
Public Lecture: Vijay Mishra

'The Religious Sublime'

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As a style or rhetorical form, the word "sublime" in its current usage came to the English language from Longinus's *Peri Hupsous* ("On the Sublime," first century C.E.) via Boethius's French translation (1674). Very quickly though the word got transformed into an object of wonder, initially representing a numinous form of something extraordinary or supreme. The specific collocation of the words "sublime" and "religion" (as in the "religious sublime"), however, has its own history and may be located in John Dennis's (1657-1734) directive: "I now come to the Precepts of Longinus, and pretend to shew from them, that the greatest Sublimity is to be deriv'd from Religious Ideas." Dennis's re-reading of the sublime as an engagement with religious ideas (suggesting indeed that great art is always religious art) was used by David B. Morris as the kernel of his highly suggestive and useful book on the religious sublime.

Although the lineage is uneven, in matters of the sublime reflective judgment takes centre stage. Through close readings of a wide range of philosophical (Kant, Hegel, Derrida), religious (Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Mircea Eliade, R C Zaehner) theories of art (Barbara Novak), and literary-critical (Frye, M H Abrams) texts the paper demonstrates the extent to which, within its primarily western ambience, the religious sublime leans upon, in particular, the Romantic and Kantian sublimines. The sublime therefore does not lead necessarily to a mystical oneness (except in "luminist quietism" where the labour of the artist disappears), but to dualistic distancing from God, which again reinforces a distinctly Christian religious attitude.

But can one view the sublime through an aesthetic as well as a religious pair of lens? A fine scholar of the subject, Gerardus van der Leeuw, believed that the secularization of art, always evident in Europe at any rate since the Renaissance, meant that the holy had to be understood through a different discourse. In terms of this argument the sublime presence of God found in Blake, in Wordsworth, and in nineteenth century American landscape painting, is not to be read as true revelation.

It follows, therefore, that the religious sublime has to be distinguished from the more generic "aesthetic sublime." Working from Rudolf Otto's reading of the religious sublime (the "holy," which is of itself and is not to be reduced from the aesthetic even if they "search for one another") as the "wholly other" whose presence can only be rendered in terms of awe, fear, dread and the like, van der Leeuw suggests that this awakening, which declares our own insignificance in front of the infinite and at the same time connects us through love, at once repellent and attractive, so remote and yet so near, is not to be found in the beautiful. In terms of this argument, the beautiful, is the work of art; the holy is the sublime.

The argument that the religious experience is the absolute instance of all sublimines is attractive and rather neat too as it establishes a hierarchy and opens the way for the religious sublime to be defined in a very systematic manner. In other words there is no need for a qualification for the sublime is, by definition, religious. This paper explores the issues raised above – issues which also take us to matters concerning monism versus theism or more narrowly a monistic mysticism versus a theistic mysticism. The argument is finessed through a reading of the Hindu religious text the *Bhagavadgita*.