Longinus "On the Sublime" and Boethius "Consolation of Philosophy"¹

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The short treatise 'On the Sublime'², along with Aristotle's 'Poetics' and Horace's 'Art of Poetry', is one of the most important documents of ancient literary criticism. It is not a comprehensive textbook, but a monograph in the form of a letter to a friend, based on a more extensive treatment, now lost, by Caecilius of Caleacte.

This treatise has been traditionally ascribed to the Neoplatonist Cassius Longinus (c. 213-273 A.D.), the adviser of Queen Zenobia of Palmyra. This Longinus, called by Plotinus "not a philosopher but a philologist" and by Eunapius "a living library and a walking university", was put to death by the emperor Aurelian as an enemy of the Roman order.

The oldest surviving manuscript which contains the treatise ascribes it in the title to "Dionysius Longinus" which does not make sense as a name, and in the table of contents to "Dionysius or Longinus" which probably means that the authorship was disputed between Cassius Longinus and Dionysius of Halicarnassus (first century B.C.). Most scholar seem to reject either attribution and prefer to give the work to an unknown author of the first century A.D. whom they call "Pseudo-Longinus" or "L".

In an article published in 1967 in the Finnish periodical Arctos, I tried to show, following David Ruhnken and others, that Longinus, the Neoplatonist, has the best claims to be considered the author of the treatise. No one, I am sorry to say, has paid much attention to my arguments, in Finland or anywhere else. But I still believe that they are valid, and I would like to show that Boethius was familiar with a theory of the sublime in literature which very closely resembles the one proposed in the treatise. Since both Longinus and Boethius were

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² Ed. RUSSELL 1964; 1968. Cf. MARTANO.
Neoplatonists, it is tempting to look for a Neoplatonist origin of the doctrine.

We know very little of the influence the treatise 'On the Sublime' had on later authors. It is a very personal document, quite spontaneous and more analytical than educational, but a serious writer could, at any point of his career, learn from this little book how to become more like the masters of the sublime - Homer, Plato and Demosthenes. But there is hardly any evidence that the theory was put to practical use. It was probably not much read, but it did survive.

Boethius' 'Consolation of Philosophy'\(^3\) is also a personal document, as well as a literary masterpiece, reflecting, as it does, his own tragedy, his downfall after a very successful career, a total reversal which brought him into a dungeon and to a cruel death. Like any great work, it transcends the personal situation of the author and takes its place among the world's classics. It is nourished by the books Boethius had read, based on his study of Plato and Aristotle, inspired by his admiration for Horace and Seneca. It seems to me that Boethius' work can be understood as a living proof that Longinus' theory was right and that it worked.

Let me briefly present this theory. As I have said already, Longinus uses as a point of departure a monograph, now lost, by an earlier critic, Caecilius of Caleacte. From this he borrows some ideas and a number of illustrations, it seems, but he also disagrees with him frequently. As he reads Caecilius, Longinus develops his own theory.

The sublime is, to him, a kind of high point in speech or writing, the maximum effect that poetry or prose can achieve. He distinguishes between speech that is merely pleasant, persuasive or entertaining and speech that produces 'ecstasy', that is, an overpowering feeling: This is great!

Longinus' first chapter contrasts elaborate logical arguments which may sink in after a while and persuade the listener or reader to the sudden brilliant flash, the irresistible turn of phrase that captivates us at once. Only writers of genius can produce this effect most naturally and authentically, although - as Longinus will point out later on - some techniques may actually be learned. "Persuasion is something we can control", he says (1.4), "but amazement and wonder exert invincible power..." And again: "Sublimity, produced at the right moment, tears everything up like a whirlwind..." (ib.).

Longinus' next point is that sublimity is mainly a gift, even though it can be taught to a certain extent. One of his arguments

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\(^3\) Ed. BIÉLER 1957. Cf. GRUBER, Kommentar; COURCELLE, Consolation.