Sublimity in Paradise Lost

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Abstract

Sublimity is a concept that is defined differently in different ages. It is one of the aesthetic canons in art that is evaluated differently throughout the literary history. It is associated with what is high and lofty in art and nature. For different scholars there are different sources for sublimity. It is first introduced by Longinus who associated it with the author and the literary work and gave it five sources. Later scholars associated it with the audience. This concept is investigated in John Milton’s Paradise Lost (book III) to find out the sources of sublimity, Longinus set ,in such a masterpiece.

1. Sublimity

It is a Latin –derived word meaning “on high, lofty and elevated” .It is first introduced by Longinus in his treatise “On the Sublime” in the first century. The treatise remained unknown until published in 1554 and then translated into Latin in 1572. After that an English translation had been produced in 1652 by John Hall . It started having influence in the late 17th century, but, the greatest influence it made on English literature and art in general was in the 18th century (Preminger,1965 :819).

This concept became fashionable in the 18th century but it was partly influenced by Longinus treatise. It became distinguished from the beautiful and ranked above it .It played a considerable role in the drift toward subjectivism and psychologizing literature and literary experience and the rise of romanticism and establishment of aesthetics as a new ,separate branch of philosophy (ibid).

In that century interest in the term went with interest in the effect of objects on the mind and consequently it got different definitions .Addison, Burke , Kant and Schopenhauer defined it differently ,yet ,they all shared the interest in the audience while Longinus associated it with the author and the literary work with his consideration of the tropes. However, Longinus admitted that sublime works transport the soul of the reader.

Longinus gives five sources for sublimity. The first element for the elevation of language is elevation of mind .We must "nurture our souls [as far as that is possible] to thoughts
sublime, and make them always pregnant, so
to say, with noble inspiration" (Longinus in
Adams , 1971: 81). Thus, "sublimity is the echo
of a great soul... Great accents we expect to
fall from the lips of those whose thoughts are
deep and grave " (ibid).

Supreme excellence can be found also in
vehement and inspired passions and this
represents the second source of sublimity,
which can be a characteristic of the author
and the work. The final three elements
represent features of the work: the due
formation of figures of speech, noble
diction, and dignified and elevated composition.

In other words, these sources can be
cast in two parts: part of them is related to
the author's elevated or grand thoughts and
emotions (first and second sources) that he
pours into the content of the literary works;
this is to be reflected on the other part. Noble
and lofty thoughts and vehement emotions
find their expression in lofty language. Thus,
the other part is associated with the form in
the use of figures (the third source) that
impart excellence and elevation to the style.

Longinus does not deal with all figures
but only with those that give distinction to
style like images, amplification, rhetorical
question, asyndeton, hyperbaton and
periphrasis (ibid: 77-102). He states (ibid: 88)
that if such devices (or figures) are handled in
the proper manner they will contribute to
sublimity of literary works.

He gives the importance of each figure
saying that images contribute greatly to
dignity and power in their mental
representations (ibid: 86). Amplification (a
device in which language is used to extend,
magnify and emphasize to attain a particular
effect (Cuddon, 1982: 35)) also gives strength,
magnitude and grandeur (Longinus in
Adams, 1971: 84). As for the rhetorical
question ( expecting no answer or to which
the answer is self-evident), it makes language
"not only more elevated but also more
convincing" (ibid: 89). Moreover, questions
asked and answered by oneself stimulate a
natural outburst of passion. Periphrasis (a
roundabout way of writing (Cuddon, 1982:
500) also contributes to the sublime because it
"harmonizes with the normal expression and
adds greatly to its beauty" (Longinus in
Adams, 1971: 93). Hyperbaton (or inversion
in which words are transposed from their
usual order (Cuddon, 1982: 315)) bear the
impress of vehement emotions; and
asyndeton (omitting conjunctions, articles, and
pronouns for the sake of speed and economy
(ibid: 60-61) heightens the expression.

Such figures give an emotional quality to
style and enrich it because they are connected
with thoughts and emotions and not merely
mechanical. Diction (the fourth source) refers
to "the choice of proper and striking words
[that] wonderfully attracts and enthralls the
hearer... Beautiful words are in very truth the
peculiar light of thought" (Longinus in
Adams, 1971: 93-94). It is also associated with
form. It includes the choice and arrangement
of words as in metaphor and simile and
hyperbole that arise from emotion. Form is
reflected also through dignified composition
and arrangement (the fifth source) which
comprises the verbal order called rhythm. It
is the harmonious combination of words that
appeals to the soul and enables the reader to
share emotions of the writer.

2. Sources of Sublimity in Paradise
Lost

"Paradise Lost" is a masterpiece epic
poem written by the 17th century English poet
John Milton (1608-1674) and published in
1667 in ten books. This great poem implies greatness of Milton's soul. Milton's poetic ambition was to write a poetry animated by moral, religious and patriotic motives. The sublimity of Milton's thought lies in his intention to serve his country by putting before it noble and religious ideals in the highest poetic form.

2.1 The First and Second Sources
The sublimity of Milton's thoughts and emotions are reflected in a sublime form (the epic). He accomplished his epic on Virgil's model. Just as Virgil had glorified Rome, Milton had considered the possibilities of an Arthuriad. In Muir's (1955:131) words:

He decided instead to write what may be regarded as an
International epic, though he wrote it in English, and not
in the Latin which he might have chosen. He
rejected the
loose episodic structure of Aristotle and Spenser, and
accepted instead the Virgilian form.

(ibid:131-2)

2.2. Other Sources in Book III
In addition to vehement thoughts and passions with which Milton wrote his masterpiece there are other sources that can be detected in the poem. The analysis is confined to Book III due to the extended length of the poem.

2.2.1 A Summary of Book III
This Book produces heaven in which God sees Satan traveling on earth. The Son sits on His right. They discuss how fallen angles lead rebellion against God through their own free will. They discuss also Man's future. God prophesizes that man also will disobey him and must die unless a suitable sacrifice is offered. The Son offers to die for Man and God praises the Son, and the angels rejoice. Satan, at the edge of the universe disguised, inquire about where Man is to be found to tempt him (McGoodwin, 2006:3).

2.2.1. The Third, Fourth and Fifth Sources
One of the images that contribute to the dignity and power of the poem is the following one which draws the happy Garden in Heaven in which Adam and Eve are enjoying the blessing of God in the image of reaping joy and love:

Our two first Parents, yet the only two 65
Of mankind, in the happy Garden plac't,
Reaping immortal fruits of joy and love,
Uninterrupted joy, unrivald love
In blissful solitude;…

Another image can be found in the Son's speech to God to die for the Man because God may not leave the Son dead but he will rise again. The image presents the Son as a victorious warrior who defeats death:

But I shall rise Victorious, and subdue 250
My Vanquisher, spoiled of his vanted spoile;
Death his deaths wound shall then receive, &
stoop
Inglorious, of his mortall sting disarm'd.

Another figure of speech used by Milton is amplification which invests the discourse with grandeur as is presented in the scene that describes God in a supreme way.
comes from the Majesty of God, a grandeur that excites admiration:

Now had the Almighty Father from above,  
From the pure Empyrean where he sits  
High Thron'd above all highth, bent down his eye,  
His own works and their works at once to view:  
About him all the Sanctities of Heaven stood thick as stars, and from his sight receiv'd Beatitude past utterance; on his right  
The radiant image of his Glory sat,  
His onely Son;...

Another example of amplification could be detected in the scene of the Angles' hails and praise to God that follows the Almighty's speech:

No sooner had th' Almighty ceas't, but all  
The multitude of Angles with a shout loud as from numbers without numbers, sweet  
As from blest voices, uttering joy, heaven rung  
With Jubilee, and loud Hosanna's fill'd  
Th' eternal Regions: lowly reverent  
Towards either Throne they bow, & to the ground  
With solemn adoration down they cast  
Thir Crowns inwove with Amarant and Gold,  
Immortal Amarant,...

Rhetorical question is another figure used to make the language of the poem more elevated and convincing. This is shown by the following extract of God's speech that shows ingratitude of man towards God that Man chose to be disobedient by his own free will:

Hee and his faithless Progenie: whose fault?  
Whose but his own? ingrate, he had of mee  
All he could have; I made him just and right,

Other examples on rhetorical question could be found in the speech directed to God praising His grace:

For should Man finally be lost, should Man  
Thy creature late so lov'd, thy youngest Son  
Fall circumvented thus by fraud, though joynd  
With his own folly? that be from thee far,  
That far be from thee, Father, who art Judge  
Of all things made, and judgest onely right.  
Or shall the Adversarie thus obtain  
His end, and frustrate thine, shall he fulfill  
His malice, and thy goodness bring to naught,  
Or proud return though to his heavier doom,  
Yet with revenge accomplish't and to Hell  
Draw after him the whole Race of mankind,  
By him corrupted? or wilt thou thy self  
Abolish thy Creation, and unmake,  
For him, what for thy glorie thou hast made?  
So should thy goodness and thy greatness both  
Be questioned and blasphem'd without defence.

Milton uses Asyndeton to endow his work with sublimity. In the scene that shows Satan's attempt to get the way to Paradise there is an example of asyndeton in which the pronoun is omitted:

... As when a Scout  
Through dark and desart wayes with peril gone
All night; at last by break of cheerful dawne
Obtains the brow of some high-climbing Hill,
Which to his eye discovers unaware
The goodly ...........

The pronoun "he" is omitted from the beginning of line 546 which should come before "obtains" to refer to Satan. Another example of asyndeton comes from the omission of the conjunction as in the following example:

Thir S[t]arry dance in numbers that compute
Day's, months, and years, towards his all-hearing Lamp
Turn swift their various motions, or are turned
By his Magnetic beam, that gently warms
The Univers, ...

The conjunction "and" is omitted from the beginning of line 582. This line describes the constellations in the sky. The constellations dance in numbers that compute days, months and years and turn their various motions (or are turned) by the Magnetic beam that warms the universe. Originally the line might have been:

(And) turn swift their various ........

Many examples of inversion (hyperbaton) could be detected in book III as well. This departure in the order of expressions or ideas from the natural sequence serves to intensify emotions as in the following extract from a scene in which a multitude of Angels are praising God:

Thee next they sang of all Creation first, 
Begotten Son, Divine Similitude,
In whose conspicuous count'nance, without cloud
Made visible, 'th Almighty Father shines,
Whom else no Creature can behold; on thee
Impress t the effulgence of his Glorie abides,
Transfs'd on thee his ample Spirit rests.

Lines 385-6 without inversion might have been:

In whose conspicuous count'nance th' Almighty Father
Shines without cloud made visible
and line 388 might have been:

The effulgence of his Glorie abides impresst,
while line 389 might have been:

His ample Spirit rests transfs'd on thee
or:
On thee his ample Spirit rests transfs'd.

Another example of inversion lies in the following extract from the scene in which Angels are praising God for His mercy and grace towards Man, and envious Satan from Globe (God made out of chaos) tries to approach paradise to deceive Man:

Thus they in Heav'n, above the starry Sphear,
Thir happie hours in joy and hymning spent.
Mean while upon the firm opacus Globe
Of this round World, whose first convex divides
The luminous inferior Orbs, enclos'd
From Chaos and th' inroad of Darkness old,
Satan alighted walks: a Globe farr off
It seem'd, now seems a boundless Continent
Dark, waste ............
Without inversion line 417 might have been:

\[\text{Spent their happie hours in joy and hymning}\]

And lines 422-23 might have been:

\[\text{a Globe which seem'd farr off}
\text{Now seems a boundless Continent}\]

Milton tries to postpone the words and inverts the order of ideas to impress and arouse vehement emotions.

* * *

Moreover, he uses periphrasis to add to the sublimity of his work. The following extracts show a roundabout way of expressing things:

\[\text{To whom the great Creator thus reply'd.}
\text{O Son ,in whom my Soul  hath chief  delight,}
\text{Son of my bosom ,Son who art alone}
\text{My word ,my wisdom ,and effectual might,}170\]

The Son is referred to as "Son of my bosom", "my word", "my wisdom" and "effectual might". And "Son both of God and Man", "anointed universal King" and "Head Supream" represent other periphrases to the Son given in the following lines:

\[\text{Here shalt thou sit incarnate, here shalt}
\text{Reigne}
\text{315}
\text{Both God and Man ,Son both of God and Man,}
\text{Anointed universal King ;all Power}
\text{I give thee ,reign for ever ,and assume}
\text{Thy Merits; under thee as Head Supream}
\text{* * * *}

Metaphor is presented with idea of the fall of man. God says that "man shall not quite be lost, but sa'v'd " and this is not for will in him but from grace in God. God gives chance for "stonie hearts" to repent and this metaphor enraths the reader with its rhetorical, vivid description and shows disobedience of hard hearted man:

\[\text{...for I will cleer thir senses dark,}
\text{What may suffice ,and soft'n stonie hearts}
\text{To pray, repent, and bring obedience due.}190
\text{To prayer ,repentance,and obedience due,}
\text{Though but endeord with sincere intent,}
\text{Mine eare shall not be slow,mine eye not shut.}
\text{And I will place within them as a guide}
\text{My Umpire Conscience, whom if they will hear,}
\text{Light after light well us'd they shall attain,}
\text{And to the end persisting ,safe arrive.}\]

"Paying debts" is a metaphor that refers to the termination of life of the Son who redeems his life for the sake of Man as in the following extract:

\[\text{Though now to Death I yield ,and am his due}
\text{245}
\text{All that of me can die ,yet that debt paid,}
\text{Thou wilt not leave me in the loathsome grave}
\text{* * * *}

Simile is another device used by Milton to elevate his diction in the following extract that describes the new Globe God created and into which Satan makes a journey:

\[\text{That stone ,or like to that which here below}
\text{600}
\text{Philosophers in vain so long have sought,}
\text{* * * *}

As for hyperbole, Milton uses many examples of it to enrich his diction as in the following line about disobedient human
beings that may not repent and insist on disobedience:

\[ \text{But hard be hard'nd, blind be blinded more} \]

Another example of hyperbole is clear in the following extract that presents the Son's offer to redeem Man as an unexampled love:

\[ \text{....offered himself to die} \]
\[ \text{For mans offence unexampl'd love, } 410 \]
\[ \text{Love no where to be found less than Divine!} \]

The reference also to stars in heaven as being innumerable and numberless is an example of hyperbole in the following lines:

\[ \text{Amongst innumerable Starrs, that shon} \]
\[ \text{and} \]
\[ \text{Numberless, as thou seest, and how they move;} \]

\[ \text{65} \]

Milton uses the fifth source of sublimity also in this poem to make his style elevated through dignified composition and arrangement that comprises the verbal order called rhythm.

The poem is written in iambic pentameter and called blank verse because it does not rhyme. The rhythm of blank verse is more formal, more intensely regular than looser rhythmic patterns of normal speech. Its regular formality creates an incantatory effect and the strong rhythm tends to capture and modify the listener's heartbeat and induce a slightly altered state of consciousness. The regularity of blank verse prepares the listener for a heightened response to the effect of language and image in the poem.

Yet, this regularity is not monotonous. Each line consists of 5 heavy stresses and 5 minor stresses. The rhythm of lines read as: da-dum ,da-dum , da-dum , da-dum , da-
dum

But many lines reverse the stress where da-dum is replaced by dum-da and dum-dum. Milton varies his rhythm and musical quality of words to fit what he wants to say. This is shown in this extract that gives God's speech about Man's disobedience and how he would be saved (rhythm of this extract varies from the one that follows):

\[ \text{That they may stumble on, and deeper fall;} \]
\[ \text{And none but such from mercy I exclude.} \]
\[ \text{But yet all is not don; Man disobeying,} \]
\[ \text{Disloyal breaks his fealtie, and sins} \]
\[ \text{Against the high Supremacies of Heav'n,} \]
\[ \text{Affecting God-head, and so losing all,} \]
\[ \text{To expiate his Treason that naught left,} \]
\[ \text{But to destruction sacred and devote,} \]
\[ \text{He with his whole posteritie must die,} \]
\[ \text{Die hee or Justice must; unless for him} \]

\[ \text{210} \]

\[ \text{Some other able, and as willing, pay} \]
\[ \text{The rigid satisfaction, death for death.} \]

Milton makes sonorous rhythms pulsate through and beyond one verse into the next without using punctuation at the end of many verses to create voluble units of rhythm and sense that go well beyond the limitations might be found in rhymed verse (Labriola, 2007:14). This can be felt in the following extract which depicts the surprise of Angels for the Son's sacrifice:

\[ \text{His words here ended, but his meek aspect} \]
\[ \text{Silent yet spake, and breath'd immortal love} \]
\[ \text{To mortal men, above which only shon} \]
\[ \text{Filial obedience: as a sacrifice} \]
\[ \text{Glad to be offer'd, he attends the} \]
\[ \text{will} \]
\[ \text{270} \]

\[ \text{Of his great Father. Admiration seis'd} \]
\[ \text{All Heav'n, what this might mean, &} \]
\[ \text{whither tend} \]
\[ \text{Wondering; but soon th' Almighty thus} \]
\[ \text{reply'd:} \]
\[ \text{O thou in Heav'n and Earth the only peace} \]
"Found out for mankind under wrauth, O thou
My sole complacence! well thou know'st how dear,
To me are all my works, nor man the least
Though last created, that for him I spare
Thee from my bosom and right hand, to save,
By loosing thee a while, the whole Race lost.

The difference of rhythm in the last two extracts is clear that each one creates a different emotion in the audience.

3. Conclusion
The epic poem "Paradise Lost" is known for its sublime style. Milton draws sublimity from different sources. Investigating the five sources Longinus set for sublimity in the third book of this poem shows that all these sources are used by Milton to endow his style with grandeur. This grandeur is detected on the levels of form and content in this masterpiece.

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