

# *On the Sublime*

by Longinus



*“Longinus” (fl.ca. 50 CE) is the name customarily given to the unknown author of On the Sublime. The text was long thought to have been written by Cassius Longinus, a noted literary critic and statesman of the third century CE. But the text lacks any citations later than the first century CE, and it treats Caecilius’s work On Sublimity, known to be a first century text, as contemporary; this, along with other items of internal evidence, has convinced scholars that it dates from the first century. The author is generally supposed to have been a Greek or Hellenized Jew who taught rhetoric to Roman clients such as the man on whom On the Sublime is addressed (also unidentified, but presumed to have been a real person).*

## Chapter VIII

### *The Five Sources of Sublimity; The Plan of the Book*

There are, one may say, five most productive sources of sublimity. (Competence in speaking is assumed as a common foundation for all five; nothing is possible without it.)

- i. The first and most important is the power to conceive great thoughts; I defined this in my work on Xenophon.
- ii. The second is strong and inspired emotion. (These two sources are for the most part natural; the remaining three involve art.)
- iii. Certain kinds of figures. (These may be divided into figures of thought and figures of speech.)
- iv. Noble diction. This has as subdivisions choice of words and the use of metaphorical and artificial language.
- v. Finally to round off the whole list, dignified and elevated word-arrangement.

Let us now examine the points which come under each of these heads.

I must first observe, however, that Caecilius has omitted some of the five—emotion, for example. Now if he thought that sublimity and emotion were one and the same thing and always existed and developed together, he was wrong. Some emotions, such as pity, grief, and fear, are found divorced from sublimity and with a low effect. Conversely, sublimity often occurs apart from emotion. Of the innumerable examples of this I select Homer's bold account of the Aloadae:

Ossa upon Olympus they sought to heap; and on Ossa  
Pelion with its shaking forest, to make a path to heaven—  
and the even more impressive sequel—  
and they would have finished their work

In orators, encomia and ceremonial or exhibition pieces always involve grandeur and sublimity, though they are generally devoid of emotion. Hence the orators who are best at conveying emotion are least good at encomia and conversely are not conveyors of emotion. On the other hand, if Caecilius thought that emotion had not contribution to make to sublimity and therefore thought it not worth mentioning, he was again completely wrong. I should myself have no hesitation in saying that there is nothing so productive of grandeur as noble emotion in the right place. It inspires and possess our words with a kind of madness and divine spirit.

*(i) Greatness of Thought*

The first source, natural greatness, is the most important. Even if it is a matter of endowment rather than acquisition, we must, so far as is possible, develop our minds in the direction of greatness and make them always pregnant with noble thoughts. You ask how this can be done. I wrote elsewhere something like this: "Sublimity is the echo of a noble mind." This is why a mere idea, without verbal expression, is sometimes admired for its nobility—just as Ajax's silence in the Vision of the Dead is grand and indeed more sublime than any words could have been. First then we must state where sublimity comes from: the orator must not have low or ignoble thoughts. Those whose thoughts and habits are trivial and servile all their lives cannot possibly produce anything admirable or worthy of eternity. Words will be great if thoughts are weighty. This is why splendid

remarks come naturally to the proud; the man who, when Parmenio said, "I should have been content" . . .