

# Romantic Border Crossings

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## Chapter 6

# Transcending Borders: Loss and Mourning in Gottfried August Bürger's "Lenore"

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Gottfried August Bürger's ballad "Lenore," composed during the spring and summer of 1773, established the reputation of this gifted and unique poet, making him famous throughout Germany as well as Europe.<sup>1</sup> In fact, even a century later his renown lived on, as indicated by the German Realist writer Theodor Fontane: "Der Ruhm Bürgers hat mir immer als ein Ideal vorgeschwebt: ein Gedicht und unsterblich." [I have always thought of Bürger's fame as an ideal: to be immortal with one poem.] How can one explain such sweeping, enduring success?

First of all, Bürger's dissatisfaction with the literary conventions of his time, namely, the artificial values and contrived, affected manner of Rococo poetry, led him to aspire to an unconventional style combining lyrical, epic and dramatic elements that reverberated with the mood and character of the traditional folksong. His aspiration to such a style reflects the influence of Herder's writings on *Volks poesie*, in particular the essay "Auszug aus einem Briefwechsel über Ossian und die Lieder alter Völker,"<sup>2</sup> which Bürger refers to with great enthusiasm and in which he finds his "popular" approach to "Lenore" mirrored and affirmed: "Ich denke, Lenore soll Herder's Lehre einigermassen entsprechen" (122).<sup>3</sup> ["I think that Lenore shall fairly comply with Herder's teachings."] Herder's distinction between *Naturdichtung* (natural poetic art) as popular and naïve and *Kunstdichtung* (poetic artistry) as less accessible and only to an initiated elite, appeals to Bürger's artistic sentiment and socio-cultural interests in an improved "Humanität" (humanism).<sup>4</sup>

Second, Bürger's poetic ingenuity, attaining masterful linguistic perfection, also helps explain the attention and respect that he not only received from his peers of the Göttingen Hain-Bund but also later throughout all literary periods inside and outside of Germany. For example Bürger scholar Schmidt-Kaspar contributes this success to the fact that "Bürgers 'Lenore' ist als Gebilde vollendet und lückenlos. Sie findet

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1 I have used Wolfgang Friedrich's edition of Bürger's "Lenore." See *Bürger Werke und Briefe, Auswahl*.

2 See "Von deutscher Art und Kunst. Einige fliegende Blätter." *Herders Sämtliche Werke*. Originally edited with Goethe and Möser in 1773. The collection of essays reflects the artistic principles of the "Sturm und Drang" period.

3 This passage is taken from Bürger's letter to Boie.

4 See Herder's *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*.

für jedes Ding, für jeden Vorgang und jeden Gedanken das Bild: nicht nur ein Bild, sondern das einfachste, das klarste, das sinnfälligste Bild. In dieser zwingenden Sinnfälligkeit liegt die Kraft des Gedichts" (133). [Bürger's *Lenore* is perfect and without any deficiencies. For every thing, every event, and every thought, the ballad finds its metaphor: and not just any metaphor but the simplest, the most lucid, the most striking and most obvious one. In this compelling simplicity lies the ballad's strength.]

In addition, the originality of Bürger's work goes far in explaining his singular success, an originality lying most of all in the ballad's sensuality, its close proximity to experience, the poet's insistence on bringing his own personality into his poems, all of which is of universal appeal: "Der Erfolg, er war ungeheuer. Wer zählt die Gesellschaften, in denen die schaurig-schöne *Lenore* vorgetragen wurde? Wer zählt die Abschriften, die von Hand zu Hand gehen? Illustrationen und Kompositionen, ihre Zahl ist Legion" (Scherer 192–3). [The success was tremendous. Who can count all the social gatherings during which the eerily beautiful *Lenore* was recited? Who counts the copies, which went from one hand into another? The illustrations and compositions, the numbers are legionary.] Yet, "*Lenore*'s" unusual widespread popularity and tremendous success, the ballad's spectacular reception extending to outside of national and linguistic borders cannot be fully understood in terms of just the above considerations, requiring further attention and elucidation.

I believe its success can more fully be understood in terms of the ballad's psychological dimension, for "*Lenore*" not only touches a nerve that concerns human life in its most fundamental condition, what Freud had conceptualized as the potentially traumatic reality of "annihilation anxiety," but the work also presents otherwise taboo subjects such as erotic desire and suicide. It is those themes in addition to the great topics of literature, human life and suffering, concerns of "intimidating dimensions," of "love, death, faith, apostasy, despair and punishment, and finally the cruel predominance of history that interferes with the individual's fate" (Schmidt-Kaspar 131), which provide the ballad with its timeless appeal. The psychological dimension of the ballad furthermore gains in complexity with the introduction of a critique of church dogmatism, which Bürger exposes as adversative to the emotional needs of a human being in mourning.

In thirty-two, eight-versed stanzas Bürger's ballad tells the story of a young woman, *Lenore*, who remains inconsolable after the loss of her lover Wilhelm, a soldier who does not return from war. Wilhelm had left six years earlier for the Battle of Prague during the Seven-Years war. In 1763, King Frederick II of Prussia and Empress Maria Theresa of Austria finally made peace. *Lenore* watches other soldiers and their families reunite in relief while she remains alone. Nobody can provide her with any information on her lover's fate. With the passing of the last soldier she breaks down in despair. *Lenore*'s mother tries to console her daughter by calling on God's wisdom and the holy sacrament, but *Lenore* can find no comfort in her mother's words. Her mother then suggests that Wilhelm may not be dead at all but rather that he has become involved with another woman "im fernen Ungarlande" [in the distant lands of Hungary]. *Lenore* is not convinced because for her "hin ist hin..verloren ist verloren." "Gone is gone" and "lost is lost."—Either way, she remains alone. *Lenore*'s need for her lover cannot be substituted with the promise

of the spiritual love of Jesus Christ. Lenore is inconsolable, and as oral tradition has it, the specter groom returns from the grave to take his bride with him. After a spooky, ghostly ride through an eerie, moonlit night, the rider along with his horse and Lenore disappear in the depths of a grave followed by a procession of howling ghosts and spirits.

Although the question of Bürger's sources for "Lenore" has not been answered definitively, there is no doubt of the influence exercised on the German poem by the ballad "Sweet William's Ghost" from Thomas Percy's folk poetry collection *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. Herder, for whom the *Reliques* were a great inspiration and model for his own work on *Volks poesie*, included a German translation of "Sweet William" in his Ossian essay. Herder proclaims enthusiastically that there is "nichts in der Welt mehr," "was kühn geworfner, abgebrochner und doch natürlicher, gemeiner, volksmässiger seyn kann" (*Ossian* 187–9) [that there is nothing in the world that could have been created more boldly, more uniquely and that at the same time is more natural and common, more folk-like]. This enthusiasm spilled over to Bürger and we can undoubtedly find more than only traces of "Sweet William" in "Lenore."<sup>5</sup> Some of Bürger's critics have gone so far as to accuse the poet of

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5 Compare:

Is there any room at your head, Willie  
Or any room at your feet?  
Or any room at your side, Willie,  
Wherein that I may creep?

There's nay room at my head, Margret,  
There's nay room at my feet,  
There's no room at my side, Margret,  
My coffin is made so meet. (from *Reliques*)

"Ist, Wilhelm, Raum noch dir zu Haupt,  
noch Raum zu Füßen dir?  
Ist Raum zu deiner Seite noch,  
So gib, o gib ihn mir!"  
Zu Haupt und Fuss ist mir nicht Raum  
Kein Raum zur Seite mir!  
Mein Sarg ist, süßes Hannchen, schmal,  
Dass ich ihn gebe dir! (Herder's translation)

"Sag an, wo ist dein Kämmerlein?  
Wo? Wie dein Hochzeitsbettchen?"—  
"Weit, weit von hier! —Still, kühl und klein!—  
Sechs Bretter und zwei Brettchen!"—  
"Hat's Raum für mich?"—"Für dich und mich!  
Komm, schürze, spring und schwinde dich!  
Die Hochzeitsgäste hoffen;  
Die Kammer steht uns offen."— (Bürger, "Lenore")

plagiarism. However, aside from what has been passed down by oral tradition, the themes of what Herder refers to as the “Bräutigamssitte” [the groom custom] and “das Kostume in der Erscheinung” (*Ossian* 189) [the customary in appearance], these correspondences can be linked only to some of the images in the ballad and not to its content, and they do not detract from Bürger’s achievement—the portrayal of a much deeper social and psychological dimension that questions church dogmatism and that, in Albrecht Schöne’s opinion, represents a “Kardinalbeispiel für Sekularisation” [a cardinal example for secularization].<sup>6</sup>

Whereas the question of the role of religious faith in this ballad has been answered in terms of its implications on the socio-political level, I would like to pick up on the role of religion in the ballad but take it into a different direction. In “Lenore,” the mother’s imperative to have faith in God’s goodness and wisdom provides no relief from the intense pain of loss, since from Lenore’s perspective God has not looked out for her and shows no pity for her suffering despite her faithful prayers. Her rejection of the idea of salvation and God’s mercy as “eitler Wahn” [mere madness] not only speaks to her acute despair and sense of hopelessness, but it is furthermore an attempt at protecting her own sense of self from fragmentation, which in its severity has the potential to resemble a psychotic state. In other words, Lenore’s need for somebody to confirm her feelings of torment as “natural” and understandable is so gravely denied that she has to turn to her own ego to have her inner reality confirmed in the outside world, or else she will go insane.

“O Mutter, Mutter! Eitler Wahn!  
Gott hat an mir nicht wohlgetan!  
Was half, was half mein Beten?  
Nun ist’s nicht mehr vonnöten”—

“Out, mother, out, on the empty lie!  
Doth he heed my despair,—doth he list to my cry?  
What boots it now to hope or to pray?  
The night is come,—there is no more day.”

A more literal, albeit much less elegant, translation of this stanza from the German will speak to this point more clearly:

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“Ah, where is the chamber, William dear,  
And William, where is the bed?”  
“Far, far from here: still, narrow, and cool;  
Plank and bottom and lid.”  
“Hast room for me?”—“For me and thee;  
Up, up to the saddle right speedily!  
The wedding-guests are gathered and met,  
And the door of the chamber is open set” (Rossetti’s translation).

6 See his *Säkularisation als sprachbildende Kraft, Studien zur Dichtung deutscher Pfarrersöhne*.

"O mother, mother! It is mere madness!  
God has not treated me well!  
What did all my praying help?  
Now it is no longer necessary."

The empathic failure that Lenore experiences from her mother is transferred and experienced as an empathic failure from God. Her despair is derived from the prohibition to express her disappointment in how God has determined her fate, and the consequential accusation of sinning against God by making her frustration known. With her mother denying Lenore the expression of her pain and despair at having been unjustly and unfairly punished, Lenore's acute sense of hopelessness, loneliness, and abandonment in the world becomes intensified. Since the mother's instructions for her daughter rely on church dogmatism rather than an individualistic, personal relationship with God, her words of consolation remain formulaic and conventional. The daughter does not feel understood and mirrored by her mother, and subsequently she must reject her lack of empathy and distanced stance, along with the religious convention accompanying them. As a result, one could understand Lenore's "wild and unruly" behavior as a rebellion against the conventions of her mother's generation and the need to free and detach herself from those in order to enable the development of a self-sustaining individuality. Lenore demands the right for an individualized and personalized fulfillment.

Taken a step further, God is not only the father in heaven but also a father figure in a more literal sense. He takes the place of the father who is not present, and who has long been absent. It appears to be an inescapable reality that the same fate awaits Lenore with the loss of her lover as it had been the case for her mother: a life prematurely focused on salvation in the hereafter and deprived of sensual and erotic fulfillment, the result of an all too early widowhood. The mother had been deprived of a life with a husband, and the daughter of a life with a father. For the mother, God had become a substitute husband, and in that sense God is also a substitute father for Lenore. Whether bloody warfare took the father away from Lenore just as it took her lover is not explicitly stated. The experience of loss, however, is nevertheless pervasive in "Lenore." Anger and rage are emotions inseparably connected with the helplessness and frustration of loss. The target of this anger is the lost person, but since the frustration is no longer directly expressible it becomes transferred to a substitute person or an imago. The "father who helps the children" has not been there for Lenore and is not there now.

The experience of loss and the subsequent complexities of the mourning process are constant and recurrent themes in the ballad to such a degree that the reader must view them as extending beyond the vicissitudes of mourning the death of a loved one. After the mother's unsuccessful attempt at consoling her daughter with the promise of God's goodness, she hopes to divert Lenore's thoughts by accusing William of unfaithfulness conjuring up the stereotype of the sexually promiscuous gypsy woman:

“Hör Kind! Wie, wenn der falsche Mann  
Im fernen Ungarlande  
Sich seines Glaubens abgetan  
Zum neuen Ehebande?”

“What if the traitor’s false faith failed,  
By sweet temptation tried,—  
What if in distant Hungary  
He clasp another bride?—”

However, for Lenore the experience of loss is equally painful whether it is due to her lover’s infidelity or due to his death.

“O Mutter! Mutter! Hin ist hin!  
Verloren ist verloren!”

“Oh! mother, mother! gone is gone,  
And lost will still be lost!”

The intensity of the feelings she experiences as a result of her loss is so overwhelming that instantly all hope withers. Suicidal ideation is the immediate and only resolution for Lenore:

Lisch aus, mein Licht, auf ewig aus!  
Stirb hin, stirb hin in Nacht und Graus!

Spark of my life! down, down to the tomb:  
Die away in the night, die away in the gloom!

But well before this crucial point, the theme of loss and grief is introduced in the very first lines of the ballad. Lenore awakes early in the morning, troubled and unsettled by disturbing dreams (“aus schweren Träumen”). She worries that Wilhelm has been unfaithful or that he is dead since he has not written in so long. That her mother should later use her daughter’s deepest fears as a way to distract Lenore from her impious thought, blaming her lover of infidelity, only further reveals how painfully alone Lenore is. For Lenore, the grieving process does not begin with the return of Wilhelm’s regiment. The anticipatory grief that Bürger so artfully places at the very beginning of his ballad not only underscores the intensity and inescapability of Lenore’s suffering, but it also constitutes the emotional field out of which the entire ballad arises, a field of prolonged loss and deprivation. Suicidal ideation then is the solution to a life that has become unbearable over time and not the spontaneous reaction to a sudden, acute experience of loss.

The manner in which Bürger portrays Lenore’s affect, her intense reaction to her loss in the form of violent outbursts and fits of despair, seems to be shaped by what we have since come to describe as typical gestures of ‘Storm and Stress’ sentiment. Yet, Lenore’s affect does not strike us as overly indulgent, as exaggerated or contrived. On the contrary, the affect that she displays elicits compassion and sympathy, so much that it feels rather appropriate as a grief reaction to loss even today in a rationalized world where moderation of affect and self-control are valued,



and where we admire a "courageous" attitude, which allows us quickly to get over a loss and go on with our lives. Almost exactly a century after Bürger had written "Lenore," Charles Darwin describes the physical aspects of the grief reaction in his 1872 work *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (80–81; 178–97). The similarities between the two are striking.

Als nun das Heer vorüber war,  
Zerraupte sie ihr Rabenhaar,  
Und warf sich hin zur Erde,  
Mit wütiger Gebärde.

She tore her black hair,  
And furiously threw herself to the ground.<sup>7</sup>

So wütete Verzweiflung  
Ihr in Gehirn und Adern.  
Sie fuhr mit Gottes Vorsehung  
Vermessen fort zu hadern;  
Zerschlug den Busen, und zerrang  
Die Hand, bis Sonnenuntergang,

Thus grief racked and tore the breast of Lenore,  
And busy was her brain;  
Thus rose her cry to the Power on high,  
To question and arraign:  
Wringing her hands and beating her breast,—  
Tossing and rocking without any rest;—

For his part, Darwin describes the early grief reaction as being characterized by much muscular hyperactivity such as hand-wringing, aimless wild walking, and hair- and clothes-pulling, then going on to interpret this behavior as a sign of impotence that the bereaved feels to undo the death that has just occurred. This frantic movement changes when the realization sets in that nothing can be done, whereupon deep sorrow and despair follow (Pollock 152).

Lenore's repeatedly stated wish to die, "for her light to be put out forever," is the expression of such acute despair and intense sense of hopelessness. As suicidologist Edwin Shneidman points out in his study *Comprehending Suicide*, hopelessness and helplessness play a major role in the "internal mental drama," which in turn is "surrounded by a syllogism that sees only escape as the acceptable solution." Yet, this desire for death is not without a strong feeling of guilt. Self-inflicted death was, and still is, a taboo. Church dogma described suicide as a sin, the law as a crime. Thus we find alternative depictions of suicide in many of the folk tales and popular songs and poems. One need only remember the scandal surrounding Goethe's *Werther* published only one year after Bürger's "Lenore" to appreciate this point. "Lenore"

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7 My own translation here, which is concerned not with style, but rather with an accurate rendering of the image and the portrayal of Lenore's affect. From this perspective, Rossetti's translation is thus misleading: "She tore her hair and she turned her round,/And madly she dashed her against the ground."

is no exception in that sense for Bürger calls on the specter groom from oral folk tradition who comes and takes his bride away with him into his grave rather than explicitly making Lenore the agent of her death.

Nevertheless, the ballad not only reveals Lenore's wish to die but it also exposes her feelings of guilt and shame associated with the actual physical execution of this desire. Lenore anticipates her own dying experience to be ghastly, full of horror—not unlike how death and life in hell of those deemed sinners are depicted in medieval liturgy and the graphic works of the medieval painter Hieronymus Bosch.

Lisch aus mein Licht, auf ewig aus!  
Stirb hin, stirb hin in Nacht und Graus!

Spark of my life! down, down to the tomb:  
Die away in the night, die away in the gloom!

This “Graus,” this “horror,” then echoes throughout the rest of the ballad as the specter horseman rides through the night with Lenore as his prey.<sup>8</sup>

“Graut Liebchen auch? ... Der Mond scheint hell!  
Hurra! Die Toten reiten schnell!  
Graut Liebchen auch vor Toten?”—

“What ails my love? the moon shines bright:  
Bravely the dead men ride through the night.  
Is my love afraid of the quiet dead?”

These lines, which the specter horseman repeats three times during the frightening ride, have an ironic, mocking if not contemptuous quality to them, as if he were laughing at Lenore's ignorance for having followed him. Lenore can only react with denial to his sardonic question, which allows her to contain her fear for the time being: “Ach nein! ... Doch lass die Toten.” [Ah no, but leave the dead alone.] The dreadful ride ends in a grave, which swallows up the couple. This scoffing voice can be understood as the voice that comes from deep within Lenore's self as she gives in to her longing for death. And as she fades, she is surrounded one last time by those hectoring voices that live within her as the result of her cultural milieu, her moralistic references, to speak in Freud's terms of the moralizing effect of superego functions. Thus, unlike what other interpreters suggest, the final lines do not represent Bürger's moralistic point of view, which would oddly contrast with his empathic, sympathetic narrative voice, but rather they give expression to the non-empathic climate with which Lenore is confronted in an environment where church dogma is substituted for *caritas* and the bereaved is left without consolation and hope.

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8 Rossetti translates the German noun “Graus” with “gloom” for the purpose of maintaining rhyme and rhythm. “Graus,” however, is better translated with “horror,” which is of important interpretative significance here.

“Geduld! Geduld! Wenn’s Herz auch bricht!  
Mit Gott im Himmel hadre nicht!  
Des Leibes bist du ledig;  
Gott sei der Seele gnädig!”

“Patience, patience, when the heart is breaking;  
With thy God there is no question-making;  
Of thy body thou art quit and free:  
Heaven keep thy soul eternally!”

Grief after loss is a fundamental human experience that defies any moralistic or ideological self-righteousness. Therein the ballad’s widespread appeal emerges, as well as the unusual and hence popular effect that was so important to its poet.