



Title	The scope of sublime: Longinus ” On the Sublime’
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Citation	文芸学研究. 2018, 21, p. 95-97
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://hdl.handle.net/11094/76913
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The scope of sublime: Longinus “ *On the Sublime*”

Kazuhiro Todaka

On the Sublime by Longinus was a rhetorical handbook in the context of ancient Greek. Given that ancient rhetoric was in a sense a literary criticism, *On the Sublime* is also regarded as a literary criticism. At the same time, *On the Sublime* is a unique rhetorical handbook and exceeds the range of ancient rhetoric. This paper purports to elucidate the propriety of *On the Sublime* as a literary criticism.

Longinus frequently quotes and treats Homer’ s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as most of the ancient rhetorical handbooks did. On the other hand, Longinus’ treatment of two epics is quite impressive in that the heroes exemplifying the sublime are Ajax and Hector instead of Achilles and Odysseus. According to

Longinus, Achilles and Odysseus, who are commonly protagonists of Homer's epics, are too humanistic to be typical of the sublime, while Ajax and Hector, especially their indignations, are superhuman and somehow divine, which characteristics are essential to the sublime. Although Longinus disregards many passions, such as pity and fear, the indignation is exceptional and can be the cause of the sublime. This exceptional treatment of the indignation is because Plato assumed this passion to be necessary for city-state's leaders. Plato advocated expelling poets from his ideal city-state, claiming that passions including pity and fear, which were aroused by poets, could corrupt citizens, but Longinus intends to prove that some passion like indignation contributes to the sublime and lead citizens to sublime mentality.

On the Sublime is estimated to have been written in the Roman Empire in 1st century CE. Then and there prevalent was the Stoic school, of which school Seneca was one of the most representative philosophers. Intriguingly Seneca appreciated the sublime as highly as Longinus, so we are inclined to suppose that Longinus was somehow influenced by Seneca (sad to say, there was no evidence). Unexpectedly from this supposition, Seneca did not value the poetry very much and sometimes criticized it from the viewpoint of morality. For Seneca, poetry was nothing but a diversion in everyday living and was not affiliated with the sublime, as the sublime must consist of tranquility and cannot be compatible with a passion like anger. For Longinus, a certain passion conduces to the sublime as they can enhance minds of citizens. In other words, Seneca's sublime is the moderate state of mind for the philosopher, while Longinus' sublime is the elevated state of mind for the poet and the audience (or the listener or the reader). It was by 'an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry' (Plato's *Republic*) that generated such difference concerning the sublime.

Baumgarten stated in *Aesthetica* that aesthetics was a descendent of poetics and rhetoric. Not just Plato and Seneca, but most of the ancient philosophers insisted that passions were ignoble and should be suppressed, whereas rhetoricians dealt with passions with a view to persuading people. It is not coincidental that rhetoric was a predecessor of aesthetic. Nevertheless,

rhetoric itself cannot be aesthetics as long as treating passions are nothing but a measure for persuasion. The uniqueness of *On the Sublime* which evaluated passions as an elevated state of mind made this book a vanguard of aesthetics.