Day, H.J.M.


A book by a classicist that aligns the 9/11 terror attacks with the Roman civil war under the sign of the sublime might seem a highly unconventional approach, but after all Lucan’s epic is itself anything but conventional. In effect, Day’s study, a revised version of his Cambridge doctoral dissertation, does much more than just compare artistic responses to traumatic events from ancient and recent history. His aim is to establish the role of Lucan’s _Bellum civile_ as a central text in the history of the sublime, by on the one hand tracing classical and modern theories of the sublime, and on the other hand by identifying key markers of the sublime that make up the aesthetic and ethical fabric of Lucan’s epic.

“What is the sublime?” Starting from this courageous question, chapter 1 (“The experience of the sublime”, pp. 30-71) gives a helpful overview of the most important theorists in the history of the sublime, from Longinus and Lucretius via Burke and Kant to Freud and Lyotard; Ankersmit’s “sublime historical experience” is discussed in chapter 4 (pp. 179-183). Day explicitly looks for “common ground” (p. 28) between the different theories, which were formulated in very different periods and contexts. While offering an illuminating discussion of some of the most difficult texts on the sublime, he emphasizes the resemblances between the diverse approaches. He often manages to connect the different texts by concentrating on specific examples of the sublime, especially those that highlight the “complex interplay of loss and recuperation” (p. 39): passages in which strong emotion, terror, danger and imminent loss are prominent motifs. Thus, in his discussion of Longinus, Day focuses on the discussion of Sappho fragment 31 (On the Sublime 10.1-3), where the poet famously describes her passionate love as a near-death experience. Longinus himself suggests a connection between Sappho’s love poem and the frightening experience of the sailors in a Homeric storm (On the Sublime 10.5 on Iliad 15.624-628);

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1 Another bold and fruitful attempt to bring (post)modern theory (among others Paul Virilio, Carl Schmitt, Jacques Derrida and Walter Benjamin) and Lucan together is Ika Willis’ _Now and Rome: Lucan and Vergil as Theorists of Politics and Space_ (London 2011).

2 Christine Walde, _Lucan’s Bellum Civile: a Specimen of a Roman ‘Literature of Trauma’_, in: _Asso, P. (ed.), Brill’s Companion to Lucan_ (Leiden 2011), 283-302, also refers to trauma theory in order to explain the unique literary form of the _Bellum civile_.

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the latter passage can be related to the sublime storm imagery in Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*, which in its turn is echoed by the focus on terror and delight in Burke’s reflections on the sublime. Danger, terror and the combination of loss and recuperation are also among the most important themes that Day subsequently selects for his discussion of the sublime in Lucan’s epic poem.

For Day, the sublime is basically one concept, which does not significantly change or develop from the first century BC to the twenty-first century AD. From a historical perspective, however, one could also emphasize the differences between Longinus, Burke, and Kant; terror, for example, is not as central to Longinus’ concept of *hupsos* as it is to Burke’s concept of the sublime: the explicit distinction between the sublime and the beautiful is a modern development. For the literary analysis of Lucan’s epic, Day’s eclectic use of different ideas of the sublime proves to be a helpful and productive instrument. For a good historical understanding of the ancient concept of the sublime in theory and practice, it would perhaps have been more rewarding to emphasize the differences between ancient and modern versions of the sublime; and hence to read Lucan from the perspective of Lucretius and Longinus rather than Burke and Kant.

Day’s discussion of the ancient concept of the sublime is not in all respects satisfactory. He rightly underlines the originality of Longinus’ concept of the sublime, which is a ‘special effect’ rather than a style. But when showing the differences between the sublime and the ‘grand style’ as presented by the rhetorician Demetrius (pp. 33-35), Day ignores the fact that Demetrius’ ‘forceful style’ is in many respects more relevant to Longinus’ treatise than the ‘grand style’: Demosthenes provides the best examples of sublimity in Longinus, and the same orator is the most prominent model of the forceful style in Demetrius. A reference to the rhetorical works of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, where the sublime is an important category, would have been helpful as well.

Day shows an admirable mastery of a great variety of texts, but there is an occasional slip in his interpretation of Longinus’ Greek, for which he has used the Loeb edition by W.H. Fyne, revised by D. Russell. In his discussion of *On the Sublime* 9.11 (p. 59) he mistakenly takes “the Greek hero” Ajax as the grammatical subject of *μαίνεται* (‘stormily raves’; *Iliad* 15.605), and he argues that “Ajax becomes ‘like the spear-wielding War-god’ Ares”. It however not Ajax who is the grammatical subject of *μαίνεται*. In the *Iliad* the subject is Hector (‘Hector was raging like Ares, wielder of the spear’); and in *On the Sublime* 9.11 the grammatical subject of *μαίνεται* is in fact Homer himself: Longinus adapts the quotation from the *Iliad* and makes the lines that describe Hector applicable to Homer, so that the poet himself comes to be compared to the War-god in his own narrative.
The strength of Day’s interpretations lies in the flexibility that allows him to associate certain scenes in Lucan’s poem with examples of the sublime in Longinus and later theorists. This same flexibility is however also a risk: some of the associations suggested in this book are more persuasive than others. Not all scholars, for example, will agree with the juxtaposition of Demosthenes’ thunderbolts (On the Sublime 12.4) with “the flaming World Trade Center” on 9/11, although that event was indeed labelled ‘sublime’ by the composer Karlheinz Stockhausen (p. 68). Another example concerns Lucan’s description of the violent death of Marius Gratidianus (2.166-190), which is somewhat surprisingly connected with Longinus’ interpretation of Sappho fragment 31. The Roman praetor was cruelly dismembered, his tongue cut out, his ears cut off, his eyeballs torn out; can we really compare this to Sappho’s broken tongue, and to her complaint that ‘I see nothing with my eyes, and my ears hum’? “The effect of the two passages is obviously not identical”, Day admits (p. 86); but he nevertheless goes on to explore how both passages are sublime in their selection and accumulation of details, and he concludes that they have a “comparable effect”. Again, Day can only connect the two texts by focusing on certain aspects while ignoring others: he emphasizes that both Sappho and Gratidianus ‘lose’ their eyes, ears, and tongue, but ignores the fact that Lucan also speaks of Gratidianus’ hands and nostrils, which have of course no place in Sappho’s poem; he underlines the accumulation of detail, but finds the obvious differences between passionate love and violent torture less important. Here, as in some other passages, not all readers will be equally convinced by the specific connection that Day suggests between Longinus and Lucan.

From the perspective of Lucan scholarship, Day’s study indeed fills a gap (as he claims on pp. 18f.), as there has been no full-scale treatment of the sublime in the Bellum civile, although related phenomena like its rhetorical pathos have frequently been discussed. Yet studies on the classical sublime by scholars such as Gian Biagio Conte, Philip Hardie or James Porter have focused mainly on Lucretius, Virgil or the Flavian epicists.3 In view of the usual intertextual agenda of Lucan scholarship, it is an innovative move, too, to emphatically put Lucretius on the map as a crucial model not only for Lucan’s sublime aesthetics but also for his presentation of Caesar’s Epicurean contempt for the gods. Another welcome decision in line with recent trends is Day’s shift

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away from the standard ideological dichotomy of Lucan scholarship between engagement or nihilism (cf. p. 28 and 105) towards aesthetic criticism; consequently, he ascribes political bias—the traumatic experience of the loss of the Republic and its recovery through the sublime—to the Lucanian narrator (e.g. p. 190), not to Lucan as historical author, whose problematic relationship with the emperor Nero is mentioned only briefly in the context of gigantomachic imagery (pp. 170-172).

As Day states in the Introduction (esp. pp. 11-14), he seeks to prove that the Bellum civile is a major text in the history of the sublime, not only by pointing out the potential contemporaneity of Lucan and Longinus (while wisely refraining from postulating an exact dating for the Peri hupsous), but also by adducing the history of the epic’s reception. However, in subsequent chapters, instances from Lucan’s reception by (predominantly) 16th and 17th century English poets are mentioned only in passing (especially in the Epilogue, pp. 234-236). Moreover, Day usually places his classical and modern examples of the sublime side by side in a comparative analysis without (at least in Lucan’s case) tracing possible direct lines of influence, glossing over the issue with phrases like “Burke’s analysis resonates strikingly with the present passage (sc. from Lucan)” (p. 137). He thus misses an opportunity to discuss whether Lucan’s text may have been involved even more closely in the evolution of the modern concept of the sublime. That at least in his later years Edmund Burke had first-hand knowledge of Lucan is testified by himself in his Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790): “Old as I am, I read the fine raptures of Lucan and Corneille with pleasure.”

Throughout, Day underlines his argument by adducing substantial quotes from the ancient texts (both Greek and Latin, always with translation) as well as from the modern theorists. Still, instead of extended paraphrases of secondary literature and an additional host of short Latin fragments that might be difficult to place in their context for readers less familiar with Lucan, one would have liked to see more close readings of his own. Day is at his best when thoroughly interpreting exemplary passages from the angle of the sublime and

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5 E.g., the quote on p. 236 ‘me teque legent’ from 9.985-986 might be misread as referring to Pompey in absence of an explicit reference back to its Caesarian context discussed on p. 91 and 101.
thereby shedding new light on familiar scenes from Lucan’s epic, even though his selection might not appear particularly original.6

Chapter 2 (‘Presentation, the sublime and the Bellum civile’, pp. 72-105) identifies the cosmic apocalypse of civil war and the hyperbolical presentation of the unspeakable as fitting material for the transgressive sublime experience by narrator, metapoetic figures (the Bacchic matron, the Pythia Phemonoe and the witch Erichtho—all representations of the female sublime, cf. p. 40 n. 27) and readers alike. The splitting of the main two chapters (3-4) into the “Caesarian sublime” (pp. 106-178) and the “Pompeian sublime” (pp. 179-233) effectively serves to highlight Lucan’s contrasting modes that mutually complement each other. The sequence of scenes featuring Caesar as a subject experiencing and surpassing the sublime in his assimilations to or confrontations with sublime objects (not only features of the natural world such as wild animals, lightning, storm, a dark grove, mountains, rivers, and the ocean, but also previous conquerors like Hannibal or Alexander and ultimately even the gods) clearly establishes this Lucanian character as a “larger-than-life, hyperkinetic, awe-inspiring source of destruction” (p. 106), a “sublime superman” (p. 229). As Day rightly remarks (p. 105 and 162 n. 148), the sublimity of the Bellum civile itself cannot be disentangled from Caesar’s sublimity even in its most demonic aspects.

Its necessary ethical counterpart, the Pompeian sublime, is of a different nature and seemingly more difficult to reconcile with classical ideas of the sublime. Therefore Day primarily refers to Frank Ankersmit’s ‘sublime historical experience’ and its links with trauma, but locates the historical sublime also in Longinus’ reconstruction of an idealized past as experienced in the present. The Pompeian sublime in Lucan is then configured as the trauma of the civil war experienced in the radical loss of Roman (Republican) identity and expressed in metaphorical and actual images of suicide. The narrator’s agonised interventions at the battle of Pharsalus constitute his first (failed) steps towards a transformation of trauma into sublime experience, that is finally realised in his (often inconsistent) responses to Pompey’s death, burial and katasterismos as figures of the absent presence of both a transfigured Pompey and an idealized Republican past.

The Caesarian and the Pompeian sublime thus appear as the ‘negative’ and the ‘positive’ side of the same sublime experience (p. 28), yet regrettably, the bipartite structure of Day’s analysis at times tends to obscure the complex

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6 In view of the vast scholarly attention devoted to Lucan’s narrator and his comments on the battle of Pharsalus, Day’s claim that “[s]trangely, this climactic moment has not so far attracted the level of critical attention afforded to other parts of the poem” (p. 197 n. 43) is a bit surprising.
cross-connections between the two concepts in Lucan. Occasionally, such connections are acknowledged, as for instance with reference to the corresponding similes of the lightning and the oak or Caesar’s and Pompey’s competing claims to divinisation, but they could have been deepened, e.g. in the rather sketchy discussion of Caesar’s visit among the ruins of Troy (pp. 176-178), as ruins, too, are a locus of the sublime (cf. Pompey’s grave, esp. p. 228). Ultimately, although many crucial moments have come along, readers are left with a somewhat fragmented sense of Lucan’s intriguing epic and its reception.

The bibliography exhibits a balanced mixture of contemporary theory, literature on classical concepts of the sublime and on Lucan. In such a broad outlook, references necessarily have to be selective, but still some relevant titles are missing. Although the most recent bibliographical entries date from 2011, the Brill’s Companion to Lucan (ed. P. Asso, Leiden 2011) that also covers aspects of Lucan’s reception has not been considered, nor, at the other end of the chronological spectrum, Eduard Fraenkel’s seminal essay on “Lucan als Mittler des antiken Pathos” (1927).7 On Lucretius’ sublime experience, Hans Blumenberg’s philosophical essay Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer: Paradigma einer Daseinsmetapher (1979; English translation: Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence) might have been taken into account, and on Pompey’s burial, the metapoetic interpretation by Mario Erasmo (Reading Death in Ancient Rome (Columbus 2008), 109-127). Also missing is the most recent commentary on Longinus’ On the Sublime: C.M. Mazzucchi, Dionisio Longino, Del sublime (Milano 1992, revised edition 2010).

There are only a few minor typographical errors (p. 217 [quote from 7.89]: involat for involvat; p. 229 n. 83: “He is not alone: others too pavido subducit cognita furto (2.168)” is syntactically elliptic; bibliography: p. 247 [Nye]: Technological for Technological; p. 248 [Roth]: missing initials [M.S.]).

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