



The Concept of Sublimity in Longinus, Burke and Kant

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My research briefly charts out the history of the sublime. In the history of aesthetics, the story of the sublimity runs parallel to the spiritual story of faith among the human race over the centuries. The definitions of the sublime as an elevating experience stem from the capacity of faith, to conquer, fear and rise to the ultimate levels of bliss. Longinus and Immanuel Kant's perceptions fall under this category.

The sublimity which terrifies and evokes negative pleasure arises from the lack of any external conviction, higher than the Psycho-physiological state of the subject. The sublimity defined by the Post modernist theory Edmund Burke is a potentially destructive force. Thus, the earlier sublimity implies a secure world order and control whereas the latter implies loss of control and order alone.

The sublimity was first introduced to the world as a figure of speech in the first century A.D by Caecilius's treatise on the sublime. Perhaps in the same century Longinus wrote his treatise "On The Sublime" as a reply to Caecilius. His reply surpasses its immediate purpose. Longinus followed to Caecilius's concept of the sublime as an artistic feature but explained it more broadly as an aesthetic category. He considered the greatest and the good works of literature to be in the field of the sublime. According to Longinus "Sublime" means 'uplift the soul by some innate power... and please all men at all times' (107). A sublime expression has the ability to "transport the hearer with wonder". It does not gratify but exerts an irresistible force and mastery thus exercising an "upper hand". Alternatively it is beyond human control either sensory or mental. Until this point all the three- Longinus, Burke and Kant are in agreement. While Burke develops an overpowering incomprehensibly force of the sublime as a terrifying threat of extinction, whereas Longinus and Kant read it as a challenge and a test of the human courage and stamina.

Though his central concern in the treatise is with the rhetorics of the sublime. Longinus' recurring references to the 'innate' power suggests an essentialists approach. He views the sublimity as a life-enhancing source. He says that it fills us with 'proud exaltation' and a sense of joy. Thus, Longinus' sublimity is a nourishing source. On the other hand Edmund Burke extends the idea of sublimity into the dark areas of experience which is related to death and to self preservation. Burke's 'Philosophical Inquiry' examines a psycho-physiological analysis of emotions, to explain the characteristics of the beautiful and the sublime. Burke says that human beings have three natural powers that is the senses, the judgement and the imagination that relate them to the external objects. With Burke the beautiful and the sublime are associated with emotions of pleasure and pain and finally observed as passions of society and self-preservation. In famine, beauty is painted in masculine and aggressive terms submissive shades and the sublimity is painted. According to Burke thus the sublime object evokes an instincts of pain, fear and terror which threatens the existence, overwhelm the senses and create a painful tension in the body.

The sublime and the beautiful in Burke are reduced which gives pain and provokes pleasure. On the other hand Immanuel Kant views the beautiful and the sublime as an ongoing process. Kant tries to reconcile the subjective and the objective elements that co-exist in an aesthetic judgement in the "Critique Of Judgement" (1790). When encountered by a beautiful object we all as rational beings feel pleasure. Our pleasure is not based on any preconceived concept yet we express pleasure in the form of judgement. We even expect others to sympathize with our judgement and feel the same pleasure. Kant says that due to this free play of imagination, we are able to make aesthetic judgements without any rules of taste and thus call an object beautiful or ugly.

It would be a mistake if I say that beauty lies in the object. The beauty that I attribute to an object is just my perception. I see what I am. Therefore self reflexive is an aesthetic judgement. It creates a sense of harmony between my rational faculties and the objects to which they are applied. This sense of harmony establishes a source of pleasure and basis for its universality. When we sense a harmony between nature and our own faculties we are impressed by the utility and the ability of everything around us. This is the sentiments of the beauty. On the other side, everything is overwhelmed by the infinite greatness of the world. We fail to understand and control it; we have just experienced the sentiments of the sublime. Therefore, the beauty that we discover is the purposive eness of nature whereas in the sublimity we have the intimation of the nature's transcendental origin of an idea not the actual world. Thus Kant gives a theological perspective to his aesthetic theory and links the sublimity to our ideas of god, reverence and spirituality.

The concluding chapter of my research examines the sublimity in the politics of survival. The two sides of survival, life and death offer two clear pictures to view the sublimity. When seen from the platform of life, it would be like as Longinus' sublimity



and when viewed from the platform of death it would be like as Burke's sublimity. Another option would be to break free of the two sides of survival i.e. life and death cycle and Kant see the sublimity beyond in a higher reality of existence.

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