

Longinus' Argument for Flawed Greatness in Nature, Sculpture,
and Human Achievement

My paper will examine Longinus' proof by analogy that an immensely huge phenomenon of nature, or a colossal statue, or a great work of literature—though flawed—is more capable of evoking a sense of sublimity than its small but perfect counterpart. The paper aims at showing how Longinus, with insightful originality, has situated the cause for this circumstance in human nature.

Previous scholars (e.g., D.A. Russell), discussing the rivalry of flawed excellence and perfect mediocrity, have focused on what they see as the *philosophical* commonplaces of the first two centuries of the Empire. What is original to Longinus is the exploration of the rivalry to *literary criticism*. More significantly, Longinus examines *size* as a cause of sublimity, for it has a special resonance in the human soul.

In Chapter 35 of *On the Sublime*, Longinus observes that we do not wonder at small streams—clear and useful though they may be—but at the Nile and the Danube, and still more at the Ocean; nor do we wonder at tiny, controlled flames but at heavenly bodies, even when they are eclipsed, and at eruptions of Aetna, even when it hurls up rocks and debris. In speeches and writings, he says, we do not wonder at small authors like Lysias but at the redoubtable Plato, whose mixture of virtues and vices is like that found in the universe itself. Plato, for all his faults, is superior to Lysias, and the faults of Plato are a necessary concomitant of his genius.

In chapter 36, Longinus rebukes an anonymous critic who has claimed that an unspecified colossal statue, *because* of its mistakes, is not superior to Polycleitus' normal-sized "Spear-bearer," a statue renowned for its accurate precision. Polycleitus

was a theorist as well as an artist and in his *Canon* discussed the proportions of the human figure and “explicated” his “Spear-Bearer.” Lysippus, the teacher of Chares, who sculpted the Colossus of Rhodes, was himself an innovator in proportion. Lysippus distinguished between his own works and those of predecessors precisely on this point: earlier artists represented men as they were; he represented them as they *appeared* to be (Pliny the Elder 34.65). Longinus’ unnamed colossus may be the Colossus of Rhodes, though there is no extant evidence that the statue was flawed. Another candidate is Pheidias’ statue of Zeus, which Strabo criticized for its lack of proportion (*Geographica* 1.1.23). Or it may be the colossal statue of Nero, to which Martial refers simply as “the colossus”—a sign that shortly after the period of Nero a colossus other than that of Rhodes could be recognized without a qualifying reference. In any case, Longinus’ point is that a colossal statue evokes a greater “erotic passion,” a greater awareness of sublimity than a technically faultless, perfectly proportioned representational statue.

The cause of our predilection for things immensely great, Longinus suggests, is an irresistible exclusively human “erotic passion” to grasp what is big and “more daemonic” than ourselves. Lucretius (1.72 ff.) had written that the living force of the soul goes out beyond the far-flaming walls of the universe and travels in mind the universe’s whole immensity; and Aristotle or pseudo-Aristotle (*On the Cosmos* 1) had contrasted the philosophical attempt to transcend the cosmos with the physical attempt of the Aloadae. But Longinus is the first to apply this innate human hunger for the vast universe with its necessary defects to a human appreciation of sublimity. Great literature, like Homer or Plato, and great natural phenomena like Aetna or the heavenly bodies, and great colossal

statues work similarly to awaken human beings to sublimity. I plan to sketch and then analyze Longinus' views on this subject.

Bibliography

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