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Cantos 3 and 4

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# EXPERIMENTS IN THE NARRATIVE OF CONSCIOUSNESS: BYRON, WORDSWORTH, AND *CHILDE HAROLD*, CANTOS 3 AND 4

BY JAMES L. HILL

## I

Byron, in so many ways the nineteenth century's popular model for the new poetry, is also a prototype for the struggle to revitalize the long poem and to rescue the narrative from prose fiction. His *oeuvre* provides the external evidence that he shared his contemporaries' conviction that the long poem was still the great test of a poet's powers; what is perhaps not so obvious is the degree to which he recognized the difficulties involved in extended verse narrative. Looking backward to Milton and Spenser might lead to that sense of futility implied in the pygmy/giant metaphor. At the same time, an awareness of the growing dominance of the lyric might suggest that the more public and objective traditional narrative forms were becoming passé, inadequate, or even irrelevant for the new poetics.

This double awareness informs Byron's two major long poems, *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan*. Both are Janus-faced, looking back with an acute self-consciousness at the romance and the epic, while looking forward with a very different kind of self-consciousness toward modern, psychological concerns that were quickly finding their home in the novel. *Childe Harold*, Byron's first experiment in serious narrative, already in its first two cantos betrays a tension between the demands of objective narration and subjective impulse. Although we are made constantly aware of a decorum by which Byron attempts to keep narrator and Harold separate, the critical distance between the two is not always strictly maintained, and it slips occasionally into ambiguity or real confusion. By canto 3, however, Harold has become at most a shadow figure, and by canto 4 he has virtually disappeared, leaving the subjective Byronic consciousness in possession of the rest of the poem.

If the relationship between an objective, external “narrative” world through which the pilgrim passes, and the subjective, interior “lyric” world of the narrator himself creates much of the vitality of *Harold*, it should not surprise us that Wordsworth’s response to the third canto was to view it as plagiarism, and to point to his own “‘Tintern Abbey’ as the source of it all.”<sup>1</sup> The closeness of *Harold* to “Tintern Abbey” is most obvious in the rather sudden transformation of the urbane citizen of the world who narrates the first two cantos into the Wordsworthian landscape artist of the last two. Somewhat subtler is the link between Byron and his little daughter, Ada, that adumbrates the relationship between Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy. If these instances marked the extent of Byron’s plagiarizing, we could call them the borrowings of the immature poet. Of far greater import is what Byron, as a maturing poet, steals with so deft a hand, then flaunts with such flamboyance throughout the last two cantos. Here are not merely the Wordsworthian subject matter of man and nature, but also the Wordsworthian perspective, in which “the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and the situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling.”<sup>2</sup> It is true that Wordsworth was not quite the first poet to reverse the ratio of feeling to action or situation; Coleridge’s “Conversation” poems antedated the *Lyrical Ballads*, and the literature of sensibility had already moved in that direction. But it is in Wordsworth that the new ratio comes of age, and when he singled out “Tintern Abbey” as the source of Byron’s “plagiarism,” he pointed to the most highly wrought and complex instance of the new perspective in the *Lyrical Ballads*.<sup>3</sup>

“Tintern Abbey” begins with feeling rather than with landscape; it is how Wordsworth has felt during his five years’ absence from the Wye valley that gives the scene its initial importance. The significance of the scene is entirely a function of his awareness, first, of what it has done for him in the past, then, of what it may do for him in the future, and finally, of how it may serve Dorothy. The direction of the poem is the movement of Wordsworth’s mind, looking before and after, through time. Even its spatial dimensions are fixed for the reader by perceptive acts of the speaker: “I am here,” “here I stand.” Nothing is presented as an external, objective, “given” to which the speaker responds. Instead, the scene grows, almost *ex nihilo*, as a creating act of the speaker’s consciousness, much as a painter fills an empty canvas. The presence of

human consciousness is certainly not new in "Tintern Abbey" but never before had the process of consciousness been so overwhelmingly both subject of a poem and constitutive of its form.

However genially Byron himself may have ridiculed Wordsworth in *Don Juan* and the much earlier "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers," imitation remains the sincerest form of flattery, and it is Byron's appropriation of the Wordsworthian perspective in the second half of *Childe Harold* that both liberates the poem from the awkwardly worn conventions of its first two cantos and brings us to the real relationship between the two poets. Byron, indeed, did more than follow in the master's footsteps; he outran him and extended the process of consciousness to a length that even Wordsworth had not yet publicly achieved.

"Tintern Abbey" is a meditative lyric, and because we expect emotional intensity in the lyric, we may not be particularly aware of the degree to which Wordsworth has reversed the old ratio of feeling to situation. However, in a poem in which feeling and situation do not form the coordinates of an isolated moment of consciousness, as in a lyric, but occur instead in a sequence of events in a narrative biography of consciousness, as in *Childe Harold* (and of course, in Wordsworth's *Prelude*), formal problems begin to obtrude themselves. *Childe Harold* cannot rely on the older coherence of epic "great argument," or of romance narrative conceived "to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline," because the pilgrimage of Harold is not explicitly directed toward the illumination of a difficult concept nor of the virtuous life.

*Childe Harold* cuts itself away not only from the ordering of argument or external narrative, but even from an imaginatively projected fictive landscape through which the pilgrim may pass. Both Milton and Spenser assumed as a given an objective truth lying beyond the mind but approachable by it, and that assumption is a part of their poetics. Milton's landscapes of hell, earth, and heaven, and Spenser's Faerieland provide a sensuous and concrete world, a local habitation in which theological and moral ideas may be embodied to act out their meanings. But Byron's Europe exists only as it is perceived, and when it ceases to be the object of perception it recedes and disappears. While heaven and hell have an existence that does not depend on our perception of them, Europe, as one component of the poetic consciousness, vir-

tually loses its external existence and functions as a trope for the mind in its fluid movement.

Byron's first audience—with the exceptions of Shelley and Wordsworth himself—was probably not aware of Byron's appropriation of Wordsworth's aesthetics in *Harold* 3 and 4. What is surprising about canto 3 is not that it was a popular success, but that Byron's appropriation of Wordsworth's aesthetics of consciousness is so authoritative from the very beginning of the new canto. The first two cantos of *Childe Harold* had opened with invocations, the first to the Muse, the second to Athena, and both invocations established perspectives measuring a dwindled modern world against a larger past. The third canto opens on an entirely new note. As in "Tintern Abbey," we are immediately within the mind of the speaker, and the image conjured up is that of the face of his daughter, Ada, as Byron confronts his irrevocable separation from his own child, a division all the more painful because irremediable. Byron's anguish is modern in Matthew Arnold's sense; it takes the form of a mental dialogue that is circular and unending, in Arnold's famous phrase, "a continuous state of mental distress . . . in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done."<sup>4</sup>

One obvious method for coping with an apparently endless mental crisis is to displace it by a shift in attention, and Byron does so in the middle of the first stanza, establishing a disjunctive pattern that will continue through the third and fourth cantos. The formula is to displace awareness of self with awareness of environment, and the famous dangling participle that introduces the strategy, "Awaking with a start, / The waters heave around me,"<sup>5</sup> while it may be Byronic carelessness or impatience with revision, is nevertheless precise in conveying the momentary confusion of self and other that such a disjunction frequently causes. In a sense, the waters "wake" because they become the object of Byron's attention, and he immediately begins to appropriate them as symbols in a pictorial representation of the current condition of his life.

This portrait, or self-definition, which occupies the first sixteen stanzas of canto 3, is in effect Byron's dark inversion of the first two verse paragraphs of "Tintern Abbey." In both poems, after introductions that take place within the speaker's consciousness there is a movement outward to landscape, carefully prepared by Wordsworth, sudden in Byron. This outward turn is immediately fol-

lowed by a shift into an autobiographical past, the memory of which has been triggered by the scene, which is then used to give direction to the autobiography. In Wordsworth's case, the Edenic landscape of the Wye valley, as a therapeutic memory to which he could turn in moments of stress, provides a theoretical basis for understanding his present self, a conception of identity that includes physiological, moral, and philosophical elements as the principal constituents of personality. The theory proposed is an idealized environmental psychology that can be crudely reduced to the equation: good early natural environment = good and visionary Wordsworth.

With Byron, the seascape is not a recurring memory that aids him in the analysis of self. Instead, it is rapidly transformed into a metaphor through which he represents the chaos of his present emotional condition. That condition, like Wordsworth's, is understood as the result of past experience (in both poets, the child is father of the man), but in Byron's environmental psychology he presents himself as the victim of his early experience rather than as the recipient of its benign gifts. One could account for this inversion of Wordsworth's idealizing psychology by citing history—the difference in generations (which included Napoleon) separating the two poets, or biography—the negative residue of Byron's Calvinist upbringing. However we account for it, Byron is using a procedural strategy very much like Wordsworth's to present an environmental psychology that is the obverse of Wordsworth's in its insistence on the negative effects of environment on the development of personality, and on the virtual helplessness of the individual consciousness to shape or control its own development. Leslie Marchand's assertion that the so-called Wordsworthian stanzas of canto 3 are "un-Wordsworthian"<sup>6</sup> makes us aware that Byron is not slavishly aping Wordsworth, but it is perhaps more accurate to see much of the canto as anti-Wordsworthian.

Throughout the rest of the canto, scenes of historical significance and a variety of landscapes serve as external stimuli for the development of separate aspects of Byron's initial self-portrait. To the extent that Byron attends more to the process of psychological reaction than to qualities inherent in historical events and figures, or in landscape, he follows the trend of writers on aesthetics in the later eighteenth century, but Byron, like Wordsworth, goes far beyond the generalized psychology of such theorizing. His re-

sponses are meant to represent not only the typical but also the individual, so that, while we may recognize in the narrator certain distinct literary types—the man of feeling, the outcast, the rebel, the artist—the whole somehow exceeds the sum of its parts, and the narrator emerges as *sui generis*, a significant new note to which his first reviewers were sensitive.<sup>7</sup>

## II

As a poem taking the process of individual consciousness as its subject, *Childe Harold* is predominantly introspective, but, unlike Wordsworth's *Prelude*, it is not primarily retrospective.<sup>8</sup> Wordsworth's conception of psychological development allows him to adopt the pattern of "normal" narrative. His psychological assumption that identity may be recovered and defined by revivifying traumatic events or epiphanies from the past provides the narrative method, a method that was to become of crucial significance for the novel, and for psychoanalysis as well. Wordsworth's psychology is ontogenetic and teleological; his analysis of the development of personality in response to environment, both natural and social, assumes that the interaction of self and world is not a series of random collisions, but that it is purposive. Moreover, we are made to feel that these interactions are themselves formative in the maturing process, that nature participates in developing the self and can thus be called, as in "Tintern Abbey," "the nurse, / The guide, the guardian of my heart and soul / Of all my moral being." While his teleology differs from older conceptions of purposive nature (and we may assume that he is following Coleridge here<sup>9</sup>), the teleological assumption itself leads inevitably into the inquiry into sequence, and thus to traditional narrative form, as the appropriate mode for answering the question, "was it for this?" The inquiry is developed to its fullest in *The Prelude*, but it is already clearly defined in "Tintern Abbey," in which Wordsworth is poised between retrospective self-analysis and prediction.

The fact that *Childe Harold* is predominantly in the present tense—and Byron shifts from past to historical present even in such set pieces as Waterloo and the dying gladiator—ought to suggest that his conception of consciousness or identity demands a narrative method radically different from Wordsworth's chronological sequence. The question with which the poem begins, "Is thy face like thy mother's, my fair child!" (3.1) is not one that needs a story to provide its answer. It is more in the mode of dramatic

irony: Ada's appearance belies whatever identity she shares with her father, a genetic joke that will repeat itself whenever he calls her face to mind.

The present tense, as a narrative tense, is the tense of drama, imitating events as they occur. The lyric, too, tends toward the present tense, as a brief review of first lines will suggest, and while we customarily think of drama as the most objective of poetic modes, and of lyric as the most subjective, we may at the same time think of them as related by their polarity, or as involved with different aspects of that polarity. Both are concerned with the immediacy of a situation; in drama, the situation leads to action as a response to the situation, as, in *Oedipus*, the plague as a situation gives rise to Oedipus's search for a remedy. In a lyric, the situation leads to meditation or contemplation, that is, toward the affective, rather than the effective, quality of the situation. That the situation may provoke either response is shown most clearly in opera, or at least nineteenth-century opera, where situations of great dramatic tension frequently resolve not into action propelling forward movement but into aria, which arrests objective dramatic movement, bringing the subjective, inner world of the character before us. (The virtually obligatory mad scene is merely the most extreme instance of this shift from objective drama to subjective lyric.)

Wordsworth's inquiry into the self through the examination of the past seems, on the face of it, close to the psychological assumptions about the development of personality that have been part of our own conceptions of human behavior since Freud (although it is well to remember that Wordsworth's psychology has a transcendental bias that points backward to older ideas about the nature of reality), and he was able to use traditional narrative with immense subtlety and power for revolutionary psychological purposes. Byron, on the other hand, presents us with a psychology that defines itself in dramatic or lyric terms, centering on the experience as it occurs and on the unpredictable but significant direction of the mind's response to the experience.

The first historical episode of canto 3, the stanzas on Waterloo that follow Byron's initial self-portrait, establishes a psychological pattern that, with variations, will govern the movement of the poem. Like the abrupt shift from subjective crisis to external nature in the opening stanza, Waterloo is introduced disjunctively, breaking in upon a meditation that has reached a point of exhaustion, and, while it will quickly turn into a moral *topos* of "the paths



of glory lead but to the grave” variety, it enters first as a *trouv * that startles the narrator out of his self-absorption. Byron’s initial response to Waterloo is frequently called rhetorical in the bad sense of rhetoric masquerading as poetry, and the rhetorical character of stanzas 17 through 20 cannot be denied. On the other hand, rhetoric of this kind, the sublime or the terrible, has as its function the stimulation of an appropriate emotional response and it is plausible to see it here as a rhetoric of self-persuasion, the intention of which is to bring the emotions of the speaker himself to the proper pitch of intensity.

These four initial stanzas consider the battle from four distinct but related perspectives: first, that no monument could do justice to the horror of the event; second, that power is by nature transitory and vain; third, that the defeat of Napoleon merely replaced one kind of tyranny with another; and finally, that those who died heroically achieved nothing by their deaths. All these are standard responses to the effect of war and tyranny, but it is the last, touching on the participants in the conflict, that finally stimulates Byron into the dramatic re-creation of the Duchess of Richmond’s ball on the eve of the battle, and it is in this dramatization that the process of psychological individualization begins.

Byron’s presentation of the battle brings the participants to life and shows them in action, but its drama goes beyond mere vivification. As a sequence, it follows a pattern of recognition, reversal, and catastrophe, so that its energy assumes the rhythm of tragedy. The condition of ironic awareness with which canto 3 opens is renewed and deepened in the sudden shifts from confidence to fear and from pleasure to horror as the first sounds of the cannon break in upon the revelers. The general slaughter is then particularized in the futile heroics of the Duke of Brunswick and Byron’s own distant relative, Frederick Howard, and this leads to a meditation on the psychological effects such deaths have upon the heroes’ survivors. All this is presented vividly, but it is prelude to Byron’s real interest, the enigmatic and incommensurate character of Napoleon, the cause, of which the battle is the dramatic effect.

The idea that character is fate comes initially from dramatic theory; character reveals or realizes itself through acts, and the interrelationship of these acts fulfills the destiny of character. In classical dramatic theory, character and its destiny are conceived within a moral framework—we may remember that Aristotle insists that a tragic hero be neither completely good nor completely

evil, but of a mixed nature; otherwise, the result will not be tragedy, but justice or injustice. From Byron's point of view, Napoleon's destiny is also the result of his mixed nature, but Byron explicitly substitutes psychological for moral considerations. In fact, morality as a category for judging or understanding Napoleon and his effect upon Europe is dismissed with Byron's opening line, "There sunk the greatest, nor the worst of men" (3.316). Napoleon's moral nature is evidently neither better nor worse than that of other men, so the source of the tragedy must be sought elsewhere.

Byron's commentators have been quick to see strong similarities between his characterization of Napoleon and Byron's own self-portrait that opens the canto. In both, the effort to arrive at a coherent or consistent definition of personality is vitiated because the self appears to be a mass of contradictions or extreme antitheses, a field of conflicting energies without a nucleus. In the portrait of Napoleon, these energies form a series of ironic and contrary movements leading up to and causing the historical catastrophe of Waterloo, and in the final stanzas of the section to Byron's conclusion that Napoleon was his own worst enemy, the victim of psychic energies that cancelled each other out, or at least could not be directed toward any meaningful end. The final import of the portrait is one of exhaustion and confusion, of force that spends itself only to come up against a blank wall. This much is clear, of course, even from a casual reading of the Waterloo stanzas.

At least two aspects of Byron's study of Napoleon merit further attention, however. The first of these is that Byron shifts tenses from the past and the historical present of the battle itself to an almost pure present for his characterization of Napoleon. Napoleon's psychology is generated out of a progressive meditation that moves back and forth between lyric projections of states of consciousness and dramatic presentation of conflicting motives and energies. Susanne Langer's distinction between the present tenses common to lyric and dramatic art may be of use to us here, because Byron is concerned in this portrait with two different but related issues: first, to isolate the unique character of Napoleon, and second, to move beyond the individual to the class of which Napoleon is a particular example. Langer's point is that the present tense of drama is pregnant with futurity, or that it is a causal present, while the present tense of lyric tends to universal-

ize the subjective experience and to move it toward the condition of being, making it an atemporal present.<sup>10</sup> What is peculiar to Napoleon is presented dramatically; his nature is seen as his particular destiny unfolds through time: personality is fate. At the same time, however, Napoleon is not a *lusus naturae*, consoling as that notion might be. He belongs to the class of “unquiet things,” whose particular differences may lead them to be, variously, “Conquerors and Kings, / Founders of sects and systems . . . / Sophists, Bards, Statesmen” (3.380–82), but all of whom are possessed by “a fire / And motion of the soul which will not dwell / In its own narrow being, but aspire / Beyond the fitting medium of desire” (3.371–74).

In both portraits, what emerges finally is not so much a sense of character composed of irremediable contradictions as a sense of psychic energy that must expend itself, like a force in nature, whatever the consequences. As a “fact” of personality, this force, like any fact of nature, is removed from moral categorization. In Byron’s self-portrait, such energy displays itself in creativity, while the portrait of Napoleon shows its consequences as destruction or “contagion.” If we may borrow Coleridge’s terms, these are the two types of genius, commanding and absolute, both of which are manifestations of psychic energy setting the possessors apart from other men. I find no evidence that Byron had read *The Statesman’s Manual*, where Coleridge defines commanding genius, using Napoleon as an illustration; certainly *The Statesman’s Manual* is a good example of the sort of Coleridgean complexity that would have put Byron off, and I would be extremely surprised to find that, even had he looked at it, he would have been moved to read it all, much less to read appendix C, in which the discussion of commanding genius occurs. But Byron was familiar with “Kubla Khan,” a poem, according to John Beer, concerned with the distinction between commanding and absolute genius, and what interested Byron most in the poem was its psychology.<sup>11</sup>

For Coleridge, commanding genius, when combined with pride, deifies the self; as Byron says of Napoleon, “thou wert / A god unto thyself; nor less the same / To the astounded kingdoms all inert / Who deem’d thee for a time whate’er thou didst assert” (3.330–33). Coleridge regards such self-deification as the mark of Satanic pride, confusing the power to command with the power to create, a confusion that will necessarily lead to self-bafflement. As in the case of Kubla Khan, it seeks to order chaos by superim-

posing form, and the relationship it establishes is one of master to slave. When such a psychology asserts itself in the human community, it takes the form of tyranny, establishing and maintaining superiority through fear; when it acts in the natural world, it is technology, manipulating a material world that it sees as inferior to itself. In both instances, the misuse of energy stems from an inability to understand the self. If we are not convinced that Byron's psychological conception of Napoleon is extremely close to Coleridge's idea of commanding genius, stronger evidence is provided by *Manfred*, where Byron once again shifts from moral to psychological categories, in effect rewriting the Faust legend in psychological terms, and creating in *Manfred* himself a psychological portrait that follows the implications of commanding genius to extremely Coleridgean conclusions.

What links Byron and Napoleon is the presence of an overwhelming energy that must express itself and the recognition of internal contradictions; what separates them is the mode in which these energies reveal themselves. That distinction, it seems to me, is crucial, because it keeps us from regarding Byron's portrait of Napoleon either as unalloyed hero-worship or as a kind of wish fulfilment in which Napoleon represents what Byron would really like to be, and also because it directs us to pay attention to the poem as a means of expressing Byron's imaginative energy, and to ask ourselves to what degree the poem vindicates or denies his own conception of the nature and function of creativity.

Byron articulates this concept in the fifth and sixth stanzas of canto 3, in the midst of the self-portrait with which the canto opens. Because the portrait is unfolded during the process of ongoing thought, rather than presented as its considered product, we may not treat it as if it were a consistently held or thoroughly worked out theory of creativity. It may or may not be; the manner of Byron's presentation provides no evidence either way. I would suggest, however, that the structural dynamics of the poem provides us with some evidence that Byron at least used this theory as a compositional strategy for the last two cantos, just as Wordsworth's theory of psychological development is represented by the structural dynamics of "Tintern Abbey."

But Byron, like Wordsworth, is not concerned merely with consciousness. They are both also concerned with what we might call a heightened consciousness, visionary moments characterized by an energy that expresses itself through creativity. Just as their ac-

counts of consciousness differ, so their descriptions of creativity point in virtually opposite directions. Wordsworth's descriptions of the access of creative or imaginative energy in *The Prelude* and "Tintern Abbey" suggest that he thought of the imagination as a power that penetrates through the visible world of appearances to something beyond it, and that transforms the world into a symbolic representation of that "something." Byron's description is couched in terms of a withdrawal from external appearance, an act by which the mind realizes itself rather than something beyond the physical world.

Byron describes the beginning of the urge to create as a recoil from the accumulated experience of a "world of woe," a retreat to the refuge of the mind and its remembered images, which he describes in Shelleyesque language as a "cave" or "cell." (We may recall here Shelley's "cave of the witch Poesy," from "Mont Blanc," composed in the same year as canto 3 and concerned entirely with mental process.) Neither the source nor the particular character of these remembered images is described; our knowledge of them is only that they are "unimpaired, though old," and we may only speculate that they are either memories of innocence untainted by later experience, or images from an idealized poetry that remain untouched by actuality. Whatever their origins, it is in their presence that creativity may begin, and creativity appears to be a power that both vivifies and essentializes the creator. The relationship between the poet and his creations may at first suggest the reciprocity of Wordsworth's statement concerning the relationship between man and nature in "Tintern Abbey," "what [we] half create / And what perceive," or Coleridge's more radical "we receive but what we give, / And in our life alone does Nature live," except that Byron limits the notion of reciprocity to the relationship between the poet and his images, rather than to the larger relationship between poet and environment.

This limitation provides another clue to the difference between Byron's psychology and Wordsworth's, and may also help to explain the necessity behind their differing methods of exposition. In Wordsworth, identity is the creation of self and environment, and in the famous passage in "Home at Grasmere," it is the spousal of man and nature that not only confirms the reality of each in a unified identity but also reifies the narrative past as something other than mere, or pure, fiction. If mind, or self, and universe are not exquisitely fitted one to the other, the possibility emerges that

what the mind regards as memory may only be the mind's creation, and that the past may be only fictive, a haunting vision of solipsism.

In Byron, however, there is no suggestion that the mind verifies its images or its fictions by referring them to the external world; on the contrary, the implication of the passage is that the act of the mind in giving form to its contents energizes and vitalizes the self, "gaining, as we give / The life we image" (3.48–49). The act of creation gives life and establishes identity. It also elevates the self transcendently, giving it visionary power, and restoring the life of feeling as well. While one might make a case for these stanzas as being merely the withdrawal of the bruised cynic to a vantage of vicarious observation, the energy of the passage is anything but cynical ("Yet I must think less wildly" [3.55]), and the episode on Waterloo that follows immediately exemplifies the process in which the mind withdraws from or surmounts external reality (the field of Waterloo and its history), and seeks to realize itself by giving poetic form to its fancies.

### III

The most carefully worked out example of Byron's assumptions about psychology and creativity occurs in the long section on Venice with which the fourth canto opens. Virtually all of the suppositions about mental process we have noticed, as well as the strategy of lyrico-dramatic presentation, are brought together in these stanzas. The section begins in a way similar to the opening of canto 3, and the assertion of poetic consciousness is made immediately in the famous (and grammatically incorrect) first lines, "I stood in Venice, on the Bridge of Sighs; / A palace and a prison on each hand" (4.1–2). Venice appears, as we would expect, not as a given external object but as a creation, almost *ex nihilo*, of the mind, appearing "As from the stroke of the enchanter's wand" (4.4); the physical city is a creation of the Venetian imagination, and for Byron it becomes a city of the mind, inhabited either by its great historical figures, or by purely imaginary beings, the creations of Shakespeare, Otway, Radcliffe, and Schiller.

Even more than Waterloo, Venice becomes a particularly rich symbol for the play of Byron's imagination, which, as it traces out the possibilities inherent in the city as symbol, will finally transform it into a metaphor for the uncontrollable process of thought. Just as the landscape that opens "Tintern Abbey" acts for Words-

worth as a “spot of time,” a physical location that allows him to explore past, present, and future, so Venice as a physical locus opens into the past, and, through the process implicit in history, into the future as well. Venice’s history is one of power and its decay, and that history evokes from Byron first a sense of nostalgia for what the city once was, and then melancholy at what the city now is, an extinct republic under Austrian domination.<sup>12</sup> But the magic of Venice, “the stroke of the enchanter’s wand,” is that, while it may have been created through power and wealth, it is still incomparably beautiful, a work of art whose power is undiminished, existing beyond its history just as a work of art exists beyond its creator.

It is significant that Byron’s knowledge of Venice began long before he set foot in it: “I lov’d her from my boyhood—she to me / Was as a fairy city of the heart” (4.154–55); and it is not to any history of the city that he refers but to the Venice of the poets, whose geographical outposts are set by Portia’s Belmont and Othello’s Cyprus. These, indeed, may be those images, “unimpaired though old,” that live in the mind, untouched by actuality, “Beings of the mind,” to be recalled as the mind turns inward from a “world of woe.” From the opening of the canto, we are led gradually inward, from the physical city to the mental city and finally into a meditation upon the activity of mind itself, and from history to art to the creative process at its most intense and active. It is to this movement that I now wish to turn.

The palace and the prison of the opening lines define the directions Byron will follow throughout the section. The palace is at once the center of government and the emblem of power, pointing to the city’s history. Bereft of that power, it remains hauntingly beautiful, a work of art whose present power is imaginative rather than physical. The prison, too, points to the city’s history and its power; moreover, in the historical present, the beautiful city is also the beautiful captive. The prison as palace reverses itself as the palace as prison, and they are linked by the Bridge of Sighs. In the first seventeen stanzas of the section, Byron develops these two aspects of the city, its changing historical fortunes counterpointed against its physical beauty, but gradually the historical city recedes, and the city of the imagination occupies Byron’s whole attention.

As in the stanzas on Napoleon, Byron establishes a parallel between himself and the city, or rather, the city comes increasingly

to mirror him. The city's history is to the city as Byron's past is to Byron, and just as the city has suffered ironically because of its political power and importance, so Byron sees his own past as the result of ironic process: "The thorns which I have reaped are of the tree / I planted,—they have torn me,—and I bleed: / I should have known what fruit would spring from such a seed" (4.88–90). But the beauty of the city is also the product of its past, and it endures. Even so, Byron's memories of the city as he knew it in childhood, when it existed for him purely as an idealized image in the mind, endure; they have only to be called forth to repeople the city, and to recreate for him not only a life for the city but also some of the happiest moments of his own life. The ability of the mind to preserve such images and to recall them at will brings together the two aspects of the city Byron had previously stressed, its power and its beauty, and together they create an image of vital endurance outlasting circumstance and thriving under conditions of adversity.

With the twentieth stanza, we are no longer in Venice but in the Alps; the transition is abrupt, but Byron wants an image of vital persistence in terms of power rather than beauty. The conditions under which the Tannen grow are adverse in the extreme; rooted in virtually barren soil at high altitude, subject to the violence of Alpine storms, they not only grow but also become trees grand enough to be "worthy of the mountains" from which they spring. Finally, at the end of the stanza, the fact that the Tannen exemplify the power of the mind to endure whatever traumatic events it encounters is made—"the mind may grow the same."

The next three stanzas are a generalizing meditation that turns from Byron's assessment of his own psychological resilience to mankind's ability to endure as does the species of the Tannen. While the previous stanzas had stressed the transience of past happiness, a melancholy derived from the temporal decay of the city but modified by its beauty, these stanzas account for the development of an attitude of Stoic fortitude by stating that negative circumstances are just as much a transitive condition of temporal process as positive ones: "All suffering doth destroy, or is destroy'd / Even by the sufferer; and, in each event / Ends . . ." (4.190–92).

Byron's assertion that particular experiences of pleasure and pain are transient is of course true, and it is not new; it is a part of Gertrude's reproof to the ostentatiously mourning Hamlet near the beginning of the play, and Matthew Arnold's version of Soph-



ocle's tragic perception of life, as "the turbid ebb and flow / Of human misery" equates it with classic realism.<sup>13</sup> The quality of that truth, however, is measured by Hamlet's response to Gertrude, "Ay, madam, it is common."

But stanzas 23 and 24 tumble what now appears to have been a comfortable but fragile house of cards. If the stanzas on endurance had speculated that the conscious mind, by seeing life "steadily and . . . whole," has the capacity to fortify itself against external shock, these stanzas posit an activity of mind over which consciousness has no control whatever, and by which it may be victimized at any time. A chance stimulus may set off a memory that acts "like a scorpion's sting." Thus, while consciousness may control and direct one kind of memory, the mind is not by any means its own master, and against the kind of purposive relationship between mind and environment that Wordsworth posits for his psychology, Byron introduces a random factor both uncontrollable and crippling in its effect—"the lightning of the mind," against which consciousness is powerless. The very randomness in Byron's list of apparently innocent stimuli—"A tone of music,—summer's eve—or spring, / A flower—the wind—the ocean—" (4.205–6) reduces the possibility of a purposive relationship between self and world; such stimuli merely restore to consciousness the mind's own traumatic content, just as Venice in a more obvious way restores the memory of childhood happiness. Whatever meaning they may or may not have in themselves, their significance here is that they have become embedded in a private symbolism of suppressed trauma. If Wordsworth is proto-Freudian in his conception of the development of personality as a narrative process, Byron's insight points in the direction of neurosis in his insistence that consciousness is unable to rid the mind of traumatic memory, and also is unable either to predict or to control that memory's reappearance. The mind as palace becomes the mind as prison.

The insight of these two stanzas tells against the more comfortable notion of consciousness creating fortitude through the recognition of mutability in the previous stanzas, and it is dramatic in character. Drama begins by destabilizing what looks like a stable field through the intrusion of the unpredictable; Byron's introduction of traumatic memory destabilizes the comfortable theory of consciousness he had previously set forth; it recognizes the ironic and unpredictable element in the mind's activity, returning us to

uncertainty and ambivalence. A lyric generalization has led to a dramatic conclusion, and brings Byron's overt psychologizing to a baffling and uncomfortable end: once more, a state of mind in which there is nothing to be done and everything to be endured.

The concluding stanzas of the section begin according to the pattern we have noticed in the opening stanza. Byron turns outward from an evidently insoluble problem for fresh stimulus: "But my soul wanders; I demand it back / To meditate amongst decay, and stand / A ruin amidst ruins . . ." (4.217–19). What follows is at first a meditation on a beautiful but ruined Italy of which Venice is a microcosm, and as we would expect, collapsed power and enduring beauty give Italy its special quality. And once more, past, present, and future open out with particular poignance from an Italy seen as being, in Shelley's words, "beautiful as a wreck of Paradise."<sup>14</sup>

The section does not end with this meditation, however. It ends, instead, by turning from the Italy of art and history, and describes with great vividness and in great detail the sunset over the Venetian lagoon—perhaps the most beautiful, if not the most spectacular, sustained description of the natural world in all of Byron's poetry. What is remarkable about this description is that it is neither lyric nor reflective, but dramatic. Byron draws no conclusions from what he describes, nor does he present it as Wordsworth had presented the landscape in "Tintern Abbey." The beauty of the "Tintern" landscape is one of harmony—man fused with nature, land fused with sky, sound fused with sight. But in Byron's description, beauty is created through an *agon*, the contention of day and night for the possession of the lagoon. Night wins, of course, and day appears as the dying protagonist, in a simile that repeats *in parvo* the vividness of the sunset scene: "parting day / Dies like the dolphin, whom each pang imbues / With a new colour as it gasps away, / The last still loveliest, till —'tis gone—and all is gray" (4.258–61).

That there is a connection between these stanzas and the preceding ones; indeed, that the description of the sunset first as it literally appears, and then through the simile of the dolphin's rapid changes of color in its death agony, brings together all the elements of the Venice section, may not be obvious at a first reading. I would imagine that its first effect on the reader is that these stanzas are not a conclusion at all, but something more in the

nature of a necessary displacement of focus after Byron's meditation both on the city and mind have reached an impasse through which he is unable to break.

But the terms of the description are derived from Byron's meditation on the city, and on the powerful, uncontrollable, and irreversible character of the mind's process. The struggle of day and night is pictured as a power struggle as well as a temporal process. The struggle gives birth to a spectacular beauty, transforming the world in which it takes place and illuminating it with incredible intensity. If beauty and power are implied in the palace and prison with which the canto opens, they are brought explicitly before us in the dramatized sunset. Byron's particular way of seeing the sunset as struggle, conquest, and as a "natural" history of decay in which beauty reaches its apogee of intensity as it is being extinguished, derives its energy from the parallel courses of Venice considered historically and as a thing of beauty, and Byron's personal history as a ruin, but a ruin in which pure images are preserved permanently in the mind.

Drama defines character through conflict; as antagonist and protagonist engage each other, what implicit identity they possess becomes explicit through speech and action; the self is created by defining itself against the other. It seems also essential to drama, particularly to tragedy, that this act of self-definition is recognized both by the audience and by the character himself. In tragedy the act of self-definition is also one of self-completion; as identity is perfected it is also exhausted, for as it perfects itself it realizes all its possibilities.

Whether these considerations of tragedy hold for all tragedy, or are applicable to some and therefore half-truths at best, they appear to me to be appropriate both in relation to what Byron is saying in the Venice section, and in the movement of the section as well. The Venice on whose Bridge of Sighs Byron stands had defined itself and destroyed itself, and in so doing has changed from a living city to an imprisoned artifact or an image. Byron, drawing on the city, engages in an act of self-definition that finally, in realizing the degree to which the mind is limited in its control over the forces within it, comes to a tragic perception that mind is both palace and prison. Finally, the struggle for self-definition is recreated in all its splendor and pathos in the image of the dying day and the dying dolphin: identity becomes fully realized at the moment of dissolution.

In spite of its immense popularity, both with the public and with other artists, *Childe Harold* was a poem without immediate progeny. Byron himself must have felt either that he had for the moment exhausted the possibilities of the lyrico-dramatic narrative with cantos 3 and 4 or that his approach had led to a dead end, because he wrote nothing like it afterward. Instead he turned to drama, and to his equally complex and even more original manipulation of the traditional epic, *Don Juan*. While it is true that the century produced two later poetic masterpieces of extended psychological narrative, Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and Browning's *The Ring and the Book*, Byron did not succeed in saving the narrative from prose fiction, and his greatest influence is to be traced, ironically enough, in the Brontës, in Dickens, and in Hardy. In these novelists, Byron's influence appears principally in their responses to the Byronic hero, rather than in their treatment of narrative, and their novels are constructed according to the kind of traditional chronological sequence that Wordsworth had used. It has remained for the twentieth-century novel to rediscover the present tense, lyrico-dramatic narrative; Byron's experiment was at least a hundred years ahead of its time.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Moore, *Memoirs, Journal, and Correspondence*, ed. Lord John Russell (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1853–56, 8 vols.), 3:161.

<sup>2</sup> William Wordsworth, *Prose Works*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and J. Smyser (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974, 3 vols.), 1:128.

<sup>3</sup> Harold Bloom sees "Tintern Abbey" (along with "Resolution and Independence" and the "Immortality" ode) as the original crisis poem standing behind both the poetry of the later Romantics, and post-Romantic poetry: see "The Internalization of the Quest Romance" in *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1970), 7. Bloom deals with the same point much more fully in "Wordsworth and the Scene of Instruction," *Poetry and Repression* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1976), 52–82.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Poetical Works*, eds. C. B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1950), "Preface to the First Edition 1853," xviii.

<sup>5</sup> *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* 3.5–6, *The Complete Poetical Works* 2, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980). All further quotations from *Childe Harold* are from this edition; citations by canto and line number will be given in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Leslie A. Marchand, *Byron's Poetry: A Critical Introduction* (London: John Murray, 1965), 52.

<sup>7</sup> As an example, see Jeffrey's review of canto 3, *Edinburgh Review*, 1817 for 1816, 277–310; reprinted in *Byron: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Andrew Rutherford (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 98–109.

<sup>8</sup> Jerome J. McGann has also made this point; see *Fiery Dust: Byron's Poetic Development* (London and Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968), 32–35.

<sup>9</sup> Owen Barfield differentiates between Coleridge's conception of purposive nature and older teleological conceptions in *What Coleridge Thought* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1971), 57.

<sup>10</sup> Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Scribner, 1953); for her analysis of lyric present tense, see 168; for tense in drama, see 307 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Byron apparently heard Coleridge recite "Kubla Khan" in 1816, according to Leigh Hunt, although Marchand hesitates to state that the two actually met; for the available information, see Marchand, *Byron: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 3 vols.), 2:597 n. Coleridge's preface to "Kubla Khan" states that the poem was published at Byron's urging; the preface makes the by now infamous Coleridgean disclaimer that the poem is to be considered as a psychological curiosity. According to Thomas Medwin, Byron also identified it as Coleridge's "psychological poem": *Medwin's Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966), 178.

<sup>12</sup> Byron's poignant contrast of Venice's (and Italy's) past with its subjugated present is very much in the spirit of the conclusion of Sismondi's *A History of the Italian Republics* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 350–59. Both Byron and Shelley were indebted to Sismondi's monumental work, which appeared in sixteen volumes between 1807 and 1818, for much of their knowledge of Italian history, and shared Sismondi's abhorrence of Austrian domination.

<sup>13</sup> Arnold, "Dover Beach," ll. 18–19.

<sup>14</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1905), *Epipsychidion*, l. 423.