CHAPTER VI

Roman Classicism - Longinus

From Aristotle and Plato, we would rather prefer to go straight to Longinus though in some books on the history of Literary criticism, the first phase of this movement begins with Roman Poet Horace. It is contended that during the period the literary activity centred around the interpretation of ancient classics especially Platonic forms, Aristotelian decorum or mannerism, formulas and examples, imitation of models, nature and convention, the audience literary ideas in the satires and Epistles, satire and comedy as poetry, the language of poetry, usage, mediocrity in Poems, the structure of the Arts Poetica, Peripatetic topics, matter and form, hedonism and didacticism, poet and poem, divine inspiration, genius and technique etc. All these ideas are reconstructed out of the fragments found at different places or they are referred to by their writers. In short, we do not find a treatise on Literary Criticism but ideas scattered in the manuscripts and put together by moderns who were in search of the historical past. Their activities were limited to Greek and Latin for they knew not that Greek and Latin languages had their mother in ancient Sanskrit or the old Vedic Sanskrit. They also did not decipher this mother language in which great classics like Ramayan and Mahabharat, the parent classics of Homers' Iliad and Odyssey, were composed and elaborate
treatises on various subjects including Bharat Natyashashtra - a treatise on the art of dramaturgy and literary criticism were composed. When after Hellenistic civilization in Europe, silence prevailed for more than two centuries, Alexandria was brewing with activities and became a centre of coming together of men of letters from Creta, Mesopotemia, Assiria, Iran, Egypt, and India who contributed to the process of cross-fertilization of ideas.

Rise of Roman Classicism:

The idea of Horace, especially his Ars Poetica became part of a critical trend, a "romantic" concern for the poet's inspiration which came to its climax, recorded for us not in the writing of a school but in the single extraordinary essay entitled Peri HUPSOUS to which the name of an otherwise unknown "Longinus" has become attached. The poetry and criticism of Horace was part of an Augustan classical movement leading back towards the high seriousness if not the moral intensity, of Greek classical Art. Horace, at that time had become a refined poet under the Epicurian influence of the school at Naples. He emerged from an Alexandrian atmosphere. Whatever earnest pleading Horace does is that of a poet for the poet's cause. His opponents are not politicians, sophists or philosophers but his fellow poets and various kinds of literary pretenders.
"Propriety" or "Decorum" main normative value:

The main thing assumed in the criticism of Horace is the normative value of the literary "species", the genre, kind or type and of the companion principle designated by the term "Propriety". The Platonic perfect idea of a thing had by the time of Horace developed a literary application

One question which modern scholars have asked about the critical assumptions of Horace is whether the notion of "Propriety" or "Decorum" entertained by him refers to something intrinsic to the nature of things or to something established by human convention. In other words the question is how conventions in general are related to nature. There is little direct evidence of what Horace thought about this difficult question. His criticism does, however, offer a good example of the thorough interpretation of nature and convention in the classical literary tradition. According to one recent opinion, the decorum of Horace is something affectively and socially oriented - towards the taste and standards of the aristocratic theatre audience of his day rather than toward an Aristotelian or natural objectivity.

"Sublimity" the soul of Poetry:

Longinus according to one recent commentator, was friend of Neoplatonist Plotinus, the teacher of Porphyry and counsellor of Queen Zenobia.
The sublime consists in a certain loftiness and consummation of language, and it is by this and this only that the greatest poets and prose-writers have won pre-eminence and lasting fame. This loftiness or sublimity in literature has as its end, not persuasion, but ecstasy-transport - "lifting out of oneself". The work of Genius does not aim at persuasion, but ecstasy of lifting the reader out of himself. The wonder of it, wherever and whenever it appears, startles us, it prevails where the persuasive or agreeable may fail, for persuasion depends mainly on ourselves, but there is no fighting against the sovereignty of genius. It imposes its irresistible will upon us all .... The sublime at the critical moment shoots forth and tears the whole thing to pieces like a thunderbolt, and in a flash reveals all the author's power.

The ecstasy - the transport - the elevation, then is the criterion by which a literary creation must be judged. Longinus in his essay describes five fold division of the "sources" of elevation. They are (1) the power of forming great conceptions, (2) inspired and vehement passion, (3) formation of figures, (4) noble diction, and (5) dignified and elevated composition.

The first two i.e. the power of forming great conceptions and inspired and vehement passion are supplied by the nature and the rest by the Art the function of which is to "regulate". He admires the daring of a genius and has little respect for the meticulous accuracy of middling ability. All the improprieties in a
genius, he attributes to a common cause - "Pursuit of novelty in thought - an orgy in which the present generation revels". The choice of words, the ornaments of style and dignity of composition which form part of the sources of sublimity belong to the domain of Art considered from the external point of view. But Longinus is least interested in it. He is rather far more interested in the internal element which springs from the "Nature" of the artist or supplied by it and which artifice can only regulate. Longinus recognises that "so though you may separately discuss words, style, structure which belong to the body of literature, you cannot actually part them from the thought and passion which belong to its soul". Grandeur of thought and vigorous, spirited treatment of the passions Longinus puts first. It is the quality of mind which determines everything "for beautiful words are the true and peculiar light of the mind" says Longinus. This natural creative force which manifests itself in the mind of man is distinguished from the regulative function of Art. He prefers to speak of the emotions which great literature sitrs, the passion it calls forth, the transport or ecstasy to which it leads. He says "I would confidentially lay it down that there is nothing so stirring as noble, inevitable passion, its rapture induced by a kind of madness or divine influence, and flowing forth in phrases that are inspired". The mark of sublimity as he has traced from Homer and Demosthenes is "in his ability to kindle and tend with his force, his swiftness, his strength, his intensity may be likened to a flash of lightning". The climax
of the Demosthenic sublimity is reached in moments of intensity and extreme passion when the reader is completely carried away. Literature when it reaches the peak in the domain of creative art - it can transport and lift us out of ourselves by a power which confounds the judgement, eclipses mere reason and illumines a subject with the vividness of lightning.

**Criterion of excellence in Literature:**

What is, then, according to Longinus, the criterion of excellence in Literature? How to distinguish great literature from the ordinary? Longinus sets a standard of quality for those who sit at the judgement for deciding the greatness or otherwise of literary product. He limits the right to judge to those who have submitted themselves to the discipline of literature. According to him "the judgement of literature is the long-delayed reward of much endeavour". He presupposes men wise and well versed in the literature of the world who have not shrunk from taking pains in mastering and understanding it. It is only for such readers that the power of literature to move becomes a test of its high quality and it must be able to exercise this power not only once, in some happy mood of the reader, but again and again. To quote him ".... when it makes the utmost demand on the attention, when it forces itself upon us importunately, irresistibly, when it takes so strong a hold on the memory that it cannot be forgotten". Such, then, is the criterion or test of the great poetry of art that it
leaves a lasting influence on our mind, lifts it up, stirs up to sublime height. The last question which every creative artist should ask to himself while deciding the qualitative gradation of his work, says Longinus, is "how will my writing strike the ages yet to come".

Concluding our account of Longinus, we may note with R.A. Scott-James, that in Longinus classicism was touched with romance but not darkened. His romanticism was sane and bright by dint of its contact with the classic order. There was no echo of the arriving mysticism which as he translated, was a lamp which could be kept trim and bright in the temple of Athene⁴.

Longinus seeks a synthesis between natural endowment inherited by the artist and artistic skill or technique imbibed by him. At one place he says "Art is perfect when it seems to be nature, and nature hits the mark when she contains art hidden within her". However he finds it difficult to conceive an art for so natural and spontaneous a performance as the sublime. At another place, while defining the role of nature and Art he says, "while nature as a rule is free and independent in matters of passion and elevation, yet she is wont not to act at random and utterly without system. Further, nature is the original and vital underlying principle in all cases, but system can define limits and fitting seasons, and can also contribute the safest rules for use and practice"⁵.
References

1. Literary Criticism: A Short History, P.80.
2. R.A.Scot-James: The Making of Literature, Ch.VIII, P.81-3.
3. De sublimate 1,3,4 Quoted in The Making of Literature, P.86.