

Lecture 06

On the Sublime

Hello and welcome back to this series of lecture on Literary Theory. In today's lecture we are going to move ahead from the word "mimesis", which had anchored our earlier discussions on both Plato and Aristotle, towards a new keyword: the "sublime". Like "mimesis", the word "sublime" too has played a very significant role in the history of English or Western literary studies. And the text which is most intimately associated with this new keyword is a treatise that bears the Greek title "Peri Hypsous".

Now in my previous lectures, I had started by trying to put in historical context authors like Plato and Aristotle, and the texts that they had produced. But today I will only be able to make the most cursory comments about the context that frames Peri Hypsous because almost nothing is known about the origins of this text that can be stated with any degree of certainty. The text, which was originally written in Greek, exists in a number of editions. The oldest of them is found as part of a tenth century manuscript which is now preserved in the French national library in Paris. This text exists in a fragmentary form and has various sections missing. But in spite of these missing bits, it is possible to grasp most of the main arguments as well as the general plan of the work.

The text begins by defining "hypsos" – a word to which I will return in a moment. Then the text goes on to describe the five elements that are necessary to produce "hypsos". And finally, the text concludes by connecting the discussion on hypsos with a socio-political commentary.

Authorship

However, before we delve into the content of the text, let me briefly comment on whatever little is known about its date and authorship. The tenth century manuscript mentions the author of the text as **Dionysius or Longinus**. The most famous Greek author bearing the name Dionysius lived between 60 BCE and 7 BCE whereas the most famous classical author bearing the name Longinus lived between 213 and 273 CE. There is no definite clue within the text itself that would allow us to definitely identify it as authored by either the historical Dionysius or the historical Longinus, but the present consensus is that it was written by a Greek author living in

Rome around the first century CE which means that the text might have been produced closer to the time of Dionysius than Longinus.

However, when the tenth century manuscript containing *Peri Hypsous* was discovered by the Italian humanists Francesco Robortello, it was assumed that the text has been written by one Dionysius Longinus. Robortello had missed out the “or” separating the two names. This confusion prevailed even with Nicolas Boileau who translated the text in French in 1674, and made it popular within the field of literary criticism. In fact, this mistaken notion of the text’s authorship was prevalent till the nineteenth century. But since there was no classical author known by the name of Dionysius Longinus, it was assumed that the text was authored by the third century historical figure of Cassius Longinus.

However, now the text is no longer attributed to Cassius Longinus. But because it has for so long been associated with the name Longinus it is now referred to as being authored by “Pseudo Longinus”, literally “False or Fake Longinus”. This allows us to distinguish the unknown author of the text from the more well-known historical figure. Thus, though in this lecture I will keep on referring to the author of *Peri Hypsous* as Longinus, please bear in mind that I am referring to an unknown Pseudo Longinus rather than the third century Cassius Longinus.

Hypsos as Sublime

Now let us come to the title of the text *Peri Hypsous* which is usually translated in English as “On Sublimity” or “On the Sublime”. The Greek word *hypsos* literally means something that is high or elevated or lofty. However, we encounter a problem when we try to understand the Greek word through such English translations like these. This is because the word *hypsos* in Greek is not usually associated with material objects but with non-material things like language, idea, artistic expression. The English words like elevated or lofty does not have this distinction because we can equally speak of an elevated language or a lofty speech as an elevated ceiling or a lofty mountain. This is why the word **sublime** is used as a more specific translation of *hypsos*. Because like *hypsos*, “sublime” too conveys a sense of loftiness that is usually associated with non-material things like art, ideas and language uses.

Now let us look at the word sublime in more details. If we break down the word sublime we first get the prefix “sub” which literally means “up to the level of”. Second we get the root word

“lime” which is derived from the Latin word “limen” which means threshold. The Latin word limen has been carried forward in English in the form of the word lintel which means the horizontal beam of wood or stone or other such materials that is used on the top of the doorway to support it. So the word sublime literally means up to the lintel, thereby indicating the sense of loftiness. But as I said sublime and lofty are slightly different as far as their usage is concerned because sublime is more specifically used to signify loftiness or the elevated quality of things like art, thoughts and ideas, and language expressions. So just like hypsos we can talk about the sublime beauty of Wordsworth’s poems or of Monalisa’s smile or of Bhimsen Joshi’s singing. But we will not use sublime to signify merely the elevation of a platform or a multistoried building or of a mountain.

Sublime: Text, Audience, Author

But how does this idea of hypsos or the sublime relate specifically to theorization and understanding of literature. To know this let us move from the dictionary meanings of sublime and try and see how the text by pseudo Longinus elaborates this crucial idea. The first chapter of the text tells us:

The Sublime, wherever it occurs, consists in a certain loftiness and excellence of language, and it is from no other source than this that the greatest poets and writers have derived their eminence and gained an immortality of renown.

These lines which identify the sublime as a special quality of language as it is used by great poets and writers is immediately followed by lines which locate sublimity in the effect that certain kinds of literature produce in the audience.

The effect of lofty language upon an audience is not persuasion but transport.

In other words, sublimity of a text’s language is realized only when it produces a particular effect upon the audience. This effect is described in the quoted line as “transport”. It is therefore different from say the rhyme sequence that underlines the language of poetry. The language of a Shakespearean sonnet like “Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day” will always have the rhyme scheme abab cdcd efef gg irrespective of whether a particular reader recognizes that rhyme scheme or not. However, the language of that sonnet can only be identified as sublime as and when it produces the effect of transportation on the reader. The sublime therefore, at least as

far as literary studies is concerned, is found associated both with the text and the reader. And in fact as I would show later, the author also plays an important part in creating the literary sublime. So the sublime as far as Pseudo Longinus is concerned is to be understood as a triangular relationship between text, author, and the reader or the audience. Let us try to unfold this relationship by going back to the line: “The effect of lofty language upon an audience is not persuasion but transport.”

Ecstasy

The keyword in this line is transport and the Greek original which it represents is ekstasis. Ekstasis has been variously translated in English, and apart from the word transport we also find it translated as the effect of “taking the reader out of himself”. But its most simple translation is perhaps to be found in the word ecstasy. What does Pseudo Longinus mean by saying that the sublime produces the effect of ecstasy within the audience? Longinus answers this question with a metaphor:

Our persuasions we can usually control, but the influences of the sublime bring power and irresistible might to bear, and reign supreme over every hearer. [...] Sublimity flashing forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and at once displays the power of the orator in all its plenitude.

Ecstasy, the feeling produced by the sublime, is therefore to be understood as an overwhelming sensation. When the reader encounters the sublime, he is stunned and even ravished as if by a thunderbolt and loses his normal sense of equilibrium. It is precisely this sense of being mightily overwhelmed that some of the translators have tried to capture by rendering ekstasis as a sense of being transported or as a feeling of being out of oneself.

Here, in order to understand the use of the word ecstasy or transport fully, we will also have to pay attention to how it has been contrasted with the idea of persuasion. Now persuasion usually happens if I convince you through logical arguments that would appeal to your rational faculties. So what does Longinus mean when he says that sublimity produces ecstasy that hits us with an irresistible force unlike persuasion which we can usually control? One way of interpreting this would be to conceive ecstasy and persuasion as binary opposites. Persuasion is then associated with reason and logic. And by contrast the sense of ecstasy that the sublime creates is associated

with irrationality and the mad frenzy of passion. Now if you are approaching Longinus's text after having read Plato's *The Republic*, this analysis might sound appealing. According to Longinus, sublime is an integral aspect of good poetry in particular and good art in general. Which means that poetry, and here I am using poetry in the broadest sense of the term, would produce ecstasy rather than persuasion. This folds in neatly with Plato's argument that poetry appeals to the irrational parts of human nature and therefore undermines rational faculties. And as you will remember from our earlier lectures, this was one of the main reasons why Plato wanted to banish poets from his ideal republic.

However, if the passage in Chapter 1, from which I have quoted the distinction between persuasion and ecstasy, is compared with what Longinus proposes in Chapter 7, then the interpretation of sublime ecstasy as a state of irrational frenzy seems to be undermined. In Chapter 7, Longinus argues that one of the marks of true sublimity in literature is that it "dispose[s] the soul to high thoughts, and [...] leave in the mind more food for reflection than the words seem to convey". So the feeling of ecstasy that is evoked by true sublimity does not simply produce a state of mad frenzy but rather elevates the human mind and guides it to higher thoughts and reflections. So ecstasy produced by the true sublime, rather than leading to frivolous irrationality, ultimately leads to a state of deeper intellectual contemplation.

A good example to understand this is perhaps Chapter 11 of Bhagvad Gita. Till chapter 10 of Gita we have a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, where the former tries to convince the latter to fight the battle of Mahabharata using various arguments that might appeal to the reasoning faculty of Arjuna. But in Chapter 11 Krishna gives Arjuna a glimpse of what is known as his Viswa-roop or cosmic self which overwhelms Arjuna and produces a sense of ecstasy. Indeed, verses 10 to 13 of Chapter 11 presents this sublime vision that Arjuna has through a kind of poetic language which is meant to produce an equivalent sublime experience for every reader. The result is not logical persuasion but ecstasy or transport where the reader, like Arjuna, is "taken out of himself". But this ecstasy does not lead to a state of irrational frenzy. Rather it leads to what Stephen Halliwell calls in his analysis of Longinus's text as a surplus of meaning. And this surplus of meaning produced through ecstasy discloses to the reader deeper layers of reality that is otherwise not available through the exercise of mundane logic.

Elements of the Sublime Style

Now from the discussion of ecstasy, let us move on to the discussion of the elements that are necessary to create the sublime in literature. According to Longinus, five elements are key to the creation of a sublime style and these five elements are divided in two broad categories – elements that are “natural” and elements that are products of art or skill. The natural category includes two elements.

1. Ability to conceive great or elevated thoughts
2. Evocation of strong emotions

The category related to art or skill in turn involves three elements:

1. Figures of thought and speech
2. Elevated diction or choice of words
3. Noble arrangement of words

Now though Longinus mentions these five elements that are necessary for the sublime style, he also holds that the first two elements which are described as “natural” are more important than the set of elements dependent on skills. Indeed, Longinus believes that it is only when the natural elements are present that the true sublime is produced. A literary work might be produced with great technical skills but without elevated thoughts and strong emotions informing it, the work will never be sublime. Thus, since the main source of the sublime style is identified as the two “natural” elements, let us have a closer look at them one by one.

The first of these elements, that is great or elevated thought, is identified as the most important requirement for a sublime style. According to Longinus, elevated thought is first and foremost the product of a great and noble mind. In chapter 9 we find that this greatness of mind is presented as a natural endowment, which means some people are born with a noble mind and therefore a capacity to conceive elevated thoughts. But this idea of a natural genius is at the same time coupled with an argument that says even if someone is born with a great mind she needs to develop it and regularly push it towards the direction of greatness so that it becomes filled with elevated thoughts. So clearly, greatness can also be cultivated and is not entirely limited to natural endowment. This notion of cultivation is also evident in the idea of imitation or emulation that Longinus talks about. He argues that elevated thoughts can be generated by

emulating other writers whose works are known for their sublimity. The intention here is not to merely copy them but rather to seek inspiration from them and finally to even surpass them.

Apart from greatness of mind, and emulation, Longinus also talks about a third characteristic that helps create elevated thought, and he describes it as *phantasia*. This Greek word is usually translated as “imagination”. But I think it is more helpful if we try and understand *phantasia* as the ability to visualize something in great details and present to the reader ideas or thoughts in the form of vivid images. So these are the three things – noble mind, emulation, and imagination or visualization – that results in great or elevated thoughts. Now let us move on to the second of the five elements which Longinus identifies as important for the production of the sublime.

According to the text, a vital aspect of the sublime style is its ability to arouse strong emotions. This is not difficult to understand after our discussion of ecstasy. The reason why ecstasy overwhelms us is precisely because it is associated with the arousal of strong and even vehement emotions. Thus, for instance the verses 10 to 13 of Chapter 11 in Bhagvad Gita which both records and reproduces for the reader the sublime experience of Arjuna is followed in verse 14 by a description of an Arjuna taken out of himself under the effect of emotions which are so strong as to be almost violent.

Democracy, Avarice, and the Sublime

Finally, before ending this lecture, I would like to comment on the last chapter of Longinus’s *On the Sublime*. As I have said earlier, Longinus’s theory of sublime presents a complex triangulation of the reader, author, and the text. But the last chapter of *On the Sublime*, introduces an added layer of complexity by connecting the sublime with social and political considerations. The chapter begins by quoting the argument of a certain philosopher which points that the sense of the sublime was apparently found to be missing in the contemporary social milieu to which the philosopher as well as Pseudo-Longinus belonged to. The putative reason for this absence is not the lack of literary skills or the use of charming language. The absence is supposedly caused by the lack of “transcendent natures”.

This statement neatly dovetails with the relative importance that Longinus ascribes to “natural” elements of the sublime style over the “technical” elements. This means that the reason sublime is found to be missing in Longinus’ contemporary society is primarily because the people around him are no longer able to conceive elevated thoughts which might produce ecstasy. But why is

there a lack of people with transcendent natures? Longinus first looks at the argument that is presented by the philosopher: transcendent natures are no longer abundant in the contemporary society because 1st century Rome was no longer a democracy. In other words, the ability to transcend the mundane which is the essence of the sublime can only flourish in a political setup which encourages individual freedom: “Freedom has power to feed the imaginations of the lofty-minded and inspire hope”. This individual freedom, according to the philosopher, is ensured by democracy. Now those of you who are familiar with ancient Roman history will know that Rome was a republic till 27 BCE. After that it transited to the form of monarchical government. Thus, the social milieu that the philosopher is talking about is the result of this political transition that has happened in the not too distant past.

However, as far as Longinus is concerned, the connection between democracy and the sublime is not quite sustainable. According to Longinus, it is out of nostalgia for the lost democratic order of the Roman republic that the philosopher is trying to connect the flourishing of the transcendent nature with a democratic political setup.

Rather, for Longinus, the real reason for the loss of the transcendent natures that can produce the sublime is the widespread social tendency towards avarice. For Longinus, avarice, or the desire to accumulate boundless wealth makes one too heavily engaged with one’s own mundane mortal existence. In such a case, greatness is sought not through transcendence or the desire for immortal fame but through an extravagant lifestyle. Longinus therefore opines that it is better to live in a political milieu which does not encourage individual freedom because that freedom invariably leads to the pursuit of avarice and all the other concomitant evils:

“it is perhaps better for men like ourselves to be ruled than to be free, since our appetites, if let loose without restraint upon our neighbours like beasts from a cage, would set the world on fire with deeds of evil.”

These differing opinions regarding the connection between the sublime and the political milieu that we encounter in this last chapter of Longinus’ text is interesting especially for us who are now situated at a different juncture of history where for most of the world democracy has become the norm rather than exception. I would therefore encourage you to deliberate on your own and see if you agree more with the philosopher or with Longinus.

In our future lectures we will see how this theorization of sublime resonates with the way literature and literary criticism was redefined by the Romantic Movement during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. But before that we will be seeing how the category of literature and English literary studies as we understand them now gradually emerged during the eighteenth century. Thank you.