

The Rise of the Sublime and the Fall of History

Vitana Kostadinova

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Article abstract

Cet article explore l'engagement de Byron à l'endroit du sublime dans le chant 2 de *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, contre l'arrière-plan de son traitement dans ses poèmes de l'histoire et de la correspondance entre l'expérience personnelle et les processus historiques. Sur le plan théorique, il prendra appui sur la discussion par Kant du sublime, selon qui nous jugeons quand nous évaluons les objets; le concept sera lié au relativisme esthétique et éthique introduit au dix-huitième siècle. L'argument sera centré sur les instances de parallélisme (produits par la métaphore et la comparaison) entre l'objet sublime et l'esprit de la personne qui le contemple.

THE RISE OF THE SUBLIME AND THE FALL OF HISTORY

Vitana Kostadinova
Plovdiv University
Bulgaria

Résumé

Cet article explore l'engagement de Byron à l'endroit du sublime dans le chant 2 de *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, contre l'arrière-plan de son traitement dans ses poèmes de l'histoire et de la correspondance entre l'expérience personnelle et les processus historiques. Sur le plan théorique, il prendra appui sur la discussion par Kant du sublime, selon qui nous jugeons quand nous évaluons les objets; le concept sera lié au relativisme esthétique et éthique introduit au dix-huitième siècle. L'argument sera centré sur les instances de parallélisme (produits par la métaphore et la comparaison) entre l'objet sublime et l'esprit de la personne qui le contemple.

What seems to underlie all transcendences in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, canto 4, is the unfathomable range of the human. So, in an attempt to add new meaning to the phrase, or else elaborate on an oxymoron, I will focus on the human sublime in Byron's work — i.e. the interpretation of the sublime moment as elevating the spirit to rival all-powerfulness (rather than conferring upon the individual a sense of his own limited capacity), defying any kind of repression of the self in the age of personality (in preference to displaying a fair degree of comfort and satisfaction with "our Nature's littleness"), and a monument of sceptic subjectivism (as opposed to eighteenth-century progressivism and objectivity).

The sublime in Byron's poem is both Burkean and Kantian, no less the reader's than the poet's, equally natural and rhetorical, but inevitably celebrating man, which only becomes possible against the backdrop of an

intricate relationship with history. The speaker's attitude towards history recalls Vico and anticipates Nietzsche, and his pessimism concerning progress is functionalised as a contrastive background for the imaginative leap beyond reality.

But let us start from the beginning, if not of beginnings, at least of canto 4:

I stood in Venice, on the Bridge of Sighs;
A palace and a prison on each hand:
I saw from out the wave her structures rise
As from the stroke of the enchanter's wand.

This initial in-between-ness of the speaker is illustrative of the ambivalences of Byron's poem and clearly points towards the products of civilization as its setting. Regardless of whether we'll think of the buildings of supreme power and abysmal powerlessness as connected to the sublime, and how our preferences (as 'informed' readers) may be influenced by our readings of the rest of the canto, or the previous one, or of the greater corpus of Byron's writings, we are ready to deal with the expressions and transgressions of the human and its transformations of rise and fall.

The human comes to the foreground in Knapp's analysis of self-consciousness in the Kantian sublime:

'The sublime is that, the mere capacity of thinking which evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense.' Since the real source of sublimity is precisely this faculty, objects outside the mind are sublime only in a secondary or a figurative sense, through our substitution of a respect (*Achtung*) for the Object in place of one for the idea of humanity in our own self — the Subject. (Knapp 74)

Kant's understanding of the sublime introduces the subjectivity indispensable in Byronic discourse. Nevertheless, it is worth bearing in mind that his philosophy, emblematic of the age of Enlightenment, is

sometimes at variance with the Romantic. If “the cause of the sublime is the *aggrandizement of reason at the expense of reality and the imaginative apprehension of reality*” (Weiskel 41), the speaker of canto 4, in between Kantian reason and Nietzschean irrationalism, seems to express a prioritisation of the mentally constructed. But even though the poem associates the creative with the mind, it does not project imagination “as an instrument of reason” (Kant, *Critique* 507):

The beings of the mind are not of clay;
Essentially immortal, they create
And multiply in us a brighter ray
And more beloved existence
(5)

Imaginative creations are not of “mortal bondage” and provide recompense for human limitations. And it is the refusal to acquiesce with the confines of flesh that engenders sublime feelings. Resisting mortality, the poet reaches beyond the imaginable and pictures the life of the spirit after the death of the body:

and should I lay
My ashes in soil which is not mine,
My spirit shall resume it — if we may
Unbodied choose a sanctuary.
(9)

It might be that the dream of greatness inscribed in the stanza would strike some readers as pretentious or even ridiculous; in such a case it would be helpful to remember that the ridiculous borders on the sublime: “The sublime and the ridiculous are often so nearly related, that it is difficult to class them separately. One step above the sublime, makes the ridiculous; and one step above the ridiculous, makes the sublime again” (Paine 107). The poetic expression of Byronic aspirations introduces the image of a human spirit transcending human boundaries. In Jerome McGann’s words, “Byron himself has seemed many things to many men,” but “[t]he narrating poet of this work writes of himself in a sublime style” (*Fieri*

Dust 132). The relevance of this poetic defiance against oblivion is further reinforced by Burke’s statement that “the sublime is an idea belonging to self-preservation” (96).

Poetry is to solve the problem of mortality for the speaker, whose hopes are of “being remembered in my line” (CHP 4. 9); similarly, if anything is capable of conquering the transience of states, it should be poetry:

Thus, Venice, if no stronger claim were thine,
 Were all thy proud historic deeds forgot,
 Thy choral memory of the Bard divine,
 Thy love of Tasso, should have cut the knot
 Which ties thee to thy tyrants
 (17)

In the context of this excerpt, poetry appears as the alternative to a history that fails Venice. In other words, Tasso’s verse will elevate the fallen Republic, for “hypsos is a quality immanent in great writing which refers us to eternity” (Weiskel 12). When “sublimity is a kind of eminence or excellence of discourse” (Longinus 138), its source is figurative language, and Longinus insists “that tropes are naturally grand, that metaphors conduce to sublimity” (150). A powerful image from *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, canto 4, illustrates his point:

But from their nature will the tannen grow
 Loftiest on loftiest and least shelter’d rocks,
 Rooted in barrenness

yet springs the trunk, and mocks
 The howling tempest, till its height and frame
 Are worthy of the mountains from whose blocks
 Of bleak, grey, granite, into life it came,
 And grew a giant tree; — the mind may grow the same.
 (20)

The symbolism of the fir tree is gradually built up and culminates in an analogy between omnipotent nature and the individual measured against it. It is a rhetorical transformation of the natural sublime into an emancipating and stabilizing self-aggrandizement. The parallel between nature and man is the rationale (and inspiration) behind a number of metaphors, such as “nor can trace / Home to its cloud this lightning of the mind” (24), which expand the subjective to take in the world of objectivity. With its focus on the human, the context of renewed suffering could be characterized as sublime for more than one reason. On the one hand, “the idea of bodily pain, in all the modes and degrees of labour, pain, anguish, torment, is productive of sublime” (Burke 95). The Burkean sublime, with its leaning towards the depressing (“the great ought to be dark and gloomy”, he says [114]), can easily embrace Byron’s description of the disastrous fate envisaged by “melancholy bosoms:”

a doom
Which is not of the pangs that pass away;
Making the sun like blood, the earth a tomb,
The tomb a hell, and hell itself a murkier gloom.
(34)

By contrast, the Kantian sublime entails uplifting the spirit, and giving us “courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature” (*Critique* 503). Thus, if we consider the same episode from a Kantian perspective, we shall find the subjective sublime not in the passive horror of the dejected who “loved to dwell in darkness and dismay,” but in the courage of the defiant who challenge either God or the demons “who impair / The strength of better thoughts” (CHP 4. 34).

When considering works of art, what the audience is captivated by is not so much the rhetorical expressiveness of the creation as the human element in it: “We stand, and in that form and face behold / What Mind can make, when Nature’s self would fail . . .” (49). Human inspiration can surpass that of the Demiurge. The achievements of the artist are not imitative and the constructions of the human mind have given rise to gods and goddesses who are not to be found in the natural world. The archetypes of the artist’s creations exist “In him alone” (122). The

spectators, who “inhale / The ambrosial aspect, which, beheld, instils / Part of its immortality; the veil / Of heaven is half undrawn . . .” are transported to another world (49). Thus, the rhetorical sublime is humanised — the transcendence of the human to the divine involves the maker and the viewers, whereas art becomes a mediator between the two. Only here the Kantian “supremacy of our cognitive faculties on the rational side over the greatest faculty of sensibility” (*Critique* 501) is given up and the audience are dependent on their senses — breathing and seeing are essential for the experience of elevation to the divine. The significance of the human is further highlighted by the speaker’s reflections on love:

Glowing, and circumfused in speechless love,
Their full divinity inadequate
That feeling to express, or to improve,
The gods become as mortals, and man’s fate
Has moments like their brightest
.....

We can recall such visions, and create,
From what has been, or might be, things which grow
Into thy statue’s form, and look like gods below.
(CHP 4. 52)

Love is a human feeling and it makes gods fall to the state of human beings; love is also a sublime feeling that raises people to the state of gods. It is this dialectic of descent and ascent that illustrates the meaning of transcendence and encapsulates the human sublime in Byron’s poem. The pedestal on which man is placed here is challenged later on in the poem when love is said to be “no habitant of earth” (121); but, although believed to be ever so elusive and evasive, it’s never given up. “To make feeling, and in particular human love, the ground of an experience of perfection: to ‘Blend a celestial with a human heart’ (CHP 4. 119),” in McGann’s phrase (*Poetics* 159), can only be rivalled by the faultlessness and unattainability of the imaginary that sets the “stubborn heart . . . wealthiest when most undone” (CHP 4. 123) off on its sublime quest.

Byron's own use of the word sublimity is related to the human: the remains of perishable flesh can sanctify a place because of the minds and spirits that have resided in those bodies.

In Santa Croce's holy precincts lie
Ashes which make it holier, dust which is
Even in itself an immortality,
Though there were nothing save the past, and this,
The particle of those sublimities
Which have relaps'd to chaos

.....

These are four minds, which, like the elements,
Might furnish forth creation

.....

Spirits which soar from ruin
(54-5)

It is the human spirit forever trying to surpass human limits that the poet pays tribute to. To the names enumerated in verse, a voluminous note to stanza 54 adds Corinna. Byron touches upon the topic of her poetry being discriminated against because she was a woman and claims for her the right to "enter into that existence into which the great writers of all ages and nations are" (CPW 2: 236). What is noteworthy in terms of the sublime is the parallel of Alpine scenery with the gratification awarded by the poetess; to others' tributes in memory of the Italian, Byron adds "the disinterested regret of a stranger, who, amidst the sublimer scenes of the Lemman lake, received his chief satisfaction from contemplating the engaging qualities of the incomparable Corinna."

Hence, even when the speaker opts for the world around rather than for art exhibits, "For I have been accustomed to entwine / My thoughts with Nature rather in the fields, / Than Art in galleries . . ." (CHP 4. 61), this is not an outward choice of the natural sublime. For, when qualified by the expostulation that "nature is here called sublime merely because it raises the imagination to a presentation of those cases in which the mind can

make itself sensible of the appropriate sublimity of the sphere of its own being, even above nature” (*Critique* 503), Byron’s lines bring the individual into the limelight. Of course, there are the different “limits of painting and poetry” to be considered — the poet states that paintings and statues are unlike poetry, and that art in galleries is “of another temper,” thus distinguishing between the two media in the manner of Lessing’s critical essay and celebrating the verbal rather than the visual arts.¹

Canto 4 is not limited to a Kantian interpretation of the sublime, it does hold instances of the Burkean sublime: the cataract of stanzas 71-2 comes “like an eternity,” “charming the eye with dread,” “horribly beautiful,” and is compared to a “death-bed” and “Madness;” Byron’s ocean is “boundless, endless and sublime” (183) and by the side of which man is reduced to “a drop of rain” (179). But then again, these can be elucidated in Kantian terms: “Sublimity . . . does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our own mind, in so far as we may become conscious of our superiority over nature within, and thus also over nature without us . . .” (*Critique* 504).

If the natural sublime displaced traditionally religious emotions, the human sublime redefined personal perceptions of time and thus affected the attitude towards history displayed in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* canto 4. The account of stanza 64 comes close to illustrating the sublime of war:

War itself, provided it is conducted with order and a sacred respect for the rights of civilians, has something sublime about it, and gives nations that carry it on in such a manner a stamp of mind only the more sublime the more numerous the dangers to which they are exposed, and which they are able to meet with fortitude. (*Critique* 504)

Such an understanding, invited by the presentation of “warring nations” (CHP 4. 63), is complicated by the shifting point of view of the speaker, trapped between omniscience and the benumbed perception of the participants:

Nature's law,
In them suspended, *reck'd not of the awe*
Which reigns when mountains tremble, and the birds
Plunge in the clouds for refuge and withdraw
From their down-toppling nests; and bellowing herds
Stumble o'er heaving plains, and man's dread hath no words.
(64, emphasis added)

The historical events are contrasted with a peaceful landscape of Byron's day and the speaker's address to Clitumnus, personified as "purest god of gentle waters" and believed to have remained "unprofaned by slaughters" (66). This double perspective on the topos, seen within different chronological frameworks, adds to the (de)construction of history. More often than not, history is presented as a series of events of devastation and death, which accounts for the scepticism expressed: the speaker sees sites "unite / In ruin" (44) and declares, "all that *was* / Of then destruction *is*; and now, alas!" (46). The meaning of it all escapes the mind and leads to the conclusion that "History, with all her volumes vast, / Hath but *one* page . . ." (108). The understanding of time in Byron's metaphysical writings and the interpretation of history in canto 4 are indicative of a tendency that is to lead to Nietzsche's superhistorical people who claim that "the past and the present are one and the same, that is, in all their multiplicity typically identical and, as unchanging types everywhere present, they are a motionless picture of immutable values and eternally similar meaning" (Nietzsche 6).

A cyclic philosophy of history highlighting devastation allows for a Voltairean awareness that historical development was not necessarily for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Byron's challenging of the view of history as progressive opens up an unexpected discourse: the sense of history from a Christian perspective transpires as an advance in time checked by the Second Coming — a precursor of the philosophical concept of "the end of history" associated with Kant, Hegel, and generally with the period of Romanticism, and made notorious by Fukuyama.² To Romanticists, "the last man" in the title of Fukuyama's book (which stirred up all sorts of opinions), inevitably evokes Mary Shelley's novel of 1826, thus establishing an associational linkage between Byron and the

end of history. But if history keeps repeating itself as a record of destruction, could there be an end to it? “Man marks the earth with ruin” and can be stopped only if something is beyond his control, like the “deep and dark blue Ocean” (CHP 4. 179). The ambivalent concept of the individual — now deity, now dust — appears to reflect a similar sort of ambivalence concerning history. It is his disillusionment with regard to history that makes the speaker turn to the Ocean:

Thy shores are empires, changed in all save thee —
Assyria, Greece, Rome, Carthage, what are they?
Thy waters washed them power while they were free,
And many a tyrant since; their shores obey
The stranger, slave, or savage; their decay
Has dried up realms to desarts: — not so thou,
Unchangeable save to thy wild waves' play —
Time writes no wrinkle on thine azure brow —
Such as creation's dawn beheld, thou rollest now.
(182)

Thus, the sublime experience serves as compensation for the depressing effects of history. Back in the first century AD Longinus already outlined the role of the sublime:

(35.3) The universe therefore is not wide enough for the range of human speculation and intellect. Our thoughts often travel beyond the boundaries of our surroundings. If anyone wants to know what we were born for, let him look round at life and contemplate the splendour, grandeur, and beauty in which it everywhere abounds. (152)

Elaborating on the healing power of the sublime, Weiskel calls it a “kind of homeopathic therapy, a cure of uneasiness by means of the stronger, more concentrated — but momentary — anxiety involved in astonishment and terror” (18); and it was not simply an antidote to boredom but also a remedy for the inadequacy of modernity, when

considered in the light of Gibbon's "golden past" or Vico's "declines into new barbarism." Hence, after confirming that

There is the moral of all human tales;
'Tis but the same rehearsal of the past,
First Freedom, and then Glory — when that fails,
Wealth, vice, corruption, — barbarism at last
(CHP 4. 108)

the speaker of canto 4 seeks consolation in the inexhaustible range of the human:

Man!
Thou pendulum betwixt a smile and tear,
Ages and realms are crowded in this span,
This mountain, whose obliterated plan
The pyramid of empires pinnacled
(109)

The human transcends its limitations in spite of (or possibly due to) the transience of matter, and becomes sublime. The poet's subjective attitude and moral relativity, incorporating a reference to Shakespearean objectivity, has the effect of dethroning history: "What matters where we fall to fill the maws / Of worms — on the battle-plains or listed spot? / Both are but theatres where the chief actors rot" (139).³ From Byron's nineteenth-century perspective, it is the men and women who are in the limelight while their stage remains obscured. Or else, it would be a stage stirring up melancholy:

One cannot suppress a certain indignation when one sees men's actions on the great world-stage and finds, beside the wisdom that appears here and there among individuals, everything in the large woven together from folly, childish vanity, even from childish malice and destructiveness. (Kant, "Idea")

The fall of history succeeds the fall of man and the salvation that the poem proposes is the sublime experience — whether that's triggered from within or from without, it provides a much-needed recompense.

Man, being “such matter for all feeling” (CHP 4. 109), can both feel and incite the feeling of the sublime — man is its bearer. Or so it seems according to the narrating poet's eulogy of the individual: “But there is that within me which shall tire / Torture and Time, and breathe when I expire; / Something unearthly . . .” (137). The “I” of the poem would become one of those, “whose ashes slept sublime” (110). Artifacts may, like the temple “worthiest of God,” have no contender “of a sublimer aspect” (154); but for a sublime experience it is required that man is not humbled by them:

its grandeur overwhelms thee not;
And why? it is not lessened; but thy mind,
Expanded by the genius of the spot,
Has grown colossal, and can only find
A fit abode wherein appear enshrined
Thy hopes of immortality
(155)

It takes a defying spirit to project aspirations not acquiescent of the consequences of Original Sin. The sublime is only possible with an acute awareness of human mortality backed up by its rejection.

In the context of the sublime, the communion with the objective is preferred to communication with other subjectivities because it allows the speaker to achieve a spiritual union with an inner self:

I love not Man the less, but Nature more,
From these our interviews, in which I steal
From all I may be, or have been before,
To mingle with the Universe, and feel
What I can ne'er express, yet can not all conceal.
(178)

Thus, even the feelings provoked by the Ocean in this canto cannot be emancipated from Kant's consideration that "instead of the object, it is rather the cast of the mind in appreciating it that we have to estimate as sublime" (*Critique* 500).

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¹ See Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laokoon: oder über die Grenzen der Malerie und Poesie* (1766); or *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1984).

² Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

³ "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players." *As You Like It* (2.7.139-40). Quoted in *The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. Agnes Latham (1975; London: Routledge, 1993) 55-6.