‘She Walks in Beauty’ and the Theory of the Sublime

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Abstract

The argument of this paper is that Byron’s early short lyric ‘She Walks in Beauty’ reflects in its first half aspects of the Burkean and Kantian theories of the sublime. In this respect, it differs from Byron’s longer poems whose many references to the sublime are different in both source and character. The essay argues that the poem’s second half, anchored firmly in the conventional lexicon of Romantic English lyric poetry, contrasts strikingly with the daring encounter with the sublime in its first half, so that the poem as a whole presents a contrast between poetry that conventionally evokes natural forces to praise human beauty and poetry that finds in the ambience of such beauty an echo of the supreme aesthetic experience of the sublime.

‘She Walks in Beauty’ is justly regarded as one of Byron’s loveliest short lyric poems. However, it has in general not received a great deal of critical attention. One aspect that has been noted is its preoccupation with contrast, expressed in its images of ‘dark and bright’, night and day, and (more subtle, perhaps, but no less present) upper and lower realms of being and perception. In the present essay I will argue that this poem, nominally concerned with the striking contrast of dark and bright seen in a beautiful woman’s dark hair and pale complexion, reflects the theory of the sublime, as formulated first by Burke and then by Kant, and uses its nominal subject to express both the nature of the sublime and the human experience of it.

A great deal has of course already been written about Byron and the sublime, in the several categories of (1) exemplifications of and references to the sublime in Byron’s works, (2) references to Byron’s works, and even to the poet himself, by others, as ‘sublime’, and (3) the place of Byron and his work in the broad Romantic conceptualisation of the Sublime. However, the trace of Burkean and Kantian theories of the sublime in this relatively early (June 1814) short lyric does not appear so far to have attracted notice.

A fundamental aspect of the sublime, as Kant defines it, is its infinite largeness, beyond human measure. Burke, less analytically, remarks that ‘greatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime’. For Byron, the poetic analogy to such immeasurability would seem to be ineffability, the sublime being that for which we lack language or descriptive powers. In ‘She Walks in Beauty’, Byron consistently approaches and
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represents the object of beauty with an indirection that locates that object’s aesthetic power in the ambience it creates and the effects to which that ambience gives rise. This suggests that although the poem’s nominal subject is the uncommon beauty of one particular lady, its real subject is something quite different: the sublime effect of the contrasts arising from the initial perception of that beauty. I will argue further that Byron, making use of the pairing of opposites that is central to both Burke’s and Kant’s notions of the sublime, aims at a subtle and delicate balance that preserves the contrasts he depicts from becoming, on the one hand, merely conventional and, on the other hand, overwhelming.

‘Beauty’ seems problematical from the poem’s opening line, where it literally denotes an ambience that enfolds the motion of both night and the lady. This ambience is defined by human judgment (which alone can be the source of our calling something beautiful). In particular, it is defined by a judgment that is purely aesthetic, which arises from the feeling of pleasure inspired by an object. In the Critique of Judgment, Kant states that, in fact, there are two kinds of beauty, free beauty (pulchritudo vaga) or merely dependent beauty (pulchritudo adhaerens). The first presupposes no concept of what the object ought to be; the second does presuppose such a concept and the perfection of the object in accordance therewith. The first is called the (self-subsistent) beauty of this or that thing; the second, as dependent upon a concept (conditioned beauty), is ascribed to objects which come under the concept of a particular purpose. [...] Flowers are free natural beauties. [...] In the judging of a free beauty (according to the mere form) the judgment of taste is pure.

If the first two lines of Byron’s poem are examined in the light of these remarks, it may well appear that they articulate a ‘pure’ judgment of ‘free beauty’. An assertion of the lady’s own beauty would presumably be a judgment of ‘dependent beauty’, since it would be a judgment of her perfections as a woman and as a human being. This would imply reference to the ‘purpose’ of such creatures as the necessary criterion by which their perfection would be assessed. However, rather than the lady’s own beauty, it is the ambience she inhabits as she walks that is described as ‘beauty’ in the poem’s opening lines. We might say, then, that this is ‘free beauty’, judged according to its ‘mere form’. But this ‘beauty’ should perhaps not be called ‘beauty’ at all, at least in the Kantian sense. It is defined by a comparison with night, or, rather, with a particular kind of night – ‘the night / Of cloudless climes and starry skies’ (1–2) – that brings to the poem its first intimations of the sublime, rather than the beautiful, in its impression of vast unbounded stretches of sky.

In this ‘night / Of cloudless climes and starry skies’, the possible boundedness of ‘sky’ (circumscribed, after all, by the horizon of sight, and, perhaps, comparably circumscribed conceptually) is contested by the use of the plural, whose force need not be merely (need not be at all) temporal (night after night), but might also intimate an innumerable multiplicity corresponding to the multitude of locations where night falls to produce a starry sky. And even if the sky is bounded, the uncountable stars of the night sky are not. The force of ‘like’ (1), however, is ambiguous, since it can imply an
analogy between the lady’s ‘walking in beauty’ and the night’s, or an identification of the beauty in which the lady walks with the night itself. In the first case, the poet may have envisioned night as ‘walking’ – making a progress across the sky from west to east – but as the ‘beauty’ in question appears to derive from the contrast between the silvery white of the stars and the blackness of the night, the second alternative seems more plausible.

The third and fourth lines of the first stanza make more explicitly clear the nature of the contrast alluded to by Byron’s word ‘beauty’, and add a significant qualification. ‘All that’s best of dark and bright’ (3) may seem (through the value term ‘best’) to introduce a moral aspect into the poem. ‘Now I say the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good’ (p. 198), Kant wrote. But it appears that Byron’s poem inverts this Kantian relation, making the morally good, if present here at all, necessarily a symbol of the beautiful (which is to say that what may be, in another context, a source of moral pleasure is here a source of aesthetic pleasure). What, after all, is ‘best of dark and bright’? It is a given that night is commonly a symbol of danger, threat, loss and even death, although it can also symbolise safety, comfort, warmth and intimacy. Similarly, the brightness of the stars, which most commonly symbolises hope, life and guidance, can also symbolise coldness and indifference. The dark and bright elements in the verse, accordingly, can as equally be sources of displeasure as of pleasure. The plural verb that begins the following line (‘meet’) requires grammatically that ‘best of dark’ and ‘best of bright’ be invoked separately, but the phrase as a whole introduces another idea: that the ‘best of dark-and-bright’, that is, presumably, the contrast between them, is what ‘meet[s] in her aspect and her eyes’ (4). ‘Her aspect’ is apparently compared to the dark sky; ‘her eyes’ to the brilliant stars. Dark sky and bright stars necessarily ‘meet’ because without the dark sky as backdrop, stars are of course invisible. It is the play of brightness against darkness, then, that is here the source of what the poem calls ‘beauty’, and the lady, like the night, incorporates both of the opposites that are contrasted. The word that begins the fifth line of the first stanza (‘Thus’) then implies that the meeting of dark and bright ‘mellows’ them both ‘to that tender light / Which heaven to gaudy day denies’ (5–6). The light produced by the union of dark and bright in the night sky is neither literally nor figuratively quotidian – it is implicitly contrasted with the ‘gaudiness’ of sunlight, which is apparently to be thought of here as an enemy of contrast.

The idea of a chiaroscuro with a single source becomes both more explicit and more elusive in the second stanza. The ensemble effect of dark and bright has a grace that is ‘nameless’ (8) – for reasons presently to be explained, but this is a notion clearly connected with the idea of ineffability – and the pairing of opposites that achieves this effect seems extraordinarily fragile and finely nuanced, since ‘one shade the more, one ray the less’ would ‘half impair’ it (7–8). The balance is clearly subtle, and susceptible of ruin by even the slight dominance of one extreme over the other. As will soon be shown, the idea of the sublime is dependent not merely upon the pairing of opposites, but on the tension between them; the movement, as it were, of one element against
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the other is of critical importance. And we see this movement in the ‘nameless grace’
that ‘waves in every raven tress / Or softly lightens o’er her face’ (8–10). This ‘grace’
itself appears to comprise a coupling of opposites, but the two manifestations of it
mentioned here appear to be alternative, rather than complementary. Moreover, one
of them is apparently itself a pairing of opposites, and of a particularly dramatic and
powerful kind. ‘Lighten’, when an intransitive verb (as here), denotes at one level the
occurrence of lightning, an electrical discharge that commonly has the form of light
flashing out of darkness (although it can of course arise in a sky that is not dark, or not
altogether so). Yet here, any lightning does its work ‘softly’. Such striking combina-
tory metaphors carry the poem’s aesthetic preoccupations and presuppositions well
beyond the ‘judgment’ of beauty and into the ambit of the Kantian sublime.

Kant’s discussion of the sublime in Book II of the Critique of Judgment, ‘Analytic of
the Sublime’, is complex and multifaceted, and incorporates several definitions of the
sublime that reflect Kant’s progressive refinement and modification of the idea as his
argument proceeds. For example, the section entitled ‘On the Mathematical Sublime’
begins: ‘We call that sublime which is absolutely great […] great beyond all compar-
ison’ (p. 86). A little further on, Kant states that the absolutely great is

a magnitude which is like itself alone. It follows hence that the sublime is not to be sought
in the things of nature, but only in our ideas […]

The foregoing explanation can be thus expressed: The sublime is that in comparison
with which everything else is small. […] Nothing, therefore, which can be an object of
the senses is, considered on this basis, to be called sublime. But because there is in our im-
agination a striving toward infinite progress and in our reason a claim for absolute total-
ity, regarded as a real idea, therefore this very inadequateness for that idea in our faculty
for estimating the magnitude of things of sense excites in us the feeling of a supersensible
faculty. And it is not the object of sense, but the use which the judgment naturally makes
of certain objects on behalf of this latter feeling that is absolutely great, and in compari-
on every other use is small. Consequently it is the state of mind produced by a certain
representation with which the reflective judgment is occupied, and not the object, that is
to be called sublime.

We can therefore append to the preceding formulas explaining the sublime this other:
the sublime is that, the mere ability to think which shows a faculty of the mind surpassing
every standard of sense. (pp. 87–89)

Later, Kant summarises this line of argument as follows:

We hence see also that true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the [subject]
judging, not in the natural object the judging upon which occasions this state. Who would
call sublime, e.g., shapeless mountain masses piled in wild disorder upon one another
with their pyramids of ice, or the gloomy, raging sea? But the mind feels itself raised in
its own judgment if, while contemplating them without any reference to their form, and
abandoning itself to the imagination and to the reason – which, although placed in combi-
nation with the imagination without any definite purpose, merely extends it – it yet finds
the whole power of the imagination inadequate to its ideas. (p. 95)
To a sensibility of a later time and different place Kant’s dismissal of mountain and ocean in their own right may seem rather too cavalier. What he refers to as ‘shapelessness’ and ‘disorder’ is readily perceptible as an aspect of the infinity of size and boundlessness characteristic of the sublime. Moreover, Kant’s ‘pyramids of ice’ are a clear articulation of geometrical form that seems contradictory in a setting he characterises in terms of its almost absolute lack of form. He goes on to argue in a later section that the feeling of the sublime in nature is simultaneously a feeling of displeasure (arising from the inadequacy of the imagination) and of pleasure (arising from awareness that this judgment of inadequacy is itself in harmony with our striving for rational ideas). So the feeling of the sublime is a feeling about the mind of the beholder, although,

by a certain subreption, we attribute it to an object of nature (conversion of respect for the idea of humanity in our own subject into respect for the object). This makes intuitively evident the superiority of the rational determination of our cognitive faculties to the greatest faculty of our sensibility. (p. 96)

Kant points out the analogy to this situation in the observer’s rational awareness of his or her own safety when contemplating a spectacle that is in itself terrifying – for it is the powers of imagination and sensibility that make us fear icy precipices or intense electrical discharges, while our mind assures us that we have in fact nothing to fear from them. As the passage just quoted indicates, Kant attributes to an act of ‘subreption’ our ascription of grandeur to the objects we consider sublime, but such an act seems to be a common and well-nigh inevitable aspect of human experience. We conventionally experience and express such feelings of awe about objects that in different circumstances would terrify us.

It is to this doubleness of sense that Byron seems to allude with the phrase ‘nameless grace’. ‘Grace’ is the name for the condition we assign to the sublime object, but it is itself ‘nameless’ because of our incapacity to encompass it imaginatively or intellectually (something that would appear to be a precondition of our ability to assign a name to it).

This ‘nameless grace’ is evidently far from passive in character, since it ‘waves in every raven tress, / Or softly lightens o’er her face’. The first of these lines may bring to mind, as a paradigm of sorts, William Blake’s painting of Urizen laying out the world with compasses – a supremely rational and controlling act that is, however, notably perturbed by an apparent breath of wind that ruffles a lock of the giant’s hair. In both poem and painting, something like a divine afflatus is perceived as clearly superior to both human perception and human rationality. In the first half of Byron’s poem, however, the issue seems to be the maintenance of a delicate equipoise that allows human apprehension and appreciation of the cosmic phenomenon without overwhelming human perception and rationality – a situation analogous to that in which the human mind can with satisfaction contemplate as sublime a phenomenon that in only slightly changed conditions might overwhelm it with terror and threaten it with destruction. There is an example of such duality in the ‘biblical sublime’ (which is...
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sometimes cited as a source of the sublime in Byron’s poetry\(^\text{20}\) seen, for instance, in
the accounts of Jacob’s encounters with angels in the Book of Genesis. The first of
these, the dream vision of Jacob’s Ladder, with the angels descending and ascending
upon it (Genesis 28. 12), is a primary instance of the ‘biblical sublime’;\(^\text{21}\) the second is a
striking inversion of this in an experience of almost pure terror, which leaves its mark
on Jacob’s body as a result of his nocturnal wrestling match with a supernatural being
descended to earth at the ford of the Jabbok (Genesis 32. 24–31).

The second half of Byron’s poem – the last couplet of the second stanza and all of the
third – anchors the cosmic phenomenology of what has preceded it firmly in the more
conventional lexicon of Romantic lyric poetry, or in what will seem to some readers
da descent into sentimentality.\(^\text{22}\) Such words as ‘serenely sweet’, ‘pure’, ‘dear’, ‘soft’,
(11–18) all serve to set the poem’s object in a frame that is both familiar and comfort-
able. In so doing, they constitute a retreat from the poem’s more daring encounter
with the sublime – although the powerful and less accommodating forces beneath the
poem’s surface are still intimated by ‘eloquent’, ‘spent’ (with its quibble on exhausted
sexual energies) and ‘all below’ (14, 16, 17).

Lines 11–12, ‘Where thoughts serenely sweet express / How pure, how dear their
dwelling place’, seem to mark the transition – indeed, they appear to record the
submission of the cognitive faculties to sensibility. The third stanza, its gestures to the
volcanic energies beneath the surface serenity notwithstanding, aims at a conciliation
of body with soul, mind with heart. But the poem as a whole expresses through its
‘antitheses’, to borrow Bernard Blackstone’s useful term, the contrast between two
kinds of poetry that are not reconcilable. ‘She Walks in Beauty’, which is nominally a
paean to the beauties of a dark-haired woman, achieves an equipoise between a kind of
poetry that conventionally evokes natural forces to describe human beauty and a rarer,
more unconventional poetry that finds, in the apprehension of the particular ambience
created by a certain kind of human beauty, an echo of the supreme aesthetic experience
of the sublime.

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\footnotesize 1 Bernard Blackstone, in Byron: A Survey (London: Longman, 1975), comments on the poem’s
‘antitheses’ (p. 153), which he sees ultimately as ‘reconciled’ (p. 155). Blackstone does not address
the philosophical issues with which the present essay is concerned, however, nor are these issues
mentioned, to my knowledge, in any of the numerous editions of, or commentaries on, Byron’s
poetry.

2 The poem makes reference to a ‘lower realm’ in its penultimate line (‘all below’), in an apparent
reference to the sphere of what I will call ‘conventional’ human emotions. Byron’s phrase seems
to imply the existence of a correlative ‘upper’ realm, which – if my conjectures about the poem’s preoccupation with the sublime are plausible – would be the sphere of rational reflection upon the forces and magnitudes that defy the reach of human imagination, and upon the natural phenomena conventionally understood to represent them.

3 The lady in question, it is generally agreed, was Byron’s cousin, ‘the beautiful Mrs. Wilmot’, in the words of James Wedderburn Webster, whom Byron had seen at a party of Lady Sitwell’s on 12 June 1814, where she ‘appeared in mourning, with dark spangles on her dress’ (See CPW, III, p. 467).

4 Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful (1757); Immanuel Kant, Kritik der aesthetischen Urteilskraft (Critique of Judgment) (1790). Kant’s earlier work from 1764, Beobachten über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen (Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime), differs considerably from the Critique of Judgment, and in its notion of the ‘Splendid Sublime’ seems to allow an association of the sublime and the beautiful that the Critique finds inadmissible.

5 All of these approaches are well represented in Paul Curtis (ed.), Byron and the Romantic Sublime (Moncton: Revue de l’Université de Moncton, 2005). Although several of the essays in this volume mention the influence of Burke and Kant, virtually all are concerned with longer poems (Don Juan, Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, Manfred, Cain, ‘The Prophecy of Dante’), the Hebrew Melodies or Byron’s Alpine journal, and the conceptualisations of the sublime invoked are most commonly those of the ‘biblical’ sublime or the ‘Oriental’ sublime (as reflected, for example, in The Giaour). It is chiefly in Ian Balfour’s essay, ‘Genres of the Sublime’ (pp. 3–26), which serves as the introduction to the volume, that the significance of Burke and Kant (the latter more especially through the extension of his aesthetic theory by Schiller) for Byron’s writing is discussed.

6 Although Byron’s precise knowledge of the writings of either Burke or Kant on the sublime must remain a matter for speculation, he often used the words ‘sublime’ or ‘sublimity’ (see, for example, Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, IV, 110, 146, 183, 159, and Don Juan, Dedication, 2), and his writings are rife with descriptions of or references to sublime spectacles, even though they are not usually so termed. Byron’s scattered mentions of Burke are generally concerned with his political activities, rather than his philosophical ideas, but Burke’s treatise on the sublime and the beautiful was very widely known among the English Romantics, and Byron is likely to have been aware of it. Peter Otto writes that ‘Kant’s influence on British aesthetic and literary theory is a little more oblique [than in Germany], although more substantial than in other European countries outside Germany. At least four book-length studies of Kant were published in London between 1795 and 1798, an early high point in his reception’ (‘Literary Theory’, in Iain McCalman (ed.), An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: English Culture 1776–1832 [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999], pp. 378–85 (p. 379). Byron may have encountered Kant’s philosophy through work by Thomas De Quincey and S. T. Coleridge. However, Madame de Staël’s De l’Allemagne (Germany) was published in English by John Murray in 1813, and this book, as Otto notes, ‘offered an account of German manners, literature, and philosophy, which included an account of the transcendental philosophy’ (p. 382). In fact, Part III of De l’Allemagne contains a fine summary of Kant’s theory of the beautiful and the sublime, and of the distinction between them in Kant’s thinking. Byron knew this book well and praised it highly (see his letter to de Staël of 30 November 1813, in BLJ, III, pp. 184–85).

7 Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful, ed. by David Womersley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), p. 114. All quotations from this text are taken from this edition. Subsequent page references follow quotations.

8 However, Burke wrote: ‘words have as considerable a share in exciting ideas of beauty and of the sublime as natural objects, painting or architecture’ (p. 187).

9 Burke clearly differentiates between ‘pleasure’ and ‘delight’, associating the first of these with the experience of beauty and the second with that of the sublime (see pp. 83–84). On his view, the experience of beauty is entirely distinct from that of the sublime, and the one cannot be conducive to, or entwined with, the other. In this respect, ‘She Walks in Beauty’ seems to me to reflect a more Kantian than Burkean view of the sublime.

All the translations of the Critique given in this essay come from this translation, and subsequent page references follow quotations in the text. The original German text is given in footnotes, quoted from Kants Werke, ed. by Wilhelm Dilthey et al., 8 vols (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1908), Volume 5, ed. by Wilhelm Windelband. Page references follow quotations. In this case, the German is: 'Es giebt zweierlei Arten von Schönheit: freie Schönheit (pulchritudo vaga), oder die bloß anhängende Schönheit (pulchritudo adhaerens). Die erstere setzt keinen Begriff von dem voraus, was der Gegenstand sein soll; die zweite setzt einen solchen und die Vollkommenheit des Gegenstandes nach demselben voraus. Die Arten der erstern heissen (für sich bestehende) Schönheiten dieses oder jenes Dinges; die andere wird, als einem Begriffe anhängend (bedingte Schönheit), Objecten, die unter dem Begriffe eines besondern Zwecks stehen, beigelegt. […] Blumen sind freie Naturschönheiten. […] In der Beurteilung einer freien Schönheit (der blossen Form nach) ist das Geschmacksurteil rein' (p. 229).


12 Blackstone interestingly writes: ‘The “grace” is composed on the aesthetic level by the union of “ray” and “shade”, on the spiritual level by the reconciliation of above/below expressed in human terms throughout the three stanzas in the aspect/eyes, tress/face, cheek/brow collocations. […] Eyes, brow, tresses compose an upper world of ‘night’ which is ‘dark’ in its interiorness: this is the realm of thought, meditation, contact with a superhuman sphere; though dark in itself, it irradiates, through its ‘stars’, the human world of aspect, face and cheek, evoking the virtues of tenderness, goodness, sweetness, innocence, and peace’ (Byron: A Survey, p. 154). With the exception of the last phrase, the relevance of these insights to the argument of the present essay is evident. However, Blackstone relates his observations to religious (Sufic, Vedantic and Christian), rather than philosophical, considerations.

13 This structure of choice is surely related to that of contrast, which is a major concern of the poem. On the centrality of choice and contrast in English Romantic poetry, see Leslie Brisman, Milton’s Poetry of Choice and Its Romantic Heirs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973).

14 Burke comments: ‘Light of an inferior strength [to that of the sun], if it moves with great celerity, has the same power; for lightning is certainly productive of grandeur, which it owes chiefly to the extreme velocity of its motion. A quick transition from light to darkness, or from darkness to light, has yet a greater effect. But darkness is more productive of sublime ideas than light’ (pp. 120–21).

15 ‘Erhaben nennen wir das, was schlechthin groß ist’ (p. 248).

16 ‘Es ist eine Größe, die bloß sich selber gleich ist. Daß das Erhabene also nicht in den Dingen der Natur, sondern allein in unsern Ideen zu suchen sei, folgt hieraus; […] Die obige Erklärung kann auch so ausgedrückt werden: Erhaben ist das, mit welchem in Vergleichung alles andere klein ist. […] Nichts also, was Gegenstand der Sinnen sein kann, ist, auf diesem Fuß betrachtet, erhaben zu nennen. Aber eben darum, daß in unserer Einbildungskraft ein Bestreben zum Fortschritte ins Unendliche, in unserer Vernunft aber ein Anspruch auf absolute Totalität als auf eine reelle Idee liegt: ist selbst jene Unangemessenheit unseres Vermögens der Größenschätzung der Dinge der Sinnenwelt für diese Idee die Erweckung des Gefühls eines übersinnlichen Vermögens in uns; und der Gebrauch, den die Urteilkraft von gewissen Gegenständen zum Behuf des letzteren (Gefühls) natürlicher Weise macht, nicht aber der Gegenstand der Sinne ist schlechthin groß, gegen ihn aber jeder andere Gebrauch klein. Mithin ist die Geistesstimmung durch eine gewisse die reflektierende Urteilkraft beschäftigende Vorstellung, nicht aber das Object erhaben zu nennen. […] Wir können also zu den vorigen Formeln der Erklärung des Erhabenen noch diese hinzuthun: Erhaben ist, was auch nur denken zu können ein Vermögen des Gemüths beweiset, das jeden Maßstab der Sinne übertrifft’ (p. 250).

17 ‘Man sieht hieraus auch, daß die wahre Erhabenheit nur im Gemüthe des Urtheilenden, nicht in dem Naturobjekte, dessen Beurteilung diese Stimmung desselben veranlaßt, müsse gesucht werden. Wer wollte auch ungestalte Gebirgsmassen, in wilder Unordnung über einander getürmt, mit ihren Eispynanoren, oder die düstere tobende See u. s. w. erhaben nennen? Aber das Gemüth fühlt sich in seiner eigenen Beurtheilung gehoben, wenn es, indem es sich in der Betrachtung derselben ohne Rücksicht auf ihre Form der Einbildungskraft und einer, obschon ganz ohne bestimmten Zweck
damit in Verbindung gesetzen, jene bloß erweiternden Vernunft überläßt, die ganze Macht der Einbildungskraft dennoch ihren Ideen unangemessen finder’ (p. 256).

In Kant’s usage of this term, its normative sense of a fallacious or deceptive representation is adapted to refer to a false attribution, since the reference in this context is to the transfer of a certain quality of one particular entity to another, to which it does not apply.

'[…] durch eine gewisse Subreption (Verwechselung einer Achtung für das Object statt der für die Idee der Menschheit in unserm Subjecte) beweisen, welches uns die Ueberlegenheit der Vernunft-bestimmung unserer Erkenntnisvermögen über das größte Vermögen der Sinnlichkeit gleichsam anschaulich macht’ (p. 257).

See, for example, Balfour, ‘Genres of the Sublime’; ‘It seems to me that a good deal of the sublimity in Byron is determined – perhaps a little surprisingly given Byron’s attitude to religion – by the presence of Biblical resources, primarily from the Hebrew Scriptures’ (p. 6). Balfour comments further on the influence of Lowth’s Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews on Byron and the other English Romantics (p. 7). See also, in the same volume of essays, Joan Blythe, ‘Byron, Milton and Psalms: Sublime Wrath; Poetic Justice’ (pp. 233–47).

A subtlety of the Hebrew text not commonly noted is that the ladder is said to be ‘mutsav ‘artsah’ (Genesis 28. 12), a phrase typically translated as ‘which rested on the ground’ (as in the New English Bible [Oxford and Cambridge: Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, 1970]), but literally signifying ‘set up towards the earth’, which emphasises the ‘sublimity’ of the vision by making it clear that the ladder is not actually connected to the earth.

However, Sharon Smulders takes the poem as a serious expression of ‘Byron’s ideal of beauty’, and writes: ‘The Byronic lady of delight […] incarnates a feminine ideal. She […] is pure, innocent, good.’ In Smulders’ view, the poem ‘exalts an ideal of femininity that focuses on physical attractiveness […] the poet […] articulates in it conventional male attitudes towards the female’ (‘Looking Past Wordsworth and the Rest: Pretexts for Revision in Alice Meynell’s “The Shepherdess”’, Victorian Poetry, 38:1 [Spring 2000], pp 35–48 [pp. 39, 40]).
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