

# 'An awful wish to plunge within it': Byron's Critique of the Sublime

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Article abstract

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‘AN AWFUL WISH TO PLUNGE WITHIN IT’: BYRON’S CRITIQUE  
OF THE SUBLIME

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**Résumé**

Cet article porte sur deux aspects importants. Le premier est le sens du sublime depuis Longin jusqu’à la résurrection de Longin par Boileau, soit le sublime que connaissait Byron (pas celui de Kant); le second concerne la citation suivante, de Byron : « c’est le sublime de cette sorte d’écriture-là<sup>1</sup> ». Boileau et Longin soulignent ce qui est noble et qui élève l’esprit, tandis que le « cette sorte-là » de Byron est humble, contingent et fondé sur des bases empiriques. Je ferai valoir que la phrase « sorte d’écriture » lie les deux aspects, car même si Byron saisit intuitivement le nouveau sublime dont il fait la promotion tout en soulignant le burlesque en parlant du « terrible désir de vous y plonger<sup>2</sup> », il n’associe pas au sublime un modèle de conscience mais bien un type d’écriture. C’est dans l’abysse du langage et de la véritable profondeur ontologique que veut plonger Byron. Je soutiendrai que la clé à cette singularité se trouve dans la position religieuse particulière de Byron.

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dans le discours.

Boileau, Préface to his translation of *Traité du  
Sublime*

The word ‘sublime’ comes from the Latin *sub limen* which can mean either ‘under the lintel’ and thus straining upwards beyond our normal height and ceiling or ‘under the threshold’ in which case it means ‘open to

the depths below our normal place of standing'. These interpretations are hypothetical but it is clear that the sublime is etymologically spatial and suggests the interchangeability of above and below. Byron gives a very strange example of this in his use of the word 'plunge' to describe the ascent of birds fleeing from an earthquake:

the birds  
Plunge in the clouds for refuge and withdraw  
From their down-toppling nests . . . .  
(CHP 4. 64)

The nests fall downwards but the birds plunge, amazingly, upwards to the clouds as though the clouds are water into which they dive in the way that Neuha in *The Island* does when she cries "Torquil, follow me, and fearless follow! / Then plunged at once into the Ocean's hollow" (4. 59-60).

Shelley makes much of this interchangeability of heights and depths in order to suggest the possibility of a different cosmos and consciousness than that we customarily think possible. Byron, I think, is more interested in the oddity of familiar consciousness and, in the end, is more likely to place the Sublime here than anywhere else. In *The Island*, he wants us to contrast Torquil's creative, hope-generated plunge with Fletcher Christian's desperate plunge when he:

Cast one glance back, and clenched his hand, and shook  
His last rage 'gainst the earth which he forsook;  
Then plunged.  
(4. 339-41)

The difference between these two downward plunges is emblematic of an ethical distinction. One plunge — Torquil's — is fearful (you might drown) but implicitly hopeful (you might survive with Neuha); the other plunge — Christian's — disguises its fear though defiance but is without hope. One is risky, the other is reckless.

It is interesting then that when Byron comes to attach the word 'sublime' directly to the idea of falling, though not here using the word

'plunge', he associates it in a well-known Ravenna journal entry (28 January, 1821), with the now standard conjunction of hope and fear but also with the idea of choice:

Why, at the very height of desire and human pleasure, worldly, social, amorous, ambitious, or even avaricious, — does there mingle a certain sense of doubt and sorrow — a fear of what's to come — a doubt of what *is* — a retrospect to the past, leading to a prognostication of the future? (The best of Prophets of the future is the Past.) Why is this, or these? — I know not, except that on a pinnacle we are most susceptible of giddiness, and that we never fear falling except from a precipice — the higher, the more awful, and the more sublime; and, therefore, I am not sure that Fear is not a pleasurable sensation; at least, *Hope* is; and *what Hope* is there without a deep leaven of Fear? and what sensation is so delightful as Hope? and, if it were not for Hope, where would the Future be? — in hell. It is useless to say *where* the Present is, for most of us know; and as for the Past, *what* predominates in memory? — *Hope baffled*. Ergo, in all human affairs, it is Hope — Hope — Hope.

Byron rarely thinks in an absolutely coherent way but he always thinks. The Sublime is wheeled in here because of the extra-human scale of the spatial extension ('the higher, the more awful, and the more sublime'), because of the blurring of height and depths (the higher = the deeper fall), and the confusion of feelings (hope and fear). The main reason, however, is the element of choice which in turn is linked to a sense of time ('a retrospect to the past, leading to a prognostication of the future'). There is a fearfulness and excitement attaching to the choice itself rather than to the fact of falling; a moral abyss as well as a real precipice. We may recall Byron's description of Julia's position just before she decides, without fully acknowledging it, to seduce Juan: "The precipice she stood on was immense, / So was her creed in her own

innocence” (DJ 1. 106-8). Julia’s precipice is moral and metaphorical. Manfred, the grandest of Byron’s precipice haunters, stands on a moral and literal one — the Jung Frau — just as Christian stands on a real crag.

Why does Byron not use the word ‘plunge’ in his Journal extract? It is because, in the first instance, he is thinking of the fear of accidentally falling (‘on a pinnacle we are most susceptible to giddiness’) and only secondly of that active desire to fall which is in Manfred’s or Christian’s or Julia’s choice. But a year later remembering his own prose doubtless, he connects the two in Canto 14 of *Don Juan* in a passage which gives me my title:

The very Suicide that pays his debt  
At once without instalments (an old way  
Of paying debts, which creditors regret)  
Lets out impatiently his rushing breath,  
Less from disgust of life than dread of death.

5

’Tis round him, near him, here, there, every where;  
And there’s a courage which grows out of fear,  
Perhaps of all most desperate, which will dare  
The worst to *know* it: — when the mountains rear  
Their peaks beneath your human foot, and there  
You look down o’er the precipice, and drear  
The gulf of rock yawns, — you can’t gaze a minute  
Without an awful wish to plunge within it.

6

’Tis true, you don’t — but, pale and struck with terror,  
Retire: but look into your past impression!  
And you will find, though shuddering at the mirror  
Of your own thoughts, in all their self confession,  
The lurking bias, be it truth or error,  
To the *unknown*; a secret prepossession,  
To plunge with all your fears — but where? You know not,  
And that’s the reason why you do — or do not.

There is the same interest here, not in the business of falling into and experiencing the abyss of space, but of being in the ‘do or do not’ position of a choice in time. Yet there is another element, only hinted at in the prose: ‘the lurking bias . . . to the unknown’. The phrase — ‘the lurking bias’ — is, I suggest, an assault on the new cult of the untethered Sublime. The idea that the Sublime may so fill the mind that one can think of nothing else, and that this can be related to terror, is familiar enough in Burke and in Kant but even when this is associated with melancholy, it dignifies and exalts. In the *Don Juan* stanzas, this isn’t so. We don’t boast about having a lurking bias. We come to it via the Suicide who is not exalted like Hamlet or De Vigny’s Chatterton, for he is clearly a panicky and cowardly individual whose impatience to let out his rushing breath is propelled by dread of death. This figure then becomes the model for everyman and the reader who, on a precipice or anywhere else, have ‘a secret prepossession to plunge’ and they have this precisely because the mystery of the ontological either/or into which we plunge matches exactly the ethical either/or of our decision to plunge or not to plunge. Worst of all is the comic tone and the comic rhyme which attach to this dilemma — ‘you can’t gaze a minute / Without an awful wish to plunge within it’. It is a long way from the exalted Wordsworth on Snowdon’s precipice or Caspar David Friedrich’s *A Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* painted only four years earlier.

My first point then is that Byron seems to be critiquing the Romantic Sublime by deliberately keeping the dimensions of real time, ethical choices, and common human situation from which the new Sublime seeks to be untethered.

Byron implies my second major contention through another unusual word-usage:

TO THE HON. DOUGLAS KINNAIRD *Venice, Octr 26, 1819*

As to ‘Don Juan’, confess, confess — you dog and be candid that it is the sublime of *that there* sort of writing — it may be bawdy but is it not good English? It may be profligate but is it not *life*, is it not *the thing*? Could any man have written it who has not lived in the world? — and [t]ooled in a post-chaise?

— in a hackney coach? — in a gondola? — against a wall? — in a court carriage? — in a vis a vis? — on a table? — and under it? I have written about a hundred stanzas of a third Canto, but it is a damned modest — the outcry has frightened me. I have such projects for the Don but the Cant is so much stronger than the C--- nowadays, that the benefit of experience in a man who had well weighed the worth of both monosyllables must be lost to despairing posterity.

‘The sublime of’ something or other is familiar usage. Blake talks of ‘the Sublime of the Bible’ in his Preface to *Jerusalem*. But we do not expect ‘the sublime of *that there* sort of writing’ any more than we expect to laugh at someone dithering on a precipice. It is partly a matter of tone. But the most obvious subversion of the Romantic Sublime that it makes, is its assumption that the particular can be sublime since ‘that there’ must mean, in the first instance, the given, diverse, actual, particularity of circumstance; whereas the Kantian and Burkean sublime is associated with the formless object or boundless abyss rather than with the fact that the sleeping Juan very specifically “had a bed of furs, and a pelisse, / For Haidée stripp’d her sables off to make / His couch” (DJ 2. 133).

In the second instance, which the context provides, ‘the sublime of *that there*’ is clearly associated with making love. And this is not a matter of making love on a Bollywood mountain-top to ‘the Ride of the Valkyries’ by Wagner but making love ‘on a table . . . and under it’. This is comic real love-making like that of Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde or Juan and Julia. It is true that Longinus found Sappho’s varied sexual emotions to be sublime but, by and large, the modern Sublime does not include sex of what Alex in Anthony Burgess’s *Clockwork Orange* calls ‘the old in out in out’ variety. Where sex is yearning, as in Tristan und Isolde, it is perfectly all right, for yearning is deferred to the infinite for its unparticularised satisfactions. From the Romantic Sublime’s point of view, inverting St. Paul’s wiser advice, it is better to yearn than to marry. There is a link then. It is the particular that-thereness of sexual experience which the Romantic Sublime can’t accommodate and Byron relentlessly

puts back into the equation. How can we bring together Byron’s precipice sublime and his that-there sublime?

Byron’s boast is that he knows about the that-thereness of life and that his poem derives from that knowledge and represents it in a way that is sublime. But there is something of a gap in fact. Byron doubtless made love in lots of peculiar places — in gondolas and post-chaises and on the sofa at Seaham almost immediately after the wedding ceremony — at least he wishes us to think so, but Juan apart from his wedding night in a cave, makes loves in a bed. Why the emphasis on not doing so? Presumably because love-making in Byron’s list is unexpected and fraught with risk — adulterous lovers, I hazard, are more likely than married couples to make love in a gondolas or a Maserati. Byron’s Don Juan makes loves in risky circumstances, the outraged husband or father — Don Alfonso, Lambro, or the Sultan — could return or the rival lover could find out as Gulbeyaz does about Dudù and Juan and determines to kill both of them. A risky business making love or, for that matter, being in a shipwreck, a slave market, or a battle. When Juan isn’t at risk — with Catharine the Great — he gets sick all of a sudden. There is suddenly no that-thereness in his life or in the poem any more. Sex is familiar but always, for Byron, it is linked to what Boileau calls ‘cet extraordinaire et merveilleux’. The original Don Juan, seducer and trickster, associates love-making entirely with risk. He lives and exults in the precipice of danger that Donna Julia more timorously tiptoes round. He lives on the threshold of hope and fear, fulfilment and escape, but finally, as he knows, is bound to that future than Byron maps out in his journal entry: ‘if it were not for Hope, where would the Future be? — in hell’. Don Giovanni knows where he will end up for the one who chooses the modality of repeated escape as risk, also craves the denied but associated risk of capture and punishment. Byron’s Juan does not seek out risk in this way but love-making is always something extraordinaire et merveilleux for him as it was, — at least for its duration — we may presume, for Byron himself.

But I have missed out two other emphases in this famous passage and risk distorting it. Byron is making a claim for truthfulness for *Don Juan*. Fidelity to the surprising, particular, repeatable yet diverse, irresistible and thrilling character of life’s energies and of our experience of constant



incongruity stuck, as it were midway, between primal energies, of which the sexual is the most powerful, and the diverse, actual, social and historical worlds to which we deeply and necessarily belong which are both, in some sense, produced by and yet stand in puzzling contrariety with primal energies. *Don Juan* holds to this tenaciously.

The other emphasis that I have omitted is on language: 'it is the sublime of *that there* sort of writing — it may be bawdy but is it not good English?' 'That there' is a 'sort of writing'; bawdiness is represented in 'good English'. This at once re-instates the connection between Sublime and style that is the main insistence of Longinus and Boileau who says that 'cet extraordinaire et merveilleux . . . frappe dans le discours'. The relation between sublimity and language is increasingly emptied out in the eighteenth century — Burke and Kant use very few literary examples, and that is partly because literature, and especially poetry, is always a matter of the that-there of particular words and when it ceases to be registered as that-there, it becomes, as reading Chapman's Homer or *King Lear* did for Keats, a jumping-off point into the 'most dizzy pain' with which he viewed the Elgin Marbles from which we have to be reluctantly recalled to the familiar 'that-there' disappointments of actual life. We get dizzy on a height for, as Byron says, 'on a pinnacle we are most susceptible of giddiness'. There is ambiguous pleasure and pain in this giddiness for Keats and, doubtless for Byron too, but precipice-induced giddiness remains, for Byron but not for Keats, bound up with life and death choices that actual life is constantly asking of us. Shall we take this risk or not?

The association of good English with life is a moral assertion too of course. It flies in the face of Southey to whom *Don Juan* is ironically dedicated and it is part of Byron's claim that his poem is in the tradition of Milton, Dryden, and Pope. Life and Literature hang together — both proceed in risk, respond to and are judged by the that-there-ness of their shaping.

It is not surprising then that the journal passage about the precipice is put as a second Thought immediately under Byron's famous definition of poetry as 'The feeling of a Former world and Future'. The two thoughts are linked. Poetry, in Byron's view, comes from the same precipice point of conjunction ('a fear of what's to come — a doubt of what *is* — a retrospect to the past, leading to a prognostication of the future'). Hence

in life, as in poetry, ‘it is Hope — Hope — Hope’ through which we live and it is the risk of Hope that we set against the known ending of life — Death — and the fact that we know that the constant risk-taking of Byron’s poem, *Don Juan*, too must eventually end.

I have argued that Byron critiques the untethering of the Sublime from morals, the particular, the sexual, and from well-fashioned living language which had been accomplished within his life-time. Why then does he use the word at all? Why not write to Douglas Kinnaird something like this: ‘As to ‘Don Juan’, confess, confess — you dog and be candid that it is ten-times better than the Laker’s dingy sublime, no this is *that there* sort of writing’. After all, he writes to Murray of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*: “You have so many ‘divine’ poems, is it nothing to have written a *human* one?” (6 April 1819). But he doesn’t write this. He makes a bid for the sublime. *Don Juan* is a sublime poem. Why and how? Easier to ask than to answer but Byron’s comment on Dr. Johnson gives us a clue:

*Tuesday, January 9, 1821*

Dined. Read Johnson’s *Vanity of Human Wishes*, — all the examples and mode of giving them sublime, as well as the latter part, with the exception of an occasional couplet. I do not so much admire the opening . . . But ’tis a grand poem — and *so true!* true as the 10th of Juvenal himself. The lapse of ages *changes* all things — time — language — the earth — the bounds of the sea — the stars of the sky, and every thing about, around, and underneath man, *except man himself*, who has always been and always will be, an unlucky rascal. The infinite variety of lives conduct but to death, and the infinity of wishes lead but to disappointment.

Here Byron asserts that the literary style is sublime (‘All the examples and mode of giving them sublime’), that the grandeur of Johnson’s poem is bound up with its truth, and that the sublime of extension — the lapse of ages — which leads to barely imaginable vistas of change, is not there simply to give us Keats’s dizzy pain at aesthetically realised scale but

gives us moral insight. The focus of that moral insight is exactly the same as the Romantic Sublime — the relationship between human finitude and a graspable infinity — but the point is quite different for ‘The infinite variety of lives conduct but to death, and the infinity of wishes lead but to disappointment’. Here it is not only the vast spatial sweep that is sublime but a combined sense of finite and infinite which is not merely aesthetically grasped (the root of the Romantic Symbol), but is the grandeur and limitation known to the moral understanding. It is clear that for Byron, the moral is not opposed to the sublime and that a vista of human lives in the context of change is as much sublime as the stars in space or a waterfall. That-thereness is the conjunction of vista and the particular in a frame that is simultaneously moral and spatial.

Parallel to this, I suggest, is a sense that sexual love, always a that-there business, belongs to vista too — to the walk of Juan and Haidée along the open sea-shore, to Aurora Raby’s encompassing of infinite space in a particular person which stills and draws Juan. This is not a matter of Tristan and Isolde yearning but neither is it simply a matter of finitude or of tooling in a post-chaise.

And this is the nub of the matter. Byron puns on cant and c...t but he does not pun on cant and the one whom he calls ‘the great Professor Kant’ (to rhyme with ‘jaunt’) in canto 10 (60). Doubtless of the three four-letter words, Byron knew the least about Kant. There can be no one in thought and personality further removed from Kant than Byron. Kant authorised that movement from real space to mental space that Byron deplored in his contemporaries. When he wished in the dedication of *Don Juan* that the Lakers would exchange their Lakes for Ocean, he means by Ocean something vast but real. Byron never wishes to stand in purely mental space:

And therefore will I leave off metaphysical  
Discussion, which is neither here nor there:  
If I agree that what is, is; then this I call  
Being quite perspicuous and extremely fair.  
(DJ 11. 33-6)

To be ‘neither here nor there’ is to desert the ‘that-there’. Byron in *Don Juan* stands between what is beyond the lintel and below the

threshold in the 'that-there' diversity of events which is part of the unstateable, customary, bewildering, living, 'is'. 'Is' is not simply constituted by consciousness and is the temporal sphere of our choices. If the increasingly fashionable word 'Sublime' is the right word for an aspect of 'is', well then Byron will use it in the new way, but the usages which I have tried to call attention to in this paper suggest that Byron critiqued an untethered or free-standing Sublime.

The main reason, I suspect, why this is so is because Byron never fully backed that blurring or elision, which in effect is displacement, of the religious by the Sublime that is the backdrop and justification for all the untetherings that I have described. It is easy to see why this is so. The Sublime and the aesthetic exist in the shadow of the religious for it is religion's business to interrelate the finite and the infinite. When religion is strong therefore, as in the Middle Ages, the concept of the Sublime and the possibility of a free-standing sense of the aesthetic are impossible because both are already used up, tethered to the untethered. They re-emerge, post Renaissance and Reformation, in Boileau's Versailles and will pass as self-important entities, via eighteenth-century England and Germany to nineteenth-century America and to twentieth-century criticism. We could call this 'secularisation'. As crucial as the aestheticising of landscape to this movement is Lowth's Lectures on the Bible which make possible Blake's phrase 'the Sublime of the Bible' which shows how radically irreligious is Blake and opens the transcendental highway to the criticism of Abrams, Bloom, Frye, and Hartman who could not accommodate Byron at all. In them the Romantic Sublime has accomplished its natural destination, as George Steiner might put it — literary criticism inventing modernity out of Romanticism's usurpation of religious intuitions and assertions. Post-modernity is its jokey coda.

In this way, the sublime is to religion as pornography is to sex. It takes out the best bits very determinedly, decontextualises them, and renders them ridiculous but makes your not finding them ridiculous in this new and separated guise, the condition of your excited attention. It is pretty ridiculous to feel sublime when standing on a precipice whether you are John Martin's Lucifer or Gray's Bard, Byron's Manfred, or Laurel and Hardy. And Byron knows this perhaps better than anyone. However we

look at him, sceptic and Satanist, he neither by-passes religion nor seeks to transform it into something else. In some recognisable sense, it persists in him. If he has an awful wish to plunge from a precipice, he does not recognise this as the privilege of a Romantic poet nor as instance of superior aesthetic taste but as something inherent in man's ambiguous risky state — half-dust, half-deity —, as much ridiculous as sublime but, in either case, fraught with risk as it is, humbled by exaltation like suicidal Manfred and exalted by fall like sexual Torquil, plunging upwards and downwards between lintel and threshold, 'is it not *life, the thing?*'

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<sup>1</sup> La traduction de Sonya Malaborza

<sup>2</sup> Traduction de Pichot.