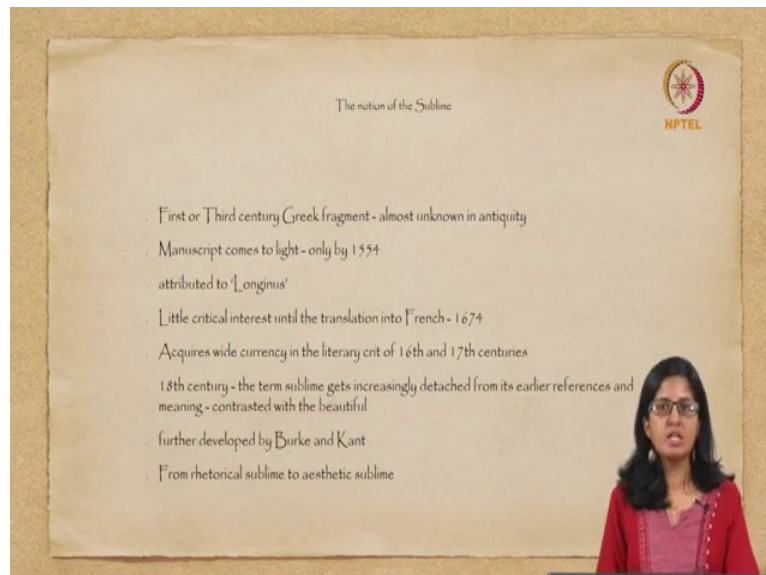


Literary Criticism
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Longinus' On the Sublime (Session 1)

Hello and welcome to today's session. Today we are looking at Longinus' text *On the Sublime*. And this is one of the very few texts in the history of English literary criticism where we have the author's name also mentioned along with the title –*Longinus On the Sublime*.

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And before we get into the text, a brief introduction, a brief background about the notion of the sublime would be ideal. And this text which is allegedly written by Longinus on the sublime is supposedly a first or third century Greek fragment.

This was almost unknown throughout the old ages, throughout the classical ages and even through Middle Ages till about the eighteenth century, and this manuscript came to light only by 1554. So, it is only in the sixteenth century that this text begins to be discussed in the context of criticism or in the context of any kind of art form. It was entirely unknown until that period of time, the manuscript was not available and it was not accessible.

So this text is attributed to Longinus. There is a lot of debate upon whether such a person actually existed or not or whether it is just some very random common name which was given as part of the text. But that is not much of a significance in today's discussion.

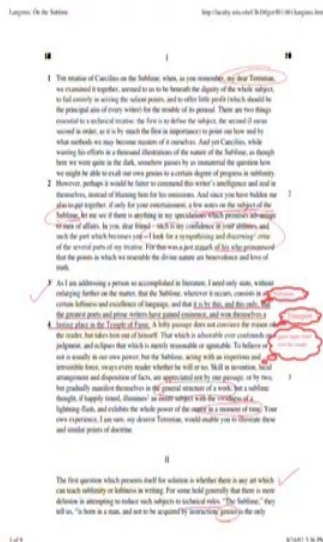
And there was very little critical interest in this text until about 1674, that was when this text was translated from Greek to French and this was also the time when a kind of literary criticism and critical principles were getting evolved in England as well as in France. And this acquired wide currency within the spectrum of literary criticism by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

So the time which had passed, the centuries which had passed from the time of its inception, maybe first or third century and until the mid-seventeenth century. So in spite of that I want you to pay attention to the fact that this continues to be very relevant even today when we talk about Longinus and the sublime. There are many elements, there are many notions which continue to make sense and there are also, just like the way we spoke about Aristotle, a lot of ways in which we can find significant departures from *Longinus On the sublime* to the current romantic notions as well.

And in the eighteenth century we find this term getting increasingly detached from its original sense, from the way Longinus had used it, and we also find the term sublime being used in an aesthetic way to contrast it against what is considered as beautiful. We should perhaps, towards the end of our discussion, take a look at how this was further developed by Burke and Kant in the later centuries.

And we also find this shift from rhetorical sublime to aesthetic sublime. So, these are the multiple ways in which the term sublime, the notion of sublimity, has contributed to the idea of literary criticism. Now we endeavor to look at the original text *Longinus On the Sublime*.

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So right at the outset, when this text begins in the first section, we find that this treatise is addressed to a certain Terentian- “my dear Terentian”. So we do not know who exactly this Terentian is except that perhaps this was one of Longinus’ disciples or maybe he is writing to a friend who is also interested in these sort of similar things. And we also get a sense of what are the qualities that Longinus is looking for in someone who is reading this.

Towards the end of the first paragraph we find, “I look for a sympathizing and discerning critic” and so are given to understand that he is writing to someone, a friend or disciple or someone who has been sharing some of these notions and ideas with him and that person also happens to be a learned person who is well-versed in the current artistic, literary and cultural scenario, who is familiar with the kind of examples that Longinus gives.

And we also get this impression that maybe Longinus had already been having these discussions with this Terentian to whom this work is also addressed. This Terentian also happens to be a sympathizing and discerning critic. And this is something that we need to also pay attention to because literary criticism in its theoretical form, in formulating its aesthetic principles in depth, in formulating the many things which have gone into it is not actually meant for just a simple

reader. It is meant for someone who has the discernment to look at literature in a way that he uses his discretion when he tries to evaluate it.

So, from the first and third century onwards, we realize that criticism inherently requires something a little more than mere readership. It is not just about spending your leisure time in enjoying a play or reading a work of fiction. It is more about the kind of discernment which comes into play while evaluating a piece of literature or trying to judge what value this piece of literature has in comparison to other works or in the context of the life that is lived.

And the first paragraph of the first section also tells us this is about sublime and this is how this work gets described in the first paragraph. It is a few notes on the subject of the sublime and we find that Longinus is someone who comes straight to the point. We do not find him spending a lot of time offering prefatory remarks. He comes straight to the point, says it is about a few thoughts on the subject of the sublime and this is meant for a scholarly audience, someone who has a discerning mind, someone who is a sympathetic critic.

And the following paragraph in Section 1 further corroborates this: “As I am addressing a person so accomplished in literature, I need only state without engaging 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.”

Look at the way in which he comes straight to the point without offering any further prefatory remarks and he also says since I am given to understand that I am addressing someone who is accomplished in literature and also someone who is aware of the context of these discussions I can come straight to the point, I am talking about sublime and what is sublime.

And he offers a definition right away over there. He says it is about loftiness and excellence of language, it is largely about what we find as aesthetic quality in a work of art and he further elaborates this definition by saying, “It is by this and only this that the greatest poets and prose writers have gained eminence and won themselves a lasting place in the Temple of Fame.”

So this is also about how literature is evaluated, this is also about how certain yardsticks are being used over here. So, the notion of the sublime is placed at the heart of this discussion right

at the outset and we are also being given a series of definitions and characteristics which would help us identify what sublimity is, what the idea of the sublime is. And he further continues, “A lofty passage does not convince the reason of the reader but takes him out of himself.”

So, this definition which he offers right at the outset is extremely important. It is not about convincing the reader, it is not about persuading the reader, it is about taking the reader out of himself, it is the idea of transport which gains focus over here. It is not about appealing to the reason, it is not about appealing to the pragmatic sense. It is about appealing to the aesthetic sense of the reader, of the spectator. “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 own power. But the sublime acting with an imperious and irresistible force sways every reader, whether he will or no.” So, here is how he makes a subtle distinction between the quality of reason, which is otherwise emphasized during the classical ages and the way in which Longinus emphasizes the idea of the aesthetics.

So when he says, it is not about reason, it is not about convincing the reader but about taking the reader out of himself, he is also at various levels considering the idea of transport, this power to elevate the reader out of oneself as superior to the other rational, reason-based notions.

And he says, an intelligent human being, an intelligent well-read person, a scholar, it is within his or her power to decide whether he needs to believe in something or not, whether he needs to be persuaded or not- that is what reason, that is what rationality tells us. But here he says, the notion of sublime, once a text gets elevated to the status of being sublime, the reader loses his power. It is also about the text, the aesthetics of the text, the power of the text to move the audience, to move the reader out of himself, that quality gains upper hand over the reader.

So, the notion of the sublime is about taking the reader over, taking and gaining an upper hand over reason, gaining an upper hand over an intelligent reader, a discernible critic, and also what does this power do? It transport the reader out of himself without giving him any sense of power, any sense of agency.

And this is something which also happens very organically, not something which can be willed to happen. There is no way in which a writer can persuade the reader to transport him or her out

of himself or herself. But here we find that there is a certain loftiness of language, there is an excellence of language which assumes a very powerful status so as to transport the reader out of himself or herself. Coming further down, he says, "Skill in invention, lucid arrangement and disposition of facts are appreciated not by one passage, not by two, but gradually manifest themselves in the general structure of a work. But a sublime thought, if happily timed, illumines 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 dear Terentian would enable you to illustrate these and similar points of doctrine."

So, again it needs to be stated that, this is being addressed to a learned audience, this is being addressed to a scholarly Terentian, who is familiar with a lot of good works which were produced during that time. Here is someone who can appreciate what good literature is, what good work of art is. It is not a naive kind of a person who is exposed to something interesting, who is exposed to something novel and suddenly he finds himself getting transported out of himself or herself, which is not the case.

Here is a Terentian and by extension this also applies to us, he is addressing someone who is a scholar, someone who is learned enough or someone who is not naive or unexposed to these areas. And that sort of further qualifies the idea of transport, saying that it is not really about the cheap thrill which language produces, not about the cheap thrill which imaginative literature produces, it is more about the aesthetic and emotional appeal that it has because it has the power to move.

So having stated in the first section without mincing any words, he has stated very directly that sublime, the idea of the sublime, the notion of the sublime, is the true test of literature. The power to transport the reader out of himself. In the second section he begins with this question, "The first question which presents itself a solution is, whether there is any art which can teach sublimity or loftiness in writing?" Let us see what Longinus thinks about this: Is this something which can be taught? Can anyone be trained in this quality of the sublime?

"For some hold generally that there is mere delusion in attempting to reduce such subjects to technical rules."

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Longinus: On the Sublime <http://study.nptel.ac.in/100110101/longinus.html>

master who can teach it. The vigorous products of nature" teach in their views "are weakened and in every respect debased, when robbed of their fire and blood by rigid technicalities." But I maintain that the truth can be shown to stand otherwise in the natural. Let us look at the case in this way. Nature is hot before and some passionate words, while deterring all appearance of reason, is not wont to show herself strictly so, and neither, and though in all cases the vital sobriety <http://study.nptel.ac.in/100110101/longinus.html> can calm down the right degree and the right measure, and in countries the process of practice and experience, in the peculiar pursuit of scientific method. The great passion, when left to their own blood and each impulse without the control of reason, are in the same danger as a ship for fire or reason without hulls. Often they need the one, but sometimes also the other. The remark of Descartes with regard to human life is general – that the process of all knowledge is to be formed, but not to that end equal to experience 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 more important point of all), a writer can only have been an when he is absolutely limited to the direction of his genius.

There are the considerations which I submit to the unalterable critic of such world studies. Perhaps they will induce him to alter his opinion as to the rarity and influence of our greatest inspirations.

III

... "And let them check the stars' long ranges of fire:
For if I saw one meteor of the earth,
I'll thrust within one cooling vortex flame,
And bring that out in water to the ground,
But now see yet to sing my noble lay."

Such phrases come to be tragic, and become halcyon. – I mean phrases like "vortex vortex flame" and "vortex to vortex," and expressing them in a paper, 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 mediocrity. Since then, even in tragedy, when the natural dignity of the subject makes a thrilling fiction allowable, we cannot pursue a needless grandiloquence, how much more incognitum must it arise in other great literature, as taught in these four words of Geoffrey of London, such as "Terror the Persian Zone" and "valures, these living words," and at certain moments of Caliban's which are high above rather than sublime, and at some in Chaucer's more halcyon will – or some whose words with wings do not move: Sophocles and so. "He shows a little paper, and shows it all." The same faults may be observed in Amphitruo and Hypocrite and Martin, who in their language maintain (as they think of inspiration, instead of playing the games are simply playing the back.

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"The Sublime", they tell us, "is born in a man, and not to be acquired by instruction; genius is the only master who can teach it." He is giving a quotation over here about what is generally considered about the sublime, which again of course tells us that Longinus is not the first one to begin talking about the sublime. There are certain discussions going on from which he is also drawing upon. The only difference perhaps is that maybe there are lot of discussions about whether technical rules are more important than the power of aesthetics.

Because during the classical time, we understand that and especially after having done Aristotle's *Poetics*, we understand that rules are also equally important. There is a way in which Aristotle focuses on the effect that what is performed on stage has in the minds of the spectator and how it affects the audience. But at the same time, we find that Aristotle is also a stickler for rules which is why in the later times one needs to depart from the classical rules. The classicism is also about sticking to certain rules and following a certain judgement, a certain pathway in doing things. There is a way, there is a method in getting things done.

But here, Longinus is also trying to depart from that and ask us this question about whether technical rules are more important than the aesthetics that is inherent in it, which is why we find him also differentiating these two elements over here about things on which a poet can be trained and the other things which are acquired by genius.

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The slide displays a quote by Longinus from 'On the Sublime' (1st century AD). The text is as follows:

... "And let them check the stern's long tapers of fire:
For if I see one taper of the torch,
I'll break within one cooling vortex flame,
And bring that out in water to the ground.
But now not yet to smother my noble lay."

Handwritten notes in red ink on the slide include:

- genius is not
- not
- not
- not

The NPTEL logo is visible in the top right corner of the slide. In the bottom right corner, there is a video inset showing a woman with glasses and a red top speaking.

“The sublime is born in a man and not to be acquired by instruction. Genius is the only 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.”

Look at the various ways in which Longinus begins to depart from the existing classical notions. One, during the classical period, the classical masters, the conventional, the mainstream way of looking at it is that, they are sticklers for rules, they need rules, they need methods, they need a proper pathway in place.

Not only does Longinus begin to depart from that by focusing on the idea of the aesthetics, he also begins to argue that it is not always about inherent genius, it is not always about people who are born with it. This is the way in which the poets need to be trained in this aesthetic element. There is a way in which the poet can be trained to write in such a way that it can result in sublimity.

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.”

I want you to again here see how the classical masters also use the scientific approach. When Aristotle is talking about rules, when Aristotle is talking about the characteristics, when Aristotle is drawing upon the various examples that he sees around him in order to formulate a certain kind of aesthetic for tragedy, for instance, he is talking about a scientific approach. There is a clinical detachment which he employs when he is talking about what happens on stage and the effect that it produces in the minds of the spectator.

Here, Longinus is departing from that. He is not talking about rules, he is talking about the aesthetic, the overall aesthetic appeal that a piece of work, that an art form has, a piece of writing has. And at the same time, even when he is focusing on something which is largely aesthetic, something which is not entirely based on reasons, something which has on the contrary moved away from the power of reason towards the power to transport the reader out of himself or herself he is also focusing on the precision of practice and experience and the peculiar province of scientific method.

This is what makes these texts, the classical texts as very foundational to the idea of understanding literary criticisms in the English as well as the western world. And here, he is saying nature of course, what we see as raw in nature, of course that can be a raw material, that can be one of the ways in which the writer/the poet gets inspired. But there is a way in which a good writer, a skilled writer, someone who is blessed with this craft, there is a way in which he also fine tunes it to meet his own ends.

Like he says, “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.” Genius is extremely important, he points out, but in a very systematic way, in a very scientific way, in a way that it does not go wayward. He is giving the example of a ship which is abandoned to take its own course. As we all know the ship, when it is in the ocean needs a sense of direction. It needs control, there should be someone at the helm to control its movements.

This is how Longinus looks at genius as well. Of course this is inborn, there is an inherent way in which the poet can produce sublimity, but it also needs to be controlled, it also needs to be navigated in a certain way. And this is what perhaps scholarship and training does to the poet, the writer. He gives these analogies of good fortune and counsel. Good fortune is a blessing, but in the same way if it is not wisely used with good counsel, it can even ruin a person's life.

So, here he is giving the example of genius and art, genius is important but the technique of art is equally or more important than that. Every person with genius may not make it big, we all know that. But genius when used in the right proportion with good techniques of art, when used wisely, when used appropriately can lead to sublimity. So, this is a combination that Longinus is focusing on, where genius and art together produce sublimity. So, this is how he situates the notion of sublime, situates the idea of sublime in this larger context.

So, towards the end of the second section, this is how he ends it, “These are the considerations which I submit to the unfavorable critics of such useful studies, perhaps they may induce him to alter his opinion as to the vanity and idleness of our present investigations.” So, he is also aware and he also wants to make us aware of the many debates and discussions which are also happening in and around him within this context, about the idea of genius and art, about the idea of sublimity, about the way in which he also positions reason, vis-a-vis the aesthetic transport to which the reader is subjected.

And with this we wrap up today's session. I encourage you to read through the remaining sections and in the next section we will also focus on what are the major characteristics of the idea of the sublime and what contributes to the sublimity of any art form. I thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.

