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Richard Powers's Sublime Visions of Human Enhancement

What did human enhancement look like before "human enhancement"? To generate some preliminary thoughts on this question as it relates to the Powers novel I will be discussing, I wish to go over a little bit of prehistory. The enhancement project of our time is only the most recent chapter in an old quest — one that has always cut across science, technology, art, and philosophy — to overcome the limitations of the human condition. As Powers's scientist character puts it, "We're after the same thing humanity has been after since toolmaking" ("we" being his genetic-engineering company devoted to improving on the "quality *and* quantity" of human life).[1] And certainly, there are continuities to explore between the current and the historical ways of augmenting and transcending the human, as well as — and this will be my focus — between recent and earlier literary treatments that the issue of human enhancement has been given.

Consider for a moment athletics in antiquity: although there may have been no ankle-strengthening surgeries for uninjured athletes on offer yet, sports medicine in ancient Greece was a rich and highly contested field. Doping-like enhancement of performance, achievable through herbal and nutritional lore, was a cultural phenomenon documented for example in Plato's *Republic* (406a-b), with its censure of a trainer who "was said to have used a combination of exercise and diet" not only to maximize success in athletics but also to "prolong his life beyond the point of usefulness."[2] But Greek athletes also had the epinician odes of Pindar (fifth century B.C.), the most difficult lyric poet of antiquity, who made a career of writing about notable athletic victories. Comparing Pindar's poetic *technē* to contemporary biomedical performance-enhancing technologies may seem far-fetched, but in fact his works profoundly heightened both the mental and physical potential of ancient athletes. That is why an ode by Pindar cost the commissioner almost as much as the hire of a distinguished trainer or sports physician: it made athletes perform like gods even as it compared them to gods and legendary heroes. And what of its aesthetic qualities? Be it the vocabulary, the use of myth, or the structure of each poem: all aspects of the Pindaric ode strive for sublimity, earning Pindar an exemplary place in the earliest known theoretical account of the sublime (first century A.D.) by the anonymous author known as Longinus.

Taking my cue from the Pindar example, I will look at how contemporary literary figurations of human enhancement mobilize the Western tradition of the sublime, which as a concept has manifested "a high degree of insistence" over its extensive history passing through a variety of artistic contexts and cultural formations.[3] Indeed, the conceptual link between the sublime and the perennial dream of enhancement is already a given in our terminology. To *enhance*, which derives from Latin *in-* + *altus* (high),

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[1] Powers, *Generosity*, Atlantic Books, 2011, p. 179.
[2] Stephen G. Miller, *Ancient Greek Athletics*, Yale UP, 2004, p. 213.
[3] Michael J. Shapiro*, The Political Sublime*, Duke UP, 2003, p.

originally (and roughly up to the sixteenth century) meant "to raise, to elevate, to exalt." As for the sublime, German has *das Erhabene* (literally, "the uplifted"), and Greek has *hypsos* ("the high"). The originally Latin word that we use in English derives from *sub-* "up to" + *limen* "threshold, limit." Both etymological schemata for the sublime — as loftiness and as a phenomenon that pushes against existing limits — strongly resonate with the current ethos of human enhancement.

Owing mostly to the legacy of Romantic poetry and painting, the sublime has been commonly understood to be the experience, by a puny human subject, of nature's majesty in its incomprehensible and menacing aspects. The supernatural, the divine, as well as the elevation of the human to the superhuman and the contemplation of "the highest potentials imaginable (even if not attainable) by mankind" have also often been framed in the sublime mode.[4] Finally, according to Longinus's salient contribution, effects of sublimity in literature in large measure derive from operations of style and rhetoric. The sublime is thus found to erupt in the moments of highest rhetorical grandeur and intensity that our greatest authors from Homer on have achieved: "you could sooner open your eyes to the descent of a thunderbolt than face [a poet's or an orator's sublimity] without blinking."[5] Curiously, this stylistic form of the sublime triggers something that feels like a temporary enhancement of the imagination, though not without having first given it the devastating thunder-like shock. The sublime's enhancement trick is to uplift us with such "proud exaltation" as to make us feel that we ourselves have authored the sublime words we are reading.[6]

What Longinus's treatise and other influential accounts of the sublime, such as those by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, share is the characterization of the sublime experience as a transition from impotence to empowerment, an oscillation between attraction and repulsion (or delight and fear), and a leap over the limits of one's sensory and mental capacities propelled by the very recognition of those limits. Classic theories of the sublime thus provide a paradigm within which we can critique both the appeal and the nightmare of human enhancement in its contemporary fictional representations. In my abstract I stated that I would discuss two novels by Richard Powers, *Generosity: An Enhancement* and *The Overstory*, but now I think that it will be more manageable to just stay with *Generosity*.

The enhancement project in *Generosity* consists in the discovery and future biotechnological promotion of a rarely expressed human gene for happiness and optimism. The plot revolves around an exceptional, chronically happy Algerian refugee from whom the supposed gene will be harvested for further study and use in outright utopian schemes that could potentially affect all humanity. This is where the sublime first comes into play, because once alerted to the existence of such an individual, the wider public begins to project on "Miss Generosity" (real name: Thassa) a myriad of sensibilities derived from the domain of religion. In the quasi-religious hysteria that grips the popular imagination, "Miss Generosity" is pushed into the role of a saint, mystic, and messiah, whose charisma is sublime in that it awes, exalts, repels, and threatens all at

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[4] James I. Porter, "The Sublime," in *Companion to Ancient Aesthetics*, ed. Pierre Destrée and Penelope Murray, Wiley, 2015, p, 400.
[5] Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans. W. H. Fyfe, Loeb, 1995, 34.4.
[6] Ibid., 7.2.

once. Here are two characters' reactions to her sublimity:

> Goose bumps run up Kurton's neck — piloerection, puffing up against danger — archaic reflex pirated by that spin-off of no known survival value: awe... Even her walk is eerie; she springs like she is on a smaller planet with weaker gravity...Just being around her is a mild euphoric. (144)
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> He can't imagine what Thassa's standing state of grace feels like; an hour of being her would blow him away. (114)

Intriguingly, Thassa is not discovered by scientists, but by her college instructor in creative writing, Russell: he is the first to suspect that her mental and neural economy must be empirically different from that of other human beings. The implication is that a creative writer — a friend of the Muses and a professional votary of the sublime — is innately attuned to the radiance of someone possessing such an enhancement, in this case natural rather than acquired. Russell's creativity, however, has lately been barren — a problem aggravated by his chronic depression and his melancholy celibacy. Russell's multiform unhappiness makes him more than eager to bask in the reflected light of Thassa's superhuman vibrancy, optimism, and imaginativeness.

Creative writing has a key presence throughout *Generosity*. One of Powers's goals, I think, is to put forth a theory of creativity that could be characterized as Pindaric in its emphasis on celebration, hope, enthusiasm, joy, and the gamut of uplifting and apotheosizing emotions as the indispensable catalysts of inspiration. The full title of the novel, *Generosity: An Enhancement*, hints that enhancement can be taken to be its very genre. In other words, in the course of telling a story about biomedical enhancement, Powers is enhancing the genre of the realist science novel (to whose development he has already richly contributed) in two ways: first, by lacing it with moments of the magical, the uncanny, the transcendent, and the surreal (e.g. the goldfinch vision in the opening and closing chapters); and second, by including self-reflexive digressions by the narrator, many of which make use of the stylistic sublime. The drama of the narrator, who can be understood as an alter ego of Russell, has to do with overcoming creative inhibitions, swimming freely with the flow of his inspiration, and remaining optimistic about his work's reception by the reader. Here is one of the digressions:

> I never seek out uncanny plots... But **they seem to find me anyway** [→ *supernatural inspiration*]. And when I do read them, however conventional, **they rip me open and turn me into someone else** [→ *Longinus 1.4: the effect of the sublime is to "transport the audience* ***out of themselves****"*].
> This is what the Algerian tells me: live first, decide later. Love the genre that you most suspect. **Good judgment** will spare you nothing, least of all your life [→ *for Longinus the sublime has nothing to do with good judgment, refinement, or rational assessment of literary quality; rather, the sublime violates all rule, measure, and proportion; see 36.1-4*]. Flow, words [→ *cf. Longinus's comparison of sublime rhetoric to a raging flood at 12.5*].

When scientists take Thassa over from the creative writer who discovered her, science itself blooms into a high strain of sublimity. Kurton, the genomicist-cum-entrepreneur

who first studies her, is a visionary figure with strong resemblances to Silicon Valley prometheuses such as Ray Kurzweil, Peter Thiel, and Elon Musk. His exceeding enthusiasm for knowledge, progress, and the technological enhancement of human potential positions him above common humanity. He styles himself as a posthumanist prophet, and in his virtuoso media appearances he communicates his research and futurist goals to the public in a lofty rhetoric. Furthermore, Kurton has his science vie with moral philosophy, art and, in particular, with literature for the title of the most exalted human endeavor. In a public debate against a Nobel laureate in literature and in a private sparring against Camus's *Plague* over his car stereo, Kurton proves that scientific inspiration has superseded the artistic imagination.

The triumph of the sublime scientific mindset, however, is brought to a bathetic halt towards the end of the novel. When the public's viral veneration turns into fear-driven hate towards both Thassa and Kurton, Kurton makes a final attempt to save science's honor. Even if society regards particular scientific projects on happiness enhancement as dubious, it must see, Kurton asserts, that the pursuit of science itself delivers all the joy and exhilaration we need in life: "Science is enough to make any person endlessly well. Why do we need happiness when we can have knowing?... If that doesn't inspire us, we don't deserve to survive ourselves" (252).

Despite Kurton's apparent idealism, his hands have blood on them: his science, in a tangle with finance, media, and the law, has exploited and abused Thassa. She is a miserable wreck by the end of the story, and in fact everyone, down to her friends, are partly to blame for her tragedy.

This brings me to my last point, which links up to one of the most contentious issues in the philosophical debate on human enhancement: the issue of moral enhancement. In the view of some scholars, it would be dangerous to embark on radical projects of biotechnical enhancement if we have not ensured that the recipient populations possess sufficient moral integrity. Hence, the argument goes, the enhancement of physical or cognitive functioning should go hand in hand with the enhancement of morality by pharmaceutical (and other technological) means.

The idea that we should be moral before we become enhanced is highly relevant to Powers's novel: it is after all because of everyone's immoral treatment of Thassa that the dream of happiness enhancement founders in *Generosity*. Altruism is one of the moral traits that theorists of moral enhancement have been particularly interested in, and altruism is precisely what distinguishes Thassa's form of happiness, aptly called "generosity," from the selfish happiness that everyone else pursues. Thassa's exuberance consistently benefits others as much as, or even more than, it does her. Its altruistic magic is dramatically demonstrated in an early episode of her "hagiography," when a college mate attempts to rape her. Powers writes here his own version, with eighteenth-century-novel overtones, of the damsel-in-distress, who saves herself by talking the violator out of his deed — more for his soul's sake than her own. Thassa's firm optimism, generosity, and care for the monster in the very moment of his attempt to destroy her make her so exalted and otherworldly but also so frightening that he suddenly "rears up, rolls off from her like she's burning" (104). That "burning" or sublimity of hers is what ultimately helps her recover from the multiple tortures to which Western society in pursuit of its self-obsessive happiness has subjected her.