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Plato's Influence on Pseudo-Longinus' Περὶ ῞Υψους

Pseudo-Longinus' On the Sublime or Περὶ ῞Υψους *has long been considered as one of the most influential texts from antiquity, which – through its impact on Boileau, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant – defined the aesthetic and literary discussions of early modern times and beyond. Yet, since the exact origin of the tractate has remained unknown, much less can be established with utmost certainty regarding the exact philosophical and literary context of the anonymous author himself. The objective of this study is to provide an overview with regard to the reception history of this work and to give an update on recent research, while examining the different philosophical and cultural influences on Pseudo-Longinus' theory. Finally, I would like to investigate one special source of influence observable in the text: Platonism. By building upon the works of Robert Doran and James I. Porter in particular, I intend to examine which elements of the ancient treatise may have had Platonic precursors, and why this connection is vital in understanding the significance of this tractate.*

Keywords: Pseudo-Longinus, Plato, Burke, Kant, sublime, ancient aesthetics

In a fashion, 18th-century dialogues on aesthetics were defined not only by pleasure, but also by displeasure: How can a work of art representing terrifying images be aesthetically pleasing at the same time? These discourses mainly revolved around a differentiation between traditionally beautiful objects and what they called *sublime*, based on *On the Sublime* (Περὶ ῞Υψους or *De Sublimitate*): an ancient tractate considered to be 'the fountain-head of all ideas on that subject'[1] and covering all aesthetic experience involving 'delightful horror', as Edmund Burke so eloquently called it.[2]

[1] Monk (1935: 10).
[2] See Burke's *Enquiry* IV, 6,7.

In his rather polemical work *The Sublime in Antiquity* (2016), James I. Porter proposes an alternative reception history of sublimity, arguing that the core of the concept (which might be best recapitulated as an experience which induces fearful awe in the observer, albeit under different names) had very much been present in Greek thought before the composition of the above-mentioned treatise.

After providing reasonable evidence as to why a new approach is needed (the ancient author himself is referencing another scholar, Caecilius; he does not treat the word ὕψος as an exclusive term for the phenomenon, occasionally using other words like μέγεθος as synonyms[3]), he embarks on a quest to find alternative precursors in antiquity. Overstepping the boundaries of rhetoric, he creates two primary categories: those of the 'material' and the 'immaterial sublime'; the former covering experiences relating to nature, the latter the spiritual aspect, which dichotomy makes it possible for him to connect sublimity with virtually any ancient school of thought.[4]

His analysis remains controversial, as it scales down the significance of Περὶ Ὕψους itself. Porter talks about 'misinheritances' and 'the bubble' of ὕψος[5], thus castigating the interpretive tradition that has given it more credit than it deserved, obscuring the actual, even more ancient roots of the notion of the sublime. This is one point which Stephen Halliwell, whose critical edition of Pseudo-Longinus' work was published in 2022, finds quite unfortunate in his review. He also criticized the book for its 'reductive formulae' regarding the conception of sublimity, which method, he argues, works well only when one wishes to find analogies, yet is equally counter-productive when one would like to outline the reception history of a concept, set apart from others.[6]

The objective of this study is to revisit the former aspect of Porter's book, and to attempt to prove that Porter's otherwise thorough analysis of the ancient treatise largely seems to ignore a rather important element in favor of

[3] Porter (2016: 51).
[4] Porter (2016: 54–56).
[5] Porter (2016: 25).
[6] See Halliwell (2016).

what Halliwell termed his 'conceptual expansionism'[7], that is, the impact of Platonism on Περὶ Ὕψους itself.

This, however, ironically also supports another claim he elaborates on in a later chapter, namely that the notion of the 'immaterial sublime', a term he uses to describe a kind of divine experience that elevates the soul, is of Platonic origin.[8] As such, this investigation would ultimately aim to serve merely as a minor correction to Porter's line of argumentation, not accepting his above-mentioned dichotomy, but at the same time agreeing with the idea that the notion of sublimity predates Περὶ Ὕψους as long as we look for these precursors in ancient Platonism, and not elsewhere.

Although he refuses to link the ancient author to any specific philosophical school, Halliwell himself accepts the fact that Pseudo-Longinus' work was significantly influenced by Plato.[9] Beside building on his and Porter's invaluable insights, my study has much to thank especially to Robert Doran's *The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant* (2015) which, surprisingly, was much more thorough in finding Platonic parallels in the text of *On the Sublime* than Porter himself.

Let us now examine the background of the tractate, a thankless task, given its fragmentary and rather insular nature. Unfortunately, the work does not seem to be referenced in any other ancient source, and only became more widely known when its *editio princeps* was published in 1554 (*De Grandi, Sive Sublimi Orationis Genere*) by the Renaissance humanist Francesco Robortello.[10] His source material, in turn, had been found in a Byzantine codex dating to the 10th century BC, commonly referred to by scholars as *Parisinus Graecus 2036*. The unknown medieval scribe attributed the work to a Dionysius Longinus on the title page, whereas in the table of contents we find a 'Dionysius or Longinus' instead, which provided the basis of the still ongoing debate as to the treatise's authorship.[11]

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[7] Halliwell (2016).
[8] Porter (2016: 391).
[9] Halliwell (2022: xxvi).
[10] See Doran (2015: 29), Porter (2016: 37).
[11] Porter (2016: 1).

The first name most probably refers to Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a literary critic living in the 1st century BC, whereas the second one to Cassius Longinus, a third-century Platonist, polymath and critic. Over the centuries, the latter was the more commonly accepted candidate, although, as Fyfe and Porter also point out, both assumptions remain highly problematic.[12]

First of all, Dionysius' many works on the subject are quite different in style and approach and secondly, there is also the question of discrepancies when it comes to content. For example, only one treatise on word order and word structures is attributed to Dionysius today, while the author of Περὶ Ὕψους says that he himself has written two books on the same subject.[13] It is also important to note that the Dionysius we know was quite critical of Plato, which is in stark contrast to the views expressed in *On the Sublime*.[14]

Nevertheless, the belief that the treatise was the work of Longinus remained strong and virtually undisputed until the 19th century. Admittedly, there are some very strong arguments in favor of this approach.

Firstly, as Fyfe notes, only three ancient scholars used the term ὕψος in their writings, and Cassius Longinus is one of them as he once used the same term in a very similar way; however, this is only evidenced by a passing reference in Proclus' commentary to Plato's *Timaeus*.[15]

Secondly, there is also a considerable overlap in content between the ancient scholar's views on rhetoric and certain passages of Περὶ Ὕψους, such as the encouragement to imitate the greats of the past, or the importance of word arrangement, rhythm and melody.[16]

That said, there are notable differences in style and vocabulary as well, and some disturbing discrepancies in content. For example, there is never any reference to writers later than Cicero, Caecilius and Theodorus in the treatise. This is odd for an author who lived in the third century, especially since from other works of his, we learn that he thinks highly of the second

[12] See Fyfe (1999: 145), Porter (2016: 1), see also Halliwell's *Introduction* (2022: xi–xv).
[13] Fyfe (1999: 145).
[14] Doran (2015: 30).
[15] See Prickard (1906: 100) cited by Fyfe (1999: 145).
[16] Porter (2016: 136).

-century Greek orator Aelius Aristides. Why does he not mention the same author in this text?[17]

The final important objection is not different from the one raised above in the case of Dionysius: Cassius Longinus criticized Plato's 'poetic style', while one of the main aims of Περὶ Ὕψους seems to be, in a sense, to defend Plato's authority.[18]

In 1808, when the Italian scholar Girolamo Amati came across another medieval manuscript that also referenced the author as 'Dionysius or Longinus', the debate recommenced, yet the identity of the author has remained unknown ever since, apart from a few credible assumptions. The content of the text strongly suggests that it must have been the work of a Hellenic Jew living in the early imperial period of the Roman Empire, and it this very cultural background that may also explain its somewhat outlandish nature.[19]

Naturally, the most obvious evidence to support the theory of the above-mentioned origin is first and foremost the *Fiat Lux*-scene from the *Genesis*, which the author references so honorably in chapter 9:

> Soo, too, the lawgiver of the Jews, no ordinary man, having formed a worthy conception of divine power and given expression to it, writes at the very beginning of his *Laws*: 'God said'- what? 'let there be light', and there was light. [...][20]

Also, we should not forget that the treatise is a direct response to Caecilius' treatise on the same subject and, according to the Byzantine *Suda* lexicon, Caecilius himself was a Jew.[21]

Yet, beside these subtle undercurrents of Jewish influence, the reader is properly inundated by the cosmopolitan Graeco-Roman intellectual excel-

[17] Fyfe (1999).
[18] Fyfe (1999: 146).
[19] Doran (2015: 108).
[20] See *De Subl*. 9,9.
[21] Doran (2015: 32).

lence which the author exemplifies by the myriads of references to Greek literature and rhetoricians, to Cicero and to various schools of philosophy.

In light of this latter cultural influence, however, some shortcomings are even more striking; for example, very early on in the Greek literary tradition, the distinction between the ordinary and the grand styles was already common, with this concept famously evolving over the centuries into the theory of the *tria genera dicendi*: *humilis*, *mediocris*, and *gravis* or *sublimis*, as theorized by Cicero and Quintilian. This tradition, almost dogmatic in this period, seems surprisingly irrelevant to the author of Περὶ Ὕψους, even if we can find some minor parallels.[22]

Quintilian, when writing about the sublime style, arrives at very similar conclusions to the ones in *On the Sublime* and, just like the latter, conjures up the image of a thunderbolt as a natural comparison[23], so the early Renaissance editors of the work could rightly have assumed that the identification of ὕψος and the sublime style was correct. Yet, others argue that this would ultimately be misleading because on closer inspection it becomes clear that, as Boileau already pointed out when he separated the concept of sublimity from the 'sublime style'[24], ὕψος, as such, implies something more: a concept that goes beyond stylistic theories in the Ciceronian sense.

In Fyfe's view, it seems more akin to the 'additional virtues' of Dionysius, or even more to the *ideai* (forms or tones of speech) established by the second-century rhetorician Hermogenes,[25] while Doran concludes that it is more correct to regard this treatise as a theory of creativity and of genius: the first treatise on the subject in Western thought.[26]

As it has already been established, only a handful of ancient scholars used ὕψος strictly as a term, which seems to imply the existence of a somewhat independent critical tradition to which the author of our treatise must belong.

[22] Fyfe (1999: 153).
[23] Porter (2016: 13).
[24] 'Une chose peut être dans le style sublime, et n'être pourtant pas Sublime [...', that is: 'A thing can be in the sublime style, and yet not be Sublime [...]' as he states in the Preface to his *Traité du Sublime.*
[25] Fyfe (1999: 152).
[26] Doran (2015: 29).

Nevertheless, similar words and expressions were very much in use during this period and some of these also appear in various passages of Περὶ Ὕψους, as we have seen at the beginning of this study; sometimes even as synonymous with sublimity, such as μέγεθος (greatness), or δεινότης (fearfulness), which are also found, for example, in Demetrius' *On Style*. But again, it may be noted that the discussion of the sublime must go beyond these concepts as they appear in the latter's work on rhetoric, since it also involves a description of a certain state of mind or soul (see μεγαλοφροσύνη, or 'high-mindedness'), which ultimately sets it apart from all the other theories mentioned.[27]

As Doran himself concludes that what the author's description of ὕψος ultimately establishes is that it is a notion (a) intrinsically related to Logos, (b) beyond style and (c) a universal and trans-historical concept.[28] The fact that the ancient treatise under analysis moves within the conceptual framework of λόγος, rather than the Aristotelian term λέξις, may serve as a final step toward discussing the influence of the Plato itself.

Porter, although devoting a whole chapter to exploring the Platonic antecedents of the sublime, says surprisingly little about the Platonic elements of Περὶ Ὕψους. Plato's name mostly comes up in a later chapter concerned with the 'immaterial sublime', which naturally focuses on the conception of exaltation within the text as the most important parallel. At the end of his book, a short final chapter is added regarding the immaterial sublime, but it is concerned mostly with Cicero and only mentions Plato sporadically.

In view of these circumstances, let us explore the philosopher's influence on the text in a more systematic fashion.

The first layer of Platonic influence can be found in the person of another, most renowned Hellenic Jew, Philo of Alexandria, whose impact is so evident in the text that some classicists have even suggested that Philo may in fact be the author of Περὶ Ὕψους.

First of all, it can be observed that the way the terms λόγος or λόγοι appear in the text is reminiscent to Philo's works, where they are used to refer

[27] Doran (2015: 33).

[28] Doran (2015: 34).

to the creative force of the universe and to the power that mediates between man and God.[29]

Another relevant locus in the text is of course the already mentioned evocation of the *Septuagint*, which bears a notable resemblance to Philo's exegetical work.

Finally, the manner in which Pseudo-Longinus uses the term ἔκστασις, and the overall prominence given in his theory to divine frenzy (μανία or ἐνθουσιασμός) in relation to great works of art, are unusual among the orators of the period and, beyond the obvious primary influence of the *Phaedrus*, can also be traced back to Philo. For example, in the treatise 'Who is the heir of divine things?', Philo distinguishes four forms of μανία: the first being manic rage caused by physical circumstances; the second describing astonishment at unexpected phenomena; the third form is a state of calm meditative contemplation, whereas the fourth category relates to the divine inspiration of prophets. The term used by Pseudo-Longinus seems to be a combination of the second and the fourth aspects.[30]

Further, it is also noticeable that the term θεοφορέω (to be possessed by God or to be divinized) appears twice in his treatise in a positive sense. This is a seldomly utilized terminus, yet it is used by Philo, which might be considered as further evidence of a connection.[31]

The discussion of this term leads us to an even deeper layer in our endeavor of textual excavation, namely, to Plato himself. Although the analytical character of the treatise is sometimes more reminiscent of Aristotle's methodological investigations, his master's role is much more prominent in the text as a whole, as already evidenced by the sheer number of references; the author mentions the philosopher up to twenty times, a number rivalled only by Homer. By comparison, Aristotle is mentioned by name only once.

In addition, it is Plato himself who is set as the finest role model for the effects of the sublime: he is even called a ἥρως, or divine.[32] This is somewhat

[29] Doran (2015: 35).
[30] Doran (2015: 43).
[31] Doran (2015: 44).
[32] See *De Subl*. 4,6.

surprising in light of the first mentioning of his name, which is in connection with one of the non-sublime elements: frigidity or ψυχρός. This occurrence can be found in the first chapter where Pseudo-Longinus – while discussing metaphor as the source of the sublimity – ironically concludes that Plato has taken it all a bit too far.[33]

However, the philosopher is exonerated of this charge elsewhere: for in another passage Pseudo-Longinus points out, similarly to early modern theorists, that ὕψος does not lie in perfection; on the contrary, occasional errors are signs of the presence of great thoughts and emotions in the work, and therefore of the very existence of the sublime.[34]

In chapter 12, the author also distinguishes between the sublimity of Plato and that of Demosthenes: the former is remotely reminiscent of Kant's notion of the more contemplative 'mathematically sublime', as he compares Plato's texts to a steadily rising tide, while the latter is more violent and therefore corresponds to Kant's 'dynamically sublime'.[35]

The former parallel is also supported by the fact that while commenting on Plato's *Republic*, Pseudo-Longinus says that:

> […] though the stream of his words flows as noiselessly as oil (χεύματι ἀψογητὶ ῥέων), he none the less attains sublimity.[36]

As Clewis and Porter also point out, the concepts of μανία or ἐνθουσιασμός, which Pseudo-Longinus often identifies as both the source and the effect of the sublime, owe much to Plato's ideas of divine frenzy described in the *Phaedrus*, the *Symposium* and the *Ion*.[37] This is perhaps the element that makes the parallel between the ancient concept of ὕψος and the early modern treatises on sublimity the most obvious, and is essentially the only motif that Porter discusses in detail in his chapter on the 'immaterial sublime'.

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[33] See *De Subl*. 1,4.
[34] *De Subl*. 33.
[35] See Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, Book II (*Analytic of the Sublime*), A-B.
[36] *De Subl*. 13,1.
[37] See Clewis (2009: 11), Porter (2016: 75).

The notion of erotic frenzy or ἔρως, which causes the hallmark ambivalent emotions of pleasure mixed with pain (reminiscent of the sublime) is another important Platonic element as Shaw also argues.[38] This notion is present not only through Sappho's poem quoted by the author, but also by the evocation of the idea of 'spiritual pregnancy' of the *Symposium*. In chapter 9, for example, he says that sublimity makes us 'pregnant with noble thoughts'.[39]

However, to simply state that the presence of μανία is a sign of genius would, of course, be a somewhat simplistic reduction of the argumentation of Περὶ Ὕψους. After all, in the ancient author's view, the influence of ὕψος in literature or rhetoric can be traced back to *two* fundamental factors: one is related to φύσις, or spontaneous, natural tendencies (namely, the presence of great thoughts and strong emotions), and the other to technical bravado or τέχνη.[40] Here too, the author may have been influenced by the *Phaedrus*, which likewise argues for the importance of learning the craft of rhetoric, in addition to innate talent:

> If you have a natural ability for rhetoric, you will become a famous rhetorician, provided you supplement your ability with knowledge and practice. To the extent that you lack any one of them, to that extent you will be less than perfect.[41]

All of the above, moreover, show a connection with Plato's later views on mimesis, which, like Pseudo-Longinus, encourage the emulation of classical ideals as a possible way of achieving the sublime. Although Plato initially condemns imitative arts, and in the most famous passages of the *Republic* we learn that works of art are three times removed from reality in the ontological hierarchy, in later texts he seems to think more favorably of mimetic art, provided that certain censorship is present for specific educational purposes. For example, in *Laws* he expresses outright admiration for Egyptian

[38] Shaw (2017: 31).
[39] ἐγκύμονας ἀεὶ ποεῖν γενναίου παραστήματος (*De Subl*. 9,1).
[40] *De Subl*. 1,2.
[41] See *Phdr*. 269d.

artists, precisely because they did nothing but copy the style of ancient art handed down to them:

> They compiled a list of them according to style, and displayed it in their temples. Painters and everyone else who represent movements of the body of any kind were restricted to these forms; modification and innovation outside this traditional framework were prohibited, and are prohibited even today, both in this field and the arts in general [...] simply a supreme achievement of legislators and statesmen.[42]

The final important parallel to be discussed lies in the moral dimension of ὕψος, This is reflected in the distinction between true and false sublimities, which notion clearly relies on the Platonic juxtaposition of δόξα and ἀλήθεια as well as its moral consequences. As Pseudo-Longinus argues, empty outward display, rhetorical excess and flashiness are morally questionable and are diametrically opposed to nobility of mind and soul, which are the ultimate sources of sublimity. For Doran, this is very much reminiscent of Plato's views on true philosophers. Just as they seek truth beyond appearances, so do great writers or artists seek true elevation beyond mere artifice.[43]

All of this is beautifully summed up in the Περὶ Ὕψους: 'The sublime is an echo of the noble mind'.[44] Porter also makes this connection in the final chapter of his book, when he quotes the following passage:

> Greatness of mind wanes, fades, and loses its attraction when men spend their admiration on their mortal parts and neglect to develop the immortal.[45]

In light of the above, we can therefore conclude that the treatise of Περὶ Ὕψους was strongly influenced by Plato and the Platonic tradition and as such, should still be seen as an integral part of the history of the sublime,

[42] See *De leg*. 656e.
[43] Doran (2015: 55).
[44] *De Subl*. 9,1.
[45] *De Subl.* 44.8. quoted in Porter (2016: 616).

even if we accept Porter's reasoning that Platonism was its actual precursor; the tractate is not an unfortunate outlier that 'misled' literary historians, but rather an important step in the evolution of the concept, inextricably linked to Plato's dualistic world view and to his ontological hierarchy.

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