

“Where Ruin Greenly Dwells: Sublimity
and Romanticism in Kant’s Critique of Judgment”

Presented by P. Winston Fettner

CUNY Comparative Literature Graduate Conference

New York, New York

November 6th, 2004

...consider bold, overhanging and as it were, threatening rocks, thunderclouds piled high in the sky and moving about accompanied by thunderclaps, volcanoes with all their destructive power, hurricanes with all the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean heaved up, the high waterfall of a mighty river, and so on.¹

[Slide 1] Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790) was published 1 year after the French Revolution broke out and the same year that Wordsworth started his walking tour of the Alps. By developing the theme of the sublime as an aesthetic and ethical experience, Kant strongly influenced the development of romantic poetry and painting. But the sublime was already an essential category of European aesthetic thought. In Longinus, sublimity is an indispensable feature of rhetoric, associated with powerful emotion, the ability to engage *movere*, the emotional component of rhetoric; to be moved to sublimity would indeed become the goal of romantic art. For example, both Wordsworth and Hölderlin intended to give pure landscape poetry the force and gravity of Milton and Homer's epic style."² The poems and paintings of succeeding generations would develop a store of motifs for expressing sublimity. The idea of redemption is expressed in light; history is expressed in ruins, sublimity itself, in darkness, mist and tremendous size. Therefore, two questions arise, the art historical question of how the content of romantic painting is related to the doctrine of the sublime in philosophy and poetry, and the philosophical question of how painting communicates emotions, concepts, and ideologies. Paintings are deliberate acts of communication by human beings, messages sent within a particular historical context. What are the allegorized philosophical messages in the paintings, and how do the images work in the *Critique of Judgment*?

In Kant's view, the sublime is properly evoked by the natural, but non-biological world: "...we must point to the sublime not in products of art (e.g., buildings, columns, etc), where both the form and the magnitude are determined by a human purpose, nor in natural things whose very concept carries purpose (e.g., animals...), but rather in crude nature..." (Kant, 1790:109 [253]). By crude Kant seems to mean mountains, oceans, and

¹. Immanuel Kant *Critique of Judgment* (1790) Pluhar, trans. Hackett, 1987 p. 120 [261]

². Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner *Romanticism and Realism: The Mythology of Nineteenth-Century Art* Norton, 1984 p. 51

other pre-organic (non purposive) entities...many of the romantic paintings depict gigantic outcroppings of rock, mountains, gorges and volcanoes. Massive and ancient, the mineral kingdom awes us for its resilience, its permanence. The lithosphere and its spectacular features are naturally indexical signs of sublimity, because they cause feelings of gravity, seriousness, and pathos. But in Kant's hands, the experience of the sublime itself becomes a sign.

The experience of the sublime is much older than the concept of the aesthetic itself. A very early expression of sublimity is found in the Earl of Shaftesbury, who had written essays on enthusiasm and the *sensus communus*, who purchased the work of Salvator Rosa [Slide 1]³, and who cultivated the taste for rocks, mountains and ruins, that was such an important feature of 19th century aesthetic. Shaftesbury wrote in admiration of one of Rosa's pictures, showing a "rock in the most stupendous manner...majestic, terribly impending, vast, enormous, as it should be" (ibid.). Roger de Piles described Raphael's genius as "sublime" in his 1706 *Art of Painting*.⁴ Jonathan Richardson's *An Essay on the Theory of Painting* [1715] and *Two Discourses* [1719] "studied the question of sublimity in literature quite carefully...and applied his conclusions to painting" (Monk, 176). In 1747, John Baillie wrote *An Essay on the Sublime*, describing the "fits of greatness" enjoyed in the experience. He offers a very Kantian definition of sublimity, centered around the mind's relationship to itself: "That *Object* only can be justly called *Sublime*, which in some degree disposes the mind to this *Enlargement* of itself, and gives her a lofty *Conception* of her own *Powers*."⁵ This statement of the structure of the sublime, as the mind feeling the presence of great power in nature and in itself, predates even Burke's more physiological treatment of 1757. Alexander Gerard's 1759 *An Essay on Taste* "includes English translations of texts on the issue by Voltaire, Jean-Baptiste Le Rond d'Alembert, and the baron de Montesquieu."⁶ In 1773 Anna Letitia and John Aikin published *On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror*. In short, it was inevitable

³. Richard Davenport-Hines *Gothic: Four Hundred Years of Excess, Horror, Evil and Ruin* North Point, 1998 p. 29

⁴. Samuel H. Monk *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* Ann Arbor, University of Michigan 1960 p. 169

⁵. Quoted in Fred Botting *Gothic* Routledge, 1996 p. 40

⁶. *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* Michael Grodin and Martin Kreisworth, eds. http://www.press.jhu.edu/books/hopkins_guide_to_literary_theory/edmund_burke.html

that Kant treat the sublime in his aesthetics, and as with epistemology, Kant's move was to consider not the objects that trigger feelings of sublimity, but the subjective conditions of the feeling.

Kant's emphasis on the sublime as subjective experience anticipates the Romantic aim of evoking the emotions and unlocking the depths of subjectivity. That meant that painting should follow music, aiming at the emotions through natural signs, generated by an artist who was able to feel and express the very emotions caused in the observer. The authenticity and spontaneity of the artist become increasingly important. Painting that is deliberately emotive need no longer obey the rules of the academics, and artists begin to paint musically:

Landscape painting and poetry for Schiller could be raised to the dignity of major arts only by the awakening of sentiment and the representation of ideas. We demand, he wrote, that the art of landscape should work upon us like music (Rosen and Zerner, 1984:52).

[Slide 2] The Romantic painters pioneered the abstract, painterly brushwork that would characterize the development of Modern art. For if artworks are to be judged according to their effects on the viewer, the artists' relationship to sign-systems itself is altered, moving from Enlightenment representation and precision of line to romantic feeling, color, evocation, that is, moving from iconic signs to indicies. Strong brushwork can be read as the sign of the painter's presence, of his or her subjectivity and emotion; the artist must feel whatever feelings the painting is supposed to evoke, and must communicate these feelings through the facture of the painting as well as through the subject matter. This freer style of expression was to define the history of modern art, expressed within the history of painting through the debate on whether *colore* or *disegno* (line or drawing) was more essential. The deeply subjective nature of Romantic painting involved using color, long regarded as a subjective property of the world, to communicate feeling [Slide 3]. Turner in particular began to paint pure energy, especially in the form of light and storm, developing a highly impressionistic, painterly style that shimmers at the threshold of three dimensional vision. Like Jackson Pollock, Turner

(following Constable) used a thick impasto to capture light in layers of paint, suggesting a very early attention to the materiality of the canvas and paint (and viewer) that would appear in later Modernism. In other words, the attention to color and facture reflected the emphasis on emotion that characterized the Romantic movement generally:

[1] The true source of art and of the beautiful is feeling. Feeling reveals the proper idea and aim of art, and points to the certain knowledge of the artist's intention, though the proof of this lies in practice rather than words. Religious feeling, piety, love and quiet enthusiasm guided the hand of the old masters. Only a few of them possessed in addition, or in its stead, what alone can replace religious feeling in art, namely, profound thought and an earnest philosophical striving.⁷

To understand the subject-matter of 19th century Romantic painting, we have to read the poetry and philosophy of the time. The ruins, mountains, gorges, storms, oceans and related images of the romantic vocabulary begin to take on new importance even before the time of the 3rd *Critique*, for example in the painting of Salvator Rosa and Piranesi [Slide 4] and in the genre of "Graveyard Poetry". The images circulated among the poets, painters and philosophers; mountains are mentioned as an example by Kant, allegorized by the poets, and depicted by the painters. Geological imagery was communicated across nations, disciplines, and media. The increasing popularity of mountains during the period may be correlated the increasing importance of the sublime in aesthetic thought from the 16th to the 19th century.

The term "Sublime" conveys a sense of height or loftiness (it probably derives from the Latin *sub* 'up to' and *limen* 'lintel', and is akin to *altitudo*, *elatio*).⁸ Mountains, then, are an obvious choice as an image leading to the experience of sublimity because of their elevation. Anytime we see an object, we can imagine it in space, ourselves engaged in many possible relations with it. Each point of view of the object is a structural transformation of each other possible point of view of the same

⁷ . Freidrich Schlegel Extract from *Descriptions of Paintings*, 1802-1804
<http://www.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/History/teaching/sem10/schlegel.html>

⁸ . Nicola Trott, "The Picturesque, the Beautiful, and the Sublime" in *A Companion to Romanticism* Duncan Wu, ed. Blackwell, 1999 p. 77

object. When we see mountains, therefore, we may picture ourselves actually on the mountains, looking down from a great height; conversely, we may picture ourselves as seen from that great height, how tiny we would seem. We get a overwhelming sense of our own finitude, our own mortality, when faced with the mineral kingdom. Mountains carry for human beings an intuition existential smallness that was allegorized and conventionalized into a legible sign.

The images of mountains, ocean and storm in the *Critique of Judgement* serve not just as examples, but mean to play the same role that they do in the work of the painter or poet. Kant intends to put us in the right frame of mind to grasp this very emotional, subjective (yet universal) experience: the oscillation between the pain of being overwhelmed by nature and the pleasure of our own transcendence of nature through reason. It is reason that allows nature to have a meaning, a final cause, because reason is outside of nature:

Hence nature is here called sublime [*erhaben*] merely because it elevates [*erhebt*] out imagination, [making] it exhibit those cases where the mind can come to feel its own sublimity, which lies in its vocation and elevates it even above nature (Kant, 1790:121 [262]).

Yet, the West's perception of Nature was to undergo a massive shift, because the 19th century was to suffer the most profound scientific discoveries of all time; I mean the discoveries of evolution, the fossil record, the place of human beings in natural history, and geological time [Slide 5]. The Cartesian separation between humanity and nature that's assumed by Kant's system was in jeopardy. The romantic poets and painters worked over the themes of fossils, extinction and prehistory to beautiful effect. There are strong links between fossils and ruins; both point to the deeply historical, finite, temporal nature of human being. John Keats' *Endymion* (1817) describes the fossil remains: "skeletons of man,/Of beast, behemoth, and leviathan,/And elephant, and eagle, and huge jaw/ Of nameless monster" (III, 133-36). Tennyson's stanzas from *In Memoriam* (1851) give an image of prehistoric violence, and question the purpose of human existence within the new contexts of extinction and evolution: "Dragons of the prime,/That tare

each other in their slime...” (LVI, CXVIII) [Slide 6]. The same poem contains the famous line “nature red in tooth and claw”, later used to capture the spirit of social Darwinism. “In *Prometheus Unbound* (1819), Shelley...reveals his awareness of previous forms of life (including human life) that have occupied the planet and catastrophic forces that have led to their destruction”:

...dead Destruction, ruin within ruin!
The wrecks beside of many a city vast,
Whose population which the earth grew over
Was mortal but not human; see, they lie,
Their monstrous works and uncouth skeletons,
Their statues, homes, and fanes; prodigious shapes
Huddled in grey annihilation, split,
Jammed in the hard black deep; and over these
The anatomies of unknown winged things,
And fishes which were isles of living scale,
And serpents, bony chains, twisted around
The iron crags, or within heaps of dust
To which the tortuous strength of their last pangs
Had crushed the iron crags; and over these
The jagged alligator and the might
Of earth-convulsing behemoth, which once
Were monarch beats, and on the slimy shores
And weed-overgrown continents of Earth
Increased and multiplied like summer worms
On an abandoned corpse, till the blue globe
Wrapt Deluge round it like a cloak, and they
Yelled, gaspt and were abolished (iv. 295-316)

Sublimity, then, was the idiom in which the profound implications of paleontology, geology, and natural history were confronted and processed by romantic culture. The spatial puniness of people under mountains had already been used to allegorize our existential tinyness in God’s creation, and would continue to be used in American romantic painting; but then (within the framework of the Kantian sublime) the rush of esteem at our own ethical nature counters these feelings.

What happens to the sublime when we grow even punier with the sudden onset of geological time? What happens when the narratives of evolutionary development supplant the Biblical teleology within which Kant had philosophized? The sublime becomes subversive, ironic; the paintings of ruins, for example, expressed the pessimistic idea that any empire had to live out a life cycle that included decline and death [Plates 7 and 8]. Kant would have resisted this Classical, pagan, cyclical model in which history itself is determined by natural cycles, because a cyclical model of human history is incompatible with the linear, Biblical narrative of the kingdom of ends, just as the imbeddedness of human being in nature is incompatible with the transcendence of the subject over the body. Cole's prospectus for his *Course of Empire* paintings make this cyclical, naturalistic historicity explicit, and gives us a sense of the process by which a painter might encode the ideas circulating in his cultural environment⁹:

A series of pictures might be painted that should illustrate the history of a natural scene, as well as be an epitome of Man--showing the natural changes of landscape, and those effected by man in his progress from barbarism to civilization--to luxury--the vicious state, or state of destruction--and to the state of ruin and desolation...The philosophy of my subject is drawn from the history of the past, wherein we see how nations have risen from the savage state to that of power and glory, and then fallen, and become extinct. Natural scenery has also its changes--the hours of the day and the seasons of the year--sunshine and storm: these justly applied will give expression to each picture of the series I would paint. It will be well to have the same location in each picture: This location may be identified by the introduction of some striking object in each scene--a mountain of peculiar form, for instance.¹⁰

Let us now turn to the great poets and painters of the Romantic period, who used Kant's reading of the sublime as a philosophy of poetry. Holderlin and Coleridge especially absorbed, reworked and transformed the Kantian sublime. Holderlin

⁹. "Because he did not have any formal education in art, his aesthetic ideas derived from poetry and literature, influences that were strongly to mark his paintings." From *American Paradise: The World of the Hudson River School* http://www.artchive.com/ftp_site.htm

¹⁰. <http://www.tamos.net/~rhay/cole/course.html>

apparently mentioned Kant's *3rd Critique* even in his dementia.¹¹ Coleridge was so steeped in German aesthetics that there is "a vexed question of his plagiarism from [these] sources, particularly the philosophers Kant and Schelling and the critics Schiller and A. W. Schlegel."¹² "The important prefaces and glosses to his supernatural poems...were written after Coleridge had read Kant on the sublime and considered translating 'The Analytic'"¹³ Schiller developed Kant's idea of sentiment into pathos; he "attempts to make beauty more sublime,"¹⁴ and "the displacement of the beautiful by the sublime is one of the major movements in Coleridge's poetry."¹⁵ In the 1800 preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), Wordsworth expressed "his belief that poetry results from 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.'"¹⁶

For poets as well as painters, the the end of empire was an important theme: "When we reflect on the sinking fortunes of nations, and the sudden falls of mighty kingdoms, we are impressed with an awful idea of the supreme Disposer...when we tread upon piles of stones, which once administered to the grandeur of princes, and over-awed the territory round; how can we persist in building our pride upon such transitory foundations, and in sacrificing the repose of our minds for such unstable rewards?"¹⁷ The immensity and formlessness of the mineral kingdom had been a figure of sublimity since before Kant, but the mountains that had been seen as simply disorderly became the sign of a new, evolutionary view of humankind. Massive geological disturbances like volcanoes [Plate 9], avalanches [Plate 10], glacial masses of ice [Plate 11] and earthquakes are used by poets and painters to allegorize the loss of foundations experienced by the societies of 19th century Europe. "To Burnet mountains were 'nothing

¹¹. Wilhelm Waiblinger, "Friedrich Hölderlin's Life, Poetry and Madness" (1830) Scott J. Thompson, trans (<http://www.wbenjamin.org/holderlin.html>)

¹². Rosemary Ashton, "England and Germany" in Wu, 2001 p. 498 Among the materials in question are Schiller's *Concerning the Relation of the Plastic Arts to Nature* (1807) and Coleridge's 1818 lectures; see *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism* David Simpson, ed. Cambridge, 1984 p. 149

¹³. Jack G. Voller *The Supernatural Sublime* Northern Illinois University Press, 1994 p. 183

¹⁴. Thomas Huhn "The Kantian Sublime and the Nostalgia for violence" in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. LIII, No. 3 Summer, 1995 p. 247, fn. 4

¹⁵. James B. Twitchell *Romantic Horizons: Aspects of the Sublime in English Poetry and Painting, 1770-1850* University of Missouri, 1983 p. 87

¹⁶. Romanticism in Literature http://www.slider.com/enc/45000/romanticism_Romanticism_in_Literature.htm

¹⁷. From "a London periodical of 1793, the Looker-On"

Laurence Goldstein *Ruins and Empire: The Evolution of a theme in Augustinian and Romantic Literature* University of Pittsburgh, 1977 p. 5

but great ruines; but such as show a certain Magnificence in Nature; as from old Temples and broken Amphitheatres of the Romans” (Quoted in Davenport-Hines, 1998:25). The capricious and overwhelming nature of Pompeii in 79 A.D., and of Lisbon in 1755, testified to the deeply irrational, precarious character of human existence, defying the rationalism and optimism of the enlightenment. If we read *Kubla Khan* (1816), we find the same images of chaos in the lithosphere:

And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momently was forced;
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river (ll.17-24).¹⁸

Volcanic activity, once associated with the infernal world, is now associated with an earlier, primal world. Human history and natural history form a continuum; conceived as a tragic cycle of growth and decay, the decline and fall of empires is mirrored in the revolutionary concepts of prehistory, cataclysm, extinction, and so forth. An organic metaphor of historical decadence, the biological imagery of extinction was linked to millenarian accounts of God's punishment for human pride, and for the abuses of empire. (For example, there's Gibbon's influence on *The Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*) (Goldstein, 1977:209). In this way, new opinions about the organic world structured a narrative view of history as old as the Hebrews [Plate 12]. Redemption would occur along with a cleansing, purifying diasaster. The romantic attack on the slave trade, for example, could draw on a Biblical narrative in of the retributive justice of God [Plate 13]. In fact, the very mountains themselves could be perceived as ruins, reminders of God's wrath. Thomas Burnet, who had traveled through the Alps, imagined that the irregular, mountainous surface of the Earth had been created in the Biblical flood; before then, “no

¹⁸. A Romantic Natural History: Geologist-Poets and Poet-Geologists
<http://www.dickinson.edu/~nicholsa/Romnat/geology.htm>

Rocks nor Mountains, no hollow Caves, nor gaping channels¹⁹ appeared, nor did the storms which they produce. Wordsworth echoes the notion: “Sublimity is the result of Nature’s first dealings with the superficialities of the Earth.”²⁰ Here, mountains, storms, volcanoes, in fact, all of nature’s savage aspects, can be traced back to Adam’s fall.

Ruins are associated with the unrepresentable character of time, history, and our own existence in time; “‘A broken column’, writes Mme de Stael [in a very Kantian tone], ‘a bas-relief half ruined, some stones linked in the indestructable workmanship of ancient architects, reminds you that there is an eternal power, a divine spark, in man’”²¹ [Slide 14]. So the artistic and scholarly interest in ruins actually predates romanticism and prepares the way for it. The enlightenment in its preoccupation with the ancient world led to an element of nostalgia in the aesthetics of the ruin and a certain taste for melancholia; Shelley wrote: “Rome is yet the capital of the world. It is a city of palaces and temples, more glorious than those which any other city contains, and of ruins more glorious than they”²² [Slide 15]. Ruins as one of the key images of the sublime appear under the influence of archaeology:

In 1758 Winckelman visited first time Naples to observe the archaeological excavations being conducted in that vicinity. Usually the excavations of Pompeii (1748) have been considered the decisive stimulus to the new archaeological classicism, but first excavation in Herculaneum took place much earlier. These two cities had been buried by an eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79. From the middle of the century the collection of “antiques” becomes a passion all over Europe, discoveries in Pompeii and Herculaneum has a profound effect on taste, especially on interior design, and a journey to Italy is a mark of good breeding.²³

Stone ruins became a code for the experience of history. If stone is not permanent (as in ruins but also in the weathering of mountains, in volcanoes, earthquakes, and

¹⁹. Thomas Burnet *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1691) Quoted in Davenport-Hines, 1998:24

²⁰. Wordsworth, *Prose Works* 2.181 Quoted in Catherine Bois “The Natural Sublime in Wordsworth’s Poetry and Romantic Landscape Paintings” *Cercles* No. 1 (2000) pp. 61-69 <http://www.history-journals.de/articles/hjg-eartic-j00124.html>

²¹. Quoted in Thomas Mc. Farland *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin* Princeton, 1981 p. 14

²². Percy Bysshe Shelley to Thomas Love Peacock, Rome, March 23 1819
<http://heritage.virtualsite.co.uk/keats/index2.html>

²³. Books and Writers, 2000 <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/winck.htm>

avalanches) then nothing is. Massive disorders in the earth called attention to the entirely new ideas of natural history and prehistory, and they symbolized the equally deep shifts taking place in psychological and political life. The decay of empire may be seen as the result of a natural, inevitable process, as in Shelley's *Ozymandias*. In a short poem that mixes the gothic with the orientalist strain, the aesthetic of the ruin is distilled:

I met a traveler from an antique land
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear --
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."²⁴

Shelley's *Ozymandias* is a very powerful meditation on empire and collapse, but also on the deeply subjective experience of history that ruins encode. The sands of time, parallel to the sands of the desert Shelley describes, spell out the infinite measure of history and the smallness of human pretensions. The boundless and bare" expanse of space around the statue, the "lone and level sands" describe an unlimited space, an analog of the even more unlimited time, surrounding the witness of this statue, and vicariously, the hearer of the traveler's description; and, vicariously again, the reader of the hearer's poem. The reader of the poem witnesses his or her own smallness, and in so doing witnesses the largeness of time, and our ability to witness that larger, historical time of which we are a part. Using only images, Shelley spells out, in a well-developed vocabulary, a profound philosophical message about time and history, but also about the intersubjective conditions of the encoded argument. His *Alastor* (1860) reveals the

²⁴. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Ozymandias* (1817-8)

C L X X X I I.

Thy shores are empires, changed in all save thee -
Assyria, Greece, Rome, Carthage, what are they?
Thy waters washed them power while they were free,
And many a tyrant since: their shores obey
The stranger, slave, or savage; their decay
Has dried up realms to deserts: - not so thou,
Unchangeable, save to thy wild waves' play -
Time writes no wrinkle on thine azure brow -
Such as creation's dawn beheld, thou rollest now.

The sea endures while empires rise and fall. The second line compresses centuries of ancient history into the rhetorical question, directed at the reader, or at the ocean, the answer an enthymeme hanging fatally in the air. An extraordinarily direct expression of the inevitable ruin of empires, nevertheless the mood is established through a subtle rhetoric that draws the reader of the poem in, so that we are complicit in his pessimism. Byron contrasts the ocean to the desert in the preceding line, denoting the desolate stage after empire's fall. The limitless desert sands match the limitless expanse of the open sea, inducing the feeling of sublimity in the imaginative reader (for one form of sublimity is associated with viewing a limitless expanse, especially well developed in painting by Friedrich). The ocean here functions as the origin of things, present since "dawn's creation", but unable to redeem history. In contrast to the Kantian sublime, and like Cole's *Desolation*, Byron's sublimity does not recoil to elevate what is transcendent in us, but ties us anew to the darkness that is nature, and prepares us for a repetition of the cycle:

C L X X X I I I.

Thou glorious mirror, where the Almighty's form
Glasses itself in tempest; in all time
Calm or convulsed - in breeze, or gale, or storm,
Icing the pole, or in the torrid clime
Dark-heaving; - boundless, endless, and sublime -

The image of Eternity - the throne
Of the invisible; even from out thy slime
The monsters of the deep are made; each zone
Obeys thee; thou goest forth, dread, fathomless, alone.

The ocean is practically deified by Byron; yet, his approach to spiritual experience is not one of transcendence but of immanence. In quick succession, violently contrasting images of the ocean—“Calm or convulsed - in breeze, or gale, or storm/ Icing the pole, or in the torrid clime”—have a dizzying effect on the reader, and recall the interest in extreme climates that we see in the painters of the generation, corresponding metaphorically to the extreme experiences of agony and ecstasy that characterized the inner life of the romantic poet. The ocean is explicitly “the image of eternity” in an interesting exposure of the rhetorical strategy that underlines these verses. [Slide 17] Byron’s ruins show a certain vitality in their destruction, they represent the immanent hope offered by a cycle of decay and renewal; Nature’s slow destruction of human structures offers such a promise, yet, the renewal is cyclical, not metaphysical. In fact, Byron resisted the supernaturalism of his friends; but he still uses ruins as a sign of nature’s dominance over humankind. Ruins, the traces of empire and sign of finitude, also offer evidence of Nature’s reclaiming empire as the stone buildings turn back into rock. Under conditions of radical immanence, the only hope is vitality. The third canto of *Childe Harold* recalls Friedrich’s *Eldena Ruin*, (title page)²⁶ the beautiful mossy ruins connoting a naturalistic, cyclical alternative to transcendence:

46
Away with these! true Wisdom’s world will be
Within its own creation, or in thine,
Maternal Nature! for who teems like thee,
Thus on the banks of thy majestic Rhine?
There Harold gazes on a work divine,
A blending of all beauties; streams and dells,
Fruit, foliage, crag, wood, cornfield, mountain, vine,
And chiefless castles breathing stern farewells

²⁶. Caspar David Friedrich *Eldena Ruin* (1825) Oil on canvas, 35 x 49 cm. National Gallery, Berlin

From gray but leafy walls, where Ruin greenly dwells.