2 December 2013: Travelling Concepts IV – The Sublime

*From Rosie Lavan*

Readings:

For this discussion, which drew our term on travelling concepts to a close, we undertook a comparative reading of two texts on the sublime—the fragmentary second-century writing later titled ‘On the Sublime’ and attributed to Longinus, and an extract from Edmund Burke’s seminal eighteenth-century *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. There is no direct relationship between Longinus, Burke and the specific critical concept of the sublime which gains force in the early eighteenth century, but is there any meaningful relationship to be established between the texts nonetheless?

**Discussion**

- Important to note the difference between Longinus’s rather prescriptive text, indicating how a writer might produce these effects, and Burke’s more descriptive analysis of instances of the sublime in writing.

- Interesting point about genre which arises from Burke: it’s easier to produce these effects in writing than e.g. in painting.

- Can we relate it back to our previous discussion of 9/11? The sublime is something which is by nature beyond description.

- NB Longinus’s place—his response is made in a tradition of aesthetics that comes down though Plato and Aristotle

- Important questions about translation and definition:
  - How does translation affect/act upon the concept, especially because Longinus doesn’t define “sublime”?  
  - There is a problem with the inaccessibility of terms—e.g. the Greek ὕψους (hýpsous)—and their correspondents in translation  
  - And are we hearing the same things as Longinus is hearing in e.g. the extract from Sappho that he cites?
- On definition, perhaps we can relate to the Barthesian *punctum*—when he writes in *Camera Lucida* that the incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance.

- Extensive discussion of the sublime as an aesthetic effect which is provoked in, and received by, a reader or onlooker.
  - Do you have to practice being a receiver of the sublime?
  - Cf enthouiasmos, from the poet to the reader
  - Almost like reverse-engineering a work of art: we can take it to pieces but we still can’t explain why it has the effect it has
  - Can we see Longinus as putting forward a reader reception theory? Is he training the reader to notice and understand art in a particular way? (Aristotle does the complete opposite: he teaches the artist.)
  - Might we then set Burke and these questions of reading and reception in relation to the commonplace book/Erasmus; that, again, you have to learn or be trained in how a particular work or extract from a work is going to affect you, the reader.
  - How individuated is the experience of the sublime? Very much so, for the Romantics (cf. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*), but is it a collective experience for Longinus?
  - The idea of what a work of art *triggers* in the receiver: art is not about representation or mimesis (anti-Aristotelian) but about the creation of the effect on the reader/receiver. Longinus in this sense is anti-Aristotelian, because for Aristotle you can’t create an effect without knowing what the effect will be—take e.g. catharsis, which comes from pity and fear. So the sublime has no content, then—it might be understood as telos without content.
  - Does the approach to the sublime involve a loss of self? Does it lead to an anarchic state (cf Judith Butler)? But if this is so, how do we relate this loss of self to the fact that for both Longinus and Burke the experience of the sublime is prompted by going back to certain canonical texts? It’s as if you’ve been told what effect these texts will have on you…
  - A slightly different point about reception theory: our idea of the sublime is inevitably conditioned by the Romantics/the eighteenth century—we can’t help but approach Longinus via Burke, Kant etc. Does it matter? Is it possible to strip away these directions of thought and recover Longinus as if we were reading him in the second century…and is that even desirable? This raises an interesting methodological question for comparative criticism and the extent to which/nature of the links between any two texts. Is it enough for the critic alone to make those links?

- Emotions/affect are key, especially as the part of Longinus’s text where he promised to discuss this is lost. Burke’s sublime is anchored in the senses. Note Burke on that sense that an experience which disrupts our life or threatens it in some way also affirms it, prompts question about the nature of it, etc. No sense of that same danger
in Longinus—the experience there is more controlled. Is this because Burke’s examples point to non-human things—to animals, to natural phenomena, to quantities in/of space and time etc.

- Burke dematerialises the experience of the sublime—this anticipates Kant. The sublime is divorced from bodily experience. His attempts to identify the sublime in experiences of taste and smell are not so convincing: he is oddly on the fence about whether the sublime can be positively triggered by these senses. And he privileges poetry as a form that has moved away from matter. Can this dematerialisation be linked to what is perhaps a reverse movement in Coleridge’s ‘This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison’—“I see not feel how beautiful they are”?

- NB Burke on privations: the sublime defined by lack and yet there remains that wish to fill the empty space—psychoanalysis and the sublime? Yes—note responses to Kant’s *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*.

- Might Burke’s building metaphors be linked to Deleuze’s fourth dimension of meaning? And the place where the logos is not stable/is broken? (Cf also Kristeva and the *chora*.)

- Contrast of sublime with the beautiful: is it a question of scale? For Burke beautiful things are small and can be seen in their completeness…the sublime is always incomplete, and the senses are not able to encompass the whole thing.

- The sublime raises interesting questions about temporality in literature: literature, and therefore the experience, has to happen sequentially. Why then is the sublime less effective (for Burke) in the *encounter* of visual art? Is the cumulative effect of literature necessary?

- Longinus is interesting on syntax and the sublime—that a breakdown of structure (no clear logos…) can prompt this effect. But the structure of the production of the sublime in Burke is about *contrast*. It’s not about the structure of narrative—instead he points to certain moments or eruptions of experience that are thrown into contrast with others. Notably, the poetic instances he cites tend towards the visual—these are images, moments.