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Sublime, the Unclear

Only that which has no history is definable.

F. Nietzsche

The word (signifier) “sublime” appeared for the first time in English in the Middle Ages and there was nothing unusual about it. Alchemists used it. To sublime meant to “subject (a substance) to the action of heat in a vessel so as to convert it into vapour, which is carried off and on cooling is deposited in a solid form”¹. Latin was the language of research and, in such contexts, the use of a Latin word in any vernacular must have been seen as a matter of course. The appearance of the word was in a sense necessary because alchemy (which is a Greek or Arabic derivation meaning “the art of transmutation”) needed predicates to denote and relate its activities. The simple words like burn, cool, etc. were to be found in the vernacular, but not those denoting more complex activities, such as transmute, sublime or calcine. These had to be taken from Latin — *transmutare*, *sublimare*, *calcinare* — though in the case of English usually indirectly, through French.

Among the many interesting things about alchemy there are two I would like to mention: one is perfection and the other, obscurity. The reason why they deserve our attention is because they show that the definition of the word “sublime” quoted above is a little misleading or at least incomplete, i.e. it must have been understood somewhat differently in the Middle Ages.

It is estimated that alchemy originated in Alexandria in the first century AD (Is it just a coincidence that the Greek treatise *On the Sublime*, once attributed to Longinus, was also written in the 1st century? The signifier was of course

¹ *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary On Historical Principles*, ed. C.T. Onions (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

different: the Greek title is *Peri Hypsous*.) Alchemy is said to have evolved from the process of mingling of Egyptian technology, Greek philosophy — particularly Aristotle, and the mysticism of the Middle East, especially Mesopotamia, where the theory of perfection had come from²:

The astrologers of Mesopotamia believed in the coexistence of the macrocosm, the great world of stars and planets, and the microcosm, the small world of man. Events in the macrocosm were reflected in the microcosm, and vice versa. Thus, under the proper astrological influences a change of lead to gold might easily occur, and the proper way to bring this change about was to use the methods of the microcosm: growth and development. As men grew and changed, so could the metals grow and change; as the human soul perfected itself and passed through death and resurrection to the perfection of heaven, so could metals develop in the earth from the less perfect to the most perfect, gold ... the original alchemy was a practical series of chemical operations, guided by the accepted theory of the nature of matter, and in its actual operations directed by the astrological and religious ideas which circulated freely in Alexandria. This practical alchemy could be, and was, expressed symbolically in terms of the perfection of the human soul³.

From the very beginning, then, words like “sublime”, though used to describe chemical processes or laboratory proceedings, had very clear religious and philosophical connotations. One could go even further and question the validity of the word “connotation” with reference to the non-technical part of the meaning of “to sublime”. Alchemists had less than a smattering of what we call chemistry. To put it bluntly, very often they simply did not know what they were doing, yet they believed they had the right theory. That theory, as was stated above, was a combination of philosophy and religion (mysticism), and since it had no application to the reality of the physical world, its vocabulary had always been and remained deeply symbolic. What today appears to have been a connotation was probably the central, dominant meaning. (That may explain the easiness with which alchemy moved away from chemical experiments towards mystical lucubrations.) Loftiness, nobility, grandeur, and other meanings that the word “sublime” is said to have acquired later, particularly in the 17th century, may have been associated with the word from the very beginning.

The mystical character of alchemy soon led into a division between practical and mystical alchemists⁴. The latter concentrated on symbolism and were not interested at all in any knowledge of chemistry. The practical alchemists, however, also contributed greatly towards confusion and obscurity of the subject as, under the influence of astrology and because they wanted to keep their trade secrets, they started inventing symbolic names for the

² Cf. “Alchemy”, in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Chicago: William Benton, 1972).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

substances and pieces of apparatus with which they worked. This aspect of alchemy was analysed at large by C.G. Jung:

The peculiar character of this literature lies, however, in the fact that there exists a comparatively large number of treatises from which, apart from the most superficial allusions, absolutely nothing of a chemical nature can be extracted. It was therefore supposed — and many of the alchemists themselves wanted us to believe — that their mysterious sign-language was nothing but a skillful way of disguising the chemical procedures which lay behind it. The adept would see through the veil of hieroglyphics and recognize the secret chemical process. Unfortunately, alchemists of repute destroyed this legend by their admission that they were unable to read the riddle of the Sphinx, complaining that the old authors, like Gerber and Raymundus Lullius, wrote too obscurely. And indeed, a careful study of such treatises, which perhaps form the majority, will reveal nothing of a chemical nature but something which is purely symbolic, i.e., *psychological*. Alchemical language is not so much *semiotic* as *symbolic*: it does not disguise a known content but suggests an unknown one, or rather, this unknown content *suggests itself*. This content can only be psychological. If one analyses these symbolic forms of speech, one comes to the conclusion that archetypal contents of the collective unconscious are being projected⁵.

Obscurity and perfection seem to have been the dominating concepts of alchemy, or at least its mystical branch. But can we perhaps be more precise about the relation between the two concepts, i.e. was it obscurity and perfection, or rather obscure perfection, or obscurity in perfection, or maybe perfect obscurity, or perfection in obscurity, etc.? We can multiply questions like that because grammar allows and even encourages us to do so. But do these questions help to elucidate the problem? It is not, for example, quite clear what it is we are doing when we place the two words (obscurity and perfection) side by side, because perfection remained a theory, though it was meant to become a practice, while obscurity, though it was basically linguistic, became a practice. What, then, we deal with is theoretical perfection and applied (or performative) obscurity. That theoretical perfection remained obscure while the applied obscurity was often really perfect in its execution. When we modify the two words, it becomes clear that in each case we use them in a slightly different meaning. Thus, modifying them helps a little bit, but on the other hand it only points to a greater complexity. It would, however, be quite interesting to try to define the sublime with the help of the two concepts: theoretical perfection and applied (or performative) obscurity.

Alchemy passed through several stages in its development, but from the 15th century it was the theory that gained the upper hand over the practical studies:

⁵ C.G. Jung, "Forward to a Catalogue on Alchemy", in *The Symbolic Life*, vol. 18 of the *Collected Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 747.

Throughout the history of alchemy we find — besides a considerable knowledge of substances (minerals and drugs) and a limited knowledge of the laws of chemical processes — indications of an accompanying “philosophy” which received the name “Hermetic” in the later Middle Ages. This natural philosophy appears first and particularly clearly in the Greek alchemists of the first to the sixth centuries AD. ... It was also especially evident in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when it reached its full development⁶.

This philosophy was strongly influenced by magic and mysticism. Hence the name “Hermetic”, from Hermes Trismegistus, the Egyptian god Thoth credited with various books on mysticism, astrology, theosophy, and other branches of occult knowledge. (Trismegistus means thrice-greatest. In the ancient times and the Middle Ages it must have been the most sublime idea imaginable. Or should we say unimaginable, because such a greatness was precisely beyond any imagination. Of course the works of the gods also belonged to the realm of the sublime. Manetho, an Egyptian high priest of the third century BC, has it that there were more than 30,000 books written to the dictation of Trismagistus. Even today 30,000 books is a stunning idea).

The relation between alchemical philosophy and the practical laboratory knowledge was explained by Jung in the following way:

As the alchemists had no real knowledge of the nature and behaviour of chemical substances, they drew conscious parallels between the unknown processes and mythological motifs and thus “explained the former and they amplified these unknown processes by the projection of unconscious contents. This explains a peculiarity of the texts: on the one hand, the authors repeat what was said by their predecessors again and again and, on the other, they give a free rein to unlimited subjective fantasy in their symbolism⁷.”

The idea of the sublime started gaining popularity in England in the 17th century, i.e. when Hermetic philosophy reached its peak, when alchemists “produced little that was new, though much that was obscure”, and when “alchemical symbolism and allegory become more and more complex”⁸. At this point, however, one could argue that it was just a coincidence, and that looking for a close link between these two phenomena is a rather far-fetched idea. The heightened interest in the sublime was sparked by the Greek treatise *Peri Hypsous*, not by alchemical writings. (It is easy to explain why it took so long for the treatise to exert its influence: though written in the first century AD, it remained virtually unknown for many centuries. Its first publication came out in 1554, then it was translated into Latin in 1572, and into English in 1652. Strangely enough, however, it was the French translation of 1674 by Boileau that evoked the most enthusiastic response in England⁹).

⁶ C.G. Jung, “Alchemy and Psychology”, in *The Symbolic...*, p. 751.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 751.

⁸ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

⁹ Cf. “Sublime”, in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. A. Preminger (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

But is the sublime of *Peri Hypsous* the same as the sublime of the 17th and 18th centuries England? In *The Longman Companion to English Literature* we find the following comment: "the traditional rendering of the Greek title is usually regarded as misleading"¹⁰. This view is confirmed by T. S. Dorsch, who in the introduction to his translation of the Greek treatise gives the following explanation:

I have also followed tradition in translating the key-word of the treatise, *hypsos*, as sublimity. However, the word does not, as Longinus uses it, mean precisely what we associate with sublimity, that is an outstanding and unusual exaltation of conception and style. As Longinus defines it, it signifies a certain distinction and excellence of expression, that distinction and excellence by which authors have been enabled to win immortal fame¹¹.

Even, however, if the translation had been correct, i.e. if the meaning of the Greek word were closer to that of sublimity, the semiotic situation would not have been much different. By the time the Latin and English translations appeared, the word (signifier) "sublime", with all its possible meanings and connotations (signifieds), had already had a long history, a history closely connected with a substantial body of alchemical writings. Seeing the word "sublime" in the translation of a Greek treatise every educated reader must have been referred willy-nilly to that history, or at least part of it. And his understanding of the word could not have been all of a sudden replaced by a new one. At best, it could have been supplemented.

It does not seem difficult, for example, to prove that in his analysis of the sublime E. Burke was more influenced by the alchemical tradition than by Longinus. I have already mentioned the fact that throughout its history alchemy, as a result of both conscious and unconscious efforts, was sunk in obscurity, or more precisely obscurities of all kinds; very often to such an extent that one can say without much exaggeration that in many instances it represented nothing but obscurity. Many alchemists, it seems, produced their manuscripts with the sole purpose of making a deep impression on the reader (in order to confirm or strengthen their position of those dwelling in the realm of the sublime). For Burke this is precisely the mechanism of the sublime:

The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully is Astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. ... No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear being an apprehension of

¹⁰ "Longinus", in *Longman Companion to English Literature*, ed. C. Gillie (London: Longman, 1972).

¹¹ T.S. Dorsch, "Introduction" to *Classical Literary Criticism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 24—25.

pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, ... Indeed terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime. ... To make any thing terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary¹².

We can discern the following chain: sublime — astonishment — terror — obscurity, i.e. down at the bottom of all things sublime lies obscurity. Then, discussing passages from Milton, Burke again stresses the importance of obscurity:

The mind is hurried out of itself, by a crowd of great and confused images; which affect because they are crowded and confused. For separate them, and you lose much of the greatness, and join them, and you infallibly lose the clearness. The images raised by poetry are always of this obscure kind¹³.

Burke makes little use of the Greek treatise, and it is not surprising at all. His understanding of the sublime is quite different from that we find in Longinus, i.e. from "a certain excellence and distinction in expression"¹⁴.

Let us now return to the semiotic situation outlined above. Burke was not much interested in *Peri Hypsous*, and there are strong indications that sublimity in the 17th century England was not understood the way it was presented in the Greek treatise. Nevertheless, it was nothing else but the French translation of *Peri Hypsous* that stimulated the amazing interest in the sublime in England. Analyzing the problem in such a way, we encounter a most peculiar, even weird situation: it appears that the career of the sublime was launched not so much by the concept introduced by Longinus, but just by the Latin word that appeared in translation. Using Saussurean terminology we would say it was the signifier of the Greek treatise that, quite irrespective of its signified, raised so much commotion in literature.

The European tradition is full of the sublime. For some reason the English literati of the 17th and 18th centuries needed to revive the concept and bring it to the fore, but why the reminder should have come in the form of a mistranslation is a real mystery. The ways of the sublime will have to remain obscure to us.

¹² E. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: 1812), Part II, Sections I—III, pp. 95—99.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Part II, Section IV, p. 106.

¹⁴ Longinus, "On the Sublime", in *Classical Literary...*, p. 100.