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**David L. Sedley**, *Sublimity and Skepticism in Montaigne and Milton*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005. vi + 208 pp. Bibliography and index. \$65.00 (cl). ISBN-13: 978-0-472-11528-0. ISBN-10: 0-472-11528-6.

Review by Jan Miernowski, University of Wisconsin-Madison and University of Warsaw.

The purpose of David Sedley's book is to demonstrate the close and mutual relationship between sublimity and skepticism in early modern European culture. This task may seem paradoxical for different reasons. Sublimity is an aesthetic concept, which, despite the limited circulation of Longinus' treatise in the Renaissance, gained wider circulation only after Boileau translated it into French in 1674. Skepticism is a brand name for an array of diverse epistemological attitudes. It has never disappeared from the European mental landscape, while having gained notoriety in the second half of the sixteenth century. Such chronological sequencing of skepticism and sublimity allowed critics to see the later as the reaction to, consequence or covert version of, the former. Instead of defining sublimity as some kind of output of skepticism, Sedley claims that both phenomena dialectically feed on one another. More specifically, he asserts that Montaigne's skepticism aimed at producing sublimity, while Milton's sublimity was the output of his skepticism (p. 15). The choice of the supporting material for the author's thesis is far from self-evident: traditionally, Montaigne and Milton are associated respectively with skepticism and with sublimity, but seldom are they considered to epitomize both concepts at the same time. Moreover, historically speaking, Montaigne and Milton have little in common, since they belong to two distinct national cultures and two different moments in European cultural history. Knowing if one has actually influenced the other is not, however, of much concern to Sedley.

Despite these challenges, Sedley's argument is rigorously constructed and well explained. The introduction lays out the major stages of the critical assessment of the two concepts under consideration. From the triumph of sublimity over skepticism diagnosed by historians such as Samuel Monk, through the post-modernist suspicion that Kant's sublimity is in fact the expression of skepticism, up to the New Historicism's careful cultivation of doubt and wonder, Sedley sees the progress of "epistemological difficulty and aesthetic force [which] energize each other" (p. 8), and which create conditions for the development of their dialectical corollary. The price to pay for constructing such a coherent narrative is twofold: Sedley expands the concepts he investigates, while transforming them from historical objects into features of the (post-) modern historian's subjectivity. In this way, Kant's understanding of Longinus' sublimity evolves into Greenblatt's wonder which testifies to the grandeur of the critic's aesthetic experience. At the other end of the chronological spectrum, a similar mechanism of conceptual expansion (or "explosion", as Sedley calls it himself, p. 15) allows the author to situate the pre-Boileauvian interest for sublimity in the context of the Renaissance aesthetics of *admiratio*. Finally Sedley warns his reader not to expect a teleological history which leads to modernity through an account of the conceptual evolution. The book is conceived as an essay in comparative literature which proposes a "model of reading." Sublimity and skepticism are merely "coordinates" which define (albeit "indefinitely") a "threshold" between early-modern culture and modernity.

Following such preliminary statements, the book unfolds through four, well balanced, and clearly defined analytical chapters devoted respectively to Montaigne's journal from his trip to Italy, his *Essays*, as well as Milton's *Comus*, and the *Paradise Lost*.

Chapter one is devoted to Montaigne's meditation on the ruins of Ancient Rome. Sedley argues that

Montaigne's focus on the fragmentation, paired with his doubt about the possibility of recollection of the Ancient heritage, should not be viewed only as the mark of his skepticism but also as the seminal moment of his sublimity. Such a claim goes further than the previous considerations on Montaigne's Roman ruins (Greene, Boccassini) and bypasses the debate over the stylistic impact of Longinus' treatise on the *Essays*. According to Sedley, such discussion is fatally inconclusive because the vocabulary of the sublime used by Montaigne may in fact come from the poetics of *admiratio* and possibly be tainted by Neoplatonic *furor*. In that respect Sedley is clearly influenced by French students of early modern sublimity such as Magnien, while refusing to limit his considerations to the history of rhetoric. Through careful comparison of Petrarch's, Du Bellay's, and Montaigne's admiration for Roman ruins, he shows how the *Journal de voyage* aims at sublimity through increased skepticism, instead of striving to resurrect the grandeur of Ancient city, or transferring *admiratio* from architectural achievements onto new monuments of literature.

Similarly, Sidely sees the *Essays* as "ruins" of Ancient culture fashioned in sublime style by skepticism. Montaigne's fragmentation of Horace's, Lucretius', and Cicero's texts in the essay "It Is Folly to Measure..." shows how the French author diverts wonder away from knowledge and creates doubt. What is less clear is the skeptical transformation of wonder into sublimity, which Sedley tries to demonstrate by analyzing the syntax, punctuation and typography of the next essay, "On Friendship." Rather, it seems to me that Montaigne's resolution of wonder into doubt leads to more doubt instead of generating sublimity. At least this is what one can deduce from the essay "On the lame": "Iris is the daughter of Thaumantis: amazement is the foundation of all philosophy; inquiry, its way of advancing; and ignorance is the end." [1] The critique of Corras' judgment which follows this quotation shows that judicial resolution is far from being sublime. The Aristotelian source of this fragment is quoted by Sedley, [2] but not its rewriting by Montaigne. Instead, Sedley includes both Socrates and Caton under the aesthetic heading of sublimity, without, in my view, insisting enough on Montaigne's rhetorical preference for the pedestrian ethos of the Athenian philosopher (p. 59). Such privileging of Cato's sublimity, placed in opposition to Cicero, leads Sedley to conclude that the fragmented style of the *Essays* aims at admiration, which is similar to the wonder produced by Ancient ruined grandeur. We can assume with the author that the image of ruins can serve as an efficient metatextual metaphor for Montaigne's writing. We should however notice that Montaigne sees his admiration for Roman grandeur as a vain pleasure in which, nevertheless, he indulges without much afterthoughts. [3] One can remain puzzled about the sublimity of such an ambivalent and self-ironic feeling.

The second half of the book is devoted to Milton, whom Sedley considers to be influenced by Baconian skepticism. Chapter three presents *Comus* as the dramatization of the grand style for which Milton would become famous. The core of Sedley's argumentation is the analysis of the stylistic echoes in the Lady's song. According to the author, they carry a skeptical charge, reminiscent of Bacon's skeptic assessment of the natural phenomenon of echo. Such assumed similarity allows Sedley to read Milton's mask as a political and rhetorical corollary of Bacon's scientific epistemology. Or rather, the correlation would be full if *Comus* conformed to the genre of mask, which should lead the spectator to know and admire the play's aristocratic patron. This is not, however, the case: the Lady's confusion and the stylistic echoes of her song do not serve to construct knowledge, but rather indicate how Milton came to write sublimely. The line of reasoning in chapter three is certainly very ingenious, but also quite convoluted and somehow unconvincing. It is captivating, because Sedley combines epistemological and stylistic considerations (while, however, postponing theological issues to the very end of the chapter). It is not very persuasive because of Sedley's rather bold claim that *Comus*'s echoes should be considered as metapoetic metaphors of Milton's sublime writing.

*Paradise Lost* serves to further demonstrate Milton's interplay between skepticism and sublimity in the last chapter of the book. Now the focus is on the figure of Satan who fails, in Sedley's view, to realize the sublime potential of his skeptical doubt, which, ultimately serves to aggrandize God. One would expect this line of reasoning to include a more comprehensive discussion of Milton's theological views. [4]

Instead, Sedley chooses to turn his attention to the poem's reception, namely Marvell's encomium of the *Paradise Lost*, which, as the author contends, uses doubt to highlight the sublimity of Milton's poetry.

The conclusion of Sedley's book links the skeptic and early modern sublimity, with its theorization by Burke, Pascal, and Kant. The bibliography which ends the book testifies to the comprehensive and thorough knowledge by its author of the extensive critical literature pertaining to the topic.

Sedley's book should be viewed less as a strictly speaking historical monograph, but more as an essay in interdisciplinary and comparative literary analysis. The idea of bringing together skepticism and sublimity is not entirely new, but Sedley's commentary on early modern authors is particularly thought-provoking. In conclusion, I would like to stress one feature of the book which I find the most valuable and one which, in my view, remains the most disappointing. I would like to congratulate the author for inviting his reader on an intellectual journey into the prehistory of the sublime, an era when this concept was not yet fully crystallized as an aesthetic category. The choice of skepticism as a revealing factor for such process is certainly fruitful and fascinating. At the same time I am disappointed by the fact that despite having extended the semantic realm of both skepticism and sublime, Sedley devotes so little attention to their interference with the religious mentality and the theological conceptual apparatus that underpins such concepts as humility, spiritual poverty, transcendence, God's glory, and ineffability.

#### NOTES

[1] Ed. by P. Villey and V.-L. Saulnier, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965), p. 1030 (translation by M. A. Screech).

[2] *Metaphysics* 982b, (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Loeb Classical Library, 1933).

[3] III, 9, ed. by P. Villey and V.-L. Saulnier, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965), p. 997.

[4] See, for instance Victoria's Kahn seminal essay "Allegory and the Sublime in *Paradise Lost*", in, Annabel Patterson ed., *John Milton* (London: Longman, 1992), pp. 185-201, included in the book's bibliography.

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