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Longinus, *On Sublimity* 35.1

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ABSTRACT: It is argued that the modern vulgate text of *On Sublimity* 35.1 (adopting Manutius' conjecture ὁ Λυσίας for the transmitted ἀπουσίας) produces an unacceptable incoherence in Longinus' argument. A very tentative alternative (ἄμουσίας) is proposed.

Longinus,¹ *On Sublimity* 35.1 reads in the modern vulgate as follows:²

ἐπὶ μέντοι τοῦ Πλάτωνος καὶ ἄλλη τις ἐστίν, ὡς ἔφην, διαφορά· οὐ γὰρ μεγέθει τῶν ἀρετῶν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῷ πλήθει πολὺ λειπόμενος ὁ Λυσίας ὅμως πλεῖον ἔτι τοῖς ἀμαρτήμασι περιττεύει ἢ ταῖς ἀρεταῖς λείπεται.

ὁ Λυσίας Manutius: ἀπουσίας P: αὐτοῦ Λυσίας Pearce | ὅμως Toup: ὁ μὲν P

At the beginning of chapter 32, Longinus mentioned Caecilius' principle that only two or three metaphors should be used in any one passage, and dissented from it, drawing evidence to the contrary from Demosthenes, Xenophon and (especially) Plato. Longinus acknowledges that Plato had been attacked for the extravagance of some of his metaphors, and significantly fails to rebut the criticism; he accepts elsewhere that Plato's style is sometimes at fault (4.4, 6f.; 29.1), and tacitly concedes the point here. However, he wholly rejects a further conclusion which Caecilius draws from such faults. For Caecilius they are evidence that Plato is inferior as a stylist to Lysias: for while Plato is often faulty, Lysias is faultless. Longinus' counter-argument is developed over the following chapters. At the beginning of chapter 33 he poses two questions. First, which is superior: greatness combined with faults, or faultlessness that fails to achieve greatness? In the rest of chapter 33 a famous series of comparisons shows that flawed greatness is superior to faultless mediocrity. Secondly, which is superior: a greater number of good qualities, or good qualities that are greater in themselves, even if less numerous? In chapter 34 an extended comparison shows that Hyperides' greater number of good qualities does not counterbalance Demosthenes' greater intensity.

Then, at the beginning of chapter 35, we read: 'With regard to Plato there is, as I said, another kind of difference. Not only in the greatness of his good qualities, but also in their number...' If one of the treatise's many lacunae had cut this sentence off after πλήθει, we should surely have assumed that it went on to

¹ The problem addressed in this note exists irrespective of authorship. I argue in favour of the traditional attribution in 'Longinus *On Sublimity*', *PCPS* 45 (1999), 43-74; sceptics may supply their own 'pseudo-'. An earlier version of the paper was presented to the departmental research seminar of the School of Classics at Leeds in November 1998; I am grateful to all those who contributed to the stimulating discussion, especially Roger Brock, Ronald Martin and Stephen Todd.

² Text after D.A. Russell (ed.), *Longinus' On the Sublime* (Oxford, 1964); minor variants (e.g. Jahn-Vahlen print Pearce's αὐτοῦ Λυσίας) do not affect the substance of the passage.

make a statement about Plato, asserting the excellence of his style; instead, its course is (in modern editions) unexpectedly diverted to make a statement about Lysias, asserting the deficiencies of *his* style: ‘... Lysias is left far behind’. Of course, a statement about Lysias may be used to say something indirectly about Plato: if it is accepted that Lysias is a good stylist, the claim that Lysias falls short of Plato will imply that Plato is a very great writer indeed. But according to this text, Lysias is not a good stylist; on the contrary, ‘he is still more abundant in faults than he is deficient in good qualities’. Caecilius claims that Plato, sometimes at fault, is excelled by the faultless Lysias; in reply, Longinus claims that Plato excels Lysias, who has few merits and many defects. This is not a compelling assertion of Plato’s greatness.

One symptom of the difficulty appears when Russell speaks of ‘the great σύγκρισις between the “mediocre” Lysias and Hyperides and the “truly great” Demosthenes and Plato’.³ If Lysias is ‘still more abundant in faults than he is deficient in good qualities’, then he is not ‘mediocre’ in the sense that was introduced in 33.1 (τὸ σύμμετρον μὲν ἐν τοῖς κατορθώμασιν, ὑγιᾶς δὲ πάντη καὶ ἀδιάπτωτον) and is still in question in the rest of chapter 35 and chapter 36 (all about the contrast between the great writers who disdain ἀκριβεία, and the lesser figures who achieve τὸ ἀναμάρτητον, τὸ ἄπταιστον, τὸ ἀδιάπτωτον). Nor can a Lysias abundant in faults and deficient in good qualities reasonably be paired with Hyperides, who is described in far more positive terms in chapter 34. Indeed, it is precisely because Hyperides is a very good writer that Demosthenes’ superiority to him is such a telling proof of Demosthenes’ greatness; by contrast, Plato’s greatness is established (if the vulgate text is correct) by comparing him with an author notable chiefly for his inadequacies.

Moreover, if it is true that Lysias abounds in faults, then the whole discussion in the two preceding chapters appears superfluous. Caecilius’ argument that Lysias is superior to Plato by virtue of his faultlessness can be rejected on that basis alone; the question of the relative merits of faultless mediocrity and flawed greatness is irrelevant if Lysias is not an example of faultlessness at all. Longinus will have used a dispute about the relative merits of Lysias and Plato as a pretext for discussing the general issue of principle concerning faultless mediocrity and flawed greatness, even though the dispute turns not on different views of that general issue, but on radically different assessments of Lysias.

Can such a procedure be explained? Longinus has multiple interests in the treatise,⁴ including (i) vindicating Plato and (ii) pursuing a running polemic against Caecilius. It might be argued, therefore, that his real interest in this section does not lie in the comparison of Lysias and Plato; instead, Caecilius’ preference for Lysias over Plato functions (i) as a dramatic way of introducing a question of principle (are faults consistent with genuine greatness?) crucial to the assertion of

³ D.A. Russell, ‘Longinus revisited’, *Mnemosyne* 34 (1981), 72-86, 84. Russell goes on to talk of the ‘inadequacy’ of Lysias and Hyperides, by contrast with the ‘truly great’. But are authors who are not ‘truly great’ to be condemned as ‘inadequate’? Contrast Longinus 36.1: καὶ τὸ μὲν ἄπταιστον οὐ ψέγεται, τὸ μέγα δὲ καὶ θαυμάζεται.

⁴ Cf. Russell (n.3), 74.

Plato's greatness, and (ii) as an opportunity to renew the attack on Caecilius. We have seen that the denigration of Lysias at the beginning of chapter 35 contributes nothing to the assertion of Plato's greatness as a stylist; so at this point the polemic against Caecilius would have to be uppermost in Longinus' mind. His aim would be to expose Caecilius' judgement as so bad that he fails to recognise Lysias' abundant faults.

But the passage is inept even for the purposes of anti-Caecilian polemic. A polemical assertion is useless, indeed counter-productive, if the only response it can elicit is incredulity. Consider, therefore, just how radical the view of Lysias expressed here is. That Lysias was a writer of limited range would not have been contentious; nor would the claim that Lysias had some faults have stretched credibility too far.⁵ But the vulgate text makes Longinus go far beyond that: the judgement that Lysias *abounds* in stylistic faults is an extraordinary one, unparalleled in ancient criticism.⁶ Longinus had no need of such a radical thesis: Caecilius' position collapses (and his poor literary judgement is exposed) if Lysias has any faults at all. The hyperbolic claim that Lysias abounds in faults (which Longinus makes no attempt to justify, although he could not have been unaware that it was unconventional and contentious) thus serves no function, other than to weaken the argument by inviting a sceptical response.

What did Longinus think of Lysias? The τῷ ὄντι at the beginning of chapter 33 may be evidence that he did not think Lysias utterly faultless; in inviting his readers to consider 'a genuinely pure and unimpeachable writer', Longinus arguably implies a contrast with Lysias' alleged (but not genuine) unimpeachability. But there is a huge difference between not being faultless and abounding in faults. And in chapter 34 we find a positive view of Lysias: if it is to the credit of Hyperides that he imitates Lysias' 'good qualities and graces' (34.2), can Lysias really be so deficient in good qualities as he appears at 35.1?

In sum: the vulgate text of 35.1 attributes to Longinus a view of Lysias that sits ill with what is said of him in the previous chapter, and that is wildly eccentric; its gratuitous hyperbole compromises the claim as polemic, while its irrelevance renders it useless as a vindication of Plato. Moreover, it produces structural incoherence, detaching the abundantly faulty Lysias from the whole discussion of faultless mediocrity, and isolating him from Hyperides and all the other genuinely good authors who are cited as falling short of greatness. The vulgate text would be problematic, therefore, even if it were the transmitted reading. In fact, our sole primary witness makes no mention of Lysias in this passage; his name was introduced by conjecture. That conjecture is undoubtedly neat; but neat mistakes are no less mistaken, only more dangerous. The superficial

⁵ Photius (cod. 262, 489b4-9, 13-15) reports the view of 'some' that Lysias was weak in amplification, and Caecilius' claim (= fr. 110 Ofenloch) that he was less successful in οἰκονομία than invention; cf. 262, 488b35-6 for an error that 'even' Lysias makes in the presentation of character. The one specifically stylistic criticism of Lysias that I have found is a comment by Theophrastus (fr. 692 Fortenbaugh = D.H. *Lys.* 14) on a single passage in a speech not regarded as authentic by later critics.

⁶ Contrast the terms in which Cicero rebuts excessive admiration of Lysias (*Orator* 29): 'venustissimus... politissimus... quod nihil habeat insolens aut ineptum.'

attractiveness of Manutius' proposal has distracted attention from the incoherence it produces in Longinus' argument, and from the methodological impropriety of foisting on an author by conjecture an opinion for which there is no parallel, and of which he has no need.

The transmitted text is, however, still in need of emendation.⁷ The following suggestion is offered very tentatively. It may help to loosen the grip which the vulgate has on our imagination by illustrating the possibility of alternative approaches, and thus serve as a stimulus to further thought. But the corruption may be much deeper than is assumed here.

ἐπὶ μέντοι τοῦ Πλάτωνος καὶ ἄλλη τις ἐστίν, ὡς ἔφην, διαφορά· οὐ γὰρ μεγέθει τῶν ἀρετῶν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῷ πλήθει πολὺ λειπόμενος ἀμουσίας, ὅτε μὲν πλεῖον ἔτι τοῖς ἀμαρτήμασι περιττεύει ἢ ταῖς ἀρεταῖς λείπεται.

ἀμουσίας M. Heath | ὅτε μὲν R.H. Martin

With regard to Plato there is, as I said, another difference. Although, not only in the greatness of his good qualities but also in their number, he is far removed from lack of refinement, sometimes he is still more abundant in faults than he is deficient in good qualities.

ἀμουσίας is a minimal change for ἀπουσίας; compare the corruption of ἄμουσος ἦ to ἄλλους ὅση at 39.2. That passage, one of three occurrences of ἄμουσος (cf. 28.1, 34.2), echoes Plato, *Symposium* 196e in its quotation of Euripides fr. 663 (admittedly a hackneyed citation). Since ἄμουσος and ἀμουσία occur at least 24 times in Plato, the word is at any rate apt in a Platonic connection. Martin's ὅτε μὲν elegantly resolves the apparent contradiction between the two parts of the sentence: limiting the scope of the adverse comment produces a complex but self-consistent assessment of Plato as an outstanding author who sometimes goes badly astray—precisely the view which Longinus expresses elsewhere (cf. e.g. 4.4 ποτε).

On this approach, therefore, the first part of the sentence makes the expected positive statement about Plato as a stylist. Moreover, there is a satisfactory contrast with the preceding discussion of Demosthenes: Demosthenes' good qualities are limited in number, though very great; Plato's are very numerous as well as very great. The second part of the sentence recognises the other side of Plato's style: for all his greatness, he sometimes writes very badly. This restatement in more challenging terms of the problem about Plato posed in chapter 32 indicates that the discussion of the preliminary questions in chapters 33-34 is complete, and that the crucial issue must now be faced squarely; hence Longinus continues with the question: 'what, then, did they have in view, those godlike authors who aspired to what is greatest in literature, disdaining accuracy in every detail?' In other words, the combination of great excellences and serious faults in Plato poses in an acute form the question of why the greatest authors do not strive

⁷ The only modern scholar to have recognised the difficulties of the vulgate is G.M.A. Grube, 'Notes on the περὶ ὕψους', *AJP* 78 (1957), 355-374: see 371-4 (not all his objections to the vulgate are valid; he overlooks, for example, parallels for elliptical οὐ... ἀλλὰ καὶ in the sense οὐ μόνον... ἀλλὰ καὶ). But his attempt to interpret the paradosis (advanced with due caution) is unsuccessful: see Russell's comments *ad loc.*

to eliminate faults from their style, a question definitively answered in chapters 35-36. This approach thus prevents the discussion reaching a premature conclusion at 35.1, and restores continuity with what follows.

One might in addition consider deleting *λείπεται*: Plato is always good, but in some passages his faults outnumber even *his* good qualities.