Session 6: George Gordon, Lord Byron, Manfred (1816/17): The Romantic Self

“The Sublime leads the listeners not to persuasion, but to ecstasy: for what is wonderful always goes together with a sense of dismay, and prevails over what is only convincing or delightful, since persuasion, as a rule, is within everyone’s grasp: whereas, the Sublime, giving to speech an invincible power and strength, rises above every listener.” (Longinus, “On the Sublime” 1.4.)

Edmund Burke’s A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful (1757)

“Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure. Without all doubt, the torments which we may be made to suffer are much greater in their effect on the body and mind, than any pleasure which the most learned voluptuary could suggest, or than the liveliest imagination, and the most sound and exquisitely sensible body, could enjoy.” (Burke, “Of the Sublime”)

William Wordsworth, “Preface to Lyrical Ballads” (1802)

“The poet] is the rock of defence of human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying every where with him relationship and love. In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs, in spite of things silently gone out of mind and things violently destroyed, the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time.”

“The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language;”

“…poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.”

Passages from Byron’s Manfred

1.
And you, ye crags upon whose extreme edge
I stand, and on the torrent’s brink beneath
Behold he tall pines dwindled as to shrubs
In dizziness of distance; when a leap,
As stir, a motion, even a breath, would bring
My breast upon its rocky bosom’ bed
To rest for ever – wherefore do I pose? (…)
The mists boil up around the glaciers; clouds
Rise curling fast beneath me white and sulphury,
Like foam from the roused ocean of deep Hell,
Whose every wave breaks on a living shore
Heaped with the damn’d like pebbles. – I am giddy. (Act I, scene II, 13-19, 85-89)
2. “The lamp must be replenish’d, but even then
It will not burn so long as I must watch:
My slumbers – if I slumber – are not sleep,
But a continuance of enduring thought,
Which then I can resist not: in my heart
There is a vigil, and these eyes but close
To look within; and yet I live, and bear
The aspect and the form of breathing men.
But grief should be the instructor of the wise;
Sorrow is knowledge: they who know the most
Must mourn the deepest o’er the fatal truth,
The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life.”

3. The star which rules thy destiny,
Was ruled, ere earth began, by me:
It was a world as fresh and fair
As e`er revolved round sun in air;
Its course was free and regular,
Space bosom’d not a lovelier star.
The hour arrived – and it became
A wandering mass of shapeless flame,
A pathless comet, and a curse,
The menace of the universe;
Still rolling on with innate force,
Without a sphere, without a course,
A bright deformity on high,
The monster of the upper sky!
And thou! beneath its influence born –
Thou worm! whom I obey and scorn –
Forced by a power (which is not thine,
And lent thee but to make thee mine)
For this brief moment to descend,
And parley with a think like thee –
What wouldst thou, Child of Clay! With me?

4. From thy false tears I did distil
An essence which hath strength to kill;
From thy own heart I then did wring
The black blood in its blackest spring;
From thy own smile I snatch’d the snake,
For it coil’d as in a brake;
From thy own lip I drew the charm
Which gave all these their chiefest harm;
In proving every poison known,
I found the strongest was thine own.
In proving every poison known,
I found the strongest was thine own.
By thy cold breast and serpent smile,
By thy unfathom’d gulfs of guile,
By that most seeming virtuous eye,
By the perfection of thine art
Which pass’d for human thine own heart;
By thy delight in others’ pain,
And by thy brotherhood of Cain,
I call upon thee! and compel
Thyself to be thy proper Hell! (Act I, Scene I, 232-251)

The curse seals Manfred’s fate with the final stanza:
And on thy head I pour the vial
Which doth devote thee to this trial;
Nor to slumber, or to die,
Shall be in thy destiny;
Though thy death shall still seem near
To thy wish, but as a fear;
Lo! the spell now works around thee,
And the clankless chain hath bound thee;
O’er thy heart and brain together
Hath the word been pass’d – now wither! (Act I, Scene I, 252-261)

5.
MAN. Forgetfulness –
FIRST SPIRIT. Of what – of whom – and why?
Man. Of that which is within me; read it there –
Ye know it, and I cannot utter it.
SPIRIT. We can but give thee that which we possess:
Ask of us subjects, sovereignty, the power
O’er earth, the whole, or portion, or a sign
Which shall control the elements, whereof
We are the dominators, each and all,
These shall be thine.
MAN. Oblivion, self-oblivion –
Can ye not wring from out the hidden realms
Ye offer so profusely what I ask?
SPIRIT. It is not in our essence, in our skill;
But – thou mayst die.
Man. Will death bestow it on me?
SPIRIT. We are immoral, and do not forget;
We are eternal; and to us the past
Is, as the future, present. Art thou answered? (Act I. Sc. I, 135151)

6.
... From my youth upwards
My spirit walk’d not with the souls of men,
Nor look’d upon the earth with human eyes;
The thirst of their ambition was not mine,
The aims of their existence was not mine;
My joys, my griefs, my passions, and my powers,
Made me a stranger; though I wore the form,
I had no sympathy with breathing flesh,
Nor midst the creatures of clay that girded me
Was there but one who – but of her anon. (Act II, Scene II, 50-59)

7.
My joy was in the Wilderness, to breathe
The difficult air of the iced mountain’s top (...) These were my pastimes, and to be alone;
For if the beings, of whom I was one, --
Hating to be so, -- cross’d me in my path,
I felt myself degraded back to them,
And was all clay again. And then I dived,
In my lone wanderings, to the caves of death,
Searching its cause in its effect; and drew
From wither’d bones, and skulls, and heap’d up dust,
Conclusions most forbidden. (Act II, scene II, 62-3, 75-83)

8.
WITCH. Spare not thyself – proceed.
MAN. She was like me in lineaments – her eyes,
Her hair, her features, all, to the very tone
Even of her voice, they said were like to mine;
But soften’d all, and temper’d into beauty;
She had the same lone thoughts and wanderings,
The quest of hidden knowledge, and a mind
To comprehend the universe: not these
Alone, but with them gentler powers than mine,
Pity, and smiles, and tears – which I had not;
And tenderness – but that I had for her;
Humility – and that I never had.
Her faults were mine – her virtues were her own –
I loved her, and destroy’d her!
WITCH. With thy hand?
MAN. Not with my hand, but heart – which broke her heart –
It gazed on mine, and withered. I have shed
Blood, but not hers – and yet her blood was shed –
I saw – and could not staunch it. (Act II, scene II, 105-121)

9.
...`tis blood – my blood! The pure warm stream
Which ran in the veins of my fathers, and in ours
When we were in our youth, and had one heart,
And loved each other as we should not love,
And this was shed: but still rises up,
Colouring the clouds, that shut me out from heaven,
Where thou are not – and I shall never be. (Act II, scene I, 24-29)

10.
...many a night on the earth,
On the bare ground, have I bow’d down my face,
And strew’d my head with ashes; I have known
The fullness of humiliation, for
I sunk before my vain despair, and knelt
To my own desolation. (Act II, Scene 4, 37-42)

11.
...Hear me, hear me –
Astarte! My beloved! speak to me:
I have so much endured – o much endure –
Look on me! The grave hath not changed thee more
Than I am changed for thee. Thou lovedst me
Too much, as I loved thee: we were not made
To torture thus each other, though it were
The deadliest sin to love as we have loved.
Say that thou loath’st me not – that I do bear
This punishment for both – that thou wilt be
One of the blessed – and that shall die,
For hitherto all hateful things conspire
To bind me in existence – in a life
Which makes me shrink from immortality –
A future like the past. I cannot rest. (Act II, scene IV, 117-131)

12.
Must crimes be punish’d but by other crimes
And greater criminals? – Back to thy hell!
Thou has no power over me, that I feel;
Thou never shalt possess me, that I know:
What I have done is done; I bear within
A torture which nothing gain from thine:
The mind which is immortal makes itself
Requital for its good or evil thoughts –
Is its own origin of ill and end –
And its own place and time – its innate sense,
When stripp’d of this immortality, derives
No colour form the fleeting things without,
But is absorb’d in sufferance or in joy,
Born from the knowledge of its own desert.
Thou didnst not tempt me, thou couldst not tempt me;
I have not been thy dupe, nor am thy prey –
But was my own destroyer, and will be
My own hereafter. – Back, ye baffled fiends!
The hand of death is on me – but not yours! (Act III, scene IV, 125-141)

13.
ABBOT. Alas! How pale thou art – thy lips are white –
Ant thy breast heaves – and in thy gasping throat
The accents rattle – give thy prayers to heaven –
Pray – albeit but in thought, – but die not thus.
MAN. ‘Tis over – my dull eyes can fix thee not;
But all things swim around me, and the earth
Heaves as it were beneath me. Fare thee well –
Give me thy hand.
ABBOT. Cold – cold – even to the heart –
But yet on prayer – alas! How fares it with thee? –
MAN. Old man! ‘tis not so difficult to die.

[MANFRED expires
ABBOT. He’s gone – his soul hath ta’en its earthless flight –
Whither? I dread to think – but he is gone. (Act III, Scene IV, 142-153)

Bibliography