the Ammonius of the Treatise was this Ammonius, the question would be settled in favour of the late date. Our author would be that Longinus who inspired

Zenobia to resist Aurelian, and who perished under his revenge. But Ammonius is not a very uncommon name, and we have no reason to suppose that the Neoplatonist Ammonius busied himself with the literary criticism of Homer and Plato. There was, among others, an Egyptian Ammonius, the tutor of Plutarch.

These are the mass of the arguments on both sides. M. Egger sums them up thus: "After carefully examining the tradition of the MSS., and the one very late testimony in favour of Longinus, I hesitated for long as to the date of this precious work. In 1854 M. Vaucher^{1.2} inclined me to believe that Plutarch was the author.^{1.3} All seems to concur towards the opinion that, if not Plutarch, at least one of his contemporaries wrote the most original Greek essay in its kind since the *Rhetoric* and *Poetic* of Aristotle."^{1.4}

We may, on the whole, agree that the nobility of the author's thought, his habit of quoting nothing more recent than the Augustan age, and his description of his own time, which seems so pertinent to that epoch, mark him as its child rather than as a great critic lost among the *somnia Pythagorea* of the Neoplatonists. On the other hand, if the author be a man of high heart and courage, as he seems, so was that martyr of independence, Longinus. Not without scruple, then, can we deprive Zenobia's tutor of the glory attached so long to his name.

Whatever its date, and whoever its author may be, the Treatise is fragmentary. The lost parts may very probably contain the secret of its period and authorship. The writer, at the request of his friend, Terentianus, and dissatisfied with the essay of Caecilius, sets about examining the nature

of the Sublime in poetry and oratory. To the latter he assigns, as is natural, much more literary importance than we do, in an age when there is so little oratory of literary merit, and so much popular rant. The subject of sublimity must naturally have attracted a writer whose own moral nature was pure and lofty, who was inclined to discover in moral qualities the true foundation of the highest literary merit. Even in his opening words he strikes the keynote of his own disposition, where he approves the saying that "the points in which we resemble the divine nature are benevolence and love of truth." Earlier or later born, he must have lived in the midst of literary activity, curious, eager, occupied with petty questions and petty quarrels, concerned, as men in the best times are not very greatly concerned, with questions of technique and detail. Cut off from politics, people found in composition a field for their activity. We can readily fancy what literature becomes when not only its born children, but the minor busybodies whose natural place is politics, excluded from these, pour into the study of letters. Love of notoriety, vague activity, fantastic indolence, we may be sure, were working their will in the sacred close of the Muses. There were literary sets, jealousies, recitations of new poems; there was a world of amateurs, if there were no papers and paragraphs. To this world the author speaks like a voice from the older and graver age of Greece. If he lived late, we can imagine that he did not quote contemporaries, not because he did not know them, but because he estimated them correctly. He may have suffered, as we suffer, from critics who, of all the world's literature, know only "the last thing out," and who

take that as a standard for the past, to them unfamiliar, and for the hidden future. As we are told that excellence is not of the great past, but of the present, not in the classical masters, but in modern Muscovites, Portuguese, or American young women, so the author of the Treatise may have been troubled by Asiatic eloquence, now long forgotten, by names of which not a shadow survives. He, on the other hand, has a right to be heard because he has practised a long familiarity with what is old and good. His mind has ever been in contact with masterpieces, as the mind of a critic should be, as the mind of a reviewer seldom is, for the reviewer has to hurry up and down inspecting new literary adventurers. Not among their experiments will he find a touchstone of excellence, a test of greatness, and that test will seldom be applied to contemporary performances. What is the test, after all, of the Sublime, by which our author means the truly great, the best and most passionate thoughts, nature's high and rare inspirations, expressed in the best chosen words? He replies that "a just judgment of style is the final fruit of long experience." "Much has he travelled in the realms of gold."

The word "style" has become a weariness to think upon; so much is said, so much is printed about the art of expression, about methods, tricks, and turns; so many people, without any long experience, set up to be judges of style, on the strength of having admired two or three modern and often rather fantastic writers. About our author, however, we know that his experience has been long, and of the best, that he does not speak from a hasty acquaintance with a few contemporary *précieux* and *précieuses*. The bad

writing of his time he traces, as much of our own may be traced, to “the pursuit of novelty in thought,” or rather in expression. “It is this that has turned the brain of nearly all our learned world to-day.” “Gardons nous d’écrire trop bien,” he might have said, “c’est la pire manière qu’il y’ait d’écrire.”^{1.5}

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-analysed fashion. Whether this art can be taught or not is a question which the author treats with modesty. Then, as now, people were denying (and not unjustly) that this art can be taught by rule. The author does not go so far as to say that Criticism, “unlike Justice, does little evil, and little good; that is, *if* to entertain for a moment delicate and curious minds is to do little good.” He does not rate his business so low as that. He admits that the inspiration comes from genius, from nature. But “an author can only learn from art when he is to abandon himself to the direction of his genius.” Nature must “burst out with a kind of fine madness and divine inspiration.” The madness must be *fine*. How can art aid it to this end? By knowledge of, by sympathy and emulation with, “the great poets and prose writers of the past.” By these we may be inspired, as the Pythoness by Apollo. From the genius of the past “an effluence breathes upon us.” The writer is not to imitate, but to keep before him the

perfection of what has been done by the greatest poets. He is to look on them as beacons; he is to keep them as exemplars or ideals. He is to place them as judges of his work. "How would Homer, how would Demosthenes, have been affected by what I have written?" This is practical counsel, and even the most florid modern author, after polishing a paragraph, may tear it up when he has asked himself, "What would Addison have said about this eloquence of mine, or Sainte Beuve, or Mr. Matthew Arnold?" In this way what we call inspiration, that is the performance of the heated mind, perhaps working at its best, perhaps overstraining itself, and overstating its idea, might really be regulated. But they are few who consider so closely, fewer perhaps they who have the heart to cut out their own fine or refined things. Again, our author suggests another criterion. We are, as in Lamb's phrase, "to write for antiquity," with the souls of poets dead and gone for our judges. But we are also to write for the future, asking with what feelings posterity will read us—if it reads us at all. This is a good discipline. We know by practice what will hit some contemporary tastes; we know the measure of smartness, say, or the delicate flippancy, or the sentence with "a dying fall." But one should also know that these are fancies of the hour—these and the touch of archaism, and the spinster-like and artificial precision, which seem to be points in some styles of the moment. Such reflections as our author bids us make, with a little self-respect added, may render our work less popular and effective, and certainly are not likely to carry it down to remote posterity. But all such reflections, and action in accordance with what they teach, are