

Longinus. Is a Critic. — His contribution (4)

Undoubtedly, Longinus is the greatest Greek Critic after Plato and Aristotle. His treatise on Sublime contains his main critical views. It shows his critical attitude that is radically different from that of the classicists. He is called the first romantic as well as the true exponent of the classical spirit, for his criticism is a fusion of classicism, romanticism and modernism. He is the first critic to emphasise that a great piece of literature has sublimity and loftiness that transport, move, carry away and lift the reader out of himself. But his romantic enthusiasm does not allow licence and unrestrained liberty and maintains a balance between 'Nature' and 'Art'. He has made some valuable contribution to criticism. Let us see in a brief.

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The classical theory of inspiration envisages that a poet is an inspired person who utters songs when he is not in his right mind. It was this theory that led Plato to condemn poets as the irrational beings who mislead the readers by appealing to their emotions. Longinus also takes the same stand and believes that a poet is a possessed person. But he emphasises that it is here that the strange power of the poet and his art lies. He does not probe into the source of this power. He is concerned only with its effect on the readers. He discovers that the highest type of poetry, which is lofty and sublime, has the effect not of mere pleasure or persuasion but of ecstasy and transport, lifting out of oneself. The passion, intensity, exaltation and transport are the fundamental condition of the sublimity in literature. He declares:—

"The Sublime consists in a certain loftiness and consummateness of language, and it is by this and this only that the greatest poets and prose-writers have won pre-eminence and lasting fame."

This discovery that great literature transports is the first effective theory of literature. Longinus points out that the value of literature is assessed by introspection on the part of the reader. If he is carried away, transported and moved to ecstasy by the grandeur and passion of the work, the work is good. The greatest virtue of a piece of literature is sublimity. It is this virtue that makes a work truly impressive in spite of certain minor defects in it. And to be sublime is the ultimate justification and function of literature. The great literature is that which has the power of exciting and arousing not only once but repeatedly. It produces this impression among men of different pursuits, lives, ambitions, ages and languages. As the purpose of literature is to move, excite, elevate and transport, the duty of the critic is to see how it is achieved.

Longinus' greatest contribution as a critic is that in an age of confused standards he has been able to turn men's attention to the ideals of Greek classical art. Unlike other Roman critics who were more concerned with the technical and formal tendencies of classical literature, Longinus recaptures its very spirit and clearly explains its unchanging principles. That is why he is called the best exponent of the classical spirit. He also exhibits some romantic elements, for he emphasises on the elements of transportation. However, he maintains a balance between genius and unimpassioned hard work, and lays stress on selection and an adjustment of means to ends. That is, he anticipates much that is in the modern critical work. His concern with the essence and not with the form of literature, his understanding of the part played by imagination and feelings in the creative work and his efforts at literary interpretation are, no doubt, the modern tendencies.

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Longinus combines within himself the qualities

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of his predecessors - Plato and Aristotle like Aristotle his approach to literature is analytical based on existing Greek literature and he uses the inductive, psychological and historical methods. He has also the spiritual fervour and idealism of Plato. It is this wonderful combination of opposite qualities - analytical rationalism and impassioned enthusiasm - that gives him a unique position among the Critics. By revealing some of the fundamental aesthetic truths about literature, he has exercised a lasting influence in the field of the literary taste. His treatise 'On the Sublime', like Plato's, is full of metaphors and poetical expressions. Really, Longinus is one of the greatest literary critics.
