

'Of Aspect more Sublime': A Foreword

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In the year 2019, the author of this piece had travelled to Bhutan, a landlocked mountainous nation between two civilizational giants, Greater India and China. His journey commenced on the first week of April, as most tourists and introspective travellers do generally this time of the year. The transit was made from Jaigaon, a town in Bengal (W), through Phuentsholing – a town bordering the previously mentioned Indian town, before winding its way upwards, dissecting the inner Himalayas to the capital city of Thimphu – a distance no less than forty-five miles. It was decided that the journey shall be undertaken between five thirty in the evening and ten at night – a decision that would prove critical as the day began drawing to a close.

As the Car drove out of the bordering Bhutanese town, the driver announced that one shall witness a steep climb for the first fifty kilometres of the journey. While hearing this being said, smoother hills had started to disappear one by one; the river flowing beneath no longer looked like a river. A significant increase in elevation made it look like a meandering thread. Vehicles started fading out of sight, people were not descried, the turns becoming sharper, the climate chillier, the guard-rails nothing compared to the imagined gorges, cascades and dingles that were already assuming gravity in their uninhabited depth as the Sun decided to go down completely at seven.

At this fair moment of sacrilege, the driver, somewhat piteously, turned on his headlights, as the car rattled slowly. In that darkness visible, the author's eyes were fixed upon two things, and two things only; as the headlights flickered, he was staring at the enormous massifs of mountains, rising immediately from the near edges of the road – barren, without any trace of vegetation, of life – huge hunks of rocks hanging loose, and the occasional boulder almost about to plunge, but where? In the unimaginable depth of the dark valleys, where no headlight could offer enough knowledge of its true power of devouring whatever lives. There was a dark vapour rising, a cold breath, not a cold breeze, in the depressing and trembling isolation of the way to the city – the true sensation, the sensation that mortals refer to – the *fear of death*.

Activities had begun happening while this experience continued to weather; city-lights had taken over from the headlights. With the cold having amplified, the *fear of death* had entered into a brief remission, not expanding any further – its turbulence settling slowly, but still operating on the crust of conscience. The night had ended.

The next day took over. The first rays of the Sun shone upon the enormous massifs of the inner Himalayas again for the first time since last night, and instead of gainsaying former experiences, an attempt had begun almost immediately to cognize what had happened without its recumbent fear. The method – an apprehension of its size and power, of its ability to terrify – through introspections, reflections and intellections that had the potential to comprehend the vastness of the object, to reduce it into a capsule, a subject of moral superiority from its apocalyptic inferiority – an attempt to invert the *fear*

of death, born from experience coupled with ignorance, into *death of fear*, born from knowledge and conscientiousness – a spiritual and mental itinerary creating an aspect truly Sublime. While the author would soon descend from the mountain terrains of Bhutan to the sacred plains of India, the methods of revealing, comprehending and generating sublime knowledge from apocalyptic experience continued to war with the human intellect until this day, lingering further on.

The intention here so far has not been to provide a magical key that unlocks the stratagems of the Sublime. Through the narrative strung together by events promoting the conceptual over the visual, two crucial questions have been asked that seek clarifications and not rigid answers – How does one invert the *fear of death* into the *death of fear*? More importantly, does the Sublime question, reared in their cradles, ever comprehend the apocalyptic without answering it perfectly? Assuming that these two questions are ever answered, there would never be another Sublimity, and this anthology and its objective would become fodder for the planktons. Incidentally, two thousand years have passed without an answer that surpasses the rest; hence, calculated risks may be taken, that involves a covenant with the unknown answer, with the properly illustrated questions in place – bold and respectful. This is not the same as saying that the answers to the Sublime question have never been answered through an ambiguous agreement with other forms of aesthetic examinations. To cite one specific example, when Swami Vivekananda describes an incident from the *Mahabharata* involving Yudhisthira in his famous ‘Paper on Hinduism’, he seems to coagulate the ‘grand’ with the ‘beautiful’, using them simultaneously to describe the sublimity of the Himalayas.¹ It does not define a mistake in his eloquence; it gives rise to a genuine contradiction, a working oxymoron of ideas against pleasure, a true ambivalence in the Indian understanding of the Sublime, to be identified by Hegel in *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*.² However, this interesting aspect ascends through the lack of clear-cut distinctions between the symbolic and the natural – something crucial to Western methodologies of the Sublime. Since one lives in a world of interpretations and not hard definitions, is it incumbent upon the individual to appreciate through distinctions only, yet not through an acceptance of honest assimilations by being amused at their fluid co-existences?³ It could preferably be called a *confusement* – an assimilation causing both confusion and amusement without retarding its movement towards a positive reception of the idea and its definitions. If the neologism is pardoned by the patient reader, would it be wrong to claim that in the dialectical (im)balance of the truly grand and the *confusement* that the beautiful transcends into, the stable form of an Indian Sublime can be made to reside?

This is not an answer. This is merely designed as a sincere question on the Sublime – a *true* Sublime question that could be answered – asking and answering the sublime questions. All the essays in this anthology shall remain committed to this purpose, and the establishment of any answer shall only be a virtuous question in which a successor, a researcher of the Sublime might step in and fulfil its visions, views and vitalities.

Notes

¹ *Vivekananda Reader* (Ed. Swami Narasimhananda) Advaita Ashrama, 2012, p. 140.

² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, “Symbolism and the Sublime”. *The Sublime Reader*. Edited by Robert R. Clewis. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, pp. 200-211.

³ *Derrida: A Very Short Introduction*. By Simon Glendenning. Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 22.