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Abstract: It is hard to decide whether the words *sublime* and *the sublimity* used in the 18th century have still the same reverberations in the 21st century. The aesthetic reflections on sublime vary in the 18th century. There are three theoriticians on sublimity dating back to the past: Pseudo Longinos, Burke and Kant. In Pseudo-Longinos, the sublime has distinct moral implications. Burke's theory is directed toward such situations where some elements or situations are felt painful or threatening. Kant's sublime theory is based on a response of reason to an overwhelming excess of greatness or power. The romanticists including Schiller and Schopenhauer spread the sublime till the nineteenth century. Pathos, nobility, dignity and gravity are associated with sublimity. In this 21st century it is also possible to find some associations like urban, industrial, religious, supernatural, modern, postmodern, existential, poetic, gothic, feminine, masculine and so on. The purpose of this study is to delve into the Burkean sublime and find its traces in the novel *Still Alice*, by Lisa Genova, an American neuroscientist and author, who self-published her debut novel in 2007, which is concerned with Alice, a Harvard professor who suffers early onset Alzheimer's disease, which takes hold swiftly and changes her relationship with her family and the world.

Keywords: *Burke, sublimity, transcendence.*

Burke (1968) sees the sublime arising out of the instinct of self preservation. He discusses the elements of sublime with the notions of transcendent particularly power, vastness and infinity. He highlights the features of sublime by their power to terrify or threaten with their largeness. He stresses the negative elements in a blocking or checking of the subject. Burke enhances the importance of the connection between negative unbeautiful experience and the standard explanation of the transcendence. Later Kant follows the Burkean idea that sublime in contrast to the beautiful is incompatible with charm. Unlike Hegel, both Burke and Kant explain sublime as a reaction to certain kinds of natural scenes.

Burke's *Enquiry* draws on the latter's basic distinction between the painful and pleasurable aspects of the terrible; for while the source of the sublime is the emotion of overwhelming fear, it is only when we are aware that this fear is not a lethal threat that we can experience the true aesthetic

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enjoyment, or what Burke calls the 'delight' of the sublime. As Burke writes in his *Enquiry,* "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (1968, p.39).

On the other hand, "When danger and pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they maybe, and they are delightful, as we every day experience" (Burke, 1968, p. 40). Physical or aesthetic distance is thus the key to experiencing the sublime as pleasure, as opposed to succumbing to its unmediated terrors in the form of traumatic pain.

The very name Alice, the titular character of the novel *Still Alice* (Genova, 2007), is eminently appropriate for a character depicting an enactment of the sublime. It comes from Adelaide (given name), from the Germanic word elements adal, meaning 'noble'. Her surname 'howland' is affiliated with the uncertain situation of the place and land.

Just at the beginning of the novel, Alice experiences memory loss twice: first in her speech, she cannot remember the word "lexicon" and then secondly while running, she finds her surroundings unfamiliar:

> *Alice runs into the center of the square then slows down. Suddenly, she's not sure of where she is. The depth of field has become very shallow, completely isolating her from her surroundings. The normal university soundscape fades away disconcertingly. She looks from one building to another - from one person to another. Things swim momentarily into focus but there's no context - no bigger picture. Her breathing starts to quicken. She ventures one way a few paces, up some stairs. Her breathing is rapid, her face flushed with fear. She puts her head down, forcing herself to focus. Then, she recognizes the Columbia Library Building in front of her. Normality returns. People walk by her, chatting. Everything is in focus now (2007, p.12).*

The turmoil she feels is gone. When she goes home, her husband asks her to walk to university so that he can finish his incomplete task. However, this makes her very annoyed and she exasperatedly says that " I don't want to go to campus. I just went for a run. I really need to be home now" which leads her husband John to have a flicker of concern and he asks whether she is ok or not. Later in the neurosurgeon's office, while she is

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answering his questions, the emotional reaction of Alice when she learns that she has early onset Alzheimer's disease is an apprehension of the sublime, the soul shattering sense of awe while the reader is the beneficiary of the vicarious "delight" arising from the narrator's intermediary position as participant-observer of her ordeal.

Readers find overt reference to Burke's sublime, as the narrator's view of her diagnosis creates a sense of "insufferable gloom" that anticipates the experience of Alice's pathological fears and neurotic despair. Later on the same day, in the afternoon, we see winter squash chopped; brussel sprouts peeled, a turkey in the oven being checked.

> *Alice is busily preparing Christmas dinner. A timer rings. She goes over to the far wall murmuring...Stethoscope. Millennium. Hedgehog. Lifting a dish cloth on a memory board, she checks three words - Stethoscope. Millennium. Hedgehog. Erasing the words, she thinks a moment and writes, "Cathode, Pomegranate, Trellis." She places the cloth back over the words and resets the timer (2007, p.19).*

Upon her youngest daughter Lydia's arrival for Christmas dinner, Alice experiences another episode of memory loss, distracted, staring at the bread pudding ingredients. She herself has started to believe that she has been afflicted with onset Alzheimer.

As an apparent connoisseur of aesthetic effects in landscape and architecture, the narrator evokes the aura of vacancy and whiteness that characterizes the house and its surroundings, thereby creating a pathologically depressive mood. Despite this, it is possible to see the conventions of sublime landscape when she walks or runs in the park.

As Burke had noted of the individual's experience of terror, "the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it" (1968, p.57).

Significantly, Genova's evocation of her peculiar psychological and physiological condition also tallies with Burke's description of the various sensations conducive to the sublime that may create pain if they are insufficiently mediated. Her diagnosis causes in her and especially her eldest daughter the greatest grief and melancholy and contributes to the sense of helplessness that characterizes his condition. According to Burke, in a languid inactive state, the nerves are more liable to the most horrible convulsions than when they are sufficiently braced and strengthened. Melancholy, dejection, despair, and often self-murder, is the consequence of

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the gloomy view we take of things in this relaxed state of body. The best remedy for all these evils is exercise or labour. (2007, p.135)

For Burke, language is surprising and forces readers to rethink their natural expectations: "in painting we may represent any fine figure we please, but we never can give it those enlivening touches which it may receive from words. To represent an angel in a picture, you can only draw a beautiful young man winged; but what painting can furnish out anything so grand as the addition of one word, the angel of the Lord? These words affect the mind more than any sensible image" (Genova, 2007, p.174). So the idea of a mysterious affinity between abstraction and sublime is present in Burke (Holmqvist & Pluciennik, 2002, p.724).

Lyotard (1993) likes the Burkean idea of the power of the words. He believes words have advantages such as

-- they bear emotional associations,

-- they can evoke what is spiritual without referring to what is visible,

-- we can create combinations impossible to make in another way,

-- the arts should devote themselves to combinations which are astonishing, unusual and shocking.

All kinds of mysterious words, glossalalia, and stylization drawing on strange language can be regarded as a perfect medium to present the unpresentable. The main figures of the sublime are rhetorical figures of oxymoron and paradox, visible in the dialogues of Alice and her husband:

> *Well I think that this is ridiculous. It's complete bullshit, you don't have Alzheimer's". He reaches out again for her, but she pulls away. Her emotion, stoked by a sleepless night and a failed Ambien, turns to anger. " God dammit! Why won't you take me seriously? I know what I'm feeling. And it feels like my brain is fucking dying. And everything I've worked for in my entire life is going. It's all going... (2007, p.27)*

Before an important dinner with her husband's colleague, Alice goes running and disappears for 2 hours: when Alice comes in the front door, John is irate. '"where the hell were you?', 'I went for a run."But you've been gone for over two hours. I was worried.'…' well I hope it was worth it because you completely blew our dinner plans with Susan Kirby and her husband"'. Alice's answer is short "I'm sorry. I forgot. I have Alzheimer's". She expresses her wish to have cancer " I wouldn't feel so ashamed. When people have cancer they wear pink ribbons for you and go on long walks and

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raise money. And you don't have to feel like some kind of a - social...I can't remember the word."(p. 39)

White (1997, p. 126) holds that that the experience of the sublime is closely related to the experience of the sacred; and he shows how even in Burke and Kant, the sublime is grasped as a religious experience – as opposed to a moral or an aesthetic experience – which finally opens the individual to that which is greater than herself.

Kant (1993) emphasizes the triumphant reassertion of the self which follows the impact of the overwhelming object of the sublime. For in his theory, the experience of the sublime functions as a bridge to our own ethical enhancement. Our physical self is threatened, but in the end this only allows us to recognize how absolutely important we are as moral agents and as ends-in-ourselves. Burke, on the other hand, regards terror as the ruling principle of the sublime. And so he writes,

> *The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it (1968, p.57).*

But as Kant himself insists, nothing out there is really sublime in itself: Sublimity, he writes, "does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our mind, in so far as we may become conscious of our superiority over nature within, and thus also over nature without us…". And he adds, "Everything that provokes this feeling in us, including the might of nature which challenges our strength, is then, though improperly, called sublime …"(1993, p. 114).

Burke himself recognizes this when he comments: "terror is a passion which always produces delight when it does not press too close" (p.46). There is clearly a very close parallel between the experience of terror and the experience of the sublime; but in order for the latter to take place, it is essential to achieve some real distance from whatever terror may be evoked.

Readers feel shocked to follow how Alice's disease shows the symptoms incrementally. Before their running, she wishes to visit the bathroom. Alice walks in but feels disoriented, suddenly unsure of where she is. In the beach house, she comes downstairs, looks into the kitchen, then makes her way to the hallway, trying doors but not finding the bathroom.

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"There's a closet. Then Lydia's room. Then an office. Hurrying towards the living room again, she becomes more and more anxious. She tries the door to her right -- the closet again. Her skin is flushed, reddening with humiliation. John rushes down the stairs." (2007, p.49) She is standing by the hallway, her sweat pants soaked in urine. She states lucidly that she could not find the bathroom and she does not know where she is.

The individual can relinquish control as the power of the sublime pulls her away from all her everyday concerns to reveal the immesureable otherness which confronts her in a very lucid and immediate way. Through the sublime, the individual is literally opened up to that which lies outside of herself. She does not experience herself as a subject who projects her interests, concerns and categories onto the world, but, paradoxically enough, as an object in so far as she is addressed in her childhood memories. Alice begins to be lost in her childhood memories of her mother and sister Alice, who died at a very young age. When Lydia asks how it feels, Alice is very articulate: "well, it's not always the same. I have good days and bad days. On my good days, I can almost pass for a normal person. But on my bad days, I feel like I can't find myself" (p. 60). She knows how it feels and she sees the demarcation between her consciousness and unconsciousness under the influence of the disease: "I've always been so defined by my intellect, my language, my articulation, and now sometimes I can see the words hanging in front of me and I can't reach them and I don't know who I am and I don't know what I'm going to lose next." (p. 61)

In Burkean sublime, it is easy to see the link between the sacred and the sublime. But like Durkheim, this sublimity tends to claim that the holy and the non-holy, or the sacred and the profane, are absolutely separate from each other. Durkheim's pronouncement is well-known: there is nothing left with which to characterize the sacred in its relation to the profane except their heterogeneity. However, this heterogeneity is sufficient to characterize this classification of things and to distinguish it from all others, because it is very particular: it is absolute. In all the history of human thought there exists no other example of two categories of things so profoundly differentiated or so radically opposed to one another. Here what happens to the modern subject of the sublime who, faced with the abject (the place where meaning collapses), experiences a dissolution and reconstitution of subjectivity. Burke, on the other hand, seems to be more aghast by a lack of nature: a universe of death as the terror of emptiness is described, which is incited by "a privation of light: terror of darkness;

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privation of others: terror of solitude; privation of language: terror of silence, and more explicitly in relation to the abyss, privation of objects: terror of emptiness; privation of life: terror of death" (Lyotard, 1993, p. 99).

The sublime is aligned with a destructive aspect of the psyche. Burke (1968) reads it as "an idea belonging to self-preservation . . . one of the most affecting we have." He observes "its strongest emotion is distress and no pleasure from a positive cause belongs to it" (p. 79). What Alice reflects in her mind and how she feels are oriented towards her desire to preserve what she has had accumulated all years long: love for family and language she uses to express herself. Her memories of her childhood and present time are blurred in her struggle to hold on to the present and she acutely shows her keen interest in staying out of this distressing situation.

On the one hand, we could relate all of this on sublimity to a renewed questioning about the role of art; and especially when art is no longer to be identified exclusively with the beautiful, the turn to the sublime makes sense as an attempt to articulate the disturbing power of art and the eschewal of restful contemplation. More deeply still, however, the recent turn to the sublime, both as an artistic category of beauty and as a category of experience, can be read as an attempt to recover something whose absence is deeply felt. (White,1997, p. 142). Burke's sublimity lies in both beautiful and painful. Alice's awareness of her situation, her wonderful relationship with her family especially with her daughters, her beautiful memories of her mother and sister looming at large, her sharp knowledge of losing her memory stand in sharp contrast with the painful yet inevitable consciousness of her being. Her disease and situation has the reverberance of pathos, nobility, gravity and dignity. Readers are spellbound by what they have experienced in Genova's novel which presents the unpresentable, the mind of an Alzheimer patient which only she herself can have access to. As Alice says in her speech, the poet Elizabeth Bishop once wrote: 'the Art of losing isn't hard to master: so many things seem filled with the intent to be lost that their loss is no disaster and people learn the art of losing every day'.

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