

## How Classical conceptions of the Sublime were received in English Romantic poetry

‘At any historical moment the Sublime is hard, if not impossible, to define,<sup>1</sup>’ writes James Porter. Famously elusive, it has embodied different things to those encountering it over the past two millennia, but it is this very ethereality which gives it such resounding value at all points of literary history. Persisting in its allure to the modern day, it is a feeling known to encapsulate both fear and rapture, thus allowing the contradictory nature of human experience to be expressed. There is also an element of great ‘heights’ or ‘grandeur’ that the original Greek ‘*hypsous*’ suggests, evoking a sense of transcendence. This essay intends to explore how Classical literary predecessors, in their discussions about or representations of the Sublime, have been received by the English Romantic poets. There is an explicit focus on the reception of the Sublime and its treatment in Romantic literature and literary theory, rather than in aesthetic and philosophical conceptions, although the two are heavily linked in their progression and influence.

There are two overarching strands which are introduced in the Classical world, and then continued by the Romantics: the literary Sublime, and the sublimity of the natural world. Ultimately however, it is the literary Sublime which has had more lasting traction. With literature being a solely human activity and creation, it set out to the Romantics something inorganic, human-made, that evoked the same feeling as that of nature. In this, humanity was raised to the level of the pastoral, and for a movement so reverent of rural existence, this was immeasurably valuable.

### The Longinian Sublime

*Peri Hypsous*, (translating to *On the Sublime*) is believed to have been written around the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD by Greek author Longinus, a fittingly shadowy figure, and the first known person whose attempt to grapple with the concept remains<sup>2</sup>. The treatise is a work of literary criticism, identifying the sources of sublimity in literature, the character necessary for sublime writing, and the rhetorical attributes which contribute to its creation. He sees the Sublime as a quality that exceeds ordinary artistic expression, evoking ‘a proud exaltation and a sense of vaunting joy, just as though we had ourselves produced what we had just heard.’<sup>3</sup> Several sources of sublimity are set out for the reader, with ‘a common foundation’ being ‘the command of language’<sup>4</sup>. The literary Sublime to Longinus is therefore a synergy of content, style, and an expression of the author’s ‘great mind’ and character.

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<sup>1</sup> Porter, J. (2007). *Lucretius and the Sublime*. Cambridge University Press eBooks, pp.167–184. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol9780521848015.011>.

<sup>2</sup> Murray, P. (2000). *Classical Literary Criticism*. London: Penguin.

<sup>3</sup> Longinus (2000). *On the Sublime*, (Classical Literary Criticism). Translated by P. Murray. and T.S. Dorsch. London: Penguin, Chapter 7, pp.120

<sup>4</sup> Longinus (2000) ‘’’’ Chapter 8, pp.121

‘Nothing contributes so decisively to grandeur as noble emotion in the right setting’<sup>5</sup>, Longinus states, proposing an emotional component to literary creation as well as an intellectual engagement with one’s craft. Longinus’ words here are reminiscent to a modern reader of Wordsworth’s assertion in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, that ‘poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ taking ‘its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.’<sup>6</sup> There must be an element of the true self in artistic endeavour therefore, without a sycophantic or superficial veil. This links to Longinus’ rejection of the ‘pseudo-Bacchanalian’<sup>7</sup> and his preoccupation with ‘natural greatness’ with which Chapter Nine<sup>8</sup> of the treatise is largely concerned. Homer is cited and celebrated at length with snippets taken from the two epics, the epitome of transcendent art in which he unfailingly ‘leads us with him to heroic heights.’

The latter half of Longinus’ manuscript is essentially an enquiry into the rhetorical features which mark out a sublime work of writing. The detail in which he elaborates underlines the value and importance of style to Longinus and his preoccupation with carefully crafted composition. This is perhaps at odds with the ‘natural greatness’ discussed previously, but there is an element here of ‘sprezzatura’ – the art of doing something with great effort whilst looking natural and effortless. This is part of the ‘natural greatness’.

Though Longinus does not directly talk of the natural Sublime at length, he uses natural imagery in his similes to illustrate his argument, and the grandeur of nature therefore shines through, its sublimity implicit. In Chapter 35<sup>9</sup> however, there is a deviation to reality beyond the literary world, and Nature, personified, is cited as the source of our ability to appreciate the Sublime, as ‘she has implanted in our souls an unconquerable passion for all that is great and for all that is more divine than ourselves.’ This faculty which we possess is what gives us our reverence for great literature, but also our ‘natural instinct’ to admire ‘the Nile, the Danube, the Rhine, ... the Ocean’, and ‘marvel’ at the ‘craters of Etna’. There is something in both nature and literature that we find inherently valuable then, and as an interrogation of the Lucretian Sublime will make clearer, I find this to be the ability of the natural world and the written word to yield deep truths about humanity and its environment. Fundamental to the Longinian Sublime is this notion of verity; the articulation of profound human truth accompanied by rhetorical talent is the essence of great literature. Sappho is the pinnacle of this skill to Longinus in her ability to ‘unite opposites’. What gives her poetry its value is its nature as a ‘fusion’ of ‘a concourse of emotions’. This embracing of conflict is at the heart of human experience, and perhaps what strikes Longinus so keenly about this talent of Sappho is that it expresses and embraces the paradoxes which mark our existence: that love causes us to ‘freeze’ and ‘burn’ unanimously.

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<sup>5</sup> Longinus (2000) ‘’ Chapter 8, pp.122

<sup>6</sup> Wordsworth, W. and Owen, W.J.B. (1979). *Wordsworth’s Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.

<sup>7</sup> Longinus (2000) ‘’ Chapter 3, pp.117

<sup>8</sup> Pages 122-126

<sup>9</sup> Page 155

### The Lucretian Sublime

Written in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC<sup>10</sup>, Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura (DRN)* explores Epicurean physics and philosophy. It is noted that the idea of sublimity is not one with which Lucretius is directly dealing; Longinus' treatise rather is a prism through which we can view Lucretius' work, and value is added to *DRN* in so doing<sup>11</sup>.

The Lucretian Sublime functions around the notion of 'void'. Death is central; the absolute vacuity about which we can have no real understanding, as it exceeds the limits of human consciousness. In this, then, 'Death is nothing to us; it concerns us not a jot'. In line with Epicurean ideals, Lucretius means with this to assuage our preoccupation with the ending of our lives, since we will have no awareness, and can have no conception, of our lives having ended. However, the very concept of the nothingness of death is what many find such terror in, as Larkin expresses in his 1977 poem *Aubade*,<sup>12</sup> rejecting that 'specious stuff that says *No rational being Can fear a thing it will not feel*, not seeing That this is what we fear—no sight, no sound,... nothing to think with, ... The anaesthetic from which none come round.'<sup>13</sup> In confronting the vacuity of death, we encounter a paradox: the terror of nothingness conflicts with the tranquillity of its embrace. That sublimity allows for and encompasses both responses to this void instils it with its power to represent the complexities of our experience.

Scientific discovery is in itself something sublime. Lucretius speaks to this in Book Three: upon 'such revelations' he has been 'seized by a divine delight' due to "Nature everywhere in every part [lying] open, all her secrets... laid bare.' There is a sense again in which sublimity is found in the *truth* that scientific breakthrough affords. It is natural philosophy's ability to lay bare the *true* 'nature of things' that Lucretius is celebrating in his work, and there is transcendence for those who have this moment of clear perception. Indeed, despite Lucretius' rejection of any role of a God in his system of thought, Epicurus is raised almost to the heights of the divine, so great is Lucretius's admiration and desire to 'follow and emulate'<sup>14</sup> the Greek philosopher.

There is sublimity in the atomism that Lucretius sets out. This recentres us to the idea of void, discussed at length in Book Six of *DRN*, where the language of emptiness is used frequently: 'cava', 'cavernae', 'vacuum', 'ianis', 'fauces', 'foramina', 'barathrum' etc. Atomistic void in this book 'becomes the protagonist'<sup>15</sup>, and the physically empty spaces depicted are an attempt to display something tangible but similar to the 'sheer vacuity' of the cosmos. Earthquakes become symbolic of this vacancy as real gaps in matter, the 'great shaking'<sup>14</sup> being a

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<sup>10</sup> Jenkyns, R. (2007). Introduction. *The Nature of Things*, pp.vii–xxiii.

<sup>11</sup> Although Lucretius is writing (it is thought) before Longinus, it is therefore necessary to discuss them in reverse order

<sup>12</sup> The unlikely relationship between Larkin and Lucretius was introduced to me in Christopher Hitchen's *Hitch-22*, and exemplifies the continuous relevance of these Classical preoccupations and exceptions

<sup>13</sup> Larkin, P. (1977). *Aubade*. [online] Poetry Foundation. Available at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48422/aubade-56d229a6e2f07>.

<sup>14</sup> Titus Lucretius Carus (2007). *The Nature of Things*. Penguin Classics. Translated by A.E. Stallings.

<sup>15</sup> Porter, J. (2007). *Lucretius and the Sublime*. Cambridge University Press eBooks, pp.167–184. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol9780521848015.011>.

manifestation of the power of the natural world, and a glimpse of the end of Earth. Thus, the physical void becomes linked with the void of death. The natural phenomena depicted in Book Six harshly convey the grandeur of nature, allowing Lucretius to illustrate his point, as they are emblematic of ‘this ultimate and primordial fear’<sup>15</sup> of the end of the world. The vivid depictions of the Sun, the ‘broad surface of the sea’, the ‘wind’s strength’ to ‘cast the blaze and scatter ash’ after volcanic activity and the ‘headwaters of the Nile’<sup>14</sup> are all objects of fear, though Lucretius makes veiled assertions that this fear elicited is part of the ‘untrained response to the atomistic view of nature’ – ‘scenes of natural disaster are fearful because they portend the unimaginable’<sup>15</sup>. The cosmological void is similarly destabilising, unimaginable, and thus fearsome, but ‘for an atomist it can be a sublime sensation to stand on nothing’<sup>16</sup>. This is in part because ‘nothing’ brings with it a portion of the truth which scientific discovery unveils, and contributes to a rejection of the need to fear death.

#### Direct Romantic interaction with these texts

The journey of the manuscript of *Peri Hypsous* is an obscure one. It survived antiquity single and incomplete, and only took hold late in the 17<sup>th</sup> century with Boileau’s translation<sup>17</sup>. It was this that started the discussion of ‘the Sublime’ which was continued by aestheticians and philosophers, most critically Kant, whose writings on aesthetics were subsumed by sublimity. Kant’s own role in Romanticism is complex; although he was to many ‘the last great defender of Enlightenment values in philosophy’, ‘his philosophy loomed so large in the German academic context’<sup>18</sup> that his influence on the great thinkers of the first wave of the Romantics, namely the ‘Jena Set’, is indisputable. Wordsworth and Coleridge are a bridge between the English Romantics and the Jena Set and wider German Romantic movement, and thus the work of Kant. Greatly invested in the work of the growing German academic scene, the pair spent many months living and studying there. In bringing back these works to England in both the original texts and their own responses<sup>19</sup>, the two allowed German Romantic thought to become more prevalent in England, and so through interacting with Wordsworth and Coleridge, the second-generation English Romantic poets imbibed much of the work of the wider Jena Set and Kant. It therefore was not necessary to have read translations of Longinus directly to interact with thought on sublimity – it became intrinsic within Romantic thought itself.

The history of the Lucretius manuscript is less murky. Rediscovered in 1417 by Poggio Bracciolini, it was first translated in 1682 by Thomas Creech<sup>20</sup>. The content of *DRN* renders it somewhat at odds with the Romantic movement. In grasping for empirical scientific truth about the nature of the universe, the poem goes against the rejection of the rationalism of Enlightenment philosophy at the heart of Romanticism. There is a trend seen throughout the period however: a fascination with scientific discovery which is not entirely in diametric opposition to the Romantics, seen in all the era’s most famous achievements: *Frankenstein*, the

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<sup>16</sup> An assertion from James Porter

<sup>17</sup> Murray, P. (2000). *Classical Literary Criticism*. London: Penguin.

<sup>18</sup> Kneller, J. (2007). *Kant and the Power of Imagination*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>19</sup> Hunnekuhl, P. (2007). *Imagination and Growth: Coleridge and Wordsworth in Germany (1798-99)*.

<sup>20</sup> Jenkyns, R. (2007). Introduction. *The Nature of Things*, pp.vii–xxiii.

work of much of the Jena Set<sup>21</sup> - Keats himself was trained as a surgeon before deviating to a life of poetry.<sup>22</sup> All first had to engage with the products of the Enlightenment before they set out to subvert it. Martin Priestman speaks to this tension in his chapter on the reception of Lucretius in Romantic Britain, writing that the time was marked 'not only by its partial attempts to transcend the aims of Enlightenment rationalism, but also by many efforts to bring those aims about.'<sup>23</sup> For this reason Lucretius proved greatly popular to the Romantics, with many great pillars of English Romantic poetry reading his work. Lucretius was a recurring character in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads, and Shelley too has a well-documented relationship with him, lauding him as 'the best of the Latin poets', and citing him as the instigator of his conversion to atheism. It is due to this Romantic reception that the Lucretian Sublime became elucidated without dilution.

### Why the Sublime had such a hold on the Romantics

'History gets thicker as it approaches recent times'<sup>24</sup>. This is no less true of literary periods. Since more artefacts and works remain from the Romantics, more internal contradictions shine through. The 'thickness' of Romanticism renders it almost a labyrinth, defined only by what it is not, and setting out what one means by Romanticism with clear conceptual parameters is therefore 'walking into a trap', argues Isaiah Berlin. In being 'the greatest single shift in the consciousness of the West that has occurred' in the past three centuries, it is marked by huge complexities, conflicts and paradox; it is a synergy of opposing parts; 'it is strength and weakness, individualism and collectivism, purity and corruption, revolution and reaction, peace and war, love of life and love of death.'<sup>25</sup> In being something intangible and capacious, the Sublime sits comfortably alongside the contradictory nature of Romantic thought.

There are, however, several threads which are woven continuously across the movement; a common core which all the Romantics, to some extent, were embodying. The Classical Sublime offers much which is valuable in relation to these common Romantic threads. The Longinian Sublime, in its ethereality and ineffability, subverted Rationalist thought and philosophy in a way which was enticing to the Romantics. It acted as a counterpoint to the Enlightenment's emphasis on logic, and rather embraced the power that mystical qualities hold. This accompanied an import placed on nature and its agency. The recognition of the grandeur of the natural world, and that its majesty rests in its ability to evoke profound emotion, is central to Romantic thought. Human emotion and nature are inextricably linked, certainly to Wordsworth, writing that 'the passions of man are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature'<sup>26</sup>. This desire to return to the pastoral was a reaction against the increasing levels of development in the Industrial revolution. It was this urbanisation which

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<sup>21</sup> Wulf, A. (2022). *Magnificent Rebels*. Knopf.

<sup>22</sup> Miller, L. (2021). *Keats*. Jonathan Cape.

<sup>23</sup> Priestman, M. (2007). *Lucretius in Romantic and Victorian Britain*. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol9780521848015.019>.

<sup>24</sup> Taylor, A.J.P. (1992). *English History, 1914-1945*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>25</sup> Berlin, I. and Hardy, H. (2000). *The Roots of Romanticism: the A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1965, the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC*. London: Pimlico.

<sup>26</sup> Wordsworth, W. and Owen, W.J.B. (1979). *Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.

Rousseau believed to pose an incarcerating threat to humanity and society, stating that ‘Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains’<sup>27</sup>, in his espousal for a reversion to a ‘natural state’. The idea of the natural world as a force, worthy of worship, was also present in the Lucretian Sublime, adding to the notion’s attraction. There is something of a secular spirituality with which both art and nature is imbued by the Romantics. That Longinus injects the Sublime with an element of divinity is made evident throughout the treatise in his metaphorical language, as he ‘plays with the tension between mystical-religious and the secular-poet.’<sup>28</sup> In the Romantics’ journey away from a necessary Christian God, the Sublime therefore allowed them to revere nature and literature not because these are general revelations of godly creator, but rather for their own metaphysical allure.

### The Romantic Sublime

The Sublime, then, has much that is captivating to the Romantics. The Lucretian and Longinian Sublime offer distinctive aspects within their conceptions, the presence of which in Romantic poetry I now set out to explore<sup>29</sup>. In what I have discussed of Classical conceptions, the two clear strands are evident: the Sublime of the natural world, and the literary Sublime.

The Lucretian concept of vacuity as something sublime is immediately in evidence in Lord Byron’s apocalyptic and introspective poem *Darkness*. In the narrative, humanity’s self-destructive tendencies lead to its death, the ‘bright sun’ being ‘extinguish’d’, allowing ‘darkness’ to ensue. The end of the world which the physical empty spaces in *DRN* stood to symbolise is here described in wrenching detail to such an extent that Byron appears to reject the Epicurean ideal of death being ‘nothing’. Human nature renders the slow decline to a universe consisting of nothing but ‘darkness’ grim on such a level that the ‘void’ in itself is tainted by human weakness and moral corruption. However, the universe as a sublime force is underscored throughout, personified as ‘Darkness herself’. Nature here is a force capable of closing the chapter of human existence without any implicit God as the instigator, and is an entity against which people have no agency – they are reduced to brutes before the world becomes a mere ‘clump of death’<sup>30</sup>. The Byronic Sublime is therefore weaponised against humanity, whilst the Lucretian Sublime is a more hopeful revelling in scientific breakthrough and the rapturous implications of atomism.

Percy Shelley’s *Mont Blanc* is more of a philosophical contemplation than a dramatic narrative. In discussing the mountain’s grandeur, personifying it as a ‘king’ and ‘titan’, parallel to his internal thoughts in response to the sight of it, the poem serves as an embodiment of the

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<sup>27</sup> Deneys-Tunney, A. (2017). *Rousseau shows us that there is a way to break the chains – from within* | Anne Deneys-Tunney. [online] the Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jul/15/rousseau-shows-us-way-break-chains>.

<sup>28</sup> Doran, R. (2017). *The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant*. Cambridge Univ Press.

<sup>29</sup> I have picked a narrow selection of Romantic poetry, and one which consists solely of male authors. This is in many ways reductive to the extensive nature of Romantic poetry, but necessary given the brevity required and depth each chosen poem offers.

<sup>30</sup> Gordon, G (1816) *Darkness*. [online] Poetry Foundation. Available at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43825/darkness-56d222aeceee1b>.

transcendent connection between the human spirit and the natural world. This is enabled by the sublimity of nature, which is rendered in terms that make it almost a cliché of the Romantic natural Sublime. ‘Lightening through the tempest’, ‘deep ravine’, ‘Earthquake, and fiery flood, and hurricane’<sup>31</sup>... these descriptions not only exactly present nature at its most majestic and terrifying, but also pick up directly on the images employed by Lucretius and Longinus. The uncontrollable character of natural disaster in particular seems to be something which troubles all generations, and this is at the forefront of the Sublime. These events are so captivatingly frightening that we cannot depict them without injecting some sort of divine or mystical role in their occurrence – they literally surpass empirical description.

The most famous homage paid to the English ‘green pastoral landscape’ is Wordsworth’s *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*. Instead of centring on the natural world as one which evokes awe along with terror, the rural here is something deeply placating. In this, Wordsworth rejects the Lucretian Sublime and Byron and Shelley’s presentation of it, depicting nature as a gentle force that enriches and soothes human experience, rather than one that dwarfs it. There is still a heavy element of transcendence however, and an interplay between the speaker’s internal experience and his surroundings similar to Shelley’s, as he expresses that nature ‘can so inform The mind that is within us, so impress With quietness and beauty, and so feed With lofty thoughts’. As the poem progresses, the landscape around him becomes a continuous whole, rather than individual elements; he has a ‘sense sublime Of something... interfused, Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, and the round ocean and the living air, and the blue sky, and in the mind of man... and rolls through all things.’ Crucially, man is included in this syndetic listing as an element of nature’s sublimity. The Wordsworthian Sublime is therefore one in which humanity can partake, and a deeply restorative entity, bringing ‘a serene and blessed mood’<sup>32</sup>.

Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan* has at its heart an interrogation of human consciousness and its limits, but allows also for a deeper celebration of human creativity. The speaker finds inspiration in mystical river ‘Alph’, which features a ‘mighty fountain’ that on occasion ‘burst huge fragments’ from the ‘chasm’, a metaphorical rendering of powerful and uncontainable creative energy that a poet accesses. That this symbolic source is a feature of the natural world, described in stereotypically sublime terms (‘with ceaseless turmoil seething’, ‘rebounding hail’ ‘deep romantic chasm’<sup>33</sup>) is significant for our understanding of the Coleridgean Sublime. Poetry may be capable of allowing for human transcendence, but the ultimate source of the inspiration, in typical Romantic fashion, is the natural world.

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<sup>31</sup> Shelley, P.B. (1816). *Mont Blanc*. [online] Poetry Foundation. Available at:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45130/mont-blanc-lines-written-in-the-vale-of-chamouni>.

<sup>32</sup> Wordsworth, W (1798). *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour*. July 13, 1798. [online] Poetry Foundation. Available at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45527/lines-composed-a-few-miles-above-tintern-abbey-on-revisiting-the-banks-of-the-wye-during-a-tour-july-13-1798>.

<sup>33</sup> Coleridge, S.T. (1797). *Kubla Khan*. [online] Poetry Foundation. Available at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43991/kubla-khan>.

The Keatsian Sublime shifts away from this, perhaps as a product of a second-generation Romantic, and centres instead on art being the ultimate source of creative brilliance. This is embodied in much of Keats' work: *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, *On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again*, *Ode to a Nightingale*... indeed the latter two equate poetry to 'wings' with which the reader is transported and inspired<sup>34</sup>. It is in *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*, however, that literature's sublimity is most purely rendered without interruption. Reading is equated to travelling 'in the realms of gold', exploring great art akin to seeing 'goodly states and kingdoms'. It is the 'demesne' 'ruled' by 'deep-brow'd Homer' which is the most alluring to the speaker, and, mediated through Chapman, he is able to 'breathe [Homer's] pure serene'. Poetry here is attributed with similar restorative powers as Wordsworth's 'green pastures'. The sublime experience upon encountering the Greek epic is also compared to scientific discovery - to 'some watcher of the skies When a new planet swims into his ken'<sup>35</sup>. The truth and beauty of Homer instils a 'silence' in the speaker, a reverence for his art and the poetic language itself. In this poem, literature is not only symbolised through natural imagery, but it is raised to the heights of nature, and indeed almost transcends it.

Mortality comes into play in this. Mountains, valleys, great bodies of water... They outdate living memory, and will live beyond it – this is part of the awe they inspire. But great art allows the artists themselves to be immortalised; they surpass normal human fragility, a part of themselves encased in the manuscripts. Longinus encapsulates this in his argument that through sublime writings, authors win for themselves 'an eternity of fame'. But it is more than this – rather an eternity of existence, understanding and influence. It is this that Keats himself wishes to access through his art, and in part why he was so struck by Homer's majesty. In his aim he thought he failed, as his grave-stone attests: 'here lies one whose name was writ in water'<sup>36</sup>. This of course was untrue; he left an indelible mark on English poetry. Fragments of the great artists are immortalised for as long as humanity chooses to engage with their work, sublimity reeling us in.

A discussion of the Keatsian Sublime would be incomplete without reference to the level to which he revels in the often-paradoxical nature of our existence, 'without any irritable reaching after fact or reason'<sup>37</sup>. He labels this adopted philosophy 'negative capability', and its presence is, to him, the hallmark of great literature, being a quality that 'Shakespeare possessed so enormously.' Such is what Longinus was so captured by in Sappho's writing; that 'uniting of opposites' which cuts to the heart of the human condition. This is seminal to our understanding of Keats' investment in sublimity, the Sublime being an entity which allows for extensive treatment of the interstitial and contradictory.

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<sup>34</sup> Keats, J. (1819). *Ode to a Nightingale*. [online] Poetry Foundation. Available at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44479/ode-to-a-nightingale>.

<sup>35</sup> Keats, J. (1816). *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*. [online] Poetry Foundation. Available at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44481/on-first-looking-into-chapmans-homer>.

<sup>36</sup> Miller, L. (2021). *Keats*. Jonathan Cape.

<sup>37</sup> Hebron, S. (2014). *John Keats and 'negative capability'*. The British Library. [online] doi: <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/john-keats-and-negative-capability>



Lucia Clark

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty”<sup>38</sup> – a closing quest for definition

The Sublime remains elusive. We can be sure only of its powers: it delights, it unsettles, it soothes. It is the ‘echo of a great mind’ wrote Longinus, and itself has echoed across centuries in its reception. The natural Sublime, in allowing a secular worship of nature to be expressed, had a clear appeal to the Romantics. It escaped the increasingly urbanised style of living, and in conveying nature as a force of such majesty, the emotional response to one’s own insignificance is given a platform. The idea of the self is therefore amplified and able to be thoughtfully digested by the Romantics in their poetry. The literary Sublime offered something deeper however: man could transcend to the heights of the natural world and be imbued with some of its potency.

At the crux of literature’s allure is ‘truth’. The truth (a rare commodity at any point in time), is a greatly sublime entity; it is desirable, often fearsome, at times placating. The mark of great art is that it lays bare these human profundities. This is, however, often a rejection of dogma; it is more truthful to embrace the liminality that life often includes than to ascribe oneself to fixed parameters or facts. It is this complexity of truth conveyed in Lucretius’ atomism, Longinus’ love for literature, Wordsworth’s dependence on nature, Keats’ musings on Homer and death, which inspires such awe, such fear, such sublimity.

Lucia Clark

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<sup>38</sup> John Keats (1819). *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. [online] Poetry Foundation. Available at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44477/ode-on-a-grecian-urn>.