The Sublime Pain of Prometheus

Alison E. Larson

Division of English Literature, British Poetry, Romanticism, Lord Byron, College of Arts & Sciences

Faculty mentor: Kimberly Jackson, Ph.D., Department of Language & Literature

21st Century Horror, literary theory, and cultural studies, College of Arts and Sciences

ABSTRACT

A critical examination of Lord Byron’s, George Gordon Byron, 6th Baron Byron Fellow of the Royal Society (FRS), poem “Prometheus” through the historicized lens of British Romanticism. “Prometheus” may be described as an eternal ode to suffering. From this figure of suffering, investigations into the mortal realm of emotions, particularly sympathy and kindness, reveal humankind’s perpetual fate of being doomed to be stuck forever between human life and immortal (divine) spirit. Byron’s “Prometheus”—through the realm of pain and human suffering—dramatizes the concept of the sublime. The troubled encounter between mortality and the divine beings that model mortality for humankind offers readers a reflection on philosophical conceptions of the sublime that were influential on Byron. There are clear echoes of Edmund Burke’s theories on pleasure and pain while complications arise with Immanuel Kant’s idealist theory of the sublime. In the end, the sublime encounter with suffering as a universal symbol for humankind’s fate cannot be articulated in the form of reason or emotion. It is instead contained within this incomprehensible figure, Prometheus, from which Lord Byron draws inspiration.

Key Words: Lord Byron, George Gordon Byron, 6th Baron Byron FRS, British Romanticism, Sublime, Prometheus, Poetry, Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, British Poetry

INTRODUCTION

Byron’s “Prometheus” might be described as an ode to eternal suffering. Its opening stanza demands answers as it laments Prometheus’s cruel punishment at the hands of the gods. The poem then proceeds to reflect on the fraught relationship between the abstract figures that inflict upon Prometheus his eternal suffering, for the “crime” of being “kind” by experiencing the mortal emotion of sympathy (35). From this figure of suffering, Byron draws the “mighty lesson” of humankind’s fate of being stuck between the mortal realm of suffering and the “pure” state of the divine (44, 47-48).

In the poem’s preoccupation with emotion and its relation to these incompatible realms of human life and immortal spirit—realms between which Prometheus is doomed to be stuck forever—Byron dramatizes the difficult concept of the sublime, particularly as it relates to pain and suffering. However, Byron ultimately pushes Edmund Burke’s concept of the sublime to a logical extreme, whereby Prometheus’s suffering exceeds the emotion-bound limits of human experience.

Framing this analysis is an understanding of English Romanticism as movement tied up in wide-reaching cultural interchange among geographically diverse sources of philosophical and aesthetic production. Silvia Bordoni describes Romanticism not as a literary “movement” but instead “as a cultural phenomenon based on reciprocal literary influences and on a fervid circulation of ideas among European cultures, thus naturally inscribing in it an international dimension,” leading to a critical framework which “conceives Romanticism as a communal cultural space where literary and social specificities merge and influence each other, forming a self-sufficient intellectual terrain” (134). Within this cultural space, philosophical interchange was no less important than specifically literary influence. The philosophical foundations of Romanticism are quite evident in Byron’s work and in “Prometheus” in particular. The poem’s preoccupation with the limits of human emotion and cognition, as this essay will discuss, constitute not only Byron’s use of Kantian and Burkean concepts but his direct contribution to philosophical discourse from within the terrain of poetry.

The role of pain in the encounter with the sublime is one of the more complex elements in “Prometheus.” Prometheus’s experience of human suffering not only constitutes the bridge between the realm of the mortal and the realm of the divine but it exposes a paradox inherent in Prometheus’s dual position between divine provenance and the human experience of pain. As Byron’s poem explores, Prometheus’s “reward” for taking on human qualities is to endure the very human suffering at the center of the gods’ indifference to human suffering itself. This punishment, in other words, is figured not as a “recompense” for Prometheus’s deed of theft, but for his human-like act of pity, which runs against the indifference of the gods and jeopardizes the divine-mortal hierarchy. Byron opens his poem with a forceful apostrophe to the “Titan,” demanding an explanation for his punishment:

Titan! to whose immortal eyes
The sufferings of mortality,
Seen in their sad reality,
Were not as things that gods despise;
What was thy pity’s recompense? (1-5)
In this opening, Prometheus’s transgression is that he bestowed “pity” upon mortal suffering, later described as the “crime” of kindness (35), whereas the gods are categorically opposed to sympathy toward suffering. Ian Dennis describes the resulting hierarchical reversal as follows: “Titans, like gods, have hitherto been the object of human attention, models of human aspiration and resentment. Now, the polarities of imitation apparently switch. This act, this veritable birth of altruism, would at first seem to be a kind of identification” (Dennis 145). Dennis goes on to observe that the seeming “identification” between Prometheus and mortal men takes on an important second layer when it is subsequently revealed that Prometheus continues to occupy a role of modeling for man (146-147).

Prometheus performs his divine/mortal modeling precisely through his silence. This is not a silence of god-like indifference, but again a performance of modeling divine qualities of pride and endurance. Later in the poem, Byron refers to Prometheus’s “patient energy,” his “endurance”:

\begin{quote}
A mighty lesson we inherit:  
Thou art a symbol and a sign  
To Mortals of their fate and force  
Like thee, Man is in part divine,  
\end{quote}

\textit{A troubled stream from a pure source; (44-48)}

In one way, Prometheus’s suffering is bound up in his altruism, in his fatal sin of giving mortal suffering an audience not normally granted by the gods. However, Byron re-figures this act of altruism and the silence with which he endures his resulting punishment, as a “symbol” of man’s divinity. The final line in the passage just quoted is crucial, for it encapsulates the complication with which Byron infuses man’s divinity. Like Prometheus, humankind comes from a “pure source” but its mortal experience is fundamentally “troubled,” and full of pain and suffering which, until the moment of Byron’s poem, has had no divine audience. Crucially, Prometheus’s punished altruism in opening mortal beings to a divine audience is where Byron derives Prometheus’s “recompense,” as referenced above. This dialectic between altruism and punishment is at the core of Byron’s “attitudes against a coherent model of forgiveness,” according to Jonathan Shears (195). Shears argues that although much of Byron’s later work searches for a model of forgiveness, earlier works such as “Prometheus” exemplify Byron’s interest in “retribution and its limits” (195). In this light, Promethean altruism remains locked in a dialectical struggle between good deeds done unto morals and punishment done unto (and by) divine beings.

This troubled encounter between mortals and the divine beings that model mortality for humankind intervenes directly upon the philosophical theories of the sublime that were influential on Byron. The poem carries out this reflection by meditating on pain, which is central to eighteenth-century aesthetic theories of the sublime—even though the sublime can be broadly understood as a state of exaltation that goes beyond simple categories of pleasure, pain, and sometimes even reason. In particular, we can look to Burke’s ideas of the relationship between pleasure and pain. For Burke, the human encounter with the sublime, though superficially a phenomenon of transcendence from mortal conditions, is actually tied up precisely in the experience of pain. In some of Burke’s remarks in his \textit{Enquiry} on the sublime, he teases the idea that pleasure and pain are separate concepts. He writes, “For my part I am rather inclined to imagine, that pain and pleasure in their most simple and natural manner of affecting, are each of a positive nature, and by no means necessarily dependent on each other for their existence” (3). By this formulation, pleasure and pain are completely distinct and independent of one another.

Though this clear assertion seems to settle the matter, Burke goes on to complicate this idea of pleasure and pain’s distinctness from one another. However, Burke’s central opposition between societal passions and passions arising from self-preservation introduce pain as a central experience within the encounter with the \textit{sublime}. For Burke, passions related to society are based in pleasure, whereas passions relating to self-preservation “turn” on the feeling of pain; in other words, the latter passions are a function of pleasure resulting from the absence of pain. Burke writes, “As the performance of our duties of every kind depends upon life, and the performing them with vigour and efficacy depends upon health, we are very strongly affected with whatever threatens the destruction of either; but as we were not made to acquiesce in life and health, the simple enjoyment of them is not attended with any real pleasure” (16). This reflection complicates Burke’s figuration of pain and pleasure as completely independent experiences. More importantly, it corresponds with his central argument that passions of self-preservation, tied up as they are in the avoidance of pain, can lead to an experience of the sublime by way of the avoidance of pain. Burke writes, “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” (13). This is the central thesis in Burke’s definition of the sublime: unlike beauty, its mirror counterpart which is in the realm of the delicate, the various, and the shimmering, the sublime is in the realm of the large, obscure, and powerful.

This obscurity and magnitude certainly permeates Byron’s poem, which begins with an invocation of vision, and a closing off of vision and hearing by the divine forces that inflict suffering. The opening line points to Prometheus’s “immortal eyes,” and the second stanza laments the “deaf tyranny of Fate, / the ruling principle of Hate” (19-20). Byron’s encounter with Prometheus’s heightened senses, counterpoised with the blunting of the senses embraced by the gods, reveals not only Byron’s idea that the sublime is tied up in a particular experience of pain; this also shows that the sublime resides in a realm not quite aligned with the senses (seeing, hearing, feeling) as commonly understood. It is worth noting that Burke carefully separates the passions of self-preservation from the passions of society, which correspond with “the highest pleasure of sense” (14). The
sublime, in contrast, occurs in conjunction with an avoidance of the feeling of pain, and yet manifests itself in the exalted state of a close encounter with forces of “terror.”

Byron pushes this concept one step further by presenting Prometheus as a figure who makes “Death a Victory,” as he says in his final line (57). For Prometheus’s victory is more complicated than a triumphant act of survival. His fate, and Byron’s sublime encounter with it is instead one of eternal suffering, and perseverance through that eternal suffering. Inasmuch as Byron’s poem presents Prometheus as a source of inspiration for mortals, he fulfills that role not as a symbol of hope or transcendence, but as a symbol or model for how to experience suffering with “patient energy” and a “firm will” (40, 53). In the end, there is a note of sobriety in the character he projects onto Prometheus’s refusal to react or speak as he patiently suffers his eternal fate. One way to interpret this is to say that Byron rejects a notion of the sublime by imbuing Prometheus with a personality of calm perseverance—inasmuch as the sublime is supposed to denote both an experience of exalted emotion and an encounter with some higher power than everyday emotions.

On the other hand, it might be more appropriate to interpret “Prometheus” as a reworking of the sublime through Burke’s concept of sublime pain. In other words, Byron pushes Burke’s concept of pain to its furthest logical extreme: the passions involved in the sublime in this case are even more extreme than the avoidance of pain and the excitement that results from a narrow encounter with pain. Prometheus’s sublime experience of pain, instead, is an emotionless descent into perpetual pain and suffering. What makes it sublime is not the emotional state of Prometheus, but the “mighty lesson” Prometheus offers mortal humankind, for whom Byron’s speaker is a mouthpiece. By exposing humankind to its “fate” of being partly divine yet wrapped up in a “troubled stream,” Prometheus’s pain serves as a stand-in for an experience that a mortal cannot imagine enduring without emotion. Thus the poem turns on Prometheus’s emotionlessness precisely by provoking sublime emotion in the beholders, namely Byron and his readers.

According to this reading of “Prometheus,” Byron’s figuration of the sublime runs almost directly against Kant’s theories on the concept in his Critique of Judgement, which hinge on the sublime as a feeling of the supremacy of human reason over nature. Kant argues, more directly than Burke, that the sublime is a form of pleasure experienced only by way of displeasure or pain. Consequently, his idealist approach to the sublime finds itself in a way repudiated by Byron’s presentation of Prometheus as a fallen (though also triumphant) figure. To put it another way, Kant’s theory of the sublime hinges on idealist reason, whereas Byron’s poem is highly resistant to the realm of reason, even as it also tries to imagine the absence of emotion. Kant writes, “For the sublime, in the strict sense of the word, cannot be contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason, which, although no adequate presentation of them is possible, may be aroused and called to mind by that very inadequacy itself which does not admit of sensuous presentation” (246). Here, Kant illustrates his idea that the sublime can only be encountered in the mind in an almost tangential way. Because of its alignment with the faculties of reason rather than with the senses, it cannot even be adequately represented. The sublime, like reason, escapes representation because it exists in a higher realm than that of the senses.

Although Byron’s emphasis on the sensuous experience of suffering runs against the Kantian idealist theory of the sublime, his poem also dramatizes this unrepresentability that Kant attributes to the sublime. Again, in a poem that begins by establishing Prometheus’s act of looking, Byron portrays his own appraisal of Prometheus’s suffering from a perspective of un-seeing and incomprehension. For, although Prometheus is presented as the conveyer of a “mighty lesson” to humankind, this very lesson comes Prometheus’s own state of bafflement, unresponsiveness, and silence. This is perhaps why Byron’s poem, for all its emotion, often remains in the realm of celestial abstraction. He writes, for example,

> And the inexorable Heaven,
> And the deaf tyranny of Fate,
> The ruling principle of Hate,
> Which for its pleasure doth create
> The things it may annihilate. (18-22)

Curiously, Byron here invokes the concept of “pleasure,” but it is only attributed to these abstract figures that inflict such a fate on the liminal figure of Prometheus, stuck between divine and mortal existence. The sublime encounter with suffering as a universal symbol for humankind’s fate, in the end, cannot be articulated in the form of reason or emotion alone, as Byron’s poem rejects the dichotomy between the two. The sublime encounter is instead contained within this incomprehensible figure from which Byron draws inspiration.

WORKS CITED

Bordoni, Silvia. “From Madame de Staël to Lord Byron: The Dialectics of European Romanticism.” Literature Compass, vol. 4, no. 1, 2007, pp. 134-149.

Burke, Edmund. A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful. 1757. Chadwyck-Healey, 1999.

Byron, Lord (George Gordon). “Prometheus.” 1816. Poetry Foundation, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43843/prometheus-56d222b61d799.

Dennis, lan. “‘Making Death a Victory’: Victimhood and Power in Byron’s ‘Prometheus’ and ‘The Prisoner of Chillon.’” Keats-Shelley Journal, vol. 50, 2001, pp. 144-161, www.jstor.org/stable/30213082.

Kant, Immanuel. The Critique of Judgement, 1790. Eds. Nicholas Walker and James Creed Meredith, Oxford University Press, 2007.

Shears, Jonathan, “‘In One We Shall Be Slower’: Byron, Retribution and Forgiveness.” Christianity & Literature, vol. 66, no. 2, 2017, pp. 193-212.