

LONGINUS

On Great
Writing
(On the Sublime)

Translated, with an introduction, by
G.M.A. GRUBE

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- ① πᾶθος (neut. sg. acc.)
that which happens
- ② περὶ πᾶθέω⁽²⁾ - vb.
to be in a state of
violent emotion.
- ③ παθητικός - adj.
capable of emotion
- ④ ἐμπᾶθής - adj
in a state of emotion
- ⑤ παθήμα - that
which befalls one,
suffering, misfortune

περὶ - prep., with gen., dat., et acc:
radic. sense, all around, about

- ὑψῆ - Adv. high, aloft,
on high
- ① ὑψός⁽⁴⁴⁾ - height
ii. metaph. the top,
summit, (sublime)
- ② ὑψηλός - high, lofty
- ③ ὑψηλοῦς - high writing
- ④ ὑψόω⁽¹⁾ - vb. lift high, raise up

(neut. sg. gen.)
περὶ ὑψους

LONGINUS ON GREAT WRITING

(On the Sublime)

⑤ ὑψηλοποιός - adj.
producing loftiness

1

When you and I, my dear Postumius Terentianus, studied Caecilius' monograph^① on Great Writing together,¹ we felt, as you know, that it was not worthy of its subject, failed to touch the essential points, and gave little help to the reader, which surely an author should aim to do above all else. Two things are required from every specialized treatise: it should clarify its subject and, in the second place, but actually more important, it should tell us how and by what methods we can attain it and make it ours. Now Caecilius does try to show what ^②great writing is—as if we did not know it!—and gives a great many examples, but he somehow fails to tell us how we can strengthen our natural talents and to some extent acquire greatness. This he omits as if it were superfluous. However, we should perhaps not blame the man for what he does not say but rather praise him for his intention and his earnestness.

Since you requested that I too should produce some commentary^③ on great writing as a favor to you, let us see whether our study has led to anything which may be useful to public speakers. You, as befits a man of your talents, will help me with frank criticism of the points I am about to make, for indeed it was well said that what we have in common with the gods is kindly service and truthfulness.

In writing to a scholar like yourself, my dear friend, there is no need for me to begin by establishing at length that

¹ For the meaning of the word *hypsos* and its derivatives, i.e., the subject of the treatise, see Introduction, pp. xi-xii, and *AJP* 78 (1957), 355-360. Terentianus is quite unknown.

περὶ τοῦ

THIS "SUBJECT" IS REALLY AN OBJECT, AND THE SECOND REQUIREMENT IS ABOUT EXPLAINING HOW THE SUBJECT SHOULD INTERPRET "IT" (THE OBJECT OF THE TREATISE), ACCORDING TO LONGINUS.

↓

THUS, LONGINUS BEGINS WITH THE PRIMACY OF THE AUTHOR OVER THE READER.

ὑψηλός
μετέθετος

great passages have a high distinction of thought and expression² to which great writers owe their supremacy and their lasting renown.^① Great writing does not persuade; it takes the reader out of himself. The startling and amazing is more powerful than the charming and persuasive, if it is indeed true that to be convinced is usually within our control whereas amazement is the result of an irresistible force beyond the control of any audience. We become aware of a writer's inventive skill, the structure and arrangement of his subject matter, not from one or two passages, but as these qualities slowly emerge from the texture of the whole work. But greatness appears suddenly; like a thunderbolt it carries all before it and reveals the writer's full power in a flash. These reflections and others of the same kind, my dear Terentianus, you could yourself supply out of your own experience.

NOT
RHETORIC

2

The first problem we have to face is whether greatness and depth¹ in literature is a matter of art.² Some people main-

² The Greek word *logos*, either in the singular or the plural, can refer to the content of a passage (what is being said) or to the language in which it is said, or both. It is here usually translated as the second, i.e., "distinction of *language*" or the like. This I believe mistaken, for we find later that diction or the choice of *words* is but one of the five sources of greatness (ch. 8) and Longinus puts a great deal of emphasis on the mind of the writer throughout; indeed, the thought alone, without its expression, may be sufficient. *Logos* therefore refers here to both thought and expression, and I have used both words to translate it, for both ideas, I am sure, are in the writer's mind.

¹ The Greek word *bathos* means "depth," and so most translators render it. The new edition of Liddell, Scott, Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1940) still takes it as "bathos," but for this meaning there is no authority. See *AJP* 78 (1957), 360-362.

² The word *techné*, here translated "art," means more than "technique" but is perhaps more restricted in meaning than "art." It implies theory and training and is easily contrasted to natural talent, as here. Any art or craft is a *techné*—farming, building, medicine as well as the fine arts, poetry and prose: anything, in fact, which requires special knowledge and training. A rhetorical textbook was called a *techné*, and in Latin an *ars*.

tain that to bring such things under technical rules is merely to deceive oneself. "Great writers are born, not made," says our author,³ "and there is only one kind of art: to be born with talent." The products of nature are thought to be enfeebled and debased when reduced to dry bones by systematic precepts. But I say that this will be proved otherwise if one considers that natural talent, though generally a law unto itself in passionate and distinguished passages, is not usually random or altogether devoid of method. Nature supplies the first main underlying elements in all cases, but study enables one to define the right moment and appropriate measure on each occasion, and also provides steady training and practice.

Great qualities are too precarious when left to themselves, unsteadied and unballasted by knowledge, abandoned to mere impulse and untutored daring; they need the bridle as well as the spur. Demosthenes shows that this is true in everyday life when he says that while the greatest blessing is good fortune, the second, no less important, is good counsel, and that the absence of the second utterly destroys the first. We might apply this to literature, with talent in the place of fortune and art in that of counsel. The clinching proof is that only by means of art can we perceive the fact that certain literary effects are due to sheer inborn talent. If, as I said, those who object to literary criticism would ponder these things, they would, I think, no longer consider the investigation of our subject extravagant or useless.

.

3

. . . the hearth's tall flames be quenched.
And, should I see a single householder,
I'll weave a coronal of torrential fire,
Burn down the roof, consume it all to ashes.
No noble utterance have I spoken yet.

³ Presumably Caecilius, but Longinus uses the expressions "says he" or "say they" in a vague manner, and the reference is often far from clear.

These expressions¹ are not tragic but theatrical: I mean the coronals, the spewing up to heaven, the image of Boreas playing the flute, and all the rest. The result is not forcefulness but turgidity of language and confusion of images. Examined in a clear light, the passage sinks from being awe-inspiring to triviality. If incongruous turgidity is unforgivable in tragedy, a naturally dignified genre which even admits some bombast, it can hardly be suitable in a discourse which deals with facts.

So people laugh at the expressions used by Gorgias of Leontini, such as his "Xerxes, the Zeus of the Persians" and "the vultures, living graves"; also at some phrases of Callisthenes which are not elevated but up in the air. They laugh even more at Cleitarchus, a superficial writer who, in the words of Sophocles, "puffs on a small flute without any stops."² Amphicrates, Hegesias, and Matris do the same thing; they often believe themselves inspired, but theirs is no Bacchic frenzy; they are triflers.

Turgidity seems to be one of the most difficult faults to avoid, for those who aim at ~~greatness~~ try to escape the charge of feeble aridity and are somehow led into turgidity, believing it "a noble error to fail in great things." As in the body, so in writing, hollow and artificial swellings are bad and somehow turn into their opposite, as, they say, nothing is drier than dropsy.

While turgidity attempts to reach beyond ^① greatness, puerility is its direct opposite, altogether a lowly, petty, and ignoble fault. What is puerility? Clearly, it is an artificial notion overelaborated into frigidity. Writers slip into this kind of thing through a desire to be unusual, elaborate, and, above all, pleasing. They run aground on tawdriness and affectation.

In ^② emotional passages we find a third kind of error which

¹ The quotation is from a lost play of Aeschylus. The fragment is incomplete because of the lacuna, and some of the phrases complained of do not occur in the lines as we have them. This, however, could have happened even if we had no lacuna, for Longinus often quotes only a part of a passage and expects his readers to have the whole of it in mind.

² This quotation from Sophocles is otherwise unknown.

borders on puerility. Theodorus³ used to call it *parenthyrsos* or false enthusiasm. It is a display of ^③ passion, hollow and untimely, where none is needed, or immoderate where moderation is required. For writers are frequently carried away by artificial ^④ emotions of their own making which have no relation to their subject matter. Like drunkards, they are beside themselves, but their audience is not, and their ^⑤ passion naturally appears unseemly to those who are not moved at all. However, we shall deal with ^⑥ emotion elsewhere.

4

The other of the faults we mentioned—namely, frigidity—abounds in Timaeus,¹ in other respects an able writer and not without occasional greatness. Though learned and ingenious, he is, however, most critical of errors in others while unaware of his own; he is so eager always to discover strange conceits that he frequently lapses into extreme childishness. One or two things I will quote, though Caecilius has already seized upon most of them. Praising Alexander the Great, Timaeus says: "He conquered all Asia in less time than Isocrates took to write his *Panegyric* on war with Persia." This comparison of the Macedonian with the Sophist is astonishing; evidently, O Timaeus, the Spartans were far behind Isocrates in valor, since they took thirty years to conquer Messene while he marshaled his *Panegyric* in only ten! And how does he elaborate his description of the Athenians captured in Sicily? "Because of their impiety toward Hermes and the mutilation of his images, they were punished largely at the hands of one man who was a descendant of the outraged god on his father's side, Hermocrates the son of Hermon." I am surprised, my dear Terentianus, that he does not say of the tyrant Dionysius: "Because of his impiety toward Zeus and Heracles, he was deposed by Dion and Heraclides."

Why speak of Timaeus when literary giants like Xenophon and Plato, brought up in Socrates' school as they were, forget

³ This is generally thought to be Theodorus of Gadara. See p. xx, n. 22.

¹ Timaeus of Taurumenium in Sicily.

themselves in feeble displays of wit? The former writes of the young Spartans in his *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*: "They were less likely to speak than stone statues, bronze images were more likely to glance aside, you would think them more modest than the very pupils of their eyes." To speak of "modest pupils" is more like Amphicrates than Xenophon, as if, by Heracles, one could believe that the glances of all these men were modest, whereas impudence, as the saying goes, is betrayed especially by the eyes, and the poet says of a bold man: "Wine-bibber, with the eyes of a dog."²

And then Timaeus, as if he had come upon something worth stealing, does not leave this frigid phrase to Xenophon. He is talking of Agathocles who abducted his cousin and kidnaped her in the middle of her wedding: "Who would do this whose eyes had modest, not immodest pupils!"

But then the otherwise divine Plato refers to writing tablets by saying: "They shall write down these records and keep cypress-wood memorials of them in their temples." And elsewhere he says: "As for the walls, Megillus, I should agree with Sparta to let the city walls sleep in the ground and not to rouse them." The expression used by Herodotus is not much better when he says that beautiful women are "a pain to the eyes." He has, it is true, some excuse in that the speakers are barbarians and they are drunk, but even through the mouths of such characters one should not disgrace oneself before posterity by such petty expressions.³

² These insulting words are addressed by Achilles to Agamemnon in *Iliad* 1. 225. Xenophon's pun on the word *koré*, a maiden and the pupil of the eye, is untranslatable (*The Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* 3. 5). He replaces *koré* by *parthenos*, which also means maiden. Timaeus then goes one better by replacing it by *porné*, which means a prostitute. We can only agree with Longinus' verdict that both passages are "frigid."

³ The last three quotations in this chapter are Plato *Laws* 5. 741c (where he is establishing the sanctity of contracts) and 6. 778d (where he argues that walled cities may encourage cowardice in the field) and Herodotus 5. 18. 4. The criticisms of Plato seem justified, that of Herodotus seems more doubtful, but it is a question of taste and of the associations of the words actually used.

5

All such frivolities in discourse are due to the same cause, namely, a desire for novel conceits, the chief mania of our time. Good things and bad come from much the same sources. Beauties of style, great ability, and also the wish to please contribute to effective writing, yet these very things are the elements and sources of failure as well as of success. The same is true of variety, hyperbole, and the use of the poetic plural. We shall show later the risks involved in their use. At the moment we must note the problem and suggest ways of avoiding the pitfalls which beset those who attempt great writing.

6

We can do so, my friend, if we first gain some clear knowledge and critical judgment of what is truly great. This is not easy to attain, for literary judgment is the last outgrowth of long experience. Nevertheless, to speak in precepts, it is perhaps not impossible to acquire discernment in some such way as this.

7

One should realize, my friend, that, as in everyday life, nothing is noble which it is noble to despise. Wealth, honors, reputation, absolute power, and all things which are accompanied by much external and theatrical pomp—these no sensible man would count as blessings, since to despise them is in itself no mean blessing. Rather than those who possess these things, men admire those great souls who could possess them but in fact disdain them. And so it is with distinguished passages in poetry or prose; we must beware of the mere outward semblance of greatness, which is overlaid with many carelessly fashioned ornaments but on closer scrutiny proves to be hollow conceit. This it is nobler to despise than to admire.

Our soul is naturally uplifted by the truly ^①great; we receive it as a joyous offering; we are filled with delight and pride as if we had ourselves created what we heard.

Any piece of writing which is heard repeatedly by a man of intelligence and experience yet fails to stir his soul to noble thoughts and does not leave impressed upon his mind reflections which reach beyond what was said, and which on further observation is seen to fade and be forgotten—that is not truly ^①great writing, as it is only remembered while it is before us. The truly great can be pondered again and again; it is difficult, indeed impossible to withstand, for the memory of it is strong and hard to efface.

Consider truly ^①great and beautiful writing to be that which satisfies all men at all times; for whenever men of different occupations, lives, interests, generations, and tongues all have one and the same opinion on the same subject, then the agreed verdict of such various elements acquires an authority so strong that the object of its admiration is beyond dispute.

8

εὐνομοία ^③ There are, we might say, five sources most productive of great writing. All five presuppose the power of expression without which there is no good writing at all. First and most ^①important is vigor of mental conception, which we defined in ^②our work on Xenophon. Second is strong and inspired emotion. Both of these are for the most part innate dispositions. The others are benefited also by artistic training. They are: ^(ch. 16 ff; p. 27) ^③the adequate fashioning of figures (both of speech and of ^(ch. 30 ff; p. 41) ^④thought), nobility of diction which in turn includes the choice of words and the use of figurative and artistic language; lastly, ^(ch. 39 ff; p. 51) ^⑤and including all the others, dignified and distinguished word-arrangement.

Let us now investigate what is included under each heading; but first we must preface our discussion by pointing out that Caecilius omitted some things. For example, he neglects ^②emotion. If he did so because he believed ^①greatness and ^③passion to be one and the same thing, so that they coincide and ^①ἄλλο ἴσους "these two constituents of the sublime" (LORD)

"vigor of mental conception": κρῆτιστον τὸ (strongest, mightiest)
περὶ τὰς νοησεις ἡ δασπῆ Α. 7. 2. 1

naturally correspond, he is mistaken. There are lowly ^①emotions which do not go with ^②great writing: pity, grief and fear; there are also ^②great passages devoid of ^③passion. Among innumerable examples we have the lines of the poet on the Aloadae: ¹

On top of high Olympus then they strove
To pile Mount Ossa, then again on Ossa
Mighty Pelion with its quivering forests,
Thus making them a stairway up to Heaven

and the even mightier words that follow:

And this had they accomplished

The encomia, ceremonial, and display speeches of our orators are full of weighty and ^②great passages, but they are mostly devoid of ^③passion. Hence we find that ^②passionate speakers rarely write encomia, while those who do write them are the least ^③passionate.

On the other hand, if Caecilius thought that ^④passion was not worth mentioning because it does not contribute to ^①great writing, he was altogether deceived. For I would make bold to say that nothing contributes to ~~greatness~~ as much as noble ^①passion in the right place; it breathes the frenzied spirit of its inspiration upon the words and makes them, as it were, prophetic.

9

However that may be, our first source of ^①greatness—I mean ~~natural high-mindedness~~—is the most important. It is inborn rather than acquired, but we must nevertheless educate the mind to ^①greatness as far as possible and impregnate it, as it ^{τὴν κρῆτιστην νοῆσιν}

¹Odyssey 11. 315-317. "The poet" in such contexts, unless otherwise named, means the poet, i.e., Homer. By *pathos* (passion or strong emotion) Longinus means the expression of emotion rather than the emotional reaction of the hearer or reader, and in this sense the lines quoted have no passion though they have grandeur and might arouse wonder. It is startling to find pity, grief, and fear, especially the first and last, classed as *not* conducive to greatness, but here again Longinus seems to be thinking of passages that directly express them rather than arouse them.