

Proceedings of the Kent State University May 4th Philosophy Graduate Student Conference

No. 005008 (2008) | ISSN: 1546-6663

Comment on Martel

Caameron Crain

Kent State University

Insofar as Martel's goal is to show that Longinus originated the notion of the sublime as found in Kant and Lyotard, several questions immediately raise themselves: what is the true level of similarity of 'the sublime' between these cases? Is the word even the same or are there significant translation issues? Is this a good interpretation of Longinus? Unfortunately, I am not well enough versed to adequately answer these questions or to argue that the answer to one of them is such that Martel's argument is undermined.

However, perhaps the goal here is not to bestow upon Longinus the title of 'author of the sublime' but is, rather to show that something like the modern notion of the sublime can be found among the ancients. Then perhaps we could argue that the experience of the sublime is an ahistorical aspect of human life.

The sublime is characterized as a lofty feeling, and it is my understanding that Longinus uses height language; however, Martel's paper suggests a link between the sublime and the subliminal- terms that many strive to keep distinct despite their apparent etymological similarity.

Martel's suggests that Longinus employs a 'subversive metaphor.' Is it indeed perhaps Longinus' goal

to 'carry us over beneath words'? Is it perhaps here that we find the sublime, as the formlessness beneath the order of form, an unconscious formlessness beneath the form imposed by consciousness? The sublime results from sensations which we cannot comprehend, which affect us in a way that we cannot understand; that is, we cannot grasp the experience, we cannot fit it into the categories of our understanding. Kant writes of the conflict between understanding and reason. The sublime is an incomprehensible thought. It is a thought of the formless, the unlimited, the infinite. Even if we, in turning away from Kant, suggest that this infinity is beneath the threshold of consciousness, we can still explain the fact that we feel it as lofty and exalted, and this due to its very infinitude. It is beyond our power to comprehend. It is therefore natural to feel it as above even if it is in fact below.

And this feeling of the sublime is purportedly the goal of Longinus' rhetoric.

Even if rhetoric is not best defined, as it is by Aristotle, as finding in any situation the most effective means of persuasion, it is still the case that, in rhetorical criticism, we look towards motivations, aims, and implications. What is the aim of a rhetoric which takes the feeling of the sublime as its goal, which seeks the conflict between formlessness and form, if it is not to call the formal order itself into question? It is in this sense, perhaps, that Longinus is opposed to Aristotle's formula ? not because of its content but because of its very formal-ity. We must indeed say then that Longinus is subversive, and also that he is a proponent of metaphor. He is calling into question the very adequacy of words, and as such stands against the tradition of representation.

Martel ends his paper by quoting Lyotard, suggesting that Longinus wages 'a war on totality' and is a witness to the unrepresentable. As such, may we not wonder if Longinus is perhaps appropriately called a

postmodernist? Can we support such a hypothesis? Can we say that, by insisting on the primacy of form, the ancient tradition is an exemplar of modernist principles?

§§§

Proceedings of the Kent State University
May 4th Philosophy Graduate Student Conference
No. 005008 (2008)

<http://philosophy.kent.edu/journal/>

© 2008 Caameron Crain

© 2008 Kent State University Department of Philosophy