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BYRON, DELACROIX AND THE ORIENTAL SUBLIME

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Résumé

Parmi les artistes de l'ère romantique, Delacroix se distingue par sa fine perception du sublime oriental dans l'œuvre de Byron. Il était attiré par les scènes tragiques de Byron qui dépeignaient les instants les plus intenses, les plus périlleux et les plus passionnés de la vie de l'homme. Un grand nombre des tableaux de Delacroix ont été inspirés par l'œuvre de Byron; dans cet article, cependant, mes observations se limiteront à l'illustration de scènes de violence tirées de *The Giaour*. De telles scènes produisent l'expérience du sublime oriental qui, selon Delacroix, forme la base esthétique des contes orientaux de Byron. Avant d'entamer une discussion sur le sublime dans les œuvres de Byron et de Delacroix, je fournirai quelques balises théoriques sur les normes du sublime en rapport aux scènes de violence entourant la rencontre du Soi avec l'Autre, différent. J'entends non seulement révéler l'importante influence de Byron sur Delacroix, mais aussi montrer comment et pourquoi Byron et Delacroix ont réussi à évoquer le sublime oriental dans leurs œuvres. Le concept du héros chez Byron, celui du héros occidental et oriental, vivant des instances de violence horrifiante dans un lieu oriental, sera analyser à la lumière de l'impact émotif et érotique sur la stimulation du sublime oriental.

I

Among Romantic artists, Delacroix was remarkable for his keen perception of the Sublime in Byron's Works. In his *Journal*, Delacroix acknowledges the impact of Byron's poetry on his paintings when he says: "Always remember certain passages from Byron, they are an unfailing spur to your imagination; they are right for you. . . . This is sublime, and it is his alone. I feel these things as they can be rendered in painting" (40). Byron's tragic scenes which involve untamed grief, anger, brutality, and horror, attracted Delacroix because they depicted the most intense and perilous passionate instances in man's life. But more than anything else, Byron's scenes of men confronting inevitable death or drastic danger left lasting impressions on the French painter. *The Bride of Abydos*, *The Corsair*, *Lara*, *Sardanapalus: A Tragedy*, *The Prisoner of Chillon*, *Don Juan*, *Marino Faliero: An Historical Tragedy*, and *Mazeppa* fired Delacroix's imaginative powers. However in this paper, I will limit my discussion to paintings of scenes of violence, death, and defeat in *The Giaour*, scenes which generate the Oriental Sublime experience, which Delacroix believed formed the artistic basis of Byron's Oriental tales. Before presenting a discussion of the sublime in Byron's and Delacroix's works, I shall first provide the theoretical standards of the sublime as it relates to the scenes of violence involving the self's encounter with the different other. My discussion is not only intended to reveal the great influence of Byron on Delacroix but also to show how and why Byron and Delacroix actually succeeded in evoking the Oriental Sublime experience in their works via images and scenes of horrifying violence, death, and defeat, images and scenes capturing the inevitable and irrevocable confrontations between self and other.

Much has been written on Longinus', Burke's, and Kant's perceptions of the sublime in art and literature, so I will try to be brief.[1] While the first emphasizes "excellence and distinction of expression" as the main source of the sublime in literature (100); the second; contends that the sublime is produced by the emotion of terror, or some passion like it, as long as it "does not press too close"(46), i.e., as long as it does not involve danger; and the third considers the sublime as an overwhelming "outrage" to the imagination and categorizes it into "mathematical" or the "absolutely great" in comparison to all around it, and the "dynamic" or that which

makes us aware of our helplessness when confronted with the horrifying power of nature (91, 94, 79, 111). Although the sublime in Byron's and Delacroix's works do not violate the theories proposed by Longinus, Burke, and Kant, it seems to me that Schiller's perception of the sublime may best fit the purposes of this study.

Charles H. Hinnant makes an interesting discussion of Schiller's perception of the sublime experience as a reaction to man's encounter with the different other — in this study the different other is no other than the Orient and the Orientals, and Self represents the Western reader or spectator. To Schiller the source of the sublime is phantasmatic terror and fear that "drives human beings to posit the Other and to achieve security through this Other — not by suppressing or fleeing it by seeking to anticipate it" (126). Though Schiller does not distinguish himself from Burke or Kant, however, he goes deeper than both in his analysis of the different other. He claims that "The custom of the ancient Taureans, to sacrifice to Diana every newcomer [every Other] who had the misfortune to land on their coast, scarcely had any other origin than fear. For only a human being formed in a depraved way and not someone merely unformed is so barbaric that he rages against what can do him no harm" (37). Hinnant explains:

> Schiller's ideas contain the germ of what is developed in philosophical rather than historical terms by Emmanuel Levinas when he describes the habitual mode of Western philosophical discourse as a 'horror' of the Other that remains other. . . . the fear aroused by the Other has to be acted out; no sooner do we represent the Other to ourselves than we experience terror; hence the instantaneous punishment that we mete out to newcomers even as we fear a similar fate for ourselves. In that moment the Other will doubtless be scarcely any different from ourselves, the terrorizer from the terrorized. (127)

This implies that, to Schiller, Self's fear of the unknown and of the external and unconventional powerful and violent realities is a major

source of the sublime, which begins with the detachment of Self from Other. This detachment brings forth the nineteenth-century Oriental exotic experience, which seems to concur with the Oriental sublime experience in as much as it reflects the detachment between the exote and the exotic, Self and Other. Todorov explains: "We cherish the remote because of its remoteness. . . . Knowledge is incompatible with exoticism, but lack of knowledge is in turn irreconcilable with praise of others; yet praise without knowledge is precisely what exoticism aspires to be" (265).

The exotic experience, like the sublime experience, generates in the subject an interest stimulated by exaggerated ignorance, fear, and illusions. "The exotic experience is thus to be carefully distinguished from the experience of immersion" in the experiences of the other, says Todorov (329). This explains Delacroix's conviction that sometimes, the sublime is no more than "astonishing naïveté" (441). The exotic experience like the sublime experience is therefore maintained by the subject's immersion in the shocking spectacles of the unfamiliar other rather than in the Other's actual experience. Thus Self preserves its proximity from the actual experiences of Other and generates its own exotic and / or sublime pleasure. This association between the sublime and the exotic experiences is necessary for this study as exoticism has for a long time been associated with Orientalism. And indeed, to nineteenth-century Western spectators, spectacles of the Orient and Oriental, especially those of violence and terror, were shocking enough to generate both the exotic and the Oriental sublime experience.

Hinnant confirms that Delacroix's *The Massacres of Chios* (1824) is a typical model of an art work exerting shocking fears in a spectator, who becomes "aware of the actualities of history through a protective but transparent barrier," and who becomes "aware of the reality of injustice, not to know the dangers lurking around us is to leave ourselves vulnerable to the dark core of destruction concealed within the world of sensuous beauty" (134, 135). Delacroix himself confesses that "*The terrible* is a natural gift in the arts, like charm. . . . *The terrible* is like *the Sublime*, it must never be abused" (369). He goes on to explain that "*Sublime* means everything that is most elevated; *perfect*, that which is most complete, most finished" (391). He believes that theme and medium must stimulate intense passions in the spectator and goes a step further to confirm that

great art goes beyond mere beauty in its search for the most profound expressions of truth because real beauty lies not in the visual but in the imaginative: "*The Beautiful* [in art] *is truth idealized*" (442). Thus, visual beauty must be sacrificed for a higher goal, the Truth; and it is no other than the vital and horrifying Truth, imposed by a shock on the viewer, that generates the feeling of the Sublime.

Byron implies his perception of the sublime when he writes in his diary on 28 January, 1821:

> 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? (BLJ 8: 37)

The higher the precipice the more fearful, the more beautiful, the more pleasurable, and consequently the more sublime. In his poetry, Byron implies his perception of the sublime in scenes depicting the most horrifying and shocking images of Truth; *Manfred*, *Marino Faliero*, *Sardanapalus*, *Cain: A Mystery*, and the Oriental tales are typical examples. He further believes that sublime deeds belong to fiery souls (*Giaour* lines 142-9), and that the severe, the austere, the dark, the boundless, the endless, the guilty, the brutal, the Satanic, the fearful, the painful, and the mysterious are reflections of the Truthful; and they are essential sources of the sublime (See *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* canto 4. 146, 183; and *Don Juan* canto 15. 95 and 16. 113). Here Byron and Delacroix join most nineteenth-century Romantic artists and writers who believed that violent and unpleasant images and subjects become beautiful in art because they represent aspects of the horrifying and shocking realities of human beings, and because these images petrify the reflexes. William Blake represents the shocking realities of life in horrifying images of children locked up in coffins of black, in the two "Chimney Sweeper" songs. Coleridge draws the most realistic sublime image of Death and untamed desires in "The Ancient Mariner" and *Christabel*, the

second of which Byron praises in a letter to Thomas Moore from Venice, on 24 December, 1816. Shelley in his "Ode to the West Wind" and *Prometheus Unbound* evokes horrifying images of nature and man caught up amidst violent incidents exposing man's weaknesses and vulnerability as well as his vigor and viciousness. I believe that such images and scenes are nowhere in Romantic art and literature more strongly exposed than in the works of Byron and Delacroix.

II

In Delacroix's paintings we observe the painter's absorption with human beings who are caught amidst irrevocable yet self-inflicted clashes. His colours are violent and expressive of the rapid motion of the action; they contribute to the creation of intense, crucial moments. Dark and gloomy, his colours reflect the mystery of fear and the terror of death. They are unlike the colours used by contemporary Orientalist painters who in their Oriental works used "brilliant, explosive colours" (Stevans 20). To Delacroix, the Orient was more than an intoxicating spectacle of brilliant light and beauty; it was a world reflecting the most uncontrolled primitive and primal passions and concerns of man. To his audience he wanted to represent it as an arena of the dark terror man experiences when confronted with the realities of cruelty and with the gloomy mysteries of life and death. Like Byron, Delacroix shocks and startles his audience and leaves them with the sense of helplessness and defeat, which according to Schiller contribute to the creation of the sublime moment: we regard the spectacle "as a might against which our own might accounts to nothing" (qtd. in Hinnant 132). The violence exhibited in his paintings drives the spectators to the borders of the valley of hell without pushing them into it. And it is at these borders that the sublime experience is felt. Delacroix's *The Combat of the Giaour and Hassan*, which is one of at least six versions painted between 1824 and 1856 of a theme inspired by Lord Byron's poem, *The Giaour, a Fragment of a Turkish Tale* (1813), is the most expressive of the Oriental sublime. The intensity of the confrontation between the combatants is enhanced by the swift action and the terrifying setting. The fighters' cloaks and their horses' manes are blown by the

wind and look like "waves madden as they meet;" the sharp and deadly weapons are poised and ready to pierce the flesh of the opponent; and the fatal gazes of the "accursed Giaour" and Hassan reveal the vicious nature of man. All these contribute to the intensity and brutality of the encounter. Thus the most sublime in the painting is the horrifying death-dealing moment, which Delacroix captures so realistically. Here the spectator's imagination is fired into a higher and more passionate feeling of distanced horror. Byron's description of the encounter between the combatants is no less effective than Delacroix's painting:

> Thus — as the stream and ocean greet,
> With waves that madden as they meet —
> Thus join the bands, whom mutual wrong,
> And fate and fury drive along.
> The bickering sabres' shivering jar;
> And pealing wide — or ringing near,
> Its echoes on the throbbing ear,
> The deathshot hissing from afar —
> The shock — the shout—the groan of war; —
> Reverberate along that vale.
> (*Giaour*, lines 632-41)

Byron's powerful images of the death-dealing encounter prompted Delacroix to paint four other works: *Scene from the War between the Turks and Greeks*, *The Combat between the Greek and Turk*, *A Turkish Officer Killed in the Mountains*, *The Giaour Contemplating the Death of Hassan*, which correspond to the following lines by Byron:

> With half the fervour Hate bestows
> Upon the last embrace of foes,
> When grappling in the fight they fold
> Those arms that ne'er shall lose their hold;
> Friends meet to part — Love laughs at faith; —
> True foes, once met, are joined till death!
>
> * * * * * * * *

With sabre shiver'd to the hilt,
Yet dripping with the blood he spilt;
Yet strain'd within the sever'd hand
Which quivers round that faithless brand;
His turban far behind him roll'd,
And cleft in twain its firmest fold;
His flowing robe by falchion torn,
And crimson as those clouds of morn
That streak'd with dusky red, portend
The day shall have a stormy end;
A stain on every bush that bore
A fragment of his palampore,
His breast with wounds unnumber'd riven,
His back to earth, his face to heaven,
Fall'n Hassan lies — his unclos'd eye
Yet lowering on his enemy,
As if the hour that seal'd his fate,
Surviving left his quenchless hate;
And o'er him bends that foe with brow
As dark as this that bled below. —
(*Giaour*, lines 649-74)

In his poem, Byron surpasses Delacroix because he generates the sublime by not only pushing the reader to the sharp edge of the precipice but by also carrying him higher to the borderline separating heaven from hell; i.e., Byron's reader experiences the sublime of the beautiful (the ecstatic setting) and of the terrible (the sinful and deadly fight). Byron introduces his tale with a paradisal description of Greece; and the scene where the combat is to take place is in contrast to the cruelty of those men who dwell in it: "Fair clime! where every season smiles," "As if for Gods, a dwelling-place," are contrasted to "So soft the scene, so form'd for joy, / So curst the tyrants that destroy!" (*Giaour*, lines 7, 47, 66-7). Also Leila's fair and heavenly beauty is contrasted to the brutality of "Black" and "Stern" Hassan. Another scene enhancing this contrast is the Giaour at his deathbed; he is neither repentant nor willing to ask for redemption when he confesses his guilt to a priest: "I want no paradise — but rest," says Giaour (line 1270). Delacroix captures these moments in a painting, *The*

Confession of the Giaour, which I believe is a masterpiece of the sublime of guilt and defeat. The background of dark brown and the cloaks of black are indicative of a cell more like a dark coffin. The Giaour's pale face reveals the images of defeat, of the graveness of guilt and pain, and of the shadow of death approaching; but the glowing eyes are far too reaching as they recall the images of black Hassan and of bright Leila, whose deaths lay heavy on his heart. Could love produce so much violence and cruelty is the question Delacroix successfully poses in his painting. However, Delacroix's most powerful sublime image is made when he portrays in the hands of the priest the rosary and its Cross, and in the background on the wall the armor which has been used to kill Hassan; the contrast is that of life and death, of salvation and doom.

This sublime image is surpassed only by Byron's tantalizing image of Giaour:

> Dark and unearthly is the scowl
> That glares beneath his dusky cowl —
> The flash of that dilating eye
> Reveals too much of times gone by —
> . . . . . .
> From him the half-affrighted Friar
> When met alone would retire —
> As if that eye and bitter smile
> Transferred to others fear and guile —
> . . . . . .
> But sadder still it is to trace
> What once were feelings in that face —
> (lines 832-5, 846-9, and 859-60)

Byron ends his tale with a gloomy image of life in death; this is the horrifying image of the repentless death of the Giaour. This image contrasts the bright images of the Eastern climes and the divine beauty of Leila. The reader is left with a feeling of outrage and horror and the illusion of being at the brim of the horrible hell. This engenders the sublime experience, which as Schiller confirms, affords the reader with a chance for salvation "not in ignorance of the dangers camped around us

— for ultimately this ignorance must come to an end — but only in the acquaintance with these dangers" (qtd. in Hinnant 132).

To sum up, Byron's influence on the generation of the Oriental sublime in Delacroix's paintings as well as in his readers cannot be doubted. After all Delacroix placed Byron on the same level as Dante, Shakespeare, and Michelangelo. To see how Delacroix's debt to Byron manifests itself in paintings exhibiting Oriental sublime scenes is to appreciate Byron's sublime Oriental images. Here, I have isolated a central, distinctive Byronian strain of thought in the Oriental tales, and specifically in *The Giaour*; it presents itself in a peculiar combination of Oriental scenes of violence, death, and defeat amidst stunning scenes of human and landscape beauty. Byron goes beyond Delacroix in his portrayal of this shocking contrast, which is paramount to the tales thematic exposition and to the creation of the Oriental sublime experience.

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[1] The following works discuss the sublime: Paul Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Peter De Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); John R. Goodreau, *The Role of the Sublime in Kant's Moral Metaphysics* (Washington: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1998); Suzanne Guerlac, "Longinus and the Subject of the Sublime," *NLH* XVI, 2 (Winter 1985): 275-89; Eileen Harris, "Burke and Chambers on the Sublime and Beautiful," in *Essays in the History of Architecture Presented to Rudolph Wittkower* (London: Phaidon, 1967): 207-213; W. J. Hipple, *The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1957); Samuel H. Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960); and Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976).