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Longinus's Sublime Rhetoric, or How Rhetoric Came into Its Own

ABSTRACT: This essay argues that *Peri Hypsous* (*On Height* or *On the Sublime*, traditionally attributed to "Longinus") marks an important moment in the history of rhetoric, as rhetoric is presented therein as an autonomous, sublime object. Through notions of *hypsos* (height) and *physis* (nature), and an amalgamation of Ciceronian/Isocratean and Gorgianic notions of rhetoric, "Longinus" frees rhetoric from the project of legitimation. He makes it a marvel that needs no justification—rhetoric "comes into its own." Even as I account for the emergence of this conception of rhetoric in *Peri Hypsous*, I question its helpfulness for rhetorical studies.

The "sublime" is a categorical refuge of a number of recent projects, most notably those of Jean-François Lyotard, in works such as *The Postmodern Condition* and *The Inhuman*, and Frederick Jameson in *Postmodernism*.¹ These thinkers find in the sublime a means of displacing Enlightenment judgment even as they find the sublime in Enlightenment texts. For example, Lyotard, whose notion of the sublime is drawn in his readings of Kant, is concerned with artistic works that, "are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work" (*Postmodern Condition* 81). This "postmodern sublime" refuses essential or teleological justification. Kant's own interest in the sublime was related to the work of the French critic Nicholas Boileau-Despréaux, who was a critical catalyst behind the upsurge of interest in the sublime in the eighteenth century. Boileau translated and interpreted in 1674 an ancient manuscript on style in poetics and rhetoric by a so-called "Longinus" entitled *Peri Hypsous*—literally translated *On Height*, but more commonly *On the Sublime*. *Peri Hypsous* is the most important ancient text with respect to the sublime. Inspired by this ancient treatise, Boileau wrote, "The sublime is not strictly speaking something which is proven or demonstrated, but a marvel, which seizes one, strikes one, and makes one feel" (qtd. in Lyotard, *The Inhuman* 97). *Peri Hypsous* offered Boileau and his successors another route in the Enlightenment project of autonomy by offering the concept of the self-justified artistic object, the sublime object.

From Longinus to Boileau to Kant to Lyotard we can trace a concern with freeing art and artistic objects from established criteria of judgment derived from external sources or discourses. The art of rhetoric finds a place here as well. I offer in this essay a reading of *Peri Hypsous*, the *locus classicus* of the sublime, which reveals rhetoric as achieving therein the status of the sublime object, even as I end by questioning this achievement.

The text of *Peri Hypsous*—for the sake of continuity with critical discourses and for convenience, I will refer to the author as Longinus²—has been, off and on, a part of the histories of rhetoric dealing with rhetoric under the Roman Empire.³ *Peri Hypsous*, when it achieves mention, is typically treated by historians of rhetoric as a “manual of style” discussed in common with those attributed to Dionysus, Demetrius, and others; its stress on grandiose rhetoric and its lament for the “decline” of rhetoric are noted (these are common topics of the style manuals of the Roman period); its provenance and influences are debated.⁴ Yet *Peri Hypsous* has not received substantial treatment by scholars of rhetoric—no analyses in books that move significantly beyond a summary of its arguments, no articles devoted wholly to it. Its minimal treatment, relatively speaking, indicates that the treatise has not been considered a major one in the history, or histories, of rhetoric.

Against this grain, I argue that *Peri Hypsous* marks an important development in the evolution of rhetoric in Western culture, not primarily for its relationship to the sublime, but for its positioning of rhetoric itself. The text represents a critical development in what Michael Cahn calls “the rhetoric of rhetoric,” the way in which rhetorical strategies are employed to constitute, justify, and preserve the discipline or tradition of rhetoric itself.⁵ From the sophists through Aristotle and into Quintilian, the art of rhetoric, as Cahn shows, was subordinated to certain essences (e.g. *technê*/art) or ends (e.g. persuasion) in order to establish and maintain its status and anchor its judgments. Even Gorgias, who in *Helen* grants *logos* divine-like power, seems to subordinate *logos* to the end (and essence?) of human desire and domination (represented by Paris in *Helen*). I argue through a close reading of the *Peri Hypsous* that it marks a point within the trajectory of the rhetoric of rhetoric where the art of rhetoric is presented as possessing its own end and essence, freeing it from subordination and, like Kant’s and Lyotard’s notions of the sublime, external judgment. This rhetoric of rhetoric in *Peri Hypsous* makes it a significant text in rhetoric’s history (or histories), especially presently, when the issue of rhetoric’s legitimation is propelling new organizational and rhetorical projects within the academy in North America. My reading of *Peri Hypsous* shows how rhetoric is therein made the sublime object, “not,” to repeat Boileau’s words, “something which is proven or demonstrated, but a marvel.” I devote the first section of my essay to the treatise’s general conception of rhetoric, and then look more specifically at three of its key concepts: rhetorical height (*hypsos*), nature (*physis*), and desire.

Longinus's Ecstatic Rhetoric

Peri Hypsous is recognized as a critical, literary, and oratorical text. Its primary topic is stylistic "height," and as such it moves easily between poetical and rhetorical discussions, and most of the text operates without any significant distinction between the two. There are moments, however, where Longinus seems to want to keep rhetoric (*rhêtorikê*⁶) within the domain of the practical and concrete. For example, "But though in fact the images found in the poets have a way of going beyond what is mythic and of entirely transcending what is credible, in rhetoric the images are always best that are practical and correspond to the truth" (15.8). This prescription places the practice of rhetoric within the realm of fact-finding and the criterion of the credible. It seems as though Longinus, in this sense, places rhetoric under the standard of the pragmatic. At the heart of Longinus's text, however, is the criticism of artistic performance, and here rhetoric is conjoined to poetics to form a single piece. For example, the passage above is followed by a description of the rhetorical use of the image that is, by Longinus's account, truly worthy of admiration and appreciation. Rhetoric shines for Longinus when audiences are "dragged away from demonstrative arguments and are astounded by the image, by the dazzle of which the practical argument is hidden" (15.11). Both the poet and the rhetor excel in artistic performance when they transcend the ordinary modes of their respective discourses to create extraordinary effects. Poetry and rhetoric are identical in their extraordinary manifestations, and as extraordinary style is Longinus's main concern, the domain of poetry and rhetoric overlap significantly in the text.⁷

Rhetoric as the Aristotelian art-of-the-available-means-of-persuasion (see Aristotle's *Rhetoric*), as the broad Isocratean philosophico-literary art for earthy political life (see Isocrates's *Against the Sophists* and *Antidosis*), or as the Ciceronian *artis* for the *res publica* (see *Of Oratory*), are not the Longinian conceptions of rhetoric. Longinus's treatise might as well have been entitled *Beyond Persuasion*, for its stated subject is not the available means of persuasion or the well-being of the public *per se*, but the road (*methodos*) to ecstasy (*ekstasis*) via "height" or *hypsos* (1.4).⁸ Longinus indicates that the subject of stylistic *hypsos* had a following in the Hellenized *paideia* of the Roman Empire, the educational world of his time. In fact, *Peri Hypsous* was probably not the title of Longinus's handbook (*technologias*) first, but that of his declared opponent, Cecilius, and probably the treatises of others before.⁹ Certainly there was a discourse about *hypsos* and its genus, style, from which Longinus's text emerged and *Peri Hypsous* pronounces a distinct concern about the status of *hypsos* in its time and proffers to show the reader the way to *hypsos*. Longinus states that he would have his reader interrogate the subject of *hypsos* by asking anew what is *hypsos* and how might it be realized (1.1). In both criticism and practice, Longinus relates, vices (*kakias*) have entangled

the teachings about *hypsos*, especially as they have over-stressed novelty and technicalities. Longinus sets out to narrate an escape (*ekpheugein*) or a way out of such vices (5.1). He offers Postumius Terentianus, his addressee and “fellow pupil,” a *technologias*, “first, to show what underlies the subject; . . . second . . . to show how and by what orderly ways (*methodôn*) *hypsos*¹⁰ may be attained by us” (1.1).¹¹ He argues in his treatise that natural greatness of thought and a powerful pathetic faculty underlie the subject, whereas figures, diction, and word choice constitute the orderly way (8.1).

Longinus’s double focus, on the speaker and the speech, puts *Peri Hypsous* in an interesting position with respect to rhetorical traditions. Longinus makes use of both the Isocratean/Ciceronian and the Gorgianic traditions. With respect to the former, the *speaker* holds a critical place in the art rhetoric as *Peri Hypsous* is focused on performance. *Hypsos*, as D. A. Russell notes, connotes an ethical quality, a type of public virtue. Historically speaking *hypsos* “is applied to moral character and social status before it is applied to *logoi*” (Russell xxxi). This is evident in *Peri Hypsous*, especially as Longinus would have his addressee find in *hypsos* a means by which his nature (*physis*) can rise, achieving new heights in the pitch (*akrotês*) of its elevation (*exokê*) (1.1-3). On this summit the ancients achieved fame: “and from no other source than this (*hypsos*) have the greatest poets and prose-writers excelled and thrown around their glorious reputations the mantle of the ages” (1.3). This discussion of speaker and status operates within an Isocratean/Ciceronian rhetorical tradition, what Michael Leff calls the “humanist” tradition, one that ties eloquence to virtue to public activity. Longinus’s invocation of the notion of *ekstasis*, however, exposes his treatise as something more than an articulation of the humanist tradition.

Jeffrey Walker, in fact, argues that Longinus’s *hypsos* represents a return to “a basically Gorgianic theory of stylistic suasion” (Walker 119). Longinus’s invocation of *ekstasis* gives credence to this evaluation. The elevation of the speaker in *Peri Hypsous* is in *ekstasis*, “displacement” (LSJ), a term commonly used in ancient Greek to describe mental states beyond reason (*logos*). Josephus, in his *Judean Antiquities*, describes madness as *logismôn ekstasin*—the displacement of reason (17.246). Similarly, Plutarch’s Solon feigns madness, *eskêpsato men ekstasin tôn logismôn*—“he pretended to be out of his head” (*Lives*, Solon, 8.1). The New Testament uses *ekstasis* to describe that wonder, awe, or astonishment that comes to those who witness the supernatural works of the Lord (Mark 5:42, 16:8; Luke 5:5; Acts 3:9, 10:10, 11:4, 22:17). In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle condescendingly puts *ekstasis* among the “barbaric” modes of honor: “The components of honor are sacrifices, memorials in verse and prose, privileges, grants of land, front seats, public burial, state maintenances, and among the barbarians, prostration and giving place (*ekstaseis*), and gifts which are highly prized in each country” (1361a).

The ecstatic experience of rhetoric recalls the Gorgianic oration, rhetoric-as-drug in the *Helen*, and Socrates' ironic self-description of his euphoric experience of the funeral oration in *Menexenus* (234a). However, *Peri Hypsous* cannot be summed up as a mere return to a Gorgianic theory of suasion, as Walker would have it. By adding the ecstatic to the humanist configuration of eloquence, virtue, and public life, Longinus produces a distinct conception of rhetoric.

The result of *Peri Hypsous*'s amalgamation of Isocratean/Ciceronian and the Gorgianic traditions, I suggest, is that Longinus moves rhetoric beyond the traditions of character and persuasion, traditions which directly or indirectly bind rhetoric to external criteria for judgment, and brings rhetoric to autonomy. This happens through a sort of elevation. *Hypsos* and *ekstasis* constitute the centerpieces of Longinus's vocabulary of the elevation of rhetoric. George Kennedy stresses that *Peri Hypsous* employs a traditional rhetorical conceptual vocabulary, and he is correct. However, he overlooks the way in which Longinus invents a new vocabulary (*Classical Rhetoric* 113). Throughout *Peri Hypsous* a vigorous spatial schema is collected around the treatise's key terms *hypsos* and *ekstasis*, such that rhetoric is conceived in vertical terms. "The ability to be persuaded lies in us," Longinus writes, "but what is wonderful has a capability and force which, unable to be fought, take a position high over every member of the audience" (1.4). Longinus also writes, "You see, by true sublimity our soul is somehow both lifted up and—taking on a kind of exultant resemblance—filled with delight and great glory" (7.2). He is so free with his vertical vocabulary that it becomes tautological: "sublimity (*hypsos*) lies in what has been made lofty (*diarmati*)" (12.1). In Longinus, rhetoric rises above the audience, above the human, and above a coherent critical vocabulary. Moreover, I argue that rhetoric is elevated in *Peri Hypsous* beyond the burden of its own legitimation. Longinus constructs the road to rhetoric *per se*. Perhaps for the first time in rhetoric's history, rhetoric—that *means* to riches, justice, fame, or freedom or that *essence* of character and civic life—becomes an end in and of itself. Rhetoric *per se* becomes an object of desire.

By "rhetoric *per se*" I mean the treatment of "rhetoric" as if it were a supreme *Thing* that possessed its own internal economy and justification. Aristotle calls such "objects" *teloi*, or ends: "what exists for itself is an 'end' (and the 'end' is that for the sake of which other things exist)" (*Rhetoric* 1363b). Longinus does not explicitly rely upon a teleological schema; nevertheless he ties human existence itself to the realization of rhetorical heights. He transfigures rhetoric into that *Thing* that is realized in full only in ecstasy. Aristotle, on the contrary, does not call rhetoric a *telos*. Instead, he speaks of the *teloi* of rhetoric, the particular ends of its various modes. Isocrates, though he esteems the art of words above any other art, does not

characterize rhetoric as that which exists for itself. It exists, rather, for the sake of the wellbeing of the political community. Not even Gorgias, the most ecstatic of the Greek rhetoricians, seems to imagine *logos* as its own end, as he continually places it within the nexus of social power. Longinus approaches rhetoric otherwise. As a treatise about *hypsos*, the work concerns itself with what may be today called “transcendence” (Longinus’s *hyperairos*). Longinus proves rhetoric’s inherent value by tying it to the *natural* in a much more ambitious way than those before him. Additionally, and paradoxically, rhetoric in *Peri Hypsous* proves its inherent worth as it is lost, remembered, and longed for. In Longinus’s peroration rhetoric *per se* becomes an object of desire.

These three markers—height (*hypsos*), nature (*physis*), and desire—structure the path of the remainder of this essay. The following account traces Longinus’s transfiguration of rhetoric into a self-justified object. I first interpret the meaning of *hypsos* and its placement at the center of a treatise on rhetoric. I then proceed to discuss Longinus’s notions of *technê* and *physis* that underlie his theory of *hypsos*. In the third section, I read the final section of *Peri Hypsous* as the moment in a history of rhetoric where rhetoric *per se*, rhetoric as the sublime object, is made the object of desire as it is placed in memory.

Longinian Height

Longinus’s *hypsos* exploits two senses of the word to form for rhetoric an autonomy, a rule and justification entirely its own. *Hypsos*, as Russell notes, was used in Homeric literature to indicate a quality of character, and by extension a quality of speech (xxx-xxxi). Longinus, as I will show, draws upon this denotation of *hypsos* when he describes it as the ethereal echo of a great soul (9.1). However, *hypsos* was also a term commonly used in Greek texts to characterize a spatial dimension, or metrics, which I have already suggested above when discussing Longinus’s vertical vocabulary; it is, for example, a key word in Euclid’s geometric schema. In histories like those of Thucydides, *hypsos* is usually employed when describing walls, mountains, or other tall structures. Josephus frequently enumerates the heights (*hypsoi*) of the temples. There are, then, ethereal and material sides to *hypsos* that Longinus fuses to refigure the art of rhetoric.

The metrical sense of *hypsos* operates in *Peri Hypsous* with connotations of materiality when Longinus discusses rhetorical products through analogy with plastic arts (for example, bodies [3.4, 10.1, 11.2, 32.5, 40.1], natural scenes [35.4], paintings [17.2-3], images [15.1], and sculptures [36.3]) and especially through analogy with natural phenomena. Longinus’s rhetorical art imitates material phenomena. Aristotelian *mimêsis* is grounded in an imitation of sights, scenes, and practices that are seen outside of art (see *Poetics* 1449b, 1455a). Similarly, Longinus’s regular use of natural phenomena and plastic

arts to describe his rhetorical *technê* of *mimêsis* (22.1) makes external objects the focus of imitation. However, whereas Aristotle stresses the imitation of human action in the *Poetics*, Longinus's invocation of material objects as subjects of *mimêsis* is aimed at the superhuman. Art imitates plastic arts and nature *in extremis*.

Thus, when Longinus aims to show that there is a *technê* ("art" or "technique") for achieving *hypsos*, and its counterpart *bathos* (depth, see 2.1), he offers as objects of imitation images of the earth splitting open (9.6, 35.4) or the heights of the heavenly bodies (35.4). In this ambition for a metrical *hypsos* that imitates objects *in extremis*, Longinus casts off a concern with precision and representation. *Hypsos* turns attention to magnitude rather than precision. This point is made most vigorously in Longinus's defense of the superiority of the imprecise and tainted Colossus over the perfectly precise "Spear-bearer": "[I]n reply to the one who wrote that the Colossus, with its mistakes, is not better than the "Spear-bearer" by Polycleitus, it may be said (in addition to many other things) that though what is wondered at in technique (*technê*) is the greatest precision (*akribestaton*), in the workings of nature it is greatness (*megethos*)" (36.3). As D. Thomas Benediktson writes, "Longinus here transcends Aristotelian *mimesis* . . . [T]he goal of literature is not accuracy but grandeur, the former being the product of art, the latter the product of nature" (143). Thus metrics is a way for Longinus to re-envision the art of speech. If rhetoric is a *technê* that aspires to precision, its perfection and justification is circumscribed by the criterion of accuracy. For Longinus, *logos*—speech and writing—has other, superior virtues and powers. As Benediktson writes of Longinus's comparisons between *logos* and the plastic arts, "the analogy of the arts is used to show that literature is greater than visual art; its medium is less limiting and gives more opportunity for true accomplishment" (143). It is evident how Longinus's *hypsos* pushes the rhetorical *technê* beyond accuracy, and even beyond the human, as he pushes the analogy between speech and statues: "[W]hile in statues likeness to a human being is sought, in speeches and writings, as I said, what transcends (*hyperairon*¹²) the human is sought" (36.3). Longinus presents two types of meaning here: what might be called representational meaning, which strives for precision, and what might be called ecstatic meaning, which strives for transcendence. Longinus's rhetoric, conceived of as a *technê* of height and depth, is not delimited by representation; it can achieve an ecstatic, transcendent meaning as precision gives way to magnitude, as *technê* as an art of precision gives way to a *logos*-inspired *technê* of hyper-metrics.

This ecstatic rhetorical feat depends also upon the Homeric meaning of *hypsos*, a quality of great character. *Hypsos*, Longinus announces, "is the resonance of greatness of mind." "As a result," he continues, "sometimes a bare thought, by itself, without a voice, is wonderful because of its nobility

of mind, as the silence of Ajax in the Nekuia is great and more sublime than any speech" (9.2). It is here, in hypsotic silence, that the breach between the *technê* of precision and Longinus's hyper-metrics is most apparent. How does one account for, even speak of, the precision of silence? Instead, a vocabulary of resonance is needed, and *hypsos* is the crux of that vocabulary. Homeric *hypsos* had to do with character and social status; it described, in Russell's phrase, "godlike or kinglike qualities" (*On the Sublime* xxxi). Even more, it described the effect of the presence of such company—the feeling of being before a great height. Heights and depths, natural or rhetorical, have a transfixatory power for Longinus. The story of the Pythian priestess is indicative of this sort of power.

[T]here, where there is a rift in the earth, she breathes in a divine exaltation from the ground; standing on the same place, impregnated by the daemonic power, she at once begins to prophesy throughout the period of inspiration. In the same way, from the natural greatness of the ancients, as if out of holy orifices, kinds of effluences are carried into the souls of those emulating them. (13.2)

Longinus's *hypsos* fuses the metric and material with the transcendent and ethereal. It is a sort of holy ground marked by chasms or heights that breathe, transfix, and inspire. The originary sources for *hypsos* are neither strictly artistic nor strictly inartistic: powers of thought and feeling, figures, diction, rhythm, and arrangement. However, these finally depend upon the edifice (*edaphous*) of the power (*dunameis*) of *logos* (8.1). *Logos* exalts itself in its exhalations as it surpasses representation and strict *mimêsis*.

This power frees *logos* from the constraints of *technê* as that human art of precision, even as *logos* exploits *technê* in the creation of heights and depths. Longinus thus transfigures antecedent versions of *technê* and *hypsos*. In Homer, for example, the gods are able to exploit *technê* for their own crafty purposes and those gods and humans who possess *hypsos* do so as a mark of their own nobility. *Technê* and *hypsos* signify their agency and power. However, Longinus's *hypsos* is finally fixated on manifesting the transcendent power of *logos* and the *technê* of height and depth. Great speakers like Demosthenes may achieve for themselves the "mantel of the ages," but their fame is secondary, as it is derived from the fusion of their souls with the power and profundity of the art of words. The great rhetor is a sign of the great power of the art and no more. That the rhetorical art can imitate objects in their extremes lifts it to a status greater than its particular practitioners, its particular audiences, its pragmatic ends, and, I will argue, nature itself. It is to Longinus's "nature" that I now turn.

Longinian Nature

There have been few as hungry for heights as Plato. Diotima, the philosopher of *eros* in the *Symposium*, describes the erotic, ecstatic ascent from boy-loving to the love of Beauty unspoilt and unchanged in terms Longinus would appreciate.

When a man has been thus far tutored in the lore of love, passing from view to view of beautiful things, in the right and regular ascent, suddenly he will have revealed to him, as he draws to the close of his dealings in love, a wondrous vision, beautiful in its nature. . . . Existing ever in singularity of form independent by itself, while all the multitude of beautiful things partake of it in such wise that, though all of them are coming to be and perishing, it grows neither greater nor less, and is affected by nothing. (210e, 211b)

However, whereas Plato finds that blissful singularity of form in a reality far from the shifting, shadowy realm of nature (*physis*), for Longinus, as James Arieti and John Crossett put it, “the aesthetics of this world, of nature, is its own metaphysical ultimate” (xvi). The relationship between nature and *hypsos* in Longinus is not hierarchical. Rather, the relationship is reciprocal: *hypsos* has its source and inspiration in nature, and nature its fulfillment in *hypsos*. The realm Longinus calls *physis* reaches its heights in volatility: in the strike of a thunderbolt (34.4), in the knot of blood-pulsing veins that we call the heart (32.5), in the excesses of *eros* (35.2), in the craters of Aetna (35.4), in the Nile and the Danube and the Rhine (34.5).

In Longinus, *technê* not only imitates nature, but does much more; the relationship between *technê* and *physis* is much more complex than imitation. Humans are driven by *physis* to wonder at the rhetorical *technê* as, or exceeding, *physis* via *hypsos*, even as the rhetorical *technê* in its fullness is hidden in *physis* by *physis*’s own design. There remain in Longinus two distinct domains, *technê* and *physis*. However, they are in deep collusion with one another, as *technê* not only imitates *physis* but also distorts it to achieve its effects, effects granted by *physis*. One of Longinus’s well-known contemporary interpreters, Paul Fry, claims that nature is the basis of Longinus’s *hypsôn technê*; however, the ways in which *physis* is the “ground” of *technê* are for Longinus obscure, and the limits of both *physis* and *technê* are not altogether clear (52-53). Consistent with older Greek conceptions of *technê*, Longinus’s *technê* “marks a domain of *human* intervention and invention” (Atwill 7, emphasis added). The problem presented by Longinus’s text for a strict correlation between *technê* and the human, however, is that Longinus’s treatise presents *technê* not just as a means to the superhuman, but the superhuman as the fullness of *technê*. The fullness (see p. 119) of *technê* is “beyond nature” (see 43.2) and beyond the “human” (36.1).

Longinus's account of ecstatic rhetorical effect is grounded in *physis*. His relatively lengthy discussion of the image (*phantasia*), for example, depends on the order of *physis* for its account of the ecstatic effect of the image (*phantasia*). Writing of Hyperides, Longinus states,

You see, the public speaker (*rhêtôr*) here has simultaneously tried his hand at a practical argument (*pragmatikôs*) and made an image (*pephantastai*); therefore he has exceeded the limit of persuasiveness in the point being taken up. But somehow by nature (*physei*) in all such things we hear what is stronger; as a result we are dragged away from demonstrative arguments (*apodeiktikou*) and are astounded by the image, by the dazzle of which the practical argument is hidden. And it is not unlikely that we should feel this: you see, when two things are arranged together, the stronger over and over again draws off to itself the capacity of the weaker. (15.10-11)

The order of *physis* makes the image stronger than demonstrative argument. In Longinus, rhetorical effect is "natural." Thus Longinus's conception of art imitating nature is quite severe—rhetorical *technê* reproduces nature. Even when this *technê* violates the common order of nature, as with hyperbata where "things which are by nature unified and indivisible" are ruptured and broken up, it reproduces the phenomena of *physis*'s self-rupturing seen in the crater or the thunderbolt. For Longinus, the affective responses of human spectators to *physis* and *technê* can be explained in exactly the same language. Rhetorical *technê* does not only aspire to imitate nature; it is entirely "natural" in its power and effects.

Yet, *physis* would have *technê* exceed the natural. "Demosthenes," Longinus writes, draws on "excellences which start from what is great in nature and end up on the height." Demosthenes "outthunders, as it were, and outshines public speakers of all ages: one might actually be more capable of opening his eyes toward a thunderbolt bearing in on him than to set his eyes on the emotions of this man as they come one on top of another" (34.4). Demosthenes, of all the orators, goes "beyond nature" (*physin methestakôs*) in *hypsos*, emotion, and rhetorical proof (16.2). Rhetoric is thus ultimately realized as exceeding nature and the ordinary limits of the human. Longinus's references to the superhuman do not, however, describe a transformation from the human to the divine; they are, rather, ways of talking about humans exceeding the limits of what is normally called "human" (35.2, 36.1-2). Rhetoric is the realization of the god-like in the human, not the annihilation of the human in deification.

The fullest realization of rhetoric in an orator like Demosthenes presents a problem for a writer of a technical treatise on rhetoric. Is rhetoric, as the ancients posed, a form of incantation or magic? Or does it amount to a

sophisticated form of technical manipulation? Is there a “method” to the god-like? What does one make of the “technological” nature of rhetoric in *Peri Hypsous*? Longinus seems to be wrestling with a paradox. To embrace rhetoric-as-*technê* is to risk it being cast into the lower realm of the instrumental arts, where rhetoric is a method by which to sway an audience, whereas to disavow rhetoric-as-*technê* altogether is to stunt the realizations of its most profound potentialities. Further, rhetoric-as-*technê* raises questions about judgment. *Technai* are judged according to the quality of their form and function. As long as rhetoric always remains subject to judgment, it cannot exceed the “human.” It must always be a subject of debate and criticism. How, then, is rhetoric-as-*technê* kept from the humiliations of instrumentality (a demotion in the teleological scheme) and judgment (a demotion in the socio-epistemic scheme, in “essence”)?

Longinus’s answer to this paradox is twofold. First, Longinus recognizes the instrumental functions of rhetoric, and can treat it as an object of judgment. This, however, is the secondary conception of rhetoric in the treatise. The primary conception, and this is the crux of his solution to the paradox, is a rhetoric hidden in *physis* as it becomes natural. There is in *Peri Hypsous* a revision of the doctrine of obscurantism found in Horace, Demetrius, and Dionysus, where art hides its artfulness (see Weithoff). This standard notion of obscurantism is in Longinus. For example, on figures he writes, “it is the general opinion that a figure is most excellent when the fact that it is a figure thoroughly escapes our notice” (17.1). However, this falls under the secondary, instrumental conception of rhetoric, where rhetoric is an art of persuasion. Longinus gives obscurantism another turn when he describes *physis* as itself possessing and obscuring the *technê*. “[I]n the most excellent prose-writers mimesis approaches the workings of nature. Then is technique (*technê*) fulfilled, when it is the general opinion that it is nature at work; and . . . nature comes out luckily whenever she has in her a technique that escapes notice” (22.1, emphasis added). Longinus’s obscurantism is about the reception of rhetorical *technê* as natural. In his coupling of art and nature, his characterization of the collusion between *technê* and *physis*, the dignity of *physis* more than *technê* is saved. Rather than aid *technê* directly, Longinus’s obscurantism upholds *physis*. For the collusion between *technê* and *physis* could invite a Platonic-like response (though not strictly speaking Platonic), where *physis* and *technê* are together relegated to the shadowy, unreliable, and suspect. In other words, in attempting to raise rhetorical *technê* to the level of *physis*, Longinus risks bringing *physis* down if *technê* is derogatorily viewed as *merely* human. Longinus would instead have *physis* “get lucky” through *technê* taking on its appearance. *Technê* and *physis* cohabitate in Longinus so as to obscure each other, for *technê* is at its height when it appears as *physis*, or as even as exceeding *physis*, and *physis* is at its best when *technê* takes on

its appearance. However, it is *technê* that finally comes out on top in its ability to preserve *physis*'s exalted status even as it can exceed *physis*.

If *physis* can come out on top, and *technê* even more so, the conditions are wrought for rhetoric *per se* to emerge, and it does quite vigorously in chapter 35 of *Peri Hypsous*. I will quote at length.

Now what did those authors (who achieved *hypsos*), equals of the gods, understand as they desired what is greatest in writing (*sungraphês*) and felt themselves to be above precision in all details? It was, in addition to many other things, this: that nature (*physis*) did not decide that man would be a low or ignoble animal; but leading us into life and into the whole cosmos (*kosmon*) as if into a kind of panegyric to be, in a way, its observers and to be lovers of the esteem (*philotimotatous*) which comes to those who compete (*agônistas*), immediately she implants into our souls (*psychais*) an erotic (*erôta*) passion which cannot be fought. . . . For just this reason not even the entire cosmos taken together can cope with the thrust of human theorizing and perceptiveness, but man's intentness on perceiving often everywhere goes out beyond the limits of what holds him in. . . . [T]hough what is useful or even necessary has for humanity an easy passage, still, what is contrary to opinion (*paradoxon*) is over and over again wonderful (*thaumaston*). (35.2-3, 5)

Rhetoric, that *technê* of opinion (*doxa*) and judgment (*krisis*), emerges from chapter 35 as "contrary to opinion" (*paradoxon*) or, as Longinus says earlier, "the object of wonder (*tô thaumazomenô*) . . . which does not lend itself to debate" (7.4). Rhetoric, which Aristotle conceived of as an instrumental art, erupts up to an acme where neither utility nor necessity matter any more. Rhetoric, realized fully in *hypsos*, is the object of desire that cannot be resisted. Hence, Longinus gives us a new Diotimian fantasy, where rhetorical *hypsos*, not the disembodied form of beauty, is met in ecstasy.

On Desiring Rhetoric *per se*

It is one thing for rhetorical heights to become the personal object of desire for the orator or wordsmith, and another for it to be cast as the object of social desire. If Terentianus had been under the impression that his teacher's treatise was meant to help him find fame and reputation through excellence in *logoi*, when he reached the final chapter, he quickly learned that his teacher's ambitions were much greater, or, perhaps, much smaller. Rhetoric, he learned, had been lost. It was well as a persuasive and political art. However, rhetorical *hypsos* had been lost, which for Longinus meant that rhetoric in its fullest and finest form had evaporated into the air of memory.¹³ Terentianus may have been disappointed.

On the other hand, he may have finally understood his teacher's obsession with *hypsos*. *Peri Hypsous*, I have argued, turns rhetoric in on itself, makes rhetoric itself an object and an end. For rhetoric *per se* to become the object of desire, it would seem requisite that it be lost. Desire requires a lack. The desire of *Peri Hypsous* is unaccounted for until its final chapter; hence for the first forty-three chapters there is a certain pettiness about the treatise's insinuations, and a certain arbitrariness about its judgments. The value and significance of *hypsos* is itself unresolved in these chapters.

In chapter 44 the lack is announced through the "philosopher," an interlocutor suddenly thrown into the treatise. He says,

Wonder holds me, as no doubt many others, how it is that though in our age there are natures which are highly persuasive and political, insightful and apt, and more fertile in producing pleasing touches in speeches and writings, yet there no longer come to be—except rather rarely—men who are *hypsos* and transcendently great. So universal is the infertility which has hold over our life.

(44.1)

The object of wonder is now a lack, a lack of "natures" that are *hypsos*. This philosopher has clearly been thinking alongside Longinus on this point. Nature is in crisis right there with the rhetorical *technê*. A wonder, indeed. The philosopher, however, departs from Longinus in his diagnosis. He makes a political diagnosis that blames the lack on the erosion of political freedom. The diagnosis is consistent with his organic metaphor of "infertility." The lack, after all, is not ultimately the lack of rhetoric *per se*, but of conditions in which rhetoric and rhetoric's "natures" can thrive.¹⁴

Longinus's diagnosis, over against that of the philosopher, is more directly about desire. He, too, finds himself in a state of wonderment.

The love of material things (of which we are all now insatiably sick) and the love of pleasure drive us into slavery—rather (as one might say), they plunge us—men, lives, and all—down into an abyss. . . . Indeed, I am not able to discover by reasoning how those of us who over-estimate limitless wealth and (to say it more truly) make it into a divinity can avoid admitting into our souls the vices that naturally follow it. (44.6-7)

Longinus, familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures,¹⁵ accuses his age of being one of idolatry. The societal soul has grown consumed with a desire for material wealth; esteem, even religious devotion, has turned toward wealth as a "limitless" object of desire. Whereas the "philosopher" is directly concerned with political conditions, Longinus is concerned with the direction of social desire.

Despite the agon constructed by Longinus, his diagnosis is in fact not that different from the philosopher's own. Both interlocutors are making social

critiques. Both place rhetorical *hypsos* at the center of the rhetorical *technê*. Both judge the state of rhetoric according to the comings and goings of *hypsos*. And both describe themselves as being in an ecstatic wonder over rhetoric's lack—they feel out of place, or, in their historical moment, they cannot find their place with rhetoric.

And so rhetoric *per se* becomes the object of their social desires and the subject of their philosophizing and teaching. They articulate a rhetorical object that transcends their particular place and moment, an object, in fact, which transcends all particular places and moments. They monumentalize rhetoric as *hypsos*, height, that Colossal object of wonderment of bygone days. The monument becomes not just the object of their longings, but also the source of their severe social critique, a critique from a lack realized through a memory spun upon the pieces of their parchment. This is a significant moment for rhetoric. Rhetoric was placed in memory and transformed there from the Gorgianic power for success, or the Aristotelian afternoon *technê* of available means of persuasion, or the Isocratean *logon technê* of the *polis*, or the Ciceronian *artis* of the *res publica*, to a Thing longed for in itself, itself the *telos*. Rhetoric, it could be said, came into its own.

Epilogue

Thus, Longinus made rhetoric itself into a sublime object, a marvel. In the histories of rhetoric we write and edit, the significance of this rhetoric of rhetoric still needs to be explored. I have here tried simply to add a new strain to the histories, putting alongside the often-told story of rhetoric's institutionalization under the Roman Empire a short story of its exaltation into excess and freedom from the project of its legitimation. In response to the demand for rhetoric to justify its own existence, Quintilian institutionalized rhetoric, and thus preserved it. Longinus monumentalized it, and lost it.

Rhetoric has been long engaged in the project of its own legitimation. My hunch is that this project is often felt to be a burden. Rhetoricians are now as much as ever faced with explaining to institutional powers what rhetoric is, what it means, and how it might be used productively. In this, some contemporary rhetorical scholars have vigorously stood against the Quintilian-like reduction of rhetoric to a school art, to "mere rhetoric." We have instead made arguments for big rhetoric, for architectonic rhetoric, for the universality of rhetoric, for the great idea of rhetoric. However, the shunning of "mere rhetoric" might lead us to a new sort of rhetoric *per se*, through an argumentative progression like this:

Rhetoric is everywhere.

What is everywhere needs no legitimation.

Therefore: Rhetoric needs no legitimation.¹⁶

Now I do not know of any rhetorical scholars that are making this argument, nor do I know of any that desire to. There is, however, within the expansion of rhetoric (with respect to general popularity, areas of inquiry, and the “discovery” that all symbolic use is rhetorical) the potential that rhetoric’s imagined or real omnipresence might be interpreted as freeing it from the obligation of the rhetoric of rhetoric. That rhetorical studies could ever be so freed seems impossible given its institutional and cultural context. However, I believe even the wish for freedom from the burden of legitimation is a dangerous wish. Rhetoric *per se* has consequences that are more severe for rhetoric than “mere rhetoric.” *Peri Hypsous* suggests that a theoretical project that would free rhetoric from the burden of legitimation, that would bring rhetoric into its own, has its own burdens: will rhetoric in such projects become a thing of the past (or the future) perpetually out of reach? How is a rhetoric brought into its own kept from being lost, memorialized, and monumentalized? Will rhetoric always be seen through a lack? If rhetoric is to presently be a theoretical, practical, and productive art, it must deliberately and continually bear the burden of its justification and remain vulnerable to the shifts and alterations that forces external to it exert upon it. Otherwise, brought into its own, made the sublime object, it will be placed just out of reach.

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Notes

1. A number of rhetorical scholars have also made use of the sublime in works of criticism, albeit in very different ways. See for examples of various approaches Gunn and Beard, McDaniel, and Oravec.

2. In the eighteenth-century *Peri Hypsous* was attributed to the third-century C.E. Cassius Longinus, but studies of its provenance have since cast serious doubt on any claims about its authorship. Likewise, the date of *Peri Hypsous* is unknown. That the date of the text falls between the first and third centuries is suggested by the tenth-century manuscript Parisinus 2036, the source of all other extant manuscripts. The manuscript has Dionusiou Longinou as its title, but “Dionusiou and Longinou” in a table of contents. Russell states that the former name refers to the first-century Dionysius of Halicarnassus, but the latter to the third-century Cassii Longini (xx). Most commentators have favored a first-century date, as the treatise is written against Caecilius, an Augustan writer on style. For a more extended discussion of the provenance

of *Peri Hypsous* see Russell's introduction to his edited "Longinus" on the Sublime and Kennedy's *Art of Rhetoric in the Roman World* 369-372.

3. Though anthologized in texts like *The Rhetorical Tradition*, *Peri Hypsous* is never treated as a major text in rhetorical histories and, consequently, in the telling of the history of rhetoric. Kennedy's description of the text as "the most sensitive piece of literary criticism surviving from antiquity" is consistent with its general treatment by twentieth-century scholars as an early work in literary criticism (*Art of Rhetoric in the Roman World* 369). As such, while a work in literary criticism like Paul Fry's *The Reach of Criticism* contains an extended discussion of Longinus, a rhetorical history even like that of M. L. Clarke's *Rhetoric at Rome*, which focuses solely on the epoch in which *On the Sublime* was composed, bypasses completely the work. Kennedy rightly begins to repair the treatise's status in rhetorical history by noting its concern with oratory and public life, however, his 641-page history of Roman rhetoric devotes a mere eight pages to *Peri Hypsous* (*Art of Rhetoric in the Roman World* 369-377).

4. See Kennedy *Art of Rhetoric in the Roman World*, W. Rhys Roberts *Greek Rhetoric and Literary Criticism*, H. J. Rose *A Handbook of Greek Literature*, and Brian Vickers *In Defense of Rhetoric*.

5. Cahn means by "discipline" a subject which achieves a degree of institutionalization, professionalization, and theorization sufficient to grant it cultural authority (61-62). This use of "discipline," however, is subject to debate. Maurice Charland argues that presently rhetoric is not a discipline, as it has no clearly identifiable code of scholarly conduct, no set of rules for what constitutes authentic rhetorical inquiry and what does not. Charland, instead, prefers "tradition" over "discipline" when talking about rhetoric's social and institutional status.

6. In this essay Greek terms placed in parentheses denote Longinus's terminology.

7. For Aristotle too one area where poetics and rhetoric significantly overlap is in the art of style (*lexis*), such that Book 3 of the *Rhetoric* and the discussion of style in the *Poetics* are presented by Aristotle as having a supplemental relationship.

8. In general, I will not translate *hypsos* in this essay; however, both "height" and "sublime" suggests important dimensions of the meaning of the word, which I will highlight in this essay. To render *hypsos* as "sublime" consistently, though, would bring unwanted modern and postmodern denotations and connotations that have come to circulate around the concept.

9. Longinus's description of his treatise as a *technologias* puts the work within the nominal history of the *technê logon* or *technographia*, the "art of speech" handbook, which thrived in fifth- and fourth-century Greece and was carried well into Roman rhetoric.

10. For the reasons explained in note #2, I have here and elsewhere untranslated the translation “the sublime,” putting “*hypsos*” or its variations where the translator has put “sublime” or its variations. On the translation, see the next note.

11. I use here and elsewhere the translation of *Peri Hypsous* made by James A. Arieti and John M. Crossett (1985). The translation, though perhaps too “contemporary” in some of its language, has two virtues over other English translations. It attempts to closely approximate Longinus’s syntax, and it uses consistent vocabulary, e.g. *hypsos* and its morphological variations are consistently translated as “sublime” or as one of its variations.

12. Among the translations of *hyperairon* in *LSJ* are “lift or raise up over,” “overshoot,” and “go beyond.”

13. George Kennedy discusses the “decline of rhetoric” as a motif among Augustan critics in his *A New History of Classical Rhetoric*. Kennedy finds this pessimism in Philo of Alexandria, the elder Seneca, Velleius Paterculus, Quintilian, Tacitus, and Longinus, who each have their own explanations for the decline (see Kennedy *New History* 186-192). However, Walker has persuasively argued that the “decline” motif of the Augustan period does not mean that rhetorical practice itself had evaporated. Rather, certain political and pedagogical types of rhetorical practice had eroded, while new and/or revived forms replaced them (see Walker 94-109).

14. Walker’s argument regarding the “decline” of rhetoric explains the “philosopher’s” lament well. Longinus interprets the “philosopher” as blaming the decline of rhetoric on “the peace of the world,” the post-Roman-Republic *pax*. The final days of the Roman Republic, the days of Cicero, were highly agonistic and extremely dangerous, as we know from Cicero’s fate. The “philosopher” seems to believe that those days of agon and danger were responsible for the heights of rhetoric (see Walker 94-109).

15. Longinus refers to the book of Genesis in 9.9 of his treatise.

16. This syllogism deliberately echoes Edward Schiappa’s in “Second Thoughts on the Critique of Big Rhetoric,” where he summarizes the “rhetoric is everywhere” argument as progressing as such:

All persuasive actions are rhetorical.

All symbol/language-use is persuasive.

Therefore: All symbol/ language-use is rhetorical.

Schiappa concludes that the “rhetoric is everywhere” argument does not force us to conclude “rhetoric is nowhere.” I concur with this and most of Schiappa’s defense of “Big Rhetoric.” My conclusions only advise against seeing the “rhetoric is everywhere” argument as freeing rhetorical scholars from the ongoing and difficult obligation to justify the discipline or tradition of rhetorical scholarship.

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