

Republican Sublimity in John Milton's *The Second Defence of the English People*

David Norbrook defines the sublime as 'what lies just beyond the available means of understanding'.¹ Milton's *Second Defence of the English People* is a text that both utilises the sublime and provides an insight into Milton's personal understanding of sublimity. Milton's sublime is republican in that it denies the existence of an intrinsic link between monarchy and sublimity, instead choosing to identify the sublime with the Christian concept of the divine. The *Second Defence* shows the relationship between poetic sublimity and political sublimity to be reciprocal through Milton's portrayal of the republican poet-polemicist and republican political figures, such as Oliver Cromwell, and provides an insight into Milton's own understanding of the workings of the republican sublime.

Despite the influence of Longinus on the seventeenth-century understanding of the sublime, Milton's understanding was distinctly Christian in nature. Republicans who demonstrate aspects of the sublime, such as Cromwell and Fairfax, are individuals who demonstrate 'supreme courage[,] supreme modesty and supreme holiness'.² Piety and religious devotion are indispensable in the attainment of the republican sublime, not only in the case of political actors, but also in that of poets seeking the sublime. As Milton himself acknowledges, the trope of blindness has long been used to represent divine election and possession of sublime insights. This trope plays an important role in the *Second Defence*, but it is essential to understand that Milton integrates this into his Christianised understanding of the sublime.

Milton cultivates the association made by his republican contemporaries between his blindness and his 'sublimity' of vision.³ He compares himself to Tiresias and Phineas,

¹ David Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric and Politics, 1627-1660*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp.18-19.

² All quotations in this essay from the *Second Defence* are taken from *A Second Defence of the English People*, in *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don M. Wolfe, trans. Helen North, vol. 4, part 1 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), p.669.

³ Norbrook, *The English Republic*, p.2.

reminding his reader that blindness symbolises insight: '[b]ecause of no offence, therefore, does it seem that this man who was godlike and eager to enlighten the human race was deprived of his eyesight, as were a great number of philosophers' (p.585). He then expands this trope so that it refers to an individual's virtue through biblical references to the patriarchs Isaac and Jacob, as well as the story of the man born blind (pp.586-587). Milton connects his polemic to the literary genres of epic and tragedy, invoking the literary sublime, and to biblical narratives, invoking the religious sublime. Milton develops his association between monotheistic piety and the sublime by comparing the warnings of his doctor to the rejection of polytheism: 'I seemed to hear, not the voice of the doctor (even that of Aesculapius, issuing from the shrine at Epidaurus), but the sound of a certain more divine monitor within' (p.588). For Milton, the poet's divine election, symbolised by his blindness, is the source of his capacity to communicate the sublime through his poetry. Sublimity, for Milton, is not dependent on one's politics, but on the nature of one's relationship with divine transcendence.

The independence of sublimity from politics is further established when Milton praises the Queen of Sweden in sublime terms. Christina is described in similar terms to Milton, the republican poet-polemicist himself; the reason she is 'truly royal' (p.604) lies in 'that vigorous mind of yours, plainly of heavenly origin, that purest particle of the divine air which has fallen, so it seems, onto these remote regions' (p.605). The similarities between these two figures, each emblematic of their respective political cause, suggest a common source of sublimity, implying that, for Milton, the republican sublime is more than political. Republicanism is sublime because it draws on something that transcends politics; Milton's republican sublime is fundamentally religious, not political, which is why he is free to praise Christina, to distinguish between tyrants and kings and to assert that sublimity has no intrinsic connection to monarchy, in which sense it is a "republican" notion. This allows Milton to reconsider the implications of the regicide.

Whereas in the *First Defence*, according to Norbrook, the regicide is portrayed as a sublime act due to its defiance of ‘received expectations’, and through its nullification of social illusions sustained by and in the cause of the monarchy,⁴ the opening to the *Second Defence* identifies an alternative source of republican sublimity in the regicide by implicitly writing it into the Judeo-Christian salvation. The ‘citizens’, he writes,

with pre-eminent virtue and a nobility and steadfastness surpassing all the glory of their ancestors, invoked the Lord, followed his manifest guidance, and after accomplishing the most heroic, and exemplary achievements since the foundation of the world, freed the state from grievous tyranny and the church from unworthy servitude (pp.548-549).

The invocation of ‘the foundation of the world’ recalls the Genesis Fall narrative and thus positions the act of regicide within an overarching salvation narrative, connecting the political act with divinely ordained purpose. The citizens of the republic implicitly regain a virtuous, prelapsarian state of existence; as Nigel Smith argues: ‘[i]n Milton, the usage of sublime [...] becomes associated with the virtue which allows mankind to regain what was lost at the Fall.’⁵

Sublimity therefore stems from the divine, but the *Second Defence* then goes on to consider the relationship between its political and poetic manifestations. Political acts can influence the degree to which the sublime enters the public sphere, so long as these have a spiritual dimension. Milton conceives of tyranny in spiritual or moral terms and, insofar as the regicide represents a moral refusal of tyrannical baseness, political republicanism can allow the sublime to enter public life. He distinguishes between kings and tyrants, stating:

if every good man is a king, [...] it follows by the same logic that every bad man is a tyrant [...] a tyrant is not something great [...] but something utterly base. And to the

⁴ Ibid., p.199.

⁵ Nigel Smith, ‘*Areopagitica*: Voicing Contexts’, in *Politics, Poetics and Hermeneutics in Milton’s Prose*, ed. David Loewenstein and James Grantham Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.109.

degree that he is the greatest of all tyrants, to that same degree he is the meanest of all (p.562).

Tyranny represents, therefore, the antithesis of the sublime. Returning to Norbrook's analysis of the regicide as the rejection of monarchical illusion, this can also be applied to the *Second Defence* if it is understood as a recognition of the moral baseness of tyranny, the rejection of which signifies the nation's political turn towards a state of openness to the sublime. This turn is facilitated by a state of political liberty, which the republican poet-polemicist plays an important role in creating.

The poet-polemicist is one who can elevate national discourse and politics to the sublime, through what Smith explains as 'the fusion of poetic selfhood with national destiny'.⁶ Loewenstein's idea that the poet-polemicist is sanctified 'in implicit contrast [...] to the sacred figure of Charles I', usurping the monarch's role as the embodiment of the state,⁷ illustrates how this process works. Milton proclaims that '[d]ivine law and divine favor have rendered us not only safe from the injuries of men, but almost sacred' (p.590). As national identity is collapsed onto him, the poet-polemicist is presented as an alternative locus of union between heaven and earth. Milton suggests that the divine shields the republican poet in contrast to the royalist version of the same theme seen in the portrayal of Salmasius. He quotes a royalist extract, saying, '[Salmasius] is the one "whom divine providence has raised up in evil times for the salvation of the world. At last, therefore, the time was at hand for kings to be protected by such a shield"' (p.593). Whereas Salmasius is the means by which the divine protects the monarchy, like a human shield, Milton is protected by the divine, the divine itself is his shield. In Milton's version, the poet becomes the contested object because he represents the nation. In republican poetics the monarch is replaced by the sublimely inspired individual, who, for

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ David Loewenstein, 'Milton and the Poetics of Defense', in *Politics, Poetics and Hermeneutics*, p.182.

Milton, is exemplified by the poet; rather than protecting the state through the monarch, therefore, the divine protects the state through the poet.

Although the sublime can enter the public sphere through the poet, the relationship between the poetic and the political sublime is not one-directional. The poet's political circumstances influence their ability to attain the poetic sublime. Whereas the republican poet represents the apex of the sublime, in the royalist version of the same idea, the monarch occupies this role and is served by the poet in an almost dehumanised capacity. According to Longinus, "tis impossible for a *servile man* to be a true *Oratour*" [original italics];⁸ consequently, royalist politics render royalist incapable of conveying the sublime. Norbrook argues that the seventeenth-century sublime had a distinctly masculine character in contrast to the implicitly feminine character of 'decorative beauty',⁹ which Milton uses to underline the inferiority of royalist poetics and their distance from the sublime by labelling his detractors 'peddlers of effeminate little verses' (p.592). For Milton, political circumstances have a decisive impact on poetics.

Republican liberty is therefore the ideal political climate for the entry of the sublime into the public and poetic spheres, but the republican poet-polemicist remains key to this, since he is both a political and a poetic figure. Milton imagines himself 'leading home again everywhere in the world [...] Liberty herself' (p.555), and introducing 'a product [...] far more excellent than that of Ceres. [...] [T]he renewed cultivation of freedom and civic life that I disseminate through cities, kingdoms, and nations' (pp.555-556). Political liberty is delivered in textual form with a sublimity that surpasses even the gods and heroes. For Milton, textual defence of the revolution implies the dissemination of sublime republican poetics. In this

⁸ Longinus, *Peri hypsous, or, Dionysius Longinus of the height of eloquence. Rendred out of the originall by J.H. Esq.*, (London: 1652), p.LXXIX, <<https://www.proquest.com/books/peri-hypsous-dionysius-longinus-height-eloquence/docview/2248555973/se-2?accountid=8312>> [Accessed 20/11/2023].

⁹ Norbrook, *The English Republic*, p.21.

respect, the *Second Defence* has a similar purpose to Milton's *Eikonoklastes*, which aimed, according to Norbrook, 'to restore poetry and rhetoric to a wider public function, to open them up in a potentially sublime direction'.¹⁰ Milton's republican poet is overtly heroic, proclaiming that with the burning of the *First Defence*, '[you] built a Herculean pyre, whence I might rise to greater fame' (p.653). From this, Nigel Smith argues that '[t]o have one's books burnt is to be cremated heroically in the Herculean way, given that books for Milton are living men'.¹¹ The literary text actively engages in the political sphere, which reinforces the link between the poetic and political sublime; and the polemic becomes the textual counterpart to the martial:

I have not borne arms for liberty merely on my own doorstep, but have also wielded them so far afield that reason and justification of these by no means commonplace events [...] are made splendidly manifest to the supreme glory of my countrymen and as an example to posterity (pp.684-685).

The text defends the republican cause and its 'events' and the function of the poet-polemicist is to consolidate the link between the political and the poetic spheres to facilitate the transfer of sublime energy between the two. Loewenstein argues that Milton was 'both anxious about and fascinated by the intersection of the imaginative and the political'.¹² The political and poetic manifestations of the republican sublime are closely linked, but to understand exactly how Milton understands this 'intersection', we need to turn back to Longinus' analysis of the workings of the sublime.

According to Neil Hertz, the Longinian sublime relies on a dynamic of risk, where power is transferred 'from the threatening forces to the poetic activity itself'.¹³ The energy of

¹⁰ Ibid., p.208.

¹¹ Nigel Smith, *Literature and Revolution in England, 1640-1660*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), p.213.

¹² Loewenstein, *Politics, Poetics and Hermeneutics*, p.189.

¹³ Neil Hertz, "A Reading of Longinus," *Critical Inquiry* 9, no.3 (March 1983), 584-586.

a risky act is translated into the poetic style.¹⁴ This is seen in Milton's address to Cromwell at the end of the *Second Defence*, where he combines an anaphoric structure with an emphasis on Cromwell's political responsibility to heighten the sublimity of his discourse:

Honor this great confidence reposed in you, honor your country's singular hope in you.
Honor the faces and wounds of the many brave men[.] [...] Honor too what foreign
nations think and say of us[.] [...] If the republic should miscarry, [...] surely no greater
shame and disgrace could befall this country (p.673).

These terms recall Milton's self-positioning as the defender of his country, particularly the reference to the 'foreign nations', who are the *Second Defence's* readership. Loewenstein argues that 'Milton links Cromwell's authority [...] with the creativity of the revolutionary writer',¹⁵ for example when he calls Cromwell 'the author of liberty' (p.672). The dynamic between Milton and Cromwell shows that the poetic and the political manifestations of the republican sublime exist in a reciprocal relationship. Milton's prose is elevated by the transfer of energy from the uncertain political situation, yet his purpose in including this address to Cromwell at the end of his *Defence* is to translate that poetic energy back into political action in order to maintain the sublimity of republican politics.

Furthermore, just as Cromwell resembles the poet, so too does the poet resemble Cromwell. They both attain the sublime through the transfer of sublime energy from a dangerous act; for Milton this is represented by his blindness. He informs his reader that he suffered 'the virtual loss of my remaining eye, and the doctors were making learned predictions that if I should undertake this task, I would shortly lose both eyes' (p.588). Not only does the republican poet fight for his cause on the textual and rhetorical battlefield, but it is almost certain that he will be, so to speak, wounded in the process. The sacrifice of his eyesight in the

¹⁴ Annabel Patterson, *Reading Between the Lines*, (London: Routledge, 1993), p.266.

¹⁵ Loewenstein, *Politics, Poetics and Hermeneutics*, p.187.

service of the republic elevates the poet's discourse to sublime status, which is in turn reflected back onto the political cause for which the sacrifice is made. The textual relationship between the figures of Milton and Cromwell demonstrates how the poetic and political aspects of the republican sublime influence one another, while emphasising that they share an external source. Like the poet, Cromwell will be judged on 'whether there truly live in you that piety, faith and justice, and moderation of soul which convince us that you have been raised by the power of God beyond all other men' (pp.673-674). For Cromwell to embody the political sublime, he must have a relationship with its divine source, just as the blind poet's Christian piety is a sign of his divine election and the confirmation of his insight into sublimity.

Ultimately, the *Second Defence* presents the political sublime and the poetic sublime as forms that, through their reciprocity, manifest the greater sublime in the public sphere. In the words of David Loewenstein, it 'is a text centrally concerned with the role of literary discourse in the new social order',¹⁶ to which we might add that it is also concerned with the role of social order in the new literary discourse. Milton underlines the reciprocal influence exerted by the poetic and political manifestations of the sublime on one another to defend both the political cause of the revolution and the sublimity of republican poetics. The *Second Defence* therefore exemplifies and expounds Milton's aesthetic and political understandings of the republican sublime.

¹⁶ Loewenstein, *Politics, Poetics and Hermeneutics in Milton's Prose*, p.177.

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