

# Feeling Thoughts: The Swarming Sublime in Longinus's *On Sublimity*

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## Abstract

Longinus's concept of the sublime remains elusive because he intentionally avoids offering a clear definition of it. While his text has been given the name *On Sublimity*, it is uncertain exactly what this *on* refers to. This article argues that Longinus's aversion to plainly defining his subject ought to be read as rejecting the requirements for good composition articulated by Plato, one of Longinus's main interlocutors. Plato's doctrine of organic unity demands that texts begin with a clear definition; to break from this demand, however, is a constitutive feature of the Longinian sublime.

*Keywords:* affect theory, media and communication, classical aesthetics, doctrine of organic unity, Plato

*On Sublimity*<sup>1</sup> begins with a dismissal: Longinus rejects Caecilius's text on the same topic because Caecilius forgoes "practical help" and instead explains "what sort of thing 'the sublime' is, as though we did not know" (1.1). *On Sublimity* does the opposite. Despite claiming that a "textbook" needs to accurately define "what its subject is," Longinus avoids "any preliminary long definition" beyond the vague description of sublimity as "a kind of eminence or excellence of discourse" (1.1, 1.3). He instead focuses primarily on the practical "art of sublimity" (2.1). I read this aversion alongside the doctrine of organic unity found in Plato's *Phaedrus*, a doctrine that requires a clear definition for the correct organization of discourse. Whereas Plato's doctrine attempts to eliminate misinterpretation by restricting text to defending a single definition, Longinus finds sublimity in language's ability to communicate not a single idea but a swarm [*synodos*]<sup>2</sup> of often paradoxical thoughts and feelings brought together in an admirable way.

## 1. The Swarming Sublime

Traditionally, one might attempt to "emphasise a view of sublimity" in Longinus "as an organic whole" by evaluating the internal consistency of the text (a challenge because of the frequent lacunae) and contextualizing Longinus within the tradition of classical rhetoric (also challenging, because of Longinus's unknown historical identity) (Innes, "Longinus: Structure and Unity" 302). D. A. Russell and D. C. Innes, for example, find structural consistency in *On Sublimity* by discovering the hidden "fourfold purpose" of an apology—to defend the accused, attack the accuser, praise the defendant, and provide instruction (Russell, "Longinus Reconsidered" 74). Just as Plato's *Apology* defends and praises Socrates while attacking and instructing the Athenians, so too does Longinus

defend and praise Plato as a sublime poet while attacking and instructing Plato's critics.<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, James Porter and Stephen Halliwell develop strong contextual arguments to trace the sublime as a theme that develops from Homeric poetry until its manifestation by Longinus. They, for example, link Longinus's discourse of sublimity to the beyond human experience described in Plato's *Phaedrus* by the myth of the soul as a winged chariot ascending to "The place beyond heaven" when "nourish[ed]" by "beauty, wisdom, [and] goodness" (*Phaedrus* 246e–247c).<sup>4</sup>

Neil Hertz and Suzanne Guerlac also analyze *On Sublimity* and the *Phaedrus* but instead focus on the doctrine of organic unity. Dictated by Socrates, the doctrine demands "Every speech must be put together like a living creature, with a body of its own," and that "Definition" must head the speech/body, *organizing* all the "things scattered about everywhere" into limb-like oppositional pairs (*Phaedrus* 264c–266a). This doctrine ensures clear communication by preventing meaning from "wander[ing] in different directions" (*Phaedrus* 263b). While both Hertz and Guerlac agree "It is certain that Longinus takes the doctrine seriously" given how often he invokes Plato's image of "the body" as a "figure of unity," these critics neglect to consider how this compositional doctrine might relate to the structure of Longinus's text (Hertz 4; Guerlac 283). As G.M.A. Grube argues, the absence in *On Sublimity* of a "formal definition" creates "confusion" about the sublime because, without an overarching definition for reference, Longinus gets "carried away by his own enthusiasms" (xii, xi). But—as I will demonstrate—getting carried away *is* the art of the sublime. The sublime exceeds the restricted definition and binary either/or arrangement. It separates the head (definition) and scatters the body (argument).

Consider Longinus's purported defense of Plato. In the classical discourse on the sublime, arguments seem to proceed by defining the sublime and evaluating a writer according to that definition. By this method, a critic could refute a writer's sublimity with contrary evidence, i.e., examples of failure. But for Longinus, Plato's examples of failure are also evidence of sublimity. Error, or "erratic excellence," he claims, displays more sublimity than sterile "Impeccability" (36.4). Longinus thus replaces the oppositional either/or structure of organic unity with a logic of the both/and as error paradoxically contributes to greatness, and contrary evidence becomes more evidence in confirmation. When swarmed by sublime feelings and thoughts, opposites unite; the left limb becomes indistinguishable from the right.

As an example of sublime arrangement, Longinus offers Sappho's *fragment 31* ("*phainetai moi*"), noting how the poem captures the feeling of the body coming apart in the "madness of being in love" by "selecting outstanding details and making a unity of them":<sup>5</sup>

Do you not admire the way in which she brings everything together—mind and body, hearing and tongue, eyes and skin? She seems to have lost them all and to be looking for them as though they were external to her. She is cold and hot, mad and sane, frightened and near death, all by turns. The result is that we see in her not a single emotion, but a complex [*synodos*/swarm] of emotions. (10.1–10.3)<sup>6</sup>

Could the same arrangement not be said about the structure of *On Sublimity*? Longinus hurries from point to point, contrasting "individual words, even individual syllables" to the "infinite space" of thought, making him also seem both hot and cold, mad and sane, frightened and near death (Halliwell 327). His text's structure echoes the effect of Demosthenes's "flurry of anaphora and asyndeta," where "order becomes disorderly," yet "disorder . . . acquires a certain order" (Innes "Longinus: Structure and Unity," 302; Longinus 20.3). He frequently describes the experience of this order/disorder by referring

to it as “enthusiasm [*enthusiastikon*],” “ecstasy [*ekstasin*],” and “Bacchic frenzy [*baccheumasi*]” (my trans.; 8.1, 1.4, 16.4). These Dionysian descriptions associate sublimity with the *sparagmos*, the frenetic tearing apart of a sacrificial body, like the cattle ripped asunder by the Maenads in the *Bacchae*. If considered as a response to the doctrine of organic unity, sublimity-as-*sparagmos* suggests a frantic tearing apart of the speech/body while releasing a swarm of meanings and feelings.

## 2. The Sublime is both Father and Son

Situating Longinus within the broader tradition of rhetoric in antiquity, Porter argues that the classical discourses on beauty and the sublime are both hewn from the same aesthetic conceptions: a theorist like Plato “might as well have said” that “beauty” is also “a matter of ‘sublimity’ (and one suspects he would have done so if the terminology had been available to him)” (564). Porter’s most intriguing example of the collision between these two terms comes from Plato’s *Symposium* and the contrast between the speeches of Alcibiades and Socrates, both on the theme of love and madness. Socrates’s speech recounts Diomata’s classification of reproductive desire as the desire for “immortality” (207a). She argues that we sublimate reproductive desire by climbing the “rising stairs” of thought from beautiful bodies to beautiful ideas, and finally to the form of beauty itself (211c). One becomes “pregnant [*egkumôn*]” when one “touches” true beauty, in turn giving “birth to true beauty” and becoming “immortal” through that reproduction (209a-212a). Here, Diomata notes that a beautiful thing—like a young man—has the sublime power to “strike you out of your senses” and make you behave irrationally. But compare the young man’s beauty to the pure form of beauty itself, and the already too alluringly beautiful youth seems drab (211d-212a).

When Socrates finishes, Alcibiades enters. Alcibiades warns against listening to Socrates because his words intoxicate like Silenus’s Dionysian music: “his melodies are themselves divine” (215c). Alcibiades describes what this experience is like, and, as Porter points out, this description is nearly equivalent to Sappho’s *fragment 31*: “my heart starts leaping” versus “it flutters my heart in my breast”; “the moment he starts to speak” versus hearing her “sweet voice”; “I stop my ears” versus “my ears hum”; “tears come streaming down my face” versus “cold sweat pours off me”; “my life isn’t worth living” versus “I seem near dying”; he “seemed marvelously godlike” versus “he seems to me like the gods” (Porter 599).<sup>7</sup> At this moment, Plato portrays Alcibiades and Socrates as opposites. Socrates is old and ugly; Alcibiades is young and beautiful; Socrates drinks but stays sober; Alcibiades is already inebriated; Socrates displays reserve; Alcibiades, hysterics; one speaks about touching beauty through reason; the other feels irrationally touched by speech; we remember Socrates’s integrity; Alcibiades, for his treachery. While they are opposites, they remain related: sublime Socrates loves beautiful Alcibiades; beautiful Alcibiades reveres sublime Socrates—like Aristophanes mythical people, they are separate but deeply connected.

This connection draws attention to how the medium and the message are separate yet inextricably linked. Plato portrays Socrates in love with the pure presence of ideas (the message) while portraying Alcibiades in love with Socrates’s power to represent ideas in speech (the medium). For Socrates, the proper communication of ideas requires purifying the message from the medium. For example, Socrates provides in the *Phaedo* the “thickest possible description” of life if one could ascend and live in heavens with “the purely intelligible realm of Ideas” (Porter 574). In this realm, one could “communicate” directly

with “the gods ... by speech,” and if one were then to look upon the Earth, they would see “a continuum of variegated colors” — the world becomes a rainbow, the symbol of Iris, daughter of Wonder, and the messenger of the Gods (*Phaedo* 111b, 110d). When the human medium of language contaminates ideas, a different power emerges. Alcibiades recognizes that Socrates’s speeches have the same “Magnetic” or “divine power” as the singing of the rhapsode, who drives his hearers into an enthusiastic frenzy without necessarily imparting knowledge (*Ion* 533d). While the *Symposium*’s structure — a “Chinese box” of stories within stories — draws attention to the “fragility” of the “knowledge” lost in representation and communication, Alcibiades recognizes the power of communication itself, which flows through even a lesser “account” of Socrates’s speech (Nussbaum 167–8; *Symposium* 215d).

One power affects false memory; the other, knowledge. Plato attacks both poetry and writing along these lines. In the *Phaedrus*, for example, Socrates recounts the myth of Theuth’s introduction of writing, and its subsequent rejection by King Thamus for not being “a potion [*pharmakon*] for remembering, but for reminding” (*Phaedrus* 275a). True memory means knowledge of “the Beautiful” and “the Good,” which we learn “before we were born” and must remember in life (*Phaedo* 76d–e). False memory is memorization and recitation, a reminder of what was said without knowing its meaning. Writing assists the latter but not necessarily the former. In *Preface to Plato*, Eric Havelock argues that Plato exiles the poets in the *Republic* for the same reason that Thamus rejects writing: Plato perceives “communication” through poetry as a harmful “psychic poison,” “confus[ing] our intelligence,” and in need of an “antidote” (Havelock 5).<sup>8</sup> Ironically, as Havelock points out, the “mode of consciousness” Plato inhabits from his experiences with writing is what separates him from the “oral state of mind” and allows him to slow down the “rhythmic memorized experience” of rhapsodic poetry, permitting analysis and criticism (41, 47). “Stop,” Socrates says as Phaedrus recites Lysias’s speech: “Read it” again, so that he can “hear it in [Lysias’s] own words” and submit them to analysis (262e–263e). Within the binary of either memory or knowledge, Homeric poetry is a kind of writing, a mere aid to memory. The various formulae and epithets in the poem assist both memorization and improvisation. Laurels are awarded for the rhapsode’s performative creativity and flourish when employing these devices to channel the energy of the space, of the crowd, or of the song. Ion, for example, wins the prize, and “it’s worth hearing how well [he’s] got Homer dressed up” rather than for what he knows (*Ion* 530d). But Plato via Socrates has no interest in “reliving experience” in the rhapsode’s performative “memory” (Havelock 45). Plato insists on “analyzing and understanding it” — tearing the experience apart to know it completely (Havelock 45).

Longinus likely writes a half century or so later.<sup>9</sup> The situation has changed, as the rhapsode no longer curates culture. The collector of papyrus has replaced him. Papyrus has what Harold Innis calls a space-bias: its relatively cheap production and lightweight material enable the transmission of messages across vast distances, helping the Roman Empire bind together huge swathes of territorial space through a vast “centralized bureaucratic administration” (Innis 106). In any given media culture, “monopolies of knowledge” coalesce around the opposite bias, in this case, time (Innis 117). Papyrus rots. So libraries operated by a literary elite come together to bind time through the preservation and copying of manuscripts. In the great libraries, however, too much material amasses — writing buries writing under more writing. Rhetoric remains vital for the politically minded, but for the teachers of rhetoric — who are also guardians of

texts—why read and save Plato, who seems to condemn both writing and rhetoric? Longinus answers this question by appropriating Plato's discourse of immortality, beauty, and pregnancy.

Plato's critique of writing repeats the familial structure employed by the theory of the universe in the *Timaeus*, where the *khôra*, the space, or the motherly "receptacle of all becoming," is stamped by the forms (father) to bring representation (the son) into being (*Timaeus*, original italics 49a).<sup>10</sup> As Jacques Derrida points out, Plato uses this structure to criticize writing for being "intimately bound to the absence of the father" (Derrida 82). Once "written down," claims Socrates, "every discourse roams about everywhere ... And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father's support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support" (*Phaedrus* 275e). Socrates proposes the doctrine of organic unity to assist orators who feel "ashamed" and "afraid" to "leave any writings behind," lest their offspring misrepresent them, and posterity accuses them as sophists—a fear that writing may kill them and their integrity like "a lost or parricidal son" (*Phaedrus* 257d; Derrida 152). Organic unity protects the father/author by policing and restricting the possibility of future meaning in a text. Longinus responds to this Oedipal model by appropriating the *Symposium's* discourse: the writer's mind is not father but mother, a medium, *khôra*, or receptacle that touches past beauty and births its future. Like the Pythia touched by the divine, and "made pregnant [*egkumona*] by the supernatural power," sublimity makes us "pregnant [*egkumonas*] with noble thoughts"<sup>11</sup> which we externalize in writing (Longinus 13.2, 9.1). To the fear of posterity described in Plato, Longinus has this to say:

If a man is afraid of saying anything which will outlast his own life and age, the conceptions of his mind are bound to be incomplete and abortive; they will miscarry and never be brought to birth whole and perfect for the day of posthumous fame. (14.3)

Longinus thus inverts the familial structure: sublime writing is the father that impregnates the mind with sublime thoughts, which in turn gives birth to more sublime writing.

### 3. The Sublime is Both True and False

Consider the sources of the sublime. In Longinus's section on greatness of thought—the first and often considered most important of the five sources of sublimity—Longinus describes sublimity as "the echo of a noble mind" (9.2). The word Longinus uses here for "noble mind" *megalophrosunes*, "recall[s]," according to Robert Doran, Aristotle's moral "great-souled man" or *megalopsuchos*—formed from the root *psyche*—"who deserves and claims great things" (Doran 49; Aristotle 1123b8-30). While these words are sometimes interchangeable, the philosophical tradition sought to distinguish the *psyche* as a rational agent "independent" of the more irrational mind associated with "the poetic performance and poetised tradition," (Havelock 200). The *phren*, the root of Longinus's word, which lends its meaning to words like frenzy and frenetic, and which translates best as heart or breast, does the opposite. It blurs the distinction between feeling and thought. Hippolytus's "tongue swore" for example, "but [his] heart (or mind or other backstage artiste) [*phren*] did not"—a well-cited line which places the *phren* in excess of the discursive mind (Austin 9–10).<sup>12</sup> Achilles likewise plays his lyre, "singing of men's fame" while feeling/thinking or "delighting his heart [*phren*]" (Homer 9.185–90).

Sublimity is the echoing of great feelings/thoughts through time in the space [*khôra*] of one's mind. The echo opposes Plato's mirror (a different kind of *khôra*) in his critique of



*mimesis*. Plato uses the mirror to depict poets as mere image-makers: the poet expresses their agency by using a mirror to “make” things “appear” inside, but “not as they truly are” (*Republic* 596e). The artist mirrors a bed, but that mirror image could not and should not be confused with an actual bed. This way of characterizing poetry reflects Plato’s overall view of language previously discussed, where to read or recite the words of another would be to imitate or represent them without knowing what they really mean. Hence, repetition is ontologically suspect. But the ontology of an echo offers a different way of thinking about repetition. In an echo, it is the same sound which adds to itself in time. Echo is amplification not representation. Sublime poetry is not an imitation of the words of another but their echo, resounding in the voice/mind of the reader/speaker. This echo produces what Stephen Halliwell describes as “a powerful *intersubjectivity*” through the “transmission of heightened consciousness between different minds via the penetrating language of speech or text” — a “collective enthusiasm [*synenthusiōsi*]” (333, original italics; my trans.; Longinus 13.2). This image of the echo has inspired reflection on the text’s composition as a series of examples. The sublime-as-echo-as-example suggests sublimity may be a “documentary technique,” a “play with quotation and of quotation,” or an “ongoing force of enunciation through the act of citation” (Carson 96; Hertz 2; Guerlac 276). In this view, the greatness of feeling/thought in the citation’s passage is lent to it by that very citation—the more frequent the resounding echo, the more sublimity the passage accumulates.

While discussing “noble [*gennaía*] diction,” however, Longinus draws our attention to the use of metaphor as a source of the sublime (8.1). *Gennaía* refers to nobility by natural birth rather than achievement, and it is metaphor’s birthright to hide in its brilliance. As Longinus points out, the speaker of sublimity “never allow[s] the hearer leisure to count the metaphors, because he too shares the speaker’s enthusiasm” (32.4). Consider the echo then for what it really is—just a metaphor—and our enthusiasm might flatten. The grand conception of thought echoing through space and time is revealed to be a figurative dream. Worse still, Longinus echoes himself: “I wrote elsewhere something like this: ‘Sublimity is the echo of a noble mind’” (9.2). As he unabashedly tries bootstrapping himself into sublimity via self-quotation, we might pause and consider that *megalophrosunes* used ironically means its opposite, i.e., excessive pride. It was used as such by Herodotus to criticize Xerxes—the man who whipped the Hellespont because the water rose against him—for delaying his advance into Greece by digging the Xerxes canal: “to display his power and leave a memorial” (7.24). On the one hand, Longinus’s infusion of self-pride might seem to risk collapsing his argument by revealing behind the grandeur of sublimity a conceited desire to memorialize oneself. On the other hand, Longinus’s figure of the echo still seems to maintain a peculiar force over us, as if the collapse of grand conception coupled with the plunge into the figure’s ironic depths is itself indicative of the sublime experience.

Commentators point to this opposition in Longinus between “*hupsos* [heights/sublimity]” and the revelation of “figurative language” to help articulate how “the brilliance of beauty and grandeur”—what Robert Doran refers to as the “*intensity of affect/effect*”—surrounds the “artifice of the trick,” blinding the reader/listener to that very artifice (Hertz 17; Longinus 17.2; Doran 41, original italics). This opposition is perhaps best put by Hertz, who writes that

when figurative language is concealed it may sustain the truthful, the natural, the masterful, and so on; but when it is revealed, it is always revealed as false. Worse yet ... what is

revealed is not the language's flat-footed falsity but its peculiar agility in moving between the two poles, whether these be named the divine and the human, the true and the false, the position of the father and that of the son, or whatever. (18–9)

Hertz here provides three terms to work with: true, false, and revelation. It is the concealment (falsity) of the figurative language that sustains the truth (*Aletheial*/unconcealment) of the matter, but the revelation of the figurative language does not just conceal what was previously unconcealed. Revelation—a word with rich, affective, apocalyptic resonances—short circuits this either/or distinction through a double truth/unconcealment. Not only does the metaphor of the echo, for example, remain brilliant after its figurative language is unconcealed (insofar as it still seems true to describe citational language as an echo), but also this revelation of figurative language strikes us with all the ironic density Longinus tucked into his own echo's brilliance. This only adds to the sublimity. The truth is that one feels the revelatory power of the figure in both its truth and falsity. We are amazed. Our excitement echoes Longinus's creative moment. The technique of the sublime then is not merely documentation or citation but revelation, which follows a double procedure: first, the arrangement of details which "attracts"; second, the "density" of those details which renews the attraction (Longinus 10.1). Examples of sublimity are appreciated when first heard, and then again in analysis. In fact, the more one analyzes, the more one appreciates.

Hertz argues that Longinus's revelatory discourse produces a "sublime turn": "a transfer of power ... from the threatening forces to poetic activity" (6). He gives the example of Sappho's *fragment 31* to illustrate how poetic power transforms "Sappho-as-victimized-body" into "Sappho-as-poetic-force," and he reads this movement through an example of Homer's "forced combination of naturally uncompoundable prepositions: *hupek*, 'from under'" (Hertz 7; Longinus 10.6). The poetic force of language helps one escape from under the "shattering erotic experiences," just as Homer's sailors are "carried away from under death, but only just" (Hertz 5; Longinus 10.5).<sup>13</sup> I disagree. The message of the sublime turn is one of no escape: the attempt to master language only leads to further revelation and captivation as analysis transforms into a shattering erotic experience. Sublimity carries us out from under the boiling water and into the fire. Longinus's gambit—as a rhetoric teacher—is that the more he tears apart the truth of poetry, the more ecstatic we will become about its revelation.

#### 4. The Sublime is both Divine and the Human

In the *Republic*, the poets are exiled for being three degrees from the divine. God creates the forms; craftsmen "look towards the appropriate form" to make objects; the artist imitates the objects (596b). Because of this distance, the poet's imitation holds the least amount of knowledge about God and his forms. The ontological criticism of art is the first of three arguments Plato-via-Socrates deploys to accuse poetry of crimes. Poetry's first crime is ignorance. The second is uselessness, and this argument largely depends on the ontological distinctions made in the first: "imitation is an inferior thing that consorts with another inferior thing [the craftsmen's object] to produce an inferior offspring" (603b). The poetic imitation of a bed, Socrates thus explains, has less use-value than the bed itself. Poetry: guilty of both stupidity and uselessness. However, these crimes are not equal to the punishment Socrates seeks. To justify the poet's banishment, Socrates must accuse poetry of what he would be later accused of—corruption of the young.

Socrates corrupts by taking apart language to “make the worse argument the stronger”; but poetry, he claims, corrupts the soul, splitting the rational part of the mind from the irrational, which it “arouses, nourishes, and strengthens,” turning rational, masculine control “womanish” (*Apology* 18c; *Republic* 605b-e). While Plato argues that it might be possible to imitate in art a “rational and quiet character,” this poetry “is neither easy to imitate nor easy to understand when imitated, especially not by a crowd consisting of all sorts of people gathered together at a theater festival” (*Republic* 604e). For the good of the crowd, poetry is banished.

Longinus responds with a bold stroke: “divine writers” produce sublime works because they understand that

nature made man to be no humble or lowly creature, but brought him into life and into the universe as into a great festival, to be both a spectator and enthusiastic contestant in its competition. (35.2)

The poets are exiled for not knowing the nature of things, but in Longinus's view, a poetless city would be unnatural since “It is our nature to be elevated and exalted by true sublimity” (7.2). Longinus here puns on the idea of heights by reconceptualizing the high or sublime style as simply writing that naturally heightens thought rather than a formalized or genre-specific style. By locating the ability to elevate thought in language, Longinus turns Plato on his head. It is not that language corrupts thought but that thought depends on this so-called corruption of language. He deviously quotes from the *Republic* itself to illustrate this point:

Men without experience of wisdom and virtue but always occupied with feasting and that kind naturally go downhill and wander through life on a low plane of existence. They never look upwards to the truth and never rise, they never taste certain or pure pleasure. Like cattle, they always look down, bowed earthwards and table wards; they feed and they breed, and their greediness in these directions make them kick and butt till they kill one another with iron horns and hooves, because they can never be satisfied. (13.1)<sup>14</sup>

Playing with Plato's condemnation of poetry for starving the rational and nourishing the irrational, Longinus gives this passage as an example of how “Real sublimity contains much food for reflection” (7.3). The meaning of the passage is clear: men must attend to the rational mind of wisdom and virtue. But the reader feels the energy of this thought through the contempt Plato displays for the mindlessly grazing crowds of cattle. By captivating us with the simile's force, Plato—Longinus implies—slips in the far more impactful metaphor of heightened thought.

Like the *Symposium's* rising stairs, the *Phaedrus's* soaring chariot, or the *Philebus's* heavenly ascent, the *Republic's* allegory of the cave uses metaphorical heights to describe the “upward journey” from the world of shadows into the brilliance of the sun-like “form of the good” (517b). The allegory begins with chained prisoners facing a wall with a fire behind them. People carry figures in front of the fire to produce dancing shadows, and an “echo from the wall” makes the prisoners believe these shadows are real (515b). If someone were freed, says Socrates, and “dragged” from the cave into sunlight, then they would have the blinding experience of gazing upon the form of the good itself (515c). Longinus reveals that behind these sorts of “brilliant finish[es]” in Plato's “philosophical doctrine” —the same metaphorical heights and lights of the Longinian sublime—lay a secret attempt “to compete for the prize against Homer, like a young aspirant challenging an admired master” (13.4). But Longinus's image of Plato's narcissistic *agon* with Homer



is riddled with irony. He prefers to play with the idea of echoes in a cave. Like Pan—who, jealous of Echo’s musical gifts and beauty, has her torn “to pieces” and “her limbs” scattered about the whole earth; Plato, jealous of Homer, launches his attack (Longus 84). However, Pan’s attack only “scattered her hymns, for she still went on singing” —her songs resounded louder and further than before (Longus 84).

Similarly, Plato’s critique, supposedly motivated by the desire to “imitate” Homer’s greatness, could only elevate Homer further (Longinus 13.4). For Plato then “To break a lance” against Homer “may well have been a brash and contentious thing to do, but” (in a nod to Socrates’s argument against use-value) “the competition proved anything but valueless” (13.4). Longinus’s metaphor of the echo responds to Plato’s allegory of the cave, solving the problem of requiring an outside force to free the individual and drag them out into the light, thereby demonstrating the value of sublime poetry. The reverberation of sound maps out space, and Longinus implies that it was the echo of Homer’s voice that revealed the space of the cave of shadows to Plato. One, therefore, does not need to be forcibly dragged into the light. One need only listen carefully to the echoes in the cave to embark on the upwards journey.

Longinus thus scrambles Plato’s formula: instead of using thought to bask in the light of the divine forms of truth/good/beauty, for Longinus “it is indeed true that beautiful words are the light that illuminates thought,” (30.2). Or, as Longinus says, in the words of Moses: “‘God says’ — what? — ‘let there be light and there was light’” (9.9). Sublimity is then not so much an object but the revelation of language to itself, and through this revelation, the expansion of language’s ability to propagate further contemplation. This expansion of thought surpasses Socrates’s limited call for the philosopher to be “high-minded enough to study all time and all being” (*Republic* 486a). The enthusiastic expansion of thought through sublime language shows this limitation by demonstrating that “the universe therefore is not wide enough for the range of human thought and speculation” (Longinus 35.3). Before making this statement about all time and being, Socrates remarks that the philosopher ought to be “always reaching out to grasp everything both divine and human as a whole” (486a). Longinus’s analysis of Plato’s sublimity does precisely this. For Longinus, nature means being enculturated into the divine festival of ever-expanding thought. That Plato received “ridicule” for “getting carried away by a sort of literary madness” demonstrates only the affective, “erratic excellence” of divinely enculturated human “nature” rather than bland craftsmanship (Longinus 32.7, 36.4). When Plato was affected by the festive echo of Homer, his energetic response was thus both human and divine. The erratic construction of *On Sublimity* helps Longinus achieve the same.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, I use Russell's translation of Longinus's *On Sublimity* in *Classical Literary Criticism*, 2008.
- <sup>2</sup> Grube's translation, p. 18.
- <sup>3</sup> See D. A. Russell "Longinus Reconsidered" and D. C. Innes "Longinus and Caecilius: Models of the Sublime" for more on this comparison.
- <sup>4</sup> See Halliwell 343 and Porter 576–94.
- <sup>5</sup> Hertz translates this as "organize them as a single body," p. 4.
- <sup>6</sup> Longinus is our primary source for this fragment. Plato may also be referring to this poem when Socrates mentions Sappho's poetry as superior to Lysias's speech in the *Phaedrus*, 235c.
- <sup>7</sup> These translations are from Porter. For a closer reading of the Greek, see Porter pp. 598–600. Alcibiades's speech can be found at *Symposium*, 215a–216c.
- <sup>8</sup> Plato's antidote for poetry is exile or *pharmakos*. For more on the relation of *pharmakon* to *pharmakos* in Plato, and the untranslatability of *pharmakon* which can mean potion, poison, and antidote, see Derrida's essay "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Disseminations*, pp. 68–186.
- <sup>9</sup> For dates and authorship see D. A. Russell 'Longinus' *On the Sublime*, pp. xxii–xxx, and Malcolm Heath, "Longinus and the Ancient Sublime," pp. 15–6.
- <sup>10</sup> See Derrida, pp. 158–9.
- <sup>11</sup> Innes translates this as "noble excitement, "Longinus: Unity and Structure," p. 308.
- <sup>12</sup> From Euripides *Hippolytus* ll. 612.
- <sup>13</sup> Homer. *The Iliad*, 15.620–30.
- <sup>14</sup> *Republic* 586a.

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