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# Forum

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## Tragic Joy and the Sublime

To the Editor:

I found R. Jahan Ramazani's paper "Yeats: Tragic Joy and the Sublime" (104 [1989]: 163–77) absorbing and stimulating reading. However, Ramazani's correlation of the tragic and the sublime seems to be based on assumptions not beyond challenge.

Ramazani explicitly assumes, following the Romantic poetics of the sublime, that "tragedy is the primary aesthetic example" of the ideal of the sublime and that "the theory of the sublime is close to being a theory of what Yeats calls tragic joy" (163). This correlation may not adequately explain the normative basis of the sublime. The tragic forces are not the only determinant of the sublime. *Hupsos* 'elevation' leading to *ekstasis* 'transport' reflects the sublime ideal. It consists of the perfect conjoining of *noesis* 'great conceptions' and *sphodron kai enthousiastikon pathos* 'inspired and vehement passion' that works as the primary principle of the sublime. In the Longinian analysis, its root lies far down in the epical vastness and *ekpleksis* 'enthralment.' In fact, Ramazani seems to set a premium on the Kantian interpretation of "threatening rocks," "clouds piled up," "lightning for flashes," "thunder peals," and "the boundless ocean in a tumult" as conducive to the sublime (*Critique of Judgement* [1790], trans. J. H. Bernard, 2nd ed., London, 1931, 125) and seeks to establish an interrelation between violence and the sublime. In trying to determine the sublime's affective basis, Ramazani takes his cue from such theorists as Burke, Kant, Heidegger, Hertz, and Weiskel and repeatedly emphasizes death's relation to the sublime: ". . . death precipitates the emotional turning called the sublime" (164), ". . . death is its ultimate occasion" (163), "[t]he sublime is inextricable from the death drive" (173).

The Kantian analysis of the alternating attraction and repulsion of the representation of the sublime in nature should, in fact, be judged according to the heroic principles. Ramazani refers to Yeats's correlation of the tragic and the sublime in Shakespeare's *Lear* and Sophocles's *Oedipus*, for which he seeks support in Longinus. But a greater part of the Longinian explication is projected against an epical background. Longinus furnishes dramatic examples only when he substantiates the rhetorical sublime (*Peri hupsos*, chs. 15, 23, 40), but in the discussions on the affective sublime (chs. 9, 10), he desists from citing examples from the dramatic or tragic genres. Longinus fills these chapters with references to the Homeric epics and points out "how [Homer]

associated himself with the sublimity of his heroic themes" (ch. 9).

Though Ramazani concentrates on such associated factors as fear, pain, and so on, Longinus discounts the necessity of these emotions in the evocation of the sublime: "For some emotions can be found that are mean and not in the least sublime, such as pity, grief, and fear" (ch. 8). Moreover, it is not death as such that is emphasized by Longinus. The Sapphic ode concentrates not on death but on the emotions attendant to the lover's frenzy, and the analysis of the Homeric sailors under the clutch of death does not simply focus on the idea of death but describes the storm by singling out its most terrifying properties (164). This passage is, as Longinus suggests, a picture of limitless terror, destruction, and danger in which death is simply one factor. It is therefore misleading to suppose that death is the only governing item for evoking the sublime. Longinus discusses other subjects equally endowed with grandeur and majesty. Some pertinent examples are the Homeric exaltation of the heavenly powers, the battle of the gods, and the majestic representation of divine nature.

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#### Reply:

D. N. Bandyopadhyay questions my analysis of the sublime because it diverges from that of Longinus. But the sublime according to Longinus is not my primary paradigm; it is a version of the sublime that interests me insofar as it adumbrates certain features of the Romantic sublime, especially the dialectic of deathlike defeat and vigorous counterassertion. Apparently annoyed that I emphasize subsequent versions of the sublime, Bandyopadhyay returns to Longinus and finds, not surprisingly, that some aspects of the sublime articulated by Burke, Kant, Schiller, and others are not in *Peri hupsos*. The Romantic and the Longinian sublimities overlap but are hardly identical. Challenging my "assumptions" not about the sublime but only about the Longinian sublime, Bandyopadhyay disagrees with me on two counts: the correlations of the sublime with tragedy and of the sublime with death.

First, the sublime and tragedy. In both its Longinian and post-Longinian incarnations, the sublime disregards the laws of genre, so many theorists of the sublime happily skip from prophecy to oration, from epic to lyric. Because the rhetorical and affective features of the sublime transgress such literary boundaries, only a fool would try to fasten the sublime to a single generic province. Therefore, my discussion of the sublime in Yeats

encompasses not only tragedy but also elegy, prophecy, apocalypse, and the curse. Bandyopadhyay quotes me as saying that "tragedy is the primary aesthetic example" of the sublime and goes on to argue that this is not the case in Longinus. But the full sentence shows that I make no such claim about Longinus: "In theoretical discussions the sublime overlaps with epic, tragedy, lyric, and prophecy, but of these genres tragedy is the primary aesthetic example for Kant and Schiller, as well as a frequent touchstone for Longinus." Although Kant and Schiller take most of their examples from tragedy, Longinus does not. He discusses excerpts from tragedies by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and so tragedy is for him an important source, but he also quotes various works by Homer, Sappho, Herodotus, Demosthenes, and Plato. Thus, I agree that the Longinian sublime traverses such genres as epic and love poem, never having argued that it was confined to tragic drama.

Second, the sublime and death. In the eighteenth century, theorists begin to argue that death is the occasion of the sublime, as death becomes ever more solitary, secular, and final. I quote Edmund Burke, for example, who states that "ideas of pain, and above all of death," precipitate the sublime, and Yeats later instances this association in his poems of "tragic joy." Here too Bandyopadhyay returns to Longinus and finds that the focus there is not, of course, exclusively on death. Even so, Longinus, having influenced later theorists, anticipates in some of his examples their more overt interest in death.

Reviewing these examples, Bandyopadhyay claims that the Sapphic ode is not really about death but about love and that the Homeric quotation is not really about death but about a frightening storm. Let's take Sappho first. Surely this is "love," but it is love described in the language of death and dying: "I cannot speak; / my tongue is broken, a subtle fire runs under my skin; my eyes cannot see, my ears hum; / cold sweat pours off me; shivering grips me all over; I am paler than grass; I seem near to dying." Struck deaf and dumb and blind, shivering feverishly and pale—this may not be literal "death," but literal "death" is not an experience we can have in life, so poets have long suggested that such love is a worldly foretaste of death. The treatise's next example of sublimity is the Homeric passage about the sailors, and Longinus twice quotes from the line that associates these nearly dead sailors with Sappho's nearly dead lover: "they are carried away from under death, but only just." Longinus adds that the sailors almost seem to be "facing death many times with every wave that comes." Obviously, neither the Sapphic nor the Homeric characters die, but because they rehearse annihilation and yet survive the threat, they exemplify sublimity. In the di-