

SAPPHO 31 IN LONGINUS, ON THE SUBLIME (Περὶ ὕψους) 10

Longinus, sometimes referred to as pseudo-Longinus because his real name is unknown, was a Greek teacher of rhetoric or a literary critic who may have lived in the first or third century CE. Longinus critically praises and blames literary works as examples of good or bad styles, promoting the “elevation of style” and “simplicity”. Longinus sets out five sources of sublimity: “great thoughts, strong emotions, certain figures of thought and speech, noble diction, and dignified word arrangement” (Longinus 136). Experiencing the Sublime causes a loss of rationality, an alienation leading to identification with the creative process of the artist and a deep emotion mixed to pleasure and exaltation, “the Sublime leads the listeners not to persuasion, but to ecstasy: for what is wonderful goes always together with a sense of dismay, and prevails over what is only convincing or delightful, since persuasion, as a rule, is within everyone’s grasp, while the Sublime, giving to the speech an invincible power and [an invincible] strength, rises above every listener.”

LET us next consider whether we can point to anything further that contributes to sublimity of style. Now, there inhere in all things by nature certain constituents which are part and parcel of their substance. It must needs be, therefore, that we shall find one source of the sublime in the systematic selection of the most important elements, and the power of forming, by their mutual combination, what may be called one body. The former process attracts the hearer by the choice of the ideas, the latter by the aggregation of those chosen. For instance, Sappho everywhere chooses the emotions that attend delirious passion from its accompaniments in actual life. Wherein does she demonstrate her supreme excellence? In the skill with which she selects and binds together the most striking and vehement circumstances of passion...

[Sappho 31]

Are you not amazed how at one instant she summons, as though they were all alien from herself and dispersed, soul, body, ears, tongue, eyes, colour? Uniting contradictions, she is, at one and the same time, hot and cold, in her senses and out of her mind, for she is either terrified or at the point of death. The effect desired is that not one passion only should be seen in her, but a concourse of the passions. All such things occur in the case of lovers, but it is, as I said, the selection of the most striking of them and their combination into a single whole that has produced the singular excellence of the passage. In the same way Homer, when describing tempests, picks out the most appalling circumstances. (W. Rhys Roberts translation)