

Manfred and the Burden of the Past

Lord Byron: Act III, Scene IV

“Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!” commanded Shelley’s *Ozymandias*, thereby epitomising the Romantic fascination for fallen civilisations. Whether drawing inspiration from the magnificence of its culture, or marvelling at the ability of time to cause to crumble such power, glory and influence, the ancient world has a particularly important presence in the work of Byron. In this scene of *Manfred*, the hero revisits a time when he stood in the ruins of Rome. But how is this presented and what significance does it hold for Manfred’s story?

The legacy of the past holds an oppressive presence for Manfred, and Byron conveys this by creating an atmosphere that is disconcerting as well as overpowering. He contrasts the grandeur of Rome, the culmination of human power, learning and expertise, with the desolation of its fallen state, counterpoising imagery evocative of power (“almighty Rome”, “Caesars’ palace”, “imperial hearths”) against the mournful sounds of the night (“the watchdog bay’d”, “the owl’s long cry”, “the fitful song”). The ruins are emphasised with such expressions as “broken arches” and “rents of ruin”, while the personification of the ivy that is taking over the building, “usurp[ing] the laurel’s place of growth” drives home the decay of the victory and honour of Ancient Rome. Rome is not all beauty and sophistication, and an ambiance of destruction still lingers on the site since “the gladiators’ bloody Circus stands”, a phrase that is given dramatic impact by the heavy consonants. The contrasting feelings this evokes are expressed by the oxymora “noble wreck” and “ruinous perfection” in the last verse of this extract, establishing a paradox where the ruins are both high and base, honourable and savage, and where time has made them at once better and worse. Manfred looks to Nature to free him from his repressive surroundings. He notes that the “stars shone through” the ruins, and personifies the moon, giving her the ability “with her wide and tender light” to soften the “rugged desolation”. This choice of imagery emphasises the beauty of the night as a source of comfort and illumination, and shows that Nature alone can link Manfred with the past across the painful divide of centuries of destruction.

Of what importance is this memory for Manfred? Why does he revisit this particular scene during his moment of solitude in the tower? Manfred is a prime example of the melancholic wanderer who came to embody the Romantic age in such iconic images as Friedrich’s *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*. He is a figure of paradoxes; in the words of the Spirits, a “man of clay” but who yet has “sufferings of an immortal nature”, a mortal who “seeks things beyond mortality”. He is a man of ideals – of feeling, pride, and honour – who yet has a deep propensity for evil. The complex feelings evoked by the memory of Rome mirror Manfred’s preoccupation with his unspecified crime towards Astarte, which he seeks supernatural aid to forget. From a religious perspective he is a version of the Jonah figure, attempting to flee from his past and his duty, but, as an example of the Romantic triumph of the individual over the church, Manfred ends his life torn by personal remorse but free from the moral grip of the Abbot. In the light of this, Manfred’s memory reflects his angst about the impact and the durability of human actions, and about the weight his own misdeeds will carry as time passes. There is a foreboding sense, as the Abbot threatens to break Manfred’s solitude, that it will be impossible for him to escape his crimes, and this raises the question of to what extent Byron himself, as a wanderer on the continent, felt that he was free from the scandals of his past. The link which is drawn between the human heritage represented by the Roman ruins and the central character’s own burdens gives *Manfred* a particular interest for twenty-first century readers. The period of accelerated technological progress and social change that we have experienced over the past few decades makes the issue of how we consider the past, and the role our heritage plays in our lives, ever more topical.

In this way, Byron builds a complex psychological drama with *Manfred* which explores many of the questions of his era, such as personal freedom and religion, and most particularly, the relationship of

the past to the present. Manfred's memory of wandering in the ruins of Rome acts as an intriguing reflection of his position as he struggles between the conflicting powers of the spirits and the church, and the grip of his own self. The relatability of the violent clash of the self and the relevance of questions of history and heritage to our own era make the drama a riveting read for a modern reader.