

'Congenial with the Night': The Sublime and Byron's Tragedies

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Special Issue, 2005

Des actes sélectionnés du 30^e Congrès international sur Byron
« Byron and The Romantic Sublime »

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/014326ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/014326ar>

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Publisher(s)

Revue de l'Université de Moncton

ISSN

0316-6368 (print)

1712-2139 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Kimura, Y. (2005). 'Congenial with the Night': The Sublime and Byron's Tragedies. *Revue de l'Université de Moncton*, 41–50.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/014326ar>

Article abstract

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Pour poursuivre cet argument, *Sardanapalus* présente un roi qui évite délibérément tout sentiment du sublime associé à la vie d'une nation. Or, à la conclusion de l'intrigue, lorsque ce dernier s'enlève dramatiquement la vie, il déclare comme Manfred qu'il est « on the brink » et qu'il sent « an inward shrinking ». Ainsi, on voit qu'il s'aventure vers l'Abysse et qu'il accepte de vivre un rapport sublime à l'histoire qu'il transcende.

'CONGENIAL WITH THE NIGHT': THE SUBLIME AND BYRON'S TRAGEDIES

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Résumé

Cet article fait valoir que le sentiment du sublime joue un rôle quasi-dramatique dans les tragédies de Byron, et surtout dans *Marino Faliero* et *Sardanapalus*. *Marino Faliero* est une pièce axée sur une injure subie par Marino dans sa vie familiale qui pousse le Doge à participer à la Révolution et ce, dans un temps et un lieu bien précis. La pièce montre également une conscience aiguë de la position élémentaire et sublime de Venise dans le cosmos qui forme une sorte d'arrière-trame à l'action locale. Cet arrière-plan sublime relativise et exalte l'action de la pièce. Nous prêterons une attention particulière au monologue de Lioni au début de l'acte IV et à la malédiction prophétique proférée par Marino contre Venise à la conclusion de la pièce.

Pour poursuivre cet argument, *Sardanapalus* présente un roi qui évite délibérément tout sentiment du sublime associé à la vie d'une nation. Or, à la conclusion de l'intrigue, lorsque ce dernier s'enlève dramatiquement la vie, il déclare comme Manfred qu'il est « on the brink » et qu'il sent « an inward shrinking ». Ainsi, on voit qu'il s'aventure vers l'Abysson et qu'il accepte de vivre un rapport sublime à l'histoire qu'il transcende.

Venice was historically entitled *la serenissima*, that is the most serene or sublime city. Venice is normally associated with light; this is obvious through the painting tradition. Yet Edmund Burke asserts that darkness is a cause of the sublime: utter darkness is for everybody the origin of terror, because in utter darkness we feel totally groundless by not seeing anything to rely on for security (172). However, Venice seems to be best described in twilight: most of Turner's paintings of Venice are in twilight, and the Venice described so vividly in Shelley's *Julian and Maddalo* is in the evening. By seeing Venetian churches and palaces in twilight, Shelley makes us feel the boundlessness of the human soul, which in turn is linked to the sublime, but twilight does not have the terrors associated with absolute darkness. Tony Tanner, taking up stanzas 27 to 29 of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* canto 4, which portray Venice at sunset, remarks that it is "that time of day when everything is indeterminate, indeterminable, in a bright, crepuscular liminality of evening," and "things are divided, as between sun and moon, or rather joined, as the present is now joined to the past. There is contention — between Day and Night — but things, or rather not things but lights, colours, the elements, are floating, heaving, melting together" (36-7). Twilight thus exerts a mysterious power to change the landscape into one filled with supernatural influence.

Venice is not seen as sublime only because of the power of twilight. Its landscape which here includes buildings, the history of the city and Venetian lives, overwhelms the viewer's mind. When Byron portrays the landscape, he always observes those things together: he does not fail to see human arts and lives in it. In his previously unpublished letter to John Murray in response to William Bowles's comments on Pope's poetical genius, Byron objects to the contemporary tendencies of poets admiring nature, saying that without "the Columns, the temples, the wrecked vessel," "the Spots of earth would be unnoticed and unknown — buried like Babylon and Nineveh in indistinct confusion — without poetry" (CMP 133). It is because columns and temples are "direct manifestations of mind" (134). In similar fashion, he says that "there would be nothing to make the Canal of Venice more poetical than that of Paddington — were it not for the artificial adjuncts above mentioned" (134). The Venice Byron describes in *Marino Faliero* is the manifestation of this idea of landscape.

In *Marino Faliero*, Venice is mainly observed in the darkness of the night, but it is not in utter darkness as in Burke's sublime. The buildings and their associated human lives are illumined by artificial light and moonlight, in other words, in something comparable to, though not quite the same as, twilight in Shelley's and Turner's Venice. The greatness of the buildings is, of course, related to their scale, but we cannot forget that the greatness of Venice also signifies the greatness of human achievement.¹ It may be said that this is one of the main differences in Byron's sublime in contrast to that of other Romantic poets, particularly, that of Wordsworth, who, weary of city life, rediscovers the healing power of nature. Byron, on the contrary, describes the city positively. It is because the city represents a kind of grandeur in human life. Unlike Dorothy, who, in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," is unified with, or even disappears into, nature, individuals in Byron's work, each one of them, dead or alive, influences the other to form the landscape. The lives of these make history. Byron's eyes, therefore, turn upwards to admire the magnificence of the buildings which reflect the history of the place, and then turn downwards to observe humans who are, collectively, the foundation of the landscape. This movement of the eye coincides with Manfred's movements on the Jungfrau. He stands on the top of the mountain, experiencing the sublime moment, but still climbs down, guided by the Chamois Hunter, back to the human world. Also, although he communicates with supernatural power, he dies a human death with the help of the Abbot. For Wordsworth, the sublime is in the natural world and in the depths of consciousness, but not in the appearance and history of the city. For Byron, it is in both: the works of the human mind create the landscape.

In *Marino Faliero*, the Doge and one patrician Lioni survey Venice from opposite points of view. In the first instance, this seems to take us away from the association of the human with the sublime which Byron argues for against Bowles, since Lioni's soliloquy gives a strong contrast between the revels under "A dazzling mass of artificial light" (4.1.33) and the city under the moonlight, so that it can emphasize the superficial and decadent life of Venetian nobles. The revels are associated with images of death: Lioni cannot cheer himself up, feeling his blood chilled (8) and "A damp like death" (9) within; the music sounds to him as a knell (12), as if he anticipated the conspiracy: "my breast feels too anxious" (23).

Artificial light shows “all things, but nothing as they were” (34). There is no difference in the appearances of the aged and the young: the aged disguise themselves to look young, while youth, when the revels end in the morning, have their cheeks shallow and their eyes sunk, “which should not / Have worn this aspect yet for many a year” (49-50).

Lioni’s “giddy eyes” (64) cannot distinguish art from nature in the appearances of Venetian nobles under artificial light. “The white arms and the raven hair” (54), for example, which are beautiful themselves, are now decorated with “flashing ornaments” (53). Lioni is about to lose his sense in “the delusion of the dizzy scene, / Its false and true enchantments” (62-3): “The sight of beauty as the parch’d pilgrim’s / On Arab sands the false mirage” (65-6). Night in this sequence, if not exactly sublime, is an uncanny world. Lioni leaves this festival early and devotes himself to “thought more tranquil, or forgetfulness” (18) in the air of “A goodly night” (25).

Nevertheless, the world that Lioni now turns his eyes to is not the sublime of natural scenery, but the man-made world of the city of Venice, and here Jerome J. McGann wrongly, I would argue, claims that “Lioni’s mind is harmonized for a brief moment by his awareness of the natural beauty that surrounds Venice” (McGann 213). The moonlight displays the city mysteriously and serenely: “the lofty walls / Of those tall piles and sea-girt palaces” and these “porphyry pillars” “Seem each a trophy of some mighty deed / Rear’d up from out the water” (75-81). Wordsworth, of course, describes the sublime scenery of the city of London in “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge.” In this poem, Wordsworth sees the city of London wearing “The beauty of the morning;” “Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples” appear so calm and serene that they are compared with the natural objects Wordsworth usually takes a delight in, such as “valley, rock, or hill” Even in this tranquillity, he cannot refrain himself from having a tremendous sense of exultation: “Dear God! The very houses seems asleep; / And all that mighty heart is lying still!” (Wordsworth 3: 38). On the contrary, although Lioni sees a not dissimilar landscape to that of Wordsworth, it does not overwhelm his senses and there is more sense of interconnection between human and non-human worlds: the moonlight softens its magnificent appearance and makes it “congenial with the night” (86), and a mysterious sense of kinship

between an ancient human city and a surrounding darkness is emphasized under the nocturnal power of congeniality. This is not Burke's sublime but it is still surely sublime.

Lioni's attention does not stay upwards, but turns downwards to observe people, and the people whom Lioni observes become part of the landscape. He does not see them directly, but, by hearing a lover's playing the guitar, he portrays in his mind a girl's trembling "delicately white" hand (93) opening a window to admit her lover.² He also hears the gondoliers' "responsive voices of the choir" (99). However, these human voices do not damage the serenity of the night in the city. The night exerts its "benign and quiet influence" (109) upon the noisy and giddy world of humans and turns it into "sweet and soothing" one (105). The whole world seems to be made "congenial with the night." However, there is the sense of closeness to something uncanny and vast in what Lioni displays. "All is gentle" (85), but "Whatever walks is gliding like a spirit" (87). Moreover, very slow movements or even static forces are observed in this landscape. This is also an unnatural world, in the opposite way to the festival.

The Doge sees the same landscape differently. In act 3 scene 1, he is waiting for one of the conspirators at the space between the Canal and the Church where his ancestors are buried. The Doge is conscious of the floor which divides the world of living things from the world of the dead. Standing there in the darkness of the night, he feels that his sleeping ancestors arise in his imagination; or, to put it another way, it seems that the two worlds of death and life become mixed, and that the Doge is now surrounded by the dead. He feels the eyes of his ancestors staring at him accusingly since his joining the conspiracy has disgraced their heroic and honourable deeds. There are eyes "in Death," he says (3.1.94), and the statue of his ancestor has been observing their secret meeting. The reason that the conspirator Israel Bertuccio, who is with the Doge at the spot, does not share any of these feelings is that he neither inherits any tradition and a sense of honour, nor does he have any sense of the Byronic sublime. The Doge insists:

I tell thee, man, there is a spirit in
 Such things that acts and sees, unseen, though felt;
 And, if there be a spell to stir the dead,
 'Tis in such deeds as we are now upon.
 (95-8)

We can see a link here between the Doge's and Byron's sense of aristocratic superiority and their awareness of sublimity in history.

In the opening stanzas of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* canto 4, Byron describes the magnificent view of Venice from offshore as resembling "a sea Cybele . . . with her tiara of proud towers" (2). She has gathered fortune from all over the world and has inspired poets and playwrights. Now the glory is gone and "Her palaces are crumbling to the shore" (3) and no songs are heard: "Venice, lost and won, / Her thirteen hundred years of freedom done, / Sinks, like a sea-weed, into whence she rose!" (13). What inspires the poet's imagination, however, is Venice's history set against huge vistas of time, reflected, in particular, by the ruined nature of the city. Under the Austrian occupation, in Byron's time at any rate, much of the city was left deserted, and this miserable plight of the city might be juxtaposed with the ruins of Rome, where Byron sees the Coliseum as "Simple, erect, severe, austere, sublime — / Shrine of all saints and temple of all gods" (146). Nevertheless, it is not the moonlight that makes the scene mysterious or awful, but it is because in the moonlight the poet can summon the past into the present: "in this magic circle raise the dead" (144). Byron sees Venice likewise:

But my soul wanders; I demand it back
 To meditate amongst decay, and stand
 A ruin amidst ruins; there to track
 Fall'n states and buried greatness, o'er a land
 Which *was* the mightiest in its old command,
 And *is* the loveliest, and must ever be
 The master-mould of Nature's heavenly hand,
 Wherein were cast the heroic and the free,
 The beautiful, the brave — the lords of earth and sea,
 (CHP 4. 25)

Standing among the ruins, Byron realizes that “A thousand years” of Venetian history, expand “their cloudy wings” around him (1), and draw him into the world of the past. Or, in other words, he re-peoples the ruins “with the past” (19). The sublimity of the ruins for Byron is not derived from nature in Wordsworth’s sense. The ruins have witnessed the temporal affairs of human worlds, but at the same time they are the proof of the immortality of the human mind. The ruins are therefore “the loveliest” with the reflections of human lives.

If we turn from dark Venice to Norman Abbey in *Don Juan*, we find another building that is congenial with the night. Norman Abbey shows a strong contrast between day and night. In the daylight, the peaceful nature of its surrounding environment is emphasized: it is located “in a happy valley” (13. 56), with “a lucid lake” (57). High in a niche of the Gothic ruin, the statues of saints and the Virgin stand to make “the earth below seem holy ground” (61). Also, the destroyed statues of the twelve saints witnessed the Civil War. In this sense, the Abbey in the day time is filled with life and all kinds of activities. However, once the night falls, the image of the Abbey changes: it becomes a place of some supernatural power, and one can hear a “voice to charm. / Sad, but serene” (64).

The gallery, on the other hand, is furnished with the portraits of ancestors. They are the pride of the long line of the family and their history and correspond to the eyes in death of which Marino Faliero speaks. In the night, however, these portraits show “something ghastly, desolate, and dread” (16. 17). It is as if these dead people awakened and moved out from the frames, for it appears that present voices are heard and shadows are seen. The Black Friar has haunted the Abbey ever since the Amundevilles came and drove the friars away at the Reformation, and in some mysterious way, he has controlled the life of the family. Adeline sings, “Amundeville is lord by day, / But the monk is lord by night” (40). This song indicates that, as the landscape shows the opposite aspects of the day and the night, the night reveals the dark side of the history related to the spot which is concealed in the daylight. If we return to Venice, we can compare this to the way that the Doge Faliero associates the Senate’s oppressive policies with blackness. Venice is polluted with “black blood” (3.1.8), and the black veil is painted over the Doge’s portrait. At the same

time, the conspiracy is also related to darkness: the conspirators hold a secret meeting in darkness to discuss the murder of the patricians.

The landscape of the Venetian night appears to reveal the different psychological topographies of Lioni and the Doge: Lioni's weary mind is healed in the night, while the Doge becomes conscious of history. What Lioni and the Doge see in the night, however, is not as different as we might at first think. Lioni's remark, which I quoted above, "thought more tranquil, or forgetfulness," appears to suggest that the landscape, "congenial with the night," is not necessarily an approving one. Byron's choice of the word "forgetfulness" may imply such a nuance. The Doge may hear the voices and songs that Lioni hears as the lovers and gondoliers as those of the ghosts of the ancestors. They soothe Lioni's weary mind, while they may sound to the Doge as the murmuring of dissatisfied people, or the voices from the meeting held in secret by the conspirators. Over the towers and pillars which are the pride of the city's power and influence on foreign countries for Lioni, the Doge sees "the destroying Angel" (4.2.133) hovering, which would finish one stage of Venetian history, though by brutal means; but the Doge still wavers between his belief in the inevitable consequences of Venetian oligarchy and his attempted betrayal and destruction of the Venetian status quo. It may be said that the Doge sees what Lioni overlooks, and senses the movement of history in darkness. Might we not call this movement of history in darkness sublime?

It is clear that there are different kinds of darkness with different kinds of light, i.e. twilight, artificial light, moonlight, and that these help the sublimity of the human city by opening it up to the dark spaces and vast tracks of human history. Byron finds sublimity in a certain congeniality between the human world and a vaster spatial and historical world. The play ends with the latter. The Doge, just before his execution, delivers a tremendous curse on Venice and, instead of backtracking through the past, imagines a futurity of similar proportion. The Doge's curse at the final scene, therefore, is important in order to see Byron's view on history. The Doge addresses the elements and stands as part of "Time and Eternity" (5.3.26), and as if he became an Old Testament prophet, he listens to the voice from above.³ Even so, although his eyes turn upwards in the manner of a sublime prophet like Gray's bard, his speech is all about human

history. But it is delivered under the natural elements, such as sky, waves, and the sun, which remain unchanged, and in a Venice which has witnessed and is to witness human lives across time. Human beings cannot control nor conquer the inevitable movements of history, nor can they escape from its influence; but they can struggle and bear witness to their own limitation and to their strivings beyond limitation. The Doge’s speech, therefore, associates this sublime aesthetic vista with a moral judgment on the city.

Byron’s Venice is the sublime city, *la serenissima*, in its original sense. It is a world of tranquillity, but numerous are the activities taking place in this apparently serene republic. It seems to represent a world of congeniality, but the seeds of commotions and confusions are hiding underneath. The moonlight displays all these movements, and, in some way, harmonizes them. They are the consequences of history, and simultaneously will produce history. This is what Byron sees as sublime in the landscape. Landscape is, for him, always “congenial with the night.”

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- ¹ Burke claims that, in order to see the sublime on buildings, “greatness of dimension seems requisite.” According to him, if the building is too long (wide), the effect on the height on the people’s eyes will be destroyed; therefore, the artists are allowed to use skills of a “deceit” on the spectators so that the building can be seen as a good work of art. See Burke 117.
- ² Tanner reads this scene as the only “defining act” in a dream-like world of Venetian night, but also it is the sign of this city’s inseparable nature of “the notion of illicit love.” See Tanner 65.
- ³ Skerry sees here the image of Christ figure, who declares the day “when all time will end” in the Book of Revelation. By using the apocalyptic ideas, according to Skerry, Byron represents “the coming of revolution” through the Doge who is now standing in the timeless realm. See Skerry 98-100.