Beyond the Limits: Longinus' *On the Sublime*

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Abstract: Despite its place in the history of Rhetoric, the treatise *On the Sublime* seems to move away from a school of rhetoric as an art of persuasion based on learning-oriented rules and precepts. Although Longinus is part of the rhetorical tradition of his time, in his view, which has nothing to do with stylistics, the sublime is not definable through the formal language of rhetoric because it goes beyond the limits of that art. The treatise presents what we may call an aesthetics of the unlimited and the impossible, evident in the examples of sublime moments in literary texts given by the author.

1. The Sublime and Rhetoric

Despite its place in the history of Rhetoric, there is no doubt that the treatise *On the Sublime* moves away from a school of rhetoric as an art of persuasion based on learning-oriented rules and precepts. Although not neglecting τέχνη, but rather assuming itself as a τέχνη, Longinus' sublime is not reducible to rigid precepts. Furthermore, contrary to rhetorical art it does not aim at persuasion, but induces ecstasy in its hearers (1.4). By refusing persuasion as the ultimate purpose of the sublime, the author seems to be removing it from the field of rhetorical art of which πειθώ was a defining concept, since Gorgias at least[1]. Moreover, ὕψος includes essential elements, innate abilities impossible to reduce to a prescription, namely the power of conceiving grandiose, impressive thoughts, and the power to create strong and enthusiastic emotions (8.2). In this perspective, the sublime is not definable through the formal language of rhetoric by which it is conceived as a style appropriated to express high subjects. In fact, Longinus never refers to ὕψος with the traditional word χαρακτήρ. The reason is that, in some manner, the sublime goes beyond the limits of stylistics and rhetoric in their strictest sense, i.e., as the art of persuasion[2].

[1] According to Socrates (Plato, *Gorgias* 453a), Gorgias defined rhetoric as πειθοὺς δημιουργός.

[2] Porter (2016: 160) takes a contrary view in arguing, against Longinus himself (15.10), that "sublimity does not transcend the limits of persuasion and belief: it is their consummation."

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This does not mean the rejection of rhetorical art, obviously. Longinus (8.1) says that the first condition for the creation of sublime moments is the mastery of language, which, as we know, is achieved through the study of Grammar and Rhetoric. The author is part of an old rhetorical tradition, and thus he incorporates many of its instruments of analysis, as well as the traditional terminology established in treatises on rhetoric since Aristotle. However, he sometimes uses these same instruments and terminology with a different meaning and purpose[3]. The scope of the first chapter is precisely to distinguish between what the author understands by sublime (a strong emotional impact that causes astonishment and wonder) and that which in rhetoric is one of the three styles that characterize the works of renowned authors. It is true that, as Porter argues, "in rhetoric aesthetic impact was never divorced from emotional impact." However, he does not seem to be right when he says that "Longinus' apparent exchange of 'ecstasy' for 'persuasion' is a ruse", or when he argues that the author is only reformulating the three Aristotelian *pisteis* – *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*. Porter says "*logical arguments and content*, subdivided into invention and arrangement" is "what Longinus refers to as experience in invention and the arrangement and organization of subject matter in 1.4 and *to pragmatikon* in 15. 9-11"[4]. However, what Porter does not seem to realize is that, in 1.4, Longinus has separated those parts of rhetoric – invention and composition – from the sublime, not giving them another name. The distinction between the two fields derives from the fact that those qualities of discourse are only discernible in the whole text, while sublimity is a thing of a single moment[5]:

> Experience in invention and ability to order and arrange material cannot be detected in single passages; we begin to appreciate them only when we see the whole context. Sublimity, on the other hand, produced at the right moment, tears everything up like a whirlwind, and exhibits the orator's whole power at a single blow.

These words imply that the main rhetorical criteria for evaluating a discourse do not apply to the judgment about the literary sublime. In some sense, the Longinian sublime is more psychological and ethical than intellectual. Hence the repproach directed at Caecilius (1.1-2): "he has somehow passed over as unnecessary the question how we can develop our nature to some degree of greatness."

Because the Longinian sublime has its roots in the human soul, which by nature aspires to the greatness that causes ecstasy and astonishment (35. 1-3), it is

I will return to this matter later.

[3] Cf. Halliwell 2013: 328.

[4] Porter 2016: 160 n. 240.

[5] Translations of passages from Longinus are taken from Russell and Winterbottom 1972.

beyond formal learning. That is the reason why when Longinus tries to teach how to discern "true sublimity" he does not resort to technical language. He instead admits the dificulty of the task and states (6.1) that "literary judgement comes only as the final product of long experience." Longinus does not have a formula for its definition, preferring to speak of the signs that allow it to be distinguished and recognized (7). In fact, his concept of sublime has more to do with ethics[6] and philosophy than with rhetoric strictly speaking. His words (9.1-3) about what it takes to have high thoughts are symptomatic of the ethical aspects of the sublimity that is at stake here. And the echoes of Plato are clear in this passage[7]:

> Even if it is a matter of endowment rather than acquisition, we must, so far as is possible, develop our minds in the direction of greatness and make them always pregnant with noble thoughts. You ask how this can be done. 2. I wrote elsewhere something like this: 'Sublimity is the echo of a noble mind.' […] 3. First then we must state where sublimity comes from: the orator must not have low or ignoble thoughts. Those whose thoughts and habits are trivial and servile all their lives cannot possibly produce anything admirable or worthy of eternity.

2. Beyond the limits

At the heart of Longinus' conception of the effects of ὕψος is the idea of going beyond the limits. In fact, he speaks of the experience of literary sublimity as a way of approaching the divine, i.e., that which surpasses human measure[8]. Poets and prose writers – Homer, Plato, Demosthenes, etc. – are ἰσόθεοι; and the words ἔκστασις and ἔκπληξις, *teloi* of sublime art, express the strong psychological impact that gives the hearer or reader a glimpse of the greatness that is above or outside of themselves, but whose yearning is imprinted on their soul (35.1-3):

> … nature made man to be no humble or lowly creature, but … implanted in our minds from the start an irresistible desire for anything which is great and, in relation to ourselves, supernatural. The universe therefore is not wide enough for the range of human speculation and intellect. Our thoughts often travel beyond the boundaries of our surroundings.

The treatise thus presents what we may call an aesthetics of the unlimited[9], because, in a way, ὕψος suspends the limits between opposites, between the pos-

[6] Cf. Eire (2002: 158).

[7] See, e.g. 13.1.

[8] About the religious aspects of longinian sublime see De Jonge (2012).

[9] Porter (161) prefers to speak of "a gap, or void, or an absence – a blank space and discontinuity that interrupts representation, threatening the very possibility of representation

sible and the impossible, providing, through imagination, instantaneous access to what is beyond human possibility. This is evident in the examples given by the author. One of them is particularly striking in suggesting an impossible action pushed to the verge of happening, besides being a clear testimony that ὕψος is not a stylistic device[10]. It is the passage when Longinus states that "sublimity often occurs apart from emotion (8.2):

> Of the innumerable examples of this I select Homer's bold account of the Aloadae:
>
> > Ossa upon Olympus they sought to heap; and on Ossa
> > Pelion with its shaking forest, to make a path to heaven –
>
> and the even more impressive sequel –
>
> > and they would have finished their work …

The mere suggestion that such a thing could happen is completely amazing and is expressed in the simplest sentence "and they would have finished their work…."

The brief quote from the book of Genesis in chapter 9 is an explicit example of greatness of thought expressed in simple words, and shows how an author's high thoughts have the power to provide an experience of ecstasy, that is, the experience of going beyond the limits of oneself and of the universe. Longinus does not say why this passage is sublime; he only says that "the lawgiver of the Jews understood and expressed God's power in accordance with its worth", leaving the meaning of Moses' words to the reader's imagination:

> Similarly, the lawgiver of the Jews, no ordinary man – for he understood and expressed God's power in accordance with its worth – writes at the beginning of his Laws: 'God said'- now what? – "'Let there be light", and there was light; "Let there be earth", and there was earth.

However, stressing the mosaic text with an interrogative pronoun – τί ('what') – creates a kind of a moment of suspense with which the author emphasizes the sublimity of the image created by the words. This simple, brief question stirs the reader's imagination and expands it in such a way that he stays on the

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and even of imagination."

[10] Porter (2016: 166) addresses the way Longinus treats hyperbaton as a figure that creates a similar effect since "it thrills on the border of chaos."

verge of reaching the humanly impossible. The idea of God creating the world with his word is so difficult to conceive and, even more so, to imagine, but at the same time it is so wonderfully amazing that it can only cause astonishment and awe. In fact, because Longinus addresses pagan readers for whom the gods, although superior to men, were subject to the order of the cosmos, this idea of a unique and transcendent divinity is awesome and formidable, and therefore an example of sublime thought[11].

One last example illustrates clearly the correspondence between sublime moments and passion for the unlimited. It is a passage quoted from the *Iliad*:

> As far as a man can peer through the mist,
> sitting on watch, looking over the wine-dark sea,
> so long is the stride of the gods' thundering horses.

Longinus goes on to explain what is striking and astounding in these Homeric verses:

> He uses a cosmic distance to measure their speed. This enormously impressive image would make anybody say, and with reason, that, if the horses of the gods took two strides like that, they would find there was not enough room in the world.

As Porter rightly says, "here we can see [...] how the sublime is being produced not so much by an originating author as by a critical reading."[12] Longinus is assuming his role as a literary critic and, to the extent that he aims to teach how to discern true sublimity, he is assuming the educational nature of his work[13].

Alongside this fascination with the unlimited, Longinus shows an undisguised contempt for everything that is too academic, normative and quantifiable. That is why he moves away ostensibly, not only from Caecilius of Calacte, but also from other authors of manuals, usually unidentified[14]. In chapter 12, while talking about amplification, he says this: *I do not feel satisfied with the defini-*

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[11] This same line of thought is expressed by West (1995: 338): "We can appreciate that L might well be impressed by the Jews' creation story once it had come his way. Here at least was something quite unlike anything to be found in the Greek classics. It was not just a grand conception, but one untarnished by any touch of the conventional or familiar." About this remarkable quotation see also Russell 1964, ad loc.; Porter 2016: 107-113.

[12] Cf. Porter 2016: 163-164.

[13] About the way Longinus comments on material used by his predecessors, see West (1995: 336), who says: "He personally feels the effects that he ascribes to the passages he quotes, and he does his utmost to define these effects and persuade others to feel them."

[14] Cf. e.g., 2.1-2, on the question of knowing if there is an art of ὕψος, where Longinus opposes the indefinite τινες (… φησί) το ἐγὼ δὲ (… φημί).

tion given by the rhetoricians (τεχνογράφων). As for the term φαντασία (15), he clarifies that this is the name he himself gives to that which others call *idolopeia* (εἰδωλοποιία).

Elsewhere in the treatise the critical tone is more subtle or less direct. An example of this is the passage in Chapter 22, in which Longinus, while stating the power of *hyperbaton* to reproduce mental agitation, makes the following comment:

> People who in real life feel anger, fear, or indignation, or are distracted by jealousy or some other emotion (it is impossible to say how many emotions there are; they are without number), often put one thing forward and then rush off to another,…

In this apparently trivial manner, within a parenthetic phrase, Longinus defends not only the impossibility, but also the irrelevance of quantifying and cataloging passions, against those rhetoricians who enumerated them in lengthy lists.

However, if the Longinian sublime has something to do with breaking limits and with giving the readers a glimpse of the impossible, poets and prose writers need a sense of appropriatness and of opportunity to avoid the dangers inherent to greatness. In the author's words, they need a method (μέθοδος) "competent to provide and contribute quantities [τὰς ποσότητας] and appropriate occasions for everything [τὸν ἐφ' ἑκάστου καιρόν), as well as perfect correctness in training and application" (2.1). Which is this method?

Chapter 32, on the use of metaphors, besides being a very eloquent example of Longinus' aversion to numbers, seems to give the answer. For some teachers of rhetoric, followed by Caecilius of Calacte, a criterion for the correct use of this trope is that of quantity. For this reason, they prescribe[15] the use of two or at most three metaphors on the same subject. Longinus simply contends that the canon, i.e., the limit (ὅρος) should be taken from the texts of great authors, like Demosthenes (32.1):

> Here too Demosthenes is our canon. The right occasions [ὁ καιρός] are when emotions come flooding in and bring the multiplication of metaphors with them as a necessary accompaniment.

The rule of Demosthenes is, after all, rejection of numerical rule, refusal to impose a quantifiable limit. Instead, the criterion must be that of καιρός, revealed in opportune and strong passions and a noble sublimity. These are also, in his

[15] The word for 'prescribe' is νομοθετοῦσι – note the ironic use of the verb to criticize the power of law that these norms acquired in treatises of rhetoric.

view, the antidote to the daring of metaphors, a potential danger against which rhetoricians warned, starting with Aristotle himself and his disciple, Theophrastus (16.3).

3. Kairos: limits for the unlimited

The word καιρός had a long, prolific history in Greek poetic, philosophic and rheorical tradition[16]. If we take, for example, Pindar, we can say that in his odes *kairos* was a moral concept of practical application that served as a criterion for human words and actions. Its appropriation by sophistic rhetoric, where it became a guiding principle for the choice of persuasive strategies, was perhaps due to Protagoras and Gorgias of Leontinus, whom Dionysius of Halicarnassus claimed to have written a work entitled Περὶ τοῦ καιροῦ. In Gorgias' view, *kairos* represented the "uniquely timely" (as Carolyne Miller says), which is the creative answer to unexpected challenges and situations.[17] Therefore, it was not liable to be taught. Dionysius of Halicarnassus says that Gorgias, "the man who first undertook to write on the subject, achieved nothing worth mentioning."[18] Neverthless he recognizes that "the nature of the subject is not such that it can fall under any comprehensive and systematic treatment, nor can *kairos* in general be apprehended by science [ἐπιστήμῃ], but only by personal judgement [δόξῃ]". The concept took a central place in Isocrates' rhetorical ideas[19]. It was also associated with the related notions of τὸ πρέπον or even of *decorum* in Cicero[20]. In this sense, it was a principle of accomodation to convention, to what is expectable at a given moment, and presumed a previous order that necessarily shaped rhetorical actions.

Καιρός is therefore a very old and a very complex concept of rhetorical analysis, and one of the many traditional concepts with which Longinus works but adapts to his particular view of ὕψος. In fact, in his treatise, καιρός is no longer directly associated with persuasion but it becomes the very measure of the sublime. Since right from the first chapter ὕψος is defined by its instantaneous quality, i.e., it is defined as a quality that reveals itself not in a whole work, but in single moments, it is natural that kairos ('opportune occasion') is a crucial item in the Longinian conception of ὕψος. Hence, in the first chapter, he speaks of ὑψος that is produced καιρίως ('at the right time'). Καιρός, the timely occasion, the exact moment, the sense of opportunity and appropriateness, which is also

[16] About the meaning and the ancient history of the term *kairos* see, e.g. Rostagni 1922, 2002; Wilson 1980, 1981; Race 1981; Kinneavy 1985; Sipiora 2002; Várzeas 2009: 31-39.

[17] Miller 2002: xiii.

[18] *De comp. Verb.* 6.12.

[19] Cf. *Against the Sophists* 9-13; 16-17. See Vallozza 1985; Sipiora 2002: 7-15.

[20] *Orator* 21.71.

related to the notion of necessity, is the very key for creating sublime moments. It is the real limit that creats the unlimited, a kind of paradoxical thought which Longinus particularly appreciates, as when he speaks of Demosthenes' order that "becomes desorderly, his disorder in turn acquires a certain order."

It is mainly in the field of emotions and in the field of figures – σχήματα – that καιρός is called to serve as a measure. Καιρός is, then, a ὅρος, a limit that is able to restrain the wild spontaneity of natural talent. If the literary sublime raises the soul and opens it to the unlimited, then in the process of its creation, the bridle is no less necessary than the sting (2.2). Therefore, καιρός is, indeed, a principle of accomodation – not to convention, as the rhetoric *decorum*, but to nature (φύσις).

In the polemic about φύσις and τέχνη, echoed in chapter 2, Longinus argues for the inseparability of the two, but καιρός is, in a way, the point where both converge. This is why he rejects what Theodorus of Gadara called παρένθυρσον, for being a πάθος ἀκαίριον (3.5), and in chapter 8 says that "there is nothing productive of grandeur as the noble emotion in the right place" (χρή – 8.4). About sublime passages in the texts of Demosthenes he argues that "the place (καιρός) for the intense, Demosthenic kind of sublimity is in indignant exaggeration, in violent emotion, and in general wherever the hearer has to be struck with amazement" (12.5). In the passage about the use of metaphor he defends that "strong and appropriate emotions (εὔκαιρα καὶ σφοδρὰ πάθη) ... are a specific palliative for multiplied or daring metaphors" (32.4).

In other parts of his treatise, Longinus warns the reader against the dangers involved in using σχήματα (17.1; 29.1) and advocates the need for moderation. I quote only the example of the oath figure. Longinus says that the greatness achieved by such a figure depends exclusively on its opportunity. It is not the oath, by itself, that guarantees the sublimity of the passage, but the limits imposed on its use: "But the greatness depends not on the mere form of the oath, but on place, manner, occasion, and purpose."

The refusal of the quantitative criterion for the appreciation of literary greatness is explicitly stated in the comparison between Hyperides and Demosthenes:

> If good points were totted up, not judged by their real value, Hyperides would in every way surpass Demosthenes. He is more versatile, and has more good qualities. … Demosthenes, by contrast … is practically without all the qualities I have been describing. … Yet Hyperides' beauties, though numerous, are without grandeur … they leave the hearer at peace. Nobody feels frightened reading Hyperides.

In the comparison between the two orators, what is at stake is the opposition between greatness with some defects and irreproachable mediocrity. Absolute mastery of technique produces perfect compositions, pleasing to read or to hear,

but they do not disturb, they do not amaze, do not terrify, they are not sublime. The beautiful things, τὰ καλὰ, which Hyperides is able to create, are quantifiable, so Longinus easily enumerates them. By contrast, Demosthenes' virtues are not valued for their number, an aspect in which he is totaly surpassed, but by the intensity, the energy, the force with which the orator draws his hearers. The vehemence, intensity and opportunity of his words and pathos make him the example of the extraordinary orator, who goes beyond the limits of persuasion.

4. The Sublime and Persuasion

In his book on *Ekstasis and Truth*, Stephen Halliwell, about the Longinian treatise, says that the work's scheme of values is marked by a "variable relationship between sublimity and persuasion"; and characterizes this "variable relationship" in terms of a tension[21]. In fact, Longinus' early assertions suggested that the argument to be developed throughout the treatise is based on the initial assumption that persuasion is excluded from the sphere of ὕψος. The truth, however, is that at some point in his text that assumption seems to be shaken. The problem becomes more acute in Chapter 15, which deals with φαντασία, 'imagination' or, as Russell suggests, 'visualization', one of the means of expressing high thoughts. Longinus starts by drawing a distinction between *phantasia* in the field of rhetoric and *phantasia* in the field of poetry (ἡ ῥετορικὴ φαντασία and ἡ παρὰ ποιηταῖς φαντασία), stating that the aim of the first is ἐνάργεια 'evidence', that of the second being ἔκπληξις, 'astonishment' or 'shock'. With this statement, the author seems to take up again the terms used at the beginning of the treatise where he drew attention to the specific ends of the sublime, ἔκστασις and ἔκπληξις, as opposed to those of rhetorical art, since apparently ἐνάργεια enters the field of persuasion. On the other hand, about an example of rhetorical *phantasy* taken from Hyperides, he says that "his thought has taken him beyond the limits of mere persuasiveness" (15.10). Halliwell[22] sees a slight contradiction in this passage, pointing out that the author

> makes rhetorical visualization sound rather like poetic *phantasia* after all. Longinus adds, in fact, that rhetorical visualization has the power to overshadow rational argument or demonstration and to draw its audiences forcefully into the experience of explêxis, which at the start of the chapter was specifically the hallmark of poetic but not rhetorical visualization.

In my view the contradiction is more apparent than real. Indeed, by distinguishing poetic *phantasia* from rhetorical *phantasia* in those terms, Longinus is

[21] Halliwell 2013: 330, 348.

[22] Halliwell 2013: 349.

merely reminding the reader of the obvious: that the universe of poetry is very different from that of oratory[23]. This is why he assumes that what he is going to say is not new (15.2): "It will not escape you that rhetorical visualization has a different intention from that of the poet". In fact, it was a common assumption to associate ἔκπληξις with poetry, and persuasive demonstration with rhetoric[24]. Later on (15.8), taking up this distinction again (ὡς ἔφην), he reminds us that

> poetical examples, as I said, have a quality of exaggeration which belongs to fable and goes far beyond credibility. In an orator's visualizations, on the other hand, it is the element of fact and truth which makes for succes.

This prior distinction is necessary to argue that it is not in poetry that orators should seek inspiration for creating visualizations, since they deal with facts and reality, from which the fabulous must walk away.

However, Longinus himself seems to be aware that his argument may seem loose or contradictory, and therefore explains:

> What then is the effect of rhetorical visualization? There is much it can do to bring urgency and passion into our words; but it is when it is closely involved with factual arguments that it enslaves the hearer as well as persuading him.

As we can see, the author does not reject persuasion as the purpose of a speaker or of a piece of oratory. How could he do so? He only argues that sublime art goes beyond that purpose, and that *phantasia* can surpass the mere persuasive effect and overwhelm the readers, leading them to loose self-control, which in this passage is expressed by the verbal form δουλοῦται. This is in line with what the author had said at the beginning of the treatise on persuasion and the sublime (1.4):

> This is because persuasion is on the whole something we can control, whereas amazement and wonder exert invincible power and force and get the better of every hearer.

Rhetorical *phantasia* is not in itself sublime, it does not lead to ἔκπληξις, but the same is true about poetic *phantasia*. The author gives examples of images contrary to the sublime in several passages of the treatise and not only in the chapter dedicated to this artistic device. We need only recall some of the flaws

[23] As Russel (1964: 121) points out about this passage, "the real difference is that rhetoric deals more with reality, not that it does not admit ἔκπληξις."

[24] About ἔκπληξις in this passage, Russell (1964, *ad loc.*) remembers that "Aristotle uses the term of poetry" and that "Hellenistic theory laid considerable stress on it as an aim of poetry."

presented in chapters 3 and 4, which Longinus attributes to "desire for novelty of thought." One of them (3.1) is taken from a tragedy of Aeschylus; but even the observation about Euripides in 15.3 somehow implies that not all poetic images reach the level of elevation that is at stake here. On the other hand, it is clear that rhetorical *phantasy* can suffer from the vices contrary to the sublime, as is the case of orators who "like tragic actors … *see* the Erinyes" (15.8).

In my view the point Longinus seeks to establish is that, despite the essential differences between these literary genres, *phantasia* can create sublime moments in both. It is precisely at this point – of greatness or sublimity – that both fields can converge.

In some extraordinary cases, rhetorical visualization is not limited to persuading – a range that can be achieved through demonstration and that requires the reader, it seems, to be more rational than emotional. This is perhaps the idea implicit in the statement, already quoted (1.4), that while persuasion depends on the hearers, the sublime is above them. Thus, even in a speech designed to persuade, moments of the truly sublime may arise, those moments where persuasion is surpassed and something more is created. This is argued very clearly in chapter 16, with the example of the oath figure in a passage of Demosthenes' *On the Crown*. With this single figure, says Longinus, Demosthenes "transforms his demonstration into an extraordinary piece of sublimity and passion". Furthermore, the oath "embraces a demonstration that they 'did no wrong', an illustrative example, a confirmation, an encomium, and an exhortation."

In fact, this chapter is very enlightening about the meaning of the Longinian distinction between sublime and persuasion. Before quoting Demosthenes' extraordinary oath, he exemplifies the natural arguments with which the orator would defend his political actions:

> Here is Demosthenes putting forward a demonstrative argument on behalf of his policy. What would have been the natural way to put it? 'You have not done wrong, you who fought for the liberty of Greece; you have examples to prove this close at home: the men of Marathon, of Salamis, of Plataea did not do wrong.' But instead of this he was suddenly inspired to give voice to the oath by the heroes of Greece: 'By those who risked their lives at Marathon, you have not done wrong!

The ways in which the sublime is much more than persuasion are thus clear. In the first case, we have an example of argument in order to persuade the audience; in the second, the real one, demonstration is transformed into something sublime and the orator "runs away with his audience".

Therefore, although it is not intended to persuade, the sublime may arise in a discourse with that purpose and can make it even more credible (πιστότερον – 18.2). Even better, with the sublime, the orator "goes beyond the limits of persuasion".

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