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LONGINUS'S ESSAY ON THE SUBLIME AND THE 'MOST SOLEMN AND AWFULL APPEARANCE' OF HAWKSMOOR'S CHURCHES

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According to still wide-spread prejudice, the English did not produce any architectural theory before the advent of neo-Palladianism after 1715. No theory accounted for the idiosyncratic English Baroque, distinguished by personal handling of the classical style. For instance, Hawksmoor covered the entire façade of St Mary Woolnoth with rustication, instead of limiting it to the ground floor, where it would otherwise have expressed strength and the uncouth character of the users and inhabitants of such floors: soldiers, peasants and craftsmen.¹ Hawksmoor also enlarged normal and unobtrusive elements of the classical style so that they were not recognisable as building elements, but instead came very close to abstract sculpture. Such elements are no longer integrated and subordinated into a larger whole as the laws of classical design dictate. In St George-in-the-East the keystones, though oversized, still perform a structural function by keeping the stones of the vault over the door in place. But the giant keystones on the ground floor of the north façade of St George, Bloomsbury, have no constructive function, because they do not keep a vault in place. Through their size they transform the door frame into an abstract form, like Michelangelo's Mannerist extravaganzas in the Biblioteca Laurenziana. Hawksmoor's work is also distinguished by what he called 'Emminencys', conspicuous towers and other ornaments on the roof-line, and his work in the City of London can now be recognised by the highly individual spires of the post-Fire churches.

Architectural historians have always found it difficult to deal with this phase of British architecture. Sir John Summerson, still the most influential historian of English architecture in this period, explained Hawksmoor's plans as a visual conundrum. In Hawksmoor's churches Summerson detected an unresolved conflict between Gothic dynamic axiality for a Christian liturgical orientation on the one hand, and a classical, square and static plan on the other.² In Christ Church, Spitalfields, for instance, the underlying square plan is marked by the four main columns in the aisle, which provide the visual and constructional orientation point in an interior which is otherwise axial. This way of looking at Hawksmoor's churches was useful in drawing attention to one puzzling aspect of their design; but it did not explain that puzzle. It also suffers from the absence of any indication that Hawksmoor or his contemporaries thought about their designs in such terms. More recently, Vaughan Hart has shown how elements or parts of Hawksmoor's designs can be traced back to examples in treatises or pattern books, but this does not explain his aesthetic either.³

Summerson's defence was that there is so little seventeenth-century evidence of what architects thought: there are no treatises, only a few scattered remarks by Hawksmoor, Vanbrugh and Wren, and very little contemporary comment, most of it unfavourable. But there is one treatise on composition that was widely translated and read in Britain during the entire seventeenth and eighteenth centuries –

Longinus's *On the sublime*. The attribution to the third-century Cassius Longinus was in fact a guess made in Byzantine times, but followed by Boileau and later by Gibbon. The manuscript refers once to Dionysius Longinus, and once to Dionysius or Longinus. The other Byzantine guess was the first-century Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and chronological hints in the text suggest at least that this was the right date.⁴ His treatise was translated into French by Boileau in 1674, but one English translation and a number of Latin and Greek editions had been published in England earlier. Even before these had appeared, Longinus was quoted by George Chapman, the translator of Homer, in his *On Translating and Defending Homer* of 1611, and Longinus's treatise had been included in Milton's ideal curriculum for the Christian poet in 1641–44.

The first English translation was by John Hall (1626–56), a Cambridge-educated pamphlet writer for Cromwell. He died attempting to cure his obesity by eating pebbles, while working on a translation of Procopius's *Buildings*. His translation of Longinus, published in 1652, is stylistically the best, and has a preface in which he calls eloquence

... a distilling our notions into a Quintessence or forming all our thoughts in a Cone, and smiting with the Point ... 'tis Empire wholly commanding, yet never to be commanded.⁵

Four other English translations followed Boileau's, but all preceded Burke's famous treatise on the sublime. The first was an anonymous *Essay on the Sublime. Translated from the Greek of Dionysius Longinus Cassius, the Rhetorician. Compar'd with the French of the sieur Despreaux-Boileau*, published in Oxford in 1698. In the same year John Pulteney's was published in London. Leonard Wellsted's *Dionysius Longinus' Treatise on the Sublime. Translated from the Greek*, was published in 1712. William Smith's *Dionysius Longinus On the Sublime*, saw the light in London in 1739.

Why would a late classical treatise on prose

composition and style be of relevance for understanding the idiosyncracies of Baroque architects like Hawksmoor? In the first place we have abundant evidence, collected recently by Sophie Ploeg, that many persons involved in the major building programme of the English Baroque were familiar with Longinus.⁶ A number of the Commissioners of the Fifty New Churches possessed one or more versions of Longinus or were closely acquainted with one or more of his translators. And Vanbrugh, himself a Commissioner as well as a close associate of Hawksmoor, wrote a memorandum on church design that shows awareness of the Sublime aesthetic. He recommended, for instance, that 'the Reverend look of a Temple it self [...] shou'd ever have the most Solemn and Awfull Appearance both without and within, that is possible'.⁷

Secondly, Longinus's language uses visual imagery and even architectural metaphor to illustrate his points. This viscosity is stressed and even elaborated in the English translations which Vanbrugh and his circle may have known. That in itself makes it a congenial document for architects and those thinking about architectural design.

Longinus defined the supreme quality of what we now call the sublime in intensely visual terms. These have been somewhat obscured by the general acceptance of Boileau's translation as 'le sublime'. But his English translations, more faithful to the original, called it 'the Height of Eloquence', in itself a visual metaphor. As John Hall put it, 'Height whenever it seasonably breaks forth, bears down all before it like a whirlwind, and presently evidences the *strength* and ability of the speaker'.⁸ 'Evidences' is also a visual term, etymologically derived from *videre*, to see. In the previous sentence he had compared the structure of a speech to the fabric of architecture:

And when the *vivacity* of Invention, the *harmony* and *order* of Disposition cannot be discerned out of one or two clauses, but difficultly make themselves appear a generall *Survey* of the whole fabrick.⁹

Similarly he evoked the overwhelming effect of sublime eloquence by comparing it with the light of the sun:

For see how like a small gleam approach't by the sun in its full lustre presently disappears, so the sophistry of rhetoric is wholly overshadowed, being so circumfused and covered by Height. Not unlike this is an observation we find in pictures; for after that Lines are drawn upon a *plain* and colours *laid on* and *shadowed* and enlivened, thrust in the light [that] projects a pleasant brightness, which is so much the more visible by how much you nearer approach it: even so Heights and Passions of speech neighbouring to our souls, as knit thereunto by a straight alliance, outshine the figures, and *only* stand in sight, overshadowing their art and clouding it in obscurity.¹⁰

This use of visual analogy also extends to Longinus's views on life in general. Life is a theatre, in which man is both a spectator and a performer. In the words of the anonymous translation of 1698:

... Nature has not design'd Man to be a Creature of a low Rank, of an ignoble Standard, but has given him Life, and brought him into the world, as unto a great Theatre, like a curious Observer of all that passes in it; and not only so, but on this mighty stage, to be an high-spirited actor, breathing after nothing but glory and renown.¹¹

This visualisation often specifically takes on an architectural character, for instance when Longinus discusses composition:

What then may we not say of composition? Which is the Harmony of Speech, the use whereof is natural to man? Which does not only strike the ear, but penetrates the mind, which masters up such different words, thoughts, things, and Elegancies suitable to the affections of the soul, which by a Mixture and Variety of pleasing sounds, crept into the mind, does create in him who hears them, the same passions that the Author himself has; and which [rests] upon *this stately pile* of words which the noble Structure of loftinesse ...¹²

Compare Hall's version:

... by mixing and moulding their sounds disposes the passion of the speaker, and infects all near him, and by all this adding magnificence to the structure of words, and raising them up to glory and majesty.¹³

And, to obtain a sense of the degree to which these early English translations stress and elaborate Longinus's visual metaphors, I will also quote the standard modern translation by D.A. Russell:

The combination and variety of its sounds convey the speaker's emotions to the minds of those around him and make the hearers share them. It fits great thoughts into a coherent structure by the way in which it builds up patterns of words.¹⁴

Longinus also offered an approach to composition different to the architectural treatises of the Renaissance, but not so different to Hawksmoor's. Whereas Summerson's analysis and Hart's comparisons and parallels can only account for some of the elements of Hawksmoor's buildings, Longinus's advice accounts for his handling of them, for instance his oversizing them or using them out of their structural context. None of the architectural treatises, neither Vitruvius, nor his Renaissance successors, Alberti, Serlio, Palladio and Vignola, offer advice on composition. What they offer instead is instruction in the correct handling of the classical orders, the ornaments derived from them and their dimensions and proportions; and they offer more general rules on how to give proportion to a building. They start from the parts of a building, for instance the basic module that will relate all proportions to each other, and they do not often discuss the composition of a building as a whole. These instructions are helpful when analysing Palladio's or Bramante's buildings, which obey their rules. But they are not much use when dealing with Hawksmoor's buildings, in which individual elements are not strange, but their handling and combination with other elements are idiosyncratic.

However, Longinus (and indeed the entire classical rhetorical tradition) offered a definition of composition, concepts with which to achieve and analyse it, and often used architectural comparisons to illustrate it. Cicero's and Quintilian's concept of composition was used by Alberti, but in his treatise

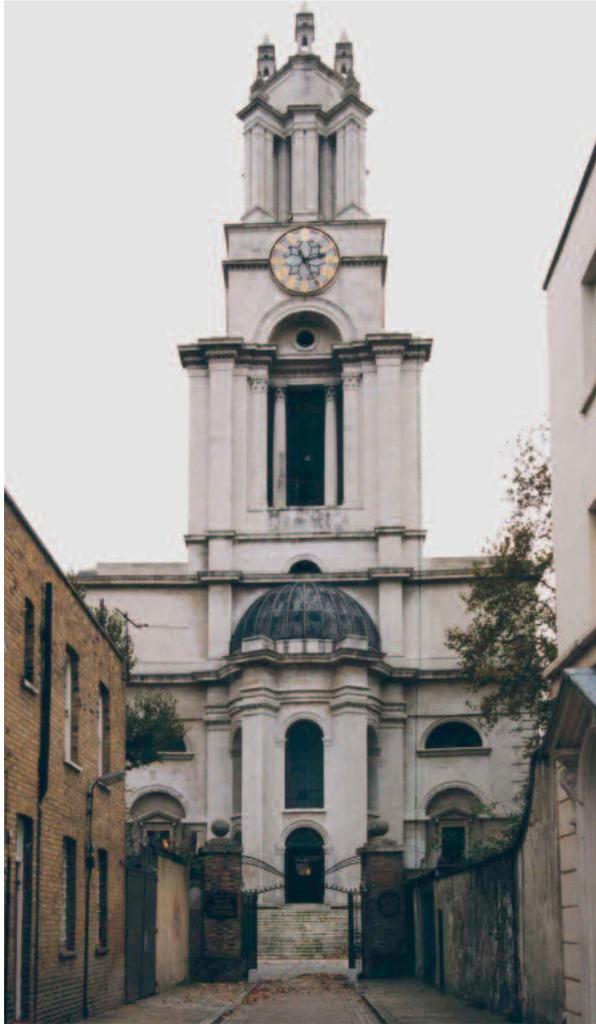


Fig. 1. Nicholas Hawksmoor, St Anne Limehouse, London (1714-30). *Sophie Ploeg.*

on painting, *De Pictura* of 1435. Quintilian, in an often quoted passage, alluded to architecture to illustrate *dispositio*, or what subsequently was called composition:

But just as it is not sufficient for those who are erecting a building merely to collect stone and timber and other building materials, but skilled masons are required to arrange and place them, so in speaking, however abundant the matter may be, it will merely form a confused heap unless arrangement [*dispositio*] be employed to reduce it to order and give it connection and firmness of structure.¹⁵

Longinus makes the similarity between prose composition and architectural design even more strongly:

But these men . . . choosing the most illustrious things that have been said, and knitting them according to their severall worths into one piece, produc'd nothing that was swelling, unbecoming or Pedantick. For such things infect the whole like washes, but great Buildings are raised up by the correspondence of parts one towards another.¹⁶

There is one passage in Longinus on sublime



Fig. 2. St Mary, Woolnoth (1716–24). Anonymous 19th-century photograph.

composition that directly brings to mind Hawksmoor's architectural composition. Longinus defined composition as the union of conflicting or contradictory elements. Here is his analysis of a description of Odysseus' shipwreck in the *Iliad*.

Moreover, by forcing into an abnormal union prepositions not usually compounded he [Homer] has tortured his language into conformity with the impending disaster, magnificently figured the disaster by the compression of his language, and almost stamped on the diction the precise form of the danger.

[...] What they [Homer, Sappho and Demosthenes] have done is to clean up, as it were, the very best of the main points, and to fit them together, allowing nothing affected or undignified or pedantic to intervene. These things ruin the whole, by introducing, as it were, gaps and crevices into masses which are built together, walled in by their mutual relationships.¹⁷

This immediately recalls the careful ordering of conflicting façades in St Anne Limehouse (Fig. 1), as Sophie Ploeg has shown, or the abrupt transitions and close massing of St Mary Woolnoth (Fig. 2).¹⁸

There is no direct evidence that Hawksmoor or Vanbrugh had read Longinus. But the introduction of Longinus to seventeenth-century Britain offered a new way of thinking about art, and in particular composition. Formerly relations between poetry and the visual arts had been conceived mainly in terms of *ut pictura poesis*. The availability of Longinus acquainted readers with another relationship between the visual arts and poetry, presenting composition in visual and verbal terms on the one hand, and, on the other, defining the sublime itself in visual terms.

The translations of Longinus also introduced a novel aesthetic concept: the sublime. The concept is discernible in Milton's *Paradise Lost*,¹⁹ but before the English translations of Longinus the sublime aesthetic was not part of the English architectural vocabulary. Vanbrugh's plea for solemn and awful appearances in church design may be heir to a tradition of appreciating Gothic for its sombre, imposing grandeur, but it had not been used in the context of classical church design before Longinus was reintroduced. His treatise inspired an aesthetic unlike those of Alberti or Palladio, who had stressed harmony, simplicity, clarity and perspicuity. Longinus, and in his wake Vanbrugh and Hawksmoor, appreciated the intricate, the difficult, the dark and the awful. Architecture, as Sir Christopher Wren would put it, 'aims at eternity'.²⁰ It should impress the beholder and inspire awe.

In this interest in the impact of buildings on their beholders British writing on architecture of the seventeenth century is unique.²¹ Continental writing, and in particular the Renaissance architectural treatises, concentrates on the architectural object itself. But Vanbrugh and Hawksmoor are concerned with the impression a building makes on the spectator. The memorandum which Vanbrugh wrote for the Fifty New Churches Commission stressed the importance of a solemn and awful *appearance*, not the intrinsic qualities of the buildings themselves. The effect of a text on the reader is precisely the

issue that Longinus which addresses in his treatise. Like so many rhetorical handbooks and treatises, it offers strategies and precepts of invention – how to compose a speech, how to move and persuade the audience, which figures of speech to use, and so on. At the same time, these function also as strategies of interpretation for the reader, the public or the beholder. Longinus tells us how to achieve the sublime in our writings, in particular by his advice on composition, uniting the discordant, for instance, or the abrupt; but he does so by showing us the effects of sublime speech and poetry on the reader. In this consideration of the effects of composition on the public, he came very close to what we know of Hawksmoor's design practice. Hawksmoor was evidently interested in the effect of a building on the spectator. In his mature work he often added coloured flaps that would allow the viewer to form an idea of the different appearances a building could take on under varying conditions of day light.

This is also shown by one of his earliest drawings, for St Mary's, Warwick, in which he significantly departs from seventeenth-century practice in showing his design by means of drawings of the ground plan and façade in an orthogonal representation.²² Orthogonal projection was preferred to linear perspective because it allows the exact calculation of all dimensions. It shows a building as actually approached—frontally; whereas linear perspective shows it from one particular angle, a necessarily individual perspective. Hawksmoor chose not the traditional, strongly mathematical and analytical techniques of orthogonal projection and linear perspective, but a view of the whole touched by the sun, creating light and shadow, projections and recesses, clear and obscure parts. Just as a spectator would view the façade as a whole on a particular day, just so Longinus tells us in a passage that caused his English translators to indulge in flights of visual metaphor: the blazing light of the sublime obscures the minor eloquence of isolated figures of speech.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

- 1 A pun that can only be made in Dutch: 'onbehouwen'
- 2 John Summerson, *Georgian London*, Harmondsworth, 1978 [1945], 84–90.
- 3 Vaughan Hart, *Nicholas Hawksmoor. Rebuilding Ancient Wonders*, New Haven and London, 2002, 70–72.
- 4 D.A. Russell and M. Winterbottom (eds.), *Ancient Literary Criticism. The principal texts in new translations*, Oxford, 1972, 460–61.
- 5 John Hall, *Peri hupsous, Or, Dionysius Longinus on the Height of Eloquence. Rendered out of the Originall by J.H.*, London [n.p.], 1652.
- 6 Sophie Ploeg, *Staged Experiences. Architecture and Rhetoric in the Architecture and Theory of Sir Henry Wotton, Nicholas Hawksmoor and Sir John Vanbrugh*, PhD thesis, University of Groningen, 2005.
- 7 Caroline A. van Eck (ed.), *British Architectural Theory 1540–1750: an anthology of texts*, Aldershot, 2003, 136–8, 'Mr Van-Brugg's Proposals about Building ye New Churches' (1712).
- 8 Hall, *op. cit.*, iii.
- 9 *Idem*.
- 10 *Ibid.*, xl.
- 11 [Anonymous], *An Essay on the Sublime. Translated from the Greek of Dionysius Longinus Cassius, the Rhetorician*, Oxford, 1698, 74.
- 12 [John Pulteney], *A Treatise of the Loftiness or Elegancy of Speech. Written originally in Greek ... and now translated out of French by Mr J.P.*, London, 1698 [1680], 174.

- 13 Hall, *op. cit.*, lxxi.
- 14 Longinus, 'On the Sublime', 39, 3, in Russell and Winterbottom, *op. cit.*, 497.
- 15 Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* [On the Education of the Orator], translated by H.E. Butler, Cambridge (Mass.) and London, 1920–22, VII, Prooemium, 2–4.
- 16 Hall, *op. cit.*, xxiv.
- 17 Longinus, *On the Sublime*, translated by W.H. Fyfe, revised by D. Russell, Cambridge (Mass.) and London, 1995, Section X, 203–5.
- 18 Sophie Ploeg, 'Staged Experiences: the church designs of Nicholas Hawksmoor', in: Caroline A. van Eck and Edward Winters (eds.), *Dealing with the Visual. Art History, Aesthetics and Visual Culture*, Aldershot, 2005, 167–91.
- 19 There are four aspects of the relations between Milton's poem and Hawksmoor's building: the sublime subject matter of the epic (when Dryden and Addison called Milton 'sublime' they had this in mind); sublime style (e.g. the use of abrupt and daring juxtapositions, something shared by both artists, and very prominent in Satan's speeches); the effect of the sublime on the reader or viewer (achieved by Milton's vivid descriptions and larger-than-life subject, again something for which we can find parallels in Hawksmoor's inflation of classical elements); and the role of architecture in *Paradise Lost*.
- 20 Sir Christopher Wren, 'Tract I', in Lydia Soo (ed.), *Wren's 'Tracts' on Architecture and Other Writings*, Cambridge and New York, 1998, 153.
- 21 Van Eck, *op. cit.*, in particular 'The Nature of Architecture' and 'Architecture and the Other Arts', 8–9, 25–6, 123–7 and 221.
- 22 Kerry Downes, *Hawksmoor*, London, 1996, 29.