

Longinus, Sappho's Ode, and the Question of Sublimity

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Article abstract

De prime abord, cet article peut sembler porter sur les attitudes à l'endroit de l'autorité des anciens, mais il porte en fait sur l'ironie du ton et sur la difficulté qu'on peut avoir à la déceler, même quand le locuteur ou l'écrivain est un de nos proches. Dans *Don Juan*, chant premier, strophe 42, par exemple, Byron écrit : « je ne crois pas que l'ode de Sappho soit d'un bon exemple, quoique Longin prétende qu'il n'est point d'hymne où le sublime prenne un essor plus élevé . . .¹ », suite à quoi il cite des passages du pseudo-Longin auquel il fait référence. Dans les marges de l'épreuve, J. C. Hobhouse le corrige — ou du moins il tente de le faire — en proposant une autre interprétation de ce qu'entend Longin, différente de celle que communique la strophe de Byron. Dans les marges de la même épreuve, Byron réagit « robustement » comme il avait parfois l'habitude de le faire et refuse d'apporter les modifications proposées.

Dans cet article, j'examinerai les deux attitudes qu'illustre le micro-argument entre Hobhouse et Byron à l'égard de l'autorité classique, et je verrai ce qu'on peut en déduire sur la difficulté qu'avaient les tout premiers lecteurs de *Don Juan* à cerner le ton de Byron et son attitude à l'égard de l'autorité et au précédent. Ce faisant, j'espère nous donner une idée de ce qu'aurait pu signifier le terme « sublime » pour (1) Byron avant *Don Juan*, (2) Byron à l'ère de *Don Juan*, et (3) un lecteur conservateur comme Hobhouse (qui représente le lecteur averti moyen vers 1819). J'examinerai également ce qu'aurait pu être la signification de l'Ode de Sappho pour chacun de ces deux hommes, et je me demanderai si la nature même de l'ode a une incidence sur notre perception de ce qu'entend Byron en parlant du « Sublime ».

LONGINUS, SAPPHO'S ODE, AND THE QUESTION OF SUBLIMITY

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Résumé

De prime abord, cet article peut sembler porter sur les attitudes à l'endroit de l'autorité des anciens, mais il porte en fait sur l'ironie du ton et sur la difficulté qu'on peut avoir à la déceler, même quand le locuteur ou l'écrivain est un de nos proches. Dans *Don Juan*, chant premier, strophe 42, par exemple, Byron écrit : « je ne crois pas que l'ode de Sapho soit d'un bon exemple, quoique Longin prétende qu'il n'est point d'hymne où le sublime prenne un essor plus élevé . . .¹ », suite à quoi il cite des passages du pseudo-Longin auquel il fait référence. Dans les marges de l'épreuve, J. C. Hobhouse le corrige — ou du moins il tente de le faire — en proposant une autre interprétation de ce qu'entend Longin, différente de celle que communique la strophe de Byron. Dans les marges de la même épreuve, Byron réagit « robustement » comme il avait parfois l'habitude de le faire et refuse d'apporter les modifications proposées.

Dans cet article, j'examinerai les deux attitudes qu'illustre le micro-argument entre Hobhouse et Byron à l'égard de l'autorité classique, et je verrai ce qu'on peut en déduire sur la difficulté qu'avaient les tout premiers lecteurs de *Don Juan* à cerner le ton de Byron et son attitude à l'égard de l'autorité et au précédent. Ce faisant, j'espère nous donner une idée de ce qu'aurait pu signifier le terme « sublime » pour (1) Byron avant *Don Juan*, (2) Byron à l'ère de *Don Juan*, et (3) un lecteur conservateur comme Hobhouse (qui représente le lecteur averti moyen vers 1819). J'examinerai également ce qu'aurait pu être la signification de l'Ode de

Sapho pour chacun de ces deux hommes, et je me demanderai si la nature même de l'ode a une incidence sur notre perception de ce qu'entend Byron en parlant du « Sublime ».

J'ai entamé la présentation avec une critique impromptue de plusieurs expériences sublimes que j'avais vécues dernièrement. La première tourne autour d'une scène dans Spiderman II dans laquelle le protagoniste part à la rescousse d'une dame perchée sur le côté d'un gratte-ciel. J'ai expliqué que le sublime de cette scène, tournée avec des angles de caméra vertigineux et de nombreux effets spéciaux impressionnants, repose sur le fait que la dame n'est pas la bien-aimée du protagoniste, mais sa tante : c'était la juxtaposition du sublime et du banal. Comme deuxième expérience, j'ai parlé du Cheval effrayé par un lion de George Stubbs, tableau dans lequel le sublime est accru par le fait que le lion ne se soucie pas du cheval terrifié à ses côtés puisqu'il vient de manger et cherche un endroit où dormir et digérer. Mon troisième exemple était celui du climax de « Libera Me », mouvement du Requiem de guerre de Britten. Par curiosité, je voulais voir comment l'orchestration du passage avait été dépassée par le passage lui-même, si sublime que mes yeux m'avaient fait défaut et m'empêchaient de voir les instruments que j'entendais. (Bernard Beatty m'a dit par la suite qu'il aurait préféré regarder Spiderman II.) Enfin, j'ai parlé du silence entretenu par Colin Davis à la conclusion de l'œuvre de Britten, pendant lequel tous les membres du public au Royal Albert Hall songeaient à la portée politique actuelle de ce qu'ils venaient d'entendre (c'était au milieu de la seconde guerre en Iraq).

[I began with an impromptu review of several sublime experiences I'd had recently. I started with the scene from Spiderman II in which the protagonist rescues a lady from the side of a tall building, with vertiginous camera angles

and many swooping special effects. I said that the sublimity lay in the fact that the lady was not his beloved, but his auntie: the juxtaposition of the sublime and the banal. Next I offered George Stubbs' Horse Terrified by a Lion, in which the sublimity is enhanced by the fact that although the Horse is terrified, the Lion can't see the problem, because he's just eaten and is looking for somewhere to sleep and digest. My third example was the climax of the "Liberia Me" from the Britten War Requiem, in which my curiosity to see how the passage was orchestrated had been overcome by the passage itself, which was so sublime that my eyes failed and I couldn't see which instruments were playing. (Bernard Beatty said afterwards that he'd rather have watched Spiderman II.) Lastly was the silence which Colin Davis held after the work had ended, in which the entire audience at the Royal Albert Hall thought about the current political implications of what they'd just heard (we were in the middle of the Second Iraq War.)]

I suppose one definition of the sublime is "that before which ironical laughter is impossible." Ironical laughter, as opposed to happy laughter, implies that other perspectives are possible, and the louder the ironical laughter, the more grotesque the difference between your perspective and the perspective being offered by that which is before you. If no ironical laughter is possible, it's a sign that you agree wholeheartedly with the perspective in which the object is offered; indeed, you don't just agree, but you honour, venerate, and are awestruck by, the perspective being offered of and by the object, to the extent that you lose all of your own perspective, and are so taken over by the object that you lose all sense of yourself. Losing all sense of yourself can be dangerous — thus ironical laughter can be a useful brake or corrective.

The problem which *Don Juan* gives us is that it often encourages us to laugh ironically at it, even when it is discussing sublimity. However, I want to show here that one of its most important early readers could not laugh at it in any way. Here are stanzas 42 and 43 of its first canto:

Ovid's a rake, as half his verses show him,
Anacreon's morals are a still worse sample,
Catullus scarcely has a decent poem,
I don't think Sappho's Ode a good example,
Although Longinus tells us there is no hymn
Where the Sublime soars forth on wings more ample;
But Virgil's Songs are pure — except that horrid one
Beginning with "Formosum Pastor Corydon".

Lucretius' irreligion is too strong
For early stomachs, to prove wholesome food;
I can't help thinking Juvenal was wrong,
Although no doubt his real intent was good,
For speaking out so plainly in his song,
So much indeed as to be downright rude;
And then what proper person could be partial
To all those nauseous Epigrams of Martial?
(Cochran, DJ)

The speaker seems to be a serious English or Spanish academic — perhaps a schoolteacher, perhaps a gentleman with children to educate. He is at first instinctively in favour of a classical education, but acknowledges that the so-called "classics" are minefields of corruption: if they weren't in the learned languages of Latin or Greek — his skill in which gives him his social status — he wouldn't have them in the house.

(There is, parenthetically, an obvious answer to the speaker's worry: confine your lessons to Horace, one important poet not in the list. His moral tone never falters. But he's left out of the poem, and therefore out of the argument, even though Byron quotes him more often in *Don Juan* than anyone else.)

Now it's clear to most modern readers that Byron is, via his moralistic narrative persona, "humming" us. He's pointing out the hypocrisy whereby all these objectionable poets are taught to the sons of serious Christian fathers (whether English or Spanish), even though they propagate sexual depravity (as in Ovid, Anacreon, Catullus, Sappho),

materialism (as in Lucretius), rude, offensive satire (as in Juvenal), or just general-purpose filth (as in Martial — as the Byronic persona would have us believe).

(Again parenthetically, I'd argue that one good definition of the Romantic Movement is "the moment English literature lost contact with Martial." We could discuss that.)

Byron, via a tone of voice which parodies that of an earnest Anglican vicar, perhaps a school chaplain, is asking his upper-middleclass English readers to examine their own two-facedness: the two-facedness which led to the major English public schools becoming infamous the world over as canting hotbeds of sodomy and sadism, both vices covertly countenanced in the interests of "character-formation", and "muscular Christianity."

He even, to give his poem another layer of parody, gives a note to the line about Longinus recommending Sappho's Ode. Vertically in the right-hand margin of the fair copy, he writes:

* See Longinus Section 10th, "Ἰνα μὴ ἐν τῷ παθῶς φαίνεται, παθῶν δὲ εὐνοδός." ("Ina meyr en ti pathos faineiyrtai, pathoon de eunodos.") (Byron, *Don Juan* canto 1, fair copy [John Murray Archive])

Byron quotes inaccurately (Hobhouse corrects him in the proof); but the gist is, "all this is done so that not one emotion alone may be seen in her, but a concourse of emotions." The Ode in question is the only complete "Sappho poem" still existing (it may even not be by her). We have it only because Longinus quotes it in his treatise *On the Sublime*. This being a bilingual conference, I think I may give you a famous French translation of it (by Boileau):

Heureux! Qui près de toi, pour toi seule soûpire:
Qui jouït du plaisir de t'entendre parler;
Qui te voit quelquefois doucement lui soûrire.
Les Dieux dans son bonheur peuvent-ils l'égalér?

Je sens de veine en veine une subtile flamme

Courir par tous mon corps, si tost que je te vois:
Et dans les doux transports où s'égare mon âme,
Je ne sçaurois trouver de langue, ni de voix.

Un nuage confus se répand sur ma vûë.
Je n'entens plus: je tombe en de douces langueurs;
Et, pâle, sans haleine, interdite, éperduë,
Un frisson me saisit, je tremble, je me meurs.

[Mais quand on n'a plus rien, il faut tout hasarder, etc.]
(Boileau, 365-7)

On this, the Greek critic, who is in fact now called by pedants and perfectionists “the pseudo-Longinus,” writes:

Are you not astonished at the way in which, as though they were gone from her and belonged to another, she [Sappho] at one and the same time calls up soul and body, ears, tongue, eyes and colour; how, uniting opposites, she freezes while she burns, is both out of her senses and in her right mind? For she is either terrified or not far from dying. [Now the bit Byron quotes:] And all this is done so that not one emotion alone may be seen in her, but a concourse of emotions. All such emotions as these are awakened in lovers, but it is, as I said, the selection of them in their most extreme forms and their fusion into a single whole that have given the poem its distinction. (114-5)

Notice the phrase of Longinus “uniting opposites, she freezes while she burns.” Byron is to use this idea again later in 1819, when John Murray sends him Francis Cohen’s critique of *Don Juan* (composed on the day the poem was published). Cohen had written:

The bursts and touches of poetry of a higher order are
exquisite, his wit is graceful, elastic, nervous &

supple. — Like Shakespeare he shows that his soul can soar well into the seventh heaven, & that when he returns into this body he can be as merry as if sublimity ne'er was known. — But Lord B. should have been grave & gay by turns; grave in one page & gay in the next; grave in one stanza & gay in the next; grave in one line, & gay in the next. And not grave & gay in the same page, or in the same stanza, or in the same line ... this thing [*sic*] must be interchanged, they must not be mixed up together: they must be kept distinct — though contemplated jointly. If we stand on a mountain we gladly view a storm breaking on one side of the horizon & dark clouds impending & the sun shining bright & calm in the other quarter of the heavens, but we are never drenched & scorched at the same instant whilst standing in one spot.²

Notice again, “his soul can soar well into the seventh heaven, & ... when he returns into this body he can be as merry as if sublimity ne'er was known.” Sublimity and merriment, that which is grave and that which is gay, freezing and burning, scorching and drenching, cannot, Cohen implies, exist on the same spot. Such things may be in a poem in sequence, but not at the same time. Could he be reacting to the very stanzas we have before us, in which two perspectives — that of the grave moralist and that of the amusing satirist — are united under one tone of voice? Byron replied in a letter which is his most famous defence of the *ottava rima* poems:

... I will answer your friend C.V. [Murray seems to have withheld Cohen's name] who objects to the quick succession of fun and gravity — as if in that case the gravity did not (in intention at least) heighten the fun. — His metaphor is that “we are never scorched and drenched at the same time!” — Blessings on his experience! — Ask him these questions about “scorching and drenching”. — Did he never play at Cricket or walk a

mile in hot weather? did he never spill a dish of tea over his testicles in handing the cup to his charmer to the great shame of his nankeen breeches? — did he never swim in the sea at Noonday with the Sun in his eyes and on his head — which all the foam of ocean could not cool? did he never draw his foot out of a tub of too hot water damning his eyes & his valet's? did he never inject for a Gonorrhea? or make water through an ulcerated Urethra? was he ever in a Turkish bath — that marble paradise of sherbet and sodomy? was he ever in a cauldron of boiling oil like St. John? — or in the sulphureous waves of hell? (where he ought to be for his “scorching and drenching at the same time”) did he never tumble into a river or lake fishing — and sit in his wet cloathes in the boat — or on the bank afterwards “scorched and drenched” like a true sportsman? — — “Oh for breath to utter” — — but make him my compliments — he is a clever fellow for all that — a very clever fellow — . (BLJ 6. 207: letter of 12 August 1819)

According to Byron's argument, sublimity and bathos may co-exist. “Opposites,” as Longinus argues, can be “united.” Byron is thus a more acute reader of Longinus — a better classicist — than Cohen.

He is also, in the letter, consciously or not, employing a number of techniques which Longinus describes as ways of achieving a sublime effect. Comparing Demosthenes with Cicero, Longinus compares Demosthenes to a thunderbolt or flash of lightning, whereas Cicero “is . . . like a wide-spreading conflagration that rolls on to consume everything far and wide; he has within him an abundance of steady and enduring flame which can be let loose at whatever point he desires, and which is fed from one source after another” (Longinus, 118).

Byron's list of “freezing and burning” examples is such a “conflagration.” The next quotation occurs after a gap in the text, but may refer to Xenophon: “the words come gushing out, as it were, set down without connecting links, almost outstripping the speaker himself” (129).

Byron, like Falstaff whom he imitates, is almost (but not quite) outstripped in his breathing by the gush of his own ideas. Demosthenes, we learn later on,

... will in a strange and unlikely order pile one idea on top of another, drawn from any kind of source and just dropped into the middle of what he is saying, inducing in his hearer the fear that the whole structure of the sentence will fall to pieces, and compelling him in his agitation to share in the risk the speaker is taking; and then unexpectedly, after a long interval, he will bring out the long-awaited phrase [in Byron's case, the quotation from Cohen, "scorched and drenched"] just where it is most effective, at the very end, and thus, by the very audacity and recklessness of his inversions, he administers a much more powerful shock. (132)

Thus it is in his letter of defence of *Don Juan*, as well as in the poem itself, that we find Byron a most accurate student of Longinus.

In her Ode, Sappho is of course speaking of the love of one woman for another — but neither Boileau nor Longinus acknowledge the fact. Boileau, indeed, masculinises the concept out of the picture. His first line should be "Heureuse! Qui près de toi, pour toi seule soupier."

Hobhouse uses this feminine version when reporting what the actress Madame Vestris tells him what it's like, having played Macheath en travestie, to be embraced by Caroline Lamb. Caroline reports a similar frisson of nervousness to have attacked her when she was embraced by Madame de Staël.

Catullus, too, in his fifty-first song, implies that the Ode gives us him, a man, talking to Lesbia.

But Byron does know that Sappho's sublime Ode is about gay passion, and would have us connect it with the "horrid" song of Virgil (it's his second Eclogue), which is about the love of one male shepherd, Corydon, for his master's male pet, Alexis. In "Observations upon Observations" (1821) Byron writes:

Ovid — Sappho — (in the Ode called hers) all that we have of ancient — all that we have of modern poetry sinks into nothing compared with him [Pope] in this production [*Eloisa to Abelard*]. — Let us hear no more of this trash about “licentiousness” — is not “Anacreon” taught in our Schools? translated — praised — and edited? — Are not his Odes the amatory praises of a boy? — Is not Sappho’s Ode on a Girl? — Is not this sublime & (according to Longinus) fierce love for one of her own Sex? (CMP 178)

Professor Germaine Greer gives the following literal version of Sappho’s poem, which contrasts with Boileau’s version, and is useful to non-classicists:

C: seems to me that one equal to the gods / to-be, who
face-to-face with-you / sits and your beautiful voice /
listens to and laughter charming, truly that my / heart in
breast shakes / for when I look at you at-once my speech
/ quite fails me but certainly my tongue unstrings, a
subtle / under my skin fire slips / my eyes are darkened,
hum / my ears down from me water oozes, trembling / all
over grips me, greener am I made / than grass, of death
little short / seem I to myself. (111n)

She then goes on (113) to wonder if it really is “water” — that is, sweat — which Sappho asserts to be oozing down from herself. Sublimity, we as good English Christians realise with a frisson, is associated — and by one of the most respected of Greek literary minds — with the gross physical manifestations of homosexual passion! The vice for which, if you were a man, and lucky, you’d merely be driven from Newgate to the Haymarket in a cart, pilloried, and pelted with rotten vegetables and pieces of dead cat, by squads of homophobic prostitutes recruited by the Bow Street Runners. The vice for which, if you were unlucky, you’d be hanged. Such, Byron implies, may be the consequences of an excessive enthusiasm for the sublime.

The proofs of *Don Juan* 1 and 2 were corrected by Byron's friend, John Cam Hobhouse. He worked on them at the family seat of Whitton Park, Hounslow (just south, nowadays, of Heathrow Airport). Hobhouse thought that his friend's best works were *The Corsair* and *Childe Harold* canto 4. He felt proprietorial about *Childe Harold* 4, for he had been with Byron during its writing only eighteen months previously ("I have not unfrequently witnessed his lordship's coupleting," were his words), and had written a hefty tome annotating it. He had received the manuscript of this new, disturbing poem, *Don Juan*, just before Christmas 1818, and had written to Byron thus:

The first time I read your Don Juan our friend Scrope Davies was in the room and we mutually communicated with each other from time to time on the papers before us. Every now and then on reading over the poem both the one and the other exclaimed "*it will be impossible to publish this*"[.] I need not say that these exclamations were accompanied with notes of admiration at the genius, wit, poetry, satire and so forth, which made us both also at the same time declare that you were as superior in the burlesque as in the heroic to all competitors and even perhaps had found your real forte in this singular style. Mr. Murray came into the room whilst we were so employed and wished incontinently to insert the names of the poems in his catalogue (Graham ed. 256-60)

Their reactions to first reading the poem were, we can see, at once admiring and full of regret. They experienced, as Longinus would say, "a whole concourse of emotions."

However, in the margin of the proof, next to the stanzas we are examining, Hobhouse corrected Byron's Greek: "ἵνα μὴ ἐν περὶ αὐτὴν πάθος φαινηταί, παθὼν δὲ εὐνοδοῖς[.] (Ina meyr en ti peri auteyrn pathos faineirtai, pathoon de eunodos)" (John Murray Archive / National Library of Scotland).

Then he gave Byron a lesson in Greek comprehension: “I do not think you are quite held out by the quotation — Longinus says the circumstantial assemblage of the passions makes the sublime. he does not talk of *This sublime* as being soaring & ample[.]”

It’s true that the ideas of the sublime being “soaring” and “ample” are in Byron, not in Longinus. Longinus takes for granted that his reader has an idea of the sublime; his concern is not to define it (he does that briefly in his opening paragraph), but to analyse different rhetorical methods by which the sublime is conveyed. But who cares? Byron is not writing in his own person. Byron answered bluntly, in the opposite margin of the proof: “I do not care for that — it must stand — /NB/.”

He didn’t bother to tell Hobhouse that he was writing under an assumed persona. Hobhouse should have seen that at once — but hadn’t.

Beppo, a poem at which Hobhouse had glanced when it had been written in October 1817, had come out less than a year before he corrected *Don Juan*’s proofs. He had paid little attention to it. It’s clear from his letter to Byron, however, that he understands this new style to be “burlesque” — which makes it all the more surprising that he finds it necessary pedantically to correct Byron’s Greek, and pedantically to correct his understanding of Longinus. In burlesque, you may misquote, and misconstrue — it’s all part of the fun. Hobhouse had written burlesque poetry himself — one of his best works is his burlesque of Byron’s *Stanzas to Augusta*:

Though a poet, you should not abuse us;
 Though a wit, have a truce with your jokes;
 Though you govern us all, yet excuse us
 If we think there’s enough of this hoax.
 Though trusted, no creditors touch thee;
 Though parted, ’tis but from thy wife;
 Though wakeful, with Molly to much thee
 ’Tis not such a damnable life.
 (Joyce 107-9)

But for some reason, he can't, while correcting the proofs, gauge Byron's tone. He thinks that *Don Juan* is a "sincere" poem. What he can't see is that Byron is inviting us to take a fresh perspective on the idea of sublimity as a serious poetic issue, when its propagation and discussion are surrounded with as much claptrap, hypocrisy, and corruption as they are in Regency England. His idea of sublimity is a reconstructed one — perhaps, a Martialian one, and he was to define it later in 1819, after *Don Juan* had come out:

As to "Don Juan" — confess — confess — you dog — and be candid — that it is the sublime of *that there* sort of writing — it may be bawdy — but is it not good English? — it may be profligate — but is it not *life*, is it not *the thing*? — Could any man have written it — who has not lived in the world? — and tooled in a post-chaise? in a hackney coach? in a Gondola? against a wall? in a court carriage? in a vis a vis? — on a table? — and under it? (BLJ 6. 232: letter of 26 October 1819)

Notice how he once again aims at an effect of sublimity by, as Longinus says Demosthenes does, "in a strange and unlikely order pile one idea on top of another."

This letter, however, is written not to Hobhouse, who needs the lesson, but to Kinnaird, with whom Byron can feel socially and emotionally at one. With Hobhouse, you had his precarious sense of sexual identity to worry about ("I know you hate that sort of thing — so I will say no more about love & the like" BLJ 5. 143: letter of 12 December 1816). With Kinnaird, you knew you were, like Martial, a man of the world speaking to another man of the world: one in whom the sense of the sublime was "far more deeply interfused" with that of the banal and worldly — to the reinforcement of both banality and sublimity.

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¹ Traduction de M. Amédée Pichot (Paris : Garnier Frères, 1909).

² See Peter Cochran, "Francis Cohen, Don Juan and Casti," *Romanticism* 4.1 (1998): 120-4.