**Questions of Unity – a response to Manfred Act III, Scene IV by Lord Byron**

Byron presents us with images of unity in this extract from ‘Manfred’, exploring the impact of these ideas on the human condition. He manipulates the way the reader understands control, presenting his protagonist, the setting and nature as dominant at different points. It is only when Manfred, and therefore the reader, realises the repercussions of such dominance that harmony is established.

Manfred places himself at the centre of his recollection, exemplified by the addition of ‘me’ in the opening line. Despite this, he is not the dominant presence within this scene. The use of the prepositions ‘within’ and ‘midst’ emphasise his smallness and the allusion to ‘almighty Rome’ accentuates his obscurity. The dual meaning of ‘chief’ enhances this implication; the ‘relics’ are both of great importance and hold dominion over their surroundings in the manner of a chieftain. The ‘Coliseum’s’ presence is stronger still, representing the achievements of the Roman Empire and embodying the necessity of military control, an idea of particular relevance to Byron writing during the Napoleonic Wars. Metaphorically it acts as a synecdoche representing the endurance of this military dominance and recalling Bede’s description of Rome to only fall ‘when the Coliseum does’.

Significantly the depicted scene does not suggest enduring military prowess. The semantic field of decay and destruction defines Byron’s narrative. The ‘Coliseum’ is imperfect and disorderly, it’s ‘levell’d battlements’ are syntactically incomplete with the adjective ‘levell’d’ shortened to allow for metrical conformity. The alliterative description of the ‘rents of ruin’ suggest violence and, when viewed against the Roman gladiatorial use for the ‘Coliseum’, implies that the destruction has been self-inflicted. The adjective ‘ruin’ denotes finality and presents the influence of violence as waning, in contrast to the power of nature which grows in Manfred’s mind. The chiastic ending ‘a noble wreck in ruinous perfection’ recalls the convention of the Roman ‘Epic’ genre and adds ironic grandeur. It is as though Manfred, in encircling the adjectives indicative of decay and weakness with images of nobility and perfection, aims to re-establish the power of man embodied within this literary genre and within the ‘Coliseum’. However, the exclamation in the caesura seem excessive and we see the futility of Manfred’s efforts to expound man’s military dominance. To a modern reader the use of the word ‘Circus’ only serves to enhance the sardonic nature of this narration with its connotations of the ostentatious and ridiculous. The juxtaposition of comedic intent and the gladiator’s ‘bloody’ sport does not present the necessity of man’s military dominance but instead seems unpredictable, in the manner of a game, or Circus. As the poem ages, the perverse nature of Byron’s message therefore endures.

Humanity is not presented as the dominant presence in Bryon’s scene, despite Manfred’s effort to lexically atone for its violent tendencies. This authority is held by nature which thrives in humanity’s decay. The imagery surrounding it is indicative of how nature is seen to establish order in the chaos and ruin. For example, the alliteration of ‘stars/shone’ forces the lines together even as they fracture, indicating that the softening influence of the star - enhanced by the sibilance - cannot be confined to a single line or sentence. Midnight is presented as ‘blue’ rather than the austere black. This suggests dilution of the influence of the darkness, a metaphorical allusion to Manfred’s internal struggle, and therefore the emergence of hope for him in nature.

The study of humanity permeates Byron’s writing. Nature is not idolised in the fashion of Wordsworth or Shelley but presented as complementary to the human condition. We see this necessary union within ‘Manfred’. Here, the ‘Coliseum’ represents humankind, which relishes in the ‘ruinous perfection’ encapsulated in the ‘Circus’. The perfection of nature indicates the influence of divinity on the human condition. Manfred rejects the influence of humanity and divinity on himself and it is therefore interesting that in his ‘wanderings’ he should return to a moment in his youth when they were inextricably linked. Initially he seems to gravitate towards the authority of man, deliberately returning to ‘the Coliseum’. Byron depicts him ‘stood’ within the ‘walls’ much like the ‘cypresses’ ‘stood’ on his ‘horizon’, connecting Manfred with his internal divinity through the repeated verb. Manfred’s difficulty to gauge distance further invokes images of this natural connection. ‘Caesars’ palace’ to Manfred is ‘more near’; with the additional qualifier making the syntax grammatically unnatural, implying the uncomfortable closeness of his unprincipled human nature. The figurative use of the plural ‘Caesars’’ indicates the enduring presence of this corruptible element of the human condition. The ‘long’ cry of the owl from ‘out’ the ‘palace’ indicates penetrating distance and therefore provides contrast. Humanity’s divine nature is presented as oxymoronically both tangible and faraway. The ‘cypresses’ are both ‘on the horizon’ and ‘within a bowshot’ denoting humanity’s capability of using one part of their nature to access the other, alluding to the simplicity of such Hypostatic union. Nature brings life to the decaying ‘Coliseum’ and ‘twines its roots with imperial hearths’. Here, each noun represents the foundations of both facets of humanity. Each provides sustenance, with the ‘roots’ supporting nature and the ‘hearths’ providing warmth to the human home. The verb ‘twines’ also suggests a neatness to this natural link. Bryon therefore has Manfred recall this indivisible union to provide his ‘wanderings’ with purpose.

Manfred’s realisation of the necessity of this union between his human and divine nature during these ‘wanderings’ of his mind is critical to his redemption and subsequent conquest of his self-imposed guilty isolation from humanity. At his death, it allows him to openly ask for and take the Abbot’s hand, a physical emulation of the necessary union between these two natures that he was first exposed to in youth. This realisation is not only applicable to the protagonist but to mankind. Although contexts have evolved and not all humanity views itself as essentially divine, the inextricable linking of perfection and imperfection within explorations of the human condition endures.

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