

Manfred and the Sublime

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

Dans sa Dédicace à *Don Juan* (strophe 10), Byron s'exprime sur Milton en expliquant que le mot « Miltonique » est devenu synonyme du sublime à cause de la façon que choisissait de vivre Milton le poète et l'homme. Selon Byron, Milton est resté fidèle à son crédo politique et religieux malgré l'opposition de ses contemporains, suivant la Restauration. Aux yeux de Byron, il y a quelque chose de très sublime et grand dans la conduite de Milton, « le vieillard aveugle¹ », qui vivait une situation difficile alors qu'il était « défait, pâle et pauvre² ». Cette perspective sur Milton rappelle une création de Byron, *Manfred*, qui reste fidèle à son crédo jusqu'à la fin et choisit de mourir plutôt qu'accepter toute intervention du clergé ou de l'Église qui puisse le sauver. Dans ses *Observations sur le sentiment du beau et du sublime*³, Kant explique que l'homme mélancolique « a surtout le sentiment du sublime³ ». On peut se demander si Kant expliquait certaines des caractéristiques du héros de Byron. Il est certainement vrai que *Manfred*, comme Kant le souligne ailleurs, « brave le danger et méprise la mort ». Avant de mourir, il prononce ces derniers mots : « Vieillard! Ce n'est pas si difficile, mourir . . .⁴ » À cet égard, l'attitude du samurai japonais face à la vie et à la mort nous rappelle la notion du sublime. Le samurai est souvent prêt à s'engager dans une bataille perdue d'avance et à y laisser sa vie afin de rester fidèle à son credo. Une telle attitude nous apparaît « sublime ». Selon Kant, « soumettre ses passions par des principes est sublime ».

Une autre caractéristique de *Manfred* en termes du concept du sublime repose sur le lieu dans lequel se déroule le drame, qui relève du sublime à son tour. En effet, Byron choisit comme lieu de l'action « les Hautes-Alpes⁵ ». Ainsi, on y trouve plusieurs scènes que Burke et Kant pourraient appeler des exemples du « sublime-terrible ». Autrement dit, *Manfred* est une oeuvre dans laquelle le décor et l'état d'esprit du protagoniste peuvent être qualifiés de sublime.

MANFRED AND THE SUBLIME

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Résumé

Dans sa Dédicace à *Don Juan* (strophe 10), Byron s'exprime sur Milton en expliquant que le mot « Miltonique » est devenu synonyme du sublime à cause de la façon que choisissait de vivre Milton le poète et l'homme. Selon Byron, Milton est resté fidèle à son crédo politique et religieux malgré l'opposition de ses contemporains, suivant la Restauration. Aux yeux de Byron, il y a quelque chose de très sublime et grand dans la conduite de Milton, « le vieillard aveugle¹ », qui vivait une situation difficile alors qu'il était « défait, pâle et pauvre² ». Cette perspective sur Milton rappelle une création de Byron, Manfred, qui reste fidèle à son crédo jusqu'à la fin et choisit de mourir plutôt qu'accepter toute intervention du clergé ou de l'Église qui puisse le sauver. Dans ses *Observations sur le sentiment du beau et du sublime*, Kant explique que l'homme mélancolique « a surtout le sentiment du sublime³ ». On peut se demander si Kant expliquait certaines des caractéristiques du héros de Byron. Il est certainement vrai que Manfred, comme Kant le souligne ailleurs, « brave le danger et méprise la mort ». Avant de mourir, il prononce ces derniers mots : « Vieillard! Ce n'est pas si difficile, mourir . . .⁴ » À cet égard, l'attitude du samurai japonais face à la vie et à la mort nous rappelle la notion du sublime. Le samurai est souvent prêt à s'engager dans une bataille perdue d'avance et à y laisser sa vie afin de rester fidèle à son credo. Une telle attitude nous apparaît « sublime ». Selon Kant, « soumettre ses passions par des principes est sublime ».

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le drame, qui relève du sublime à son tour. En effet, Byron choisit comme lieu de l'action « les Hautes-Alpes⁵ ». Ainsi, on y trouve plusieurs scènes que Burke et Kant pourraient appeler des exemples du « sublime-terrible ». Autrement dit, *Manfred* est une œuvre dans laquelle le décor et l'état d'esprit du protagoniste peuvent être qualifiés de sublime.

Of major writers on the theory of the sublime, such as Longinus, Edmund Burke and Kant, Byron mentions only Longinus in regard to aesthetics. For instance, in *Don Juan* he refers to Sappho's "Ode" in the section where Donna Inez is deciding which classical authors young Juan should or should not read. The narrator says, "I don't think Sappho's Ode a good example, / Although Longinus tells us there is no hymn / Where the sublime soars forth on wings more ample" (DJ 1. 42). Longinus praises Sappho's "Ode to Aphrodite" since he thinks Sappho succeeds in depicting various facets of passionate love.⁶ In "Observations upon Observations," Byron brings in Sappho's "Ode" again by saying "Is not Sappho's Ode on a Girl? — Is not this sublime & (according to Longinus) fierce love for one of her own Sex?" (CMP 178).

In his poetry Byron makes a frequent use of the word sublime and its derivatives. For instance, Tracy tells Inkel in "The Blues" that he is ready to tell a blue-stocking "in rhyme / What I've told her in prose, at the least, as sublime" (98-9). Inkel rejoins him: "As sublime! If it be so, no need of my Muse . . . / As sublime! — Mr. Tracy — I've nothing to say" (100-2). One senses that by Byron's time the word sublime could easily sound like a cliché, and hence comic depending on how it was used.

In *Don Juan* Byron again generates comedy from the notion of the sublime. Juan, who is in love with Julia, thinks and behaves rather strangely, like a good lovesick boy should. He does not know what has happened to him and wanders forth into the midst of nature. He is said to have "pursued / His self-communion with his own high soul" (1. 91), much like Wordsworth. He has also turned "Like Coleridge, into a metaphysician," and thinks about the stars, earthquakes, wars, the moon, "the boundless skies" (92) and the like, the things that constitute the stuff of which the sublime is usually made. Then this train of Juan's sublime

thoughts leads him in the end to that of Donna Julia's eyes. The narrator comments: "In thoughts like these true wisdom may discern / Longings sublime, and aspiration high," but he adds, "I can't help thinking puberty assisted" (93). One can see here that Byron brings in the word sublime and its overtones just to ridicule the lake poets and their thoughts. Juan ends up missing his dinner as a result of indulging in sublime feelings. Another comic use of the word sublime is found in his depiction of Gulbeyaz's fury when her advances to Juan are rejected. The narrator says, "Nought's more sublime than energetic bile, / Though horrible to see yet grand to tell, / Like ocean warring 'gainst a rocky isle" (5. 135). He also says that the sixth canto "shall have a touch of the sublime" (159), meaning he will give an epic treatment of the war between the Russians and the Turks. As these quotations show, Byron often uses the notion of the idea of the sublime in a comic or ironical context.

Byron, however, can be serious too in his use of the word sublime. The following stanza will show this:

If, fallen in evil days on evil tongues,
Milton appeal'd to the Avenger, Time,
If Time, the Avenger, execrates his wrongs,
And makes the word '*Miltonic*' mean '*sublime*',
He deign'd not to belie his soul in songs,
Nor turn his very talent to a crime —
He did not loathe the sire to laud the son,
But closed the tyrant-hater he begun.
(DJ "Dedication," 10)

We are immediately reminded of those famous lines of Milton: "though fallen on evil days, / On evil days though fallen, and evil tongues" (VII. 25-6). The "Dedication" is addressed to Robert Southey, and Milton's conduct, in Byron's view, presents a sharp contrast to that of Southey. The italicized "*He*" indicates very clearly how Milton and Southey are politically and literarily miles apart. Then in what way is Milton sublime, or Miltonic for that matter? Byron thinks very highly of Milton, because he did not change his credo with the change of times, even though he was "worn, and pale, and poor" and was left with "helpless eyes"

(“Dedication,” 11). In Byron’s opinion, Milton is sublime in that he held constant politically, religiously and literarily, against all the odds that were besetting him. For once, Coleridge and Wordsworth share Byron’s view.⁷

Thus Byron does use the word in a serious vein. He creates characters, settings, situations, speeches, and so forth in his poetry that can be termed sublime and Miltonic. This paper will look at *Manfred*, since its protagonist can be considered sublime in a Miltonic way. In all events, Manfred does not change his credo, and he lives and dies believing in himself. Moreover, the background of this play is set in the Swiss Alps, with Manfred commenting on their grand and vast scenery. The depictions of the Alps found abundantly in this play are full of sublime scenes. This aspect ties in with the more ordinary meaning of the word sublime, even though Byron never uses the term in this play. First, I would like to show how Byron treated the Swiss Alps, the setting of this play, and secondly, to see to what extent Manfred is Miltonic in the Byronic sense of the word. To put it another way, the first section treats what can be called the natural sublime, and the second section deals with the sublime of passions, about which Nicola Trott says, “Romantic writers focus on the notion that certain aspects of the sublime style — namely, grandeur of thought or conception, together with vehemence or intensity of passion — are dependent upon a nobility of soul or character. Longinus presupposed a nobility of soul or character” (78). Longinus says “Sublimity is the echo of a noble mind” and that “the thought of the genuine orator must be neither small nor ignoble” (Fyfe 185). Byron certainly makes his alter ego Manfred appear quite similar to the Milton evoked in *Don Juan* because their respective lives can be described as hard and enduring, patient and, yes, sublime in suffering.

Byron writes to Thomas Moore on 15 March, 1817, “I wrote a sort of mad Drama, for the sake of introducing the Alpine scenery in description . . . Almost all the *dram. pers.* are spirits, ghosts, or magicians, and the scene is in the Alps and the other world” (BLJ 5: 188). Thus he made a point of writing about the Alps and described its scenery abundantly. In fact many writers on the sublime refer to the Alps. For instance, John Dennis writes about his alpine crossing, “In the mean time we walk’d upon the very brink, in a literal sense, of Destruction; one Stumble, and

both Life and Carcass had been at once destroy'd. The sense of this produc'd different motions in me, viz, a delightful Horrour, a terrible Joy, and at the same time, that I was infinitely pleas'd, I trembled . . ." (qtd. in Ashfield 59). Kant is not an exception. To him, "The sight of a mountain whose snow-covered peak rises above the clouds" is sublime (Kant 47). Pope also refers to "the towering Alps," and "Th' Eternal Snows" in his *Essay on Criticism*, when he describes the difficulty of learning (1: 225, 227).

As for "the other world" mentioned in Byron's letter to Moore, certainly *Manfred* is filled with "magicians — ghosts — & the evil principle — with a mixed mythology of my own" (BLJ 5: 195). Burke says that "Poetry's apparitions, chimeras, harpies, allegorical figures are grand and affecting" (59). Joseph Addison talks about what "Mr. Dryden calls *the Fairy Way of Writing*," in which figure "Fairies, Witches, Magicians, Demons, and departed Spirits" (299). He says that reading about them raises "a pleasing kind of Horrour in the mind of the Reader" (300). In fact, these mythological and supernatural beings are what make the sublime in poetry. Burke talks about the idea of eternity and infinity, and refers to Milton's portrait of Satan, as Kant and others do.⁸ Generally speaking, the Christian God is often referred to by the idea of eternity, but other supernatural beings figure as part of what constitutes the other world as well. Thus Byron expresses what the play *Manfred* is all about from the sublime point of view by these two localities, the Alps and the other world.

We can now consider the setting of *Manfred*. Except the last act where Manfred stays inside his castle, the other scenes mostly take place in the midst of the Alps. Act 1 scene 2 shows Manfred standing alone on the cliffs. In act 2 scene 1 Manfred is in front of a cataract in "A lower Valley in the Alps," as the stage direction indicates. Scene 3 takes him to the top of the Jungfrau. As these scenes testify, the action of *Manfred* takes place right in the heart of the Alps. Consequently, *Manfred* is full of descriptions of natural scenes, and Byron makes a point of emphasizing their sublime aspects. In act 1 scene 1 Manfred invokes seven "Spirits of earth and air" (1.1.41). They are "Earth, ocean, air, night, mountains, winds, thy [Manfred's] star" (132). For instance, the second spirit, that of mountains, can control the advance of "the Glacier's cold and restless

mass" (68), and "Could make the mountain bow / And quiver to his cavern'd base" (73-4). He talks about Mont Blanc and its avalanche appropriately. The fourth spirit comes from where "the slumbering earthquake / Lies pillow'd on fire, / And the lakes of bitumen / Rise boilingly higher" (88-91). The fifth spirit is "the Rider of the wind, / The Stirrer of the storm" (100-1). The seventh spirit talks about "A wandering mass of shapeless flame, / A pathless comet, and a curse, / The menace of the universe" (117-9).

Act 1 scene 2 is again sublimity itself. Manfred says, "ye crags, upon whose extreme edge / I stand" (13-4). Hildebrand Jacob says, "We are moved . . . by the view of dreadful precipices" (qtd. in Ashfield 53). Shaftesbury in his *Characteristics* exclaims, "See! With what trembling steps poor mankind treads the narrow brink of the deep precipices!" (qtd. in Ashfield 76). Manfred's life is certainly endangered, and he is ready to jump from the cliffs. In act 2 scene 2 Manfred stands above "the crag's headlong perpendicular" (4). Burke himself says, "The noise of vast cataracts, raging storms, thunder or artillery awakes a great and awful sensation in the mind" (75).

When Manfred talks to the Witch of the Alps in act 2 scene 2, he parades his biographical data, which in turn show him a lover of the sublime. He says, "My joy was in the Wilderness, to breathe / The difficult air of the iced mountain's top" (62-3). He also sought to "catch / The dazzling lightnings" (71-2) and so forth. Manfred in the end "made / Mine eyes familiar with Eternity" (90). Definitely he is a seeker of the natural sublime. The idea of eternity is justifiably included in the sublime. Kant says that "the meditations of metaphysics upon eternity, Providence, and the immortality of our souls contain a certain sublimity and dignity" (57). This aspect of *Manfred* is further stressed in act 2 scene 3 in which Manfred stands at "The Summit of the Jungfrau Mountain." The first Destiny talks about "The glassy ocean of the mountain ice" (5), "its [ocean's] rugged breakers, which put on / The aspect of a tumbling tempest's foam, / Frozen in a moment" (6-8) and so forth. The hymn of the spirits sung in act 2 scene 4 is full of what makes the sublime. Here is what Arimanes does: "He breatheth — and a tempest shakes the sea; / He speaketh — and the clouds reply in thunder . . . / He moveth — earthquakes rend the world asunder" (5-6, 8).

To this point I have referred only to the outside scenes, but even when Manfred is within his castle and reminisces, he is drawn to describing things sublime. Burke says, "To the sublime in building, greatness of dimensions seems requisite" (68), and that "all edifices calculated to produce an idea of the sublime, ought rather to be dark and gloomy" (74). According to Joseph Priestley, ruins are sublime, because "Celebrated buildings and cities *in ruins* . . . present that [idea] of the length of time that hath elapsed since they flourished" (qtd. in Ashfield 122). In the last scene of the play Manfred is inside the tower and recalls the time when he wandered at night in the Coliseum, "the gladiators' bloody Circus . . . / A noble wreck in ruinous perfection" (3.4.27-8). He also remembers "Caesar's chambers, and the Augustan halls . . . in indistinct decay" (29-30). Thus his reminiscence of the Coliseum at night creates another sublime scene. In conclusion, then, as far as the setting is concerned, the world of *Manfred* is made out of the natural sublime and almost nothing else. Not only do natural objects of the sublime dominate Byron's descriptions, but also a general atmosphere of darkness, obscurity, mystery and other worldliness inhabited by supernatural beings contributes to making the play a case study of the sublime per se.

We can move on now to what may be called the notion of the sublime of the passions. John Baillie says, "the sublime of the passions must influence the mind in the same manner as the sublime of natural objects, and must produce the same exaltedness of disposition" (qtd. in Ashfield 91-2). He regards "heroism, the contempt of death, power, or of honor" as examples of the sublime affections (93). Kant, in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, discusses the relationship between temperaments and the notion of the sublime. He singles out the melancholy man, for whom "All emotions of the sublime have more fascination . . . than the deceiving charms of the beautiful" (54). He continues,

He has a high feeling of the dignity of human nature. He values himself and regards a human being as a creature who merits respect. He suffers no depraved submissiveness, and breathes freedom in a noble breast . . . He is a strict judge of himself, and not seldom is

weary of himself as of the world . . . Insult and injustice
kindle vengeance in him . . . He defies peril, and
disdains death. By the perversity of his feeling and the
lack of an enlightened reason he takes up the
adventurous — inspirations, visions, attacks. (66)

Reading the above quotation, one wonders if Kant were not explicating prophetically some of the major characteristics of the Byronic hero. If we couple John Baillie's idea of the sublime, quoted above, with the Kantian notion of the sublime attributes of the melancholy man, a sublime man emerges as one who has strong self-will, believing in his own principles, not yielding easily to others and having a high opinion of human dignity. He is a heroic and fearsome man, defying peril and despising death. He makes himself familiar with supernatural beings. With these characteristics in mind, I should like to probe to what extent Manfred is a sublime figure.

In the discussions of the sublime, military heroes such as Caesar or Alexander often get mentioned. Alexander Gerard says, "there is sublimity in heroism . . . we suppose a mighty conqueror, in opposition to the most formidable dangers, acquiring power over multitudes of nations" (qtd. in Ashfield 169). Well, Manfred is not a military hero like Caesar or Alexander, but he is a heroic figure in that he tries to go beyond what is expected of man and against all odds. In fact he is larger than life like famous military heroes. He does not conquer nations, but tries to conquer human limitations, which pose as much formidable opposition as hostile armies. In this sense he can be described as heroic. He is a Promethean figure and believes in human dignity. He is told by the spirits to die, but he retorts, "Slaves, scoff not at my will!" (1.1.153). Though he is "cooped in clay" (157), he will not yield "the Promethean spark" (154). Thus, what characterizes Manfred is his strong sense of resistance to the human condition, and a wish to surmount the limitations of man. This is evident in several important scenes.

His strong self-will and loyalty to his own credo are shown in his refusal to seek any help from the Church. When the Chamois Hunter says, "there's comfort yet — / The aid of holy men, and heavenly patience" (2.1.33-4), Manfred flatly refuses the suggestion. Towards the end of his

life the Abbot Herman proposes reconciliation with “the true Church,” but Manfred proudly refuses to let any mortal be his mediator (3.1.51, 54-5). He will have his own way even if the future state of his soul is at stake. He does not bow to any authority. Here again he is Promethean and larger than life. This defiant attitude can be considered the major characteristic of Manfred.

Another characteristic of Manfred is his ability to command spirits. A list of the supernatural beings he commands is impressive. As has been shown, he has power to invoke the seven spirits who represent nature. He knows the status of man, as Pope knew it, when he says, “we, / Half dust, half deity, alike unfit / To sink or soar” (1.2.39-41), and that in the end “our mortality predominates” (45).⁹ Yet this does not prevent him from seeking beyond the common condition of man. He can also invoke the Witch of the Alps. She even wonders why Manfred seeks help from her since she thinks he is a very good Byronic hero: “I know thee for a man of many thoughts, / And deeds of good and ill, extreme in both” (2.2.34-5). When the Witch asks him to “swear obedience to [her] will,” he refuses by saying that he cannot be “the slave / of those who served me — Never!” (156, 159-60). Though he knows that Astarte is “a sufferer for my sins” (197), he means to “champion human fears” (205).

When he is taken before Arimanes, Manfred is told by the spirits who serve Arimanes to “Bow down and worship;” (2.4.28); his answer is “I kneel not” (36). He goes even further by saying, “I sunk before my vain despair, and knelt / To my desolation” (41-2). Thus he not only commands the supernatural agency, but also will not give in to any of the supernatural beings. The First Destiny acknowledges Manfred’s superhuman status by saying “his sufferings / Have been of an immortal nature, like / Our own” (53-5). Thus Manfred is made of clay but has almost become a supernatural being by his strong will, sufferings and despair. He can be described as a hero and a sublime figure. He goes to see Arimanes because he wants him to call up the dead Astarte. When she leaves him unsatisfied, he falls into a convulsive fit. The supernatural beings are quite impressed: “he mastereth himself, and makes / His torture tributary to his will” (160-1). All through his dealing with the supernatural agents he stands with them on equal terms and very often feels superior to them.

At the very end of his life, a spirit, “The genius of this mortal” (3.4.81) comes finally to take him to the realm of darkness. Manfred’s reply is quite characteristic of him: “Away! I’ll die as I have lived — alone” (90). Manfred relies on his mortal strength, saying “I stand / Upon my strength — I do defy — deny” (119-20). He takes full responsibility for what has befallen him. It is no wonder that his last words confirm his strong will, “’tis not so difficult to die” (151). Thus in dealing with the churchman and with the spirits Manfred has his own way and never seeks help to save his soul but will face the reality of his despair. His is an indomitable will and he has a strong belief in human dignity. He never wavers in his thoughts and chooses to die alone, having his own way.

Lastly I would like to discuss Manfred’s attitude to death. Here again he is above the level of ordinary humanity. For Manfred “it [is] my fatality to live” (1.2.24). His life has given him so much suffering that it is no wonder that he always thinks about dying. Yet if he is to die, again he will have it his own way. Once he tries to kill himself by jumping from the cliff. He has debated the matter within himself before he takes this action. For once he despairs, and succumbs to his suffering, and attempts suicide. This is because he is abandoned by the seven spirits and cannot expect any superhuman aid. He has been made to know that he is a child of clay, even though he wishes to be immortal so badly. In any case, the incident shows that he is not afraid of death. He just becomes very skeptical about reaching a superhuman level.

After his attempt at suicide he is not tempted to kill himself again. Surely he is possessed by “the fierce thirst of death — and still unslaked!” (2.1.48). With his death-wish intact he continues to live, since as he says, “’tis still to bear — / In life what others could not brook to dream” (77-8). He tells the Witch of the Alps about his life, and says, though he has “affronted death . . . fatal things pass’d harmless” (2.2.135,7). Yet his credo for life is this: “I dwell in my despair — / And live — and live for ever” (149-50). It is this strength of Manfred that is impressive and sublime. We do not know if morally Manfred is as worthy as Milton, or as self-sacrificing as the samurai who is ready to die for his warlord. Still, Manfred dies, having always been ready to die, and having confronted death until the very end.

Manfred faces squarely the consequences of his own actions. He is sublime and Miltonic in that he does not change his credo and fights on against enormous odds. As Kant has it, "Subduing one's passions through principles is sublime" (57). The play, *Manfred*, owes considerably to the notion of the sublime in its natural descriptions and in the delineation of the passions, and Byron made full use of the idea in its composition. If it had not been for the notion of the sublime, *Manfred* would have become a quite different work, if it had ever been written at all.

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¹ Traduction de M. Amédée Pichot, (Paris : Garnier Frères, 1909).

² Pichot

³ Les passages de Kant en traduction sont de R. Kempf, (Paris : J. Vrin, 1969).

⁴ Traduction puisée de *Byron* par André Maurois, vol. 2 (Paris : Grasset, 1930) 125.

⁵ Traduction de B. Laroche, (Paris : V. Lecou, 1847).

⁶ Longinus says that Sappho "feels contradictory sensations, freezes, burns, raves, reasons, so that she displays not a single emotion, but a whole congeries of emotions." See Fyfe 201.

⁷ According to Nicola Trott, "Wordsworth's image of Milton is the steadfast, yet blind and isolated, figure of *Paradise Lost* Book VII, 'In darkness, and with dangers compass round, / And Solitude'" (VII. 27-8). See Nicola Zoë Trott, "Wordsworth, Milton, and the Inward Light," *Milton, the Metaphysicals, and Romanticism*, ed. Lisa Low and Anthony John Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 119. Coleridge, in his "Lecture on Milton and the *Paradise Lost*" of 4 March, 1819 says, "There is a greatness arising from images of effort and daring, and also from those of moral endurance; in Milton both are united." See *The Romantics on Milton: Formal Essays and Critical Asides*, ed. Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr. (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1970) 244.

⁸ Burke says, "The ideas of eternity, and infinity, are among the most affecting we have . . . We do not any where meet a more sublime description than this justly celebrated one of Milton, wherein he gives the portrait of Satan with a dignity so suitable to the subject" (57). Kant regards "Milton's portrayal of the infernal kingdom" as one of the things that "arouse enjoyment but with horror" (47).

⁹ Pope says, "He [man] hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest, / In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast . . . / Created half to rise, and half to fall." *An Essay on Man* Epistle II, 7-8, 15.