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‘Cruel Wrongs and Strange Distress’: an Ethical Terror-Sublime in ‘The Destiny of Nations’

John Axcelson has recently identified a series of Coleridge’s long politico-prophetic poems – ‘The Destiny of Nations’, ‘Religious Musings’ and ‘Ode to the Departing Year’ – as exemplary of a sublime mode in his early poetic output. Stylistically, Axcelson emphasises the ‘grand, world historical approach … [and] extravagant rhetoric’ of these texts, a set of characteristics echoed by Peter Kitson in singling out ‘The Destiny of Nations’ as articulating a so-called Unitarian sublime. However, in this chapter I shall identify a different kind of sublimity found not in the poem’s rhetorical and visionary flights but in the tragic, naturalistic narrative that lies at its centre. This describes the heroine, Joan of Arc, coming across a dying family of refugees caught up in the turmoil of war. Consider the following passage:

The foremost horse
Lay with stretched limbs; the others, yet alive
But stiff and cold, stood motionless, their manes
Hoar with the frozen night dews. Dismally
The dark-red dawn now glimmered; but its gleams
Disclosed no face of man.

The writing is realistic and largely non-figural, embellished with disturbing gothic touches and a foreboding sense of hostility and danger. If we were to look for literary analogues, it would not be in the fantastic excess of Milton (invoked by Kitson), but rather something like Friedrich Schiller’s The Robbers. As a young Coleridge wrote in 1794, in a note appended to an admiring poem dedicated to the German playwright, ‘SCHILLER introduces no supernatural beings; yet his human beings agitate and astonish more than all the goblin rout – even of Shakespeare.’
In this chapter, I explore the nature and function of this sublime of terror, and its roots in a purely human experience of suffering, injustice and horror. This involves a crucial ethical, social and political dimension. Unlike Burke's sublime, which was the dominant contemporary theory of an aesthetics of terror, ‘The Destiny of Nations’ is a poem in which terror is deliberately and forcefully intertwinwined with a consuming experience of sympathy, exemplified by its heroine and in which the reader is impelled to share. Thus, where the Philosophical Enquiry identifies the sublime as a passion of self-preservation grounded in the immediacy of one’s own physiological stimulation, I will show that Coleridge, with the aid of David Hartley’s philosophical system, conceived of a powerfully ethical response to terror, based on feeling along-side others. However, as I argue in the second half of the chapter, the very intensity of this sympathetic passion creates problems of its own. ‘The Destiny of Nations’ enacts a series of compelling demands made by the innocent dead that cannot be easily satisfied by standard Unitarian ethics but only by more archaic forms of retribution: a bloody, divine counter-violence. The intensity of sympathy that Coleridge draws forth for radical ends is born in the crucible of sublime terror: in so far as sympathy in turn creates a demand for justice, this sublime, intensifying context seems to produce a desire for an equally terrifying justice.

Two empiricisms: Edmund Burke and David Hartley

There is little doubt that Edmund Burke’s 1757 A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful eclipses every other modern theorisation of the sublime with the exception of Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Judgment. For the Coleridge of the 1790s, yet to engage with the German tradition, he would certainly have been the dominant voice. Moreover, if we are thinking in terms of terror, it was Burke who placed it unambiguously at the centre of sublimity and provided explicit theoretical rationale for doing so:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.6

The theoretical rationale in question was firmly empiricist. It is thus with Burke’s distinctive model of the human subject that I want to