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Longinus' Theory of the Sublime and its Differences from Burke and Kant

1. Longinus' Theory of the Sublime

Longinus' On the Sublime (1st century CE) explores how literature and rhetoric can elevate the human soul, creating an overwhelming sense of grandeur, awe, and emotional intensity. His concept of the sublime is centered on the ability of language to transport the reader beyond the ordinary, making them feel an almost divine presence.

Key Sources of the Sublime in Literature

Longinus identifies five primary sources that contribute to sublimity:

1. Greatness of Thought – Profound and lofty ideas.
2. Strong Emotion (Pathos) – Genuine, deep passion that resonates with readers.
3. Figures of Speech – Metaphors, similes, and rhetorical flourishes that heighten impact.
4. Noble Diction – Elevated word choice and phrasing.
5. Dignified Composition – Structuring sentences in a way that enhances grandeur.

Literary Examples of Longinian Sublime

- Homer's Iliad :The depiction of Achilles' wrath in The Iliad exemplifies greatness of thought and intense pathos. Longinus praises Homer's ability to evoke emotions that transcend the literal narrative.

- Milton's Paradise Lost: The opening invocation ("Of Man's First Disobedience, and the Fruit / Of that Forbidden Tree…") displays grandeur of subject matter, lofty diction, and an almost divineintensity.

- Shakespeare's King Lear: Lear's thunderous speech in Act 3, Scene 2 ("Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!") exemplifies the sublime by blending intense emotion, powerful imagery, and elevated diction.

For Longinus, sublime literature has a timeless quality, moving audiences regardless of their era or culture.

2. Burke's Sublime: Fear and Astonishment

In A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and

Beautiful (1757), Edmund Burke differentiates between the beautiful (which is harmonious, small, and pleasurable) and the sublime (which is vast, powerful, and evokes awe or terror).

Burke argues that the sublime is rooted in our physiological response to overwhelming forces— things that are immense, infinite, or evoke fear. He believes the sublime arises from:

- Obscurity – The unknown is more terrifying than the known (e.g., Gothic horror).

- Power – Displays of immense force (e.g., storms, earthquakes).

-Vastness – The feeling of being dwarfed by something (e.g., mountains, the ocean).

- Terror and Pain – The mind is overwhelmed by danger but finds pleasure in its safe contemplation.

Literary Examples of Burkean Sublime

- Mary Shelley's Frankenstein – The description of the Alps and Arctic wastelands captures the sublime through vastness and desolation. The creature himself also evokes terror and fascination.

- Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner – The supernatural, the vast sea, and the isolationof the mariner create a sense of dread and awe.

- Edgar Allan Poe's The Fall of the House of Usher – The decaying mansion and psychologicalhorror reflect Burke's sublime in Gothic literature.

Burke's sublime is visceral—it is not just about greatness of thought (as in Longinus), but aboutpsychological and emotional intensity.

3. Kant's Sublime: The Infinite and the Rational Mind

Immanuel Kant, in Critique of Judgment (1790), builds on Burke's idea but shifts it into the realm of philosophy and reason. He distinguishes between two types of the sublime:

1. Mathematical Sublime – When something is so vast that it defies human comprehension (e.g.,the universe, the ocean, infinity).
2. Dynamical Sublime – When nature's power (e.g., a storm, an avalanche) threatens us but does not destroy us, making us aware of our own resilience and moral strength.

For Kant, the sublime is not just an emotional reaction; it involves a rational realization that the human mind can conceive of the infinite, even if we cannot fully grasp it. The sublime experience reminds us of our own ability to transcend limitations.

Literary Examples of Kantian Sublime

- Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" :The poet reflects on nature's vastness, which both humbles and uplifts the human soul, demonstrating the mathematicalsublime.

-Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Mont Blanc": The grandeur of the mountains inspires awe but also evokes the power of human imagination, fitting Kant's concept.

- Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*: The white whale represents an unknowable, almost infinite force that challenges human understanding. Ahab's obsession with it reflects the tension between the finite and infinite.

Kant's sublime is intellectual, that is, it does not merely terrify (as in Burke) but elevates the humanspirit through reason.

How do the three differ in their views of sublime?

- Longinus sees the sublime as an effect of eloquent language and noble thought that transcends time.

- Burke grounds the sublime in human emotions, linking it to fear, vastness, and danger.

- Kant shifts the sublime into philosophy, viewing it as a struggle between human reason and the infinite.

Each theorist contributes a unique perspective:

- Longinus' sublime is literary and artistic.

- Burke's sublime is emotional and physical.

- Kant's sublime is intellectual and moral.

This evolution of the sublime shows how the concept has shifted from literary aesthetics to psychological and philosophical inquiry, influencing how we interpret literature, nature, and human experience.