Introduction to World Literature
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Longinus on the Sublime - I

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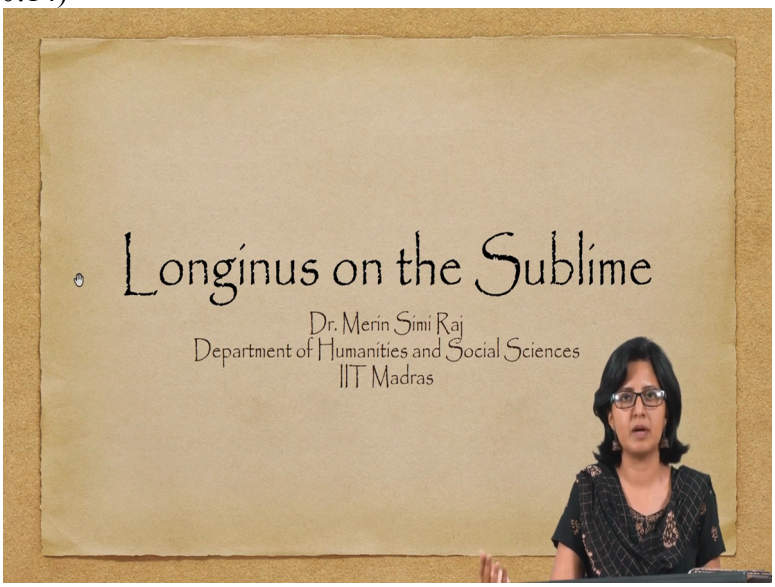

Hello and welcome to today's session of the NPTEL course, 'Introduction to world literature'. Today we are discussing the text on the sublime arguably written by Longinus. The authorship of this work is still debatable. It is a first century text and it has been considered as a text which is now a part 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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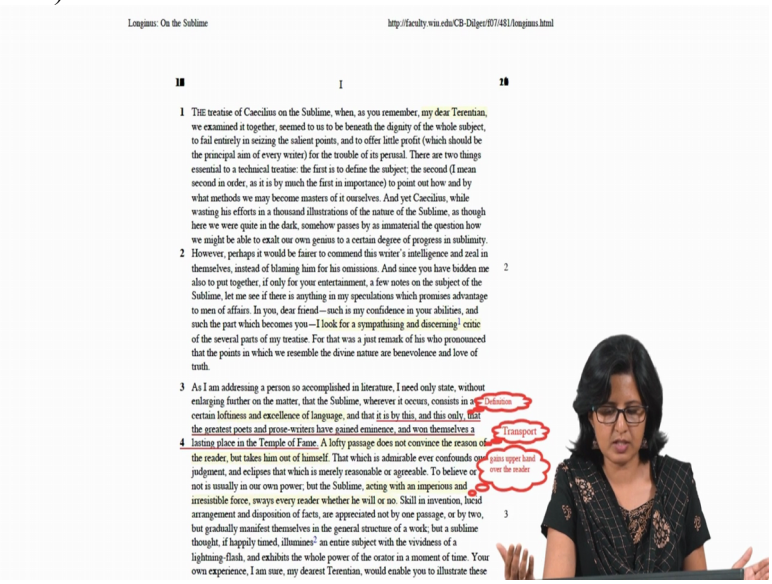

To give you a sense of how this text is structured, to look at the different parts of it, we will also take a quick look at it and of course we do have, we have access to the translated version now and one third of this is said to have been lost. Even when the manuscript was found, it is said that they 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 treaties of Caecilius on the sublime, when as you remember, my dear tension 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 whewhether 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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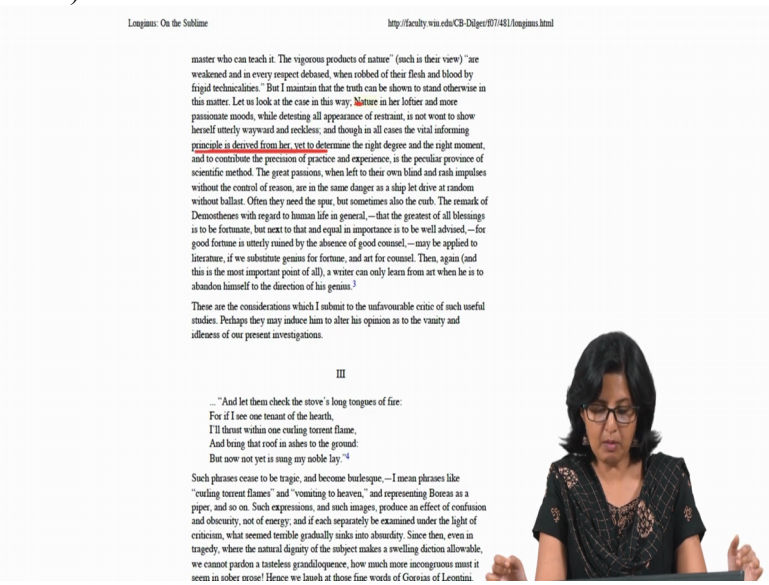
Longinus: On the Sublime http://faculty.winedu/CB-Dilger/f07/481/longinus.html

master 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 frigid 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 Demosthenes 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 idleness 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 representng 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 absurdity. Since then, even in tragedy, where the natural dignity of the subject makes a swelling diction allowable, we cannot pardon a tasteless grandiloquence, how much more incongruous 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 vigourous 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 to be fortunate but next to that Andy: 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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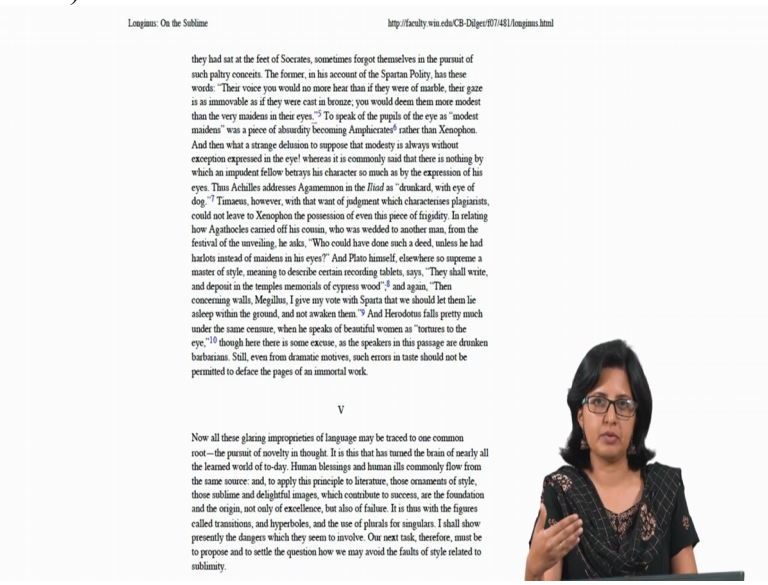

Today what we shall do is, look at some of the important excerpts so that you get a hang of this text and you also feel more comfortable in going back to this text and reading through this and looking at the major arguments that it is putting forward. So we now we come to look at section 5 where he is 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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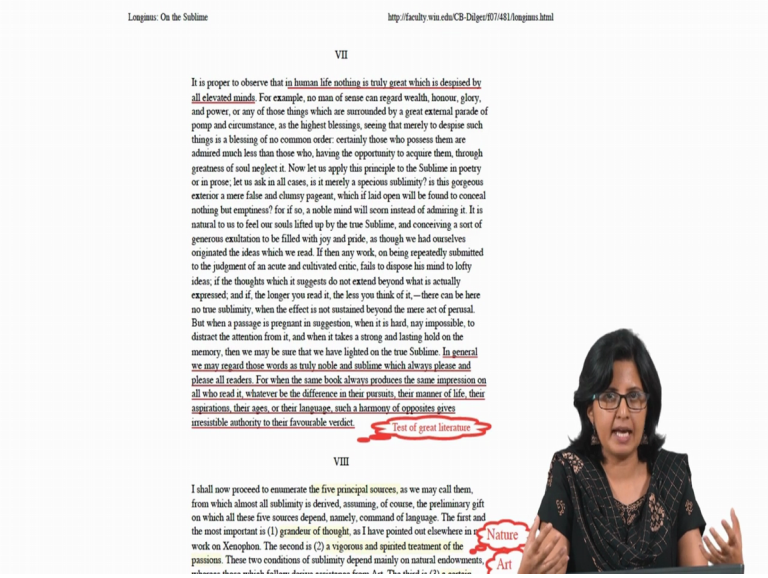

In section 7, he is trying to tell us about how great literature can be tested and this is something that he offers like a litmus test. Of course, there are certain inherent problems with it. The most important problematic being the the fault of essentialisation that Longinus is prone to as we can see 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 vigourous 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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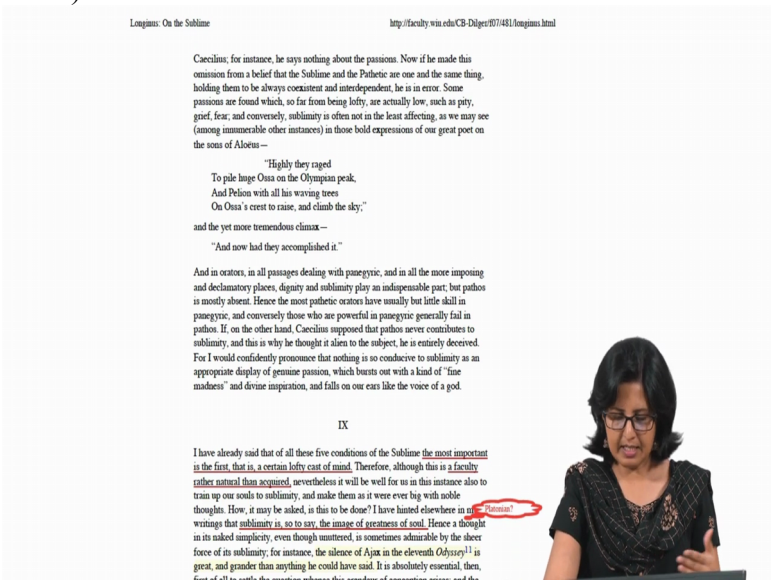

In section 9, he draws our attention, the most important one, the most important of these conditions that being, a lofty cast of mind. And this is a faculty rather natural than acquired he says. Of course there is genius which can be trained, which can be directed to a better direction, which can be 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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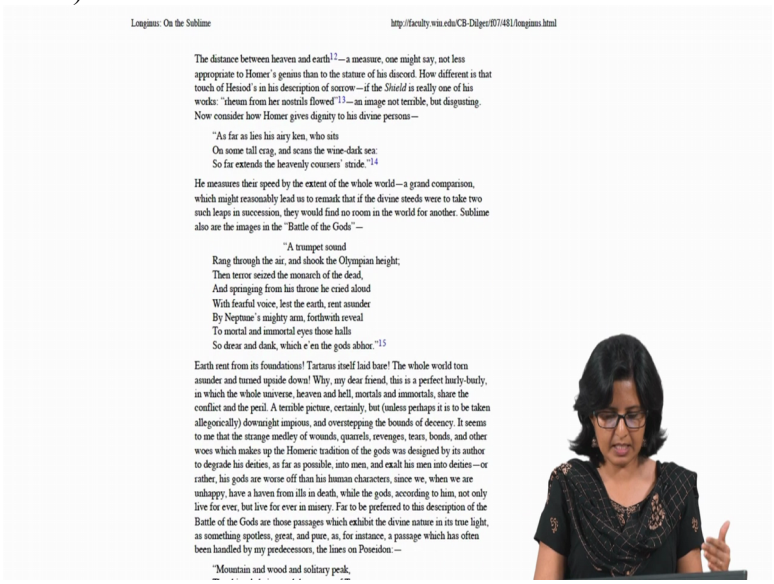

And he gives a series of examples which we shall not be taking a look at now.

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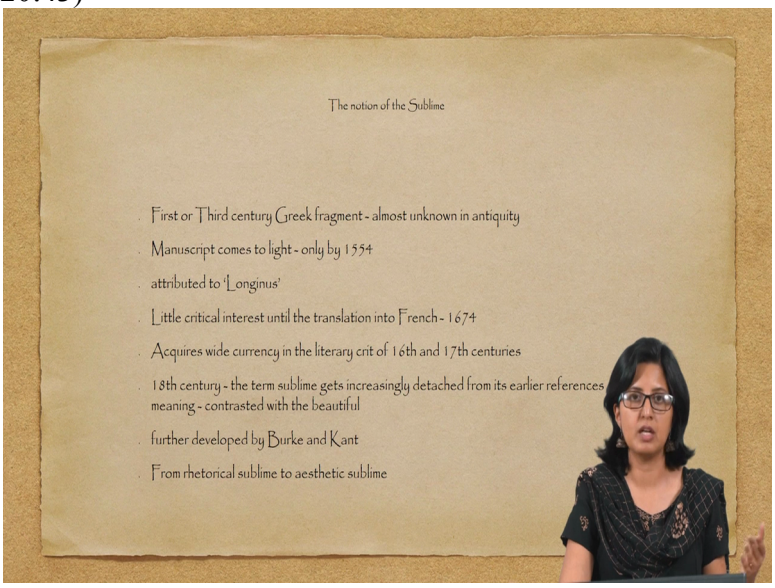

Having said that, I want you to recall that this is the first or third century Greek fragment which was almost unknown in antiquity. We do not find many discussions or dialogues about this work, on the sublime during those times and this manuscript in fact came to light only by 1554 and this important 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 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.