

## M. A III SEM PAPER-I

### CRITICAL THEORY

#### *On the Sublime*

Longinus, whose true identity is uncertain and whose name likely comes from a scribal error that confused him with Cassius Longinus, is usually referred to as Pseudo-Longinus, probably a Greek literary critic or rhetorician from the 1st century CE, and his treatise *On the Sublime* was written to Posthumus Terentianus to define and explain what sublimity in literature is the quality that lifts the soul, moves the reader, and creates timeless beauty. The text, incomplete with only 26 out of 30 chapters surviving, is not a dry manual but a passionate letter combining literary criticism, philosophy, and rhetoric, written in response to poor literary standards of the time and aimed at teaching readers and writers how to elevate language and thought. For Longinus, sublimity is “the echo of a great soul,” something that transcends normal speech, elevates the audience, and creates awe not just beauty but grandeur, power, and emotional force, as seen in Homer’s epics or in the divine brevity of Genesis’ “Let there be light.” Sublime writing has transporting effects, lifting readers above themselves, shaking, striking, and penetrating the soul, ensuring that great works are remembered for generations. Longinus identifies five true sources of sublimity: first, grandeur of thought, for great writing comes from great souls with noble ideas and moral strength, exemplified by Demosthenes or Homer; second, strong and genuine emotion, since authentic passion like Sappho’s poetry of love and agony creates true sublimity while artificial feeling falls flat; third, the proper use of figures of speech such as metaphor, hyperbole, rhetorical questions, or apostrophe, which, when natural and arising from emotion, enhance sublimity, but when overused become bombast; fourth, noble diction, since elevated and precise word choice dignifies thought, as seen in Shakespeare’s sonnets or biblical phrasing; and fifth, majestic composition, where sentence arrangement, rhythm, and harmony create grandeur, with rhetorical techniques like asyndeton, polysyndeton, or climactic pauses giving speeches their power, as in Cicero or Martin Luther King Jr. Yet Longinus also warns of false or pseudo-sublimity: turgidity (inflated style), puerility (childish cleverness), false sentiment (pretended emotion), over-decoration, and moral weakness, for only a great soul can produce great art. He distinguishes types of sublimity: inborn sublimity, springing from natural genius and moral nobility, seen in Homer; acquired sublimity, gained through training, study of figures, diction, and composition, exemplified by Demosthenes; and combined sublimity, the ideal form where natural greatness fuses with artistic skill, as in Plato or Sophocles, producing the most lasting effect. He also insists that moral and cultural conditions shape literature freedom, virtue, and nobility of soul are necessary for sublime art, while moral decline leads to literary decline. Quotes like “Sublimity is the echo of a great soul” (ch. 9), “It is not possible to produce a great and noble work without having a great and noble soul” (ch. 9), and “Art is perfect when it seems to be nature, and nature hits the mark when it contains art hidden within” (ch. 22) capture his vision that sublimity is both natural and perfected by art. Thus, the path to sublimity requires thinking nobly, feeling genuinely, speaking artfully, choosing words

wisely, and composing harmoniously. The significance of *On the Sublime* lies in its bridging of rhetoric, philosophy, and aesthetics: unlike Aristotle's technical focus, Longinus emphasizes emotional and spiritual impact, originality, and the timeless greatness of literature, and his ideas profoundly influenced Renaissance critics like Boileau, Enlightenment thinkers like Burke and Kant, and Romantic poets, making sublimity not just a style but an experience that immortalizes art.

Longinus, in *On the Sublime*, begins in Chapter 1 by addressing Posthumius Terentianus and states the purpose of his treatise: to explore what sublimity in writing is and how it affects the audience, for sublimity, he argues, elevates the soul and produces transport—an emotional rapture—in the listener or reader. In Chapter 2, he defines the sublime as loftiness and excellence in expression that moves the reader beyond logic into awe and admiration, distinguishing it from mere persuasion or beauty. In Chapter 3, he stresses that sublime writing lifts the audience to a higher level of emotion or thought and has a universal, timeless appeal, for great works survive because they are sublime. In Chapter 4, he contrasts the sublime with mediocrity, noting that mediocre writing may be correct but lacks emotional power, while sublime writing may have flaws but its greatness makes us forgive imperfections. In Chapter 5, he observes that true sublimity is rare and difficult to achieve, urging writers to aim high, even at the risk of failure, since it is better to fail in attempting greatness than succeed in mediocrity. In Chapter 6, he explains that sublimity is both natural and learned, arising partly from innate genius and partly from education and effort, with a balance between nature providing inspiration and art perfecting it. In Chapter 7, he warns against faults that pretend to be sublime but are not, such as turgidity (overblown language), puerility (childish cleverness), and false sentiment (unreal emotion). In Chapter 8, he traces the causes of these faults to vanity, the desire for applause, and lack of emotional truth, insisting that passion must be genuine, not artificial. In Chapter 9, which is central, he outlines the five true sources of sublimity: grandeur of thought, strong emotion, use of figures of speech, noble diction, and majestic composition. In Chapter 10, he elaborates on grandeur of thought as the first source, declaring that sublimity begins with great ideas and that only a noble soul can produce noble thoughts, citing Homer, Plato, and Demosthenes as examples. In Chapter 11, he discusses amplification, explaining that enlarging an idea can add grandeur but, when misused, becomes verbose and ineffective. In Chapter 12, he turns to the second source passion and emotion stressing that deep and authentic emotion contributes to sublimity and must arise naturally, not artificially. In Chapter 13, he treats figures of thought and speech as the third source, showing that figures heighten expression when they emerge from genuine emotion or argument rather than mere ornament. In Chapter 14, he illustrates with examples such as rhetorical questions, apostrophes, and sudden exclamations, which increase intensity, citing Demosthenes' abrupt questions as evidence of urgency and passion. In Chapter 15, he adds that figures must suit the content and tone, since misused figures distort meaning and distract. In Chapter 16, he explains the fourth source tropes and diction where words must be grand, poetic, and precise, for the right metaphor or expression can ignite emotion and elevate thought. In Chapter 17, he notes that metaphor, if used sparingly and naturally, is powerful, but too many metaphors confuse or overwhelm. In

Chapter 18, he analyzes Homer and others to show how diction and word choice enhance sublimity. In Chapter 19, he encourages imitation of great writers, but not mere copying, since emulating Homer or Plato helps develop one's own sublimity. In Chapter 20, he extends imitation to nature, the greatest teacher of sublimity, urging writers to observe thunder, oceans, and storms for emotional and spiritual inspiration. In Chapter 21, he outlines the fifth source harmony and composition where sublime writing depends on structure, rhythm, and flow, as arrangement of sentences, pauses, length, and repetition powerfully affect emotional impact. In Chapter 22, he insists that true art must conceal itself, so that the reader feels uplifted rather than noticing technique, with ideal art being technique guided by genius. In Chapter 23, he criticizes his era's literature for focusing too much on style and ornament while lacking passion, greatness of mind, and sincerity. In Chapter 24, he connects this decline to moral decay in society, explaining that loss of freedom, virtue, and ambition leads to a decline in literature, since sublime writing requires a noble spirit and free culture. In Chapter 25, he distinguishes sublimity from persuasion, noting that persuasion convinces the mind, while sublimity transports and lifts the soul. In Chapter 26, though the treatise ends abruptly, Longinus reminds readers to cultivate greatness of soul, pursue lofty thoughts, and study noble examples. Finally, he notes that Chapters 27–30 are lost or fragmentary, leaving the work incomplete, yet *On the Sublime* remains a foundational text in aesthetic theory, rhetoric, and literary criticism.