On this Day: 18 July 1816

by Patrick Vincent

> When the last sunshine of the expiring day
>
> In summer's twilight weeps itself away,
>
> Who hath not felt the softness of the hour
>
> Sink on the heart—as dew along the flower?
>
> – Byron, "Monody on the Death of the Righ Honourable R.B. Sheridan"

On 18 July 1816, the world was expected to come to an end. As Jeffrey Vail and others have noted, an astronomer in Bologna had predicted that the sun would die out on that day, an event often associated with Byron's composition of the deeply pessimistic "Darkness." Although we are unsure when the poet composed his apocalyptic dream vision, we do know that he wrote another poem thematizing the sun's disappearance, the "Monody on the Death of the Righ Honourable R.B. Sheridan" sometime between 7 July 1816, when Richard Sheridan died, and 22 July, when Byron sent the poem to Douglas Kinnaird. Possibly inspired by a Lake Geneva sunset, this lesser known work rehearses many of the same themes as the summer's other literary productions, most notably its strange atmospheric conditions. The poem's controlling symbol, the sun is represented as "a Power" that "Hath pass'd from day to darkness", yet whose "Promethean heat" will forever continue "to cast its halo" in spite of the "public gaze", which makes "Hearts electric—charged with light from heaven / Black with the rude collision".

In 1826, the painter William Edward West reported an anecdote in which Byron apparently attributed the composition of "Darkness" to a "celebrated dark day, on which the fowls went to roost at noon, and the candles were lighted as at midnight." I have come across no other evidence that such a day occured on or around 18 July, or ever at all, yet the story has contributed to 1816's gothic reputation. Byron's prodigious literary productivity during his time in Switzerland, in particular in July when he composed the "Monody," "Prometheus," "Stanzas to Augusta" and perhaps also "Darkness" in addition to finishing and correcting *Childe Harold III* and *The Prisoner of Chillon*, strikes me as more significant than the Genevan summer's overly rehashed gothic incidents. It is as if the poet refused to allow the weather, European politics, or even his exile extinguish his own Promethan heat. And while the "Monody" suggests the sun's extinction may indeed have been a topic of conversation at Diodati, the opening lines' calm, elegiac tone better captures villa's daily routine and largely unremarkable incidents than do the many dark and doomsdayish accounts of 1816.

Primary sources for the month of July 1816 are scarcer than for the rest of the summer: Polidori had stopped keeping his diary on 2 July, Mary only began hers on the first day of their Chamonix excursion on the 21st, and Byron was either too depressed, or more likely, too busy writing and sailing to keep a regular correspondence. Through Lady Frances Shelley's diary and several other contemporary accounts, we know that the poet's nemesis, Henry Brougham, had arrived in town along with 1100 other English visitors, some of whom enjoyed playing cricket at Plainpalais, others spreading gossip on Diodati's scandalous household. We also know that Byron and Polidori went to Coppet for the first time on 12 July, where the second Duchess of Devonshire pretended to faint and the poet discussed *Glenarvon* with Madame de Staël. In Geneva's register of foreigners, we can read that the two men received their *permis de séjour* the next day. Claire's two undated notes in July reveal that things between her and Byron had soured—her attemtps at finding a pretext to see him, notably by fair copying his poems, are sure signs of his rejection. Finally, in a lesser known anecdote recorded by a town magistrate and discovered by Claire Eliane Engel, we learn that thieves tried to break into Diodati on 17 July, inciting the Cologny mayor to make an inquiry.

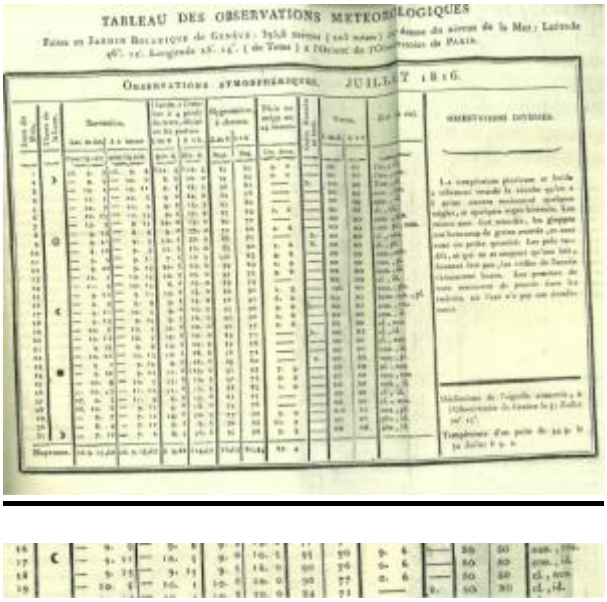
TABLEAU DES OBSERVATIONS METEOROLOGIQUES

OBSERVATIONS ATMOSPHÉRIQUES. JUILLET 1816.

Marc-Auguste Pictet, Tableau des observations météorologiques faites au Jardin Botanique de Genève, July 1816, in Bibliothèque universelle, Sciences et Arts, volume 2 (Genève: Bibliothèque britannique, 1816).

Another important source, the daily meteorological recordings published in the *Bibliothèque universelle* indicate the weather that month was not as dramatic as often portrayed: a recent meteorological study based on this data argues that it was the summer's climate that was extreme, not its weather. The sky was indeed overcast, the temperature lower than the seasonal norms, and it rained an unusual amount, causing flooding around all Switzerland's lakes, yet the summer also had its good days. On July 17th, for instance, it was 10 degrees and raining, on the 18th it warmed to 16 degrees at 2pm but was still overcast, and the next day the temperature climbed to 20 degrees, allowing Lady Shelley to complain in her diary of the excessive heat. Apocalyptic fears nevertheless did make some headway among Geneva's well-educated and usually staid populace. In his less than reliable memoirs published in 1883, for example, Jean-François Vernes-Prescott recalls that "sermons were attended assiduously" ("les prédications sont très suivis"). Furthermore, a brief article on the first page of the local *Gazette de Lausanne* on 19 July (the same day that Sheridan's death and Brougham's arrival in Geneva were reported) cites Parisian astronomer Charles Rouy's popular demonstrations at the *Muséeum uranographique* in order to help dispell these superstitions:

> Les taches actuellement visibles sur le soleil, le froid, et les pluyes extraordinaires dans cette saison étant devenus l'objet de toutes les conversations et d'une crainte presque générale de la prochaine extinction de ce flambeau de notre système planétaire, et par conséquent de la fin du monde, M. Rouy a cru devoir contribuer à dissiper les craintes chimériques que la malveillance et la superstition se plaisent à propager. C'est dans ce but qu'il ajouté aux démonstations qu'il fait chaque soir dans son *muséum uranographique* le représentation des sudites taches sur le disque du soleil, en y ajoutant l'explication de ce phénomène (p. 1)

> [Translation: The spots currently visible on the sun, the cold, and the rain that is out of the ordinary at this season have become the topic of all conversations and an almost universal source of fear that the planetary system's flame will soon die out, hence ending the world. As such, M. Rouy has thought it necessary to help dissipate these chimerical fears propagated by malevolence and superstition. With that goal in mind he added a representation of these sun spots to his evening demonstrations at his Muséum uranographique, together with an explanation of this phenomenon.]

As he noted in his 20 July letter to Kinnaird, Byron intended his "Monody" to be delivered with "Energy" at Drury Lane. One may argue that poem likewise shares Rouy's skepticism regarding the possibility of the sun's extinction, and might be read as a hopeful counterpoint to "Darkness," dissipating the forces of superstition and fear that belittle man's genius.

Gazette de Lausanne
et Journal Suisse.

Nº. 58. Vendredi 19 Juillet 1816.

France.

Angleterre.

Nouvelles diverses.

La Gazette de Lausanne et Journal Suisse, Friday 19 July 1816

Far more worrisome than these imaginary apocalyptic warnings was the all-too-real suffering, already much discussed in this blog, brought upon by the end of the wartime economy, the rain and the cold, but also poor government planning, as historian Daniel Krämer has recently shown. These elements are arguably more important to the genesis of "Darkness" than the Bologna prophecy itself. The *Gazette de Lausanne* regularly reported the hardships but always in its backpages, stating on 16 July for example that snow fell in the Bernese Alps and that cattle had to be killed because of lack of feed. The *Bibliothèque universelle* in July commented that all the harvests were late, and potatoes rotting. Unlike in other regions of Switzerland, the Genevan government was able to avoid a famine thanks to its emergency storehouse of grain and government intervention in the sale and pricing of flour. As Lady Shelley commented, "Scarcity, owing to the destruction of crops, has been felt here also, and white bread is forbidden, under an amende of eight louis d'or." Thanks to a letter that emerged at an auction in 1975, we know that Byron and Shelley were also aware of the situation. Writing to his friend Peacock on 17 July to describe his tour around Lake Geneva with Byron, Shelley adds at the end of the letter as a sort of afterthought: "Affairs here are rather in a desperate condition. The magistrates of Geneva have prohibited the making of white bread.—all ranks of people are in the greatest distress.—I earnestly hope that England at least will escape." The passage was curiously cut from the published version of the letter in *History of a Six Weeks Tour*, however, as if these problems were not important enough to impinge on their memories of the Swiss summer. On 17 September, to his credit, Byron donated three hundred francs to the pastor of Cologny in order to help the poor. He then took off on his tour of the Alps, the weather having at last turned warm and sunny.

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