

“Darkness” All Over the World

The first time I read “Darkness” by Lord Byron was two years ago, when it was brought up in my novel selection class *Mary Shelley and Her Novels* by Prof. Weng when she introduced the concept of “apocalyptic novels” and the background for, to quote the radio program, “the Genesis of *Frankenstein*.” I was haunted by that poem for a couple of days as the topic it touches upon was really scary: a world filled with darkness, and the desperate measures people would take to generate a sparkle of light. Not knowing the details about the reason why Lord Byron composed this poem, I thought of it as a fable, read the wars and conflicts as some kind of symbol and tried to find out the connotations of them in this poem.

But I didn’t let the poem occupy my mind for too long and cast it aside until this March, with the outbreak of Coronavirus, I saw it again on the poetry community on Reddit (an American online platform.) Reading it the second time while trying to picture what was going on in other places where people had to deal with quarantines and lockdowns, for a while I couldn’t help but think that it was probably how the end of the world felt like. And I didn’t feel detached to what was happening even though Taiwan remained relatively unaffected by the virus as I got to read the news and receive information from social media; but I wondered what would have happened if we hadn’t had the technology we did today when similar things happened—and that was the case when the eruption of Tambora took place.

I’ve read about the eruption of that volcano and many consequences that followed before, but didn’t really have a concrete idea of how serious it was. I

recognized that its influence was on a global scale, but never before have I seriously thought of people's reaction towards it hundred years ago. Now that I know the relation between the eruption of Tambora and the social background during the time where people couldn't possibly figure out what's the real cause of the disastrous effects, reading "Darkness" again strikes me in a different way, especially when the guests of the radio program remind its audience that for Romantic poets, what they have been through was a "sublime experience" and they themselves had been trying to interpret their relationships with nature and relocating their position in the universe.

Despite the horrible scenes illustrated for the most parts of the poem, I feel that the last few lines of it indicate Lord Byron's mentality towards and his take on this global disaster where there's no escape: he depicts an image where everything seems still, a world that falls silent as all are dead after the conflict and there's no life at all, and even the moon "had expired before" (L79). In front of him in his dream he sees nothing but Darkness, who doesn't need the aid from the clouds or other natural phenomena because Darkness herself "was the Universe" (L82). Throughout the poem the narrator doesn't tell his readers how he feels when he witnesses what's happening in front of him, but for me, I personally feel a sense of calm and tranquility from those last few lines as if time has stopped and I am staring at the representation of eternity. And I think this could be Lord Byron's attitude towards such an event: even though he didn't know the cause of the climate change was some volcanic eruption somewhere far away, he knew that the world was an entity as everywhere he went was under the influence of it. And he recognized that humans were not the center of the universe; that we were vulnerable and ephemeral, and there's some greater force far powerful than we were that could consume and erase people from the earth, and continue to exist when all the lives were gone—and that's the Universe herself.

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