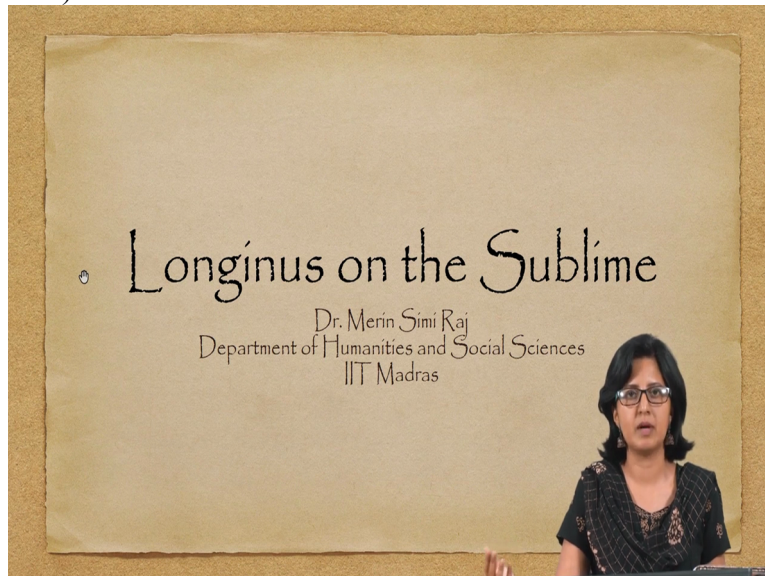


Introduction to World Literature
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Longinus on the Sublime - I

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Hello and welcome to today's session of the NPTEL course, 'Introduction to world literature'. Today we are discussing the text on the sublime arguably written by Longinus. The authorship of this work is still debatable. It is a first century text and it has been considered as a text which is now a part of literary criticism. Longinus is one of those critics who has laid the foundations of Western critical thought. It barely more appropriate to say that on the sublime is a text which has laid the foundations of Western critical thought and also has influenced the base in which the English literary critical tradition has been shaped. So when we talk about the English literary criticism, there are 3 big names which way encounter when we talk about the foundations- Aristotle, Plato and then it is Longinus.

And of course we sometimes also talk about Horrius and his (())(1:11) but these 3 names, Aristotle, Plato and Longinus, they are extremely important in understanding some of the literary concepts which have worked in very foundational ways to shape the concept of literary criticism, the concept of literary yardsticks and the ways in which we have been taught to read text in a very traditional, in a very literary critical way. It is important to give a background to our understanding of this text, on the sublime.

Before Longinus, there were 3 major things that were considered as foundational in terms of understanding, in terms of appreciating any literary work. Of course, we know that the words were not published or disseminated in the way that it is in the contemporary there was an oral tradition, there was a sense of aesthetic and there was a way in which the forms of art, the form for entertainment were also read within particular frameworks, were also understood within particular frameworks. And if you know the significance of Aristotle and Plato, you would also know that the understanding of literature was also through rhetoric, through aesthetics, through moral principles.

So there was a holistic way in which any kind of art, any kind of artistic output was also seen as. So before Longinus, we are given to understand the function of literature was threefold. One, to instruct. Second, to delight and thirdly to persuade. So every good work, every work of art whether it is a play or any poem or something which is a part of folklore, the merit of it, the merit of that work, the merit of its effect was judged on account of its power to instruct, to delight or to persuade.

So when Longinus is writing, on the sublime, he is writing from such a context. And we will begin to see how his work on the sublime also departs significantly from these 3 aspects, to instruct, to delight and to persuade. And he begins to talk about the idea of the sublime and he is the first one to talk about it and we also know that there are others who perfected this such as Berk in later centuries. But it is important to realise that the term as such was used, a Greek term of course was used by Longinus for the first time.

And when we talk about sublime, there are multiple ways in which we can situate its meaning today but in this context, in the context of this text he is actually talking about how to identify the sublime or how to or what constitutes what we now understand as sublimity literature. One of the chief arguments in this text, on the sublime is that the function of literature cannot be limited to these 3 things, not to, not just to instruct, delight and to persuade because these 3 aspects also require the willing cooperation of the reader.

There is a very active wilful participation that one requires from the reader in order to be instructed to be delighted or to be persuaded. Longinus on the other hand is talking about the power of the sublime as an involuntary thing, as something which will not nearly convince the

reader but will transport the reader out of himself or herself. It is just not really well within the power of the reader and it is almost like a spell which is cast on the reader. That is the kind of power that Longinus argued that good literature, great literature should have on the reader's mind.

Of course, there are various ways in which one could debate the essentialisation which is part of some of the ancient works. But regardless of that, to talk about the new concepts, to depart from the ways in which literature and its reading had been seen during that period, that is what makes this text very very distinct. In this session, we will take our look at some of the excerpts from this dated text, on the sublime and it is also important for you to keep in mind that one third of this text from the original has been lost.

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Longinus: On the Sublime
<http://faculty.win.edu/CB-Dilger/07/04/Longinus.html>

- 1 This treatise of Caecilius on the Sublime, when, as you remember, my dear Terentian, we examined it together, seemed to us to be beneath the dignity of the whole subject, to fail entirely in seizing the salient points, and to offer little profit (which should be the principal aim of every writer) for the trouble of its perusal. There are two things essential to a technical treatise: the first is to define the subject; the second (I mean second in order, as it is by much the first in importance) to point out how and by what methods we may become masters of it ourselves. And yet Caecilius, while wasting his efforts in a thousand illustrations of the nature of the Sublime, as though here we were quite in the dark, somehow passes by as immaterial the question how we might be able to exalt our own genius to a certain degree of progress in sublimity.
- 2 However, perhaps it would be fairer to commend this writer's intelligence and zeal in themselves, instead of blaming him for his omissions. And since you have bidden me also to put together, if only for your entertainment, a few notes on the subject of the Sublime, let me see if there is anything in my speculations which promises advantage to men of affairs. In you, dear friend—such is my confidence in your abilities, and such the part which becomes you—I look for a sympathising and discerning¹ critic of the several parts of my treatise. For that was a just remark of his who pronounced that the points in which we resemble the divine nature are benevolence and love of truth.
- 3 As I am addressing a person so accomplished in literature, I need only state, without enlarging further on the matter, that the Sublime, wherever it occurs, consists in a certain loftiness and excellence of language, and that it is by this, and this only, that the greatest poets and prose-writers have gained eminence, and won themselves a lasting place in the Temple of Fame. A lofty passage does not convince the reason of the reader, but takes him out of himself. That which is admissible even confounds opinion, judgment, and refigures that which is merely reasonable or agreeable. To believe or not is usually in our own power, but the Sublime, acting with an impetuous and irresistible force, sways every reader whether he will or no. Skill in invention, local arrangement and disposition of facts, are appreciated not by one passage, or by two, but gradually manifest themselves in the general structure of a work; but a sublime thought, if happily timed, illumines² an entire subject with the vividness of a lightning-flash, and exhibits the whole power of the orator in a moment of time. Your own experience, I am sure, my dearest Terentian, would enable you to illustrate these

To give you a sense of how this text is structured, to look at the different parts of it, we will also take a quick look at it and of course we do have, we have access to the translated version now and one third of this is said to have been lost. Even when the manuscript was found, it is said that they did not have the entire the entire original thing. And (5:43) this is also a text which came in public attention after the 16th century and only in recent times, especially after the Romantic period, the critics and other writers began to pay more attention to Longinus and Longinus was also in that sense seen as the first Romantic critic because he was the one who spoke about the power of their literary work to transport the reader out of oneself, out of himself or herself.

So I want to draw your attention to this text which is also available online. This is addressed to a certain Terentian. As you can see over here, the treatise of Caecilius on the sublime, when as you remember, my dear Terentian be examined it together, seemed to us beneath the dignity of the whole subject, to fail entirely in seizing the salient points, and to offer little profit. It goes on like that. So this is also, the tone of this piece, this work on the sublime, it also gives us an understanding that it is meant to make sense to an educated reader who is also familiar with some of the other things which were written, produced during those times perhaps.

So this is addressing someone, a Terentian who is familiar with similar kinds of works and there is a comparative note with which this text begins to talk about the idea of the sublime as well. And what is it that Longinus has in mind? When he is put forwarding his arguments, it comes at the end of the first paragraph. In you, dear friend such is my confidence in your abilities and such the part which becomes you-I look for a sympathising and discerning critic of the several parts of my treatise. For that was just a remark of his who pronounced that the points on which we resemble the divine nature are benevolence and love of truth.

So is looking for a sympathetic and discerning critic which also gives us the understanding that this is meant for an educated reader who is also familiar with the current critical traditions. And in the 2nd paragraph itself, we are soon introduced to something which could be considered as a definition of the idea of the sublime. The sublime, wherever it occurs consists in a certain loftiness and excellence of language, and that it is by this, and this only, that the greatest poets and prose writers have gained eminence, and won themselves a lasting place in the Temple of Fame.

So this is the cryptic brief definition that he gives right at the outset for the sublime. It is loftiness and excellence of language and he also argues at the beginning, he states at the beginning that this is something which would assure a place of prominence as far as literature or artistic works are concerned. A lofty passage does not convince the reason of the reader but takes him out of himself and this is the mark of true great literature. It takes one out of oneself. And this has pointed out, this is not about convincing the reader, not about persuading or instructing the reader.

This is having complete authority, complete power over the reader as we can see as we read on. That which is admirable, ever confounds our judgement and eclipses that which is merely reasonable or agreeable. To believe or not is usually in our power, but the Sublime, acting with an imperious and irresistible force, sways every reader whether he will or no. So that precisely is the point that Longinus is trying to make and the crux of the argument throughout this treatise that whewwhether the reader is willing or not, the Sublime has the power to sway the reader this way or not.

To sway every reader whether he will or no. And unlike the other 3 aspects, to instruct, to persuade and to delight, this is something, this concept of transporting the reader out of himself, out of herself, that is something which happens to the reader in spite of himself, in spite of oneself entirely. Having briefly drawn your attention to what he has in mind, what he uhh the way in which he has framed the ideas of the Sublime, it goes on to tell us whether this is something whether this is a quality in which someone can be trained or not.

Come to the 2nd section, the first question which presents itself a solution is whether there is any act which can teach sublimity or loftiness in writing. For some (10:17) generally but there is a mere dilution in attempting to reduce the search subject to technical rules, the Sublime, they tell us is born in a man and not to be acquired by instruction.

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Longinus: On the Sublime <http://faculty.win.edu/CB-Dilger/07/441/longinus.html>


matter who can teach it. The vigorous products of nature" (such is their view) "are weakened and in every respect debased, when robbed of their flesh and blood by rigid technicalities." But I maintain that the truth can be shown to stand otherwise in this matter. Let us look at the case in this way. Nature in her loftier and more passionate moods, while detesting all appearance of restraint, is not wont to show herself utterly wayward and reckless; and though in all cases the vital informing principle is derived from her, yet to determine the right degree and the right moment, and to contribute the precision of practice and experience, is the peculiar province of scientific method. The great passions, when left to their own blind and rash impulses without the control of reason, are in the same danger as a ship let drive at random without ballast. Often they need the spur, but sometimes also the curb. The remark of Democritus with regard to human life in general, —that the greatest of all blessings is to be fortunate, but next to that and equal in importance is to be well advised, —for good fortune is utterly ruined by the absence of good counsel, —may be applied to literature, if we substitute genius for fortune, and art for counsel. Then, again (and this is the most important point of all), a writer can only learn from art when he is to abandon himself to the direction of his genius.³

These are the considerations which I submit to the unfavourable critic of such useful studies. Perhaps they may induce him to alter his opinion as to the vanity and uselessness of our present investigations.

III

... "And let them check the stove's long tongues of fire:
For if I see one tenant of the hearth,
I'll thrust within one curling torrent flame,
And bring that roof in ashes to the ground:
But now not yet is sung my noble lay."⁴

Such phrases cease to be tragic, and become burlesque, —I mean phrases like "curling torrent flames" and "vomiting to heaven," and representing Boreas as a piper, and so on. Such expressions, and such images, produce an effect of confusion and obscurity, not of energy; and if each separately be examined under the light of criticism, what seemed terrible gradually sinks into stupidity. Since then, even in tragedy, where the *artificial dignity* of the subject makes a swelling diction allowable, we cannot pardon a tasteless grandiloquence, how much more inconspicuous must it seem in sober prose! Hence we laugh at those fine words of Gorgias of Leontini.



Genius is the only master who cannot teach it. The vigorous products of nature” (such is their view) “are weakened in every respect a debased, when robbed of their flesh and blood by frigid technicalities.” But I maintain that the truth can be shown to stand otherwise in this matter. Let us look at this case in this way; Nature in her loftier and more passionate moods, while detesting all appearance of restraint, is not wont to show herself utterly wayward and reckless; and though in all cases the vital informing principle is derived from her, yet to determine the right degree and the right moment, and to contribute the precision of practice and experience, is the peculiar province of scientific method.

The great passions, when left to their own blind and rash impulses without the control of reason, are in the same danger as a ship let to drive at random without ballast. Often they meet the spur, but sometimes also the curb. The remark of Demosthenes with regard to human life in general, that the greatest of our blessings is to be fortunate but next to that, importance is to be well advised, for good fortune is utterly ruined by the absence of good counsel. Maybe applied to literature, if we substitute genius for fortune, and art for counsel.

So how will it read? Uhh So how will that statement read if we substitute literature with fortune and come back and take a look at it again. For good literature is utterly ruined by the absence of good counsel, good advice and finally towards the end of that paragraph, then again and is the most important point of all, a writer can only learn from art when he is to abandon himself to the direction of his genius. A writer can only learn from art when he is to abandon himself to the direction of his genius.

And then he says these other considerations which I submit to the unfavourable critic of such useful studies. There is a point that Longinus is trying to make over here. He is departing from the conventional, more dominant traditional opinion about critical genius, about literary genius that which is inborn. There is nothing which can be added to what is inherently there. And Longinus is trying to argue that of course there is nature, there are certain aspects which are there.

But unless it is guided well, unless it is advised well with proper counsel, unless it is taken to the right direction with a proper steering then to quote his own words, then it would be utterly wayward and reckless. And this is an important point given that this given the time during which

this is written, that he is privileging, training over genius and this is extremely important when it comes to the idea of literature, the idea of criticism that to be able to bring your genius to fruition a certain kind of a training, a certain kind of a framework weather in which your genius, your talent is situated is also extremely important.

The first 2 segments which we took a look at it, has also given you the idea, it has given you a hang of this text and you can also, you can you can also begin to see that this is not a very difficult text to engage with. I strongly encourage you to read through this on your own and to see how the ideas, how the ideas still resonate here in the contemporary and how some of the aspects that Longinus talks about, that has really laid the foundation of Western critical thought and many of the ideas about genius, about literary criticism, about the idea of art, about language, about loftiness of thought, these are some of the things that have drawn much from Longinus treatise, on the sublime.


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Longinus: On the Sublime <http://faculty.wvu.edu/CS/DJgiers/97/441/longinus.html>

they had sat at the feet of Socrates, sometimes forgot themselves in the pursuit of such paltry concerns. The former, in his account of the Spartan Polity, has these words: "Their voice you would no more hear than if they were of marble, their gaze is as immovable as if they were cast in bronze, you would deem them more modest than the very maidens in their eyes."² To speak of the pupils of the eye as "modest maidens" was a piece of absurdity becoming Amphicrates³ rather than Xenophon. And then what a strange delusion to suppose that modesty is always without exception expressed in the eye! whereas it is commonly said that there is nothing by which an impudent fellow betrays his character so much as by the expression of his eyes. Thus Achilles addresses Agamemnon in the *Iliad* as "blunkard, with eye of dog."⁴ Timaeus, however, with that want of judgment which characterizes plagiarists, could not leave to Xenophon the possession of even this piece of frigidity. In relating how Agathocles carried off his cousin, who was wedded to another man, from the festival of the unveiling, he asks, "Who could have done such a deed, unless he had harlots instead of maidens in his eyes?" And Plato himself, elsewhere so supreme a master of style, meaning to describe certain recording tablets, says, "They shall write, and deposit in the temples memorials of cypress wood"⁵ and again, "Then concerning walls, Megillus, I gave my vote with Sparta that we should let them lie asleep within the ground, and not awaken them."⁶ And Herodotus falls pretty much under the same censure, when he speaks of beautiful women as "torments to the eye,"⁷ though here there is some excuse, as the speakers in this passage are drunken barbarians. Still, even from dramatic motives, such errors in taste should not be permitted to deface the pages of an immortal work.

V

Now all these glaring improprieties of language may be traced to one common root—the pursuit of novelty in thought. It is this that has turned the brain of nearly all the learned world of to-day. Human blessings and human ills commonly flow from the same source: and, to apply this principle to literature, those ornaments of style, those sublime and delightful images, which contribute to success, are the foundation and the origin, not only of excellence, but also of failure. It is thus with the figures called metaphors, and hyperboles, and the use of plurals for singulars. I shall show presently the dangers which they seem to involve. Our next task, therefore, must be to propose and to settle the question how we may avoid the faults of style related to sublimity.



Today what we shall do is, look at some of the important excerpts so that you get a hang of this text and you also feel more comfortable in going back to this text and reading through this and looking at the major arguments that it is putting forward. So we now we come to look at section 5 where he is selling the reader that he, there are certain glaring mistakes which are part of every work, part of every artistic and literary adventure and his time to tell us how the faults regarding

style, the faults in terms of the stylistic representations could be avoided if we keep a few things in mind.

And section 6 begins to talk about that and he also talks about the ways in which some of the ways in which the reader can train himself or herself to distinguish between true and false sublime. And he also tries to kind of give certain frameworks and certain rules to go by so that it is easier to see what it is.

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Longinus: On the Sublime <http://faculty.win.edu/CB-Dilger/07/443/longinus.html>

VII

It is proper to observe that in human life nothing is truly great which is despised by all elevated minds. For example, no man of sense can regard wealth, honour, glory, and power, or any of those things which are surrounded by a great external parade of pomp and circumstance, as the highest blessings, seeing that merely to despise such things is a blessing of no common order: certainly those who possess them are admired much less than those who, having the opportunity to acquire them, through greatness of soul neglect it. Now let us apply this principle to the Sublime in poetry or in prose: let us ask in all cases, is it merely a specious sublimity? is this gorgeous exterior a mere false and clumsy pageant, which if laid open will be found to conceal nothing but emptiness? for if so, a noble mind will scorn instead of admiring it. It is natural to us to feel our souls lifted up by the true Sublime, and conceiving a sort of generous exultation to be filled with joy and pride, as though we had ourselves originated the ideas which we read. If then any work, on being repeatedly submitted to the judgment of an acute and cultivated critic, fails to dispose his mind to lofty ideas, if the thoughts which it suggests do not extend beyond what is actually expressed, and if, the longer you read it, the less you think of it, — there can be here no true sublimity, when the effect is not sustained beyond the mere act of perusal. But when a passage is pregnant in suggestion, when it is hard, nay impossible, to distract the attention from it, and when it takes a strong and lasting hold on the memory, then we may be sure that we have lighted on the true Sublime. In general we may regard those words as truly noble and sublime which always please and please all readers. For when the same book always produces the same impression on all who read it, whatever be the difference in their pursuits, their manner of life, their aspirations, their ages, or their language, such a harmony of opposites gives irresistible authority to their favourable verdict.

VIII

I shall now proceed to enumerate the five principal sources, as we may call them, from which almost all sublimity is derived, assuming, of course, the preliminary gift on which all these five sources depend, namely, command of language. The first and the most important is (1) grandeur of thought, as I have pointed out elsewhere in a work on Xenophon. The second is (2) a vigorous and spirited treatment of the passions. These two conditions of sublimity depend mainly on natural endowments, whereas those which follow derive assistance from Art. The third is (3) a certain

In section 7, he is trying to tell us about how great literature can be tested and this is something that he offers like a litmus test. Of course, there are certain inherent problems with it. The most important problematic being the the fault of essentialisation that Longinus is prone to as we can see and he tends to club all kinds of literature in the the same way and look at them in a very universal way which we also see can lead to a lot of complex problems when we try to essentialise, when we try to universalise.

So nevertheless given that this text to part significantly from the prevalent tenets of those times, it is very important to see how he frames these ideas and how the originality of his thought, his critical perceptions come through very clearly throughout this. In section 7, he begins like this. It is proper to observe that in human life, nothing is truly great which is despised by all elevated minds. Here I also want you to think about a certain foundational aspects that Aristotle and Plato

also believed in about great minds identifying great literature and also about the great minds from which great literature is also produced.

So here we find Longinus all almost following that train of thought and taking it to a different direction arguing that if a set of elevated minds, if a set of great minds have decided that a particular text is great, then there is no other way in which it can be judged otherwise. I take you the final section of section 7. In general, we may regard those works as truly noble and sublime which always please and please all readers. So this is a phrase which has been used in many contexts. The works which always please and please all readers.

And this is something on which Longinus also places most of his arguments. One of his foundational ideas that there are works which please always and please all readers. That is certainly a debatable, a contestable thing of course but which shall come back to this text. For when the same book always produces the same impression on all who read it whatever be the difference in their pursuits, their manner of life, their aspirations, their ages, or their language, such a harmony of opposites gives irresistible authority to the favourable verdict.

So this Longinus argues is the test of great literature. And coming to section 8, he talks about 5 principle sources from which the sublime originates, on which the idea of the lime primarily, chiefly rests. I will read out to you the 5 aspects which he has recorded over here. This is in the section 8. The first and most important is one, pioneer of thought. The 2nd is a vigorous and spirited treatment of the passions. The 3rd is a certain artifice and the employment of figures, 4th is dignified expression and the dignified expression is subdivided into proper choice of words and the use of metaphors and other ornaments of diction.

5th is majesty and elevation of structure. So he also takes the reader through these different 5 aspects and discusses them and he also chooses to discuss them in detail.

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Longinus: On the Sublime
<http://faculty.wvu.edu/~CB-Dilger/9771481/longinus.html>

Caelius; for instance, he says nothing about the passions. Now if he made this omission from a belief that the Sublime and the Pathetic are one and the same thing, holding them to be always coexistent and interdependent, he is in error. Some passions are found which, so far from being lofty, are actually low, such as pity, grief, fear; and conversely, sublimity is often not in the least affecting, as we may see (among innumerable other instances) in those bold expressions of our great poet on the sons of Aethon—

"Highly they raged
To pile huge Ossa on the Olympian peak,
And Pelion with all his waving trees
On Ossa's crest to raise, and climb the sky;"


and the yet more tremendous climax—

"And now had they accomplished it."

And in orators, in all passages dealing with panegyric, and in all the more imposing and declamatory places, dignity and sublimity play an indispensable part; but pathos is mostly absent. Hence the most pathetic orators have usually but little skill in panegyric, and conversely those who are powerful in panegyric generally fail in pathos. If, on the other hand, Caelius supposed that pathos never contributes to sublimity, and this is why he thought it alien to the subject, he is entirely deceived. For I would confidently pronounce that nothing is so conducive to sublimity as an appropriate display of genuine passion, which bursts out with a kind of "fine madness" and divine inspiration, and falls on our ears like the voice of a god.

IX

I have already said that of all these five conditions of the Sublime the most important is the first, that is, a certain lofty cast of mind. Therefore, although this is a faculty rather natural than acquired, nevertheless it will be well for us in this instance also to train up our souls to sublimity, and make them as it were even big with noble thoughts. How, it may be asked, is this to be done? I have hinted elsewhere in my writings that sublimity is, so to say, the image of greatness of soul. Hence a thought in its naked simplicity, even though unuttered, is sometimes admirable by the sheer force of its sublimity; for instance, the silence of Ajax in the eleventh *Odyssey*¹ is great, and grander than anything he could have said. It is absolutely essential, then, first of all to cultivate the greatness whence this grandeur of passionate silence and the



In section 9, he draws our attention, the most important one, the most important of these conditions that being, a lofty cast of mind. And this is a faculty rather natural than acquired he says. Of course there is genius which can be trained, which can be directed to a better direction, which can be trained well so that it will not go wayward or reckless but he also believes like Plato that there is an inherent, natural quality about the loftiness of mind and he says, I have hinted elsewhere in my writings that sublimity is so to say, the image of greatness of soul. This is very very Platonian.

And there is an example that he gives for sublimity. So it is not always about the words which are there on the page, it is not always about the words which these characters utter. But also the silence. For instance, the silence of Ajax in the eleventh *Odyssey* is great, and grander than anything he could have said. And here, he says, this kind of sublimity, this elevation is possible because it is coming from a lofty mind. Sublime thoughts belong properly to the loftiest minds. And this is an argument which he pursues throughout this treatise, on the sublime that only a writer, only an author who has lofty thoughts, who has genius, which is well-trained, and also has lofty thoughts, is capable of great literature which will stand the test of time.

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Longinus: On the Sublime <http://faculty.wvu.edu/CS-DeGree/997/481/longinus.html>

The distance between heaven and earth¹²—a measure, one might say, not less appropriate to Homer's genius than to the stature of his discord. How different is that touch of Hesiod's in his description of sorrow—if the *Shield* is really one of his works: "thence from her nostrils flowed"¹³—an image not terrible, but disgusting. Now consider how Homer gives dignity to his divine persons—


"As far as lies his airy ken, who sits
On some tall crag, and scans the wine-dark sea:
So far extends the heavenly couriers' stride."¹⁴

He measures their speed by the extent of the whole world—a grand comparison, which might reasonably lead us to remark that if the divine steeds were to take two such leaps in succession, they would find no room in the world for another. Sublime also are the images in the "Battle of the Gods"—

"A trumpet sound
Rang through the air, and shook the Olympian height;
Then terror seized the monarch of the dead,
And springing from his throne he crept aloof
With fearful voice, lest the earth, rent asunder
By Neptune's mighty arm, forthwith reveal
To mortal and immortal eyes those halls
So dear and dark, which e'en the gods abhor."¹⁵

Earth rent from its foundations! Tartarus itself laid bare! The whole world torn asunder and turned upside down! Why, my dear friend, this is a perfect hourly-burly, in which the whole universe, heaven and hell, mortals and immortals, share the conflict and the peril. A terrible picture, certainly, but (unless perhaps it is to be taken allegorically) downright impious, and overstepping the bounds of decency. It seems to me that the strange medley of wounds, quarrels, revenges, tears, bonds, and other woes which makes up the Homeric tradition of the gods was designed by its author to degrade his deities, as far as possible, into men, and exalt his men into deities—or rather, his gods are worse off than his human characters, since we, when we are unhappy, have a haven from ills in death, while the gods, according to him, not only live for ever, but live for ever in misery. Far to be preferred to this description of the Battle of the Gods are those passages which exhibit the divine nature in its true light, as something spotless, great, and pure, as, for instance, a passage which has often been handled by my predecessors, the lines on Poseidon:—

"Mountain and wood and solitary peak,




And he gives a series of examples which we shall not be taking a look at now.

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The notion of the Sublime

- First or Third century Greek fragment - almost unknown in antiquity
- Manuscript comes to light - only by 1554
- attributed to 'Longinus'
- Little critical interest until the translation into French - 1674
- Acquires wide currency in the literary crit of 16th and 17th centuries
- 18th century - the term sublime gets increasingly detached from its earlier references meaning - contrasted with the beautiful
- further developed by Burke and Kant
- From rhetorical sublime to aesthetic sublime



Having said that, I want you to recall that this is the first or third century Greek fragment which was almost unknown in antiquity. We do not find many discussions or dialogues about this work, on the sublime during those times and this manuscript in fact came to light only by 1554 and this important to know that it is attributed to Longinus and it could be a generic name, it could be one specific person, it could be a product of a group of people working together on something. There is no way in which we can know this but there is little critical interest in Longinus on the sublime

until the translation happened to French, from Greek to French. This was in 1674, end of the 17th-century.

And this acquired wide currency in the literary critical scene of the Western academies mainly, this is in the 16th and 17th centuries. And by the 18th century, the term also gets increasingly detached from its earlier references and meaning and it is also contrasted with the idea of the beautiful. And this was in fact further developed by Burke and Kant in the later centuries and I want you to think about how the word, sublime is different from the idea of the beautiful. And Burke talks extensively about it.

He says something small that we see in nature like a butterfly or a small flower, it is beautiful but the kind of feeling that you get when you are standing on the top of a cliff and looking down, that is sublime, that is not beautiful, that is not something that takes you out of yourself. It transports you out of yourself and very very importantly, Burke also says, it is an experience which gives you some kind of fear as well. It is very very frightening and it is not something which you experience voluntarily in spite of yourself.

When you are standing on top of a cliff and looking over it, you get this feeling which is sublime, which is frightening, which is not well within your control but at the same time, it makes you it makes you experience the grandeur of it. It is an experience that you would really love to have but at the same time, you realise that there is a certain kind of fear which you feel along with the beauty that you are experiencing and that is sublime in Burke's words. So we wrap up today's session by drawing your attention to the fact that there has been, there has been a transition from the rhetorical sublime to the aesthetical sublime.

So having introduced you to Longinus on the sublime, we come back in the next session to also talk about some of the other aspects which in connection with Longinus' text on the sublime is being discussed in the contemporary and it is also important to see how the idea of the sublime has seen as foundational in not just in western critical thought but also in shaping the ideas of romantic thought, in shaping the ideas of literary criticism from the 19th century onwards.

So with this, we wrap up today's session. We shall be looking at some of the important aspects and also trying to fit this term in the contemporary, in the context of Longinus dated text on the sublime. I thank you for listening to this and look forward to seeing you in the next session.