

# Manifestations of the Pre-Burkean Sublime in Britain: Milton, Wren, Thornhill and Handel

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The sublime was a popular and widespread aesthetic concept in eighteenth-century England, but with roots firmly embedded in the soil of the seventeenth. The aesthetic concept of the sublime evolved significantly between the period of the publication of *Paradise Lost* by Milton in 1667 and its culmination in British aesthetic philosophy, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* by Edmund Burke in 1757, positioned at the midpoint of the long eighteenth century.

Over the course of this span of time, the most important development in the history of the idea was the rediscovery and re-dissemination of the Greek treatise *On the Sublime* and the appearance of a French translation by Nicolas Boileau in France in 1674. This played a crucial role in the reemergence and revitalisation of the concept in England after its journey across the Channel and process of vernacularisation.

After considering different versions, this discussion will turn to some realizations of the aesthetic concepts of the sublime from the time of Milton to that of Burke in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England. It shall consider the importance of the reawakening of interest in such ideas due to Boileau, then look briefly along the way at the works of such artists as Christopher Wren and James Thornhill. In this way, literature, architecture, painting and music will each be given their turn in an examination that is fundamentally interdisciplinary.

Eva Martin traces the roots of the early modern fascination with the sublime possibly as far back the fifteenth century, and definitely to 1554, when

Francesco Robortello's *Dionysi Longini rhetoris praestantissimi liber de grandi sive sublimiorationis genere* entered print (78). In terms of the widening the accessibility of *On the Sublime* (in Greek, the *Peri Hupsous*, or "On Height") as a treatise, an English translation by John Hall of 1652 has been positioned as "the first English version" (Russell 155), but, as Axelsson notes, it was "barely read" (20). There is actually an ironic and somewhat wry comment by William Smith, who undertook a 1739 translation entitled *Dionysis Longinus on the Sublime: Translated from the Greek with Notes and Observations and of the Life, Writings and Character of the Author*. He wrote "I have since accidentally met with two other English Versions of this Treatise; one by J. Hall, Esq; London 1652; the other without a Name, but printed at Oxford in 1698, and said in the Title-Page to have been compared with the French of Boileau. I saw nothing in either of these which did not yield the greatest Encouragement to a new Attempt" (qtd. in Axelsson 22).

As the tremendous rise of interest in the sublime took place during the late seventeenth century, English enthusiasts were highly indebted to the French translation by Boileau of the treatise *On the Sublime* by a writer who may or may not originally have been called "Longinus". On the question of authorship, modern scholarship tends to follow this as the conventional name for the author, although one might suspect that this is perhaps more out of convenience than any other reason. Even so, Malcolm Heath notes that "if the attribution to Longinus was conjectural, it was a good conjecture" (15).

In general, Sir William Soames contributed to the early stage of the promulgation of the sublime in England by revising the French version. John Dryden had also joined in the process of this revision. Dryden replaced the French "poetic examples" with English ones and recontextualised the French translation into English (Levine 60). Many of the treatises on aesthetics and rhetoric in England were greatly influenced by the work of Boileau, such as the *Telluris Theoria Sacra* of 1681 (English translation in 1684) by Thomas Burnet, and *The Moralists* of 1709 by Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of

Shaftesbury (Saint Girons 325). John Dennis's *Advancement and Reformation of Poetry* (1701), and his *Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704), drew strongly upon the French version, as did the popular book *The Art of Rhetoric Made Easy* (London, 1739) by John Holmes (Warnick 356).

More famously, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele explored the issue of the sublime extensively in the essay "The Pleasures of the Imagination" in *The Spectator* at the beginning of the eighteenth century. As acceptance of the sublime increased in England, the French influence was gradually weakened. Samuel Johnson noted the vernacularisation of the idea, stating that "the sublime' is a Gallicism, but now naturalized" (qtd. in Saint Girons 325). This became most apparent in *A Philosophical Enquiry* by Burke, representing as it did the high point of British thought on the topic in eighteenth-century England.

The sublime itself depends on a series of qualities which have shifted in definition over time, but, in the early modern period, these were founded in Longinian principles that were commonly accepted until Burke and Kant began their respective redefinitions of the concept. Longinus – or the author of the *Peri Hupsous* commonly known by that name, at least – distinguishes five causes of the sublime. These are:

- a) grandeur of thought
- b) capacity for strong emotion
- c) appropriate use of figures
- d) nobility of diction
- e) dignity of composition

In Longinian terms, there is also element of risk involved with greatness from the point of view of a creator of art. The type of work, such as a Miltonic epic, which approaches the sublime carries with it a concomitant risk of failure should the poet slip into banality – as, indeed, Longinus seems to have felt

Homer did with much of the *Odyssey*. As one can read in the treatise, “Sublimity is an echo of a great mind” (9.1).

Boileau incorporated a contemporary French aesthetic idea of the sublime by emphasizing the grand elements through terminology such as “admiration”, “delight”, “astonishment”, and “surprise”, along with similarly impassioned emotional states (Warnick 356). These distinctive elements evolved upon association with English naturalism. Evidence for this process can be found in definitions of the sublime by Addison and Steele, leading up to that of Burke.

Greatness in particular was often advanced as a primary cause of sublimity, perhaps as it was the easiest to conceptualise. “The Pleasures of the Imagination” by Addison, which appeared in *The Spectator* in 1712, addressed and expanded this point for the fashionable British readership of its day:

By *Greatness*, I do not only mean the Bulk of any single Object, but the Largeness of the whole View, considered as one entire Piece. Such are the Prospects of an open Champion Country, a vast uncultivated Desert, of huge Heaps of Mountains, high Rocks and Precipices, or a wide Expanse of Waters, where we are not struck with the Novelty or Beauty of the Sight, but with that rude kind of Magnificence which appears in many of these stupendous Works of Nature. Our Imagination loves to be filled with an Object, or to grasp at any thing that is too big for its Capacity. We are flung into a pleasing Astonishment at such unbounded Views . . . (qtd. in Gilman 533-534)

Addison does not simply, therefore, suggest that sheer size is enough to constitute a greatness which can overwhelm the senses, but argues that there must be a combination of elements in order to produce the effect. Beauty is here distinguished from magnificence, prefiguring the later division which forms the centerpiece of the argument in the 1757 *Observations* of Edmund

Burke. His discussion draws upon similar imagery, but is directed much more firmly towards the establishment of a clear separation between beauty and the sublime:

The sublime, in particular, is the proper walk of a great Genius, . . . in which alone it can display its powers to advantage. . . A Genius always attempts to grasp the most stupendous objects, . . . the rude magnificence of nature, [rather] than the elegant decorations of art; since the latter produce only an agreeable sensation of pleasure; but the former throw the soul into a divine transport of admiration and amazement. (qtd. in Gilman 534)

Within the arts in Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the manifestation of the sublime became evident in works and their subsequent reception. The present discussion will thus now explore the works of several influential figures from the period, beginning with the poet and critic John Milton, whom many commentators, including Burke, were subsequently to characterize as being intimately connected with the sublime.

Milton was known to be aware of the original Greek text of *On the Sublime*, referring to the text in his 1644 *Of Education*, although it may only have been a passing acquaintance. He also knew the translation by John Hall, of whom William Smith was so disparaging nearly a century later. Although Milton was an avowed Puritan, he was involved in both literature and politics during the time of the Interregnum, and the secular essence of Classical literature can be considered as being in opposition to strict Puritanism. Milton merged Classical literary techniques and allegory, including rhetoric and the Longinian sublime amongst others, with the dour pessimism of Puritanism. The grim and self-punishing image of Hell can be considered as Puritanical, set up in opposition to idealized Catholic iconographical visions. *Paradise Lost* was published after the Restoration in 1667 and Milton died in the same year of the publication of the modern French version of *On the Sublime* in 1674.

According to Addison, Milton was “wonderfully turned to the Sublime” (qtd. in Moore 2). As well as the unimaginable vastness between hell, chaos and heaven, the grand scale of Satan’s defiance and the subsequent battle in Heaven prepare the ground for the definition of sublimity associated with naturalism by Addison and Steele. The vocabulary used by Milton to describe both nature and the grimness of Hell vividly can be understood as a figurative usage of *topographia*. At the same time, lofty vocabulary is subordinated to the logical order of the literary structure (Hale 22-27). In essence, the descriptions of the natural and supernatural worlds are required both to evoke vastness, yet confine themselves within the lines of a poem, as in this example:

The dismal situation waste and wild,  
A dungeon horrible, on all sides round  
As one great furnace flamed, yet from those flames  
No light, but rather darkness visible  
Served only to discover sights of woe,  
Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace  
And rest can never dwell, hope never comes  
That comes to all; but torture without end  
Still urges, and a fiery deluge, fed  
With ever-burning sulphur unconsumed: (*PL* Book 1, lines 60-69)

All five of the Longinian precepts – grandeur, strong emotion, figures, nobility of diction and dignity of composition – are present in the work. Surprisingly, however, these are far more apparent in the oratory and deeds of Satan than in the rather pallid self-righteousness of God and his angels. Subsequent reception would argue in support of this, as the most famous quotation from the poem today is the tragic yet magnificent proclamation by Satan that it is “Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav’n” (*PL* Book 1, line 263).

The sublime in Milton is distinguishable in two important ways in a

Longinian sense. First of all, as noted, there is the greatness of his theme. Milton famously had earlier intentions to write an *Arthuriad*, but his arguments for choosing the vast canvas of Christian mythology instead were based largely on his perception of the banality of the former. In the second place, there is the element of risk in the process of poetic creation. Missteps, overly jarring tonal shifts and banality – a fall from lofty verse – would render the poem a waste as a whole. A poet aiming at the sublime would therefore seem to be required to have the ability to keep the whole of the work in their mind as they worked on a specific part in order to accomplish such an integration. Such a feat is rendered all the more impressive by the fact of Milton's blindness at the time.

Additionally, the sublime has an element of scale distinct from the beautiful. Heaven and hell themselves are described in sweeping terms, yet Satan's travels over a "vast vacuity" (*PL* Book 2, line 933) suggest an even greater infinity of Chaos into which Hell has encroached (and is correspondingly resented).

Three years after Boileau published his translation, in the preface of 1677 version of *The State of Innocence*, the theatrical version of *Paradise Lost*, one notable comment by Dryden on his own work is an apology for not reaching the sublime quality of the original. Dryden described *Paradise Lost* as "being undoubtedly one of the greatest, most noble and most sublime poems which either this age or nation has produced" (qtd. in Levine 64). He again notes Milton's sublimity in his work *A Discourse Concerning Satire* (1693), having "found in him [Milton] true sublimity, and lofty thoughts, which were clothed with admirable Grecisms" (qtd. in Levine 64).

In order to consider the development of the sublime in England, the discussion shall now look at some further examples, starting with Christopher Wren. Wren, famously, began his large-scale rebuilding of London following the Great Fire of 1666, and in such a conceit, one can immediately sense the

sublime grandeur of thought necessary to begin such an undertaking, for all the recent discussion that Hawksmoor was, in fact, far more fecund as an architect.

The attainment of the sublime in the architecture of Wren is commonly associated with the Roman Catholic aspects of Baroque architecture. The adaptation of highly sensualized architectural motifs as equivalent to rhetorical figures, stimulating the aesthetic perceptivity of the sublime, is arguably due to the incursion of neoclassical Palladian architecture from the time of Inigo Jones before the Interregnum. This accords with the Catholic tendencies of Anglicanism in terms of the divine right of monarchism emphasized since the Elizabethan period and the Catholic inclinations of Charles II and the Catholic James II. Drawing upon the Baroque mentality inherent in the architectural style of Jones, the sublime is apparent in Wren's overall construction as well as figurally in the use of decorative elements.

St. Paul's, opened for use in 1697, officially completed in 1711 and arguably Wren's masterwork, is also representative of the culmination of Baroque architecture in England. The central decorative piece of the dome is in the style of the Roman Baroque, with its dramatised roundness and the disposition of the columns. It actually consists of two domes overlaying each other, constructed so as to reach the required height. This can be seen in a 1755 engraving by Samuel Wale and John Gwynn. Wren's "cone" design offers support to the external dome, whilst the internal creates the illusion of continuity.

The central motif of the side façade is highly Baroque along the dramatic proscenium, emphasizing the dome. One can, again, find grandeur, the capacity for strong emotion – or, in this case, devotion, figures in terms of the rhetorical disposition of design elements, nobility of diction (if, in architecture, the realization of constructed elements counts as such), and dignity of composition.



The artist chosen to decorate the interior of the dome was James Thornhill, who chose the theme of eight scenes from the life of St Paul and executed them between 1716 and 1719. The interior decorations by Thornhill were also influenced by the Continental Baroque, especially by Rubens and the French Baroque ideas of Le Brun at Versailles. Thornhill can be considered perhaps the leading exponent of the English Baroque in terms of decorative painting. His biggest project, the Ceiling of the Painted Hall from the Old Royal Naval College, at Greenwich (1707-27), offers evidence of his mastery of design in a style both continentally derivative and strangely Anglicised. The ceiling decoration centralised the depiction of William and Mary. It celebrates the victory of "Peace and Liberty over Tyranny." The shadowed image of the representation of Tyranny signified the defeated nation of France, lead by Louis XIV (Bindman et. al. 54).

Whilst this Baroque allegorical image employs technical elements of the Italian and French schools, the ideology behind the image was of a highly politicised Anglicanism. The whole image contains every possible aspect of the Baroque idiom in disarray, jumbling up the King and Queen, mythological figures and other objects within a world of dramatic gesture, expression and drapery, drawing rather on great human deeds and broad ideals such as the restoration of liberty and the overthrowing of tyranny, then representing them through a complex, figural interplay, mixing contemporary (battles, the sketches of Wren and the formulae of Newton), Classical (Greek gods and goddesses), general allegorical (the four corners of the globe, the virtues, Britannia) and Christian (St. George) themes with little regard for their origins. Despite the unpopularity of the Baroque as the eighteenth century progressed, Thornhill occupied the position of the dominant painter in England in the earlier part of the eighteenth century.

This is far from the naturalistic sublime as represented in late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century art, as in, for example, works such as the 1812 painting of Hannibal by Turner. One is thus moved to ask whether or not

Thornhill is successful in creating sublime art. It is difficult to answer this with any authority. Certainly there is grandeur, but one might argue that there is ultimately a failure of coherence in vision. Reading contemporary – and many subsequent – descriptions of the decorations, one gains the feeling that they are patriotically associated with sublimity more because they are the best of the English art available, not simply the best art.

Finally, the present discussion shall consider the music of the period. In particular, Handel's musical style was seen as sublime. There were critics from throughout the eighteenth century who recognised the sublimity within Handelian musical aesthetics such as John Hawkins, John Lockman and John Brown (Johnson 517). His oratorios were particularly seen as expressing a Sublime ideal.

Handel was influenced by the sublime style of Milton, a connection which is well-documented through *Samson* in 1742. The Oratorio established by Handel was based on an Anglican sacred music tradition, and his use of biblical texts in works such as *Israel in Egypt*, *Messiah*, *Esther* and *Belshazzar* ensured that commentators of the time, such as Bishop Syngé (who attended the 1742 first performance of *Messiah*), saw the words themselves as sublime, elevated through musical setting. As demonstrated by the ironic verse of Pope in the four-book revised *Dunciad* of 1743, Handel was seen in British public life as a mighty figure:

But soon, ah, soon, rebellion will commence,  
If Music meanly borrows aid from Sense:  
Strong in new arms, lo! Giant Handel stands,  
Like bold Briareus, with a hundred hands;  
To stir, to rouse, to shake the soul he comes,  
And Jove's own thunders follow Mars's drums.  
Arrest him, Empress, or you sleep no more' –  
She heard, and drove him to th' Hibernian shore. (Book 4, lines

Whilst Handel was popular during the first half of the eighteenth century, his position was consolidated as a monumental English cultural figure as the long eighteenth century went on, in parallel with the culmination of the English sublime. If the Miltonian sublime was derived from Puritan ideology, the religious component of the Handelian sublime was deeply associated with the stabilised Anglicanism of the eighteenth century. Arguably there is a continuing link between the English sublime and religion, and the legitimacy of this idea is partially supported through the oratorios of Handel, where, as in *Paradise Lost*, the biblical subject matter centred on the Old Testament. In this regard it may be noted that in his 1739 translation of *On the Sublime*, William Smith draws an interpretative connection between the Longinian sublime and actual biblical texts (Tarling 68).

Like Milton's poetry, the religious themes underpinning Handel's oratorios allowed them to appeal to both privileged and popular audiences. The spreading of literacy through the middle classes was due to the highly politicised promulgation of the Bible, and other religious literature, which had begun during the Elizabethan period (Corns 4). In the eighteenth century the *Book of Common Prayer*, the King James Bible and the *Book of Homilies* were available everywhere. The sublime in Handel follows the same precepts as that in Milton, in that greatness of theme is combined with greatness of artistic vision and enhanced by the corresponding risk of failure by a misstep.

In parallel with the process of revitalisation which took place through the agency of the culmination of the aesthetic concept of the sublime, the pre-Burkean (and thus pre-transformative) application of this aesthetic idea can thus be observed at work in artistic output ranging from Milton to Handel. Indeed, these two were regarded as the supreme mediators of the sublime by eighteenth-century commentators. Although the sublime quality in the works by others presented here can be identified by contextual interpretation, they

offer evidence of the continuity of the utilisation of a sublime aesthetic from the late seventeenth century through to the mid-eighteenth century. They also reflect the transformation of sociopolitical religious circumstances associated with England, namely, Puritanism, Catholicism and Anglicanism. Overall, one can draw a connection between the concept of an aesthetic, defined literary form and its application to art works beyond the literary.

The four examples given here of employers of a British sublime, Milton, Wren, Thornhill and Handel, share sublimity on two important grounds:

- 1) Their *themes* are great or large in conception
- 2) Their *execution* is great or large in conception

One might argue, however, that Milton and Handel succeeded, Wren delegated and Thornhill perhaps largely failed, yet all reached for an ideal which was fraught with the risk of failure and loaded with the reward of immortality through success.

By the time of Burke, as has been noted throughout, the sublime was seen as distinct from beauty. In fact, this separation is perhaps his major contribution to the idea of the sublime in aesthetic philosophy. Intensity of expression, obliterating detail, achieves sublimity. Delight is derived from negative pain, not pleasure. The greatness of art inspires awe, but this is far removed from facile beauty. Reaching from the beginning to the endpoint of the present discussion, Burke wrote:

No person seems better to have understood the secret of heightening, or of setting terrible things, if I may use the expression, in their strongest light, by the force of a judicious obscurity, than Milton.  
(100)

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