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## CREATIVE CRITICISM: THE LONGINIAN SPIRIT

*"The permanent critics do not settle the question. They compel us to ask it again. They are the rotating chairmen of a debate only the rhetoric of which changes from time to time. Among these we may think of Longinus."<sup>1</sup>*

AS MY TITLE AND EPIGRAPH SUGGEST, I intend to treat Longinus as an eponym, as the shadowy ancestor of a tribe of "creative" critics. Consequently, it is strangely appropriate that we should know so little about the author of *On the Sublime*, for whoever he was and whether he lived in the first or the third century A.D. he represents ultimately a recurrent attitude toward literary art.

Robert Graves has said: "Poetry has always had two hands."<sup>2</sup> Left-handed poetry is corrective and regulatory; whereas right-handed poetry blesses, *i.e.*, it is creative or responsive. I believe this distinction holds equally for criticism, with the exception that there have been fewer ambidextrous critics than poets. That is, critics in their concerns for consistency and articulated explanation are likely to be either right-handed or left-handed, and thus enter naturally into dialectical relationships with their fellows. From this perspective, the past two thousand years of criticism may be viewed in terms of the alternating stylishness of left- and right-handedness.

I take Longinus to be the archetype of the right-handed, creative critic whose over-riding concern is with the perception of great writing and with the ardent recounting of his response to it. For Longinus, perception of great writing is not gradual; he says that ". . . greatness appears suddenly; like a thunderbolt it carries all before it and reveals the writer's full power in a flash."<sup>3</sup> The recounting of his response to this "flash" is enthusiastic, sympathetic, impressionistic: creative rather than analytic. The thrust of Longinus is toward a re-creation of the effect produced

by great writing, so that his criticism itself is eloquent and touched with the sublime. The historian Gibbon makes just this point:

Till now, I was acquainted only with two ways of criticizing a beautiful passage; the one, to shew, by an exact anatomy of it, the distinct beauties of it, and from whence they sprung; the other, an idle exclamation, or a general encomium, which leaves nothing behind it. Longinus has shewn me that there is a third. He tells me his own feelings upon reading it; and tells them with such energy, that he communicates them. I almost doubt which is the most sublime, Homer's *Battle of the Gods*, or *Longinus's* apostrophe to *Terentianus* upon it.<sup>4</sup>

I also take it that recurrent episodes of Longinian or creative criticism have been provoked by periods of intensely corrective or regulatory criticism. It is a truism that any tendency or movement or even civilization produces its counterstatement. Any overwhelming concern with man's rational and intellectual capacities will in time stimulate some champion of the emotions and intuition. A too insistent concern with external form will at last provoke a turn toward internal form or highly individualized form or even formlessness. Finally, any insistence on a closed system of rules will certainly falter in practice (as was the case during the English neoclassical period when a distinct breach between literary theory and practice existed) and is bound to produce enthusiasts who refuse to be confined.

Longinus stands in his own times as a counterstatement to the Alexandrian critical outlook. In a later time, from the Boileau translation of 1674 to the end of the eighteenth century, he was invoked as a kind of classical antidote to straight neoclassicism; and his spirit was an essential part of the incipient subjectivist reaction against the weakening neoclassical code. Presently, after more than a century of relative obscurity, there are clear signs of a Longinian revival in the face of a new Alexandrianism, as the categories of the New Criticism continue to harden in the academies of America and England.

Wimsatt and Brooks have described the effects of Hellenistic civilization on literary criticism about the time of Horace in the following way:

It is a period known for historically rigorous studies, formalism, and technicalities, and at the same time for extreme aestheticism, literary novelties, and *préciosité* . . . It was the heyday . . . of the grammarian, the scholiast, the philologist . . . The communal interest in religious and patriotic issues which during more ancient times had produced the great genres of drama and epic dwindled during the Hellenistic age to an esoteric and merely literary cultivation of smaller forms . . .<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, if literature and criticism had grown so constricted during the Augustan era in which Horace wrote, the situation had become worse by the time of Longinus

a century or two later. In such times, sensitive critics may be expected to turn from the established and conventional critical concerns toward bold statement of the largest and most general critical problems. Unusual means and shifts of emphasis are then in order.

Hence, there is a fundamental difference between Longinus and even so sensitive and relatively unacademic a critic as Horace. This difference consists in the emphasis placed by Longinus on the qualities of the poet himself as opposed to matters of literary form and choice of subject. Horace, on the other hand, generally takes the left-handed position that a poetic gift amounting to genius would not ensure success without a craftsman's command of poetic technique. In *The Art of Poetry* he attacks those who would reject rules in favor of following their impulses or inspiration: "In works of genius are clearly-marked differences of subject and shades of style. If, through ignorance, I fail to maintain these, why hail me poet? Why from a false shame, do I prefer ignorance to knowledge?"<sup>6</sup> Horace implies that a poet's best friend is the strict critic. He advises the Pisos to "censure the poem that has not been pruned by time and many a cancellation—corrected ten times over and finished to the finger-nail."<sup>7</sup> The Hellenistic critics, focusing on the external qualities of the literary work, stress perfection or correctness as a realizable goal of the poet.

Longinus implies, however, that the power or force of the great poet is essentially a natural endowment, and as such defies completely rational discussion and analysis, not to mention obedience to academically conceived rules. Consequently, Longinus' discussion of technique (which does, of course, comprise about half of his fragmentary treatise) lacks real conviction. Technique is clearly ancillary to his unfortunately incomplete comments on the qualities that make for greatness in the poet himself. Indeed, although three of the five sources of the sublime *are* technical and may thus be learned, Walter Jackson Bate makes this observation:

Yet despite the technical nature of its material, the treatise, when compared with most ancient analyses of rhetoric, discusses the subject of language and figures of speech in a way that is far from mechanical. It is concerned less with the mere classification of rhetorical devices than with their use as a means of arousing emotional transport. Indeed, from one point of view, Longinus' *On the Sublime* is actually directed against the mechanical handbook of rhetoric, for it takes as its starting point the inadequacies of just such a handbook by the rhetorician Caecilius, and deliberately attempts to supply the deficiencies of that work. Hence the continual generalizing tendency throughout the treatise, not only in those sections of it that are openly concerned with grandeur of conception and emotional intensity, but also, now and then, throughout the more technical portions.<sup>8</sup>

Obviously, therefore, Longinus is not indifferent to technique and rules. In his reaction against Alexandrian discipline, he never hints at anything like a complete indifference to form. Rather, he is—by example—trying to indict what had become a badly limited and unproductive approach to form. In Chapter 33, Longinus states that “Preciseness in every detail incurs the risk of pettiness, whereas with the very great . . . something must inevitably be neglected.”<sup>9</sup> Greatness with some imperfection is to be preferred to a severely limited kind of perfection. In the same chapter, Longinus shrewdly observes “It is perhaps also inevitable that inferior and average talent remains for the most part safe and faultless because it avoids risk and does not aim at the heights, while great qualities are always precarious because of their very greatness.”<sup>10</sup> The Longinian critical spirit is supremely *laissez faire*: in its desire for the sublime effects of great thoughts and intense passion, it is willing to gamble; imperfection is gratefully accepted as too small a price for genuine greatness. The errors of the great may even “transport” us farther than a conventional and limited perfection.

It is clear that Longinus is not interested in skilful imitation of nature. Like Henry James, he argues that the greatness of the art is contingent upon the greatness of the artist. In Chapter 9 he says that the most important source of greatness is “natural high-mindedness . . . [which] is inborn rather than acquired.”<sup>11</sup> We are told that “great writing is the echo of a noble mind.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, far from being satisfied with correct imitations of nature, Longinus maintained that sublimity (that “echo of a noble mind”) may produce what transcends nature and may raise inspired men almost to the level of divine perception. This, says Longinus, is a greatness that far transcends obedience to rules and standards, a greatness which is in no way compromised by the existence of flaws and blemishes in the work.<sup>13</sup>

Greatness in writing, then, is not primarily a matter of structure, selection, and arrangement; it is a matter of *hypsos*, elevation or spirit. What is equally important, however, is the fact that Longinus characteristically signals his perception of great writing by enthusiasm rather than by analysis. This enthusiasm is demonstrated in two ways: by extensive quotation of passages which communicate the spirit of the poet and by an ecstatic statement of the response which the writing has aroused.

The characteristics of Longinian criticism contrast sharply with the critical practice of his own times and any Alexandrian age. As a critic, Longinus exemplifies the following qualities: a wide reading background, unusual catholicity of taste, a great capacity for enthusiasm, an ability to proceed beyond the letter to the

spirit, extreme sensitivity to style, a feeling for tradition and a sense of history, and enough independence to resist the grosser and less flexible kinds of traditionalism. These are in themselves striking attributes, but they stand out even more against a background of highly normative criticism by rhetoricians and grammarians. Almost needless to say, these are attributes that can be only in part acquired by training. The true Longinian critic is virtually as remarkable and rare as the true object of his study, since his right-handed or creative response to the work of art becomes a participation in it and a re-creation of it. Longinus states that great writing fills us "with delight and pride as if we had ourselves created what we heard."<sup>14</sup>

To speak of the rarity of Longinian critics is perhaps just another way to say that they are closely attended to only at special moments in literary history. In the eighteenth century there occurred in England and elsewhere the gradual disintegration of the system of neoclassical criticism which, deriving from antiquity (principally from Aristotle and Horace), was developed and codified in Italy and France during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As René Wellek has pointed out, "For three centuries people repeated the views held by Aristotle and Horace, debated these views, put them into textbooks, learned them by heart."<sup>15</sup> The need for a critical counter-statement to the rigors of neoclassicism began to assert itself; and, in France, Corneille and Saint-Evremond endeavored to inculcate more liberal views concerning literature.

There was a growing audience for an ancient critic who offered a new sanction. By the end of the seventeenth century, the Longinian spirit had been thoroughly revived; and by the end of the eighteenth century Longinus had served as one of the fundamental influences in the reformation of European aesthetics.<sup>16</sup> It was said of Longinus that "he taught criticism a new language and breathed into it a new soul."<sup>17</sup> Invocation of "the rules" was replaced, in the writings of the Wartons, Lowth, and Hurd, by a refreshing conception of criticism as primarily a matter of interpretation guided principally by taste. This "new soul" is evident even in two such celebrated exemplars of neoclassicism as Addison and Pope, who were both directly influenced by their reading of Longinus to speak out against the mechanical acceptance and practice of the neoclassical code (see *The Spectator*, Numbers 291, 409, and 592; and "An Essay on Criticism", I. 141-160, II. 233-252, III. 675-680).

It may be said that the Longinian stress on the importance of emotional transport as the chief literary value, with corollary stress on imaginative grandeur and the sympathetic reaction of the individual reader or listener, contributed significantly to the explosion of romantic literature in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth

centuries. However, by the end of the eighteenth century, constant iteration of the sublime made a kind of self-parody of Longinus; so that while his spirit is evident in later romantic theory and practice (see Oscar Wilde's essay "The Critic As Artist") there is little explicit reference to Longinus during the nineteenth century.

More than a century of rising, flourishing, and decadent romanticism invited the return to classical principles in our own century. Professor Wellek, among many others, has noted this neoclassical revival:

There is now a large academic literature which interprets the principles, applications, and fortunes of neoclassical criticism not only with the historian's sense of detached justice but with enthusiastic endorsement of the main neoclassical doctrines and polemical fervor directed against the romantic creed. Also, in contemporary non-academic English and American criticism we find many tendencies and ideas which could be interpreted as a revival of neoclassical principles.<sup>18</sup>

Professor Wellek calls attention to the increased interest in rhetoric and its techniques. Professor Maynard Mack has characterized the New Criticism as "the pioneering phase . . . in a general revival of rhetorical interests and disciplines."<sup>19</sup> In the past twenty years, this revival has become progressively Alexandrian, and even Byzantine.

The signs are apparent: there is the absorption of "creative writing" into the universities; the importation into literary criticism of all the "ologies," each with its specialized lingo; the tidal wave of handbooks, "understanding" books, and "reader's guides"; the interest of critics in genre study; the rediscovery of such ancients as the Old English poets, Langland, Skelton, and the "metaphysicals" (the conceit, or what Addison would have called "false wit," has swept back into critical vogue); the close use of these models by academic poets; the highly philological nature of much recent criticism (most notably, Empson's); and the pervasive eclecticism of modern criticism, for which Kenneth Burke may stand as an exceptional illustration. Above all, the present age—like the Alexandrian—has been characterized by the growing dominance of criticism over imaginative literature. The poet Randall Jarrell has described ours as an "Age of Criticism,"<sup>20</sup> and Malcolm Cowley begins his latest book, *The Literary Situation*, with an essay entitled "The New Age of the Rhetoricians."

Against this background, a right-handed reaction is already apparent. There is, first of all, the dawning recognition that a new Alexandrianism exists and is making itself felt. Malcolm Cowley suggests that "In the 1950's, as in Alexandria under the Ptolemys and Rome under the Caesars, young emotions had stiffened in senile works."<sup>21</sup> This recognition is implicit in the growing hostility, first rumored but now a matter of record, to the New Criticism.<sup>22</sup> The same hostility has been

extended to the widespread pedagogic applications of the New Criticism, e.g., Karl Shapiro describes *Understanding Poetry* as the textbook "that took poetry off the street and put it in the laboratory,"<sup>23</sup> and Alan Swallow concedes that this book has created "a new kind of academic unimaginativeness."<sup>24</sup> Robert Graves concludes the fourth of his Clark Lectures with this anecdote: "I must tell you about a girl who is reading English here under Professor X. I asked her: 'What poems do you enjoy most?' and she answered with dignity: 'Poems are not meant to be enjoyed; they are meant to be analysed.'"<sup>25</sup> Indeed, this sense of the growing futility of literary study may be found even in a reigning New Critic like Allen Tate. Mr. Tate no longer believes that the several kinds of critical discourse can be taught or are being taught,<sup>26</sup> and he seems to have become much more skeptical of any systematic programmatic approaches to criticism.<sup>27</sup>

There is, secondly, an increased awareness of Longinus in critical circles these days. Malcolm Cowley reports, "it is interesting to note that the treatise *On the Sublime* . . . is once again being widely quoted."<sup>28</sup> Mr. Tate's essay on Longinus<sup>29</sup> properly calls attention to the general underestimation of Longinus and suggests the need of his revival; however, the essay develops into a rather odd piece of special pleading for the compatibility of Longinus with the New Criticism.

Finally, there are genuine traces of the Longinian spirit in the sensitive and sometimes unconventional enthusiasms of Randall Jarrell, whose influential *Poetry and the Age* would have been very dear to the eighteenth-century Longinians, expressing as it does the operation upon poetry of a refined taste and a capacity for ardent response. Mr. Jarrell follows the Longinian strategy of very promptly citing the great, the emotionally transporting lines; his essays often read like an anthology of the best that the poet under discussion has thought and said. His perception of greatness, moreover, is rarely without its consequent effusion of unmediated admiration, wonder, and joy. Here is Mr. Jarrell on Frost:

We feel, here, that we understand why the lines are as good as they are; but sometimes there will be a sudden rise, an unlooked-for intensity and elevation of emotion, that have a conclusiveness and magnificence we are hardly able to explain . . . . It would be hard to find words good enough for *this*. Surely anybody must feel, as he finishes reading these lines, the thrill of authentic creation, the thrill of witnessing something that goes back farther than Homer and goes forward farther than any future we are able to imagine.<sup>30</sup>

And here is Mr. Jarrell on Whitman:

There are faults in this passage, and they *do not matter*: the serious truth, the complete realization of these last lines makes us remember that few poets have shown more of the

tears of things, and the joy of things, and of the reality beneath either tears or joy. . . . In the last lines of this quotation Whitman has reached—as great writers always reach—a point at which criticism seems not only unnecessary but absurd: these lines are so good that even admiration feels like insolence, and one is ashamed of anything that one can find to say about them.<sup>31</sup>

While our present version of Alexandrianism is obviously not to be confounded with the vastly different conditions that produced the first Alexandrian age and neo-classicism, it is like them in that it is beginning to provoke the kind of reaction from sensitive, creative minds that links together a line of critics from Longinus to Mr. Jarrell. However, each reaction, shaped by different conditions, has inevitably and perhaps unwittingly reinterpreted Longinus. Consequently, in the present sophistication and complexity of critical thought, it is most unlikely that the Longinian spirit will explode among us with anything resembling its eighteenth-century character and effect. It will need, beyond Mr. Jarrell, something very elevated and transporting to clear this air, some new species of creative criticism. Although the signature may not be manifestly Longinian, it will assuredly be written with the right hand.

## NOTES

1. Allen Tate, *The Forlorn Demon* (Chicago, 1953), p. 151.
2. *The Crowning Privilege* (London, 1955), pp. 40-41.
3. *On Great Writing (On the Sublime)*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, The Library of Liberal Arts, No. 79 (New York, 1957), p. 4.
4. *Gibbon's Journal to January 28th, 1763* (New York, n.d.), pp. 155-156.
5. *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York, 1957), pp. 77-78.
6. *The Complete Works of Horace*, ed. Casper J. Kraemer, Jr. (New York, 1936), p. 400.
7. *Complete Works*, p. 406.
8. *Criticism: The Major Texts* (New York, 1952), p. 60.
9. *On Great Writing*, pp. 44-45.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
15. *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950*, Vol. I, "The Later Eighteenth Century" (New Haven, 1955), p. 6.
16. For an excellent account of this development, see Samuel H. Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1960).

17. Quoted in J. W. H. Atkins, *English Literary Criticism: 17th and 18th Centuries* (London, 1951), p. 187.
18. *History of Modern Criticism*, Vol. I, p. 1.
19. "The Muse of Satire," *Yale Review*, XLI, No. 1 (1951), 81.
20. *Poetry and the Age* (New York, 1953), pp. 70-95.
21. *The Literary Situation* (New York, 1955), p. 244.
22. See Karl Shapiro, *In Defense of Ignorance* (New York, 1960); H. H. Waggoner, "The Current Revolt Against the New Criticism," *Criticism*, I, No. 3 (1959), 211-225; G. P. Elliott, "The Sky and a Goat," *Accent*, XVIII, No. 3 (1958), 147-156.
23. *The Nation*, March 9, 1957, p. 208.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
25. *The Crowning Privilege*, p. 91.
26. *The Forlorn Demon*, pp. 102-106.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 162-163.
28. *The Literary Situation*, p. 5.
29. "Longinus and the 'New Criticism'", in *The Forlorn Demon*, pp. 131-151.
30. *Poetry and the Age*, pp. 56-57.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 124-127.