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‘The sun shall be darkened’:
Eco-critical Byron and the Feminine Apocalyptic Sublime in “Darkness” (1816)

In terms of the representation of apocalyptic vision in modern English literature, there is a set of texts produced around 1816 by a group of Romantic authors that constitutes the most immediate response to climate change – a sense of the end of the world caused by untimely darkness and stormy weather. A brief three-year period of reduced sunlight in the northern hemisphere, caused by a major volcanic eruption, suggested to Byron a world in which human civilization, having lost every vestige of social contract, was finally extinguished in cannibalism. Though less famous than Mary Shelley’s novel, and its scenery of frozen Alpine wastes, Byron’s poem “Darkness” (1816) expresses in even more vivid imagery the sense of impending doom, the imminent collapse of social order, and the consequent threat to the human species that pervades *Frankenstein* (1818). The poem has been read both as a dream-vision with references to the Apocalypse and the *De Rerum Natura* of Lucretius and as a kind of figurative biography, an unfiltered response to the chaotic upheavals that rocked Byron’s personal life during the year of its composition. A more political dimension may also be derived from this text if we have in consideration its historical context of the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars in Europe. Indeed, within the artistic framework of the lyric in blank verse, Byron’s personal, political and ecological visions of the world are here jointly presented. In particular, the multiple levels of chaos that are implied grant particular significance to the ideas formulated in the poem’s final lines; ‘Darkness’ becomes a new and tangible entity, capable of shaping the universe in her own image. The possibility of a new universal order is represented by the dominion of a powerful universal femininity, whose disturbing sublimity is constructed upon the essentially masculine domain of the ‘old world’ that crumbles.

Key terms: Byron, nature, climate, ecopoetics, apocalypse, the sublime

While recent ecocritics like Andrew Hubbell, based in works such as *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage,* have been emphasising what they designate as “Byron’s Cultural Ecology” or his “environmental consciousness” (2010: 183), Timothy Morton has observed that “It sounds perverse to read Byron – the ultimate poet of existential irony – as an ecological writer” (2007: 155).[1] And indeed modern criticism has shown, as will be seen, that Byron frequently rebelled against or opposed the Romantic concept of *nature*, despite the fact that he was

[1] Hubbell claims that “In later writings, Byron extended this environmental consciousness to a vision of Europe and the Mediterranean as a bioregion connected by its waterways” and that “Byron’s cultural ecology provokes some necessary rethinking of key ecocritical concepts, specifically ‘dwelling’ and ‘nature’, leading to a broader understanding of how writers imagine human-environment relationships.” (2010: 183).

always confronted with major manifestations or experiences of the sublime in his much travelled and convoluted life. If Byron's poetry helped to construct a unique version of the natural world that affected readers throughout the nineteenth century, his extensive travels brought him into contact with parts of the world that were little known to most Europeans before they read Byron's verse descriptions.

Perhaps we should begin the discussion with a reference to the origin of Byron's own understanding of the concept of 'nature'. In the first century BC, the Roman poet and philosopher Titus Lucretius wrote *De Rerum Natura,* or *On the Nature of Things*.[2] It seems very probable that Byron read this poet's enlightened images of the universe, which were bound to fire his imagination, and with whose Epicurean philosophy he may have identified. In general terms, Lucretius' poem introduces the spiritual and material nature of man and the development of the world, including the variety of celestial and terrestrial phenomena. More importantly for Byron, Lucretius maintained that the unhappiness and degradation of humankind arose from a *gigantic superstition* or the dread of the Gods, who only sent gloom, misery and death.[3] Basically in order to remove these fears, he sought to demonstrate that *soul* and *body* live and perish together, and that the material universe was formed *not* by a Supreme Being, but by the mixing of elemental particles governed by certain simple laws. Thus, the courses of the Sun and the journeying of the Moon did *not* obey some divine plan but were forces steered by nature itself.

Lucretius' fifth and sixth books, in particular, treat of the changes of the seasons and the progress of human society, in which he explains some of the most striking natural *catastrophes*, including earthquakes, volcanoes and devastating diseases *as* resulting from

[2] *De Rerum Natura* is an epic whose theme is the universe itself: the world, nature, human beings, the soul, death, and the gods. In this epic work, written in dactylic hexameters and divided in six books, Lucretius explores Epicurean physics through richly poetic language and metaphors.

[3] The times through which Lucretius lived, like Byron's own, were dominated by intense social and political unrest and punctuated with outbreaks of revolution and war. The second decade of the first century B.C., in particular, was a period of civil war and bloodshed. The second decade of the nineteenth century was marked by the Napoleonic wars in Europe.

‘chance’, or nature’s free will, in an essentially physicalistic universe. Lucretius’ poem could, therefore, be said to constitute one of the first works of ‘ecopoesis’, allowing Byron and us to rethink the fragility of our environment, as well as our dependence on it for our own fragile subjectivity. It is in this context that *De Rerum Natura* seems also to permeate Byron’s poem “Darkness”, a work that has gained an ecological resonance as ecocriticism “has discovered within and behind it a ‘real’, or historical-real, natural-historical event: the eruption of a volcano” (Morton, 2007: 155).

A form of ecopoetics would be generally practised by the English Romantic poets of the early nineteenth century, in the context of a renovated concern for the mutual interdependence of man and nature, namely in the formation of subjectivity. For example, the poetry of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge repeatedly emphasises the vital importance of a *communion* between the individual and the outer world, a *dialogue* that should be based on respect for different life forms, which may be imbued with a spirit or meaning of their own. In the immediate contemporary scenarios of the industrial revolution and the imperial expansion overseas, these poets also analyse the often dire consequences for man of tampering or interfering with the course, systems and powers of the natural world. [4]

Thus, when the climate of the northern hemisphere suddenly and drastically changed around the year 1816, causing general *darkness*, wind-driven storms and record-cold temperatures across Europe, fanatic fears of the end of the world were raised by false prophecies and misinterpretations of natural occurrences. Indeed, that year became known as ‘The Year without a Summer’, and also as one that would give origin to successive crop failure, starvation and death. All this not because God had finally unleashed his punitive *apocalypse* upon sinful mankind but simply because Mount Tambora’s massive volcano had erupted in the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) the previous year (April 1815), casting enough

[4] That is the paradigmatic case, namely, of Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), in which the killing of an albatross occasions a series of natural and supernatural catastrophes, providing a redemptive lesson on nature’s interconnectedness.

ash into the atmosphere to *block out the sun* and cause abnormal weather for a period of three years.[5]

The notion that climate affected human history had been widely accepted since the publication of Montesquieu's *De L'Esprit des Lois* (1748) and Humboldt's *Essay on the Geography of Plants* (1807), but Benjamin Franklin was the first one to establish the link between *volcanic eruptions* and *climate change* when he suggested that the bitterly cold winter of 1783-84 in Europe was a result of the dust cloud from the massive eruption of Iceland's Mt. Laki, back in 1783 (Bate, 2000: 90). Natural history was also a common topic of conversation between Byron and P. B. Shelley; according to William Brewer, both poets were familiar with the writings of Buffon and Cuvier (1994: 30-31).[6] Before writing *Queen Mab*, Shelley had read James Parkinson's *Organic Remains of a Former World* (1804-11), and his discussion of the extinction of pre-historic civilizations and animal species. Thus, the theory of *catastrophism* may have been particularly attractive to both poets, and it is likely that they were mostly interested in its political ramifications.[7]

The search for a cause of the strange changes in the light of the day, in particular, grew as contemporary scientists discovered sunspots on the sun so large that they could be seen with the naked eye. Newspapers such as the *London Chronicle* reported on the panic that this caused in the following terms:

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[5] "… the eruption of Tambora volcano in Indonesia in 1815 killed some 80,000 people on the islands of Sumbawa and Lombok. It was the greatest eruption since 1500. The dust blasted into the stratosphere reduced the transparency of the atmosphere, filtered out the sun and consequently lowered surface temperatures. The effect lasted for three years straining the growth capacity of life across the planet. Beginning in 1816, crop failure led to food riots in nearly every country in Europe. Only in 1819 were there good harvests again. (Bate, 2000: 97)

[6] They knew and read passages from Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle* (1749-1804) and Georges Cuvier's *Recherches Fossiles* (1812). These pre-Darwinian scientists argued that natural phenomena must be explained by natural laws rather than theological doctrine.

[7] Catastrophism argues that life on earth has been repeatedly annihilated by sudden and drastic geological events. There have been violent and sudden natural catastrophes such as great floods and the rapid formation of major mountain chains. Plants and animals living in those parts of the world where such events occurred were often killed off according to Cuvier. This theory may have been attractive to Shelley and Byron because it had the virtue of making a phenomenon like the French Revolution, or indeed any political upheaval, seem almost like a natural occurrence.

> The large spots which may now be seen upon the sun's disk […] are said to be the cause of the remarkable and wet weather we have had this summer; and the increase of these spots is represented to announce *a general removal of heat from the globe, the extinction of nature, and the end of the world.* (cited in Bate, 2000: 98)

A scientist in Bologna, Italy, even predicted that the sun would go out on the eighteenth July and his 'prophecy' caused riots, suicides and religious fervour all over Europe (Bate, 2000: 90). But these fears and reactions appeared to stand in direct contrast with many of the more optimistic feelings of the Romantic age. In his "Lines written above Tintern Abbey", Wordsworth had stated that "*Nature never did betray* / The heart that loved her" and "all which we behold / is full of blessings" (122-23 and 133-34, my emphasis); Coleridge, in his turn, had argued in the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* for a kind treatment of nature that is *only* cruel if treated cruelly. Thus, when George Gordon, known as Lord Byron, decided to write his poem entitled "Darkness", in July of that same year, he seemed to be going deliberately against a more hopeful vision, not only of the future of man's world but of man himself.[8]

Although usually hostile to the pantheistic God-in-Nature strains he identified in the early poems of Wordsworth, Byron was willing to admit that he had been 'doused' with Percy Shelley's Wordsworthianism during the summer the two younger poets spent together in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1816. The result of this famous Shelley-Byron Alpine alliance were lines in Canto III of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* that were as naturalistic as any Byron ever wrote: "I live not in myself, but *I become* / *Portion of that around me*; and to me, / High mountains are a feeling" (3: 72, my emphasis).[9] Later in this same canto, he is willing to admit a connection between the human heart and the natural world that is antithetical to a proto-existentialism that is often identified with the cynical Byronic pose: "Are not the mountains, waves, and skies *a part / Of me and of my soul, as I of them?* / Is not the love of

[8] "Darkness" was published with Byron's collection *The Prisoner of Chillon and Other Poems*, in 1817.

[9] All the quotations from Byron's poems or letters are taken from Jerome MacGann's edition of *The Oxford Authors Byron* (Oxford University Press, 1986).

these deep in my heart / With a pure passion?" (75, my emphasis). This Shelleyan version of Wordsworth was not to last in Byron's own heart for long, however.

The much more characteristic Byronic attitude toward nature is present in a poem like *Mazeppa* (1819), based on a popular legend about the early life of Ivan Mazepa (1639-1709), which recounts this man's tortures facing the extreme miseries of heat and cold, dry and wet, a natural world that is mostly about terror and human suffering: "The tortures which beset my path, / Cold, hunger, sorrow, shame, distress, / Thus bound in nature's nakedness" (Stanza 13).[10] The complexity of Byron as nature-poet is perhaps surprisingly evident in his careful attention to the details of his surroundings, an essential part of the rhetoric of poetic naturalism that came to pervade the nineteenth century. He wrote in his *Alpine Journal* during the September following the Frankenstein summer:

> I am a lover of Nature – and an Admirer of Beauty – I can bear fatigue – & welcome privation – and have seen some of the noblest views in the world. – But in all this – the recollections of bitterness – & more especially of recent & more home desolation – which must accompany me through life – have preyed upon me here – and *neither the music of the Shepherd – the crashing of the Avalanche – nor the torrent – the mountain – the Glacier – the Forest – nor the Cloud – have for one moment – lightened the weight upon my heart* – nor enabled me to lose my own wretched identity in the majesty & the power and the Glory – around – above – & beneath me. (McGann, 1986: 990)

The year 1816 had also seen Byron estranged and exiled from his home country, as well as his conflicted marriage to Annabella Milbanke, both of which had taken an emotional toll on the poet. On the other hand, Europe was still recomposing itself from the Napoleonic Wars that had raged for more than eight years of destruction, carnage and dislocation (1807-15). In this context of war, *the huge cloud of darkness* that suddenly blanketed the continent became for most people at the time a dire prophecy come true. But, typically, Byron saw in this occasion an opportunity that he could not bypass; the cold darkness that prevented the company

[10] The bulk of the poem describes the traumatic journey of the hero strapped to the horse. The poem has been praised for its vigor of style and its sharp realization of the feelings of suffering and endurance. The collection contained the short story "A Fragment", also known as "Fragment of a Novel" and "The Burial: A Fragment", one of the earliest vampire stories in English.

assembled at Villa Diodati (Lake Geneva) from outward recreation prompted him to challenge his friends to write their own macabre Gothic stories.

Buffon's idea of a progressively cooling world may have influenced that company; what Percy Shelley had seen in Chamonix – ice glaciers inexorably advancing – probably also reminded him of the theory of catastrophism.[11] Conversations among Byron, Shelley, and Mary Godwin Shelley led the latter to the 'dream' that became the genesis of *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818). Bill Phillips (2006) suggests that ecocriticism provides an alternative explanation for both the novel's genesis and meaning (61); the storms that ravaged Europe in the spring and summer of 1816 are mentioned in Mary's correspondence and the Preface of her work (62); "the gothic gloom of the novel may well be a reflection of the meteorological conditions under which it was conceived and written" and "the monster's world of ice and cold has become Frankenstein's too, where he dies [...] lost in darkness" (Phillips, 66). For this critic, her novel attempts to give meaning to a natural disaster, and Tambora indirectly provided the inspiration for her work.

An important influence on both Mary Shelley and Byron must have been Cousin de Grainville's *Le Dernier Homme* (*The Last Man*) of 1805, a powerful story of the demise of the human race, drawing on the traditional account in *Revelations*, and the departure point for many other speculative fictions of this type throughout the nineteenth century.[12] Byron himself takes advantage of the catastrophic events of the time in order to create a hellish description of the end of humanity. But he chooses to offer a more neo-classical interpretation of the effect: he paints *an extreme picture in a grotesque version* of what might have been

[11] The idea of a cooling world is also used in Byron's *Cain* (1821), in which antediluvian Cain lives in a "clime which knows no winter."

[12] Cousin de Grainville (1746-1805) was ordained a priest in 1766, left the priesthood during the French Revolution, and died in 1805. Grainville's masterful imagination is evident in the vast scale of the action as Omegarus, the Last Adam, and Syderia, the Last Eve, are led toward the moment when the light of the sun and the stars is extinguished. The intimate relationship in its pages between Ruins and Futurity comprehensively illuminates the 18th century European mind.

going through the heads of a superstitious community at the time. One of the sources of fear, as Byron well knew from his early indoctrination, was in John's apocalypse, the *Book of Revelation* in the Old Testament, containing dream-visions of the end of the world. In this sense, the whole poem could be seen as a reference to Matthew, "the sun shall be darkened" (24: 29). [13]

While Byron probably could not have foreseen the outcome of these effects, his poem significantly starts with the speaker proclaiming, "I had a dream, which *was not at all a dream* /the bright sun was extinguished" (vv 1-2). In fact, Byron was referring to the day-to-day reality of millions of people across the northern hemisphere at that time, and his description that "Morn came and went – and came, and brought no day" (v 6) was far from being simply metaphorical or biblical. In line 17 of his poem, Byron indeed mentions "volcanoes" and "forests set on fire", an indication that he might have knowledge of the natural cause for the conditions of the time. But he uses this to set up his condemnation of mankind, delivering *his vision* in a voice fitted to the pulpit of an evangelical preacher. He thus goes on to depict men driven by the force of extreme circumstance to behave as mere savage animals:

> […] and the pang
> Of famine fed upon all entrails--men
> Died, and their bones were tombless as their flesh;
> *The meagre by the meagre were devour'd*,
> Even dogs assail'd their masters, all save one,
> And he was faithful to a corse, and kept
> The birds and beasts and famish'd men at bay,
> Till hunger clung them, […]

[13] Christian Apocalyptic eschatology referred throughout all of scripture to "this age" and "the age to come". Evangelicals were in the forefront popularizing the biblical prophecy of a major confrontation between good and evil at the end of the age, a coming Millennium to follow, and a final confrontation whereby the wicked are judged, the righteous are rewarded and the beginning of Eternity is viewed. One of the most complete exegetical works on the meaning of the Book of Revelation, read by both Blake and Byron, had been written by Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Apocalypse Revealed*, first published in Amsterdam in 1766.

(lines 43-50, my emphasis)

In a scene reminiscent of Milton's Hell, Byron paints a picture of humanity as dead, dying or killing. Man's suddenly revealed inferior qualities are emphasised by his focus on *a single dog* that heroically protects his dead master's corpse. The poet introduces us to a new form of chaos implicit in the reversal of the binary notions of 'human/animal': Men 'howl', birds 'shriek' and vipers 'crawl' (vv 32-37). This is accompanied by his use of enjambment and scattered punctuation, adding a sense of urgency to the changed rhythm of the poem. And, indeed, at the end, Byron returns to the less wild, iambic rhythm with which the poem had started. After Darkness has taken control, the poet creates a deceptively calmer, more serene world: the seas are still, the winds are withered, and the clouds are gone. This *more even* flow is also created by the use of alliteration and consonance: "The populous and the powerful – was a lump, / Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless" (vv 70-71). Man is gone and, no longer interfering with the natural order, the universe has returned to chaos.

A lump of death – a chaos of hard clay. (v 72)

But the memory of the ghostly, Gothic atmosphere of that summer is not only present in the nightmarish world of "Darkness". Byron's dramatic poem *Manfred* (1816-17) contains a very similar but also a more personified description of that world, in Manfred's invocation of the spirits: "a star condemned, / The burning wreck of a demolish'd world, / A wandering hell in the eternal space" (I. I. 43-46); and Manfred himself is "an awful chaos – light and darkness […] All dormant and destructive" (3. I. 164-67).[14] Also P. B. Shelley's

[14] Manfred is a Faustian noble living in the Bernese Alps. Internally tortured by some mysterious guilt, which has to do with the death of his most beloved, Astarte, he uses his mastery of language and spell-casting to summon seven spirits, from whom he seeks forgetfulness. The spirits, who rule the various components of the corporeal world, are unable to control past events and thus cannot grant Manfred's plea. For some time, fate prevents him from escaping his guilt through suicide. At the end, Manfred dies defying religious temptations of redemption from sin. Throughout the poem, he succeeds in challenging all authoritative powers he comes across, and chooses death over submitting to spirits of higher powers. *Manfred* was written shortly after the failure of Byron's marriage to Annabelle Millbanke, who most likely accused him of an incestuous relationship with his half-sister Augusta Leigh.

The Cenci and Act I of *Prometheus Unbound* appear to be shaped by both catastrophism and Byron's 'darkness'. In the first, Beatrice imagines Cenci's transformative effects as "no God, no heaven, no Earth in the void world; / The wide, grey, lampless, deep, unpeopled world!" (5. 4. 57-60). In the latter, the bound Prometheus describes his surroundings as "Black, wintry, dead, unmeasured; without herb, / Insect, or beast, or shape or sound of life" (I. 21-22). The references to War in "Darkness" may remind us that the contemporary historical analogue to Manfred and Cenci was a man who had created unprecedented carnage across Europe – Napoleon Bonaparte. The impact of Byron's imagery in this poem became such that in 1986, when the campaign for nuclear disarmament was at its height in the British Parliament, Sir Michael Foot[15] quoted passages from it and praised Byron as a *prophet of nuclear winter*, and that war would ultimately lead to the destruction of life on earth (Bate, 2000: 90):

> And *War, which for a moment was no more,*
> *Did glut himself again*: a meal was bought
> With blood, and each sate sullenly apart
> Gorging himself in gloom: no love was left;
> All earth was but one thought – and that was *death*
> *Immediate and inglorious*;
>
> (lines 38-43, my emphasis)

Like Coleridge in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Byron seems to imply that Man was the one responsible for creating the disharmony in the universe, but the poet's ending is not so forgiving: the conclusion of "Darkness" offers nothing but death and desolation. The neoclassical form of the poem and its anti-romantic tone, with no hint towards emotion beyond the work's Romantic 'I' at its very beginning ("*I* had a dream, which was not all a dream") seems to challenge directly Romantic idealisations, such as Wordsworth's praise of

[15] Michael Foot was the leader of the British Labour Party in the early 1980s.

Nature and Rousseau's panegyric on Man.[16] Also, in contrast with these authors, Byron depicted humanity as he viewed it: a superstitious, self-serving, collection of beasts with the capabilities of reason and emotion, but the inability to use them. As such, the poem demonstrates the foolishness of man's self-importance when placed against the background of the most powerful of forces – nature itself.

Byron's attitude toward the nonhuman world was as complex as his view of human society. His wry cynicism often led him to compare human beings (unfavourably) with lower forms of life; as a master of descriptive and satiric language, he often connected the animal kingdom with human affairs. This is namely the case of the epitaph Byron penned for his beloved Newfoundland dog, Boatswain:

> . . . the poor dog, in life the firmest friend,
> The first to welcome, the foremost to defend,
> Whose honest heart is still his master's own,
> Who labors, fights, lives, breathes for him alone,
> Unhonored falls, unnoticed all his worth,
> Denied in heaven the soul he held on earth.
> *While man, vain insect, hopes to be forgiven,*
> *And claims himself a sole, exclusive heaven.*
> *Oh man! thou feeble tenant of an hour,*
> *Debas'd by slavery, or corrupt by power,*
> *Who knows thee well must quit thee with disgust,*
> *Degraded mass of animated dust!*
> *Thy love is lust, thy friendship all a cheat,*
> *Thy tongue hypocrisy, thy heart deceit,*
> By nature vile, ennobled but by name,
> Each kindred brute might bid thee blush for shame.
> […]
> (lines 5-20, my emphasis)

[16] Jean-Jacques Rousseau's belief in humanity's natural goodness is present, namely in *Émile, or On Education* (1762), a treatise on the nature of education and on the nature of man.

These misanthropic, if naturalistic lines, offer a pessimistic view of man but they undoubtedly also reflect the author's emotional state at the time he wrote "Darkness". In spite of declarations to the contrary, Byron often identified his character with his writings; his poetry, in particular, is often a mirror in which the movements of his soul are reflected. He had frequently solicited from his public regard to 'the dark current of his sorrows', by revealing the privacy of his domestic life and demanding judgement of his character, leaving himself open to scrutiny. In this respect, "Darkness" also illustrates the emotional workings of what we could call 'a complex megalomaniac' during a time of crisis in the world that he lived. According to Geoff Payne,[17]

> Byron's era saw vast political unrest, from the Luddite riots and the suspension of *habeas corpus,* to the Napoleonic wars and the abolition of the slave trade in England. The 'old' established order of society seemed to face an ever growing number of threats, each of which could be read as *a harbinger of doom and the triumph of chaos*. (2008: 20-21)

In an early poem of 1806, entitled "The Prayer of Nature", Byron already made reference not only to "the *elemental war*, / Whose hand from pole to pole I trace" (vv 43-44), but also to his soul as being "*dark within*" and himself as "corrupt and weak" (v 39). Many of his autobiographical characters, Harold, Manfred, Cain, could be described as he famously did 'Lara': "A thing of dark imaginings". The dark and gloomy image of the romantic misanthrope would indeed become the iconic aspect of Byron's public face. After the bright spark of the Enlightenment, a darker philosophical movement (a mixture of De Sade with Fichte or Schiller's nihilism) would reshape his world.

Byron knew that darkness was one of the foundational aspects of existence – primal in the sense that it exists without need for creation. The King James Bible, which he had read in his youth, begins precisely with a set of verses that establish a relationship between God, light and darkness: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was

[17] Geoff Payne, in his book *Dark Imaginings*, explores amongst other topics the relationship between sublime aesthetics and the gendering of desire, the connection between darkness and Byron's Scottish nationalism.

without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. […]" (cited in Payne, 2008: 23). Such ideas were also endemic to the dualistic philosophical traditions of the Classical world, in which light was associated with unity and the male, and darkness with plurality and the female; Hesiod's darkness is a direct descendent of Chaos and, in the guise of feminine Night, it becomes the mother of all the woes of humankind.[18] In spite of the largely gender-neutral language of Byron's poem, a discourse of gender *is* present in "Darkness" and is also central to its system of meaning, connecting with the poem's discourse of power. Payne argues that "darkness indicates a dynamic of gender and desire that operates in the discourse of Burke's aesthetic of the sublime and beautiful, and a similar […] dynamic in the discourse of abject terror developed in his later writings on the French Revolution" (31). This was, in Burke's eyes, an event that threatened apocalyptic catastrophe, and in this context both women and the poor became monstrous, truly threatening in their newly powerful positions – iconic images of terror. [19]

Critics such as Benita Eisler[20] have framed Byron's 1816 poems in relation to "The personal disaster of the poet's life and its blighting losses", those of his "wife, child, sister, possessions, and reputation" (2000: 74). The year indeed saw the collapse of Byron's marriage, rumours of incest and sodomy and a severe financial situation, all of which led to his European exile. In this sense, "Darkness" could be said to be a manifest response to a threatening femininity and a developing chaos in his personal life. These facts grant particular significance to the ideas formulated in the poem's final lines, to whose presiding feminine consciousness, and supposed conspiracy, they figuratively allude:

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[18] *Theogony*, a poem by Hesiod (8th-7th century BC) was composed circa 700 BC. It is a large-scale synthesis of a vast variety of local Greek traditions concerning the gods, organized as a narrative that tells how they came to be and how they established permanent control over the cosmos. It is the first Greek mythical cosmogony. The initial state of the universe is chaos, a dark indefinite void considered as a divine primordial condition from which everything else appeared.

[19] Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1759).

[20] See her book *Byron: Child of Passion, Fool of Fame* (London: Penguin Books, 2000).

[…] darkness had no need

Of aid from them – *She was the universe*.

(lines 81-2, my emphasis)

These lines, as Payne stresses, help to establish the poem's vision of a new universal order, constituted by the dominion of a powerful universal femininity (2008: 33). Although "Darkness" engages with several political discourses, Payne argues, the capitalisation of the word 'She' gives gender discourse a privileged position in the poem's symbolic hierarchy (34).

Thus, the kind of power granted to the feminine is itself akin to the effect of darkness, a blurring of distinction. If the self, deprived of light and uncertainty, does not want to concede to terror, he must turn outside, through prayer, to a more powerful deified *male Other* who is capable of providing solace through certainty-forming light. When young, the poet had experienced a similar despair when he believed himself condemned to eternal damnation by the 'severe' Calvinist doctrines, and in his 1806 poem "The Prayer of Nature" he addressed God significantly as "Father of Light" and as one "who canst guide the *wandering star*" (1, 41). Byron feared that his more pantheistic belief might place him in disadvantage with those fanatic advocates. Ten years later, this movement is indeed attempted at the beginning of "Darkness":

Morn came and went--and came, and brought no day,

And men forgot their passions in the dread

Of this their desolation; and *all hearts*

Were chill'd into a selfish prayer for light:

(lines 6-9, my emphasis)

But this conventional relying on religious faith is soon abandoned in the poem for more godless attitudes of either quiet hopelessness or restless despair, to which a form of Byronic cynicism is also added:

> […] some lay down
> And hid their eyes and wept; and *some did rest*
> *Their chins upon their clenched hands, and smil'd*;
> And others hurried to and fro, and fed
> Their funeral piles with fuel, and look'd up
> With *mad disquietude* on the dull sky,
>
> (lines 24-29, my emphasis)

Here, the poet implicitly associates the old world that crumbles, "The pall of a past world" (v 30), under the weight of such darkness, to an essentially masculine domain, whose landscape is dominated by the identifiable symbols of patriarchal order (castles, temples, cities) and respectively secured by masculine modes of thought.

In conclusion, we could say that Byron's eco-critical work broadened the scope of the merely aesthetic, by looking for causes of sublime experience *outside* language and seeking to show how the aesthetic can *frame* personal experience in response to the natural and social world. This response in Byron, as we have seen, points to an apocalypse of soul that reflects and is reflected in turn by natural or climatic catastrophe. He declares that all Nature needs cyclical release. Like the boiling, spewing volcano of Mount Tambora, which really functions as an exhaust valve of the planet Earth, the poet expresses, in a short poem significantly entitled "My Soul is Dark", his similar need for emotional outburst and decompression, in "wild and deep" poetic form:

> […]
> If in these eyes there lurk a tear,
> 'Twill flow, and *cease to burn my brain*.

But bid the strain be wild and deep,

[…]

[…] I must weep,

Or else *this heavy heart will burst*;

For it had been by sorrow nursed,

And *ached in sleepless silence, long*;

And now 'tis doomed to know the worst,

And *break at once* – or yield to song.

(lines 7-9, 11-16, my emphasis)

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