

A painting of Thomas Jefferson in Italy, wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a white coat over a red waistcoat. He is seated on a ledge, looking out over a landscape with ancient ruins and Mount Vesuvius in the background.

# JOURNEY TO ITALY: The Picturesque, Beautiful, Sublime

October 16, 2020

# The Beautiful & Sublime in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Aesthetics

- Augustan and neoclassical values saw the aesthetic and the moral as connected. That is, that which is beautiful is beautiful because it is good.
  - Romantic values began to consider beauty and goodness as related but not necessarily strictly correlated.
- Edmund Burke's *On the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757)
  - Distinguishes between these two aesthetic categories (neither is rational, **both are emotional responses**)
    - The Beautiful is that which is well-formed and aesthetically pleasing / The Sublime is that which has the power to compel and destroy us
    - The Beautiful attracts and reassures / The Sublime intimidates
    - The Beautiful is smooth, soft, and feminine / The Sublime is powerful, chaotic, and masculine
- Immanuel Kant considered the the agreeable, the beautiful, the sublime, and the good in his critiques of judgment.
  - He considers the beautiful and sublime as '**subjective universals**'
  - The judgment that something is beautiful is a claim that it possesses the "form of finality" — that is, that **it appears to have been designed with a purpose**, even though it does not have any apparent practical function.
  - The judgment that something is sublime is a judgment that **it is beyond the limits of comprehension**

# The Picturesque in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Aesthetics

- An aesthetic ideal introduced by William Gilpin in 1782 in a “a practical book which instructed England’s leisured travellers to examine ‘the face of a country by the rules of picturesque beauty.’” (Wikipedia)
- Like the Gothic and the cult of sentimentality, it was part of the emergence of a Romantic mode of thought.
- The term was influenced by popular 17<sup>th</sup>-century artists of Italian landscapes and ruins. These artists transitioned from a focus on stiff and mannered portrayals of statuesque architecture and trees to sublime images of nature that included wildlife overtaking ruins, storms, avalanches, and waterfalls.
- “During the mid 18th century the idea of purely scenic pleasure touring began to take hold among the English leisured class. This new image disregarded the principles of symmetry and perfect proportions while focusing more on “accidental irregularity,” and moving more towards a concept of individualism and rusticity. William Gilpin’s work was a direct challenge to the ideology of the well-established Grand Tour, showing how an exploration of rural Britain could compete with classically-oriented tours of the Continent. **The irregular, anti-classical ruins became sought-after sights.** (Wikipedia)

# On Picturesque Travel

- The term ‘picturesque’ was, from the beginning, tied up with both art and travel.
- William Gilpin in his ‘On Picturesque Travel’ (1792) gives this as a definition of the picturesque:
  - “That we may examine picturesque objects with more ease, it may be useful to class them into the sublime, and the beautiful; tho, in fact, this distinction is rather inaccurate. Sublimity alone cannot make an object picturesque. However grand the mountain, or the rock may be, it has no claim to this epithet, unless it's form, it's colour, or its accompaniments have some degree of beauty. Nothing can be more sublime, than the ocean: but wholly unaccompanied, it has little of the picturesque. When we talk therefore of a sublime object, we always understand, that it is also beautiful: and we call it sublime, or beautiful, only as the ideas of sublimity, or of simple beauty prevail.”
- Of ruins in the same essay he writes:
  - “But among all the objects of art, the picturesque eye is perhaps most inquisitive after the elegant relics of ancient architecture; the ruined tower, the Gothic arch, the remains of castles, and abbeys. These are the richest legacies of art. They are consecrated by time; and almost deserve the veneration we pay to the works of nature itself. Thus universal are the objects of picturesque travel.”

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# The Evolution of Picturesque Taste

## Discussion Questions

- What did you notice of the BEAUTIFUL, SUBLIME, or PICTURESQUE in your readings?
- What did you think of those same keywords in the images you looked at?

# Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch)

- 1304 – 1374, Florentine poet and essayist
- Father of Renaissance Humanism
- Developed the concept of the ‘Dark Ages’
- He is considered a modern writer in many ways
  - For example, his climb of Mount Ventoux and the letter he wrote about it is considered a strikingly "modern" attitude of aesthetic gratification in the grandeur of the scenery
- Popularized the Italian sonnet as a poetic form
- He and his poems are devoted to his unrequited love, Laura



# George Gordon Byron (Lord Byron)

- 1788-1824, British poet and leading Romantic figure
- Best known for his long verse narratives, *Don Juan* and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*
- From 1809-1811 he went on a Grand Tour
- From 1816 to 1823, Byron lived in Italy, primarily in Venice, but traveling around the peninsula. He considered himself a self-exile from Great Britain for political reasons.
- Childe Harold is in 4 Cantos. Cantos I and II involve a pilgrimage to the classical world in Greece. Canto III deals with the boundary between civilization and nature. Canto IV focuses on the Renaissance and Rome as two of the highest civilizations.
- Canto IV's main through line is the secular view that the individual is responsible for his own life. Life's meaning is constructed through mental activity and nothing else. This mental activity is visibly represented in civilization and culture.
  - Life made meaningful has the form of an artwork - it is a product of civilization and culture.
- Venice and Rome, as we see in our reading, are both images of both continuity and decay in Canto IV.



# Percy Bysshe Shelley

- 1792-1822, British poet and leading Romantic figure
- Best known for "Ozymandias", "Ode to the West Wind", "To a Skylark"
- Husband of Mary Shelley
- Shelley was very influenced by Petrarch and his famous “Lines written among the Euganean Hills” can be seen as an answer to one of Petrarch’s most famous poems, “Italia mia”.
- Shelley lived in Italy from 1818 until his death by drowning in 1822.
- Shelley is buried in Rome in the same cemetery where the Romantic poet, John Keats is buried.
- Shelley was an outspoken vegetarian and that vegetarianism is a hallmark of his unconventional life and of his fervent idealism and insistence on the breaking of ideological chains.
- Shelley, like Byron, believed in liberating nations from the yokes of the monarchs; Shelley, however, believed in non-violent rebellion. Thoreau, Tolstoy, and Gandhi were all influenced by Shelley’s writing on non-violent resistance.





## Discussion Questions

- ALL TOGETHER
  - What is happening in the Petrarch poem?
  - What is happening in these stanzas of *Childe Harold*?
  - What is happening in Shelley's "The Coliseum: A Fragment"?
- IN GROUPS
  - Petrarch has been called the first Humanist writer and, though he lived in the 1300s, the first exponent of modern writing. What, if anything, strikes you about his poem in comparison to Byron's poem and Shelley's essay?
  - What is it, do you think, about the Coliseum, in particular, especially as you see it expressed by these writers (as well as Goethe, Chateaubriand and Stendhal), that makes it a crucial space of contemplation? What does it make them contemplate?
  - Today's secondary reading suggests that one way in which the ruin was meaningful in the proto- and Romantic periods for Picturesque tourists was as a *memento mori*. As something that reminds us of the passing of time and our inevitable deaths. How do you see that idea demonstrated in these readings and why might it be significant?

# Giacomo Leopardi

- 1798-1837, He is considered the greatest Italian poet of the nineteenth century and one of the most important figures in the literature of the world, as well as one of the principals of literary romanticism
- Best known for his sonnet 'The Infinite' and his poem 'The Broom'
- He was born into a noble family, his father a count and his mother a marchioness, in a region in Italy that was still officially a Papal State.
- He was physically disabled and lived all of his youth secluded in a remote region of Italy, where he was tutored and self-taught
- Despite his isolation, he had access to a great library and eventually transformed into a radical thinker who challenged the 19<sup>th</sup>-century status quo, like other Romantic poets



# Felicia Hemans

- 1793-1835, was a renowned Irish-English Romantic poet
- “The pre-eminence of Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Byron and Shelley was largely the invention of the twentieth century and is now superseded by a growing consensus that Charlotte Smith, Hannah More, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Helen Maria Williams, Felicia Dorothea Hemans and Letitia Landon [who were highly regarded at their time] be read alongside them.” (*Cambridge Companion to Romanticism*, xxxiii)
- Hemans, like LEL, was part of a literary movement amongst women that romanticized and idealized Italy, writing extensively about it without ever having been able to visit.



## Discussion Questions

- ALL TOGETHER
  - What is happening in Leopardi's sonnet?
  - What is happening in Heman's poem?

# Discussion Questions

- This lesson is dedicated to the Sublime, the Beautiful, and the Picturesque. Which of these aesthetic traits do you think Leopardi is meditating on in his ‘The Infinite’? Why and to what end?
- The ruins of Pompeii were discovered in the early 1700s and Vesuvius was active across the century. According to your reading of the Goethe excerpt, what educational experience might Grand Tourists and later travelers have sought to attain through a visit to the active volcano and its ancient ruins?
- How is Felicia Hemans’ poetic description of Vesuvius and Pompeii similar to / different from Goethe’s?
- How is Angelica Kauffmann’s depiction of Vesuvius (Pliny the Younger and His Mother) and Pompeii similar to / different from Michael Wutky’s (The Summit of Vesuvius Erupting)?



## Reading Questions

- What is the threat to Italy (not yet conceived of as a ‘nation’, but as an absolute entity, at least) according to Petrarch?
- What is the promise for Italy in the future?
- What is the threat to the nation, or specifically, the individual within the nation, according to Byron?
- Where does Byron look for a promise for the future and answer to the tyranny he sees in Europe?
- How does Shelley’s poem engage with both Petrarch medieval concerns for Italy and Byron’s concerns for the nation and contemporary conceptions of ‘freedom’?
- What role does the past (the past of Italy, of Venice) play in these poems?
- What does the broom (a type of flowering bush) symbolize for Leopardi as it grows on the slopes of Vesuvius? What, in turn, might Vesuvius symbolize?
- In a way that is similar to the women writers we have read before, I wonder how you see Barrett Browning’s introduction to the theme of liberty and nationhood as different from the men writers who are writing on similar themes?