

How Sublime (and Prolific) was Byron? What the Reviewers Said

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Article abstract

Cet article propose un survol des livres, des articles et des critiques (et lettres) écrits sur Lord Byron et son oeuvre de son vivant et peu de temps après sa mort, soit de 1807 à 1830 environ, de sorte à déterminer à quel point les contemporains de Byron le trouvaient « sublime ». Walter Scott, en faisant le compte rendu de *Childe Harold 4*, affirmait avec enthousiasme qu'il s'agissait de « la poésie la plus sublime », mais d'autres, comme William Hazlitt, étaient d'avis que « l'auteur de *Childe Harold* et de *Don Juan* est... un poseur, encore qu'il soit provoquant et sublime ». En parlant de *Don Juan*, John Wilson Croker s'exclamait quant à lui : « Quelle sublimité! quelle légèreté! quelle audace! quelle tendresse! quelle majesté! quelle insignifiance! quelle variété! quel ennui¹ ». Ma discussion sur un grand nombre de ces jugements sur l'oeuvre de Byron par ses contemporains nous permettra de déterminer si le terme « sublime » définit adéquatement l'esprit de la poésie de Byron, surtout ce « sublime » tel qu'il a été compris par Longin, Burke et d'autres.

HOW SUBLIME (AND PROLIFIC) WAS BYRON? WHAT THE REVIEWERS SAID

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Résumé

Cet article propose un survol des livres, des articles et des critiques (et lettres) écrits sur Lord Byron et son oeuvre de son vivant et peu de temps après sa mort, soit de 1807 à 1830 environ, de sorte à déterminer à quel point les contemporains de Byron le trouvaient « sublime ». Walter Scott, en faisant le compte rendu de *Childe Harold 4*, affirmait avec enthousiasme qu'il s'agissait de « la poésie la plus sublime », mais d'autres, comme William Hazlitt, étaient d'avis que « l'auteur de *Childe Harold* et de *Don Juan* est... un poseur, encore qu'il soit provoquant et sublime ». En parlant de *Don Juan*, John Wilson Croker s'exclamait quant à lui : « Quelle sublimité! quelle légèreté! quelle audace! quelle tendresse! quelle majesté! quelle insignifiance! quelle variété! quel ennui!¹ ». Ma discussion sur un grand nombre de ces jugements sur l'oeuvre de Byron par ses contemporains nous permettra de déterminer si le terme « sublime » définit adéquatement l'esprit de la poésie de Byron, surtout ce « sublime » tel qu'il a été compris par Longin, Burke et d'autres.

This essay has many debts, not the least being to Donald H. Reiman, whose commitment to scholarship led him over 30 years ago to publish *The Romantics Reviewed*, a photofacsimile edition of contemporary reviews of English Romantic works. Among the nine volumes of this edition are five dedicated to “Byron and Regency Society Poets,” containing hundreds of reviews of Byron's poetry that were written between 1807 and 1824. These many reviews, occupying 2,338 pages of

text, detail the contemporary cultural reaction to Byron and Byronism, and they inform us just how sublime Byron and his poetry were thought to be during this period.

Byron's contemporary reviewers used the word "sublime" well over one hundred times to evaluate all of his publications between *Childe Harold* cantos 1 and 2 (in 1812, the year of Byron's instant fame) and *The Deformed Transformed* (in 1824, the year of Byron's death). In reading these reviews, I discovered not only how "sublime" Byron was at this time but also how "prolific" he was — and how much he was "puffed" in the contemporary press. Puffs were "Pars" (paragraphs) or "Adverts" (advertisements) in a newspaper or journal that masqueraded as news items (e.g., "Have you heard that Lord so and so is returned from the continent and about to publish a new novel on such and such"). Such puffs are usually associated with the crassness of the nineteenth-century London publisher Henry Colburn, but John Murray (and, for that matter, Byron) was no stranger to marketing techniques. Witness the first sentence of the review of *Marino Faliero* in the May 1821 *European Magazine*: Byron's latest drama was "Heralded by the puff preliminary, the puff collateral, and every other species of ostentatious announcement, and note of preparation, up to the puff direct" (RR 2: 969a; EM 79: 437a).² Such a statement acknowledges how clever Murray (and even Byron) had been in the last ten years of marketing Byron's texts, a marketing that encouraged the reviewers to keep Byron before the public so that he could be praised, over and over again, for his sublime accomplishments. In fact, the puff preliminary, the puff collateral, and the puff direct provide us an opportunity to investigate Byron's poetry for the sublime prolific, the sublime expressive, and the sublime demoniacal — all three of which sublimities made Byron's reputation.

I begin with what I term the "sublime prolific," a phrase I could not find in these reviews but an implication that frequently punctuated the reviewers' remarks on Byron. The closest I came to finding what I sought was in the *European Magazine* review of *Werner* in January 1823, when Longinus (of the sublime) was invoked as follows: "Should some future Longinus ever class the numerous ages of literature, and attach to each its discriminative cognomen, whatever may be the merits or the demerits of the present period, we are convinced, that an epithet synonymous with

prolific would supersede any term of its other characteristic features.” The unidentified reviewer in this monthly magazine then observed that Byron in *English Bards* condemned Southey for publishing at least one epic every year — and then wrote, sarcastically, that his lordship himself is “publishing at the rate of two or three tragedies per annum,” the tragedy being, incidentally, “the most sublime and difficult of compositions” (RR 2: 994b; EM 83: 73b). The *Literary Chronicle* also judged a year later, in February 1824, that Byron was “becoming an interminable writer, and seems to think that whatever he does must take,” and the reviewer specifically complained that “the public have become weary” of Byron “dol[ing] out piecemeal” his cantos of *Don Juan* and mere portions of *The Deformed Transformed* (RR 3: 1352a; LC #250: 129a).

Such responses to Byron were far from unique — in fact, dozens of reviewers commented on the frequency with which Byron published at an almost sublimely super-human rate, especially during the period of his *Turkish Tales* and then again during the last year of his life. In the first of these periods, the twenty-two months from the publication of *The Giaour* in June 1813 through the publication of *Hebrew Melodies* in April 1815, Byron published six major works that collectively went through nearly 50 editions, with many of these editions adding lines to the texts, thereby encouraging the public to purchase yet another edition of the same work. Sometimes we overlook this whirlwind of publishing that single-handedly dominated the reviews of the period — but attend to the voices of the reviewers who had to keep up with the indefatigable Byron during the first half of his career.

1) The *Christian Observer* in reviewing *Childe Harold* canto 3 in April 1817 said it could not keep up with “the almost magical rapidity with which his lordship’s poems have lately thickened around us” (RR 2: 595d; CO, 16: 246b) and warned Byron that “No man who lets off a poem every six months, can reasonably hope long to attract attention to his performances; nor will all the ‘guns, trumpets, blunderbusses, drums, and thunder,’ with which his lordship lately announced one of his poems [sounds like “the Puff Direct”], be sufficient to arouse the public, when once they have fairly fallen asleep” (RR 2: 596c; CO 16: 248a).

2) The first sentence of a review of *The Prisoner of Chillon* in the December 1816 *Dublin Examiner* reveals that even those across the Irish

Sea were amazed by the prolific Byron: "We fear that if Lord Byron continue to write at this rate, he will give his Reviewers a busy time of it . . . he should determine (and abide by such determination) not to publish another line for the next seven years" (RR 2: 693b; DE 2: 116). More bluntly: he should not "soon again overwhelm us with such a torrent of verse as he has lately let loose" (RR 2: 694a; DE 2: 117).

3) Earlier, in the May 1816 *Dublin Examiner*, the reviewer of *The Siege of Corinth* complained that Byron seemed to have lost his "sublimity, energy, and originality" in his attempts "to hurry his poems, prematurely, into the world" (RR 2: 683a; DE 1: 9).

4) The respected *Critical Review* made the same point when it reviewed *Hebrew Melodies* in April 1816: "his Lordship is going out of fashion, more especially with his female readers. The truth is, that an individual who publishes so much and so repeatedly, ought to have a larger stock of true poetical feeling than is possessed by the author of these melodies" (RR 2: 647b; CR 3: 357). The reviewer looked back at all of the Turkish Tales and said that "the town . . . was surfeited with such anti-human heroes" (RR 2: 648a; CR 3: 358).

5) Even as early as August 1814 in a review of *Lara*, the monthly *Theatrical Inquisitor*, despite its "very veneration for [Byron's] superior talents," could not "but wish he would bestow more time and labour on his works; there is not one that does not betray strong marks of haste and negligence" (RR 5: 2255a; TI 5: 111).

6) The *Eclectic Review* remarked in its review of *Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte* in May 1814 that "We did not, indeed, expect to meet his Lordship again so soon" (RR 2: 724b; ER 1: 516).

7) Two months earlier, in March 1814, the *Satirist* complained that *The Corsair* was "the fourth poem we have had from his pen in a very short space of time, and in all of them the heroes have been unamiable and repulsive, and the incidents dismal and terrific" (RR 5: 2142a; S 14: 246).

8) In the same month, the conservative *Antijacobin Review* began its review of the seventh edition of *The Bride of Abydos* and the first edition of *The Corsair* as follows: "The muse of Lord Byron is so extremely prolific, that if she do not actually bring forth *Twins*, her offspring succeed each other with such wonderful rapidity, that it becomes almost

impracticable to complete the examination of the beauties and deformities of one, before another bursts upon us” (RR 1: 36a; AR 46: 209).

What we may have forgotten is that Byron actually (and purposely?) encouraged some of these responses by his dedicatory letter to Thomas Moore in *The Corsair*, published on 1 February 1814: “I have written much, and published more than enough to demand a longer silence than I now meditate; but for some years to come it is my intention to tempt no further the award of ‘Gods, men, nor columns’;” indeed, he began this letter to Moore promising that *The Corsair* would be “the last production with which [he] shall trespass on public patience . . . for some years” (CPW 3: 148-9). This, of course, was not the first or even the last time that Byron would promise and then break his promise to restrain his muse and curb his tongue: recall his announcement in the 1807 *Hours of Idleness*, his “first, and last attempt” in poetry: it was “highly improbable [not, mind you, “impossible”] . . . that [he] should ever obtrude [him]self a second time on the Public” (CPW 1: 34).

But Byron obtruded himself many times after that, especially after he aligned himself with John Murray in 1812, and by 1815 Murray was actually publishing the “collected” edition of *The Works of the Right Honourable Lord Byron. In Four Volumes*. By 1817, the so-called “collected” Byron grew to 5 volumes of foolscap octavo. And by July 1817, in a review of *Manfred*, the *Monthly Review* nicely discriminated Byron’s proclivity for both composition and publication: the reviewer began with praise of Byron’s “high poetic talents” but wished “that he would for a time withdraw from public view, and curb, if not his facility of composition, at least his inclination to print” — the reviewer then warned Byron that his seemingly endless repetitions of the Byronic hero “will pall on the appetite which they have pleased, and at last from mere repetition excite something like disgust.” Many reviewers at this time similarly accused Byron of being a one-note poet, the singular Byronic hero appearing too often in only slightly different guises between 1812 and 1817. But this particular reviewer sensed as early as July 1817 that Byron would, or would need to, change his tune: “A few years may alter the tenor of the noble poet’s train of thinking, and produce some new effusion, which, novel in its design and executed with all his native energy, may delight and surprise his countrymen” (RR 4: 1780a; MR 83:

300). How perceptive! We, of course, have the hindsight and know that “the sad truth which hover[ed] o’er [Byron’s] desk / Turn[ed] what was once romantic to burlesque” (DJ 4: 3), leading the noble lord to redefine his craft and the Byronic hero in such later works as *Beppo*, *Don Juan*, and *The Vision of Judgment*.

The sad truth of things, of course, which characterizes most of the prolific number of Byron’s works, is redeemed or at least relieved by different kinds of Byronic sublimity, what might be called the sublime expressive and the sublime demoniacal that dominated so many of his works — or at least the perception of his works by his contemporary reviewers. Consider, for example, the reviews in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* that provide a touchstone on Byron and the sublime. Although this widely read monthly magazine did not always approve of Byron’s ideas, it pointed to the “sublimity of description” in *Bride of Abydos* (RR 3: 1090a; GM 84.1 [Jan. 1814]: 51a), the “sublime passages” in *Ode to Napoleon* (RR 3: 1094b; GM 84.1 [May 1814]: 477b), the “sublimity of ideas” in *The Prisoner of Chillon* (RR 3: 1105a; GM 87.1 [Jan. 1817]: 41a), and even the “horrible sublimity” of *Manfred* and *Cain* (RR 3: 1128b; GM 92.1 [Jan. 1822]: 48b).³ The *Gentleman’s Magazine* eventually cooled to the later Byron, suggesting that his matter-of-factness in his 1821 dramas evidenced that he has lost “grandeur and sublimity” (RR 3: 1120b; GM 91.2 [Dec. 1821]: 537b) — and judging that *Don Juan*, cantos 6-8 and 9-11, were “the most abominable in spirit, and wretched in execution, of all of the writings of the author.” Nevertheless, this same reviewer in *Gentleman’s Magazine* conceded the genuineness and the genius of the first two cantos of *Don Juan*, finding in them “every thing that is vicious and depraved, glorious and sublime, . . . so skilfully filtered through the drip-stone of sentimentality, that we know not the nature of the draught until we have imbibed enough of it to make us desirous of swallowing the rest” (RR 3:1142b; GM 93.2 [Sept. 1823] 250b). With a different metaphor but the same point, the *Miniature Magazine* had observed in its review of *Don Juan* in October 1819 that the “sublimity of thought and expression” in those first two cantos “makes us blind to [Byron’s] numerous faults, his malignant inveterate disposition” and to his “detestably filthy and impious poem” (RR 4: 1643a, b; MM 3: 236, 237).

If we go to the other side of the Tweed, we will find similar judgments about Byron's sublimity disguising or, in some cases, redeeming his depravity. In the April 1814 *Edinburgh Review*, Francis Jeffrey saw "moral sublimity" in the first edition *The Corsair* and the sixth edition of *The Bride of Abydos* despite the purported "crimes and vices" of their heroes (RR 2: 848b, 859a; ER 23: 199, 220). Over two years later, in a December 1816 review of *Childe Harold* canto 3 and *The Prisoner of Chillon*, Jeffrey saw in Byron's works "a certain morbid exaltation of character and of feeling, — a sort of demoniacal sublimity, not without some traits of the ruined Archangel" (RR 2: 865b; ER 27: 279). Similarly, in a review of *Childe Harold* canto 4 in the June 1818 *Edinburgh Review*, John Wilson could find in Byron (or the Byronic hero) "something majestic in his misery — something sublime in his despair" (RR 2: 896b; ER 30: 93) — and the genius that Wilson found in *Manfred* and even more in the fourth canto meant that Byron's "skepticism, if it ever approaches to a creed, carries with it its refutation in its grandeur. . . . through his gloom there are frequent flashes of illumination; — and the sublime sadness which, to him, is breathed from the mysteries of mortal existence, is always joined with a longing after immortality, and expressed in language that is itself divine" (RR 2: 898b-899a; ER 30: 97-98). That language, especially in the description of the Cataract of Velino, makes us, according to Wilson, "feel as if we, as well as the poet, had been eyewitnesses of all the sublimity." Wilson believed in 1818 that Byron had the power to write a great poem for his age, "to build up a work that shall endure among the most august fabrics of the genius of England" (RR 2: 904a and 909a; ER 30: 108 and 118), and he lamented that his age had "not yet produced any one great epic or tragic performance." Moreover, his age had

produced no poem gloriously illustrative of the agencies, existences, and events, of the complex life of man. It has no Lear — no Macbeth — no Othello. Some such glory as this Byron may yet live to bring over his own generation. His being has in at all the elements of the highest poetry. . . . We might also say, that he needs but to exercise his will to construct a great poem. (RR 2: 909b; ER 30: 119)

That exercise would eventually produce the great poem of *Don Juan*, but apparently neither Wilson nor Jeffrey would judge Byron's epic satire to be the "great" poem for the age.

But the short-lived *Edinburgh Monthly Review* did address *Don Juan* in its October 1819 review of Byron's works ranging from *The Giaour* to *Don Juan* cantos 1-2. The reviewer distinguished Byron from the herd of other descriptive poets who might feel the charms of external nature and attempt to express its sublimities: Byron

does not make mere *description* the end and object of his labours . . . ; — but, keenly alive to every element of emotion, which sense or imagination can administer, he bears along with him in his rapid course all that is beautiful or sublime in the external world, and casts down, in splendid profusion, all the flowers of descriptive poetry, before the dark and dread shrine of human passion.

But this Scotch reviewer, unlike Jeffrey and Wilson, qualified his praise when he lamented that Byron did not use his genius in the service of the Lord. With overwrought prose, this reviewer condemned the "infidelity of Byron [as] a very repulsive species of bold, uninquiring, contemptuous dogmatism. It is not the trembling ague of the understanding, but the bad and burning fever of the heart." Equally troubling were Byron's "phrenzied and infectious profanity" and his "grumbling reproach and deep resentment, compared with which the levity of Voltaire himself is but the sting of an insect to the rabid ferocity of a tiger" (RR 2: 797a, b-798a; EMR 2: 478-80). The reviewer continued with his purple prose: "But though the rays of his genius may gather round the mass of moral putrefaction, and gild it with their prostituted brilliancy, they can never exalt or perpetuate an ignoble or revolting theme" (RR 2: 799b; EMR 2: 483). As a demoniacal infidel, Byron neglected (indeed, ridiculed) the spiritual "elements of grandeur and sublimity," "the lofty resources which are opened to [any poet] in the system of . . . religion" (RR 2: 798b; EMR 2: 481).

The *Edinburgh Review* was merely one of many to take Byron to task for his irreligious view of things: for example, the *Christian Observer*, which reviewed Byron's major works between 1812 and 1816, lamented that Byron's poetry tends to "degrade" rather than uplift us, noting also in the June 1812 review of *Childe Harold* that "If, as Longinus instructs us, a man must feel sublimely to write sublimely, a poet must find pleasure in the objects of nature before him, if he hopes to give pleasure to others" (RR 2: 568a, b; CO 11: 384 a, b). Because Byron did not measure up to this ideal, the *Christian Observer* went out of its way to find fault: the November 1813 review of the fifth edition of *The Giaour* found its fragmentary nature "artificial," suggesting "a want of skill in the artist" — more bluntly, "Imperfection is no part of the sublime or beautiful. If a wise man stutters, it is because he cannot speak plain; if he limps, it is because he has not the free use of his limbs" (RR 2: 572b; CO 12: 732b). In another *Christian Observer* review dated April 1814, the halting "octosyllabic verse" of *The Bride of Abydos* was said to pale in comparison to "the chaste sublimity and exquisite rhythm of the Miltonic blank" (RR 2: 585a, b; CO 13: 252a, b). This particular reviewer was very quick to find fault with the irreligious Byron: we "must own [that] the sublimest flights of poetry, of whatever kind, to have been made on the wings of Religion;" and again, "we are Christians [and] possess, in our religion, a source of the sublime and the beautiful infinitely beyond all others" — even the "heathen Longinus" would concede that point (RR 2: 587b and 588a; CO 13: 254b and 255a). And when Byron attempted the Wordsworthian sublime in *Childe Harold* canto 3, the reviewer in April 1817 said that the expression might "be very excellent, but it is far too absurdly sublime for us to understand" (RR 2: 599b; CO 16: 253b).

A number of reviewers agreed that Byron attempted the sublime but that for many reasons, including his rushing so many works into print, he did not realize it. For example, in the August 1817 *Mentor, or, Edinburgh Weekly Essayist*, Byron in *The Corsair* "sometimes aspires to the sublime" (RR 4: 1640a; M #14: 161). And the November 1818 *Monthly Review* observed that in *Childe Harold* canto 4 "sublimity is rather the character of his inclination than of his genius" — even the famous Address-to-the-Ocean stanzas "struggle, as it were, towards some higher range of thought, which often ends in a repetition of the same idea in different terms, or in mere bombast and tumour of phrase" (RR 4: 1793a;

MR 87: 297). The July 1819 *Monthly Review* conceded that in *Don Juan* cantos 1-2 and *Mazeppa* Byron had a great range but never quite reached the genius of Shakespeare or Dryden or Pope (RR 4: 1797a; MR 89: 311). And in a January 1822 review of *Cain*, the same *Monthly Review* judged that Byron has dared “a comparison . . . with Milton” but “has not even tried to avoid the difficulties attached to his subject which that great master [Milton] has escaped with so much skill and propriety” (RR 4: 1818a; MR 97: 97). Other reviewers of *Cain* also compared Byron disadvantageously to Milton: for example, the January 1822 *London Magazine* observed that Byron lacks

Milton’s plastic power; — that power by which our great poet has made his Heaven and Hell, and the very regions of space, sublime realities, palpable to the imagination, and has traced the lineaments of his angelic messengers with the precision of a sculptor. The Lucifer of “Cain” is a mere bodyless abstraction, — the shadow of a dogma; and all the scenery over which he presides is dim, vague, and seen only in faint outline. (RR 4: 1616a; LM 5: 71a)

The January 1822 *Ladies’ Monthly Magazine* put it more succinctly: in the “most depraved work” of *Cain*, Byron “has fallen short of Milton’s sublimity” (RR 3: 1254b; LMM 15: 39). The *Edinburgh Scots Magazine* also noted that Byron’s “very gross and senseless piece of machinery” in *Cain* pales in comparison to the “Miltonic sublimity” of the voyage through the abyss of space in Shelley’s *Queen Mab* (RR 5: 2196b-d; ESM 10 [January 1822]: 111b-112a-b).

Many other critics judged that Byron was not writing as carefully or sublimely as he could in that last year or two of his life, when he seemed to be rushing to publish anything that he composed — yet they still acknowledged his genius. For example, the January 1823 *[Literary] Museum* complained about Byron’s uncontrolled numbers and his uncouth rhythm in *Heaven and Earth*, adding: “we question whether in a single instance he has reached that point of sublimity to which we expected to

see him soaring.” But the reviewer quickly continued: “Ld. B. may write below himself, but he must and will always command attention” (RR 4: 1496b; [L]M #37: 1c). Using the same phrasing and judgment in reviewing *The Deformed Transformed* in March 1824, the *London Magazine* complained that the drama “was monstrous in design, flimsy in composition, meagre in imagery, wretched in versification, — a hasty, crude, and extravagant thing. But no one can read it, without acknowledging that it is the effusion of a great and extraordinary mind, an audacious fancy, and a splendid genius. Lord Byron may write below himself, but he never can write below *us*” (RR 4: 1627b; LM 9: 321b).

So perhaps that is how sublime Byron is — not as high as he might have been — but certainly higher than us and most other artists — with verse that can inspire — and prolific verse that seemed to be endless. *The Deformed Transformed* was his penultimate publication on 20 February 1824, in the short Preface of which Byron indicated that he was publishing “the two first Parts only; and the opening chorus of the third. The rest may perhaps appear hereafter” (CPW 6: 517). Byron, it seems, was up to his same marketing tricks — promising, “perhaps,” to publish (or not publish) more works, leaving his readers wondering what would come next. His ultimate publication of *Don Juan*, cantos 15-16, appeared a month later, on 26 March, and that final sixteenth canto left the readers in sublime suspense: we encounter a Gothic Abbey, “An edifice no less sublime than strong” (59), where Don Juan retired to his midnight couch “to despond,” so “full of sentiments, sublime as billows / Heaving between this world and worlds beyond” (110) — but just then the ghostly “sable Friar” appeared “through shadows of the night sublime” (113) under the lintel of his doorway and revealed herself to be, “In full, voluptuous, but *not o’ergrown* bulk, / The phantom of her frolic Grace — Fitz-Fulke!” (123). One month later Byron died, and his prolifically public voice was silenced before he could fulfill his own promise as an artist — and we will never know if Juan escorted her Grace back through that doorway, under the lintel, that sublime night.

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¹ La traduction de Sonya Malaborza.

² All quotations from these contemporary reviews will be taken from *The Romantics Reviewed: Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers, Part B: Byron and Regency Society Poets*, ed. Donald H. Reiman, 5 vols. (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1972). Citations after each quotation will include volume and page numbers from *Romantics Reviewed* (RR) — followed by the volume (or #) and page numbers from the original journal (with abbreviated title). The citation will bracket the date of the review if it is not otherwise stated in the text.

³ This litany of the “sublime” in Byron was echoed by many of the other reviews at this time: e.g., *The Ladies' Monthly Museum* remarked on the “sublime horrors” in *Manfred* and the undermined “sublimities” in *Cain* (RR 3: 1251b and 1254a; LMM 6 [Aug. 1817]: 91 and 15 [Jan. 1822]: 38).