



## AN ASSESSMENT OF DIONYSIUS LONGINUS' 'PRINCIPLES OF SUBLIME'

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### Abstract

'On the Sublime' of Dionysius Longinus has been the most effective, influential and everlasting principle in the history of Literary Principles. Art needs aestheticism. It must have aesthetic sense and essence. It can be achieved through elements of sublime. The world has been realising the values of aestheticism in art and literature. It is true that without aestheticism, art can't provide satisfaction to mind and heart. It is the most essential element of creativity. If content is important, elements of sublime are equally significant.

"The Sublime, wherever it occurs", says Longinus, "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. [1] Despite lack of authenticity and concreteness of sources, Dionysius Longinus has been read, discussed, debated and cited not less than other theorists and critics of literature. His 'On the Sublime' has been considered as the first written document to affirm the requirement of the grace & elegance in artistic creativity. Beauty, grace, elegance and decorum are essentials of literary compositions. Whether it is English literature or Urdu, Hindi, Greek, French etc., the need and requirement of artistic beauty to bring aestheticism has been felt since the inception of literature. Evidently for above reasons, R.A. Scott-James regards Longinus as "the first romantic critic." [2]

Dearth of concrete information leaves us with no alternative but to trust that he was born around the third century A.D. At the same time, literature is different from history. Dating can be important but content, form; quality, essence and

elegance are more significant than other personal or chronological information. It is believed that he lived in the third century A.D. As per the available information, he happened at the time of Queen Zenobia. He was one of her ministers there. His contribution in planning, designing and establishing the beautiful Imperial City of Palmyra has been praiseworthy. His love for teaching has been well-known. Prior to his ministerial responsibility, he opened and served an academy at Athens where he taught literature and rhetoric.

The influence of Plato is clearly visible upon treatise 'On the Sublime'. The same was clearly revealed, revived and interpreted by the Neo-Platonists. The influence of Plato left in delineable imprints upon his work. We do believe that the great literary or social thinkers, heroes or legends of the past leave in delineable impacts upon the writers of the upcoming generations. Such heroes change the very conception of the new generations. In art and literature too, we find similar situation. Regarding Longinus, it is said that he adopts a very homely method in his treatise. His love and reverence for elegant literature has made him unique and singular. He emphasised the value

and significance of 'aesthetic' importance in the literature.

Poetry has been a source of multidimensional outcomes. It can give pleasure or instruction or it can give both – Pleasure and instruction. For great Greek poet Homer, poetry is to delight but for Aristophanes, it goes for instructions and attempts to uplift men to make them better. Throughout the centuries, the well-accepted aim of the poet has been to instruct and to delight. Rhetoric, on the other hand, aims to persuade readers in general. The rhetorician tries to capture men's minds to lead them. The medium is aesthetic language and most skilfully arranged arguments. In the views of Longinus, sublime is not delight or persuasion. It does not work by reason. Its end is ecstasy, transport, and lifting out of oneself. Longinus believes that the sublime consists in a certain loftiness and excellence of language. The great writers have achieved eminence, height and popularity on the basis of incorporating sublime elements or contents.

Literary art is different from other forms and branches of learning. It is equally about form and content. In the words of Longinus, "Nothing is so conducive to sublimity as an appropriate display of genuine passion". [3] Romantics were much curious and enthusiastic about the content creating a clear and clean departure from the classics who valued form and structure. In the opinion of Longinus a lofty passage does not convince the reason of the reader, but takes him out of himself. He finds that which is admirable ever confounds our judgment, and eclipses that which is merely reasonable or agreeable. He seems very apt in his arguments. Skill in invention, lucid arrangement and disposition of facts, are appreciated not by one passage, or by two but gradually manifest themselves in the general structures of a work. For him, a sublime thought illumines an entire subject in its totality.

It is evident that without making the work sublime, the art cannot be acknowledged as artistically aesthetic. The sublime moves us deeply, and it is by his power to move that the poet achieves name, fame and recognition. It appears as a flash. It changes the entire conception. We build

different opinion about the poet of that composition. In the words of Longinus, "The expression of the sublime often needs the spur, but it also needs the curb which is put by art alone." [4] Reason works slowly, and aims only at convincing us. The sublime builds instantly and goes straight to our passion. The formal beauty of poem is understood through a slow process of analysis. But the sublime suddenly captures our mind and sets vibrating every bit of our heart and mind. The impact is so deep that it touches and soothes the very soul of the readers.

According to great theorist Plato, poets are inspired beings. He felt that they compose their inspiring compositions not by art, but as they are inspired and possessed with poetic instincts. He says that there is no invention in the poet until he has been inspired. He is out of his senses. His mind is under different impulse. It is either inspiration or passionate passion or the divine madness, which lifts both the poet and the audience out of themselves. This produces and provides an atmosphere of ecstasy.

Longinus shows in interest in the source of the power that Plato mentioned. His concern is merely its effects on human heart and mind, which is to produce ecstasy. Imaginative support is a must for artistic creativity. He searches those elements that can make us light-winged and in result, lift us. So, Inspiration and the sublime both achieve a common end. There is reason to believe that Plato influenced Longinus's conception of the sublime. Similarly, we find the effect of imagination in poets and literatures of succeeding generations. The sublime effect of literature, for Longinus, is achieved through self-revelation or self-intuition. He feels that the appeal is not rational rather passionate. Its effect upon the mind is quick, immediate and like a flash of lighting upon the eyes of the poets and readers.

Longinus is the first to expound the doctrine on which romanticism rests. The sublime, according to him, issues from grandeur of thought, and a vigorous and spirited treatment of passions. But passion alone does not make great literature: it should be presented in a proper form. Form is as

much important for the literary artist as the spirit behind it. Greek literature is born of lofty ideas, deep passions and flawless techniques.

Hence, the poet must study to master the technique of his art. Nature must be wedded to art both are regarded by Longinus as sources of the sublime. That is why nature and art both are regarded by Longinus as sources of the sublime. Grandeur of thought and a vigorous and spirited treatment of passions, which are the two main sources of the sublime, depend on natural endowments. Besides these Longinus suggests three other sources which derive assistance from art. They are,

(1) A certain artifice in the employment both of the figures of thought and figures of speech;

(2) Dignified expression which results from proper choice of words and the use of metaphors and other ornaments of diction; and

(3) Majesty and elevation of structure.

Longinus, therefore, is both a romanticist and a classicist. Passion must be tempered with all that is best in classicism in order to give proper form of literature. But though Longinus is concerned about proper form and technique, he is more interested in that side of literature which springs from the nature of the artists, the internal element which supplies what artifice can only regulate. Grandeur of thought and a vigorous, spirited treatment of passions are the primary sources of the sublime. But thought and passion must be properly presented; otherwise they will lose much of their beauty, hence, the necessity of art and technique.

According to Longinus, there are five principal sources of the sublime. These sources can be classified into two groups:

1. Inborn quality or Gifts of genius
  - a] Grandeur of thought
  - b] Strong and inspired passion
2. Acquired qualities
  - c] The use of figures---

i) figures of thought, and ii) figures of language

d] Noble diction and

e] Dignified, elevated, and elaborate composition.

But there can be a lofty style, without either lofty ideas or deep passions. Such a style results from bombast or puerility caused by over-elaboration, or false sentiments. A lofty style results from lofty cast of mind and genuine passions, and not by the use of artifices alone. It is the desire to create novelty which induces a writer to employ false methods. It is this that has turned the brain of nearly all the learned world today. Correctness in style and expression is welcome, but a writer should not be solely pre-occupied with it. For a mind always intent on correctness is apt to be dissipated in trifles. Better a blemish with sublimity than perfection of form without it. Still, the poet should aim at artistic perfection, which comes through rendering art simple and natural. According to him, for art is then perfect when it seems to be nature, and nature, again, is most effective when pervaded by the unseen presence of art.

What is the distinction between true and false sublime, or, in other words, what is the criterion of excellence in literature? Longinus raises this question and gives his own answer to it. We are to be guided by the opinion of an acute and cultivated critic, one who has read widely and thought deeply about literature. If, then, any work fails to dispose the mind of such a critic to lofty ideas; if the thoughts which it suggests do not extend beyond what is actually expressed; and if the longer he reads it, the less he thinks of it- then there is no true sublimity in such a work. He believes, "Great literature springs from great and lofty souls, and not from those with whom the world is too much." [5]

On the other hand, when a passage is pregnant with suggestions, when it is hard to distract the attention from it, and when it takes a strong and lasting hold on our memory, and then we may be sure that we have lighted on the true

sublime. Great literature has a universal appeal. It always pleases and pleases all the readers. Its appeal is not limited to any clique, coterie or age. It lives through the ages delighting all those who seek delight in it. It is ever fresh, ever new, a thing of beauty and joy.

The poetry of Homer, the plays of Shakespeare, Dante's divine comedy and the odes of Keats belong this class of great and immortal literature. Longinus also believes that if a book produces similar impacts and provides equal amount of enjoyment irrespective of age, creed, region, manner, language and aspirations, it means the success of compositions. This is the authentic proof of sublime in that particular text. Poets like Shakespeare, Homer, Virgil, Tulsī, Balmiki, Milton etc produce same effect, impression and entertainment irrespective of all. This is the mark of great poetry, of all great literature. Longinus lays emphasis upon the use of figure to elevate the style. He writes: A figure is most effective when the figure is happily concealed, and it is concealed by splendour of style." [6]

The cradle of literary criticism in Europe is ancient Greece, from there it gradually spread to their parts of Europe. To the wisdom of the Greeks the Romans did not make any appreciable addition. They lacked the critical and creative powers of the Greek masters and admitted their superiority. Aristotle, for instance, was a literary law-giver, while Horace was mere codifier. In Western Europe, particularly in England, criticism began to show signs of existence at the time of Renaissance. But when it was born it has its face turned towards the Greek masters.

There is possibility of being lofty and verbose in the process of literary compositions. It is always probable. Even Longinus rejects the notion that a great artist must have raw genius. This can be acquired through proper learning. It is a peculiar sort of query. Because, sublimity in an art and has been a matter of continuous practices and incessant attempts to mastery over it. Some people believe that the Sublime is an inborn instinct. They stand on their notion that it can't be acquired through any means.

## CONCLUSION

To Summarize, it can be said that the approach, intention and content of Longinus changed the entire course of literary discourse. Atkins applauded in following terms, "finest monuments of antiquity." [7] Literary creativity has given the acceptance of his noble idea. The world has been realising the values of aestheticism in art and literature. It is true that without aestheticism, art can't provide satisfaction to mind and heart. In order to create excellent literature, we, the writers, need to understand the worth, value and essentiality of the elements of Sublime. It is the most essential element of creativity. If content is important, elements of sublime are equally significant. Without aestheticism, art will prove prosaic, boring and futile. As researcher, I do acknowledge and appreciate the significance of Dionysius Longinus' 'On the Sublime'.

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