Forms of the Sublime in Modern American Poetry

Junior Tutorial, Spring 2010, Martin Greenup

Meeting Time: Thursdays 3-5pm

Course Description

The idea of the sublime has a long and complex history. For Longinus in classical times it was primarily associated with the high rhetorical style, but more than this it stood broadly for a literary excellence that was able to uplift the reader: “sublimity is a thing of the spirit, a spark that leaps from the soul of the writer to the soul of the reader” (Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics). For philosophers in the 18th century, including Burke and Kant, it became an aesthetic category associated with the large, frightening, and overwhelming, as opposed to the small, tame, and dainty, and dealt with nature as well as with literature. For the Romantics, the sublime became a key element in their poetry, which allowed them to explore and transcend the boundary between the human and what lies beyond – whether that is God, Nature, eternity, the infinite, or the other.

This course considers how the sublime is represented in American poetry, how certain poets dealt with and reacted to (or against) the sublime, and how an understanding of the sublime can lead to a greater understanding of the poetry. Beginning with Dickinson and Whitman, we will not only examine how the sublime figures in each poet’s work, but we will also chart its evolution and note how these poets refer to each other. Broadly, we will reflect on the question of whether there is such a thing as a distinctively American version of the sublime. While the course will necessarily involve some intellectual history, especially at the start, this is primarily a poetry course that will involve rigorous attention to all aspects of verse form. Our weekly discussions will therefore be centered on very close and detailed readings of the poems.

The poets listed below are all American, but with one exception. D. H. Lawrence was of course English, but he engaged deeply with America and American literature, and for a time he lived and wrote in New Mexico. Given this, he is included here.

Requirements

- 3 5-minute in-class presentations, occasional response-papers
- Consultation with Widener librarian Laura Farwell-Blake for training in scholarly research methods
- 2-page prospectus, bibliography, 2 draft versions of junior essay
- 20-page junior essay

Schedule

WEEK 1: Introducing the Sublime
from Longinus’s On The Sublime, from Burke and Kant; from Thomas Weiskel’s The Romantic Sublime; from Mary Arensberg’s The American
WEEK 2: Walt Whitman: “The worlds that were and will be”
from _Leaves of Grass_; Emerson’s essay “The Poet”

WEEK 3: Emily Dickinson: “My Business is Circumference -”
from _Poems_ and _Letters_; Emerson’s essay “Circles”; Laura Gribbin’s essay “Emily Dickinson’s “Circumference: Figuring a Blind Spot in the Romantic Tradition”; from Gary Lee Stonum’s _The Dickinson Sublime_

WEEK 4: Robert Frost: Countering the Romantic Sublime
from _Poems_; Priscilla Paton’s essay “Robert Frost and the American Landscape”

WEEK 5: D. H. Lawrence in New Mexico: the Indian Past and Becoming Animal
from _Birds, Beasts, and Flowers_; Lawrence’s essays “Whitman,” “New Mexico”; Deleuze's and Guattari's chapter "Becoming-Animal" (_A Thousand Plateaus_)

from _Poems_; Timothy Bahti’s essay “The Nuanced Sublime”

WEEK 7: Hart Crane: the Technological Sublime
_The Bridge_; from David E. Nye’s _American Technological Sublime_

WEEK 8: Robert Lowell: Form and Formlessness
from _Poems_; from Henry Hart’s _Robert Lowell and the Sublime_

WEEK 9: Elizabeth Bishop: Dangers of Sublime Susceptibilities
from _Poems_; William James’s chapter “The One and the Many” (_Pragmatism_)

WEEK 10: A. R. Ammons: “You cannot come to unity and remain material”
from _Selected Poems_; Harold Bloom’s essay “A. R. Ammons: The Breaking of the Vessels”

WEEK 11: John Ashbery: Infinite Irony
from _Poems_; Fredric Jameson’s essay “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”; Paul de Man’s essay “The Concept of Irony”; from Wayne C. Booth’s _A Rhetoric of Irony_

WEEK 12: James Merrill: Comic Transcendence
from _Poems_; Peter L. Berger’s essay “The Comic as a Signal of Transcendence”