THE DEMOSTHENES OF PAINTING.
SALVATOR ROSA AND THE 17TH CENTURY SUBLIME

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Salvator Rosa, the depictor of ‘Wild and Savage Nature’, the exponent of a ‘Great and Noble’ style, has long been celebrated as the precursor of 18th century concepts of the Sublime.¹ Horace Walpole famously described a journey across the Alps in 1739 as ‘Precipices, mountains, torrents, wolves, rumblings – Salvator Rosa’, and the startling subjects of his paintings of prodigies and enchantment had, by the 1770s, become traditionally sublime. He was celebrated as a freedom fighter, and in his Self Portrait as Warrior (Siena, Monte dei Paschi di Siena),² hand on sword, he challenges the viewer with melancholy intensity; he seems the archetype of the sublime and original genius, whose bold and rapid brush could ‘snatch a grace beyond the reach of art’.³ The aim of this essay is to put Rosa back into his own times, and to rethink his relationship with contemporary aesthetics and concerns.

The Sources of the 17th century Sublime

The major source for 17th century concepts of the sublime in Italy was the anonymous treatise on rhetoric, On the Sublime, probably written in the mid first century AD;⁴ it was long thought to be by Longinus, and I shall here use this traditional name. For Longinus the sublime was characterised by its power to amaze, and to transport. It overwhelmed with

² Cassani, S. (ed.), Salvator Rosa; tra mito e magia, exhib. catal. (Naples: 2008) 103. The attribution of this portrait is uncertain. It is possible that it is an 18th century painting, and that the artist, who clearly knew the Rosa Self portrait (Detroit, Detroit Institute of Arts) has already represented the Rosa of myth and Romantic legend.
⁴ I have throughout used the translation by P. Murray and T.S. Dorsch, in Murray P. (ed.), Classical Literary Criticism (London: 1965; repr. 2004).
the expression of violent emotion; it was associated with fear and danger. Longinus praises those writers who can create terror, and, through metaphor, he associates his literary heroes with the elemental violence of nature; his instances of sublimity involve storms, the openness of the sea, and the heights of the heavens. Longinus says little of external nature in its own right, but in a famous passage he does suggest that whatever is divine in man longs for the infinite. By some instinct implanted in our souls we admire, not small streams, but ‘the Nile, the Danube, the Rhine, and even more than these the Ocean’, not the household fire, but those of the heavens, shrouded in darkness, and the craters of Etna, ‘whose eruptions throw up from their depths rocks and even whole mountains, and at times pour out rivers of that earth-born, spontaneous fire’.

In this passage he established a catalogue of wonders which proved long lasting in the sublime tradition.

The baroque passion for novità and the prodigioso stimulated an interest in an aesthetic of the sublime. Longinus’ treatise was well known in 17th century Italy, particularly in those circles in which Rosa moved, amongst the scholars associated with the Barberini court, and at the Accademia degli Umoristi. For those poets associated with Giovan Battista Marino, it suggested the power to enchant and to astonish with something rare and exceptional, never before seen, whose skill itself created meraviglia, a state of rapt admiration. It had, too, a mystic power, and the Jesuits seized on aspects of the sublime to suggest a desire to transcend the boundaries of the sensible world. And for some natural scientists and philosophers the Longinian sublime blended with the ‘aesthetics of the infinite’, with that sense of the vastness and mutability of the natural world revealed by the new science of the early modern era. This science exalted intellectual and physical daring, and created, before a universe so newly rich in wonders, a sense of ‘stupore’ and ‘ebbrezza’. Nature became a theatre of marvels, its power unleashed and irrational, its relationship with man

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5 Longinus in Murray, Classical Literary Criticism 155.