

Genres of the Sublime: Byronic Tragedy, *Manfred*, and “The Alpine Journal” in the Light of some European Contemporaries

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Article abstract

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GENRES OF THE SUBLIME: BYRONIC TRAGEDY, *MANFRED*,
AND "THE ALPINE JOURNAL" IN THE LIGHT OF SOME
EUROPEAN CONTEMPORARIES

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Résumé

Cet article aborde un aspect négligé des écrits sur le sublime : celui du genre. Je ferai valoir que les critiques abordent trop souvent le sublime comme s'il opérât transcendentalement par rapport à ses instantiations, cherchant peu à comprendre comment le mode du sublime s'agence avec les genres à l'intérieur desquels il est encodé.

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Anyone writing on the sublime has the at least faintly paradoxical task of trying to be clear about something that, by definition, is not. Obscure, infinite, boundless, unfathomable, un-imaginable, incomprehensible: these are some of recurrent predicates of the sublime. The hermeneutic task, Schleiermacher used to say, is an infinite one but somehow in matters of the sublime it seems a little more infinite. Yet despite the elusive character of the subject matter, there is a good deal to be learned by attending to the complexities and specificities of the discourses of the sublime, especially

in the Romantic era that was the highpoint of its theory and one of the highpoints of its practice. Recent decades, especially the 1980s, have seen an especially vigorous and rigorous series of studies of the sublime. In the context of the poststructuralist critique of representation generally — led variously by Derrida and Foucault and sometimes stretching back to Heidegger's critique of metaphysics — it made sense that many critics and thinkers would return to one of the very few times and places in the history of philosophy where the limits of representation were most resolutely confronted: namely, in the thinking of the sublime in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹ In principle, the sublime is a trans-historical phenomenon but we know that the fate of the sublime as conceptualized and the fate of the theory of the sublime are far less trans-historical: the word and the concept and perhaps even the practice of the sublime have their appearances and disappearances. And even when we do agree on its “appearance,” we are not necessarily all on the same page as to how or even if the term sublime should be used. In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno advised abandoning the category as too hopelessly embedded in a certain piety of culture as Ersatz religion, whereas Lyotard proposes the sublime as the dominant category of artistic practice in the twentieth century and hence indispensable. And in this broad spectrum from all (Lyotard) to next to nothing (Adorno), there is a wide range of positions as to when and how the concept should be invoked.

Still, in the grand outlines of this thinking and even in its recent reception, the profile of the sublime may still be reasonably clear: it tends to entail a perceptual overwhelming of the subject in the face of an awesome object of nature *or* a work of art. The subject is, as a result, unable to represent properly the object or event that is the impetus for this odd sort of experience, an experience attractive and repulsive at one and the same time, producing, as Kant says, “negative pleasure,” *negative Lust*.² Typically the imagination, which Kant calls the faculty of representation, the *Darstellungsvermögen*, fails and the subject is left, at least temporarily, tongue-tied or worse, prey to a kind of figurative death, a “blockage of the vital forces” (*Hemmung der Lebenskräfte*), to invoke another key phrase of Kant's (Paragraph 23).

But almost as soon as we get beyond the basics of the sublime situation, and perhaps even before we do, differences emerge. Different

poets, artists, and thinkers, implicitly or explicitly, foreground certain kinds of sublime experience over others or they construct narratives, and different sorts of narratives, to deal with, if not quite to represent as such, the occasions for sublime experience. Thus Burke will stress the element of terror as constitutive of the phenomenon and Longinus will foreground, especially by way of his examples, the dynamic of the self going out of itself. Kant emphasizes how the very failure of the imagination in the face of the sublime will prompt that faculty of mind to *sacrifice* itself — that's his term — to *sacrifice* itself to reason, a move which snatches victory from the jaws of defeat and, for the program of critical philosophy, constitutes a most crucial articulation between the faculties of imagination and reason, without which the entire system of the three critiques would lack a final articulation.³ Even this most minimal Kantian story points us to a interesting dialectic or maybe just tension between the isolated moment, on the one hand, and the encompassing narrative, on the other, that has consequences for how we might think the sublime, not least in relation to genre. My hunch is that we have for too long operated as if the sublime operated transcendently, as it were, that is, always somehow working the same way regardless of the *kind* of text it may inhabit or inform. Even if there is, at a certain level of abstraction, a certain homogeneity of the sublime within the horizon of its various theorizations, can we really say that the sublime works in the same manner in an epic as in a Gothic novel, the same way in an ode as in a tragedy? Certainly the history of criticism suggests that not every genre lends itself equally well as a possible vehicle of the sublime. But even some of the counter-intuitive kinds of genres have been perfectly good media for the sublime mode.⁴ Still, it's hard to imagine quite how, say, — and this is an example that now brings us close to Byron — *satire* very readily could be conducted in a sublime mode, excepting that a certain virtuosity in any genre has at least a little something sublime about it, rather in the way that Byron in a letter to Douglas Kinnaird writes: “As to *Don Juan* confess — you dog and be candid — that it is the sublime of that *there* sort of writing” (Marchand 315). In judgments of satirical writing as sublime, I would suggest we are often talking about the author rather than the text or, not quite as problematic, the performance of the text rather than its matter or, better still, the dialectical relation between matter and performance. The virtuosity of *Don Juan* is in some sense

sublime without the poem itself quite being of the order of the sublime. Auden claimed that Byron's characteristic mode was comic not satirical (xi). But Auden's definition of satire is rather restrictive, entailing a necessary hope for reform, whereas Byron, it seems to me, was quite happy to satirize regardless of anyone's possible reform being on the horizon. Indeed, reform would have left him bereft of targets.

Of the major English Romantics Byron has been the least discussed in terms of the sublime. Virtually all of the rest have had full monographs devoted to them: *Wordsworth and the Sublime*, *Keats and the Sublime*, and so on. There's little doubt that Lord Byron cut a sublime figure in European culture while alive and for a long time after. The very phrase "Byronic hero" seems to have as much to do with Byron as with the heroes of his texts, even if the distinction between Byron and his heroes is hard to maintain and sometimes downright impossible. If Byron is relatively un-discussed in terms of the sublime that has, I think, a good deal to do with the primacy of what I would still call satire — not least in the original sense of "mixed bag" — throughout his work and in his masterpiece *Don Juan*. In short, it is the Popean legacy. (Not that Pope was not also the translator of *The Iliad*, which constituted for Longinus the first great example of the sublime, after which everything has been more or less downhill.⁵) But satire is far from the whole story in Byron. So where should we turn to locate the sublime in his work?

We might think in terms of sublime figures or personages, Prometheus or Napoleon, say, or in terms of materials, that is, some kinds of content over others, or in the domain that will concern me most, certain genres where the sublime may flourish. But before turning to genre, we might dwell for a moment on the matter of materials. It seems to me that a good deal of the sublimity in Byron is determined — perhaps a little surprisingly given Byron's attitude to religion — by the presence of Biblical materials, primarily from the Hebrew Scriptures, or what so often used to be called the "Old Testament." We know that even from a tender age the Old Testament gave Byron pleasure, whereas the New Testament was felt to be a task (Marchand 14). In the domain of Byron's texts that engage Biblical sources, *Cain* is perhaps the best example, but not to the exclusion of *Manfred* or even the *Hebrew Melodies*. And we know that Byron contemplated writing a work in imitation of the Book of Job but

shrank back from it, defeated by what he thought of as the incomparable example of the poetic sublime.⁶ It is good to recall that the Hebrew Scriptures were considered by many, for better or worse, an “Oriental” text, thus significantly removed from Byron in time and space. Even just the *antiquity* of the ancient Hebrew Scriptures helped to create an aura of sublimity — antiquity being a possible but not sufficient quality for the sublime in Burke. But it also mattered that the status and integrity of the individual subject, if the term is not too anachronistic in the Hebrew Scriptures, was so often precarious — so often verging on nothing. This is an aspect Hegel stresses in his decidedly idiosyncratic analysis of the sublime, which circumscribes the sublime in the strict sense to ancient Biblical poetry and, in the strictest sense — which is also the negative sense — to the Davidic Psalms, in which nothing so much is proclaimed as the nothingness of human existence in relation to the divine. For this strain of the sublime, Byron and his contemporaries were directly or indirectly indebted to Robert Lowth’s *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* delivered at Oxford in the middle of the eighteenth century. The modern reception of Lowth suggests that his principal contribution was the theory of parallelism, proving that Hebrew poetry was actually poetry, but in fact a good deal more of the time and space in the lectures was devoted to the sublime. Here attention was accorded to the highly figurative and, with respect to the deity, necessarily negative language enlisted to represent him, all the time knowing full well that God could not really be represented. This sort of the sublime is a kind of discursive correlative of the Hebraic prohibition against images, which would be so crucial a hallmark of the sublime for Kant and many of his contemporaries. It is also in keeping with Hegel’s discussion of the sublime as purely a matter of the word, and pre-eminently of the Hebraic, poetic word. It also helps explain why, despite the sometimes more or less overt anti-Semitism in Kant and to a lesser extent Hegel, these thinkers could return, with some respect and sympathy even, to ancient Judaic models as premiere examples of the sublime. Protestant iconoclasm vaults over the centuries of Catholic benightedness — I’m ventriloquizing here — to return to the Judaic resistance to the image with which it has a strong affinity. (I note in passing that Byron has some caustic things to say about the prohibition against images, claiming it was rooted in God’s jealousy, who feared that the perfection of the human form attainable in

sculpture constituted an annoying threat to his sovereignty in that domain.⁷⁾ Edmund Burke, even though he may well have been a crypto-Catholic, also promoted words over images as vehicles of the sublime, for their relative indeterminacy and for the powerful possibilities of the “assemblage” of words, as he phrases it, superb examples of which were to be found in Milton’s inventive syntax. In this he follows Longinus who had implicitly promoted hyperbaton — or inversion — as the paradigmatic figure of the sublime, which is to say, a literary figure that cannot easily be understood in terms of representation, understood phenomenally. It somehow fits perfectly that the two poets quoted most often by Burke — Milton and Homer — were blind.

By invoking the word and syntax we are moving closer to the matter of form, since materials cannot quite of their own accord constitute the sublime. Even the *fiat lux*, God’s inaugural “let there be light,” Boileau suggests, would fall flat if it were expressed in a periphrastic or long-winded fashion. As has become proverbial, from the sublime to the ridiculous there is only a step. Thus formal and generic matters have to be taken into account and I would suggest that in Byron the primary locus of the sublime is in tragedy or, perhaps more precisely, something very close to tragedy. Quasi-tragedies, so to speak.

Walter Benjamin, in his *Trauerspiel* book, claimed that “a major work will either establish the genre or abolish it; and the perfect work will do both.” This is tantamount to saying that perfectly achieved works are in some sense utterly singular, even singular in their relation to the genre or genres proximate to them. In some of the remarkable examples of Romantic tragedy or quasi-tragedy we confront the paradoxical situation of a genre with only one example, as Schelling claimed was the case with Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, which counted, for so many of the German Romantics as the inaugural work of “modern” literature. In this light, the principal text by Byron that I shall address is *Manfred* but largely in the mode of using it, despite *its* singularity, as a point of departure for thinking about any number of texts.

We know that Byron had a vexed relation to the stage. On the one hand, there was his active involvement in Drury Lane, with a vested interest in what was to be presented to the public and on the other hand, there was his professed **horror** of the stage — horror is Byron’s word —

such that his dramatic works that had, from the outset, and for varying over-determined reasons, little or no chance of being performed (BLJ 5: 185). David Erdman has suggestively charted this dynamic in Byron in the context of the period's anti-theatricalism, a movement well analyzed more generally by Julie Carlson and Alan Richardson among others, a movement whose most notorious document is usually thought to be Lamb's essay claiming Shakespeare's plays were "least calculated" for the stage.⁸ It is perhaps more accurate to think of Lamb's provocative essay less as anti-theatrical than as entailing a recognition of how the particular sublimity of the great Shakespearean tragedies could not be contained by the stage. Lamb has relatively little to say against theatre per se, aside from some not so controversial hesitations about the constraints of spectacle and the spectacular. In this, he is not so far removed from Aristotle, given the philosopher's marked preference for idea or thought (*dianoia*) over spectacle (*opsis*). But Lamb's commentary does move us in the direction of a *certain kind* of drama, very close to Byron's famous notion of "mental theatre". Lamb remarks:

To know the internal workings and movements of a great mind, of an Othello or a Hamlet for instance, the *when* and the *why* and the *how far* they should be moved; to what pitch a passion is becoming; to give the reins and to pull in the curb exactly at the moment when the drawing in or the slackening is most graceful; seems to demand a reach of intellect of a vastly different extent from that which is employed upon the bare imitation of the signs of those passions in the countenance or gesture, which signs are usually observed to be most lively and emphatic in the weaker sort of minds (Lamb 86)

Whereas here Lamb's emphasis is on the limitations of actors in their attempts to present Shakespeare effectively, it is clear that the principal object of his concern is with a certain *interiority* of the Shakespearean hero, with a kind of mental theatre *avant la lettre*. Theatrical performance tends not only to do little to help get this interiority across: it rather impedes its communication. Hence the superiority of *reading* Shakespeare

and his main characters' characters, which are less written in their faces than buried in their thoughts and encrypted in their words.

Missing from Erdman's perspicacious account — and Lamb's essay helps draw our attention to this — is some sense of the operations of what Harold Bloom called “the anxiety of influence” and Walter Jackson Bate “the burden of the past,” that is to say, the network of forces having to do with the haunting and often debilitating models of the great exemplars of the past that impede creation as much as they inspire it. Virtually all of the major Romantic writers, including the Big Six, variously wanted to be a kind of Shakespeare born again, that is to say, a successful writer for the stage who sacrificed nothing in poetical complexity. These forces weighed on Byron, even if he sometimes eschewed the increasingly widespread lionization of Shakespeare in his time.

None of the major Romantic poets wrote more than the occasional play that was either good *or* successful or, even more rarely, both: one thinks of Shelley's *The Cenci* or perhaps Coleridge's *Remorse* but not much else. It might be said that Joanna Baillie was the only British writer of the time to write more than the odd tragedy that was both aesthetically meritorious and viable for the stage. And to make matters worse, there was also something like a burden of the present, in the example of the successful German dramatic writers of the day: Goethe and Schiller, above all.⁹ Even Kotzebue — and this was a galling fact — was infinitely more successful than any of the great English Romantics. And yet, despite or because of these models of dramatic and sometimes theatrical excellence, past and present, Byron devoted a great deal of his poetic energy (which was, admittedly, not a huge fraction of his formidable energy in general) to dramas or, what is not necessarily the same thing, dramatic poems.

In this light, I want to offer less a detailed reading of any Byron text than to present a framework or frameworks that might assist us in thinking about a number of texts by Byron and in Romanticism more generally. For the purposes of exposition I shall take *Manfred* as a point of departure — but really a departure — for thinking about the sublime in and in relation to the tangled matter of genre, with a focus on tragedy but using as well Byron's “Alpine Journal” as a kind of foil.

From the very outset of its critical reception, *Manfred* was clearly recognized as moving in the mode of the sublime. As Francis Jeffrey wrote in his account of the text (and it was a text, not a performance):

He contemplated but a dim and magnificent sketch which did not admit of more accurate drawing, or more brilliant colouring. Its obscurity is a part of its grandeur, and the darkness that rests upon it, and the smoky distance in which it is lost, are all devices to increase its majesty, to stimulate our curiosity, and to impress us with deeper awe. (qtd. in Rutherford 117)

This is by no means always the judgment rendered on *Manfred*: Jeffrey himself undercuts this verdict elsewhere in his review, though his more negative comments are a far cry from Auden's dictum that "the play is dead and a big bore" (ix). Yet the drama still has its defenders today: Michael Foot calls it, rather more analytically, "a serious poem on a tremendous theme" (190).

Byron himself used the word "metaphysical" to characterize his *Manfred* and the term certainly points to the peculiarly intellectual or conceptual character of the work, called a dramatic poem. The unusual classification perhaps derives from *Samson Agonistes* with which it bears some similarities, though for Milton such a classification was not opposed to tragedy. In principle, a metaphysical drama could take place anywhere, but Byron chooses to double-code it as sublime by setting his lofty intellectual drama in the most textbook locus for this aesthetic mode: the Alps. (This is a setting only to be outdone, in terms of the sublime, by act 2 of *Cain* being located in "The Abyss of Space." How would one stage that?) Byron's "Alpine Journal" of 1816 furnishes one striking entry into this material and it is also of interest not least because the journey was one of the sources for *Manfred*. But it also provides a very different *sort* of writing exactly where some of the concerns are the same.

Byron's account of his travels in the Alps begins unprepossessingly enough. Mont Blanc first appears only between two blanks, two dashes: "weather very fine — the Lake calm and clear — Mont Blanc — and the Aiguille of Argentière both very distinct ..." (BLJ 5: 96). But we are soon treated to more traditionally sublime discourse, and this time in a way that

inscribes gender distinctions aligned with the beautiful and the sublime that had started to harden more than a half-century before. In a passage very like Coleridge's account of a young lady's aesthetic gaffe at the Falls of Clyde, when she called the Falls "pretty" instead of "sublime" (thus forming part of a tradition in which men teach women the difference between the sublime and the beautiful, which also happens to be bound up, for Kant, Burke, and others, in the putative differences between men and women), Byron notes:

On our return met an English party in a carriage — a lady in it fast asleep in the most anti-narcotic spot in the world — excellent — I remember at Chamouni — in the very eyes of Mont Blanc — hearing another woman — English also — claim to her party — "did you ever see anything more *rural*" — as if it was Highgate or Hampstead-or Brompton-or Hayes. — "*Rural* quotha — Rocks — pines — torrents — Glaciers — Clouds — and Summits of eternal snow far above them — and "*Rural!*" I did not know the thus exclaiming fair one — but she was a — very good kind of woman." (97)¹⁰

Without expressly saying so, Byron is lambasting members of the *fair* sex — and the appellation is already a sign of the problem — either for having no feeling for the sublime (sleeping right through it) or for confusing the sublime with the merely rural, and this in perhaps the most clichéd locus of the sublime, period. No site was more *de rigueur* for Romantic poets, even and perhaps especially the British. Shelley duly wrote his "Mont Blanc" and Wordsworth's sublime encounter in the Alps forms arguably the high point, literally and otherwise, of *The Prelude*. And when Coleridge couldn't see the sights or sites in person as the occasion for writing a poem, he simply borrowed, to put it kindly, from a German woman poet the basis for his "Hymn Before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamounix."

In Byron's "Alpine Journal" his telegraphic notation — with its plethora of paratactic dashes — is well suited to the discontinuous, rupturing mode of the sublime. Such syntax is all the more crucial to the

description of the Jungfrau — which, when Byron (anticipating Manfred precisely) is striving to forget himself and his relations to a certain young woman, is not just any name for a mountain — the mountain that will reappear in *Manfred*:

at the Curate's — set out to see the Valley —
heard an Avalanche fall — like thunder Arrived at
the foot of the Mountain (the Yung-frau. i.e. the
Maiden) — Glaciers — torrents — one of these
torrents *nine hundred feet* in height of visible
descent-lodge — saw Glacier — enormous —
Storm came on — thunder — lightning — hail! —
in all perfection — and beautiful

A little further on, Byron continues:

the torrent is in shape curving over the rock — like
the *tail* of a white horse streaming in the wind —
such as might be conceived would be that of the
“*pale horse*” on which *Death* is mounted in the
Apocalypse. — It is neither mist nor water but
something between both — it's [sic] immense
height (nine hundred feet) gives it a wave — a
curve — a spreading here — a condensation there
— wonderful — & indescribable. (101)

This is classic testimony to the workings of the sublime, culminating in a verbal throwing up of the hands, as if the scene successfully resists translation into words. The reader of *Manfred* will have noticed how some of the phrases appearing in the play are taken almost verbatim from the journal, such as the observation on the pale horse of Death. That phrase is an interesting counter-example to the rule in this prose effusion, in being longer and less interrupted than the surrounding prose, all of it choppy. It is perhaps this coherence that makes it particularly fitting for the far more regular syntax of the drama or dramatic poem.¹¹ But is the sublime in this scene, however variously rendered into prose, really having its desired effect? Having just noted that he has “seen some of the noblest views in the world,” Byron goes on to say:

But in all this — the recollection of bitterness — & more especially of recent & more home desolation — which must accompany me through life — have preyed upon me here — and neither the music of the Shepherd — the crashing of the Avalanche — nor the Cloud — have for one Moment — lightened the weight upon my heart — nor enabled me to lose my own wretched identity in the majesty and the Glory — around — above — & beneath me. (104-5)

Here there is no experiential equivalent of the loss of self, of the *ekstasis*, the characteristic effect of the rhetorical sublime in Longinus. Geoffrey Hartman long ago outlined the pervasive pre-occupation of European Romanticism with anti-self-consciousness, from Keats' envy of the nightingale's unpremeditated verse to Kleist's fascination with marionettes.¹² But surely Byron's exposition of the desire for anti-self-consciousness in *Manfred*, the play and the character, is one of the most extreme versions of it. "Oblivion" and "self-oblivion" are Manfred's explicit goals in the play bearing his name. On the scale of ways to obliterate consciousness, drowning one's sorrows or dulling one's pains with wine or opium hardly stack up against Manfred's desire for oblivion, which includes, for him, the tempting possibility of suicide.

The dynamic at the core of *Manfred* is the assertion of the titular hero's will. Assertions of will are familiar in tragedy and are arguably an indispensable characteristic of the tragic hero. But this assertion takes a peculiar form in *Manfred*. Manfred's titanic assertion of will is less given over to action than even, say, the overly reflective "actions" of a Hamlet or an Oedipus, much less the more stereotypical heroes of tragedy.¹³ Moreover, it is not as if there is a singular, dominant force or character opposing the hero of *Manfred*. To be sure, there are the "Destinies" and their ringleader "Nemesis" but even these formidable figures appear rather in the mode of momentary obstacles than that of substantial antagonists. We shall return later to discuss, from another angle, the dynamics of sequence in *Manfred* but before doing so we might entertain one further stumbling block built into Byron's drama.

The not necessarily so dramatic matter of oblivion in *Manfred* is coupled with another not so auspicious problematic for the stage, namely: the unspeakable. Often some key issue at the core of the psychic history of a tragic or quasi-tragic protagonist resists being clearly enunciated as such. Reviewing the history of the tragedy, one finds that there is a surprisingly good deal of talk about the unspeakable, from *Oedipus Rex* to *Phèdre* to *The Cenci*. And often the name of the unspeakable is incest. The absence creates a secret at the heart of the tragedy and places an extra burden on language as the medium for the action, which in these texts often seems somewhat lacking in action as traditionally conceived. For reasons of propriety, generic or otherwise, the matter of incest — based, as almost every critic notes on Byron's own fraught history — is only “insinuated,” as Francis Jeffrey termed it in his review of the play. But the strong suggestion is there (“we loved each other as we should not love”) and the idea is just as strong, if not more so, for being there in the mode of suggestion.

This emphasis on thought, even in the negative mode of thinking of self-annihilation, is less out of place in tragedy than in a good many genres and it is one aspect of the genre that helps account among the hierarchies of genre for its almost systematic privileging by philosophers from Aristotle through Hegel to Nietzsche and beyond. Peter Szondi, in his stimulating study *On the Tragic*, suggests that it is really only in the era of German Idealism that one for the first time encounters philosophies of tragedy rather than accounts of tragedy issuing from philosophers.¹⁴ One concern of this ferment of thinking on the sublime was the sense, in Schelling and August Wilhelm Schlegel, that tragedy was the most comprehensive of the genres, as the synthesis of epic and lyric and as such lent itself more to the sublime than any other. Schelling goes on to contend that the subject — that is, the protagonist — of tragedy as subject cannot experience the infinite as infinite, even if the infinite is an idea that hovers more or less constantly over so many tragedies. This simultaneous necessity and impossibility of experiencing the infinite, all the while in the mode of finitude, helps produce the allegorical character of a good many tragedies, including, say, the allegorical extravagance of Goethe's *Faust* and Byron's *Manfred*.

One might expect that it would be to Hegel to whom one could look for a theory of tragedy as sublime, given the lofty status he assigns it in his *Aesthetics* and given, for example, the philosophical dignity he ascribes to *Antigone*, making it the very model for the dialectics of ethical life as expounded in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. But strictly speaking, for Hegel, there is, in principle, nothing in classical art (which corresponds essentially to ancient Greek art) that is sublime. In Hegel's tri-partite division of the arts in historical terms into the symbolic, the classic, and the romantic, the sublime inhabits *only* symbolic art, which is to say, more or less ancient Eastern (or Oriental) and Middle Eastern art. This is art which is not really even art but rather "pre-art," as Hegel calls it. It is termed "pre-art," because it is not characterized by the interpenetration of meaning (*Bedeutung*) and form (*Gestalt*) that is definitive of all art in the first place. As mentioned previously, Hegel, unlike any of his contemporaries, confines the sublime in the strict sense to ancient Biblical poetry and then allows for a few epigonal formations as in Christian mysticism and what he calls Mohammedan poetry. So for a "Hegelian" account of tragedy as sublime we can turn instead to Hegel's disciple, Friedrich Theodor Vischer, who in 1837 published a fascinating treatise called *On the Sublime and the Comic*, at a time when only the first part of Hegel's lectures on *Aesthetics* had been published, thus lacking the analysis of comedy and tragedy that would eventually be the very final topic or culmination of Hegel's text.¹⁵ Vischer follows Hegel in many things but departs from him, at least at the level of the letter, in the analysis of the sublime.

For Vischer sublimity is not the opposite of the beautiful, as, say for Burke, or for Schelling: it proceeds from beauty. Vischer posits two kinds of sublimity: the sublimity of nature (or what he also calls substance) and the sublimity of the subject. One of the intriguing features of texts on the theory of the sublime is the status of examples in them; and what is striking in Vischer is the extent to which, even more Hegelian than Hegel, he so resolutely promotes, by example but also in principle, tragedy over all genres. Through the course of the analyses of both sublimes, of nature and of "the subject," it is already remarkable how prominently tragedy figures as the main source of examples before tragedy emerges explicitly as the synthesizing category that reconciles and raises to a higher level both nature and the subject now in the heady domain of the absolute.

Vischer's curious invocation of a scene from Goethe's *Faust* — a play even in its earliest published form recognized by Schelling as “the absolute philosophical tragedy” — gets us back reasonably close to Byron's *Manfred*, for it is in the invocation of spirits by a solitary man disenchanted with “philosophy and science” that Byron's poetic drama most resembles *Faust*. Even though our sense of the precise extent of Byron's knowledge of *Faust* will forever remain up in the air, we do know Matthew “Monk” Lewis read at least some scenes to Byron in the fabled year of 1816 and he may well have absorbed some of the charged snippets of the play via Madame de Stael's discussion and partial translation in her path-breaking study *De l'Allemagne*.¹⁶ Goethe, only a little narcissistically, thought *Manfred* an admirable “version” or appropriation of his *Faust*. Byron, predictably and with some justification, downplayed the comparisons. But there is little denying the clear affinities with Goethe's *Faust* in the opening scene, featuring the hero's inaugural monologue and his chanting invocation of the spirits, especially the spirit of the earth.

This scene with the *Erdegeist* or “Spirit of the Earth,” was, even among Goethe's rough contemporaries, singled out as particularly sublime, not just because the spirit is addressed by Faust explicitly as “*erhabener Geist*.” Faust summons up no less than the spirit of the earth, the earth personified, and despite the struggle of forces, arguably gains the upper hand (not unlike the way Byron's *Manfred* achieves superiority over the cosmic forces he summons up). Vischer is one of the critics who seizes on Goethe's scene as paradigmatically sublime, but does so partly with a striking blindness, as he offers it as an example of the *natural* sublime, forgetting somehow, that we are not dealing with the earth as such but the spirit of the earth, and not the spirit of the earth as such but the *text* of the spirit of the earth.

It is one thing to talk about the “microcosmos” or the earth in general and quite another thing to represent those forces as if embodied in single characters. These are situations which strain the possibilities of representation, especially for a work conceived for the stage or modeled on a work for the stage, and contribute to the allegorical texture of these tragedies, which may not, after all, be such pure tragedies. It is clear from

Goethe's early notes to *Faust* that an express concern with the sublime was essential to the project. The notes read, from the beginning:

Ideal striving to achieve an influence upon and a felling for the whole of Nature

The appearance of the Spirit as Genius of the World and of Action

Conflict between Form and the Formless

Preference for formless content over empty form¹⁷

For this scene a drawing by Goethe survives, outlining how he envisaged it, namely, with the face of the *Erdegeist* — Manfred too is concerned to see spirits, as Moses wanted to see God, “face to face” — floating huge and disembodied high above the mortal Faust on the stage, rather like the scene in *The Wizard of Oz* in which the wizard's visage is projected in front of the cowering Dorothy and friends, prior to his unmasking by Toto. Needless to say, this is easier done in film than on the stage.

The affinities with Manfred's invocations of a procession of spirits, the texture of which curiously anticipates that of *Faust II*, which Byron could almost certainly not have known, are clear. The stately and strangely static procession, if that is not a contradiction in terms, does seem to recall Marlovian tragedy more than Shakespearean, and not just *Doctor Faustus* but *Tamburlaine* as well, whose numerous opponents correspond to the panoply of spirits and dead people conjured by Faustus.¹⁸ It is a kind of drama that, given its relative paucity of action (“no action, no plot, no characters,” according to Francis Jeffrey!), throws a greater emphasis on the word and in this too Byron's grandiloquence in *Manfred* seems closer to Marlowe than to Shakespeare. (Like Goethe, Byron, in composing the speeches of the spirits, conspicuously varied the rhyme, rhythm, and length of line from one speech to the next, trying to break what otherwise risked being a monotonous sameness.) But unlike Faust's quest for knowledge, pleasure, and power, played out in a relentless movement aspiring to totality and infinity, a kind of dramatic parallel to the odyssey of the subject in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Manfred abjures all the powers offered him and desires instead, as we have seen, the sheer oblivion that would come with the loss of life. Still, the structure of a tormented soul face to face with other-worldly spirits has more than a

family resemblance with Goethe's unconventional tragedy. We shall return to this aspect, partly the "metaphysical" aspect of Byron's "mad" drama, from one last perspective.

Yet before turning to that, I want to note how the sublime, in literature, can never be simply a matter or topic or even structure. The language too must rise to the level of the sublime, as dictated already by the ancient strictures of the (usually three) levels of style, with the sublime always associated with "grand" or "high" style. Byron is eminently capable of mastering this high style, and even of ratcheting things up a notch. An instance from *Cain* may serve to illustrate what I have in mind. When Cain, in act 2, Scene 1, is shown the awesome splendours of the universe in the "abyss of space," he exclaims:

Oh, thou beautiful
And unimaginable ether! and
Ye multiplying masses of increased
And still-increasing lights! what are ye? what
Is this blue wilderness of interminable
Air, where ye roll along, as I have seen
The leaves along the limpid streams of Eden?
Is your course measured for ye? Or do ye
Sweep on in your unbounded revelry
Through an aerial universe of endless
Expansion, at which my soul aches to think,
Intoxicated with eternity?
(CPW 6. 255, lines 98-109)

Despite beginning by sounding the idea of the beautiful, the passage soon shifts to the modality of the sublime, and not just in any way, not just by enlisting some of the standard predicates of the sublime ("unimaginable," "unbounded," etc.) Byron's control of the verse line here is sovereign, as witnessed by the striking use of enjambment, most particularly by repeatedly ending the line in the middle of a pregnant phrase, temporarily suspending things at the end of the line with an adjective thematically linked with precisely the lack of ending. This is the function of in the words "interminable" and "endless," very much in the way Wordsworth will leave a line hanging with the word "hang."

Terminating with “interminable” and ending with “endless” underscore the “presence” of the infinite by performing and thematizing a small version of it in the drama of the line.

One final angle of approach in my long circumscription of the matter of tragedy or quasi-tragedy and the sublime in Byron, *Manfred* and beyond, is afforded by Schiller, who is in the unusual position of being a successful dramatist on the one hand and a powerful theorist and critic of tragedy and the sublime, on the other. It is Schiller’s insistence on the centrality of freedom that seems to resonate so well with Byron. The sublime is not at all self-evidently, in the first instance, a matter of freedom. To judge from Longinus, Burke, or to a lesser extent, Kant and Hegel, one is close to the opposite of free in the moment of the sublime. Typically in the sublime, one is at least temporarily overwhelmed, cast out of oneself, disoriented, un-comprehending, astonished, or figuratively dead. Yet Schiller’s principal essay on the sublime begins by quoting the famous dictum spoken by the titular hero (a Jew) of Lessing’s *Nathan The Wise* “No human being must ‘must’.” *Kein Mensch muss müssen.*” Schiller’s virtual obsession with the literal primacy of freedom constitutes a somewhat singular position on the spectrum of theories of the sublime, even if he, like so many of his contemporaries, insists on the affinity of tragedy with the sublime. Schiller maintains that “the ultimate goal of the work of art is the representation of the super-sensuous (*die Darstellung des Übersinnlichen*) and that it is especially tragic art that accomplishes this.¹⁹ The very definition of art here displays how massively the presence of the category of the sublime had changed the basic conception of the aesthetic in general. For a few thousand years or so the aesthetic had been essentially coterminous with the beautiful and it tended to be thought through categories such as harmony, symmetry, proportion, and intelligibility. But with the re-discovery of Longinus’ treatise on the sublime in the late seventeenth century, principally via Boileau, a new discourse arose which would by the middle of the eighteenth century, especially with Burke and the early Kant, completely reshape how one divided up the terrain of the aesthetic: namely into the *opposed* categories of the beautiful and the sublime. Schelling would call the relation between the two a *Gegensatz*, an opposition. Moreover, in Schelling we can see how the presence of the sublime retroactively informs the very definition of the beautiful, now for almost the first time conceived also in terms of

the infinite. Thus in his *Philosophy of Art* he determines the sublime as the “informing [the *Einbildung*] of the infinite into the finite” but also the beautiful as “the informing of the finite into the infinite.” Rarely had anyone ever defined the beautiful in terms so close to those of the sublime.

Sharing this orientation, Schiller will nonetheless put his distinctive stamp on the conception of the aesthetic, characterizing art as “Freedom in its appearance” (*Freiheit in der Erscheinung*, in the Kallias Brief of 8 February, 1793). This virtual obsession with freedom surfaces also in his conception of tragedy, even where the odds seems stacked against it, given that so many theorists agree on the balance of freedom and necessity, being crucial to the mode. Schelling conceived of the dialectic of freedom and necessity as the determining relation constituting the sublimity of tragedy, though the thematics of freedom are far from constant throughout the genre. It could hardly be said to be the hallmark of Shakespearean tragedy, for starters. For his part, Schiller, bucking what so many have found to be the dominant Hellenophilia of his time, chastised Greek tragedy, precisely for its overemphasis on the pole of necessity or fate in tragic plots.²⁰

Following Kant, Schiller claims that “in moral sensibilities [but who, we might ask, is not or does not have a moral sensibility?] what is terrifying in the imagination quickly and easily passes over into the sublime. Just as the imagination loses its freedom, so reason makes its freedom viable (so *macht die Vernunft die ihrige geltend*).”²¹ This putatively easy passage from the terrifying (the defining characteristic of the sublime for Burke) to the sublime happens only, in Kant and in Schiller, when the subject of this experience is safe and secure. Still the passage is a little mysterious. In Kant the faculty of imagination is said to “sacrifice itself” (*aufopfert*) to the reason.²² Kant to be sure stresses any number of elements of freedom in his analytic of the sublime: the free play of the imagination and — despite the aesthetic needing to be provisionally cut off from any interest, any judgement that would entail a purpose or a sense of what is good — ultimately, if indirectly, the freedom of the subject generally to act in a way at least analogous to the moral. For Kant, reason has the freedom to think beyond the realm of the senses to the domain of the supersensible and the self’s very ability to do so is the

index of its superiority to nature, its *Übermacht*. Schiller too describes the dynamic of the sublime as a sequence of *Ohnmacht* and *Übermacht*, of powerlessness and superiority or dominion, in that order. As in Kant, the momentary powerlessness is said to give way to a greater power succeeding it but the mechanism whereby this happens is curiously and indeed surreptitiously negotiated in Schiller. In the face of the violence or power set to overwhelm one, Schiller says: “To negate violence (*Gewalt*) according to the concept means nothing other than to submit to it voluntarily (*sich derselben freiwillig unterwerfen*).²³ It is hard to exaggerate the oddness or dubious character of this move in Schiller’s thinking. How free is the free submission to violence that one cannot otherwise escape?

Be that as it may, there is in Byron’s tragedies, mysteries, and quasi-tragedies an unusual and not always problematic emphasis on freedom, quite like that in Schiller’s tragic theory and practice, as well as in Goethe’s *Faust*. Both Schiller’s and Byron’s dramas are less concerned with fate or inevitability than is usually thought, even when the term *Schicksalsdrama* is sometimes applied to the former. Indeed, they feature what might be called “evitability,” that is, a sense of contingency and possibility that is at least partly a matter of will. Even the most fateful of tragedies has to ascribe some agency to its heroes — otherwise, their sorry outcomes would be merely unfortunate or at most “sad.” But the Byronic tragedies and their German fellow travelers display an unusual emphasis on the hero’s ability to direct his fate, the supreme example of which might be Manfred’s overcoming of the Spirit at the end of the drama and choosing death on his own terms. It certainly enhances the possibilities for the exercise of the hero’s freedom if the hero has larger-than-life powers. Not even most grand heroes of tragedy are able to summon spirits at their spoken or written will. Manfred apostrophizes those spirits with the phrase “Mysterious Agency” but his own agency is mysterious in his own right, given his ultimately sovereign power over any number of spirits, including Nemesis and the “Destinies.”

Not quite tragic in all its formal properties, *Manfred* has nonetheless a good deal of the aura of a tragedy, not least through a plethora of allusions to tragedies, especially to *Hamlet* but also to *King Lear* and a good many others. And the very name and figure of *Nemesis*, who appears as such in

Manfred, summons up the archetypal figure of fate from Ancient Greek tragedy. There is perhaps nothing essentially new under the generic sun — certainly that is one of the lessons of Northrop Frye’s thinking on genre — but it does seem to me that the works of Byron, Goethe, and Schiller, in practice and in sometimes in theory, combine a thematic insistence on freedom with a corresponding experimentation in dramatic form, especially in their skewing of the conventions of tragedy. This results in making their plays, their quasi-tragedies, all the more “singular” and all the more sublime.

Tragedy, however sublime, tends to put the sublime in its place, so to speak. There is a powerful drive in tragedy to make sense of everything, if only after the fact, at the end of the play or in a “beyond” posited by the play. Thus Hamlet is very concerned for Horatio to remain among the living so that he can tell the story and there is a strong sense at the end of *King Lear* that to have survived the extremity and even insanity is to have made some sense of it all. For Aristotle, what is not of the order of reason, what is *alogos*, should not be represented on stage. That is to say, the discursive space of the stage is one of reason, even if one can more or less directly confront situations that take us to the limits of reason and in some sense, that is, virtually, beyond. Thus the illogicality — the threat to reason — of incest is put in its narrative place by the overarching plot. Somewhat paradoxically, Byron’s “Alpine Journal,” which only undertakes to give an account of what was happening to him on his journey through the Alps, emerges as more sublime than *Manfred*, not least because it allows the sublime moment to be just that: a moment. Aided by Byron’s ubiquitous dash, the non-totalizable moment of the sublime is rendered in a language even more striking than the lofty extravagances of *Manfred*.

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- ¹ See, for example, the excellent collection *Du sublime*, ed. Jean-Francois Courtine (Paris: Belin, 1988). The volume contains essays by Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and others. It is also available in English as *Of the Sublime*, ed. Jeffrey S. Librett (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993). See also the standard points of reference: Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976); Neil Hertz, *The End of the Line* (New York and London: Columbia UP, 1985); Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
- ² See Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968) [Werkausgabe X], Paragraph 23. All references to Kant's text will be given by paragraph number and thus to be found that way in any English translation.
- ³ Paul de Man calls attention to this crucial (and dubious) motif of sacrifice in his "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant," collected in his *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1996) 70-90.
- ⁴ I have tried to demonstrate this in my essay, "The Sublime Sonnet in European Romanticism," in *Romantic Poetry*, ed. Angela Esterhammer (Philadelphia: Benjamins, 2002), 181-95.
- ⁵ On Pope as not simply a writer of satire, see the excellent study by Steve Shankman, *Pope's Iliad: Homer in the Age of Passion* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983).
- ⁶ For an excellent study of the "Job" phenomenon in the eighteenth century, see Jonathan Lamb, *The Rhetoric of Suffering: Reading the Book of Job in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).
- ⁷ See "A Note on Sculpture," *The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Andrew Nicholson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) 224.
- ⁸ See David V. Erdman, "Byron's Stage Fright: The History of his Ambition and Fear of Writing for the Stage," *ELH* 6 (1939): 219-43. For a more wide-ranging treatment of anti-theatricalism, see the outstanding study by Julie A. Carlson, *In the Theatre of Romanticism: Coleridge, Nationalism, Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994); on "mental theatre" see the path-

breaking study by Alan Richardson, *A Mental Theatre: Poetic Drama and Consciousness in the Romantic Age* (University Park, Pennsylvania State UP, 1988).

- ⁹ One could add Kleist to this exalted company in terms of dramatic excellence but his dramas had little impact outside German circles in his lifetime.
- ¹⁰ For one of many versions of the Coleridge anecdote, see S.T. Coleridge, *The Shorter Works and Fragments*, ed. H. J. Jackson and J.R. de J. Jackson, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995) 362. The editors remark: “[Coleridge] has improved upon it slightly, altering the epithets to fit his theme and turning the original gentleman into a lady” (362, n. 3). I discuss at length the problematic gender alignments with the sublime and beautiful in an essay forthcoming in a special issue of *Eighteenth-Century Studies*. The essay is entitled: “Torso: (the) beautiful Sex, (the) sublime Sex, and the Matter of the Text.”
- ¹¹ At one point Manfred does employ a stuttering, “dashed,” paratactic syntax like that of the “Alpine Journal,” namely, when the Chamois Hunter has just intervened at the moment of what looked very much like a suicide attempt. Manfred experiences a kind of vertigo, in reality and in language. See act 1, scene 2, lines 133f.
- ¹² See “Romanticism and Anti-Self-Consciousness,” in his *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-1971* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1970) 298-310.
- ¹³ For a good study of the heroic (will) in tragedy, see Reuben Brower, *Hero and Saint: Shakespeare and the Graeco-Roman Tradition* (New York: Oxford UP, 1971).
- ¹⁴ See Peter Szondi, *On the Tragic*, trans. Paul Fleming (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002).
- ¹⁵ See Friedrich Theodor Vischer, *Ueber das Erhabene und das Komische unde andere texte zur Aesthetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967).
- ¹⁶ For a concise and yet thorough account of the state of knowledge regarding *Manfred* in relation to Goethe’s *Faust*, see the essay on this topic (“*Manfred* and *Faust*”) by Peter Cochran on the website of the International Byron Society. See also the valuable account by E. M. Butler, *Byron and Goethe: Study of a Passion* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1956).
- ¹⁷ I follow the translation from Cyrus Hamlin’s extremely useful notes in his edition, *Faust: A Tragedy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976).
- ¹⁸ I see no particular reason to doubt, however, Byron’s claim that he was ignorant of Marlowe’s play. To some extent, the processional character of *Manfred* and of the various *Faust* dramas is built into the very premise of the situation, of a larger-than-life protagonist who can summon spirits and/or the dead.
- ¹⁹ See Friedrich Schiller, *Vom Pathetischen und Erhabenen: Schriften zur Dramatheorie* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1999) 55. (From the essay “Über das Pathetische”).
- ²⁰ See for example, Schiller’s essay “Über den Gebrauch des Chors in der Tragoedie,” in *Vom Pathetischen* 104-114.
- ²¹ Schiller, *Vom Pathetischen* 69. (From the essay “Über das Pathetische”).
- ²² On the problematic character of this move in Kant, see Paul de Man, “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant,” in his *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1996) 70-90, especially 85-6.
- ²³ Schiller, *Vom Pathetischen* 84. (From the essay, “Vom Erhabenen”)