

**Impossible Parties:
An Exploration of the Convergence of Life and Art as a
Romantic Theory of the Party**

Amina Otto University of Colorado Boulder

Department of Humanities

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Defense Committee

Stephanie Rowe, Ph.D., Department of Humanities

Paul Gordon, Ph.D., Department of Humanities

Aimee Kilbane, Ph.D., Department of French and Italian

Thora Brylowe, Ph.D., Department of English

Abstract:

The nature of the interaction between life and art has been a point of dispute in the field of Humanities for centuries, and we have failed to reach a consensus on which one imitates or informs the other. During the Romantic era, it was particularly difficult to separate the two, especially when considering some of the parties, balls, and fêtes that took place in that time. Romantic novelist Georges Sand provides a Romantic theory of the party as a work of art in her novel *Lélia*, and presents criteria for what makes a truly successful ball. This thesis utilizes Sand's criteria in the analysis of several Romantic parties—some of which are actual historical events and some are fictional representations—in order to determine their success as not only social events, but also as works of art. Romantic parties and their literary counterparts provided a unique and spectacular environment in which guests could, in the words of Sand, “approach the impossible” and indulge their “most voracious imaginations and the most capricious desires.” Ultimately, Romantic parties, even the ones that took place in the real world, had to “satisfy the artist” in order to be truly perfect, meaning that they had to transform life into art and bring art to life.

The question “What is Life?” has plagued humanity from the instant we became self-aware. The question “What is Art?” stemmed from the unending quest to answer the first. The two are inseparable entities that are essential to the existence of humankind and these questions have driven philosophy, science, religion, language, and civilization. At some point early in human history it became impossible to claim that art is a representation of life, because art’s influence on life is too significant to ignore. Art has been used to persuade, move, convince, unite, and subdue people in numerous manifestations, and so it is impractical to say that the stream of influence between life and art flows entirely in one direction. Many have argued for and against each side and no conclusion has yet been reached. It is during one particular period of human history that these questions were addressed in a fashion entirely unique to the epoch and its circumstances. The period known as the Romantic Era in Western Europe brought life and art together in a way that was only possible in that place during that time. The values intrinsic to Romanticism as an artistic and literary movement elevated life to the level of art and its participants modelled their lives on the art that moved them. This cyclical feedback between art and life is apparent in the art they produced and the lives they led, making this period ideal to examine when pondering the interaction between fiction and reality. By analysing how real events, namely balls, masquerades, and fêtes, were conceived as types of art and inversely how the literature and art represented these events, one can conclude that the parties of the Romantic age were the ultimate intersection of life and art where it was impossible to distinguish which influenced the other more.

The reciprocity between parties and art, life and fiction, was a unique phenomenon of Romanticism and exhibits the importance of art in life and vice versa. Romanticism took place largely in Western Europe during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, though historians struggle

to pinpoint concrete dates that mark its beginning and end (Roe, 4-5). This was a time when this region of the world was fraught with revolutions, profound artistic movements, social reform, and literary genius. Romanticism was the product of all of these aspects coalescing and manifesting in the poetry, novels, paintings, fashion, and balls of the time. Some of the Western canon's most notable works of art and literature originated from this time and place; when one examines some of the figures who inhabited this epoch, it is not difficult to imagine why. These individuals led fascinating lives and exhibited a level of creativity that was essential for inspiring and realising these works. Due to the high concentration of artistic and literary creativity and radical social changes, the celebratory occasions during this era were some of the most interesting in the Western world. Balls, parties, salons, and soirées provided very specific circumstances in which the artistic people of this time could not only interact with each other, but also escape reality for a short period of time. These parties were works of living art and real fiction, where art created itself in real life. The parties not only provided the artists with creative material for their works, but also exhibited themes and values plucked directly from contemporary art and literature.

One particular novel of the Romantic era provides a practical theory of the party as a work of art. Georges Sand's *Lélia* (1833) outlines specific criteria for regarding the Romantic party as art through the experience of her titular character. During this journey of profound self-discovery, Lélia passes through different phases of sexual awakening and spiritual exploration with her lovers Trenmor, Sténio, and Magnus. Lélia herself is depicted as a unique woman who elicits uncommon levels of adoration from her multiple suitors and enjoys the gifts of ineffable feminine genius that inspires this excessive admiration. During her search for life's meaning, Lélia attends a ball given by a wealthy prince where the narration illustrates the specific

integration of life and art during the Romantic era that occurs only at these excessive parties. This ball is given by the Italian Prince of Bambuccj, “the richest of the small princes of the State” (88). He invites nobility and members of the wealthy middle class from all corners of the civilised world and hosts his guests in his own lavish palace. He decorates his estate with the most ostentatious but tasteful items, and even hires intelligent men to observe the crowd and ensure that the guests are neither exhausting themselves nor being too idle. He also bans “politics, gambling, and diplomacy from his parties” while encouraging “affairs of the heart” (91). In short, he spared no expense or resource to produce the most elegant and decadent event that he possibly could. Since Lélia herself exhibits many qualities of classic Romantic heroes and heroines, she experiences the event through the lens of Romanticism and readers are allowed a glimpse into her expectations, judgments of what a ball should be, and disdain at parties that fail to meet these expectations. In the two balls she attends in the novel, the second of which is Prince Bambuccj’s, her isolation and her perception of the event as a thing to be contemplated, not participated in, are both emphasized. At the first one she observes that, “flowers were dying in the heavy atmosphere... the orchestra [was] muffled... and pale, sad, beautiful figures” wandered in costume “through the hot, vaporous air” (29). All of this Lélia sees but does not participate in, and the melancholy adjectives express her own mood as she projects it onto the scene before her.

But above this rich tableau, above these tones, softened by the blurred depths of the courtyard and the weight of the atmosphere, above the costume masks, the sparkling apparel, the stylish quadrilles, the groups of young, laughing women, Lélia’s tall, isolated figure stood out. She too was observing the ball as she leaned against an antique bronze column on the steps of the amphitheatre. (Sand, 29)

Here Lélia is literally elevated and spatially separate from the ball, and she views it as a “tableau,” an object of art that exists for her contemplation. She removes herself not only by standing above the rest of the party, but also by literally looking down on it and “observing” rather than participating. The narrator refers to the second ball as a tableau as well, and Lélia’s comportment at that one continues this comparison. “She came there seeking entertainment,” writes Sand, “These vast moving tableaux, arranged more or less with the taste and skill within the frame of a ball were for her objects of art to examine” (88). This correlation between balls and actual paintings is a key element of the social events where the attendees come with the intention of being seen by peers and interacting with one another within a very specific set of circumstances. There is a strong visual component to these balls, and the similarity between them and a carefully executed tableau serves to emphasize that. These circumstances and the unique environment provided by the hosts constitute the “frame” of the tableau.

As stated before, Sand not only provides a protagonist who examines the purpose of a ball and scrutinizes its aesthetic success, but also offers a Romantic theory of what exactly a ball should be:

Indeed, nothing is further from realizing the pretension of the beautiful than an ill-arranged ball. So many things difficult to assemble are necessary that during an entire century perhaps only two are given that can satisfy the artist ... There must be a profusion of things rare and difficult to possess, because a ball should be a realization of the most voracious imaginations and the most capricious desires. One must understand one thing before giving a ball: rich civilized human beings find pleasure only in the hope of the impossible. So one must approach the impossible as closely as one can. (89)

Sand's narrator is positing that a truly successful ball must remove the attendants from reality and bring them closer to an experience that only exists in the imagination. In this way the parties of this time had to create an environment in the real world that made reality appear as art or fiction. The host attempted to make life an art form and fiction a reality. These elaborate balls strove to remove the guests from reality and insert them into a completely new world that was entirely different from the realm they inhabited. The event enclosed all attendees in a temporary fictional environment that removed them from Western Europe and whatever physical, temporal, social, or political influences existed in their quotidian lives. By “approach[ing] the impossible” as Sand puts it, these events created an insular space where guests could shed the fetters of rigid social propriety and express themselves with a freedom not often available to them.

Bambuccj's ball is Lélia's idea of the perfect party, and the one she uses as an example to demonstrate a perfectly executed ball. The wealthy prince understood the intricacies of hosting the perfect event. He took his role very seriously and knew the difficulty of impressing and entertaining a group of “rich, civilized human beings.” The narrator outlines the prince's own understanding of such an undertaking:

The task undertaken by the prince was not easy. It was a grave matter which he had reflected upon more than one night before attempting. First he needed to surpass all those rivals worthy of him in expenditure of money and spirit. Then he needed to succeed in intoxicating them so much with pleasure that, forgetting their pride wounded in defeat, they would have the good faith to admit it. (92)

The prince understands parties exceedingly well, and has no trouble in supplying his guests with an environment that can be said to “approach the impossible.” He definitely provides “a profusion of things rare and difficult to possess” with “alabaster vases...exotic flowers whose

name, form, and perfume were unknown to most who saw them” and even supplies “twenty savants” to explain to the guests “without affectation, the use and price of the things they were admiring” (90). He realizes “the most voracious imaginations and the most capricious desires” by creating a perfectly balanced environment in which his guests can freely engage. Guests could repose in the charming gardens if they wish to escape the noise of the party: “The front of the villa and the courtyard sparkled with lights. But the gardens were lit only by reflection from the inner rooms. As one drew further away, one could bury oneself in a soft, mysterious darkness and rest from the movement and noise in the depths of these shadows” (90). Bambuccj carefully monitored the activity so as not to “fatigue the senses when one wishes to arouse voluptuousness in enervated souls” (90). This meant that: “inside the rooms the light was not too bright for delicate eyes. The harmony was sweet and without bursts of brass instruments. The dances were slow and occasional” (90). Many of his guests appeared in costumes, or masked so that their identity was hidden, which added to the intrigue and otherworldly atmosphere of the event. He has successfully created an enclosed world of such taste and perfection that all desires, no matter how capricious, are met, and “hope of the impossible” is provided in abundance.

Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) and Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) present conflicting ideas on life imitating art and art imitating life, both of which are valid in the context of Sand’s criteria for the ideal ball. Because she insists that these events must “approach the impossible” there must be a reciprocity between both life and art; the art must bring reality as close to fantasy as possible and reality must “satisfy the artist” in order to inspire more art. It is in this type of setting that the arguments for life versus art become particularly relevant. Baudelaire argues that it is art’s duty and function to capture and imitate life (art must include an element of

“modernity¹”) and Wilde claims that art is by definition incapable of representing, let alone imitating, life (to paraphrase, art represents only itself) and so life takes its cue from art (Baudelaire, *Modernité* 1863; Wilde *The Decay of Lying* 1891). According to Baudelaire,

The pleasure we derive from the representation of the present is due not only to the beauty with which it can be invested, but also to its essential quality of being present... Beauty is made up of an eternal, invariable element, whose quantity is excessively difficult to determine, and of a relative, circumstantial element, which will be, if you like, whether severally or all at once, the age its fashions, its morals, its emotions... I defy anyone to point to a single scrap of beauty which does not contain these two elements. (681)

Baudelaire means that for art to be beautiful, it must contain an element of the age in which it was created. Art must capture the life around it and distill from it the temporal markers of its era. Without this “modernity” art is simply copying a dead past. Wilde, however, opposes this view with claims such as, “To us, who live in the 19th century, any century is a suitable subject except for our own” (793). He introduces his opinion that life cannot imitate art in a conversation between two characters, Cyril and Vivian in *The Decay of Lying: an Observation*:

Cyril. I quite agree with you there. The spirit of an age may be best expressed in the abstract ideal arts, for the spirit itself is abstract and ideal. Upon the other hand, for the visible aspect of an age, for its look, as the phrase goes, we must of course go to the arts of imitation.

Vivian. I don’t think so. After all, what the imitative arts really give us are merely the various styles of the particular artists, or of a certain school of artist. ... No

¹ “By ‘modernity’ I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and immutable” (681).

great artist ever sees things as they really are. If he did, he would cease to be an artist. ... The fact is, we look back on ages entirely through the medium of Art, and Art, very fortunately, has never told the truth. (791-792)

To Wilde, if art ever accurately imitated life or captured its era's true essence, it would cease to be art. Artists are not faithful to their time, but rather use their medium as a vehicle for their own expression and style, or the style of their schools and masters. This in turn allows artists to push boundaries and provoke thought in people. Art by nature cannot emulate the time in which it was created because it is an idealization and abstraction itself. Later on in the same work, Vivian states:

The third doctrine is that Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life. This results not merely from Life's imitative instinct, but from the fact that the self-conscious aim of Life is to find expression, and that Art offers it certain beautiful forms through which it may realize that energy. It is a theory that has never been put forward before, but it is extremely fruitful, and throws an entirely new light upon the history of Art. (794)

This theory goes directly against what Baudelaire posits as art's purpose. Baudelaire believes art *must* contain an imprint of its time and imitate the ephemerality of modern life in order to be truly beautiful. Wilde counters that true art by definition eludes the stamp of its era and actually has more of an impact on its time than its time does on it. In fact, according to Wilde, not only does art *not* imitate life, but life must imitate art in order to "find expression" and progress forward. While they are referring in general to visual art, their theories can apply to literature and other media as well. They also apply to parties, which were, as Sand's Lélia makes clear, yet another form of art. These two opposing views can coexist in the context of these parties because

they simultaneously indulge the imaginations of the patrons, which have been informed by the art and fiction of the time, and provide them with material for literary and visual representations as they seek to represent their experiences at these events. This is one of the reasons Sand points out that it is the artist who must be satisfied if a ball is to be successful: art and life must meld and feed cyclically off each other in these unique circumstances.

William Beckford's twenty-first birthday party, which took place at his pastoral English residence at Fonthill Abbey in December 1781, exhibits all of Lélia's criteria required for a "truly successful ball." The flamboyant and exceedingly rich young nobleman succeeded in creating a completely alternate world for his guests within his manor for the three-day duration of the event. Beckford hired Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg, the exceptionally innovative and talented artist who specialized in theatrical effects, to transform the many rooms of Fonthill into an orientalist fantasy realm. The eccentric Beckford was profoundly moved by the tales in *Arabian Nights* and wished to recreate the sensuous and opulent atmosphere for his three-day birthday celebration. In a letter written sixty years after the event, Beckford recalls,

I seem even at this long distance to be warmed by that genial artificial light Loutherbourg had created throughout the whole of what absolutely appeared a necromantic region, or rather, one of those fairy realms where K[ing]'s daughters were held in thrall by a powerful Magician — one of those temples deep below the earth set apart for tremendous mysteries — and yet how soft, how soothing was this quiet light — so serene and genial while all without was bleak and dark and howling... The glowing haze, the mystic look ... the endless intricacy of vaulted labyrinth produced an effect so bewildering that it became impossible for anyone to define exactly where at any moment he was wandering— so perplexing

was the confusion so many different storeys and galleries gave rise to. It was the realization of romance in all its fervours, in all its extravagance. (Chapman, 105-106)

From this letter, it is apparent that Louthborough was successful in orchestrating an event in which the attendees of the ball would feel themselves transported completely out of reality. It is difficult to find a person of this era, even among the Romantics, with more “voracious imagination” and “capricious desire” than William Beckford, and this event appealed directly to those aspects of his personality. In his essay “The Virtual Inferno” historian and professor Iain McCalman writes, “An instinctive Romantic, Beckford’s imagination veered automatically towards emotional excess and magical fancy” (17). His 21st birthday celebration reflected those qualities and indulged his whimsy in every way imaginable. The party was decadent, Orientalist², and mystically ephemeral; it swept Beckford and his guests away from the “bleak” reality of 18th century England, allowing them to luxuriate in the exoticism of an imagined world for three days of revelry. As he wrote in his letter, the manor was converted into a “necromantic region... temple... vaulted labyrinth,” with “soft, soothing, serene, genial” light that contrasted with the “bleak and dark” world of England in December. This description suggests that he was so successful in creating a separate realm that even he believed himself to be in that imagined world. By transforming Fonthill so thoroughly, Beckford achieves the “realization of the most voracious imaginations” and is able to “satisfy the artist.” The incredibly detailed setting of the party leaves no way for reality to interact with human perception, allowing his guests to

² “The Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting idea, personality, experience. Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative. Orientalism expresses and represents European *material* civilization and culture” (Said, 1-2). The West needed the Orient in order to serve several purposes, including defining what Europe was *not*, projecting all of the perverse desires that were repressed in Western society, and creating an Other to act as a foil to everything European. The result of meeting these needs the Western way was Orientalism.

completely engage in his fantasy. This attention to detail brings his party so close to “the impossible” that it was, as indicated in his letter, disorienting even to him, the one who constructed it. Beckford had perhaps the most voracious imagination and capricious desires of any who attended his party, so he insisted on the meticulous detail in order to convince himself and his guests that they briefly inhabited a voluptuous, orientalist fantasy. Having these desires realized so convincingly thanks to Loutherbourog’s expertise gave Beckford and his guests “hope of the impossible.” The descriptions in the letter attest to the success of this event as a ball by Lélia’s standards, for Beckford was indeed a satisfied artist.

This ball may be the most successful event of the epoch when evaluated within these particular parameters. Loutherbourog’s ingenuity and Beckford’s wealth allowed for the execution of a party that would have met and possibly even surpassed the requirement of providing “hope of the impossible” as successfully as the party in *Lélia* does. Beckford was eager to engage every single one of the five physical senses at his party, and this attention to detail completed the sensation of being transported to a different world entirely. With the help of three opera singers who performed at his formal birthday celebration, he filled his manor with sweet song. Loutherbourog’s fantastic lighting enchanted the vision while “tables... covered with delicious consummations and tempting dishes,” seduced the tongue, and the nose was charmed by “the fragrance of a bright mass of flowers, the heliotrope, the basil and the rose” (Chapman, 105). As for the sense of touch, that was left to the guests themselves to provide for each other, and greatly encouraged by the numerous and comfortably furnished wings of Fonthill. In fact, Beckford himself had developed an amorous interest in the young William “Kitty” Courtenay, and he and his lover Louisa Beckford (the wife of his cousin) were planning on seducing the thirteen year old (McCalman, 8). The party was strategically arranged to allow these secretive

encounters not only for the host, but for guests as well. Iain McCalman writes, “Desperate to preserve her own relationship with Beckford, Louisa offered herself as a mask for this forbidden love. Hints of prospective “iniquities” in letters of autumn of 1781 signalled their intention of turning the Christmas event into a *ménage à trois*” (8). With these intentions, the purpose of the party, and therefore the planning, had erotic undertones, which were definitely encouraged by the excessive sensuality and exotic setting. In order to orchestrate the consummation of his love for Kitty, Beckford needed an elaborate cover, and what better way to mask sexual designs than with a disorientingly sensual orientalist bacchanal? By creating this other world that did not operate within the rules of 18th century England, Beckford’s own eccentricities and usually repressed desires of his guests were no longer subject to strict British propriety. Within this “necromantic region” sexual norms and moral codes were abandoned so that anything was permissible and the inhabitants were free to explore sensuality, sexuality, and pleasure. With the genius effects of Louthembourg and opulence that satisfied even Beckford confounding the senses, the world of this party was as close to the impossible as one could be at the time.

Beckford’s insistence on the lavish orientalist theme of the party of 1781 was a product of his love for the *Arabian Nights*, and the party itself drove him to write his own exotic novel based on the content of those stories. This collection of fantastic tales was translated first into French in the early 1700s by Antoine Galland, and played a crucial role in inspiring European fetishization of the “Orient.” The young English nobleman was even more taken with the stories than the average European, and the themes of magic, adventure and sex appealed directly to Beckford’s own erotic interests. He was so deeply influenced by the successful exoticism of his birthday party that he was driven to produce *Vathek*, a novel about a decadent caliph who seeks knowledge beyond that of mortals, immediately after. McCalman notes, “Ever after, he

acknowledged that Philippe's necromantic spectacle inspired him to scribble the outlines of his Oriental novel, *Vathek*, over a few days and nights, stopping neither to sleep nor eat" (23; see Roger Lonsdale). Though it is unlikely that Beckford wrote the entire novel without stopping to sleep or eat in the days following the party, there is no doubt that the event was its inspiration. The description of his protagonist, the Caliph Vathek, in the beginning of the novel depicts a man not unlike Beckford himself:

Being much addicted to women and the pleasures of the table, he sought by his affability, to procure agreeable companions; and he succeeded the better as his generosity was unbounded and his indulgencies unrestrained: for he did not think ... that it was necessary to make a hell of this world to enjoy paradise in the next ... Notwithstanding the sensuality in which Vathek indulged, he experienced no abatement in the love of his people, who thought that a sovereign giving himself up to pleasure, was as able to govern, as one who declared himself an enemy of it. (29-30)

The fictional Caliph's hedonism and penchant for opulence directly reflects the currents of the party at Fonthill. The qualities of generosity, amiability, and indulgence link strongly to aspects exhibited by the host himself, and Vathek even shows the same attention to sensuous experience as Beckford did for his fête. Unsatisfied with the splendour of his predecessors' palace, Vathek builds five extravagant palaces. The description of these sumptuous additions occurs within the first two pages of the novel, corroborating Vathek's hedonism and demonstrating his excessive wealth. *The Eternal or Unsatiating Banquet* corresponds to taste, *The Temple of Melody / The Nectar of the Soul* to hearing, *The Delight of the Eyes / The Support of Memory* to sight, *The Palace of Perfumes / The Incentive to Pleasure* to smell, and *The Retreat of Mirth / The*

Dangerous to touch (*Vathek*, 29-30). Each of these five palaces was filled with the most exotic and pleasurable items to engage their respective senses, a feat that Beckford strove to achieve at his own party. He successfully engaged all five of the senses, which left no way for reality to reach his guests. Here is yet another way in which Beckford provided “hope of the impossible” and removed his party from the confines of reality. This meticulous decadence is not only yet another manifestation of the realised fantasies of the “voracious imagination” and “capricious desires,” but also a “profusion of all things rare and difficult to possess” that is so essential to the ideal ball. The attention to sensuous experience in both novel and party implies further parallels not only between the story and the event, but between the author and protagonist as well. McCalman states, “At some levels, [the book] can be regarded as a literary re-enactment of the Fonthill saturnalia, with Beckford playing Vathek, Louisa the black-magical priestess Carathis, and Courtenay the effeminate boy Gulchenroz. Philippe’s presence is signalled in references to “the magic of optics” and mysterious “sciences that did not exist” (McCalman, 24). It is almost difficult to separate one from the other when both the party and the novel are examined. The two are so inextricably bound up in each other that the influence between life and art becomes undeniably reciprocal in this instance. Beckford was so intoxicated by the stories of *Arabian Nights* that he did everything in his power to recreate the exotic fictional world in which it takes place; the success of the event in turn inspired *Vathek*, which is the imitation of life within art.

The second event to consider might have been a perfect ball had it not been cut short by imminent war and a call to arms. The Duchess of Richmond hosted this ball in 1815 on the eve of the Battle of Quatre Bras near her residence in Brussels. The ball appeared to have everything needed to “satisfy the artist.” The decorations were tasteful and extravagant, there was an

abundance of champagne, and all of the guests were distinguished members of society. The Duchess had provided a setting that gave hope of the impossible, especially given that all who attended were well aware of the ongoing war. It is difficult to say whether it was because of this or in spite of it that the ball gave its guests “hope of the impossible” since it provided welcome distraction and an escape from the carnage that ravaged the country. The “impossible” in this case is not necessarily some exotic fantasy realm, but simply the normal decadence enjoyed by members of high society in times of peace. Had it been allowed to continue to its natural end, it would have undoubtedly been the “realizations of the most voracious imaginations and the most capricious desires.” According to accounts of the event, the decorations, refreshments, attire of the guests, and overall atmosphere all met the needs of the aristocratic attendees, and would have most likely met Lélia’s criteria had it not been ruthlessly halted by news of Napoleon’s approaching army.

The ball’s inception was a simple exchange of words between Duke and Duchess:

‘Duke,’ said the Duchess of Richmond one day, ‘I do not wish to pry into your secrets... I wish to give a ball, and all I ask is, may I give my ball? If you say “Duchess, don’t give your ball,” it is quite sufficient, I ask no reason.’

‘Duchess you may give your ball with the greatest safety, without fear of interruption’ (Longford qtd in Hastings, 230).

The carefully worded request was so put because the Duke was in the midst of the Napoleonic War and the Duchess knew how dangerous an event such as this one could be. Nevertheless, the Duke consented, and hosted what Elizabeth Longford describes as “the most famous ball in history” (Hastings, 230). This event was also significant enough to feature in literary works by both Thackeray and Byron, each embellishing the event to suit his work. According to Longford,

the ball “gave Byron a chance to include Brussels in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and Thackeray to make Becky Sharp roll her green eyes and flaunt her pink dress in a perfect setting” (Hastings, 231). The impact and popularity of this ball is sustained today by annual reenactments and still more fictional representations by contemporary writers. The tragedy of the ball’s interruption is still a rich topic for literature, since it was such a shocking and dramatic turn of events; though it is historical fact, the events of that night seem possible only in fiction. The party’s gaiety contrasted starkly with the atmosphere of war and terror in which Western Europe was swathed at this time, and it provided not only a respite from these morbid affairs but also a striking setting for wartime drama. The narrator of Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* claims:

There never was, since the days of Darius, such a brilliant train of camp-followers as hung round the Duke of Wellington's army in the Low Countries, in 1815; and led it dancing and feasting, as it were, up to the very brink of battle. A certain ball which a noble Duchess gave at Brussels on the 15th of June in the above-named year is historical. All Brussels had been in a state of excitement about it, and I have heard from ladies who were in that town at the period, that the talk and interest of persons of their own sex regarding the ball was much greater even than in respect of the enemy in their front. The struggles, intrigues, and prayers to get tickets were such as only English ladies will employ, in order to gain admission to the society of the great of their own nation. (Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 312)

The decadence of the ball itself was incongruous with the tension felt by all who attended; while accounts of its stellar guest list and aesthetic beauty of the ballroom have survived, it could not protect its guests entirely from their worries. The opulent decorations and fancy dress were meant to distract, but the shadow of war permeated even this lighthearted party.

Longford's description of the decorations paint a vivid picture of an earnest attempt to blunt the edge of inevitable battle and inspire morale:

The ballroom, itself situated on the ground floor of the Richmond's rented house in the rue de la Blanchisserie, had been transformed into a glittering palace with rose-trellised wall paper, rich tent-like draperies, and hangings in the royal colours of crimson, gold, and black, and pillars wreathed in ribbons, leaves and flowers. [What Byron referred to as] 'lamps' were the most magnificent chandeliers... (Longford qtd in Hastings, 232).

The Duchess had gone to great lengths to alter the coach house on rue de la Blanchisserie into a separate region where her guests could escape the horror of reality for an evening. Despite these gorgeous surroundings, the ball failed to keep its guests from feeling the pressure of the looming battle. The rich draperies and flowers attempted to mask the fact that the opposing army was mere miles from the ball, but the guests, though dressed in eveningwear, were all too aware of the threat. As told in the fictional descriptions and historical accounts, the Duchess had provided her guests with a "profusion of things rare and difficult to possess" but even the perfect setting could not keep out impending doom. Georgiana, the daughter of the hostess, wrote in *Reminiscences of Lady de Ros*, "It was a dreadful evening, taking leave of friends and acquaintances, many never to be seen again" (132). Rumors and news flew around the ballroom all night, distracting the officers and ladies from their revelry and dampening the spirits of all. Indeed the ball was interrupted by the discreet announcement to the Duke of Wellington and other officers in attendance of the arrival of Napoleon's troops.

As this terrible news (Georgiana's words) rapidly circulated, the ball-room was like a hive that someone had kicked: an excited buzz arose from all the tables and

elegantly draped embrasures ... Some officers flew to and fro saying their goodbyes and departed, other clung so desperately to the loved one's hand or to the champagne bottle that when the hour struck there was no time to change and, like the heroine of *The Red Shoes*, they had to march in their dancing pumps.

(Longford qtd in Hastings, 232)

This event did not succeed in making excessive desire and capricious whims a reality, but not because it was an “ill-arranged ball.” It would have been entirely successful if it had not been interrupted. The fact that its legacy has endured not only in accounts, but in fiction and art as well is a testament to its impact. It was a valiant effort to boost morale when all were captivated by the horrors of war, and many key figures of the period were present. Though not as meticulously decadent as the party in *Lélia* or that given by William Beckford, the Duchess of Richmond's ball was nonetheless a spectacle, captured in paintings and fictional representations forever. It provided a welcome distraction that would have delighted its guests if it had been allowed to continue as planned. Many thrilling stories and anecdotes were generated from that night, which perhaps earns it Longford's title of “most famous ball in history.” The image of officers and important nobles receiving news of the approaching army and rushing off to fight in proper evening dress or clutching champagne as they bade their loved ones farewell are so dramatic and heroic that it is hardly a wonder that these details of the ball have survived two centuries. The Duchess of Richmond hosted many significant officers that night in the converted coach maker's depot, and the sheer concentration of heroic people who would die the very next day lends the event the allure needed to sustain its fame through time. Though not a perfect party by *Lélia*'s reckoning, this ball has been indelibly established in the archives of Occidental culture's memory.

There are some realities from which not even a well-arranged ball can offer surcease, and the terror of the Napoleonic Wars was one of those. This ball given by the Duchess of Richmond to bolster the troops was meant to delight and distract the guests, allowing them to set aside the constant preoccupation with Napoleon's army, which it could have done provided it was not curtailed. Unfortunately, however, it was at this event that the call to arms came and shocked the gathered men more than if they had not been in the midst of all the finery. The ball itself became the tragic hero, slain in the desperate yet gallant crusade against war's melancholy. Lord Byron recounts the episode in the third canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* when the titular character imagines the ball when visiting Waterloo in 1818:

There was the sound of revelry by night,
And Belgium's capital had gather'd then
Her Beauty and her Chivalry, and bright
The lamps shone o'er fair women and brave men;
A thousand hearts beat happily; and when
Music arose with its voluptuous swell,
Soft eyes look'd love to eyes which spake again,
And all went merry as a marriage-bell
But hush! hark! a deep sound strikes like a rising knell!

Did ye not hear it? — No; 'twas but the wind,
Or the car rattling o'er the stony street;
On with the dance! let joy be unconfined;
No sleep til morn, when Youth and Pleasure meet

To chase the glowing Horus with flying feet –
But, hark! — that heavy sound breaks in once more,
As if the clouds its echo would repeat;
And nearer, clearer, deadlier than before!
Arm! Arm! it is — it is — the cannon's opening roar! (421)

Byron's poem dramatically captures the abrupt commotion once word spread that the army was moving out to fight. Since *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is meant to emulate the style of medieval epic poetry, Byron's language here frames the ball in terms of the notions of courtly love and chivalry that were so germane to that genre, such as the ball's "Beauty and Chivalry" of "fair women and brave men" exchanging looks of love with "soft eyes." These phrases would not seem out of place in a romance of the Middle Ages. The thousand beating hearts and "voluptuous" music in these verses echo scenes of courtship that occurred often in Arthurian legend and other tales of chivalrous knights courting noble ladies. The swift change in atmosphere and harshly truncated revelry augmented all the panic that normally accompanies a march to battle. Byron's sudden, "But, hark! — that heavy sound breaks in once more" perfectly illustrates the precipitous decline in festive spirit and portends the chaotic assembly and departure of the troops. Though Byron does not embellish the aesthetics of the ball, he accurately portrays the mood and unparalleled drama that make this event an inexhaustible source of fascination for centuries. It is the works of authors such as Byron and Thackeray that have immortalized this ball as one of the most brilliant events in European history, and it has remained so significant to Western society that it is still recreated in Brussels on June 15th of every year including this one.

If the Duchess of Richmond's ball was the first of the two well-arranged parties that, according to Lélia, occur in a century, then Dumas' Masquerade Ball in 1833 was the second. In David Downie's description of the event in his work *A Passion for Paris: Romanticism and Romance in the City of Light* claims that, "Dumas' fancy dress Carnival Ball of 1833 was to go down in history not as the biggest but as the wildest, most creative private party of its kind" (231). Dumas amassed seven hundred of Paris' elite bohemian artistic community in two adjacent residential apartments on Rue de Saint Lazare, where he demanded that they arrive in full costume and help themselves to his considerable supply of champagne, wine, and freshly caught game as two orchestras played simultaneously. Among guests who participated were such famous members of the Parisian art and literary elite as Georges Sand, Alfred de Musset, Victor Hugo, Mademoiselle Mars, Alfred de Vigny, Marie Dorval, and Juliette Drouet, saturating the event with the drama and whimsy of so many creative spirits. The food was not served until three in the morning, and the revelry lasted well into the next day. "At nine o'clock in the morning, Dumas recalled triumphantly, with music resounding in their heads, they began a final gallop in the rue des Trois-Frères, the head of the procession reaching to the boulevard while the tail was still frisking in the courtyard of the square" (qtd. in Downie, 235). Because he and his friends had been excluded from a recent party hosted by King Jean-Philippe, it made sense to celebrate the exact qualities that had prevented them from being invited to rub elbows with the nobility and wealthy bourgeoisie; their passion for art, theater, and literature may have lowered them socially in the eyes of royalty, but it was exactly these eccentricities that Dumas wished to indulge and celebrate. This party's entire *raison d'être* was to "satisfy the artist" and "approach the impossible." It achieved this in unexpected ways, for the artists were satisfied through their own creativity and enjoyment of one another's company, and the impossible was not only

approached but achieved when Dumas overcame the limitations of space, décor, and resources that faced him when he was planning it. “It has yet to be topped when measured in terms of talent, gumption, and panache packed into one floor of an apartment house” (Downie, 231). The sheer eccentricity of each individual guest added to the air of fantasy that is essential to a successful ball. The fact that they were required to arrive in costume, like so many of Prince Bambuccj’s guests, ensured that they were utterly removed from reality.

The party served the twofold purpose of entertaining the artist community and reacting to the insult done to them by the monarchy: King Louis Philippe had snubbed Dumas and his artist friends when he failed to invite them to his latest ball. Dumas decided that retaliation was in order and he devised a plan to host a Carnival Masquerade ball at his Paris apartment with all of his many fellow artists who had been excluded from the royal festivities. The first complication that arose was the limited space of Dumas’ home. He, like many Parisians, inhabited a modest apartment that could not host the hundreds of guests he planned to invite. Fortunately the apartment opposite his on the same floor was unoccupied and the landlord allowed him to use it for this event.

With the issue of limited space solved, it was now time to turn attention to food. Dumas expected approximately four hundred guests, so he took a hunting party and returned with nine roebucks and three hares. After several trades and bargains, Dumas had two or three roebucks, a salmon weighting between thirty and fifty pounds, and an enormous galantine.³ For drink, Dumas supplied three hundred bottles of Bourgogne, three hundred of Bordeaux, and five hundred of champagne. This meant that each guest could have almost three bottles each, which demonstrates the scale to which Dumas planned to indulge his guests.

³ Downie’s account claims there were three roebucks and the salmon was 50lbs, Schopp’s says two roebucks and 30lb salmon but does not mention the hares (Downie, 233; Schopp, 221).

The next logistical matter was the decoration. This task he entrusted to his numerous artist friends, among them the celebrated Eugene Delacroix. Delacroix was the last to add his contribution to the décor, but when he did it was an impressive moment. Dumas requested a scene of “King Roderigo after a battle” and Delacroix obliged:

Without removing his close-fitting frock coat or turning up his sleeves or taking off the cuffs, without “putting on a blouse or cotton jacket, Delacroix began by taking his charcoal and, in three or four strokes, he had drawn the horse, in five or six, the knight, in seven or eight the battlefield, dead, dying and fugitives included.”

This was all Delacroix needed before getting down to the real business, the paint he would apply in brilliant, bloody color. “In a flash as if someone had unveiled a canvas, you saw appear under his hand first a knight, bleeding, injured, and wounded, half dragged by his horse who was as hurt as he was... The whole thing was wonderful to see. A circle gathered around the master and each one of the artists left his work to come and clap hands without jealousy or envy at the new Rubens who improved both composition and execution as he went.”

(Downie, 233-234)

Delacroix’s and the other artists’ extemporaneous and skillful creation of entirely new works of art for the sole purpose of party decorations produced tangible evidence of a link between art and this “counter-ball, a nose thumbed and at the bourgeois monarchy” Dumas was putting on (Downie, 220).

Though Dumas was working with limited space, he still strove to completely envelope his guests in an alternate space where normal social rules did not apply. Visual art was not

enough to achieve this, so he, like Beckford, sought to engage all the senses. To achieve this, he hired two orchestras to play simultaneously, one in each apartment so that there would be no lack of continuity in the music at any point during the party, creating what was perhaps the first instance of stereo surround-sound. He had provided a physical location and addressed the food, music, and décor, so all that was left to complete the event were the guests themselves. In order to ensure that the guests were not only physically present at the party, but fully participating, the invitations read “costume strictly required” and most guests rose admirably to the occasion. Dumas himself wore medieval garb in the guise of Dante Aligheri. His guests arrived dressed as “Henri III... Italian peasants women or shepherdesses... harlequins, magicians, dolls, Turkish slaves, sailors, soldiers, and aristocrats from the time of Louis XIII,” and still more came dressed as specific historical or literary figures (Downie, 234). This demand for costume was so strictly enforced that anyone who showed up without one was barred from entering until they had donned a “billowing Victorian cape” (Downie, 235). This also ensured that the freedom of anonymity would pervade the party, further freeing the guests from the consequences of their actions while they participated in the revelry. The masquerade theme and required costumes allowed his guests a playful anonymity, and the very spirit of the event, to retaliate against the exclusive monarchy, lent a current of mischief and deviance to the fête. The guests of this ball were perhaps the most voraciously imaginative and artistic individuals of the time, and Dumas succeeded in providing them “hope of the impossible” with his lavish environment and celebration of the creative spirit. He provided a “profusion of things rare and difficult to possess” with his unique and impromptu commissions from the finest painters of the time, as well as with the exciting atmosphere created by collecting so much creativity in one place and filling two apartments with seven hundred people.

The lavish food, extravagant costumes, unique art, and creative musical arrangement allowed for a completely different world within those two small apartments on rue de Saint-Lazare. With everyone in exotic dress, it was easy for guests to imagine that they had entered a different realm that no longer belonged to 19th century Paris, but rather to the times of ancient courtiers and noble poets. Though it lacked the impossibly ostentatious display of taste and wealth of Bambuccj's party, Dumas' masquerade ball still succeeded in exciting the guests and encouraging the Romantic spirit. It catered perfectly to the demographic he sought to entertain, and its elements, though not as subtle and exact as Bambuccj's, elicited the same amount of enjoyment from his guests. The liveliness of the event and enforced costumes swathed the guests in devious good spirits and kept away the banality of the real world where one is born into a specific social class and must follow certain rules. At the party, the guests could become whatever or whomever they pleased, and they were temporarily liberated from Paris' adroit customs. This ball served the twofold purpose of creating a space of impossibility where the guests could inhabit whatever social class, time period, or character they wanted, and retaliating against the King's exclusionary actions. The masquerade was a welcome escape from the intricate social politics of 19th century Paris, and those in attendance could enjoy an evening of drink, mingling, and some semblance of anonymity. With so many renowned and talented artists in the same place, "the possible combinations are a delight to contemplate," as Downie writes (235). Dumas approached the impossible by bringing together seven hundred of the finest members of Paris' artistic milieu to celebrate their passions, revel in each other's infamy, and snub the monarchy while doing it, which created a space completely separate from the reality of 19th century Paris.

Fictional representations of parties are equally important in exploring a Romantic theory of the party as a form of art, and some of the most important of these representations take place in Germaine de Staël's novel *Corinne, or Italy*. Much of Sand's literary inspiration, and even that of her peers, stemmed not only from her own life experiences, but also from the wildly popular works of Germaine de Staël (1766-1817), a fellow French novelist from the prior generation. Both of these French women have been instrumental in shaping the feminine literary world of the West, and inspiring subsequent generations of women writers. De Staël was one of the first female Romantic writers and she successfully portrayed a woman as a relatable Romantic protagonist in *Corinne, or Italy*. In her analysis of De Staël and Sand's impact on literature, Linda Lewis notes that, "*Corinne* was in the early decades of the nineteenth century a coming-of-age novel for many young women in England" and elsewhere (Lewis, 15). "Barbara Dennis notes," writes Lewis, that "'Elizabeth Barrett read it... in Herefordshire, George Eliot devoured it in the Midlands, George Sand read it in France...'" and the list grows, showing the novel's reach and significance to many women in Europe and Britain. De Staël's *Corinne* is just as significant in the Romantic canon as other monumental characters such as Goethe's Werther and Faust, or Byron's Manfred and Childe Harold. In fact, observes Lewis, "When Madelyn Gutwirth says that Corinne is the Byronic equivalent for women, she could just as well say that Childe Harold is the Corinne for men, for Staël, Byron's senior in life and literature, influenced the English poet — not the other way around" (Lewis, 8). De Staël's influence on Romanticism reaches across gender as well as time, and her most famous novel was essential not only for the inspiration of women writers, but also to the formation of the Romantic novel. Her work and life helped define a literary and artistic movement that was dominated by men, and her achievements are all the more impressive for the impact they have had on writers and artists of both genders.

The characters of Corinne and Lélia acted as autobiographical outlets for their respective authors. They serve as living individual examples of the Baudelaire/Wilde argument of whether art influences life or vice-versa. De Staël and Sand both drew on their own experiences, lives, and aspirations to create their characters, and in doing so became almost indistinguishable from them. Lewis points out that “After the publication of her novel, Germaine de Staël was inseparable from her self-created myth; she was called ‘Corinne’ and reportedly responded ‘I am not Corinne but I can be her’” (Lewis, 8). It became even more difficult to distinguish between character and creator as de Staël began emulating Corinne’s aesthetic style as well by dressing in turbans and Grecian garments, and presenting herself with a lyre in hand for two portraits (Lewis, 8). Sand was equally conflated with Lélia, perhaps to an even further degree since “Lélia” was a pet name given to her by her lover Alfred de Musset and she admitted to feeling as though she were the character herself. Maria Espinosa, translator of the 1978 English edition of *Lélia* remarks that, “In a letter to Sainte-Beuve she wrote, ‘I am utterly and completely Lélia... I had wanted to convince myself this was not so (Espinosa, xiv). Lewis makes a similar remark when she claims, “Similarly [to de Staël] George Sand creates mythic womanhood. Specifically she writes versions of herself in several novels: ... the dramatic Lélia who is the female counterpart of Goethe’s Werther or Byron’s Manfred...” (Lewis, 8). Sand, née Aurore Dupin, who was known for her adoption of a man’s name as well as dressing as a man at most social functions, also has Lélia appear dressed as a man at the first ball of *Lélia*: “Dressed in a man’s costume, austere but elegant, she had the austere gaze of a long-ago poet” (Sand, 29). The two women emulated their hyperbolic fictional projections of themselves after the releases of their respective novels, and influenced their own lives with their own fiction, which in turn they had initially rooted in their reality.

Though Germaine de Staël is a perfect example of how art and life cyclically influence each other, the novel itself represents the intersection of life and art through the parties that Corinne attends. Since de Staël was so influential to Sand and it is by the latter's criteria we are examining the real-life social events that shaped the artistic sphere of 18th and 19th century Europe, it is also useful to apply them to the three parties that mark the progression of the main character's demise in *Corinne, or Italy*. These events act as touchstones for readers to follow Corinne's fall from grace as she deteriorates from Rome's brilliant darling to a decrepit and sickly shade of her former self. Each of these events either reflects or contrasts Corinne's inner state as the heroine's tragic story progresses. This seminal novel narrates the romantic journey of a young woman blessed by true literary genius as she falls completely in love with Oswald, Lord Nelvil, a brooding Scottish nobleman. The first of these parties is one she herself hosts after her coronation as Rome's most talented poet. Lord Nelvil happens upon the ceremony and is instantly captivated by the vivacious lady who is so different from the demure British women he has known his whole life. The Count d'Erfeuil, a mutual friend of Corinne and Lord Nelvil, agrees to introduce them to each other. He takes Oswald to Corinne's home where she gathers her friends to celebrate her success, and the Count tries to describe her to the morose lord: "Corinne is really a delightful person; she is intelligent and charming... She is rich, young, and free, and with no one able to find out definitely whether or not she has any lovers" (37). This is essentially how Corinne is portrayed for the first section of the novel. Her appearance at her own party confirms the count's description, and the party she arranges demonstrates and augments her own beauty, talent, and taste:

The view of the Tiber enhanced the beauty of the house, and its interior was decorated in the most perfect taste... At last Corinne appeared. She was dressed

without any affectation, but in a picturesque style. In her hair she was wearing antique cameos, and round her neck a string of coral. Her courtesy was dignified and easy. As she mingled freely with friends one could recognize the divinity of the Capitol, although she behaved simply and naturally in every way. (37-38)

This poetic description of Corinne's party, though written well before *Lélia*, contains some of the aesthetic elements that Sand emphasized in that novel. The apartment is perfectly decorated without being ostentatious and Corinne herself is only modestly, if beautifully, adorned. The party itself, which is a small affair for her friends, portrays Corinne's inner state in the calm, amicable, and effortlessly perfect taste observed by Oswald. The poetess, her apartments, and her comportment coalesce into an ideal scene that visually embodies the intrinsic talent of the *improvisatrice* at the peak of her life. This party demonstrates her quiet charm and innate genius through its own understated brilliance. The beginning of the novel is the apogee of Corinne's career, health, and happiness, and her small celebratory event exhibits this perfection. She mingles easily with her guests and converses happily on art, music, poetry, and culture while basking in the adoration of everyone present. The party itself is quite intimate, and all the guests are well behaved and cheerful. Here, Corinne's wit and genius corresponds to the modest gaiety of the party and the amity of all in attendance there. That which is "rare and difficult to possess" is not paraded around to guests as they are in Prince Bambucj's ball, but rather contained in Corinne herself, for her talent is very rare and she is, as Oswald discovers, very difficult to possess. It "satisfies the artist" by virtue of being an event in celebration of artistic genius, and Corinne's perfection "approaches the impossible." This party allows readers a glimpse at these qualities through the success of the event. Much later in the novel, Oswald reflects that Corinne is known for her "good taste in the arrangement of a party, her understanding of everything

connected with the arts,” which implies, as Lélia does, that the party is really an art form. This event reflects her good taste and intermingles the arts with the success of the party.

The second party is one that Corinne arranges for Lord Nelvil, and the event itself is executed with perfect taste and attention to detail. She invites “the English who were in Naples and some Neapolitan men and women whom she liked” and the event is held near Naples at the seaside (230). At this point in the novel Corinne has begun to succumb to the distress that plagues her for the rest of her life. Her inner state is reflected in this party as it was in the first, and her anxiety can be seen in her own demeanor as it contrasts with the gaiety of the celebration. “Corinne had decided to give a party for Lord Nelvil in the course of the eight days’ delay she had requested, but the idea of a party was for her combined with the most melancholy thoughts” (227). This event is interesting because the party itself reflects Corinne’s excellent taste and flair, while also providing stark contrast to her emotional turmoil. “In the midst of the cruellest anxiety, however, she was secretly preparing a brilliant day which she still wanted to spend with Oswald. Her imagination and her feelings were thus romantically combined” (230). This “romantic” combination of her “imagination” with her “cruellest anxiety” and “melancholy thoughts” signals the ambivalence within Corinne. She still takes joy in planning the perfect party for her beloved but her behavior betrays her struggles with her emotions. The description of the party itself sounds very idealistic, though she is unable to partake in the pleasure that she herself has orchestrated:

It was at Cape Miseno that Corinne had had the dances and music organized.

Nothing was more picturesque than the display at this entertainment... She was asked to join the peasant women’s dance, and at first she gladly agreed. But she had no sooner started that the amusements she was taking part in were made

hateful to her by the gloomiest feelings, and she went away quickly from the dancing and music to sit down at the very end of the cape by the sea. (233)

She had arranged an idyllic day by the sea with all of the things she loved and wanted to share with her new beau, Oswald. The dancing, singing, and seaside environment should have culminated in a successful celebration during their travels. Instead, it is the first time Corinne shows signs of losing the genius for which she had been so recently celebrated in Rome. The setting and activities in which she should have thrived were “made hateful to her by the gloomiest feelings” and even her gifts for poetry and improvisation are stifled. She attempts to improvise at this party in order to display her considerable talent to Oswald and their guests, but falls into a dead faint at the end of her verses (238). This considerable change from her behavior at the party she threw in Rome is evidence of the inner decline that is reflected through the social events she arranges. The event itself evidently does not “satisfy the artist” as shown in Corinne’s reaction, and fails to distract her from her own distress. The flaw is not in the party itself, which Corinne arranged and which all the other guests enjoy, but in Corinne’s own mental state, which prevents her from enjoying the party. It does not realize her “most capricious desires” because those lie in her feelings toward Oswald. Though it may not objectively fail as an ideal ball to an observer, because it fails to satisfy Corinne, it does not meet Lélia’s criteria.

The novel’s final party is perhaps the most dramatic and shows Corinne at her lowest, shortly before death. The other two events occurred in Italy, but this last one takes place in Scotland, at Corinne’s own family’s home from which she has been exiled. There are many aspects coming into play at this part of the novel that contribute to Corinne’s deteriorated state, but this event is the beginning of the precipitous decline that eventually leads to her death. The party in this case is neither a charming soirée in a small apartment, nor an open-air fête by the

seaside, but rather a traditional ball, with formal attire and equally formal dances. It lacks the relaxed, spontaneous quality of the Italian parties and has a quality of sobriety that matches Corinne's distress. The music is "monotonous" and the style of dancing the "English country dances" is "dignified but not very lively" (340). The guests are dressed in proper English fancy dress and Lord Nelvil cannot help but compare this dreary event to the "Lively charm of Italian tunes and dances" (341). The guests continue to dance the same dances with the same partners to the same music, and the repetitive quality contrasts sharply not only with the parties seen in Italy that included elements of spontaneity, but also with Corinne's own talent of improvisation that she has lost. Just as this ball is devoid of any spark of originality or vivacity, so Corinne is completely bereft of the rare and brilliant talent for which she had once been acclaimed. Nothing about this ball fits Lélia's criteria. Though it may be the most expensive and well-attended event in the novel, nothing about it satisfies the artist, let alone realizes "the most voracious imaginations and the most capricious desires." Everything about this ball is trite, repetitive, and solemn, with not the slightest indication of caprice or imagination. It is perhaps the most prosaic event, and makes no attempt to "approach the impossible" or provide its guests with a hope if it. Lélia would deem it an "ill-arranged ball."

The ball is introduced in the novel with little ceremony, allowing focus to remain on Corinne's plight. "For two days Lady Edgermond [the mother of Corinne's half-sister, who is now Oswald's betrothed] had been at her estate, and that very evening there was a great ball at her house. All her neighbors and tenants had asked her to bring them together to celebrate her arrival" (340). These sentences present the ball vaguely because Corinne is an outsider to the event. Though the ball itself is essential to her story, she does not actually participate in it. She was the center of attention and the soul of the event in Rome, she arranged the party by the sea

and attempted to participate, but in Scotland she is outside observing the ball through an open window. Though her love, Oswald, and her half-sister Lucile are integral parts of the ball, Corinne herself is left to the periphery just as she has been exiled from her relationship with both Oswald and her family. She learns of the ball as well as Oswald and Lucile's involvement in it only after her arrival near her family home:

Corinne enquired why the house was lit up and who were the people who were there just then. It happened by chance that Corinne's servant questioned one of them whom Lord Nelvil had taken into his service in England and who was there at the moment. Corinne heard his reply. *It is a ball*, he said, *that Lady Edgermond is giving today*, and, he added, *my master Lord Nelvil opened the ball with Miss Lucile Edgermond, the heiress of the house*. (340; italics added)

Learning of an event from servants instead of being directly involved in them is new for Corinne's character and is further evidence of her exclusion. She has moved from the focus of attention at the beginning of the book to the very edge of society by this point. She is no longer sought after and adored, but rather pushed aside as an afterthought. She observes rather than participates because she is unable to reconcile her love of Oswald with her poetic genius, creating inner discord as she tries to remain true to herself while adhering to the stringent morals of the man she loves. In this way, Corinne's own personal "hope of the impossible," her hope that she and Oswald could be together, which had been nurtured among the art and splendor of Italy, fades completely as she realizes that it is indeed impossible. Corinne wanders the grounds outside the house, exercising her outsider status and proving to the reader that she really has become a peripheral figure:

As Corinne walked on, she found herself near the river. There she could hear both the festive music and the murmur of the water. From above the lamplight of the ball was reflected as far as the middle of the water, while only the pale reflection of the moon lit up the deserted banks of the other side. As in the tragedy of Hamlet, it was as if ghosts were wandering round the palace where festivities were taking place. (341)

This passage shows the liminal position of Corinne in relation to the party. She can hear both the “festive music” and the “murmur of the water”, see both the “lamplight” on the surface of the river and the “pale reflection of the moon.” The words “murmur” and “pale” contrast sharply with the atmosphere of the party, and they can be understood to apply to Corinne’s depleted state. She no longer emulates the festive music of a ball, but rather can only muster a watery murmur. She had once shone brightly as a lamp, but is now as pale and weak as the reflection of the moon on a river. She is solitary and forgotten as she wanders alone in the shadows of the periphery while the crowded, brightly lit ball continues inside without her. Her explicit reference to Hamlet invites further comparison between Corinne herself and the ghosts she imagines. At this point, she may as well be a shade looking bleakly in on a grand ball she would have once attended. Instead of complementing and corroborating her inner state as the first event did, this one now juxtaposes her feebleness to the opulence and grandeur of a ball. She even contemplates the same fate as Ophelia, so distraught has she become:

Corinne, unhappy, alone, and forsaken, had only one step to take to plunge into eternal forgetfulness. “Oh” she cried. “if when he walks these banks tomorrow with his happy band of friends, his triumphant steps were to stumble upon the remains of the woman whom nevertheless he once loved, would he not have an

emotion which would avenge me, a pain which would match what I was suffering? No, no, it is not vengeance I must seek in death, but rest” (341)

This morbid imagery, so far from the vibrant cheerfulness that Corinne exhibited in the beginning of the novel, reinforces the idea of her as a ghost, as a mere shell of her former self. The fact that she has arrived at the point of considering suicide as either a kind of vengeance on Oswald or as a respite from her feelings shows how far she has fallen throughout the course of the novel. This passage is perhaps the most extreme expression of the emotional unrest that characterized so many Romantic heroes within Corinne, who, earlier, seemed to have been spared from the agony that the Romantics imagined accompanies great genius. She has succumbed to the torment inflicted on her by her feelings for Oswald and her devotion to her art. She cannot have both, and the pain of trying to allow them to coexist has driven her to consider ending her own life.

The heroines of both de Staël and Sand suffer greatly throughout their respective novels, but each seems to exhibit excellent taste and refined opinions on parties. *Lélia*’s narrator lays out strict criteria for a successful ball, and Corinne’s aptitude for creating these perfect events is mentioned explicitly in the novel when Oswald, stuck at the somber yet opulent Edgermond ball, reminisces about the events he attended with Corinne in Italy. “This long boring party wearied him. He remembered Corinne’s good taste in the arrangement of a party, her understanding of everything connected with the arts, and he felt it was only in regular, domestic life that he liked to think of Lucile as his companion” (342). “Understanding of everything connected with the arts” creates a strong link to the idea in *Lélia* about understanding the impossible and creating it. Oswald’s rumination also distinguishes between “the arts” and “regular, domestic life,” which implies that a successful party, which is itself a form of art, must also be clearly separated from

prosaic life. This distinction between “regular, domestic life” and the art of the party echoes Lélia’s demand for the hope of the impossible. Both Lélia and Corinne know what is necessary to ensure the successful execution of an ideal ball, though they may have slightly different ideas of what that may be. While Lélia is more focused on the aesthetic alone, Corinne shows “good taste in the arrangement of a party,” as evidenced by the first two events in the novel. The fact that Oswald is bored by the party Corinne neither arranges nor attends proves that she was the key element of the events he truly enjoys, and elevates the parties toward “achieving the impossible” to paraphrase Sand.

The similarities and differences between two important encounters in *Lélia* and *Corinne* underline the influence of de Staël on Sand and also portray the literary device of parties as a place of emotional action, unexpected reunion, and settings in which the impossible can occur. While Lélia is often compared to Byron’s Manfred and Corinne to his Childe Harold, both characters exhibit similar qualities of impossible perfection and both meet tragic ends because of failed love. Both heroines also have complicated and significant relationships with their sisters, whom they encounter only when at a party. Lélia’s sister Pulchérie is a courtesan and Lélia is disgusted and ashamed by her decisions, whereas Corinne’s much younger half-sister Lucile is naïve, innocent, and angelically virginal. Pulchérie encourages Lélia to try leading the life of a courtesan who pleases others because Lélia is satisfied with neither embracing nor spurning men. It was Lucile whom Oswald’s father had intended him to marry and it is Lucile who lies at the root of the tragedy in *Corinne*. In both novels, the pairs of sisters encounter each other at different balls for the first time in years. Both meetings happen almost entirely by chance, and could only take place at a party, where the impossible is sought after. In *Lélia* it is during Prince

Bambuccj's ball, after she drifts away from the festivities to weep in private in the gardens, that her sister finds her and they are reunited:

Suddenly she felt a hand on her naked arm, a hand as hot and humid as the breath of that stormy night. She shivered. Ashamed, annoyed at being surprised in this moment of weakness which no one had ever seen, she leaped up with a sudden reaction of courage and rose to her full height before the reckless person...

Lélia gave a loud cry. Then trying to make her voice as severe as possible, she said, 'I recognize you. You are my sister. . . .' (Sand, 96)

Lélia and Pulchérie's reunion is ultimately tender, with each seeking to support and comfort the other throughout the remainder of this chapter and the majority of the next. Corinne's encounter with Lucile is very brief and much less enjoyable. In *Corinne* it is during the third party, the massive ball thrown by lady Edgermond, that Lucile glimpses Corinne whom she believed to be dead.

At that moment Lucile came up to the window and, as she saw, through the darkness, a woman dressed in white, but not wearing a ball gown, go past in the garden, her curiosity was aroused. She looked out and, gazing intently, thought she could recognize her sister's features, but as she did not doubt that Corinne had been dead for 7 years the fright she received from this sight made her fall down in a faint. Everybody ran to help her. Corinne could no longer find a servant to speak to and she retreated further down the path so as not to be noticed. (342)

The earlier parallels drawn between Corinne and ghosts are brought back in this passage. Lucile sees not her sister, but a specter in a white gown haunting their childhood home after many years' absence. Viewing Corinne not as her corporeal self, but as a spirit is the only way Lucile

can reconcile her sister's presence at the ball. Lucile's strong reaction causes those around her to rush to her aid and Corinne disappears away from the crowd, her actions embracing the spectral state in which she now exists. Ghosts cannot exist in the "real" world, so Lucile's interpretation of Corinne's sudden appearance can only happen in a context where the impossible is attempted. Though the party at which this scene occurs is a failure in the sense that it does not successfully approach the impossible, the setting of any party is sufficient for the impossible to occur, if only briefly.

The entire notion of achieving or approaching the impossible is can only be realized through the gratuitous application of performance and spectacle. That it is to say, the impossible environments created by these events where time, place, people, society, and morality are no longer concrete require a certain amount of willingness to suspend disbelief on the part of participants in order to exist. When the party is considered as a form of art, it must take on the quality of the spectacle, which, like art, is a representation of something but not the thing itself. Because Sand's criteria demands the impossible, or at least the hope of the impossible, the closest reality can come to an ideal party is a representation of the impossible that can still function in the real world. This representation is the spectacle itself, which is present in all successful parties, manifests most evidently in Louthembourg's fantastic special effects and Prince Bambuccj's careful manipulation of his guests. Lélia's perception of parties as paintings reinforces not only the parallel between art and parties, but also the idea of the party as spectacle: if the party is a tableau, then it is a representation of reality, an image within a frame, and therefor does not exist within reality. A successful ball, if it is to be a work of art, also requires an illusion itself in order to give a setting to the performance and create a space in which the

participants can interact and perform. These two aspects, performance and spectacle, are interdependent and lie at the base of any truly successful ball, especially under Sand's criteria.

The spectacle, as defined by Guy Debord in *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), can be understood as a phenomenon of Western industrialized society as primarily a form of distraction. The first few paragraphs of the book roughly define the Spectacle as an entity:

The whole life of those societies in which the modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.

Images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream, and the former unity of life is lost forever. Apprehended in a *partial* way, reality unfolds itself in a new generality as a pseudo-world apart, solely as an object of contemplation. ...

The spectacle appears at once as society itself, as a part of society and as a means of unification. As a part of society it is a sector where all attention, all consciousness converges. Being isolated — and precisely for that reason — this sector is the locus of illusion and false consciousness; the unity it imposes is merely the official language of generalized separation. (Debord, 12)

Though Debord frames the spectacle in light of how it affects the proletariat at both a societal and economic level, his claims can be applied to the parties, balls, and fêtes of the Romantics in their lives and their literature. The principal purpose of these events was to distract and delight, offering a respite from the banality and harshness of mundane existence. The spectacle is present in these intentions in a very deliberate way instead of the quiet insidiousness insisted on by Debord. It is the same entity in both instances, but in the case of parties the spectacle is sought-

after and embraced, not used as tool of power and control over the masses. The Romantic party must *be* a spectacle in order to be successful, since it is the only way the impossible can be achieved: the impossible being made possible is a paradox in itself and can only be realized through fallacy and illusion.

The other aspect that is essential to the success of these events is the conscious participation of the guests in the illusion of the spectacle. This is the “performance” part of the parties, and can be seen in all the aforementioned events. It is present in Beckford’s successful seduction of Kitty, in the Duchess of Richmond’s guests’ brave attempt to ignore the war and enjoy themselves, in Dumas’ absolute insistence that all his guests be in costume, Prince Bambuccj’s banishment of politics and intrigue, and Corinne’s literal genius for performing improvisation, for which she is celebrated at her first party. None of these would have been possible without the willingness of the attendees to set aside the social norms by which they normally abide, and perform a different role within the temporal and physical confines of the parties. Sociologist Erving Goffman acknowledges the importance of the spectacle, or “setting” as he calls it, if any sort of social performance is to take place.

First, there is the “setting,” involving furniture, décor, physical layout, and other background items which supply the background and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it. A setting tends to stay put, geographically speaking, so that those who would use a particular setting as part of their performance cannot begin their act until they have brought themselves to the appropriate place and must terminate their performance when they leave it. (Goffman, 22)

The setting, as Sand makes clear in *Lélia*, is absolutely essential to a successful ball. The importance of the setting is what drove Beckford to hire de Louthembourg to transform Fonthill into the orientalist seraglio he so fondly remembered in his letter (and then thematized in *Vathek*). In the case of Beckford's party, the success of the event can be attributed to the success of the setting itself; since de Louthembourg created such a convincing and otherworldly atmosphere within the manor, the guests were able to comfortably perform their debaucherous roles. The stationary quality of the setting is also important to note, because it emphasizes the fact that guests can only comport themselves differently for the duration of the party. Once they quit the premises, they must drop their performance and take up their roles as "normal" people who go about their day-to-day business — or, in Oswald's words, "regular, domestic life" — and follow social norms. Sometimes the transition between one setting and another results in the transition between one performance and another, which can be abrupt and unpleasant, as seen in the Duchess of Richmond's ball. Once the call to arms reached the guests, the officers had to shed their pretenses of festive enjoyment, and don their military personas. Though some did this more reluctantly than others, the sudden change corroborates Goffman's idea of performance itself and demonstrates what can happen when the two are incongruent: even with the perfect setting, the guests of these parties must agree to participate in the tacit rules and behave a certain way, but when they are forced into different roles the entire event fails. Conversely, guests who do not immediately adhere to the performance demanded of them by a party may not be allowed to participate. If the excitement that disrupted the Duchess of Richmond's ball is the transition from party role to another role, Dumas' fête was the reverse of that. As stated above, he refused to allow anyone who was not in costume to enter his party, and barred their participation until they were wearing what he deemed appropriate. This demand reinforces the importance of

performance and also ensures that the setting will not be ruined by lack of involvement or incongruity on the part of the guests.

Through the careful examination of these events and the literature that both inspired and immortalized them, it is evident that life and art are closely intertwined in the Romantic era. These parties and the atmospheres created therein would not have occurred without the wild fiction so characteristic to the time, nor would the fiction have been so vivid if these events had not fueled their authors' imaginations. The boundaries of art and life, fantasy and reality, author and character were blurred and often entirely transgressed during this tumultuous era in the artistic and literary world. Within the ephemeral confines of the Romantic ball, the inhabitants of this other realm were free to behave as they wished regardless of what was considered proper by their respective societies. As seen in both *Lélia* and *Corinne*, parties played an essential role in not only the creation of the literature, but within the literary works themselves. As a literary device, balls serve as a backdrop for whimsical encounters and a reflection or contrast of a character's emotional experience. Inversely, literature serves as a way of preserving a real-life event and elevating it to an almost mythical status as seen in Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. Life and art in the Romantic era could not help but feed off one another and create both fiction and history that have been critical to Western memory and imagination.

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