Sacred Ambivalence: Mimetology in Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus

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Almost from its very beginnings mimetology has looked to ancient Greece for its proof texts. For both René Girard's hypotheses surrounding the ethical and ethnological implications of mimetic desire and Eric Gans's identification of the part played by mimetic resentment in cultural evolution, the texts of Homer and the tragedians have served (in the words of Walter Burkert) as "a mirror in which the basic orders of life, lying far behind us, become visible with an almost classical clarity" (xxiii).

For Burkert, this mirror's clarity is the product of ancient Greece's serendipitous "union of antiquity and sophistication" (xxiii). While mimetic theory has dwelt on the significances of Greek literary and religious traditions, the culture's sophistication–especially in matters critical and philosophical– have received relatively scant notice. In light of the historical priority of the aesthetic over the theoretical, such inattention is understandable. This essay, however, will demonstrate how the writings of three of the classical age's most influential commentators on literary theory–Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus–manifest a debate on the proper place of the sacred in the aesthetic scene of representation. The debate begins with Aristotle's establishment, via critical fiat, of the aesthetic scene's formal and ethical self-sufficiency. Rather than following up the possibilities for artistic and anthropological discovery enabled by this bold gesture, however, Horace and Longinus display a curious reluctance to evacuate sacrality from aesthetic representation, as if they sensed that to do so was, at the very least, to run the risk of emptying the center of its attention-fixing capabilities.

For Aristotle's successors, in other words, the processes of aesthetic demystification came into inevitable conflict with the originary "power" the aesthetic scene retained as it emerged from ritual. Their writings can thus be seen as struggles to reconcile originary or ritual immediacy with the emotionally leveling effects that representation acquired as it became increasingly institutionalized. An examination

of these early attempts to codify aesthetic value thus illustrates that–despite postmodern claims to the contrary–the problematic status of mimesis is never fully eradicated by artistic institutionalization.

I. Aristotle

Tradition holds that Aristotle's *Poetics*, the West's single most influential work of literary criticism, originated in an esoteric dispute. To the end of his argument for the banishment of poets from the good State in book X of *The Republic*, Plato appended a challenge to all those who "love poetry but who are not poets to plead for her in prose, that she is no mere source of pleasure but a benefit to society and to human life" (340). Aristotle's *Poetics* answered this call, countering Plato's claim that poetry is "far removed from reality" and "wisdom" (334-5) because the poet lacks both knowledge and "correct belief" of the

"subjects he portrays" (332) by asserting that "poetry and politics, or poetry and any other art, do not have the same standard of correctness. . ." (67). Further, as a reply to Plato's concern that seeing "some hero in Homer or on the tragic stage moaning over his sorrows in a long tirade" (337) will encourage us to indulge in similar theatrics when "we are suffering ourselves" (338) so that we behave "like a child who goes on shrieking after a fall and hugging the wounded part" (336), Aristotle advances his famous theory of catharsis: tragedy "through a course of pity and fear complete[s] the purification of tragic acts which have those characteristics" (25).

The impatience with aesthetic representation that prompted Plato to question the place of poets and poetry in the ideal state is conventionally attributed to the problematic status of art within his "theory of forms"; teacher and pupil differ, it is said, in the degree to which they grant philosophical legitimacy to poetry. Whereas Plato sees "a long-standing quarrel between poetry and philosophy" (339), Aristotle advances the opinion that "poetry is a more philosophical and serious business than history" (33). From the standpoint of the mimetic theory, however, the real issue at stake is not philosophy, but the threats posed by any kind of imitation to the social fabric. As Girard writes, "Plato's hostility toward mimesis is an essential aspect of his work and it should not be seen as confined, as it always is, to his criticism of art. If Plato mistrusts art it is because art is a form of mimesis, and not the reverse. He shares with primitive peoples a terror of mimesis that has yet to be sufficiently explained" (15). Though he concedes his teacher's intuition that that imitation is art's core element, Aristotle nevertheless asserts that the aesthetic scene's self-containment amounts to a guarantee that representational mimesis cannot

threaten the polis with the kinds of social and ethical disintegration Plato feared. Eric Gans puts it this way:

> For Aristotle, mimesis has none of the conflictive connotations it had retained for ritually focused thought up to Plato. It is a wholly advantageous doubling, participating in all the benefits of originary representation with no possibility of provoking the resentful rivalry that accompanies mimesis in the real world; on the contrary, mimesis is a purgative cure for resentment, a catharsis (*Originary Thinking* 135).

For Girard, then, Plato's intolerance for poets and poetry stems from his unwillingness or inability to separate "appropriation from imitation." Furthermore, this misapprehension has passed "unnoticed because all of his successors, beginning with Aristotle, have followed his lead" (*Things Hidden* 8). Gans, on the other hand, recognizes the extent to which Platonic and Aristotelian concepts of mimesis differ. For Plato, literature's ties to the originary event remain strong enough to ignite new crises; Aristotle, on the other hand, holds that poetry's institutionalization has effectively severed its threatening connections with primeval, violent forms of mimesis. That artistic representations are indeed "far removed from reality" is for Aristotle their saving grace; poetry's ability to create bracketed worlds effectively establishes safe havens where primevally "infectious" behaviors may be indulged with relatively little fear of instigating communal crisis.

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The difference between Platonic and Aristotelian mimesis therefore becomes more a matter of degree than of kind. Thus both Girard's refusal to distinguish between the two and Gans's view of Aristotelian mimesis as "participating in all the benefits of originary representation with no possibility of provoking. . .resentful rivalry" oversimplify the contribution of *Poetics* to the understanding of the essential operations of imitation and art. Lying at the core of Aristotle's text is an ineradicable tension between the tangible emotional power of originary or ritual immediacy and the comparatively vitiated affects of secular, aesthetic representation. This tension places Aristotle and subsequent critics on the horns of a dilemma both ethical and practical: how much violence can the scene of representation contain? How thoroughly must–or can–poetry cleanse itself of the stain of its violent origins?

Aristotle's inquiry into the precise nature of the relationship between the ritual and aesthetic scenes of representation is the bold first step that enabled his subsequent discoveries of art's possibilities; only by calling into question Plato's one-to-one identification of the two scenes could Aristotle advance, as Gerald Else has written,

“a viable philosophy of literature” (*Poetics* 4). Curiously, however, this achievement begins not by denying literature’s ritual origins, but by relocating ritual from the human to the animal realm:

> As to the origin of poetic art as a whole, it stands to reason that two operative causes brought it into being, both of them rooted in human nature. Namely (1) the habit of imitating is congenital to human beings from childhood (actually man differs from the other animals in that he is the most imitative and learns his first lessons through imitation), and so is (2) the pleasure that all men take in works of imitation (20).

His anthropological starting point enables Aristotle to disconnect mimesis and ritual by advancing a hypothetical, pre-ritual scene of representation. If mimesis is a behavior, part of our animal inheritance (“man differs from the other animals in that he is the most imitative”), then the Platonic closed loop of imitation and ritual leading either to ethical action or to mimetic crisis must be re-examined in light of the existence of animal (non-ritualistic because “congenital”) “forms” of mimesis. In short, resituating mimesis within an ethological context enables Aristotle to rid representation of its narrowly ethnological (that is to say, Platonic) threats and terrors.

The distinguishing characteristic of the neoclassical art, according to Gans, is its aesthetic self-consciousness (*Originary Thinking* 151-156). While it is impossible to decide whether Aristotle’s faith in artistic self-sufficiency enabled or merely hastened the neoclassical era’s “discovery” of aesthetic self-consciousness, it seems more than just a coincidence that this development so closely followed the Renaissance’s rediscovery of the *Poetics*. But while separating the aesthetic and ritual scenes represents an important step in the ongoing process of understanding the fundamental categories of humanity, de-emphasizing literature’s ritual legacies comes with an affective price, and Aristotle knows it. So long as Aristotle strives–as he clearly does in *Poetics*–to present both a general theory of

representation and universal criteria for poetic excellence, he cannot ignore the potent emotional force, or pathos, which ritual, drawing on the crisis/resolution pattern of the originary event, possesses in abundance. The famous “rules” of tragic construction are, in fact, attempts to specify the means by which a relatively de-ritualized aesthetics may nevertheless retain ritual’s power (to employ a telling and still-popular metaphor) to “strike” its audience. Take the central recommendation about plot: “the plot must be so structured, even without benefit

of any visual effect, that the one who is hearing the events unroll shudders with fear and feels pity at what happens. . .” (40). This represents, in effect, the interpolation of a ritual or even pre-ritual phenomenology into the theory of tragedy. By definition, ritual is participatory, even if participation amounts to little more than directing one’s attention to the scene on which an event unfolds; the complete evacuation from the aesthetic scene of ritual elements would thwart the arousal of what Aristotle calls the indispensable “tragic emotions” of pity and terror.

Other Aristotelian recommendations for representational success can be seen as attempts to balance the power–and danger–of originary representation against aesthetic distance. We will begin with the most famous–and hotly debated–criterion: what nearly two thousand years of criticism have termed the “unity of action.” From Ludovico Castelvetro in the 16th century, through Pierre Corneille in the 17th, right up to the present century’s “Chicago critics,” perhaps no aspect of *Poetics* has generated as much comment and controversy as this. The so-called unity of action informs practically all of *Poetics*, since tragedy is defined as “an imitation not of men but of a life, an action” (27) and “the structure of events, the plot, is the goal of tragedy, and the goal is the greatest thing of all” (27). Subsequent critics derived the unity of action primarily from section 7: “Tragedy is an imitation of an action which is complete and has some magnitude (for there is also such a thing as whole that has no magnitude). ‘Whole’ is that which has beginning, middle, and end” (29-30). Elaborating on the meaning of “magnitude,” Aristotle writes that

> the beautiful, whether a living creature of anything that is composed of parts, should not only have these in a fixed order to one another but also possess a definite size which does not depend on chance–for beauty depends on size and order; hence neither can a very tiny creature turn out to be beautiful (since our perception of it grows blurred as it approaches the period of imperceptibility) nor an excessively huge one (for then it cannot all be perceived at once and so its unity and wholeness are lost), if for example there were a creature a thousand miles long–so, just as in the case of living creatures they must have some size, but one that can be taken in in a single view, so with plots: they should have length, but such that they are easy to remember (30-31).

In short, a tragedy’s length should be such that “it must be possible for the beginning and the end to be seen together in one view” (63).

Like almost all of Aristotle’s recommendations in the *Poetics*, the unity of action is

grounded in what a hypothetical viewer is likely to see and, more important, to believe. Tragedy's formal coherence, in other words, is itself tested and therefore relies for its ability reliably to produce its defining effects upon its phenomenological consistency with a hypothetically pre-aesthetic concept of human nature. Despite his contention that poetry and politics may employ different standards of correctness, both are ultimately subject to the fundamental structure of center and periphery. In fact, it is the unity of action by which aesthetic representation accesses ritual's spellbinding and emotionally charged effects. As Gans writes,

> Discourse, as it emerged from ritual, was temporalized, as was ritual; its own duration followed the irreversible progress of the rite, which itself followed that of the original event. . . . Discourse operates within the temporal limits of the original crisis/resolution, which, whether it last a few hours or a few days, is of necessity extremely short in relation to the normal life span of its participants. . . . The elaboration of ritual is less a prolongation of the critical moment than the addition to it of other episodes. Significance is thus originally a short-term phenomenon, which we may assume to follow more or less the time scheme of a drama, where the speeches of the characters occupy a real time of interaction (*Origin of Language* 243, 288).

Aristotle anticipates Gans in grounding the significance (or, to use his word, beauty) of literary discourse in a ritually derived temporality. As Aristotle writes in Section 7: "'Beginning' is that which does not necessarily follow on something else, but after it something else naturally is or happens; 'end,' the other way round, is that which naturally follows on something else, either necessarily or for the most part, but nothing else after it; and 'middle' that which naturally follows on something else and something else on it" (30).

To make the connections between aesthetic contemplation and ritual participation too explicit, however, is to risk falling into what Aristotle might have called the Platonic fallacy. Hence his recommendations with respect to the construction of plots tend to de-emphasize the perceptual elements most closely associated with originary representation. The three elements of plot, according to Aristotle, are peripety, recognition, and pathos, which he defines as "a destructive or painful act, such as deaths on stage, paroxysms of pain, woundings, and all that sort of thing" (37). The emotions aroused by pathos play a paradoxical role in *Poetics*: while he identifies pity and terror as the "tragic emotions," the most effective formal means by which they are aroused are, in Aristotle's view, "the least connected with poetic art." Though "the visual adornment of dramatic persons can have a strong

emotional effect," this is the "least artistic element" among the six constituents of tragedy (29); and while "it is possible for the fearful or pathetic effect to come from the actors' appearance," the "mark and characteristic of a better poet" is to engender these effects "from the very structure of events" (40).

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Again, originary analysis points to how this, one of the most influential of Aristotle's literary opinions, can be understood as an attempt to reconcile what increasingly appeared to be the potentially mutual exclusiveness of aesthetic contemplation and ritual participation. The non-instinctual attention of the periphery toward the central object at the originary scene must be, at least initially, captured and sustained (for however brief a time) through the eyes. That is, peripheral identification with the central figure is first visual and then "replayed" on each individual's internal, imaginary scene of representation. For this reason, ritual retains a primarily visual orientation. Thus, to define aesthetic excellence as that which resists the strict mimetic conservatism of ritual is to disconnect even more radically art from its violent origins. Similarly, Aristotle's recommendation against reliance on the *deus ex machina* arises not merely from the "organicism" of his concept of dramatic plot, but from his perception that the proper phenomenal model for tragedy is not ritual but revelation. The poorest plots, he writes, "are those that are contrived by the poet," such as that of *Iphigenia*, where Orestes says "what the poet, rather than the plot, wants him to say" in the recognition of his sister. By contrast, the most artistic plots are those "that develop naturally but unexpectedly." Ritual is the opposite of revelation," writes Gans in *Science and Faith* (16).

> Nothing new must occur there; the only evolution the rite undergoes is the gradual draining away of the truth it was its task to preserve. Rites die and are replaced by others, keepers of new revelations. But these revelations themselves never occur within the framework of ritual; their privileged locus is the individual imagination, whose intuitions are tested only after the fact by the community (16-17).

Aristotle thus anticipates Gans in identifying some of the ways in which the aesthetic scene's escape from ritual conservatism enables it to become an important locus for the discovery of fundamental human truths. The durability of Aristotle's theory therefore results neither from historic accident nor scholarly conspiracy: discovering that an anthropologically-grounded theory of the sign could sidestep Plato's fears about art initiating the contagion of conflictive mimesis enables the classical aesthetic eventually to achieve its logical end point: the exploration the scene of representation *qua* scene. Aristotle's achievement comes

not, however, from merely denying the validity of Plato's intuited connection of representation and crisis. Both thinkers recognize, as Gans has put it, that "[t]he institution of art constitutes an intermediary third term between the minimal institution of language and the maximal one of ritual," and that "[l]anguage and ritual are each in their own way coercive" (*Originary Thinking*, 122). Poetry, according to Plato, has ties to the more communally coercive (and therefore threatening) institution of ritual; for Aristotle, it is more closely allied with the individually coercive institution of language.

It is significant, however, that Aristotle's attempt to rid the aesthetic scene of its Platonic threats never fully succeeds; as Gans writes, "[t]hroughout history, Plato's qualms about the subversive nature of art alternate with the cathartic claims of Aristotle" (*Originary Thinking* 136). Later literary theorists,

–especially Horace and Longinus, as we will see–while they followed Aristotle's lead in centering their discussions around mimesis, found themselves having to steer between the Scylla of art's violent origins and the Charybdis of the emotional lassitude of a scenic center devoid of its specifically sacred power. Although, as Gans argues, the "relative importance of the Platonic and Aristotelian attitudes depends upon the balance of centrality and decentralization within a given society" (*Originary Thinking* 136), the most famous ancient literary critics maintained the belief that the positions were interchangeable by falling into sacred ambivalence: the unwillingness to further Aristotle's desacralization of the aesthetic scene.

II. Horace

Consider, for example, Horace's *Ars Poetica*. Both in form and content, this treatise on the craft (*techné*) of poetic composition is predominantly Aristotelian: like that of the *Poetics*, the argument of *Ars Poetica* unfolds according to the prescribed succession of poesis, poema, and poeta (Atkins 70). Both works, moreover, identify unity as the essential determinant of literary quality. During the renaissance, in fact, neoclassical critics frequently spoke of the two as if there were no differences between them: concerning the so-called "unity of place," writes Pierre Corneille in "Of the Three Unities," "I can find no rule. . .in either Aristotle or Horace" (Adams 211).

For all their concurrences, however, there is an important difference between Aristotle and Horace. Whereas the former makes only one fleeting–and rather dismissive–reference to the question of poetic inspiration, the latter devotes a considerable number of words to the elucidation of the temperamental qualities

that conduce to literary genius. Horace's contribution to classical literary criticism thus consists of neither an elaboration of the theory of representation nor the practice of poetry, but of his subtle, even hesitant reminders of the poet's "cult of personality." For Aristotle, Sophocles' greatness as a poet is demonstrated a posteriori, the result of his having produced the "perfect" tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*. Horace, on the other hand, takes what would no doubt have struck Aristotle as a step back toward the Platonic fallacy by reviving both mystery and violence as indispensable elements of poetic craft.

In *Ion*, Plato had offered the characteristically mythicizing statement that "all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed" (Adams 14). Though Horace does not go quite that far in this anti-Aristotelian direction, his very willingness to consider "whether a praiseworthy poem be the creation of nature or of art" (Adams 74) indexes his dissatisfaction with what Gans has called Aristotle's patently demystifying gesture of identifying "the human with the central" (*Originary Thinking*, 135). Though Horace refuses to commit himself explicitly to either side of the craft/inspiration controversy–"For my part I do not see what study can do without a rich vein of native gift, nor what the native gift can do without culture" (74)–other elements of the essay indicate that he may have felt inspiration to be more important than he is willing to admit. First, he repeatedly invokes the Muses, indicating that for him poetic composition was still to be undertaken in an attitude of religious seriousness. Second, and even more significant, is

Horace's deliberate and detailed attention near the end of the letter to the social influence and temperamental characteristics of the poet.

"While men were yet savage," writes Horace,

> Orpheus, the sacred, the mouthpiece of the gods, awed them from bloodshed and the foulness of their living; whence the legend said that he tamed tigers and ravening lions. . . . This was what was meant by wisdom in old days–to separate the rights of one from the rights of all, divine things from common, to forbid lawless love and prescribe rules of wedded life, to build cities and grave laws on wooden tables (74).

This legacy imposes sober duties on those who would take up the poet's vocation. Consequently, Horace concludes his treatise with a warning: "the rapt poet is the terror of all sensible people: they fly at his approach" (75). Therefore those like

Empedocles, who indulge themselves in the euphoria of the *furor poeticus* "should have the right and the power to destroy themselves" (75), for

> none of us knows how he came to be always writing verses. It may be he has defiled the graves of his ancestors, or set foot on some accursed ground and incurred uncleanness: at the best he is mad, and like a bear if he has broken his cage bars, he sets unlearned and learned alike scampering away from fear of his reading his poetry to them. If he catches one, he hugs him close and reads and reads till he kills him; for he will not let him go, any more than a leech will let go the skin before it is gorged with blood (75).

Recalling for his reader the "fate" of Empedocles does more, however, than merely buttress Horace's insistence that poets maintain both literary and personal decorum. The equation is clear: poetic inspiration is inextricably tied up with originary violence. Almost despite himself, Horace abandons the Aristotelian scientism that characterizes most of his essay for an exhilarating return to poetry's violent origins. In ultimately rejecting the ethically advanced Aristotelian gesture of reconfiguring the poet as attendant on the scene of representation, Horace opts for the Platonic and necessarily sparagmatic vision of poet as primeval victim. That he would purchase poetic sacrality at this price testifies both to Horace's inability to overstep the imaginative horizons of ritual closure and to the strength of his sacred ambivalence, his anguished intuition that the very processes of artistic institutionalization which he helped to further threatened to erase literary distinction as he knew it.

III. Longinus

Horace's response to these levelling tendencies is archetypically conservative: he retreats, though somewhat obliqely, to the terra firma of the originary indistinguishability of violence and sacrality. For an even more radical attempt to establish the propriety of the sacred within the aesthetic scene we must look to Longinus, whose concept of

the "sublime" manifests its ties with originary violence far more explicitly than Horace's "poetic inspiration." His recuperation of the originary into literature, however, is also more thoroughgoing than Horace's, less ambivalent, since rather than arguing merely for the indispensability of an originary moment to poetic composition, Longinus make the re-creation of the structure of the originary scene

the very essence of poetic achievement.

The Longinian sublime is frustratingly ambiguous, so vague, in fact, that it must be approached via negativa; one arrives at the sublime by differentiating it from “that which aims at persuasion and gratification” (77). “[A] certain distinction and elegance in expression,” the sublime is “power and irresistible might.” Unlike “skill in invention, and due order and arrangement of matter,” which at best impress the mind or gratify lesser order, basic emotional desires that “we can usually control” (77), “sublimity flashing forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt” (77).

In short, the sublime is that which is palpably violent. Not surprisingly, then, the sublime is repeatedly and closely associated with imitation–though decidedly not with the “wholly advantageous” Aristotelian variety of mimesis. In fact, Longinus embraces Plato’s nightmare by endorsing emphatically the imitation of literary models. Essentially, the sublime is an attribute of the soul, a propensity toward “vehement and inspired passion” and a willingness to undertake the arduous task of “forming great conceptions” (80). Yet these largely innate qualities can be fortified–and, to a certain extent, those who lack them can begin to develop them–through the “imitation and emulation of previous great poets and writers” (85).

> 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. Similarly from the great natures of the men of old there are borne in upon the souls of those who emulate them (as from sacred caves) what we may describe as effluences, so that even those who seem little likely to be possessed are thereby inspired and succumb to the spell of the others’ greatness (85).

As we have seen, the scandal of imitation for Plato is its dimly-perceived pre-historic connection with communal crisis and scapegoating violence. Longinus celebrates that very connection, for to be in the presence of violence is to experience the exhilaration of genuinely originary representation–what Nietzsche would later identify as the Dionysian “intoxication” that had succumbed to the Apollonian principium individuationis. Hence the practical recommendations Longinus offers for achieving sublime effects in poetic composition and oratory consistently aim at recreating the “vehement emotion” of mimetic crisis. Rhetorical figures like asyndeton, the elimination of conjunctions, hyperbata (inversions), and anaphora

are reliable means of achieving sublimity, for they mimic the gestural stychomythia and undifferentiation of violence:

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> The words issue forth without connecting links and are poured out as it were, almost outstripping the speaker himself. ‘Locking their shields,’ says Xenophon, ‘they thrust fought slew fell.’. . . For the lines detached from one another, but nonetheless hurried along, produce the impression of an agitation which interposes obstacles and at the same time adds impetuosity. This result Homer has produced by the omission of conjunctions. . . . By these words the orator produces the same effect as the assailant–he strikes the mind of the judges by the swift succession of blow on blow. In this way, with him, order is disorderly, and on the other hand disorder contains a certain element of order (89-90).

Periphrasis, on the other hand, if “handled with discrimination,” can add a “lofty idea” (93) to an expression; its employment is most often, however, “[a] hazardous business,” because “its odor of empty talk and its swelling amplitude” make it particularly susceptible to “fall[ing] flat” (93). The successful figures, therefore, are successful by virtue of their connection with violent immediacy; whatever vitiates that immediacy is for Longinus necessarily not sublime.

In the end, Longinus is much more daring than Horace in allowing those aspects of art that Plato feared most to be recuperated in a defense of poetry. This willingness to recognize the extent to which culture originates in crisis is unprecedented in ancient literary criticism, and stems, perhaps, from just how far art’s institutionalization in the first century of the common era had stripped it of its Platonic dangers. It is curious, therefore, that Longinus’ treatise ends as pessimistically as it does. Rather than building to an appropriately sublime climax, in other words, Longinus concludes by noting–with no small degree of bitterness–how sublimity has of late all but disappeared from the world.

> [A] philosopher has recently noted that in our time there are men who have the gift of persuasion to the utmost extent, and are well fitted for public life, and are keen and ready, and particularly rich in all the charms of language, yet there no longer arise really lofty and transcendent natures unless quite exceptionally. So great and worldwide a dearth of high utterance attends our age. “Can it be,” he continued, “that we are to accept the trite explanation that democracy is the kind nursing-mother of genius, and that literary power may be said to share its rise and fall with

> democracy and democracy alone? For freedom, it is said, has power to feed the imaginations of the lofty-minded and to inspire hope, and where it prevails there spreads abroad the eagerness of mutual rivalry and the emulous pursuit of the foremost place" (101).

Instead of noting how consistent this argument is with practically everything he has said, Longinus attributes the contemporary decay of greatness to the "love of money, (a disease from which we all now suffer sorely) and the love of pleasure," which have combined to "drown us body and soul in the depths, the love of riches being a malady which makes men petty, and the love of pleasure one which makes them most ignoble" (101). If, however, this is really Longinus's final statement on the decline

of sublimity, he appears to have missed his own point. The absence of democracy has to have played a crucial role in creating what strikes Longinus as modernity's degraded character; for sublimity as Longinus describes requires both freedom (that is, from ritual coercion) and rivalry. In other words, since the sublime, as a theory of representation and art, manifests its originary inheritance as blatantly as it does by locating the highest achievement as that which most closely approximates the emotional and phenomenological states of the crisis at its height, only in a society relatively free of ritual and political restraint–here understood as the liberty to instigate the mimetic tensions that brought about the crisis in the first place–can the sublime exist.

Longinus's apparent failure to recognize this is, however, quite telling in itself. We must see this partial blindness to the implications of his own theory as itself a reflection of sacred ambivalence, which for Longinus is relocated from the aesthetic to the political realm. Frightened, perhaps, by the violent realities that lay behind his own views, Longinus rushes to the judgement that "being the slaves of pleasure,"

> it is perhaps better for men like ourselves to be ruled than to be free, since our appetites, if let loose without restraint upon our neighbors like beasts from a cage, would set the world on fire with deeds of evil. Summing up, I maintained that among the banes of the natures which our age produces must be reckoned that half-heartedness in which the life of all of us with few exceptions is passed, for we do not labor or exert ourselves except for the sake of praise and pleasure, never for those solid benefits which are a worthy object of our own efforts and the respect of

> others (102).

For all the sophistication of his understanding and elaboration of the generative links between mimesis, cultural crisis, and art, Longinus shows himself in this passage to be susceptible the very Platonic blindnesses he implicitly opposes. In the end, like Plato, he is willing, even eager, to sacrifice sublimity to a communal peace which, while condemning him to a life of half-heartedness, prevents men from setting the world on fire.

Ironically, this banishment of greatness to the irrecoverable past establishes even more fully the extent to which Longinus's sublime can be said to correspond to the central object of the originary scene. The central object's minimal significance derives from its ability to focus desire while remaining inaccessible; in this way it becomes, as does the sublime for Longinus' theory of the operations of art, the guarantee of aesthetic value. As the center gradually loses its sacred aura, however, it also loses its power to transport the those on the periphery, who must, like Longinus and his philosophic friend, satisfy themselves with ever-lower thresholds of signification. Longinus's is the paradigmatically anguished cry against the inevitability of this draining away of the sacred, and against a society that sacrifices the aura of centrality in the name of protection from mutual aggressiveness.

Its nostalgia and poignant evocation of a "belated" consciousness give *On the Sublime* an eerily modern tone. We must be careful not to push this anachronistic interpretation too far, however, for Longinus can be distinguished from what we are

tempted to portray as his postmodern progeny by the touching ambivalence of his attitude toward metaphysics. As Gans has written,

> Postmodern metaphysics thinks it has purged itself of the metaphysical by its atheism, but its fundamental gesture is still the same. The sacred is irrecoverably violent, so it must be denounced. But the denial of violence is not its overcoming. The historical movement of desacralization operates neither through the endless deconstruction of the originary center nor through its definitive rejection, but through its omnicentric multiplication (*Originary Thinking*, 219).

The sacred ambivalence undergirding the founding documents of western literary

theory demonstrates that there is nothing new about the “postmodern” attempt to deconstruct or reject the originary center. That center is maddeningly paradoxical: born of violence, it is nonetheless the best means arrived at for deferring the conflict and strife that brought it into being. For Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus, longing for the genuineness of the originary (conceived, of course, *ex post facto*) alternates with terrified intuition of its irrecoverably violent reality. Their struggle to maintain a place for the sacred finally testifies not to their bloodthirstiness but to their honest recognition of the ineluctability of origins in any genuinely comprehensive theory of the sign.

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