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# Byron's "one word": The Language of Self- Expression in *Childe Harold* III

IN CANTO III OF *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, just after the Alpine storm is hushed into a background music of "departing voices" (96), Byron raises his own in an apparent assault on self-expression:

Could I embody and unbosom now  
That which is most within me,—could I wreak  
My thoughts upon expression, and thus throw  
Soul, heart, mind, passions, feelings, strong or weak,  
All that I would have sought, and all I seek,  
Bear, know, feel, and yet breathe—into *one* word,  
And that one word were Lightning, I would speak;  
But as it is, I live and die unheard,  
With a most voiceless thought, sheathing it as a sword.

(97)<sup>1</sup>

Thus it is that "what we have of feeling most intense / Outstrips our faint expression" (iv.158); but even so it does not get away without leaving behind some "faint expression" of itself. Byron's feeling becomes increasingly intense between stanzas 92 and 97, as his attention moves from a natural scene to its viewer's reach for self-expression and relief from self, to return again to the landscape. This movement and the gesture of dismissal which concludes it are recurrent in *Childe Harold*; and when studied in the context of similar actions, Byron's taking leave of his stormy mood appears to be complexly politic and by no means out of order, just as phrases like "and yet breathe" or "And that one word were Lightning" seem less melodramatic than they have to many readers and more appropriate to the dramatic hazards of the moment.<sup>2</sup>

1. All quotations of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and earlier poems are from *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 2 vols. now in print (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

2. John A. Hodgson remarks that Byron's "'Lightning' stanza" is "Certainly . . . not

Byron's moment in III.97 is frustrated by the combination of self-reference and self-concealment,<sup>3</sup> and so is the reader, but these impulses to describe himself and to declare himself indescribable work together again and again in Canto III.<sup>4</sup> One way to approach both this collaboration, and the series of engagements between Byron and the landscape, is to look into and behind the recounted career of Byron's self-consciousness, to see exactly how reflexive attitudes and attitudes towards reflexivity express themselves in his language.

For there is a workable analogy between the figure Byron cuts as he regards himself in the world, and the configuration of his reflexive language—language that often is, or is used to explore, the maneuver of an imagination that reflects on itself.<sup>5</sup> In the following essay I will apply the term “reflexive” to images in which something is presented in terms of itself (“Vice, that digs her own voluptuous tomb,” I.83) and to syntactical movements which turn back on themselves (“to be trodden like the grass / Which now beneath them, but above shall grow,” III.27), as well as to the way such figures may ultimately refer to the speaker

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more famous than infamous, widely regarded as a classic piece of rodomontade” (“The Structures of *Childe Harold* III,” *SiR*, 18 [1979], 379).

3. Cf. Michael G. Cooke's argument that Canto III “essays possibilities in a discontinuous scheme of self-assertion and self-cancellation” (*The Blind Man Traces the Circle: On the Patterns and Philosophy of Byron's Poetry* [Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1969], p. 55).

4. Idiosyncratic as it is in Byron's writing, this strategy might be discussed in terms of the classical rhetorical figure of *occultatio* or paralipsis. The unknown author of the *ad Herennium* (traditionally though mistakenly attributed to Cicero, who makes numerous appearances in *Childe Harold*) explains in IV.xxvii.37 that *occultatio* (hiding, concealment) “occurs when we say that we are passing by, or do not know, or refuse to say that which precisely now we are saying . . .” (trans. Harry Caplan, Loeb Library ed. [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1954], p. 321). And see—particularly with regard to *Childe Harold* III.97—Quintilian's related remarks in the *Institutio Oratoria* IX.II.75: “Some things . . . which cannot be proved, may, on the other hand, be suggested by the employment of some figure. For at times such hidden shafts will stick, and the fact that they are not noticed will prevent their being drawn out, whereas if the same point were stated openly, it would be denied by our opponents and would have to be proved” (trans. H. E. Butler, Loeb Library ed., 4 vols. [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1976], III, 421). Other examples of Byron's expressive concealment may be found in *Childe Harold* I. “To Ianthé,” 18 ff., and “To Inez”; IV.49–53, 62–65, 108 ff.; *Don Juan* II.5–7, v.52 ff., VI.106–9, XIV.38–40. For a discussion of the relation between Byron's “‘contempt for language,’ a constant motif in his works,” and “the fiction of the oral bard,” see Jerome J. McGann, *Fiery Dust: Byron's Poetic Development* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 148–53.

5. The most comprehensive study of reflexive imagery is Christopher Ricks' “‘Its own resemblance’” in *Approaches to Marvell: The York Tercentenary Lectures*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Routledge, 1978), pp. 108–35. See also Rosalie Colie on “Problems of Self-reference” in *Paradoxia Epidemica: the Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1966), pp. 355–95.

who makes them. Before Canto III was published Shelley wrote poetry in which these references are ambivalently positive and negative, suggesting a kinship between the creativity of the reflexive imagination and its self-destructive solipsism.<sup>6</sup> And like Shelley, Byron was of course familiar with the connotations of Milton's reflexive imagery and imagery of recoil, both of which are powerfully infused with the experience of a being whose mind is its own place.<sup>7</sup> Although criticism has dwelt on Byron's celebrated way with the Satanic persona, very little has been said about his grasp, in *Childe Harold*, of the way Milton's imagery evokes the closed circuit of self-projection, the enlarging yet confining continuum of inner and outer landscapes.<sup>8</sup>

In fact Byron's positions and movements are far more often tracked in the criticism of Canto III than is the language in which he makes them known. And yet the remarkable persistence of reflexive imagery and syntax is a material witness of particular value in the case of a poet who is himself his own material. Of course this fact does not settle the question of premeditation—always a tricky one with Byron. I will pursue his meditations in the order and in the language in which he presents them, for his language gathers meaning episodically, as does much else that accumulates in *Childe Harold*. By the time Byron reaches stanza 97 the pattern of his self-expression is fully articulated. And the relationship between his verbal strategy and his verbalized experience suggests an important point of negotiation, a promising means of coming to terms with a poet who says repeatedly what he will not say.

## I

Four years before he published Canto III Byron wrote that "Passion raves herself to rest, or flies" (l.83), and that "Each has his pang, but

6. See William Keach, "Reflexive Imagery in Shelley," *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 24 (1975), 49-69.

7. See, for example, *Paradise Lost* iv.15-23, vii.56-59, x.737-41.

8. Byron's approach to reflexive language also involves—and may have developed out of—affinities to the Augustan poetry he admired; and this may be seen most pertinently in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, where a series of zeugmatic turns structure imagery which strikingly anticipates *Childe Harold* III: the wounded Eagle "Viewed his own feather on the fatal dart, / And winged the shaft that quivered in his heart" (ll. 839-48. Cf. *Childe Harold* III.15 and 18). And in *Childe Harold* II.80, zeugmatic syntax binds reflective and reflexive images which will be differently drawn together in the next Canto: "A brighter glance her form reflected gave, / Till sparkling billows seem'd to light the banks they lave." Donald Davie briefly (and unfavorably) compares Byron's syntax to the brilliant zeugmatic condensations of Pope in *Articulate Energy: An Inquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1955), pp. 30, 62-63. See also A. B. England, *Byron's Don Juan and Eighteenth-Century Literature* (Lewisburg, Penn.: Bucknell U. Press, 1975), pp. 69-71.

feeble sufferers groan / With brain-born dreams of evil all their own” (II.7). The circular action implicit in the first and drawn out in the second of these two comments aptly introduces Byron’s shipboard reflections on nature—which, in turn, are introduced by an image of geographical reflection, as Byron beholds two land masses beholding each other:

Through Calpe’s straits survey the steepy shore;  
Europe and Afric on each other gaze!  
Lands of the dark-ey’d Maid and dusky Moor  
Alike beheld beneath pale Hecate’s blaze:

(II.22)

It may be that the Maid and the Moor bring him back to the sense that he is “friendless now,” just as the literal reflection he sights gives way to his reflexive image for what he feels within: “The heart, lone mourner of its baffled zeal.” Byron laments the fate of lovers whose “mingling souls forget to blend” (II.23), and there is something of the failure to blend in his subsequent attempt to forget his axioms about life on earth while brooding on part of the earth: the maneuver is curious, typical, and predictably doomed. “Thus” as he gazes at the moon’s reflection in the waves, his “soul forgets her schemes of Hope and Pride,” and dwells on “something dear, / Dearer than self” which nonetheless recalls him to himself with “A flashing pang” (II.24).

Byron is back upon the waves at the beginning of Canto III; and his language at once plunges the reader into a multiple experience of reflection and reflexiveness, as Byron finds himself in Harold and both find themselves in nature and neither—not surprisingly—finds relief for long in either. If he is “as a weed” (III.2) at the mercy of the wind and water, his “theme” (III.3) is at the mercy of his own relentless course of thought. This would seem like double jeopardy for the “One” who has already been tossed about by his own dark fate—or it would, if Byron did not suggest that Harold, “The wandering outlaw of his own dark mind,” really has only one dark mind to contend with. What Byron finds in his “Tale” are a seascape and a landscape that are both physical and mental, his and Harold’s:

in that Tale I find  
The furrows of long thought, and dried-up tears,  
Which, ebbing, leave a sterile track behind,  
O’er which all heavily the journeying years  
Plod the last sands of life,—where not a flower appears.

(III.3)

Like the experience which it describes, the image evolves into a vista that is not only imagined by the mind but seems physically to open out

within it. There is something like this masterfully grotesque hybrid of vision and literal-mindedness in Canto II, where Byron imagines the “broken arch,” “ruin’d wall,” and “chambers desolate” within a skull which was, like his own mind, “once Ambition’s airy hall, / The dome of Thought, the palace of the Soul” (6).<sup>9</sup> This kind of parallel imagery is developed in III.5, where “thought seeks refuge in lone caves” which are at once Byron’s haunts on earth and his own “soul’s haunted cell.” The “airy images” he seeks recall the “little schemes of thought” (II.36) he derided earlier but which he now substantiates into “A being more intense” (III.6) than anything he projected in Canto II. But if “we endow / With form our fancy” (III.6) partly in order to achieve “Forgetfulness” (III.4), then Harold’s virtue may already be compromised beyond redemption. For the worrisome thing about “gaining as we give / The life we image” (III.6) is its being all we gain.

And the “giddy circle” (III.11) of such relationships does not end here, as nature too has imaged itself in legible form: when Harold shares their “mutual language,” he is forsaking “the tome / Of his land’s tongue” in order to read from “Nature’s pages glass’d by sunbeams on the lake” (III.13). Once more the reflection that he sees in nature precedes the reflexive act of his own imagination: “Like the Chaldean, he could watch the stars, / Till he had peopled them with beings bright / As their own beams. . . .”<sup>10</sup> This is unfortunate not only because the stars are

9. Compare the mental action in IV.155, which both enables, and is, an experience of St. Peter’s: “thy mind, / Expanded by the genius of the spot, / Has grown colossal, and can only find / A fit abode wherein appear enshrined / Thy hopes of immortality . . . .” The reflexive idea here, though not as compactly put, is in its way as heady as that of the “Forrain Architect” in *Upon Appleton House*, “Who of his great Design in pain / Did for a Model vault his Brain” (*The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell*, ed. H. M. Margoliouth, 3rd ed., rev. Legouis and Duncan-Jones, 2 vols. [Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 1971], ll. 2–6). Both Marvell’s “sober Frame” (l.1) and Byron’s more widespread constructions might be measured against the language of Alexander Gerard’s discussion of the sublime: citing Longinus and John Baillie as precedents, Gerard remarks that “When a large object is presented, the mind expands itself to the extent of that object, and is filled with one grand sensation . . . it finds such a difficulty in spreading itself to the dimensions of its object, as enlivens and invigorates its frame: and having overcome the opposition which this occasions, it sometimes imagines itself present in every part of the scene which it contemplates; and from the sense of this immensity, feels a noble pride, and entertains a lofty conception of its own capacity” (*An Essay on Taste* [1759], a facsimile reproduction of the third edition [1780] with an introduction by Walter J. Hipple, Jr. [Gainesville, Florida: Scholars’ Facsimiles, 1963], p. 12). See *Childe Harold* III.62 and IV.158–59, in which Byron associates the self-projective expansion of the spirit with the “sublimity” of a landscape or artifact. Cf. Paul H. Fry, who relates Byron’s “habit of self-analogy” (427, n.28) to “a poetics of the anti-sublime” (413) (“The Absent Dead: Wordsworth, Byron, and the Epitaph,” *SiR*, 17 [1978], 413–33).

10. According to William Keach, the reflexive comparison of imaginary beings inspired by the stars to the stars’ own beams suggests a “balance and reciprocity . . . between the

associated with the futility of fame in stanza 11, but also because watching stars peopled by human thought can never insure that "human frailties" will be "forgotten quite." Byron observes that if Harold could "have kept his spirit to that flight / He had been happy"; but the reflexive imagery hints that Harold has never really gotten off the ground. In any case, "this clay will sink" (III.14).

Byron admires the way the heart holds out against ordeals like these, "Shewing no visible sign, for such things are untold" (III.33). Like the natural mirrors he finds at sea and in lakes, the heart is itself a mirror that may "break, yet brokenly live on" (III.32). But this kind of vitality might be as "antithetically mixt" as the spirit of Napoleon (III.36)—a spirit whose problem is different in degree but not in kind from the problem of Harold and his creator. If there is a "fever at the core, / Fatal to him who bears" it, then the Napoleonic "fire / And motion of the soul" are essentially self-consuming no matter how far they "aspire" beyond the self (III.42). Byron repeats this conclusion in the next two stanzas, and does it in a way that brings to mind the storm he himself is "riding" at the beginning of the Canto: "Their breath is agitation, and their life / A storm whereon they ride . . ." (III.44).

Images like these help explain why Byron gives two different reasons in stanzas 4 and 6 for writing Canto III. He wants to forget all "agitation," but without any real or imagined "high adventure" (III.42) the cure of quiet will prove as fatal as the disease: the "intense" existence he creates keeps Byron from being "Even as a flame unfed, which runs to waste / With its own flickering, or a sword laid by / Which eats into itself, and rusts ingloriously" (III.44). As for the actual life of high adventure, Byron banishes those struggles which can neither attain the "sun of glory" nor evade "Contending tempests" (III.45). His declaration that "true Wisdom's world will be / Within its own creation" (III.46) recalls the impulse of Harold's proud desolation to "find / A life within itself" (III.12).

These descriptions of self-sufficiency are, like Byron's rationale for writing, far less ominous than the kind of preying on oneself he describes in stanza 42. But the likeness is troubling regardless of what Byron intends, and the likeness only deepens when he turns back again to the

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creative imagination and the external natural beauty which activates that creativity—the way in which these realities complement and sustain each other . . ." (68). But when restored to the context from which Keach has taken it, the "balance" in Byron's image seems unstable and the "reciprocity" unsustaining. W. Paul Elledge notes the element of self-projection in this and other images in *Childe Harold* III, but he relates it to the development of Harold's sense of "the importance of human influence in any balanced, mature existence" rather than to the linguistic pattern of Byron's self-expression (*Byron and the Dynamics of Metaphor* [Nashville: Vanderbilt U. Press, 1968], p. 77).

world of "Maternal Nature" (III.46). He now associates "the mountain-majesty of worth" with "immortality" (III.67), and it is fitting that when Lake Lemman "woos" him "with its crystal face," there are stars mirrored in the water among the mountains:

The mirror where the stars and mountains view  
 The stillness of their aspect in each trace  
 Its clear depth yields of their far height and hue:

(III.68)

But once he has been brought to the water, Byron's own reflection may be what gets in his way; he at once protests that "There is too much of man here, to look through / With a fit mind the might which I behold." The reflection of man's image, displacing that of nature, makes way for the reflexive language of Byron's formula for a life that would be the "survivor of its woe" (III.67):

keep the mind  
 Deep in its fountain, lest it overboil  
 In the hot throng, where we become the spoil  
 Of our infection. . . .

(III.69)

Thus the mountains become volcanic and may either implode or explode; under the circumstances it may be "better, then, to be alone" (III.71). The solitary bird to which he likens himself two stanzas later may spurn "the clay-cold bonds which round our being cling," but it takes off into some circular syntax—"waxing vigorous, as the blast / Which it would cope with"—that recalls those ill-fated voyagers whose "breath is agitation, and their life / A storm whereon they ride" (III.44). Without access to "the immortal lot" (III.74), these flights, like the mingling in stanza 72, might be "in vain."

It is as a sharer in "the immortal lot" that Byron later celebrates the author of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, but Rousseau's love of "ideal beauty, which became / In him existence" (III.78) recalls not only the enlivening life Byron breathes into Harold but also the troubling reflexiveness of that creation, "which could find / A life within itself, to breathe without mankind" (III.12). At first the creation of Harold promises to take Byron where he wants to go, but it delivers no more completely than do those Napoleonic figures whose "breath is agitation." The reflexive agitation of Rousseau is mingled with the breath of his inspiration, much as they are in Byron's verse, so that the "breath which made him wretched" (III.77) also "breathed itself to life in Julie" (III.79). But Byron's telling note to stanza 79 lets some of the air out of this mouth-to-mouth resuscitation: he extols Rousseau's description of a kiss, then denies the



adequacy of even this superlative expression—and he does it, characteristically, because such words “must be felt, from their very force, to be inadequate to the delineation.”<sup>11</sup> As in stanza 97, Byron’s dismissal of mere language helps substantiate emotion that is said to be ineffable; but for Byron’s Rousseau, the imperfect fit of words and feeling offers no escape from reflexive interchange, which is sustained in hope and frustrated in fact. And if this form of self-expression may bring no relief from self, it may also shorten the lives of those who have mastered it. Although his words start innocently enough as “sunbeams” (III.77), Rousseau is soon said to be “Kindled . . . and blasted” by the “ethereal flame” which, in turn, “teems / Along his burning page” (III.78).

Byron eventually turns back from these to nature’s pages as reflected in the purity and stillness of “Clear, placid Leman” (III.85). But the contemplation of nature again comes around to a circular pattern of thought. Glittering in the dark on a hillside, the star-reflecting dews (like the drop that reflexively weeps its own tear in Marvell’s “On a Drop of Dew”<sup>12</sup>) “All silently their tears of love instil, / Weeping themselves away, till they infuse”—very much in the Shelleyan spirit of *Epipsychidion* (ll. 465–69)—“Deep into Nature’s breast the spirit of her hues” (III.87). There is something comparable to this kind of interaction in the next stanza, in which man seeks to “read” his fate in the stars to which he has already claimed kinship and after which earthly fortune, fame, power, and life have already “named” themselves. Given the number of stanzas Byron has devoted to the vanity of glory-seeking, this sort of nomenclature may sound a troubling hint of the spells that Rousseau cast. “’Tis to be forgiven,” Byron says, that “in our aspirations to be great, / Our destinies o’erleap their mortal state” (III.88), although he once found it hard to forgive the fiery souls who “aspire / Beyond the fitting medium of desire” (III.42). The point is not that Byron is carried away by the “poetry of heaven,” but that he carries himself away. And in so doing he brings home to the reader the dangerous glamour of Rousseau, who is very much in Byron’s mind when he confronts the storm on the lake where Julie once drew breath.

## II

In stanza 89 Byron expands his involvement with the stars into a vision of the involvement of all creation in a single “life intense.” Stanza 85

11. *Works*, II, 309. On Rousseau and the “aesthetics of self-projection” see Jerome J. McGann, *Don Juan in Context* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 41–44; George M. Ridenour, *The Style of Don Juan* (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1960), pp. 154–61; and William H. Marshall, *The Structure of Byron’s Major Poems* (Philadelphia: U. of Pennsylvania Press, 1962), pp. 79–80.

12. Cf. also “Eyes and Tears,” ll. 43–44.

makes way for this imagery of nature "Mellowed and mingling" (III.86), as he sails into Lake Lemman and so into the night when heaven and earth are silent as "we" are in "thoughts too deep" to express (III.89). The "feeling infinite" at once "purifies" Byron from self and keeps him company when he is by himself—both soundlessly; for its "tone" is not the familiar harmony of music but its "Eternal" soul and source, a tone which, like "the fabled Cytherea's zone," is impalpable except to the imagination (III.90). But when the sky changes and thunder sounds among "the rattling crags" (III.92), Byron's simile for the scene is suddenly more discordant. In this image—which is glimpsed while the mountains echo and "the lit lake shines" with reflected lightning, "a phosphoric sea" (III.93)—the banks of the Rhone are seen to answer to each other across the water, or rather, it is seen that they once did, for they are

Heights which appear as lovers who have parted  
 In hate, whose mining depths so intervene,  
 That they can meet no more, though broken-hearted;  
(III.94)

The image recalls those desolate souls Byron thought of as he sailed through Calpe's straits with Europe and Africa on either side (II.22); and like those mourners, these banks seem to be turned back on themselves, left alone, as Byron puts it, "war within themselves to wage" (III.94).

Byron's earlier use of images of reflection makes this cluster of them seem portentous; and the portents do not diminish when a distinction between man and nature develops with the storm, leaving Byron silent in his thoughtfulness while "every mountain now hath found a tongue" (III.92). Now that it is neither moonbeams nor sunbeams that glass nature's image on the lake, Byron seems less fluent in the "mutual language" (III.13) he and Harold share with her. This is perhaps why, although they are already intimate, Byron begs the night to let him be "A sharer in thy fierce and far delight" (III.93). When she expresses herself "With night, and clouds, and thunder" (III.96), nature is personified as a man who behaves "as if he did understand, / That in such gaps as desolation work'd, / There the hot shaft should blast whatever therein lurk'd." These gaps bring to mind not only the so-called desolation of Harold but also the fact that his creator may be "here" in his boat at the cleavage of the banks, where "The mightiest of the storms hath ta'en his stand" (III.95).<sup>13</sup> But even

13. In a note to stanza 99, Byron refers to being on the Lake of Geneva during a storm which involved some "danger to the boat," but this storm is clearly distinguished from the one "at midnight" which he says he described in stanza 92 (*Works*, II, 311, 312). McGann shows that stanzas 92–97 were written during the storm which they describe (*Fiery Dust*, p. 305 and n.5).

if Byron (who does not choose to specify his whereabouts) is watching the storm from a distance, the dangers the scene presents to its would-be participant are more than theoretical: Byron has already shown how those who climb too high, like Napoleon, are exposed to "The avalanche—the thunderbolt of snow" (III.62), or how those like Rousseau are "On fire by lightning; with ethereal flame / Kindled . . . and blasted" (III.78).

In the stanza between the outbreak of the tempest and the momentous stillness that precedes it, Byron refers to the various ways that men have expressed their emotions in "Nature's realms of worship, earth and air" (III.91).<sup>14</sup> But only "now" (III.97) that the storm is nearly out of earshot does he speak of giving vent to his own feelings. He has staged a confrontation between himself and nature when she is the way he likes her best, "in her features wild" (II.37); and the result—which follows a series of reflexive actions and images—is the climax of the relationship between Byron's attitudes towards self-description and self-control, and that pattern of circular reflections which is both an instance of and a comment on the way he has found to express himself in Canto III.

The force and suddenness of his outburst in stanza 97 imply not only that this impulse has been strong (and perhaps growing) since stanza 93, but also that his desire to be part of the storm has brought him neither direct nor vicarious relief. Meanwhile, the desire itself has been conditioned by Byron's response to the storm, so that it persists only as ambivalence within the conditional mood of stanza 97. This ambivalence informs his choice of words between "Could I" and "I would speak," although his opening verb indicates that under the circumstances Byron's experience (of history, of the scene, of himself) will control his ambition. "Embody" recalls his scheme to "endow / With form our fancy" (III.6), but also the almost palpable way that the night has made itself felt. "Unbosom" relates both to his rationale for writing in stanza 4 and to the uneasy questions which conclude stanza 96. That Byron wants to

14. Early in his note to stanza 91 Byron replaces the subject of worship with that of outdoor oratorical performance—which is roughly the same transition he makes between stanzas 91 and 97. "To wave the question of devotion, and turn to human eloquence,—the most effectual and splendid specimens were not pronounced within walls. Demosthenes addressed the public and popular assemblies. Cicero spoke in the forum. That this added to their effect on the mind of both orator and hearers, may be conceived from the difference between what we read of the emotions then and there produced, and those we ourselves experience in the perusal in the closet" (*Works*, II, 310–11). This sentiment might conceivably be urged in extenuation of the apparent excesses of stanza 97. But such an interpretation would lose Byron's very particular urgency in his general and multi-purpose exploitation of the convention of "indescribability."

express his thoughts is nothing new, but his striking use of the verb “wreak” corresponds to the violent self-indulgence—the “fierce and far delight”—with which the tempest “unbosoms” itself. “Throw” in the third line likewise answers to the way the storms “fling their thunderbolts” (III.95). Since Byron rarely feels anything mildly, “strong or weak” probably refers to the quality rather than the intensity of his emotions, and thereby draws attention to the mixed character of “all I seek.” “And yet breathe” may refer to his usual way of surviving his feelings, as in stanza 32; but the words may also function in relation to “could I wreak” in the same way that “into *one* word” relates to “Could I embody.”

So Byron may be implying that he will not wreak his thoughts upon expression because he cannot do it “and yet breathe.”<sup>15</sup> That this is not his primary emphasis is clear from his placement of italics, but the phrase does contribute to a sense of hazardous extremity, as if Byron were as imperiled by a potential decision as Rousseau was by his over-boiling passions. The seemingly perverse insistence on “*one* word” forces the reader back on Byron’s previous usage and forward to the conclusion that it was loaded on the negative side. If he had simply wanted to foreclose his option, the “*one* word” would have been enough. But he adds the further condition that “that one word were Lightning,” which complicates the case past immediate dismissal. After all, in the implicit parallel between nature’s “Sky, mountains, river, winds, lake” (III.96) and Byron’s “Soul, heart, mind, passions, feelings” (III.97), the “lightnings” correspond in position to the alternatively “strong or weak.” Lightning has the power and beauty to which Byron is drawn in stanza 88; but it is also associated with the image of Rousseau as a tree on fire (III.78). Even this ambivalence would be relatively simple if Byron were not so dazzled by the brilliance of Rousseau’s writing, or if he did not think at times of human life as a tree which can only bear “detested fruit” (III.34). The apples on the Dead Sea’s shore suggest that man and nature are in a similarly fallen condition, and this is ultimately why Rousseau’s outbursts may be related to a storm’s. In stanza 96 Byron questions the tempest about the goal of its “departing voices,” which he supposes might either return unquietly on the being which

15. Cf. Hodgson’s similar suggestion (379–80) based on E. H. Coleridge’s text of III.97, in which “and yet breathe” is preceded by a dash instead of a comma, and in which dashes rather than commas follow each noun in l. 4 and also the final adjective (*The Works of Lord Byron, Poetry*, 7 vols. [London: John Murray, 1898–1904], II, 276). Although he emphasizes different questions about stanza 97 from the ones I raise in this essay, Hodgson’s discussion of Byron’s language about fire and swords supported and enhanced my sense of the “imagery of desire” in the poem (374–75).

produced them, "like those within the human breast," or else might find such respite as eagles do. But this image conjures up both the eagles which fly "unutterably high" around Parnassus (iv.74) and—from much less far afield—the self-consuming "eagle" Napoleon (III.18).

It is the reduced potential of man and nature that reduces Byron to an unsatisfying choice of the lesser of two evils: "as it is" he avoids the physical and spiritual dangers of lightning, but stanza 97 still seems to fall into silence as stanza 96 fell into doubt. Once again, it is important to note that Byron's gesture of dismissal does not alter his sense of likeness to the storm. As he discovers or details this likeness his wish to participate does not so much diminish as it becomes superfluous, redundant. This is why he denies neither his wish of stanza 93 nor the storm itself but only the lightning-like outbursts of which he may or may not be capable. In refusing, at least poetically, to authorize this ultimate parallel between his own self-expression and the storm's, Byron criticizes a way of life and of writing which would provide him with no escape from his tempestuous emotions. This much may seem simple; but as has already been suggested, the conditional mood of stanza 97 contains both Byron's reservations about the storm and his onrushing impulse to explode. The dramatic result seems to be at once a natural culmination of his uneasiness and an unnaturally strained attempt to deflect the course of impulse.

It is possible that Byron deliberately represents rather than resolves this conflict, deploying italics and punctuation which give weight to the fast-moving lines and put a sort of drag on their meaning. Six nouns and five commas draw out the first line of stanza 96, and it seems appropriate to take in slowly the accumulating subject of the verb "be." But in the next stanza, Byron's "Soul, heart, mind, passions, feelings, strong or weak" are all objects of the verb "throw," which they follow at a surprisingly even pace, so that the syntax which does so much to create the momentum of stanza 97 also slows the speed with which it may be pronounced. The argument and meter of line 6 would have passed more inconspicuously through the narrow space of "a" word; instead both come up against the "*one*" italicized by Byron. But regardless of how long it takes to reach the seventh line, his requirement that his word literally be lightning rather than lightning-like suggests how far out of his way he feels he must go to make the anticlimax seem inevitable.

The same sort of pressure is behind his insisting on just "*one* word." He does not reject all self-expression but refers instead to one particularly explosive mode which he fabricates into what seems to be a highly specific impossibility—which he accordingly finds impossible.

This process would loosen logic far enough to draw attention even if it did not end in a non sequitur. But the conclusion that he will “live and die unheard” because he cannot or will not say everything in one word cannot be imputed to petulance. It amounts either to an admission that he cannot do the impossible—which may be reason for self-complacency; or it amounts, metaphorically speaking, to preferring torture by suffocation to torture by inflammation, which is not very far removed from the choice he makes in stanza 69. To put it another way, Byron’s blanket statement in the last two lines may be proof that he still has energies that need to be stifled: his decisively ambiguous announcement leaves him with the same problem as before, and no further solution.

Unlike the Byron of stanza 93, the Byron of the end of 97 is sobered rather than exhilarated by nature: his likeness to the world around him no longer seems to constitute a license for flights of the spirit but rather the grounds for self-control. As so often in Canto III, Byron turns from his life among others to his kinship with nature; and—like many people who return with mixed feelings from abroad—he is reminded of himself where he is most at home. But in stanza 97 the pattern of circular returns comes to an almost operatic crisis. The familiar experience of running into himself is sharpened by a sense of dramatic danger, which is part of the role not only of the storm but also of Napoleon and Rousseau, whom its imagery recalls. With “the far roll / Of your departing voices” (III.96), Byron seems to give himself the cue for a solo. But what happens instead is that he drops the voice that rises to a pitch in 97, which accounts for the paradox of his audibly announcing that he is now “unheard.” The impression that he has forced himself up to a kind of falsetto suggests that Byron may have conjured up the storm with the purpose of compelling this voice to break. As an attempt at self-definition, stanza 97 operates by contradistinction to the careers of Napoleon and Rousseau. The crescendo of emotion which begins with nightfall involves a Napoleonic reach for the sky as well as a Rousseauan dalliance with lightning. By rehearsing their ascents Byron puts himself in a position to undergo a rhetorical fall which escapes the more fatal falls of his models. Insofar as his leap is a trial run, it is not clear whether Byron is trying to school himself or his readers or both. But if things seem to settle all too soon into their denouement, one of the points of stanza 97 is that a gentle decline is the safer way to go.

So the excess of stanza 97 may be another typically Byronic desperation measure: that is, it may be an instance of Byron’s carefully measured use of desperation. Certainly he elaborates his intention in a way that compromises his innocence of self-conscious and even premeditated motives. Regardless of whether Byron means for the reader to associate

this “sheathing” with Harold’s in stanzas 10 and 15 or the “sword” with Napoleon’s in stanza 44, and regardless of whether he assumes that no one will expect him to be “voiceless” for long, his metaphorical resignation seems almost mock-heroic. It is not surprising that Shelley uses the same imagery to make the opposite, dashing hero point: “Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it.”<sup>16</sup> But stanza 97 has its triumph too, and it is more than a matter of getting the last words in.<sup>17</sup> Byron makes a gesture of triumphant self-expression out of the very boundaries that he senses in reflexive thoughts of nature, and out of the very limits that he sets to his speaking of himself. For if “sheathing it as a sword” is an act of self-defense, it is also a form of self-assertion. The life in the poetry unmistakably proclaims that he has got something to sheathe.

### III

On the morning after the night before, Byron turns from the “mining depths” of the Rhone to the spot where the river has “spread himself a couch” on which Byron can now muse in peace (III.104). He sees no more or less of himself in the scene than ever, but he sees it somewhat differently. Like Voltaire’s, Byron’s is a “various” wit, and his having “multiplied himself among mankind” (III.106)—like the “broken mirror” that makes “A thousand images of one that was, / The same” (III.33)—may contain a clue to the riddle of how a man could hypothetically say everything he thinks in “one word.” But this is no more than a hint, and Byron once more takes leave to “quit man’s works, again to read / His Maker’s” (III.109)—which he soon turns from in order to read his own.

Byron’s reading of *Childe Harold* III is presented in a coda that summarizes important aspects not only of its “theme” but also of its strategy of self-expression. In stanza III, the patterns of self-concealment and self-reflexiveness converge in a recital of what “we” have been “taught”:

16. *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 491. In his article on “Romanticism and the Self-Annihilation of Language,” Robert F. Gleckner also points out a relationship between stanza 97 and this (and other) passages in Shelley (*Criticism*, 18 [1976], 185 and 182, n.14).

17. Compare Edward E. Bostetter’s view that at the end of the stanza Byron is “triumphant in his failure because of the very audacity of his aspiration” (*The Romantic Ventriloquists* [Seattle: U. of Washington Press, 1975], pp. 268–69) and Peter J. Manning’s statement that “the impotence symbolized by the sheathed sword is a miniature of the failure of Byron’s resources” (*Byron and his Fictions* [Detroit: Wayne State U. Press, 1978], p. 69).

to steel

The heart against itself; and to conceal,  
 With a proud caution, love, or hate, or aught,—  
 Passion or feeling, purpose, grief or zeal,—  
 Which is the tyrant spirit of our thought,

The rhyme words “feel,” “steel,” “conceal,” “zeal,” sound a reminder of elements in stanza 97 which they draw together in ringing affirmation that “We are not what we have been.” Although he has repeatedly turned away from the returns of language on its creators, although he has repeatedly given notice that his words may be no more than a “harmless wile” (III.112), still his language of self-protection is a mode of self-confinement, and still this is deliberate. If he is no longer a man “in a shroud” of his own thoughts, he has since “filed” his mind, “which thus itself subdued” (III.113).

But with the reflexive language a belief also persists to which he has not given voice before. “I do believe, / Though I have found them not, that there may be / Words which are things . . .”—words that do not circle him with echoes that enclose him and then fade, words that do not “weave / Snares for the failing” like the “virtues” he suspects (III.114), words that do not just express him but go on—as he means them, and as he means them to—without him. As in stanza 97, Byron’s mood is conditional, subjunctive, and as in stanza 97, his language describes the possibility of a condition of language which it denies having discovered. But what Byron gives credence to here are “Words,” not “one word,” “things,” not one thing, like lightning. Although the plurals may suggest a way out of the singular rhetorical trap of stanza 97, in the present tense of Canto III it may be that words are things only in a “dream.”

And it seems to be from out of a dream, or in waking from a dream, that Byron—who proudly denied that he had “cried aloud / In worship of an echo” (III.113)—now cries aloud to his unseen daughter. The section devoted to Ada dwells on a different sort of offspring from *Childe Harold* or *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*; but whatever else she means to him, Ada is also involved in Byron’s hope to extend himself beyond his own lifetime. As in the case of his literary hopes in Canto IV (9–10), his confidence in his daughter will (or will not) be realized because she is his daughter and because of self-discipline. His prediction about her is shaped by the same patterns of self-reflexiveness and self-constraint as are his predictions about himself: “of thy sire / These were the elements,—and thine no less. / . . . but thy fire / Shall be more tempered, and thy hope far higher” (III.118). This reference to fire looks back to



the untamed lightning bolt of III.97 and forward to the Apollo Belvedere which is informed rather than consumed by flame (IV.163).

Byron concludes with a sigh over the distance that separates him from his daughter. But it is important to remember that like the “voiceless thought” which may be imagined but not heard in stanza 97, even “as it is” (III.97 and III.116) the voice of her father will somehow blend with Ada’s “future visions”—a “token and a tone” (III.115), something “more than life” that will persist when his is over (III.117). She may never be what she “might’st have been” to him; but in declaring what he plans to be to *her*, Ada’s unseen, unheard father makes us ponder the words which alone can reach her.

#### IV

The best commentary on the implications of Byron’s “one word” is Byron’s, and it comes, indirectly, in Canto iv: “History, with all her volumes vast, / Hath but *one* page” in stone or in ink (108). The words which disclose “all human tales” are likewise involved in a continuum within which they may refer to themselves or to each other, and may be envisaged as part of a single meaning, or a single meaninglessness. This reunion of far-flung multitudes has about it the spirit of Byron’s repeated dismissals of the circlings of language rather than the air of any celebration; but the stanza also points to the coalescence of many words into something which is the opposite of what he mistrusts, something substantial, irreducible, invariable. The alternative Byron proposes to repeating “the same rehearsal of the past” is not no rehearsal but instead “one” which is “better written here” and can be recognized anywhere, any time. “Here,” as elsewhere in *Childe Harold*, refers to the poem that is written as well as to the place it is written about; and Byron’s swift passage between Rome and the page written in Rome presages his equally fluent translations back and forth between audible and legible words, between words which need not be written to be apprehended, and the visible words which he says he can speak on without. And thus, like the “voiceless thought” which is unsounded in Canto III, the one page which is “better written here” is, by a seeming sleight of mind, suddenly unworded, unread: “Away with words! draw near, / Admire, exult—despise—laugh, weep,—for here / There is such matter for all feeling” (IV.108–9). In the retrospect of Canto iv, it takes no sleight of mind to see how one word which is written for the future—for Ada, for posterity—may be voiceless, and yet taken to heart: “Something unearthly, which they deem not of, / Like the remembered tone of a mute lyre . . .” (IV.137).

In the meantime, the “clay-cold bonds” (III.73) which encumbered

him before are galvanized into an "electric chain wherewith we are darkly bound," as Byron associates, more generally than in Canto III, the "lightning of the mind" with the reflexive action of "things which bring / Back on the heart the weight which it would fling / Aside for ever" (IV.23-24). But near the end of Canto IV he "steal[s]" from what he may be or has been in order "To mingle with the Universe, and feel / What I can ne'er express, yet can not all conceal" (178). Unlike in III.III, it is now "steal" not "steel" that rhymes with "feel" and "conceal," and the word evokes the Promethean theft which is repaid by the sculptor of the Apollo Belvedere in stanza 163. The "blight and blackening" effects of the "lightning of the mind" (IV.24) are countered by the afterglow of "an eternal glory" which "breathes the flame with which 'twas wrought" (IV.163), as Byron develops his ideas about "A being more intense" (III.6) into a theory or hypothesis of salvation by art in its various forms—including the form that is taken by a poem. The "poetic marble" which is "not of human thought" (IV.163) is opposed to the "false creation" of the self-projective imagination, which fondly pursues outside itself the ideal "forms the sculptor's soul hath seized" (IV.122). Yet even while Byron describes the unearthly inspiration of the statue, a "solitary nymph" appears who has "madden'd in that vision" (IV.162), and if only for a moment her figure touches on the connection between the god who glances "lightnings" (IV.161) and the "nympholepsy of some fond despair" (IV.115). In thinking of the dreams which mortals entertain, Byron still cannot disown that configuration of exhibition and inhibition, of self-projection and self-restraint, by means of which he expresses himself in Canto III. However partial, however fitful, the glimpse of other possibilities comes through his sense of self-imprisonment, in terms of it, as the scent of the ocean comes to a man who feels landlocked:

Though from our birth the faculty divine  
Is chain'd and tortured—cabin'd, cribb'd, confined,  
And bred in darkness, lest the truth should shine  
Too brightly on the unprepared mind,  
The beam pours in, for time and skill will couch the blind.  
(IV.127)

Byron moves towards the discriminations on which this outlook is based in III.97 and 104 when he implies that only certain kinds of "beings" of the mind will serve his purpose: they must be disciplined, "purified," tempered by "time and skill" into something timeless, like the ocean. In this long perspective, the "one word" of III.97 comes to suggest not only a kind of writing which does not solve his problems

but also a redeeming work of art of which he may not yet be capable. These two readings are not mutually exclusive because the artist who does not control his potential is ultimately in the same boat as the artist who prematurely exploits it: in neither case does the end justify the dangerous means. But when he writes his way into Canto iv, Byron reverses the persistent moods of stanza 97, making declarative his intention to be heard and leaving conditional his suspicion that he might not be. Although twined with longer-winded doubts, a new note of confidence is sounded that recasts Harold's motive to forsake "his land's tongue" (III.13): "I twine / My hopes of being remembered in my line / With my land's language" (IV.9). When he later invokes what has been most within him, it is "a far hour" that "shall wreak" the fulness of his verse rather than his own unmediated impulse that would "wreak / My thoughts upon expression" (III.97). Again rhyming "weak" and "seek," he now denies any implication of weakness if his "voice break forth" and declares that he means to seek "in this page a record" (IV.134). Regardless of its intended meaning or effect—and readers have had reason to question both—it is by "Forgiveness" (IV.135) that Byron seeks to break free of the vicious circle of his circumstances—the very "Torture and Time" which he says his words, if not his life, will outlast: "But there is that within me which shall tire / Torture and Time, and breathe when I expire" (IV.137).

Much as Byron's "one word" eventually compresses a variety of experience and may be read in a variety of ways, a single artifact expresses the variety of the author of *Childe Harold* or *Don Juan*. The words which only "may" be things in *Childe Harold* III.114 most emphatically "are" things in *Don Juan*:

But words are things, and a small drop of ink,  
Falling like dew, upon a thought, produces  
That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think. . . .

The enormity of its spread is all the more impressive as the markedly small drop of "ink" extends itself into "think" with the help of nothing more than the first two letters that spell out a "thought"—a cunning literalization of Byron's next remark:

'Tis strange, the shortest letter which man uses  
Instead of speech, may form a lasting link  
Of ages. . . .

(III.88)<sup>18</sup>

18. All quotations of *Don Juan* are from *Byron's Don Juan: A Variorum Edition*, ed. Truman Guy Steffan and Willis W. Pratt, 4 vols. (Austin: U. of Texas Press, 1957). In his

Chosen out of the whole expanse of written language, “the shortest letter” is the most swiftly scanned link between a man and those who come after him, and the link that makes the “ages” look most expansive by contrast. Yet “the shortest letter” is not a *trompe-l’oeil* but a thing like the “one word” that is lightning “Instead of speech” in *Childe Harold*: a striking yet potentially silent thing that is taken in, as it is put out, in almost no time, and whose recurrently visible design outlasts the lifetimes of men.<sup>19</sup>

So Byron’s final return to the immutable ocean may suggest the access he has found through art to another “image of Eternity” (iv.183), and artfulness—his own if not other men’s—also helps rescue him from foundering in his own time-bound reflections.<sup>20</sup> But before he returns to the “glorious mirror” where it is the Almighty’s form that “Glasses itself in tempests” (iv.183), Byron pauses for a stanza at a spot which lacks the glitter of Lake Lemman, but which persists in the memory of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*—as a reminder not only of Byron’s self-en-

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note to stanza 88 (iv, 97), Pratt refers the reader to a Journal entry of 1813 in which Byron rhetorically asks “are not ‘words things?’” and to an 1814(?) letter in which he attributes to Mirabeau “the saying . . . that ‘words are things.’” But Byron seems to be referring to spoken words here, not to written ones as in the passage from *Don Juan*. See *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 11 vols. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard U. Press, 1973–1981), III, 207 and IV, 74.

19. That it may be helpful in explaining the language of Canto III does not of course imply that Byron claims to have realized this idea in *Childe Harold* or that he pledges allegiance to it throughout *Don Juan*. After all, with its wish that he were “so much Clay” as he is “blood—bone—marrow, passion—feeling—,” the canceled stanza Byron wrote on the back of *Don Juan* 1.218 sounds a little like a parodic inversion of *Childe Harold* III.97; and the “faculty divine” of the sounding stanza 127 gives way to the bound and sea faring Juan who is wittily “‘cabin’d, cribb’d, confined’” (iv.75) in the same terms from *Macbeth*. Michael Cooke argues that Byron “implicitly repudiates” the notion that words are things in his “Epistle to Augusta” (pp. 56–57), and suggests that in *Don Juan* his use of language is “less categorical than paradoxical, approximative, revising and qualifying, reflecting and amplifying” (pp. 155–57). Peter Manning observes that the view of language as pointing to a “supralinguistic reality . . . may be found throughout *Childe Harold* and occasionally in *Don Juan*, but the nature of the latter poem qualifies the statements made within it” (231–32). His exploration of “the unavoidable inauthenticity of language” in *Don Juan* (233) leads Manning to relate the one word to the many in a way that is suggestively different from what I have proposed in my reading of *Childe Harold* III: “it is precisely in proportion to his refusal to exalt the individual word that Byron is able to display the multiple functions of language itself” (“*Don Juan* and Byron’s Imperceptiveness to the English Word,” *SiR*, 18 [1979], 208).

With regard to the connection in *Childe Harold* between oneness and lightning, see also iv.39 and 41.

20. Ridenour remarks that Byron’s turning towards art is itself a part of a “circular argument” (pp. 87–88).

trapment, but also of the strategies of self-expression by which he made his escape:

Lo, Nemi! navelled in the woody hills  
 So far, that the uprooting wind which tears  
 The oak from his foundation, and which spills  
 The ocean o'er its boundary, and bears  
 Its foam against the skies, reluctant spares  
 The oval mirror of thy glassy lake;  
 And, calm as cherish'd hate, its surface wears  
 A deep cold settled aspect nought can shake,  
 All coiled into itself and round, as sleeps the snake.

(173)

This passage begins just after Byron refers once more to “the electric chain” of a despair “Whose shock was as an earthquake’s” (iv.172)—a reference which circuitously involves Byron’s allusions to lightning and his vision of “the long envenomed chain” of the asp that winds around Laocoön (iv.160). So it may come as no surprise that the description of the volcanic Lake Nemi seems to shuffle and reuse the volcanic imagery Byron applies to himself in iii.69, or that it recalls the image of Milton’s Serpent which Satan finds “fast sleeping . . . / In Labyrinth of many a round self-roll’d.”<sup>21</sup> But the Serpent is not harmful at this point in *Paradise Lost*, for Satan has not entered into the shape which he beholds. And at this point in *Childe Harold* the infinite regress of reflexive imagery has been worked into another kind of pattern, as the snake with its Old Testament associations of coldness and hate is wreathed into the tail-eating serpent whose figure is the emblem of eternity.<sup>22</sup> Byron’s art may free expression from the circle of mortality, but it leaves the sting in language that recoils upon itself.

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21. ix.182–83. Quoted from *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Odyssey, 1957).

22. See, for example, the lines describing the tail-eating serpent in George Withers’ *A Collection of Emblemes, Ancient and Moderne*, 1635, which was commended by Charles Lamb: “TIME’S nature, by the *Fading-flowre*, appears; / Which, is a *Type*, of Transitory things: / The *Circled-snake*, ETERNITIE declares; / Within whose *Round*, each fading Creature, springs” (London: The Scholar Press, 1968), p. 102. And in Shelley’s “The Daemon of the World,” “the vast snake Eternity / In charmed sleep doth ever lie” (*The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Neville Rogers [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975], II, 24, ll. 100–01).