

Introduction to World Literature
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Longinus on the Sublime - II

(Refer Slide Time 0:15)

Good morning and welcome to today's session will be continue to look at Longinus on the sublime. And as mentioned in the previous session, this is one of those texts which had laid the foundations of Western classical thought and on the sublime is a treatise of which one third is missing and from the available manuscript, the central argument, the central thesis of this work seems to argue that the test of literature, the true test of any great art lies in its power to transport the reader out of oneself, transport the reader to ecstasy.

So based on this central theme, based on this central argument, we find Longinus who is arguably the author of this work, we find him married together a number of elements which were perhaps leader text to this state of elevation, to this state where it achieves, it attains the level of sublimity, so one of the earliest definitions that he gives in this context is of great speech, irresistible magic of speech which has the power to transport the reader out of oneself.

And what Longinus seems to be focusing on is the moving power of literature, the great power that literature has to move one, to move emotionally and he is departing significantly from, he is moving away significantly from the 3 major tenets which were considered to be the major

objectives until then of literature to instruct, to delight or to persuade. And this is why Longinus is being seen as a significant influence in reshaping and redefining the purposes, the objectives and the very intentions behind artforms and literary works in particular.

And he also had the view that the true test of literature, great literature, can be manifested when the work has the power to please all and please always. So there is certain essentialisation, universal elements that he brings in to argue that when great minds together from different parts of the world, from different situations, when they seem to agree on the importance and the centrality and significance of a work, it by default becomes a great work of literature. And when different people hold the same view, it is also seen as a kind of irresistible authority that it seals the fact that the text is beyond doubt a great one. That it has the power to transport the reader out of oneself.

And for these different kind of news that he held which was not really in vogue in the time when the text was written, the manuscript was written, in the modern times Longinus is often considered as a classicist in taste, a romanticist in temper and an idealist at heart. So it was mostly the romantic who really began to admire Longinus principles and also began to use them extensively from the 18th century onwards and this is that what we see in a way in which Burke, Edwin Burke in the 18th century began to redefine and refashion the ways in which the idea of the sublime could be engaged with.

(Refer Slide Time 3:33)

Longinus: On the Sublime <http://faculty.wvu.edu/~CB-Dalget/0374401/longinus.html>

VII

It is proper to observe that in human life nothing is truly great which is designed 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 advanced 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 chummy pageant, which if laid open will be found to conceal nothing but emptiness? For if so, a noble mind will soon 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 emulation 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 unbiassed critic, fails to engage 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, very impossible, to detach 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 parents, their manner of life, their imaginations, their ages, or their language, such a harmony of opposite groups irreconcilable 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 my 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 artifice in the employment of figures, which are of two kinds, figures of thought and figures of speech. The fourth is (4) dignified expression, which is sub-divided into (a) the proper choice of words, and (b) the use of metaphors and other ornaments of diction. The fifth cause of sublimity, which embraces all those preceding, is (5)

Nature
Art

We had taken a look at the 5 major factors that Longinus had described about the 5 major sources of sublimity and literature. And if you look at these 5 sources, the first one being grandeur of thoughts, 2nd one capacity of strong emotions, 3rd one, appropriate use of figures, mobility of diction being the 4th one and the final and the 5th one is dignity of composition. And if you look at these 5 elements and we can also see that it is divided into 2 different segments and it is, we also need to pay attention to the previous passage where Longinus argues that the sources of sublime, the sources of great literature can be derived from 2 major factors.

The first one being nature and the second one being art. If you recall the discussion in the previous section, he also strongly believed that even if there is an inherent genius, even if there is inherent talent, unless it is steered towards perfection, unless it is nurtured with proper counselling, it may go wayward and reckless. And this is something that he continues to press upon, this is something that he continues to underscore in these 5 sources as well by dividing them into 2 different segments; sources which are part of nature and sources which are part of art, sources which are there inherent as inbuilt qualities and things which needs to be nurtured.

So here we can see that the first 2 elements, grandeur of thoughts and the capacity for strong emotion or vigorous and spirited treatment of passions, these 2 are part of nature. These 2 are inherent emotions which are part of personality much part of the way a person is, has been shaped, a person thinks and something which he gives out from his internal being. And the next 3 are part of art. Those are the things which can be trained, those are the things which need counsel, those are the things which can be further affected with training, with advice and next 3 being appropriate use of figures, nobility of diction and dignity of composition.

And here, notably Longinus breaks with prevalent traditions in 3 major ways and this is, this needs to be seen in the light of the other important works of those times, particularly Aristotle's politics and Horace's *Ars Poetica*. And given that these 3 texts-the poetics, *Ars Poetica* and on the sublime, that these critics had laid the foundations of Western classical thought, it is important to see how Longinus departs significantly from the prevalent traditions.

First of all, he focused on the idea of the transport. The power of literature, the significance of literature was not to be evaluated on the basis of whether it persuades enough, whether it instructs enough. Now I also want you to recall and I also want you to think about how poetics

and Aristotle and other classical traditions in literature about the significance of cuppasses, about the significance of purifying a person, once emotions and making one into a better person. So we do not fight Longinus doing any of those things.

He only talks about the power of the sublime, to transport the reader out of oneself. It is about ecstasy, it is about the supreme kind of enjoyment that a literary work gives. And this is completely devoid of any kind of moral compasses, this is completely devoid of the kind of greatness, the kind of grandeur the other traditions believed that a perfect reader or a perfect writer should have. And secondly, he did not limit the number of metaphors to be used and this is something very significant because Longinus was also writing during the time when rhetoric was seen as the most supreme form of articulation and aesthetics and the other things came very very below that.

And art for any kind of enjoyment, for the sake of enjoyment, that was not seen as something very productive and for a long time, the validity of art, the validity (())(7:34) work, it also depended on how much a work had the capacity to transform a person into a better moral being, into a higher moral being. So here we find Longinus departing from these prevalent traditions and focusing on things that need to be done if there are certain things which are required to transport the reader out of oneself then Longinus did not think it fit to put restrictions on the style or the kind of language to be used.

So unlike the prevalent tradition which focused on the rhetoric, we find him not putting in any limit on the number of metaphors. And also, he sees no merit in faultlessness. It is not a flawless kind of work that Longinus is appreciating. In fact, he is very very attentive to the flaws which are part of major classical literature and he finds that as part of human rendition, he finds that as part of a genuineness that is part of writing, a part of articulation, to quote his own words, the correctness escapes injure but sublimity commands positive reverence.

It is for the same reason that Cord James one of the modern critics, he identified Longinus as the first romantic critic. We also need to be attentive to the ways in which Longinus shares certain things with poetics and Aristotle and there are 2 things we find that he shares with Aristotle's idea. There are 2 things may be we can find its resemblance. One is in the art of rhetoric and the 2nd one is in the scientific approach. But at the end of it, though he appreciates the significance of

rhetoric and though he is all for a scientific approach which also means a systematic approach, Uhh an approach which can be broken down and understood in different steps.

That is what we have in mind when we talk about the scientific approach. So in spite of that, in spite of our focus on the art of rhetoric and scientific approach, we find that he is purely pleading for an aesthetic appreciation more than anything. So that is the aesthetic appreciation of art and this need not be cathartic, this need not be moral, this need not have any kind of use value or a sense of purpose which will transform a person into a better being or a higher moral being. It is purely for its aesthetic appreciation. And this makes Longinus more romantic, this makes Longinus more a part of the Romantic tradition than the part of the classical tradition where he is chronologically situated.

And he is also arguing for, he is also allowing for the transcendence of all kinds of rules. He does not find that it is important to stick to certain rules in order to produce great literature. As long as literature is transporting the reader out of oneself, as long as it is reaching the level of the sublime, even if certain rules are flouted, it really does not matter. And he in that sense becomes one of those earliest persons to measure literature by spirit, rather than by form. And we find most of the great artists and the Masters also following this.

For instance, Shakespeare, when he started writing we find him not really adhering to the prevalent traditions. He is taught in the rules of classical unity and we also find him using the stage techniques which were not really invoked during that time and making that itself as a sort of a trendsetter. And in all this, we find that there is a sort of a theoretical background that Longinus is giving even before his time.

And this is not to say that this framework that Longinus provided, it was instrumental in bringing in more freedom in artistic expressions but the point that I am trying to drive home is that Longinus even before the time came to talk about romanticism even before the time came to talk about flouting the rules and talk about the power of literature to take the reader out of oneself, we find him documenting these ideas and detailing them with great clarity and also with a very well framed scientific approach.

So when he is talking about literature, when he is talking about any kind of artform, what Longinus privileges is the aesthetic rather than the formal. He privileges the romantic rather than the classical. I repeat, in Longinus approach, he privileges the aesthetic rather than the formal and he also privileges the romantic rather than the classical. So we find a very aesthetic and romantic approach towards writing, towards literature, towards the appreciation of art in general.

But at the same time what makes him classical enough is the fact that he also believed very very strongly that the kind of aesthetics and the kind of romanticism which has the power to transport the reader out of oneself, it can come only from a noble mind. Here we find him sharing that human aesthetic tradition along with Aristotle and we also find a lot of resemblance here with the tenets which were put forward in the poetics. And he also, as we have already noted in the previous session, he also believed strongly that a great soul can produce great speech.

So there is a connection here which is being made between the author figure and the kind of works and the kind of elevated works that he or she produces. But what makes Longinus different is that though the producer of this art is in possession of a great mind, the work of literature does not necessarily intend to transform the person morally, does not really intend to bring about a catharsis of emotions in the reader. It only focuses on the pure aesthetic experience which elevates, which transports the reader into another aesthetic world altogether.

And we also find certain similarities with Plato over here. In a very Platonian way, Longinus also believed that excellence in art can be achieved only through excellence in character. So when Longinus or Plato or Aristotle, when they are talking about the author figures, the ones who are producing great works of art and literature, they also believed in the moral capacity that this author figure had, this is of course in line with the humanistic tradition, this is in line with the moral compulsions of those times and we also need to keep in mind that the society in which they lived, society in which they wrote, it also had played a significant role in shaping the way in which they looked at art, looked at literature and looked at aesthetic components. So there is a very strong underlying moral element and a moral compulsion which is also defining the ways in which art, literature and critical traditions have been formed and framed.

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Longinus: On the Sublime <http://faculty.wvu.edu/CS-D/qlg/051401/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 descent. How different is that touch of Homos' in his description of sorow—if the *Shield* is really one of his works: "demon from her nostrils flowed"¹³—an image not terrible, but disgusting. Now consider how Homer gives dignity to his divine persons—

"As far as I can see his airy ken, who sits
On some tall crag, and scans the wide-dark sea:
So far extends the heavenly countess' make."¹⁴

He measures them 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 rose the monarch of the dead,
And springing from his throne he cried aloud
With fearful voice, lest the earth, rent asunder
By Neptune's mighty arm, forthwith reveal
To mortal and immortal eyes those halls
So dark and dank, 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 hasty-hasty, 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 unpoetic, and overstepping the bounds of decorum. It seems to me that the strange medley of wounds, quarrels, revenges, tears, boasts, 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 heaven from ill 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 lauded by my predecessors, the lines on Poseidon—

"Mountain and wood and solitary peak,
The deep Achæan, and the towers of Troy,
Trembled beneath the god's immortal feet.
Over the waves he rode, and round him played,
Lured from the deeps, the ocean's mountain brood,
With smooth symbols welcome their host."

Longinus: On the Sublime <http://faculty.wvu.edu/CS-D/qlg/051401/longinus.html>

of his "Laws": "God said"—what?—"let there be light, and there was light: let there be land, and there was."

I trust you will not think me tedious if I quote yet one more passage from our great poet (referring this time to human characters) in illustration of the manner in which he leads us with him to heroic heights. A sudden and baffling darkness as of night has overpowered the ranks of his warring Greeks. Then Ajax in sore perplexity cries aloud—

"Alas! my Sir,
Only from darkness love Achæus's sons;
No more I ask, but give us back the day;
Grant but our sight, and slay us, if then wilt."¹⁷

The feelings are just what we should look for in Ajax. He does not, you observe, ask for his life—such a request would have been unworthy of his heroic soul—but finding himself paralyzed by darkness, and prohibited from employing his valor in any noble action, he dares because his aims are idle, and prays for a speedy return of light: "At least," he thinks, "I shall find a warrior's grave, even though Zeus himself should fight against me." In such passages the mind of the poet is swept along in the whirlwind of the struggle, and, in his own words, he

"Like the fence war-god, caves, or waiting fire
Through the deep thickets on a mountain-side:
His lips deep foam."¹⁸

But there is another and a very interesting aspect of Homer's mind. When we turn to the *Odyssey* we find occasion to observe that a great poetical genius in the decline of power which comes with old age actually leans towards the fabulous. For it is evident that this work was composed after the *Iliad*, in proof of which we may mention, among many other indications, the introduction in the *Odyssey* of the sequel to the story of his heroes' adventures at Troy, as so many additional episodes in the Trojan war, and especially the return of sorow and mourning which is paid in that poem to departed heroes, as if in fulfillment of some previous design. The *Odyssey* is, in fact, a sort of epilogue to the *Iliad*—

"There warrior Ajax lies, Achilles there,
And there Patroclus, godlike counsellor;
There lies my own dear son."¹⁹

And for the same reason, I imagine, whereas in the *Iliad*, which was written when his genius was in its prime, the whole structure of the poem is founded on action and struggle, in the *Odyssey* he generally prefers the narrative style, and adapts to old age. Hence Homer in his *Odyssey* may be compared to the poet who is still as great as ever, but he has lost his fervent heat. The strain is in him, but it is a lower

There is something very significant about some of the excerpts that Longinus uses in this world. I want you to draw your attention to the ways in which he refers to the book of Genesis in the last paragraph on this page. "And there is also the lawgiver of the Jews, no ordinary man. Having formed an adequate conception of the supreme being, given adequate expression, the opening words of his laws. God said, what? Let there be light, and there was light. And let there be land and there was.

It is very very important and significant to note that along with other Greek plays, along with other Greek masters, he is also quoting from the Bible from the book of the Genesis. And this also gives us a sense of the background, the context and the familiarity that Longinus had with

the prevalent traditions and also about the familiarity that perhaps during those times Longinus and others had with Christianity and the books which were part of that.

And this excerpt, and this reference from the book of Genesis, Let there be light and there was light, this draws our attention to 3 major things as some of the contemporary critics also indicate and point out that emphasises on a literature of power rather than on a literature of knowledge. So it is really not about scholarship, it is really not about building the knowledgeable, it is about power, the power of transforming. And secondly, he is also arguing that the effect of great literature, the effect of great art work, it is not achieved by argument but on the contrary, it is achieved by revelation.

And thirdly, literature is not about propaganda, it is not about sermon, it is not about entertainment, it is about which is also more than the spirit of knowledge or argument or the power of propaganda, sermonising or entertainment, what Longinus seems to focus on and underscore is the power of literature to transform. So more than all this, what Longinus seems to emphasise is on a literature of power, a literature which reveals, a literature of revelation and finally a literature of vision.

And this is what makes great literature, this is what enables the reader to be transported out of himself with this sheer power of the sublime. So the truly sublime in Longinus' words, it is about an uplifting effect. More than anything, more than the transformation that the reader may or may not undergo in a moral sense, in an ethical sense, it is about this ecstatic power which transports the reader out of oneself addressing uplifting effect in his life. And as we begin to wrap up the session, it is also important to remember and recall that Longinus had a very significant role to play, a very significant influence on post-Renaissance critics and this was also the time incidentally when the work was rediscovered as we had noted in the previous session as well.

The manual count for instance was deeply influenced by Longinus and his ideas of the sublime and Alexander Pope had paid a very telling tribute to Longinus and very importantly, Edwin Burke in the 18th century, he had refashioned and redefined the ways in which the ideas of the sublime could be accessed and could be engaged with. So today when we talk about the ideas of the sublime, it is not just about the power off-line much to transport, it also talks about various other things which also has theories related to aestheticism complementing and supplementing it.

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Longinus: On the Sublime <http://faculty.wvu.edu/~CB-Olden/ET/481/longinus.html>

Cicero, 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 concomitant 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 ruin of Albee—

"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 pathetic, 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 pathetic, and conversely those who are powerful in pathetic generally fail in pathos. If, on the other hand, Cicero supposed that pathos were conducive 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 loftiness 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 minds 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 named 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 unadorned, is sometimes admirable by the sheer force of its sublimity: for instance, the silence of Ajax in the eleventh *Odyssey*¹ is great, and greater than anything he could have said. It is absolutely essential, then, first of all to settle the question whence this grandeur of conceptions arises; and the answer is that true eloquence can be found only in those whose spirit is generous and aspiring. For those whose whole lives are wasted in petty and dilatory thoughts and habits cannot possibly produce any work worthy of the lasting reverence of mankind. It is only natural that these words should be full of sublimity whose thoughts are full



I hope this discussion has been useful for you to enter this text with more clarity and also grasp the fundamental limits that it is talking about. And as I begin to wrap up, there is one final point I want to leave you with. This work, on the sublime incidentally is not the only work that Longinus had written about, we do find some clues about that in this text. He refers to and talks about the definition of the sublime in section 9. I hinted elsewhere in my writings that sublimity is so to state the image of the greatness of soul.

So if there is any way in which sublimity can be attained in a particular work, we are not really talking about the effect that it has on the reader. Longinus is here, is talking about how this level of sublimity can be attained in a nutshell, in a single phrase, he is telling us it is in the image of the greatness of soul. And he also says that he had written about this elsewhere as well in his other writings about sublimity. So we have every reason to believe that maybe there was an ongoing discussion and there was an ongoing engagement with this idea of the sublime when Longinus was writing this.

And this also gives us further insight into the understanding of the formulations of the romantic and how the aesthetic began to undergo significant changes especially in the later centuries and accessing the idea of the aesthetic, power of literature to transport and power of literature to take one to ecstasy one that begins to make more sense when we do such a chronological and a systematic survey of literary critical traditions from the first and third century onward. So with

this, we wrap up today's session. I hope this discussion was useful for you. I also encourage you to take a look at the original text in order to get a hang of what Longinus had been discussing about. I thank you for listening to this and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.