

XXVI.—Lowell and Longinus

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Although Lowell only twice specifically refers to Longinus, he surely was acquainted with the *Περὶ Ὑψους*; and his works support most of Longinus's ideas. Among these ideas are the following: elevated style produces *ἔκστασις*, not persuasion; it proceeds from a well-disciplined, great soul; five qualities are requisite to its production; the word must fuse with the thought to produce elevated literature; bombast, frigidity, puerility, and insincerity injure the "sublime"; colloquialisms may be advantageously used in good literature; the supreme test of excellence is applied by time. Finally, Lowell and Longinus both believe that the temper of a period can make or mar its literature.

I

Pre-eminently among ancient critics, Horace lends himself to frequent quotation, and his apt phrases have become currency in the realm of literature. To a less degree, Aristotle also furnishes a fund of critical catch-words. From the nature of his subject, perhaps, Longinus's assets are less liquid. The more quotable an author is, the easier it is to trace the path of his influence. Unless he has become so popular as to be commonplace and quoted by men who have forgotten the origin of their words, as in the case of Horace's *Ars Poetica*, one can readily demonstrate where such an author appears in the minds of subsequent writers.

Since Longinus does not fall into the class of authors apt for quotation, the investigator who seeks to show his influence must proceed warily. Except where there occurs a direct quotation or a named reference, he had better content himself with the mere claim to a similarity. The accumulation of many similarities becomes circumstantial evidence of an indebtedness to the earlier author on the part of the later; it does not constitute final proof. If, indeed, it can be shown that the later author knew of the existence of the earlier treatise, had access to it, and was the sort of man who would have curiosity and inclination to look into it, then the circumstantial evidence is strengthened into at least a strong probability.

All these varieties of evidence support the contention that James Russell Lowell was influenced by the *Περὶ Ὑψους* of Longinus. Lowell twice mentions the treatise, and once quotes from it. Scores

of passages in Lowell's essays bear the imprint of Longinus's thinking; these treat most of the principal matters which Longinus discusses. Parts of the treatise had been included in a Greek textbook, 'Ανάλεκτα Ἑλληνικά, *sive Graeca Majora*, edited by Andrew Dalzel, which had been a text at Harvard for several years immediately before Lowell entered the college. Copies of it were undoubtedly still numerous on the campus. There were also complete copies of both the Greek text and English translations available to him. Moreover, Dryden and Addison, to name two only of the many English authors who had studied Longinus, were among his preferred reading. Both these authors refer several times by name to Longinus, and show extensive debt to his ideas. Lowell was also acquainted with the work of Nicolas Boileau, the French translator of Longinus, whose well-known *Art Poétique* owes much to Longinus. With his inveterate curiosity in literary matters, and his excellent taste in discerning great literature, Lowell was hardly the man to ignore a treatise whose merits both of form and of content had in several ways undoubtedly been impressed upon him.

It is true that, in the varying emphasis which he put upon the several parts of literature, Lowell was Aristotelian rather than Longinian. Like Dryden, whom he admired, he believed that organization was of greater importance than language, a position which the superficial reader of the *Περὶ Ὕψους* might fail to note in it. Lowell would realize that Longinus was writing with one eye upon the art of rhetoric, and that his extensive treatment of diction probably was caused by his interest in the need of the orator to make an immediate impression upon his hearers. It is unlikely that he would be deceived into thinking that Longinus discounted the supreme importance of organic unity.

This paper will attempt to show that in a dozen matters which are of great moment for literature, Lowell consistently aligns himself with Longinus. It will consider the nature of "the sublime" and how it may be attained; the faults that hinder its attainment; and other relations between Lowell and Longinus.

II

Longinus asserts that "sublimity is a certain distinction and excellence in expression."¹ His immediate addition (1.3), that "it

¹ The text of Longinus used in this article is *Longinus on the Sublime*, edited and translated by W. Rhys Roberts (Second edition, Cambridge, 1907). The vexed

is from no other source than this that the greatest poets and writers have derived their eminence and gained an immortality of renown," should not be taken as ignoring the importance of organic unity. He almost immediately thereafter declares (1.4): "We see skill in invention, and due order and arrangement of matter, emerging as the hard-won result not of one thing nor of two, but of the whole texture of the composition." It is to a work thus organized that sublimity adds the final touch: "Sublimity flashing forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and at once displays the power of the orator in its plenitude." A good Aristotelian like Lowell, recalling the extended treatment of diction in the *Poetics* (22, 1458a18-1459a14), would see nothing objectionable in these statements by Longinus.

Lowell is greatly taken with the simile of the thunderbolt. A poet himself, and no neo-classicist, he does not transfer the simile bodily into his own writing; he plays with it, now using almost the same comparison that Longinus uses, now varying it according to his own fancy. I have noted twenty-two instances of his using such a figure. Sometimes he calls it lightning; at other times it becomes a beacon suddenly darting heavenward, a "rocket's burst of momentary splendor," a burst of molten lava from a volcano, a flare from a bonfire, a meteor, an electric spark, the aurora borealis, the flash of light from a crystal, or a sudden sunburst through a cloud.² In his desire, however, not to lose sight of the all-important beauty of structure, he almost as frequently insists that "the true artist is never spotty, and needs no guide-boards of admiring italics." "A great writer," he elsewhere asserts, "does not reveal himself

question as to the author's identity is immaterial to the purposes of this paper. The terms "sublime" and "sublimity" are employed in accordance with Roberts's practice. Since the paper is not concerned with the quality of the translation, and since there is no question of verbal echoes of Longinus in Lowell's works, it has seemed unnecessary to reproduce the Greek of Longinus in these notes.

The edition of Lowell's works that is used is *The Writings of James Russell Lowell* (Riverside Edition, 7 volumes, Boston, 1899).

² For sublimity as lightning, see "Dryden," 3.166; "Gray," 7.1, 3; "Walter Savage Landor," 7.45-46; "The Old English Dramatists," 7.202, 286-287; "Shakespeare Once More," 3.40. For sublimity as a beacon, see "A Fable for Critics," 1747-1752. For sublimity as a rocket, see "Shakespeare Once More," 3.79-80; as lava, see *ibid.*, 3.37, 39; as the flare from a bonfire, see "Dryden," 3.129, "Wordsworth," 4.109; as a meteor, see "Walter Savage Landor," 7.48; as electricity, see "Gray," 7.42; as the aurora borealis, see "Shakespeare's 'Richard III,'" 7.121-122; as the flash of light from a crystal, see "The Study of Modern Languages," 7.143; as a burst of sunlight, see "Wordsworth," 6.112-113.

here and there, but everywhere."³ He evidently fears the pitfall of the rhetorician, that sublimity may be sought without that organic structure which serves as the keystone of great literature.

In the same passage (1.4), Longinus says that the effect of elevated language is ecstasy or transport, not persuasion. Lowell, too, writes of "that ecstasy of mind, from which the highest poetry is supposed to spring, and which it is its function to reproduce in the mind of the reader." He is acquainted with the current stricture passed upon eighteenth-century poetry, that it is "rather the conclusions of the understanding put into verse than an attempt to express, however inadequately, the eternal longings and intuitions and experiences of human nature. These find their vent, it was thought, in those vivid flashes of phrase, the instantaneous bolts of passionate conception, whose furrow of splendor across the eye-balls of the mind leaves them momentarily dark to the outward universe, only to quicken their vision of inward and incommunicable things." Elsewhere, he asserts: "People are not to be argued into a pleasurable sensation, nor is taste to be compelled by any syllogism." "Poetry," he says again, "is not made out of the understanding"; and he clinches his position with the words: "We like to be surprised into admiration, and not logically convinced that we ought to admire."⁴ In Chapter Fifteen, after mentioning an instance in which Hyperides, in order to defend a proposal which he had just made, has combined a train of reasoning with a flight of imagination, Longinus adds (15.10): "He has, therefore, passed the bounds of mere persuasion by the boldness of his conception." Lowell, writing of Milton, nearly echoes the sentiment: "Now it is precisely this audacity of self-reliance, I suspect, which goes far towards making the sublime, and which, falling by a hair's-breadth short thereof, makes the ridiculous."⁵

The emotion aroused in the reader by a sublime passage is akin to that experienced by the author when he had the work in hand. "For," says Longinus (7.2), "as if instinctively, our soul is uplifted by the true sublime; it takes a proud flight, and is filled with joy and vaunting, as though it had itself produced what it has heard." Writing of older times, Lowell says:

³ "Chaucer," 3.332.

⁴ "Gray," 7.30-31; *ibid.* 1-2; "Carlyle," 2.280; "Chaucer," 3.319; "Shakespeare Once More," 3.79.

⁵ "Milton," 4.116.

Then the poet brought heaven to the people, and they
Felt that they, too, were poets in hearing his lay.

He mentions Emerson's "masculine faculty of fecundating other minds"; and he defines the "few great poets" as men "who exalt men's minds, and give a right direction and safe outlet to their passions through the imagination, while insensibly helping them toward balance of character and serenity of judgment by stimulating their sense of proportion, form, and the nice adjustment of means to ends." Once again, he declares that "the imaginations of poet and reader leap toward each other and meet halfway."⁶

The element of the sublime is the product of well-disciplined genius; in this Longinus is at one with Horace. "Some hold that those are entirely in error who would bring such matters under the precepts of art. A lofty tone, says one, is innate, and does not come by teaching; nature is the only art that can compass it. Works of nature are, they think, made worse and altogether feebler when wizened by the rules of art. But I maintain that this will be found to be otherwise if it is observed that, while nature as a rule is free and independent in matters of passion and elevation, yet is she wont not to act at random and utterly without system. Further, nature is the original and vital underlying principle in all cases, but system can define limits and fitting seasons, and can also contribute the safest rules for use and practice. Moreover, the expression of the sublime is more exposed to danger when it goes its own way without the guidance of knowledge, — when it is suffered to be unstable and unballasted, — when it is left at the mercy of mere momentum and ignorant audacity."

This passage (2.2), which is perhaps the clearest statement of the position taken by ancient criticism on a still-vexed question, is echoed by many of Lowell's words. The poetry of Europe in the age preceding Dante shows, he says, "no trace of the creative faculty either in unity of purpose or style, the proper characteristics of literature. If it have the charm of wanting artifice, it has not the higher charm of art." "A careless good luck of phrase," he remarks

⁶ "A Fable for Critics," 1729-1730; "Emerson the Lecturer," 1.351; "Wordsworth," 4.355; "Dryden," 3.129. Cf. "Emerson the Lecturer," 1.358: Those who are grateful to Mr. Emerson, as many of us are, for what they feel to be most valuable in their culture, or perhaps I should say their impulse, are grateful not so much for any direct teachings of his as for that inspiring lift which only genius can give, and without which all doctrine is chaff.

elsewhere, "is delightful; but criticism cleaves to the teleological argument, and distinguishes the creative intellect, not so much by any happiness of natural endowment as by the marks of design." True style is the joint result of culture and natural aptitude. "Whoever would write well must *learn* to write," even to the study of technical minutiae. Perhaps his most detailed statement on this head is the following: "When we hear of certain productions, that they are feeble in design, but masterly in parts, that they are incoherent, to be sure, but have great merits of style, we know that it cannot be so; for in the highest examples we have, the master is revealed by his plan, by his power of making all accessories, each in its due relation, subordinate to it, and . . . to limit style to the rounding of a period or a distich is wholly to misapprehend its highest and truest function."⁷

As a complement to his discussion, Longinus adds to the passage just quoted (2.2): "It is true that it often needs the spur, but it is also true that it often needs the curb." Lowell recognizes the same need. Dante's *Vita Nuova*, he declares, "enables us in some sort to see how, from being the slave of his imaginative faculty, he rose by self-culture and force of will to that mastery of it which is art." Of Chaucer and Langland, he says: "The abundance of the one is a continual fulness within the fixed limits of good taste; that of the other is squandered in overflow."⁸

Longinus names five sources of the sublime: the power of forming great conceptions, vehement and inspired passion, the due formation of figures, noble diction, and dignified and elevated composition. These all build upon the gift of discourse as the indispensable

⁷ "Dante," 4.228; "Chaucer," 3.332; "Pope," 4.21; "Gray," 7.30-31; "Shakespeare Once More," 3.34-35. Cf. "The Study of Modern Languages," 7.145; "Library of Old Authors," 1.292-293; "Shakespeare Once More," 3.35; "Walton," 7.64; "Wordsworth," 4.357; *ibid.* 407; "Gray," 7.38.

⁸ "Dante," 4.148-149; "Chaucer," 3.331. Cf. "A Fable for Critics," 886-890 (The passage concerns Whittier):

Let his mind once get head in its favorite direction,
And the torrent of verse bursts the dams of reflection,
While, born with the rush of the meter along,
The poet may chance to go right or go wrong,
Content with the whirl and delirium of song.

Cf. also "Dryden," 3.137: I remark also what he says of the couplet, that it was easy because the second verse concludes the labor of the poet. And yet it was Dryden who found it hard for that very reason. His vehement abundance refused those narrow banks, first running over into a triplet, and, even then uncontainable, rising to an alexandrine in the concluding verse.

foundation. Of these five, the first is also foremost in importance (8.1). Lowell, too, considers all these as vitally necessary in the production of elevated literary style.

"Sublimity," says Longinus (9.2), "is the echo of a great soul." Lowell's literary essays, except when they are little more than cursory reviews, concern the great souls of literary history; and he is at pains to point out their greatness. Dryden, for all his faults, was essentially manly. Dante's sufferings developed in him the capacity to see and grasp the significance in facts that normally hides from man. Wordsworth's greatness lies, not in the great body of his verse; he had "in some respects, a deeper insight, and a more adequate utterance of it, than any man of his generation." Chaucer, Spenser, and Milton had in differing sorts great souls, which their works echo; Emerson receives similar praise. Of Landor, he concludes: "One would scruple to call him a great thinker, yet surely he was a man who had great thoughts, and when he was in the right mood these seam the ample heaven of his discourse with meteoric showers." The thought determines whether the style is elevated or not: "Properly speaking, vulgarity is in the thought, and not in the word or the way of pronouncing it." With all their importance, however, Lowell warns his reader that great conceptions alone are not enough. "'It is not, then, loftiness of mind that puts one by the side of Virgil?'" cries poor old Cavalcanti at his wits' end. Certainly not altogether that. There must also be the great Mantuan's art; his power, not only of being strong in parts, but of making those parts coherent in an harmonious whole, and tributary to it."⁹

Lowell agrees again with Longinus in assigning an important place in the making of literature to vehement and inspired emotion. He speaks of "that ideal representation of the great passions which is the end and aim of Art." He accounts for the lack of emotion in Pope's work by saying that "the moment a great passion enters a man he passes at once out of the artificial into the human. So long as he continues artificial, the sublime is a conscious absurdity to him." "I believe," he writes elsewhere, "that our language

⁹ "Dante," 4.127; "Dryden," 3.104; "Shakespeare Once More," 3.35; "Walter Savage Landor," 7.48-49; Introduction to *The Biglow Papers*, Second Series; "Carlyle," 2.80. Cf. "Emerson the Lecturer," 1.353: For us the whole life of the man is distilled in the clear drop of every sentence, and behind each word we divine the force of a noble character, the weight of a large capital of thinking and being. Cf. also "Dryden," 3.103: Without earnest convictions no great or sound literature is conceivable.

had two periods of culmination in poetic beauty, — one of nature, simplicity, and truth, in the ballads, which deal only with narrative and feeling, — another of Art (or Nature as it is ideally reproduced through the imagination), of stately amplitude, of passionate intensity and elevation in Spenser and the greater dramatists, — and that Shakespeare made use of the latter as he found it.”¹⁰

Lowell is not wholly at one with Longinus in his estimate of the relation between strong emotion and sublimity. Longinus considers some emotions, such as pity, grief, and fear, to be low and far removed from sublimity. When passion “bursts out in a wild gust of enthusiasm and as it were fills the speaker’s words with frenzy,” he concedes it to be sublime (8.2; 3.5). Lowell somewhat skeptically suspects violent expression of feeling: it may be violence masquerading as intensity, the fault which Longinus calls *parenthysus*. He follows Longinus again in discriminating between pathos and tragedy. He sees, however, something that Longinus’s preoccupation with oratory perhaps hid from his view, that grief, at least, may be sublime. “The ‘prithce, undo this button’ of Lear, coming where it does and expressing what it does, is one of those touches of the pathetically sublime, of which only Shakespeare ever knew the secret.”¹¹

Two lacunae, in chapters 9 and 15, have probably lost for us a part of Longinus’s treatment of figures. In the part that survives, one figure discussed is amplification. Longinus distinguishes amplification from sublimity by saying (12.1) that “sublimity consists in elevation, while amplification embraces a multitude of details. Consequently, sublimity is often comprised in a single thought, while amplification is universally associated with a certain magnitude and abundance.” Lowell notes “an incomparable amplitude” in the style of Chapman’s Homer. Of Milton, he says: “His imagination seldom condenses, like Shakespeare’s, in the kindling flash of a single epithet, but loves better to diffuse itself.” His words remind the reader of Longinus’s contrast of Demosthenes to Cicero.¹² Lowell is himself frequently successful in employing this figure.

¹⁰ “Shakespeare Once More,” 3.2, 18; “Pope,” 4.32. Cf. “Chaucer,” 3.299, 319; “A Fable for Critics,” 1300–1301; “Carlyle,” 2.81; “Gray,” 7.2. Cf. also “Swinburne’s Tragedies,” 2.122: They forget that convulsion is not energy, and that words, to hold fire, must first catch it from vehement heat of thought, while no artificial fervors of phrase can make the charm work backward to kindle the mind of writer or reader.

¹¹ “Swinburne’s Tragedies,” 2.122; “Shakespeare Once More,” 3.39; “Fielding,” 6.55; “Dryden,” 3.124–125.

¹² “The Old English Dramatists,” 7.276; “Milton,” 4.99. Cf. Longinus, 12.4.

Of the other figures Lowell for the most part makes good use in his own writing; but most of them he fails to discuss. His was not an age interested in the aridities of formal rhetoric. He says nothing of apostrophe, asyndeton, hyperbaton, hyperbole, nor of accumulations, variations, and climaxes. With regard to adjuration, he twice makes comic references specifically to Longinus. In a note to Series I, Number II of *The Biglow Papers*, occurs the following remark (Homer Wilbur *loquitur*): "Though Time be a comparatively innocent personage to swear by, and though Longinus in his discourse *περὶ ὕψους* have commended timely oaths as not only a useful but sublime figure of speech, yet I have always kept my lips free from that abomination. *Odi profanum vulgus*, I hate your swearing and hectoring fellows." In *Leaves from My Journal*, he refers to an overheard outburst of profanity: "I think it would have gratified Longinus or Fuseli (both of whom commended swearing) to have heard him."¹³

Lowell, like Longinus, recognizes the danger inherent in periphrasis. "A hazardous business," says Longinus (29.1), "eminently hazardous is periphrasis, unless it be handled with discrimination; otherwise it speedily falls flat, with its odor of empty talk and its swelling amplitude." In the introduction to the second series of *The Biglow Papers*, Lowell has this to say of current usage: "But while the schoolmaster has been busy starching our language and smoothing it flat with the mangle of a supposed classical authority, the newspaper reporter has been doing even more harm by stretching and swelling it to suit his occasions." To illustrate his point, Lowell lists a number of extravagant periphrases for common words, usages which he has collected from the daily papers. Later he wrote of Pope and his school: "As the master had made it an axiom to avoid what was mean or low, so the disciples endeavored to escape from what was common. This they contrived by the ready expedient of the periphrasis. They called everything something else."¹⁴

Between the discussion of amplification and the other figures, Longinus inserts a long chapter (15) on images. He defines them as follows: "Some call them mental representations. In a general

¹³ Lowell has in mind Longinus 16.2. There is no reason to suppose that Lowell is unaware of Longinus's serious treatment of adjuration; Lowell is simply perverting for comic purposes the sense of the passage. The Latin quotation, from Horace, *Odes* 3.1.1, is here likewise perverted in sense. The passage from Lowell occurs in "Leaves from My Journal," 1.173.

¹⁴ "Pope," 4.9-10.

way the name of image or imagination is applied to every idea of the mind, in whatever form it presents itself, which gives birth to speech. But at the present day the word is predominantly used in cases where, carried away by enthusiasm and passion, you think you see what you describe, and you place it before the eyes of your hearers. Further, you will be aware of the fact that an image has one purpose with the orators and another with the poets, and that the design of the poetical image is enthrallment, of the rhetorical — vivid description." Into Lowell's detailed consideration of imagination we need not go; it was a matter discussed by most nineteenth-century critics. There are, however, passages in his work which resemble the words of Longinus on images. In one of them he draws a distinction that is reminiscent of Longinus's differentiation between the poetical and the rhetorical image. "In that secondary office of imagination, where it serves the artist, not as the reason that shapes, but as the interpreter of his conceptions into words, there is a distinction to be noticed between the higher and lower mode in which it performs its function. It may be either creative or pictorial, may body forth the thought or merely image it forth. With Shakespeare . . . imagination seems imminent in his very consciousness; with Milton, in his memory. In the one it sends, as if without knowing it, a fiery life into the verse . . . ; in the other it elaborates a certain pomp and elevation. Accordingly, the bias of the former is toward over-intensity, of the latter toward over-diffuseness. Shakespeare's temptation is to push a willing metaphor beyond its strength, to make a passion over-inform its tenement of words; Milton cannot resist running a simile into a fugue." He writes of "intensity and picturesqueness, symptoms of the imaginative faculty in full health and strength." Spenser's imaginative visions "seemed to him, it may be suspected, more real than the men and women he met." In the great poets, "the imaginations of poet and reader leap toward each other and meet half-way."¹⁵

Longinus's remark (15.3) about Euripides, "notwithstanding that he is by nature anything but elevated, he forces his own genius, in many passages, to tragic heights," is remarkably close to Lowell's estimate of Dryden: "He was a strong thinker who sometimes carried common sense to a height where it catches the light of a

¹⁵ "Shakespeare Once More," 3.40-41; Introduction to *The Biglow Papers*, Second Series; "Spenser," 4.343-344; "Dryden," 3.129. Cf. "Shakespeare Once More," 3.39-40; "Shakespeare's 'Richard III'," 7.116; "Milton," 4.84; "Walton," 7.88-89; "Fielding," 7.52; "Carlyle," 2.79.

diviner air, and warmed reason till it had wellnigh the illuminating power of intuition."¹⁶

Longinus recognizes (30.1) the truth of what this study has already indicated, that "in discourse, thought and diction are for the most part developed one through the other." After he has considered the other matters that combine to make up an elevated style, he endeavors to collect any stray items concerning diction that have not yet been treated. In the midst of his discussion of words there occurs a large lacuna; yet in the part that we have two points are made. The first is that "the choice of proper and striking words wonderfully attracts and enthralls the hearer"; and, as a gloss on the "proper" words, the remark (30.1) that "stately language is not to be used everywhere, since to invest petty affairs with great and high-sounding names would seem just like putting a full-sized tragic mask upon an infant boy." The second point he makes (31.1) is that "a homely expression . . . is sometimes much more telling than elegant language, for it is understood at once since it is drawn from common life, and the fact that it is familiar makes it only the more convincing." Such expressions may sometimes "graze the very edge of vulgarity, but they are saved from vulgarity by their expressiveness" (31.2).

Lowell adheres both to the belief in the interrelation of thought and diction and to the two statements about diction which survive in Longinus's treatise. "Poems," he insists, "are not made of words and thoughts and images, but of that something in the poet himself which can compel them to obey him and move to the rhythm of his nature." His clearest words, however, come in his critique of Shakespeare, where we find such dicta as these: "Words and thoughts have a much more intimate and genetic relation, one with the other, than most men have any notion; and it is one thing to use our mother-tongue as if it belonged to us, and another to be the puppets of an overmastering vocabulary. . . . That he used language with that intimate possession of its meaning possible only to the most vivid thought is doubtless true. . . . He fuses thought and word indissolubly together, till all the parts cohere by the best virtue of each. . . . Shakespeare's language is no longer the mere vehicle of thought, it has become a part of it, its very flesh and blood."¹⁷

¹⁶ "Dryden," 3.188-189.

¹⁷ "Chaucer," 3.299; "Shakespeare Once More," 3.6, 19, 36, 41.

It is in Spenser that Lowell finds especially the style that attracts and entralls the reader. "None but the daintiest and nicest phrases will serve him, and he allures us from one to the other with such cunning bits of alliteration, and such sweet lapses of verse, that never any word seems more eminent than the rest nor detains the feeling to eddy around it, but you must go on to the end before you have time to stop and muse over the wealth that has been lavished on you." In Gray, too, he finds a similar capacity of stirring the emotion by words. In Chapman, Massinger, Ford, and Landor, he notes the lack of felicitous diction, with the corresponding failure to attain sublimity where this fault occurs.¹⁸

When the second series of *The Biglow Papers* appeared in a volume, it bore on its title-page the following quotation from Longinus, chapter 31: ἔστιν ἄρ' ὁ ἰδιωτισμὸς ἐνίοτε τοῦ κόσμου παρά πολὺ ἐμφανιστικώτερον. His leading character, Hosea Biglow, is made according to the specification set forth above by Longinus. "I imagined to myself such an upcountry man as I had often seen at antislavery gatherings, capable of district-school English, but always instinctively falling back into the natural stronghold of his homely dialect when heated to the point of self-forgetfulness." In his treatment of Gascoigne, Surrey, and Wyatt, he notes their failure to strengthen their literary position by basing their works on the similar "natural stronghold" of the ballads. After quoting from the "Twa Corbies," he adds: "There was a lesson in rhetoric for our worthy friends, could they have understood it. But they were as much afraid of an attack of nature as of the plague." Later, in his evaluation of the language available to Shakespeare, he writes: "Those who look upon language only as anatomists of its structure, or who regard it only as a means of conveying abstract truth from mind to mind, as it were so many algebraic formulae, are apt to overlook the fact that its being alive is all that gives it poetic value. We do not mean what is technically called a living language, but one that is still hot from the brains of the people, not hardened yet. . . . So soon as a language has become literary, so soon as there is a gap between the speech of books and that of life, the

¹⁸ "Spenser," 4.334-335; "Gray," 7.17; "The Old English Dramatists," 7.277, 313-314; "Walter Savage Landor," 7.46. Cf. "Shakespeare Once More," 3.8-9; "Pope," 4.25; "Gray," 7.36.

language becomes, so far as poetry is concerned, as dead as Latin."¹⁹ The basis of this statement at least is Longinian in form.

To the sources of sublime style which have now been considered, there should be added a useful aid to its attainment — "the imitation and emulation of previous great poets and writers" (13.2). Lowell's expressions on this head bear an almost startling resemblance to those of Longinus. In showing the value of the study of great models, Longinus declares (13.2): "For many men are carried away by the spirit of others as if inspired, just as it is related of the Pythian priestess when she approaches the tripod, where there is a rift in the ground which (they say) exhales divine vapor. By heavenly power thus communicated she is impregnated and straightway delivers oracles in virtue of the afflatus." In his "Fable for Critics," Lowell apparently burlesques this passage when he condemns

A fervor of mind which knows no separation
 'Twixt simple excitement and pure inspiration,
 As my Pythoness erst sometimes erred from not knowing
 If 'twere I or mere wind through her tripod was blowing.

More seriously, he says of Spenser: "No other of our poets has given an impulse, and in the right direction also, to so many and so diverse minds; above all, no other has given to so many young souls a consciousness of their wings and a delight in using them." Young poets, he says elsewhere, have sat at the feet of Milton to be taught. Dryden, he adds, "always had to have his copy set him at the top of the page, and wrote ill or well accordingly"; his difficulty lay in often failing to select a good author to furnish him the external impulse which he so sorely needed. As Longinus does, and as Horace directs us to do, Lowell in one of his most eloquent passages gives full credit to the Greeks as still the best models.²⁰

¹⁹ "Spenser," 4.276; "Shakespeare Once More," 3.5. Lowell does not as a rule consider Latin a dead language. In his "Harvard Anniversary Address," he declares (6.65): Only those languages can properly be called dead in which nothing living was ever written.

²⁰ "A Fable for Critics," 882-885; "Spenser," 4.352 (Lowell is aware of Spenser's debt to Plato's *Phaedrus*); "Milton," 4.114; "Dryden," 3.143. Cf. "Shakespeare Once More," 3.34: It is the Greeks who must furnish us with our standard of comparison. Their stamp is upon all the allowed measures and weights of aesthetic criticism. Nor does a consciousness of this, nor a constant reference to it, in any sense reduce us to the mere copying of a bygone excellence; for it is the test of excellence in any department of art, that it can never be bygone, and it is not mere difference from antique models, but the way in which that difference is shown, that we are to consider

Neither critic has in mind slavish copying: Longinus (13.3-4, 13-30) instances the debt Plato owed to Homer as his model, and neither Lowell nor any other modern writer would tolerate plagiarism.²¹

The ultimate test for sublimity is that made by time. Longinus anticipates the *quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus* of Vincent of Lerins.²² "That is really great," he declares (7.3-4), "which bears a repeated examination, and which it is difficult or rather impossible to withstand, and the memory of which is strong and hard to efface. In general, consider those to be examples of sublimity which please all and always. For when men of different pursuits, lives, ambitions, ages, languages, hold identical views on one and the same subject, then that verdict which results, so to speak, from a concert of discordant elements makes our faith in the object of admiration strong and unassailable." From the many utterances of Lowell on this subject, the two following are selected as clearly stating his position. "It is the test of excellence in any department of art, that it can never be bygone." "A classic is properly a book which maintains itself by virtue of that happy coalescence of matter and style, that innate and exquisite sympathy between the thought that gives life and the form that consents to every mood of grace and dignity, which can be simple without being vulgar, elevated without being distant, and which is something neither ancient nor modern, always new and incapable of growing old."²³ He has no patience with so-called national literature: "I confess I have little faith in that quality in literature which is commonly called nationality, — a kind of praise seldom given where

in our judgment of a modern work. The model is not there to be copied merely, but that the study of it may lead us insensibly to the same processes of thought by which its purity of outline and harmony of parts were attained, and enable us to feel that strength is consistent with repose, that multiplicity is not abundance, that grace is but a more refined form of power, and that a thought is none the less profound that the limpidity of its expression allows us to measure it at a glance.

²¹ Cf. "Milton," 4.85: Almost every aphoristic phrase that he <Milton> has made current is borrowed from some one of the classics. . . . This is no reproach to him so far as his true function, that of poet, is concerned. Cf. also "The Study of Modern Languages," 7.145: But even though the susceptibility of art must be inborn, yet skill in the practical application of it to use may be increased — best by practice, and very far next best by example. See also "Gray," 7.39-40.

²² Vincent of Lerins in the first two chapters of his *Commonitorium* (434 A.D.) developed this test for sound theological doctrine: *Magnopere curandum est ut id teneatur quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*. With its first two elements generally transposed, and lifted quite out of its immediate, theological reference, the phrase quoted in my monograph has been applied also to literature.

²³ "Shakespeare Once More," 3.34; "Spenser," 4.266.

there is anything better to be said. Literature that loses its meaning, or the best part of it, when it gets beyond sight of the parish steeple, is not what I understand by literature."²⁴

III

Longinus devotes three chapters (3-5) to his discussion of the faults which hinder the attainment of the sublime. A lacuna which precedes this passage probably contained his general statement concerning these faults. The three closely allied faults all derive from the lack of genuine emotion in the writer. Of these, the first is tumidity, which "desires to transcend the limits of the sublime." Longinus characterizes this flaw by saying (3.4): "Evil are the swellings, both in the body and in diction, which are inflated and unreal, and threaten us with the reverse of our aim." The second, which is the lowest vice of all, is puerility, pedantically learned trifling which ends in frigidity (3.4). In its search for novelty, it ends often in mere childishness (4.1). The third, which Longinus calls parenthyrsus (3.5), is "unseasonable and empty passion, where no passion is required, or immoderate, where moderation is needed."

Lowell found in the Elizabethan dramatists numerous instances of these faults.²⁵ A number of his remarks, scattered throughout his essays, indicate his agreement with Longinus in these respects. "It is false aesthetics," he declares in his essay on Dante, "to confound the grandiose with the imaginative." Longinus's description (3.1) of bombastic writing as "turbid in expression and confused in imagery" finds an echo in Lowell's praise of Dryden:

²⁴ "Spenser," 4.270. Cf. "Pope," 4.56: It will hardly be questioned that the man who writes what is still piquant and rememberable, a century and a quarter after his death, was a man of genius. Cf. also "Dante," 4.170: The aim in expounding a great poem should be, not to discover an endless variety of meanings often contradictory, but whatever it has of great and perennial significance; for such it must have, or it would long ago have ceased to be living and operative, would long ago have taken refuge in the Chartreuse of great libraries, dumb henceforth to all mankind. See also "Dryden," 3.100; "Keats," 1.227; "Library of Old Authors," 1.247; "Shakespeare Once More," 3.19; "Spenser," 4.351; "The Study of Modern Languages," 7.150.

²⁵ "The Old English Dramatists," 7.220: Marlowe . . . calls in help from every the remotest corner of earth and heaven for what seems to us as trivial an occasion <as Lowell has just been describing>. I will not say that he is bombastic, but he constantly pushes grandiosity to the verge of bombast. His contemporaries thought he passed it in *Tamburlaine*. "Shakespeare's 'Richard III'," 7.119-120: Chapman's grandeur comes dangerously near what a friend would call extravagance and an enemy bombast. See also "Library of Old Authors," 1.292-293.

"Amid the rickety sentiment looming big through misty phrase which marks so much of modern literature, to read him is as bracing as a northwest wind." Lowell considers Collins the first English poet who "found again the long-lost secret of being classically elegant without being pedantically cold."²⁶ This final phrase is closely parallel to Longinus's description (3.5) of puerility: "a pedant's thoughts, which begin in learned trifling and end in frigidity. Men slip into this kind of error because, while they aim at the uncommon and elaborate and most of all at the attractive, they drift unawares into the tawdry and affected." Bryant fails, not from any lack of art, but from the excess of it without any warmth of feeling:

Your topmost Parnassus he may set his heel on,
But no warm applauses come, peal following peal on, —
He's too smooth and too polished to hang any zeal on:
Unqualified merits, I'll grant, if you choose, he has 'em,
But he lacks the one merit of kindling enthusiasm;
If he stir you at all, it is just, on my soul,
Like being stirred up with the very North Pole.

Landor's so-called grandeur is suspiciously like "uppishness," the result not of a great soul but of "blustorous self-confidence and self-assertion." "Stimulated passion," he declares elsewhere, "leads inevitably to declamation." The modern writer's confusion of violence with genuine intensity of emotion causes him to catch his breath whenever he is on the verge of saying something naturally and exclaiming to himself, "Good heavens! I had almost forgotten I was inspired." Lowell is also in harmony with Longinus in ascribing these faults to "pursuit of novelty in the expression of ideas," when the prime object should be the expression of genuine emotion. Landor "is often content to think himself original when he has lashed himself into extravagance."²⁷

IV

Longinus, though interested deeply in the minutiae of performance that mark success in literature, always gave the palm to the writer whose works showed grandeur of conception rather than faultless mediocrity. "I do not waver in my view," he declares (33.4), "that excellences higher in quality, even if not sustained

²⁶ "Dante," 4.162; "Dryden," 3.189; "Pope," 2.4.

²⁷ "A Fable for Critics," 819-825; "The Old English Dramatists," 7.289; "Shakespeare Once More," 3.38-39; "Walter Savage Landor," 7.47.

throughout, should always on the comparison be voted the first place, because of their sheer elevation of spirit if for no other reason." After detailed comparisons of faultless authors with sublime authors, Longinus concludes (36.1-2): "It is fitting to observe at once that, though writers of this magnitude are far removed from faultlessness, they none the less all rise above what is mortal; that all other qualities prove their possessors to be men, but sublimity raises them near the majesty of God; and that, while immunity from errors relieves from censure, it is grandeur that excites admiration. What need to add thereto that each of these supreme authors often redeems all his failures by a single sublime and happy touch?"

Lowell finds many places to express a like doctrine. "Milton's ear was too busy about the larger interests of his measures to be always careful of the lesser. He was a strategist rather than a drill-sergeant in verse, capable, beyond any other English poet, of putting great masses through the most complicated evolutions without clash or confusion, but he was not curious that every foot should be at the same angle." He remarks of Dryden that, "with all his defects, he had that indefinable something we call genius." In the course of rather extensive strictures upon Wordsworth's poetry, he nevertheless admits: "Even where his genius is wrapped in clouds, the unconquerable lightning of imagination struggles through, flashing out unexpected vistas, and illuminating the hum-drum pathway of our daily life with a radiance of momentary consciousness that seems like a revelation." As for the work which is without blemish, it is, as we might say to-day, like the second-hand automobile, "mechanically perfect," and perhaps not much more likely to function.

"Roots, wood, bark, and leaves singly perfect may be,
But, clapt hodge-podge together, they don't make a tree."

His clearest word on this matter occurs in his essay on Chaucer: "The really great writer is great in the mass, and is to be tested less by his cleverness in the elaboration of parts than by that *reach* of mind which is incapable of random effort, which selects, arranges, combines, rejects, denies itself the cheap triumph of immediate effects, because it is absorbed by the controlling charm of propor-

²⁸ "Milton," 4.99; "Dryden," 3.190; "Wordsworth," 4.412-413; "A Fable for Critics," 544-545; "Chaucer," 3.332.

tion and unity."²⁸ In these words, Lowell indicates his appreciation of the emphasis which Longinus, together with the other writers in the classical tradition of letters, puts on the supremacy of the author who can construct an organic work of art.

V

The last chapter of Longinus's treatise, as we now possess it, is an eloquent explanation of the "dearth of high utterance" that his age was suffering. Longinus blames the lack of great literature in his time, not upon the age itself, but upon the people who live in it. The desire of men for money (Virgil's *auri sacra fames*²⁹) and for the pleasure which boundless wealth makes possible keeps men from lifting their eyes upward to the ideal and blocks in them the desire for fame. No author in such an age receives the encouragement without which he cannot write. "In an age which is ravaged by plagues so sore, is it possible for us to imagine that there is still left an unbiased and incorruptible judge of works that are great and likely to reach posterity, or is it not rather the case that all are influenced in their decisions by the passion for gain?" (44.9).

Lowell in his latter days experienced much the same depression of spirits that we find in Longinus; and, as we see in his poem, *Credidimus Jovem Regnare*, although its pessimistic title is borrowed from Horace, he followed Longinus in flying for solace to great men and great eras of the past. He had earlier found a similar situation, as he thought, in the materialistic, insincere English court of the Restoration. After describing it scathingly, he had added: "It is impossible that anything truly great, that is, great on the moral and emotional as well as the intellectual side, should be produced by such a generation." His poem was a criticism of his own countrymen, but he felt that England at the height of the Victorian Age was in no better plight. "A sceptic might say, I think, with some justice, that poetry in England was passing now, if it have not already passed, into one of those periods of mere art without any intense convictions to back it, which leads inevitably, and by no long gradation, to the mannered and artificial";³⁰ that is, in the words of Longinus, to the turgid, the puerile, and the frigid, which always ensue when writing is not inspired by sincere emotion.

²⁹ *Aen.* 3.56-57.

³⁰ "Pope," 2.19; "Swinburne's Tragedies," 2.121.

VI

The evidence which this paper presents shows, I believe, that Lowell's reading of Longinus bore fruit in several of his literary ideas. The changes in literary theory which the nineteenth century ushered in were changes largely in emphasis. The old gods did not go when the new arrived. In his conception of literary style and the method of its attainment, in his warnings against the faults that mar it, and in his belief that the author's soul must be as aspiring as he would make his writing, Lowell is in the tradition of Longinus.