Longinus (1st or 3rd Century AD)

* He was a Greek rhetorician.
* He discusses the merits and demerits of many writers and their works. (Hence comparative critic.)
* 1/3rd of the text is lost. But what remains clearly expounds the writer’s ideas.
* Longinus Dionysius or Cassius Longinus. The identity of the author is not fully established.
* *Peri Hupsous* (Greek book); translated as *On the Sublime*
* It focuses on the production and reception/effects of good oratory/writing; hence it is about both the writer and the listener/reader/spectator.
* In this work, the author discusses the quality of sublime in art and what produces it.
* The sublime can be defined as a style of writing which elevates itself “above the ordinary”. It also has an ennobling effect on the readers/viewers.
* Longinus sets out five sources of sublimity.

a. Great thoughts/conceptions

b. Strong emotions/passions

c. Good figures of thought and speech

d. Noble diction

e. Dignified composition (dignified word arrangement or “high composition”).

We can say that Longinus states that good content presented in good form produces sublimity.

* For sublimity to be realized, perhaps three constituent elements should satisfy certain conditions:

1. Writer (great thoughts, moral excellence etc.)
2. The work (noble composition)
3. The reader/viewers (feelings aroused in them)

* The sublime also arises out of an empathetic bond between the writer and the reader.

Author

Reader Text

* Sublime = noble, lofty (high)
* Sublimation refers to elevating thoughts, actions, attitudes etc. to a higher plane (for noble results).
* Sublimity is that higher quality that transforms a work into more than the sum of its parts.
* For Longinus, sublimity is an inspiring explosion of revelatory illumination.
* According to Longinus, sublimity is the product of a happy union of both natural gifts and art/skill. Here he comes close to Horace’s idea that natural talent should be honed by art/training.
* Different translations of the book:
* Wordsworth: *Elevated Writing*
* Quiller Couch: *On the Sovereign Perfection of Writing*
* Allen Tate: *Elevation of Language*
* Longinus was a Greek probably writing to the Romans. (Writing to Terentianus about the sublime)
* He starts the text addressing Terentianus and speaking about the many shortcomings of Caecilus’ treatise on sublimity. This shows that Longinus was taking part in a literary/philosophical discussion/ dialogue prevalent at that time.
* The work mentions or quotes at least 50 authors/texts spanning 1000 years. Mentions a passage from Genesis, Homer, Apollonius etc.
* The work is a bit abstract.
* Unlike Horace he is not giving advice on how to write; it is more a discussion of literary greatness.
* Many later thinkers like Edmund Burke, Emmanuel Kant et al. are indebted to the work. Also the Romantics.
* The most quoted work after *Poetics*.
* The first Romantic critic; also comparative critic
* Keats, Shelly, Byron, Coleridge, Wordsworth - Romantics
* Longinus stresses upon feeling, intensity of emotion etc. which were central to the Romantics also.
* Coleridge- willing suspension of disbelief
* Keats - Negative capability
* For Joseph Addison, Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is a great poem because of its sublimity.
* The Romantic concept of artistic inspiration goes back to Longinus’ sublime.
* Longinus influenced later generations in all ages: medieval, Renaissance & after, Neoclassical, Romantic & after etc.
* Greco-Roman/ Graeco-Roman = Greek+Roman
* The Eastern Roman Empire’s headquarters was in Constantinople. The whole of Western civilisation traces its lineage back to the Greco-Roman tradition is some way or the other. We also have become bound to this tradition through colonisation and the current globalisation.
* Fall of Constantinople – 1453

**A general observation:**

There were many other writers/theoreticians who wrote about art, writing, oratory etc. as part of their creative or critical writing. Some of these writers are Quintilian, Cicero, Tacitus, Plutarch et al. Later Dante (in Italy), Chaucer (in England) et al. also discussed these issues.

Similarly, there may be old texts which are yet to come to the attention of researchers, experts and readers.

Thus, our critical and aesthetic tradition and continuity are not composed solely of the few writers and texts that we regularly discuss, study in schools/colleges etc. Many forgotten, ignored or even undiscovered writers actually form part of our tradition and the continuing dialogue.

\*\*\*\*\* Biju Joseph’s classnotes; typed by Vidhubala KR, 04/03/2015 \*\*\*\*\*