

IX CHILDE HAROLD

EVEN the casual reader of Byron's *juvenilia* can see that the earliest Byronic Hero did not spring full-grown and unprepared for from the mind of the young poet on his Grand Tour. Something like the poetic character of Childe Harold had already appeared in the early *Hours of Idleness* — in the figure of the eighteen-year-old student who fondly recalls his past "childhood" at Harrow, for instance, and the tombstone on which he was wont to lie and meditate on autumn evenings ("On a Distant View of Harrow"). Or in the figure who opines in "Childish Recollections" that he is a "Hermit" straying alone in the midst of crowds. The Gloomy Egoist of the "Elegy on Newstead Abbey," the "last and youngest of a noble line," views with poetic melancholy the "mouldering turrets" and the "damp and mossy tombs," and finds that even the grass "exhales a murky dew" from the "humid pall of life-extinguished clay." Still, Byron's first volumes, being only the subsidized publications of another poetizing young nobleman, were not notably successful, and it is probably safe to say that by 1812 few remembered the derivative *Hours of Idleness* or their traditional poetic characters. If Byron was remembered at all, it was as the author of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, the free-swinging Giffordesque satire prompted by the poor reviews of his first publications, and these heroic couplets gave little promise of *Childe Harold*.

Scott was therefore expressing the views of the general public

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when he said he was pleasantly surprised by *Childe Harold* I and II, since this was not the kind or the quality of poetry which he had come to expect of Byron. That the reading public was favorably impressed is of course amply evident in the fact that both poem and poet became legendary and lionized almost in a matter of days. Of course the character of the Childe is not the poem's only interest, or even perhaps its chief interest: *Childe Harold* is also a great poetic travelogue, a moving rhetorical account of scenes and events described with uncommon sensitivity and intensity. Even in our anti-Byronic twentieth century a Donne enthusiast like H. J. C. Grierson writes, "As a descriptive poem alone . . . *Childe Harold* is the greatest of its kind, the noblest panoramic poem in our literature."¹ Our concern here is with heroes, however, and not primarily with poetic description, and, as is commonly acknowledged, *Childe Harold* is the first important Byronic Hero, and the prototype of all the rest.

It has been almost as commonly supposed, however, from Byron's day to our own, that *Childe Harold* is in reality none other than Lord Byron himself, or at least his conception of himself, and this, of course, in spite of Byron's repeated protestations to the contrary, both in his letters and in a long passage in the Preface to Cantos I and II, in which he refers repeatedly to Harold as a "fictitious character" and a "child of the imagination." Critics and the public have goodnaturedly ignored his distinction, however, and have made the identification of poet and poetic character the subject of endless biographical and critical discussion. The fact is, of course, that Byron was himself in part responsible for this popular misconception of his poem.

In reality the first two cantos of the poem have no less than three different poetic characters, none of which is kept clearly distinct from the others. There is first of all the Childe himself, who is largely a traditional literary Romantic hero or an agglomeration of hero types. Second, there is in the first canto, at least, a minstrel-narrator whose archaic diction and occasional moralizing comment are in the tradition of Scott's romances or of Beattie's *Minstrel*. Finally, there is Byron's own persona, who breaks in with personal elegies,

or with poetic diatribes against war and tyranny, and who is not really consistent in voice or character with the other two persons in the poem. Byron does not really clear up the confusion until the fourth canto, when he drops the first and the second poetic characters, and retains only the third.

Byron had both a precedent and an apology for this confusion of poetic characters or voices. Sir Walter Scott frequently confuses narrators in his romances. In *Marmion*, for instance, he sets up as the narrator of his story a moral harpist with the characteristic attitudes of a pious Catholic late-medieval minstrel, but frequently he drops this pose for that of a nineteenth-century Scots Romantic poet. The confusion is even more evident in Beattie's *The Minstrel*, one of Byron's acknowledged models for *Childe Harold*. The ballad-minstrel persona of the first book with a "Gothic Harp" and a medieval mind, who reports sympathetically the facts and myths of the Child of Nature's rearing, becomes in the second book a contemporary Scottish moral philosopher, at home in the Age of Reason. Byron obviously chose to follow the pattern of having a minstrel-narrator, for the sake of the objectivity and impersonality of third-person description of his pilgrim. When Dallas, who was following the poem through the press, asked Byron whom the "he" referred to in the closing elegy of the second canto, Byron replied, somewhat piqued, "The 'he' refers to 'Wanderer' and anything is better than the *IIII* always *I*" (*Works*, II, 161, note).

The minstrel-narrator is plainly in evidence in the opening of the third-person description of the Childe in Canto I. His archaisms and shocked moral tone are clear in the second stanza:

Whilome in Albion's isle there dwelt a youth,
 Who ne in Virtue's ways did take delight;
 But spent his days in riot most uncouth,
 And vexed with mirth the drowsy ear of Night.
 Ah me! in sooth he was a shameless wight,
 Sore given to revel and ungodly glee . . . ?

But even in the first canto Byron is inconsistent. The sentiments of the stanzas on the Convention of Cintra, for instance, seem peculiarly unfit either for the Childe or for the aged Minstrel, so in the

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next stanza (27), the poet catches himself with a "So deemed the Childe," and apologizes by noting that although the Childe was not accustomed to such reasoning, "here a while he learned to moralize." (For the dissipated young cynic portrayed in the first few stanzas, this is a transformation indeed.) The Minstrel seems to breathe his last in the closing stanza of this canto, however, when he tells us that after this "one fyttē of Harold's pilgrimage" we may find "some tidings" in a "future page, / If he that rhymeth now may scribble moe."

In the second canto, the Minstrel having disappeared, we are left for the most part with Byron's own persona. Even the literary Childe of the first canto – the young-old Wandering Jew or Hero of Sensibility with Gothic sins – seems largely to have been eclipsed. The canto opens with a long *vanitas vanitatis* passage including a malediction on Lord Elgin and all despoilers of Greek ruins, and then the poet continues: "But where is Harold? Shall I then forget / To urge the gloomy Wanderer o'er the wave? / Little recked he of all that Men regret . . ." (II, 16) – in the last line dissociating the literary Childe from the sentiments of the poet's persona in the prologue. Through most of the canto, then, the Childe is used only for occasional and casual asides (usually "So deemed the Childe"), or for easy transitions ("Then rode Childe Harold" into the next landscape).

The third and fourth cantos were of course written much later, in 1816–17, after Byron's four eventful years in England – the years of his greatest fame, and, after the scandalous separation, of his greatest ignominy. Byron must have grown as a man during those years, and certainly he grew considerably as a poet. Yet something of the same confusion of poetic characters persists in *Childe Harold*, at least through Canto III. The literary Childe appears again in this canto, but he, like his creator, has grown more mature. There was something adolescent about the hero of the first cantos, but the new figure is more like the traditional rebellious Romantic Hero. Like Byron, he has returned to society, but unable to resist Beauty and Fame, he has again been "burned," and has finally realized that he is "himself the most unfit / Of men to herd with Man," since "He

would not yield dominion of his mind / To Spirits against whom his own rebelled, / Proud though in desolation . . ." (III, 12) — including for the first time, I believe, an echo of the Satan of *Paradise Lost*. The identification between the literary Childe and Byron's own persona is of course quite close in this canto, and in the Preface to Canto IV, Byron drops all pretense at keeping the two distinct:

With regard to the conduct of the last canto, there will be found less of the pilgrim than in any of the preceding, and that slightly, if at all, separated from the author speaking in his own person. The fact is, that I had become weary of drawing a line which every one seemed determined not to perceive: like the Chinese in Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World*, whom nobody would believe to be a Chinese, it was in vain that I asserted, and imagined that I had drawn, a distinction between the author and the pilgrim; and the very anxiety to preserve this difference, and disappointment at finding it unavailing, so far crushed my efforts in composition, that I determined to abandon it [i.e., the "difference," not the "composition"] altogether — and have done so. (*Works*, II, 323)

It is still important to note, however, that throughout the poem and even in Canto IV Byron and his persona are two different beings. The latter is of course a fabrication, an achievement of the poet's imagination, comparable, I believe, to Beattie's Edwin, and an even more "literary" personality than Wordsworth's "I" of the *Prelude* of 1850. The Byron of this period was no solitary, for instance, as Harold most certainly is; Byron was always the most social of poets, and even a casual reading of his letters proves that he realized the fact. Perhaps the distinction between the poetic and the real personalities is nowhere more evident than in the matter of a sense of humor or a capacity for irony. It is this capacity which Harold notably lacks, and it is this capacity which Byron himself, as seen in his letters and in his conversations, was never without. One need only note the manner in which he refers, in a letter to his friend Hodgson, to some of the most passionate concerns of the first cantos:

I have attacked De Pauw, Thornton, Lord Elgin, Spain, Portugal, the *Edinburgh Review*, travellers, Painters, Antiquarians, and others, so you see what a dish of Sour Crout Controversy I shall prepare for

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myself . . . *Vae Victis!* If I fall, I shall fall gloriously, fighting against a host. (*LJ*, II, 46-47)

This is not to say, of course, that these concerns were insincere, but the passage does demonstrate that Byron was even in 1812 capable of that mixture of irony, pathos, and bravado, largely missing in *Childe Harold*, but which was to make *Don Juan* his masterpiece.

These, then, are the three poetic characters in *Childe Harold*: The minstrel-narrator one need not be concerned with; he is a traditional poetical mouthpiece, and in any case he disappears after Canto I. The Childe himself is at first largely a traditional figure, a combination of sometimes incongruous traits from the heroes most popular in the Romantic age. He is kept distinct from Byron's own persona, however, only occasionally in the first two cantos; the distinction largely disappears in the third canto, and it is nonexistent in the fourth. Of course the earlier picture of the Childe colors all the rest of the poem, and the composite figure of the later cantos, while gaining in depth of distinctive personality as the first great Hero of Sensibility in English Romantic literature, retains many of the features he had acquired in his first traditional appearances in Cantos I and II.

Childe Harold of the first two cantos is indeed an imaginary literary figure, however many details of ancestry or biography he may have acquired from Byron's personal life, and in spite of the fact that he has also taken a Grand Tour. In personality he is a compound of many distinct and even disparate elements of the heroes discussed in the last chapters. In age and in some of his attitudes he is a Child of Nature; in his appearance and with his burnt-out passions and secret sins he bears a resemblance to the Gothic Villain, especially to the sentimentalized villain of Gothic drama; and in his meditations and in his personal reactions toward man and nature he resembles most closely those eighteenth-century types, the Gloomy Egoist and the Man of Feeling.

Insofar as he is a Child of Nature, Harold belongs of course to the romanticized late eighteenth-century type; he has not the aggressive ebullience of a Belcour or a Hermsprong, but rather the tender sensibilities of Fleetwood, or of Beattie's Edwin. (As we have seen,

this hero was already on the wane at the turn of the century, and it could therefore be expected that this would be the least important aspect of Harold's personality.) First, his tender age is repeatedly emphasized. He is a youth "of Albion's isle," "scarce a third" of whose days have "passed by"; a "youth so raw," "One who, 'twas said, still sighed to all he saw" (I, 2, 4, 33). Like Beattie's Edwin, the Childe is also accomplished in rude minstrelsy, and in moments of solitude he turns to his lute to compose impromptu songs for the consolation of his drooping spirits: "He seized his harp, which he at times could string, / And strike, albeit with untaught melody, / When deemed he no strange ear was listening . . ." (I, 13).

Mostly, however, Harold is a Child of Nature in his attitude toward the natural world. Like Beattie's Edwin, or Fleetwood, or perhaps the poet *manqué* of *The Prelude*, he loves "To sit on rocks — to muse o'er flood and fell — / To slowly trace the forest's shady scene, / Where things that own not Man's dominion dwell . . ." (II, 25). In another passage Harold himself calls nature his mother, and himself her child:

Dear Nature is the kindest mother still!
 Though always changing, in her aspect mild;
 From her bare bosom let me take my fill,
 Her never-weaned, though not her favoured child . . .
 (II, 37)

(Two manuscript variations help to explicate the last enigmatic adjective: "her weakly child," or "her rudest child.") Finally, we find that as with most of the Children of Nature, Harold, too, is fond of his "mother" in her more sublime and terrible aspects. Beattie's Edwin "was a strange and wayward youth, / Fond of each gentle and each dreadful scene. / In darkness and in storm he found delight . . ." ³ So also Childe Harold exclaims:

Oh! she is fairest in her features wild,
 Where nothing polished dares pollute her path:
 To me by day or night she ever smiled,
 Though I have marked her when none other hath,
 And sought her more and more, and loved her best in wrath.
 (II, 37)

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These features of the Child of Nature seem somewhat incongruous in combination with characteristics of the next of Harold's prototypes — the Gothic Villain. Harold, as were the Gothic Villains, is of "lineage long" which was "glorious in another day" (I, 3). This resemblance is perhaps adventitious, but the same cannot be said of the Childe's haughty pride and cold reserve, his burnt-out passions, his secret sins, and his flashes of half-hidden remorse.

It is interesting to note first of all that in a variant reading of one manuscript Harold is given two of the Gothic Villain's most typical characteristics, the first, pride, almost a hallmark. We are told that

An evil smile just bordering on a sneer
Curled on his lip . . .
[He] deemed ne mortal wight his peer
To gentle dames still less could he be dear . . .
(*Works*, II, 21, note)

The finished picture is less blatantly Gothic, but his relationship to his villain cousin of the drama or novel is nevertheless still clear:

Strange pangs would flash along Childe Harold's brow,
As if the Memory of some deadly feud
Or disappointed passion lurked below:
But this none knew, nor haply cared to know;
For his was not that open, artless soul
That feels relief by bidding sorrow flow,
Nor sought he friend to counsel or condole,
Whate'er this grief mote be . . . (I, 8)

That Byron had ample literary precedent for giving Harold these past and secret sins and the attendant remorse has I think been proven in the preceding chapters. The glamour, the irresistible romance of a secret and sinful past was one of the prime attractions of the original Gothic Villain, and, as we have seen, the intensity of remorse, sentimentalized in the hero-villain of the Gothic drama, had carried over into the character of the Noble Outlaw, long before Byron began to write. It is especially interesting to note that Byron gave the Childe these secret sins in his first appearance in Canto I, presumably before Byron had any of the sins of the rumored incest or of his marriage on his conscience, and when, from

the evidence of his letters and the testimony of his personal friends, he seems to have been “not sated . . . not cheerless . . . not unamiable,” but “all a-quiver with youth and enthusiasm and the joy of great living.”⁴ This seems clear evidence for the conclusion that this aspect of the Byronic Hero, in its earliest manifestation, at least, was inspired by literature, not by life.

Of course Gothic Villains were passionate actors in sensationalistic drama, and Childe Harold is not; he is above all a “pilgrim,” not in the sense of being a tourist, on the one hand, or as a real penitent, on the other, but as marked and cursed of sin, wandering over the face of Europe in an almost hopeless search for self-restoration, and fearing that this can never come about, even in death. In other words, Harold is Byron’s first Cain or his Wandering Jew. Now this is not to say that the Cain or Ahasuerus stories gave much direct inspiration for *Childe Harold*; these stories were themselves creations of the Romantic Movement, and they illustrate typical themes — eternal remorse, wanderlust, ennui, and *Weltschmerz* — which *Childe Harold* also illustrates. In other words, these are classic themes of the Romantic literary tradition; they are by no means personal to Byron. And, as might be expected, Byron does not leave implicit this association of Harold with his fellow remorse-stricken wanderers. We are first told of the Childe that “life-abhorring Gloom / Wrote on his faded brow curst Cain’s unresting doom” (I, 83), and later, the Childe himself names his malady:

It is that settled, ceaseless gloom
The fabled Hebrew Wanderer bore;
That will not look beyond the tomb,
But cannot hope for rest before.

(“To Inez”: I, following 84)

These are still not the most important of his prototypes, however: most of all in his meditations (and most of the poem is meditation), the Childe of the first two cantos is an eighteenth-century Gloomy Egoist, or a Man of Feeling.

One of the purposes which *Childe Harold* served was to furnish eager readers with an imaginary Grand Tour, and this at a time when Englishmen had been obliged for years to sit at home, through

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wars and rumors of wars on the Continent. Of course then, as now, the commonest tourist sites in Europe were ruins, tombs, and monuments of glories past. Childe Harold was therefore making a natural choice when he selected such sites as settings for his meditations, and they were given an especial poignancy for his readers by the fact that many of the conflicts commemorated were of recent wars, and wars in which Englishmen had taken a prominent part.

Yet the general elegiac tone of the first two cantos of the poem, and the recurring themes of *ubi sunt* and *sic transit*, are very much in the tradition of the Gloomy Egoists of the preceding century. There are many passages reminiscent of such poems as Hervey's *Meditations among the Tombs*, or passages one might imagine having come from a later and secularized Edward Young. Beckford's deserted mansion at Quinta da Monserrate provides a setting for one such meditation:

Here giant weeds a passage scarce allow
To Halls deserted, portals gaping wide:
Fresh lessons to the thinking bosom, how
Vain are the pleasaunces on earth supplied;
Swept into wrecks anon by Time's ungente tide! (I, 23)

There is a long meditation on a skull in the second canto which reminds one not only of a Hervey or Young, but perhaps also of Hamlet in the graveyard:

Look on its broken arch, its ruined wall,
Its chambers desolate, and portals foul:
Yes, this was once Ambition's airy hall,
The Dome of Thought, the Palace of the Soul:
Behold through each lack-lustre, eyeless hole,
The gay recess of Wisdom and of Wit . . . (II, 6)

The personal elegies which close each canto remind one particularly of Young's *Night Thoughts*. At the close of the first canto, in a long note, Byron himself reminds the reader of Young's lines: "Insatiate archer! could not one suffice? / Thy shaft flew thrice, and thrice my peace was slain . . ." ⁵ The second canto closes with an echo of the same passage: "All thou couldst have of mine, stern Death! thou hast; / The Parent, Friend, and now the more than Friend: / Ne'er

yet for one thine arrows flew so fast" (II, 96). Harold's elegies hold out no Christian consolation of an immortality beyond the grave, however. The Pilgrim, in part a follower of Young or of Hervey, is a secularized Gloomy Egoist, closer to the classics (in theme, at least) than to his ecclesiastic forebears of the previous century. In the long *vanitas vanitatis* passage with which Canto II opens (reminiscent of Lucretius, perhaps, but also of the Preacher), Harold can only conclude that man is a "Poor child of Doubt and Death, whose hope is built on reeds."⁶

Finally, the Childe of the first two cantos, in many of his poses, is a Man of Feeling. He is suffering from unrequited love; in spite of his often-confessed preference for solitude and his dislike for mankind, he is a humanitarian — sternly against war and tyranny in all its forms; and in his meditations on the natural world he adopts many of the attitudes characteristic of Mackenzie's Harvey (*The Man of Feeling*) or of the sentimental heroes of Mrs. Radcliffe's Gothic novels.

His unfortunate love affair is merely hinted at, and never developed. We are told from the first that he "Had sighed to many though he loved but one, / And that loved one, alas! could ne'er be his" (I, 5). He is impervious now to Cupid's arrows, even while watching dark-eyed Spanish maids dancing in the moonlight: "For not yet had he drunk of Lethe's stream; / And lately had he learned with truth to deem / Love has no gift so grateful as his wings" (I, 82).

Harold's affinity with the Man of Feeling is shown more clearly in his prevailing human sympathy. He is solitary and antisocial, but as with the typical Man of Feeling, more because of his exquisite sensibilities than because of anything basically misanthropic in his nature. Like most Romantic poetic personalities, he has been "fated," set apart from other men, alienated from the social world of which he would otherwise gladly be a part:

Still he beheld, nor mingled with the throng;
But viewed them not with misanthropic hate:
Fain would he now have joined the dance, the song;
But who may smile that sinks beneath his fate? (I, 84)

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Again, like most Men of Feeling, he cannot stand war or violence, and he sympathizes with the "rustic" who shrinks from viewing "his vineyard desolate, / Blasted below the dun hot breath of War" (I, 47). In his description of his first experiences with Spanish bull-fights, he concludes that the sport is barbaric, and his sympathies go out to the gored horse and the dying bull, reserving nothing but contumely for the "vulgar eyes" that watch (I, 72-80).

Finally, the Childe of the first two cantos belongs with the Man of Feeling in his attitude toward external nature. One can quite imagine Harold joining Mrs. Radcliffe's Emily St. Aubert in enraptured contemplation of the more rugged reaches of the Pyrenees or of the mountain fastnesses around Udolpho. As Professor Lovell has so thoroughly demonstrated, the early Childe, at least, belongs in that long and persistent tradition of landscape painters in English pre-Romantic literature.⁷ The scenes are carefully sketched and balanced, with just the proper tinting, and just that note of the fearful-lovely sublime which so attracted painters and poets through the latter half of the eighteenth century. One of the more famous of the scenes serves to illustrate the point (note the "harmonizing" blue of the sky, and the definition of the sublime in the last line):

Monastic Zitza! from thy shady brow,
Thou small, but favoured spot of holy ground!
Where'er we gaze — around — above — below, —
What rainbow tints, what magic charms are found!
Rock, river, forest, mountain, all abound,
And bluest skies that harmonise the whole:
Beneath, the distant Torrent's rushing sound
Tells where the volumed Cataract doth roll
Between those hanging rocks, that shock yet please the soul.
(II, 48)

The traditional literary figure of Childe Harold in Cantos I and II is indeed, then, a potpourri or an agglomeration of the characteristics of the heroes discussed in the last two chapters: the Child of Nature; the Gothic Villain (unregenerate, as in the novel, or remorseful, as in the drama or in Scott's romances); the accursed Wanderer; the Gloomy Egoist, meditating on ruins, death, or the

vanity of life; and the Man of Feeling, suffering from a lost love, or philanthropically concerned with the suffering caused by war or oppression.

That such a literary character could not but contain some incongruities is perhaps obvious enough, but I think it is highly probable that the very breadth of the selection of heroic characteristics accounts in large part for the poem's immediate and astounding acclaim. Here was a poetic character who combined in his person many or most of the characteristics the age found attractive: though suffering from "misfortuned" love and from the ennui of spent passions and remorse, at the same time he could appreciate the beauties of natural scenery and could moralize with the best of the meditative egoists on the passage of fame and glory and on the vanity of life. In a preceding chapter I noted that Scott's *Rokeby* was a very treasure trove of Romantic hero types, offering a virile Child of Nature, a youthful Man of Feeling (given to solitary walks and musical extemporizing), and no less than two Gothic Villain-Heroes. But here, in the person of Childe Harold, Byron has rolled all of these into one, and added to boot the characteristics of a meditative moralist. Such a hero could not fail to attract in the Romantic age. This, then, is the character of the Childe Harold of the first two cantos: he is striking, if largely traditional, and he was vastly popular, even if somewhat inconsistent.

The Childe of Cantos III and IV is in some ways a different person. Like the verse of the later poems, he is less rhetorical, and more poetic; less traditional, and far more personal. The important transformation, as has been commonly noticed, is that the Childe becomes assimilated to Byron's own persona, although some colors of the original portrait remain, not only in the mind of the reader, but in sporadic passages of the later poems. The scandalous "past" of the Childe has become actual, and the "exile" of the Harold of Canto III has become real, not merely a literary device. In other words, the new figure is not so far from the old but that many of his sentiments fit into the traditional pattern set in the first two cantos. There is, however, less of cynicism, and more of suffering; less of sin and guilt, and more of being sinned against. In a word, there is less of the

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Gothic Villain and more of the first important English Hero of Sensibility.

But let me first admit that there are passages in the later cantos in which the suffering becomes too personal to remain literary, in which the emotion is too specific to be generalized and made objective. The most offensive of these is the famous "appeal to Nemesis":

if calmly I have borne
Good, and reserved my pride against the hate
Which shall not overwhelm me, let me not have worn
This iron in my soul in vain — shall *they* not mourn?
.....

Not in the air shall these my words disperse,
Though I be ashes; a far hour shall wreak
The deep prophetic fulness of this verse,
And pile on human heads the mountain of my curse!
.....

That curse shall be Forgiveness . . .
Have I not suffered things to be forgiven?

(IV, 131-135)

Such a passage is not only too personal, but too petty and vindictive. One could perhaps maintain that this sentiment is in the "Christian" tradition, as does Professor G. Wilson Knight, who goes so far as to call these stanzas "Promethean," and points to them as the source of Shelley's innovation in the Prometheus legend — the Christian ideal of forgiveness which Prometheus exhibits toward Zeus.⁸ In the Alexandrine above there is probably an echo of St. Paul: "If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him to drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head" (Romans 12.19-20). But the sentiment remains inconsistent in *Childe Harold* — and, one might add, in the New Testament. It is far more characteristic of the Byronic Hero to say:

Meantime I seek no sympathies, nor need —
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.

(IV, 10)

But enough has been written on the autobiographical in *Childe Harold* III and IV. Comparatively little in these cantos is so strictly personal as the passage just quoted, but that little has been much exaggerated by those critics and biographers who are legitimately more concerned with the poet's life than with his work. What I am more interested to point out here is that the Childe becomes in these cantos one of a long line of Heroes of Sensibility, a line which begins in the Romantic movement and continues through the remainder of the nineteenth century.

In an earlier chapter I defined the Hero of Sensibility as having emerged from a union of a secularized Gloomy Egoist with the ethically uncommitted Man of Feeling. His essential characteristics are that he is always passive, not acting but being acted upon (as was Harvey, the *Man of Feeling*); that he is given to prolonged, intense, and sometimes even morbid self-analysis, especially of his emotional states (as was Parson Yorick, or the later Werther); that since he is always egocentrically self-concerned, the whole world becomes colored with his own particular ennui and world-weariness (as is the case certainly with Edward Young's persona, and is pre-eminently the case with Werther); and finally, that most of these characteristics stem from his peculiar psychic malady of *Weltschmerz*: the tension in his personality that results from the conflict of two contradictory drives, one toward total commitment, toward loss of self in a vision of absolutes, the other toward a skeptical and even aggressive assertion of self in a world which remains external and even alien.

Perhaps Rousseau's St. Preux (or Rousseau himself) was the first of these Romantic Heroes of Sensibility. Certainly Werther belongs to this line of development; his anguished cry for self-commitment I have cited earlier as a prime expression of *Weltschmerz*. Faust himself, with his lonely and discouraged search for absolutes, and his subsequent resolve that "The highest, lowest forms my soul shall borrow, / Shall heap upon itself their bliss and sorrow / And thus, my own sole self to all their selves expand . . ." ⁹ belongs in part in the same tradition.

That the later Childe Harold has the first of these characteristics

tity to be able so to commit himself, however. In one sense, since this self-assertion frustrates any total commitment, it brings about what Professor Lovell calls the "failure of a quest," and it is the disappointment of this failure which Werther expresses when he says, "When we hurry toward it . . . , everything is as before, and we stand in our poverty, in our own narrowness, and our soul languishes for the refreshment which has eluded our grasp."²¹ Childe Harold feels at times the same disappointment:

Could he have kept his spirit to that flight
 He had been happy; but this clay will sink
 Its spark immortal, envying it the light
 To which it mounts, as if to break the link
 That keeps us from yon heaven which woos us to its brink.

(III, 14)

Still, it is not all disappointment and frustration; it is also in a sense a return to life: ". . . for waking Reason deems / Such over-weening phantasies unsound, / And other voices speak, and other sights surround" (IV, 7). There is certainly a note of defiance in the tone of this affirmation of the reasoning self, and this, perhaps, is Byron's final answer to all forms of Romantic mysticism:

Yet let us ponder boldly —'tis a base
 Abandonment of reason to resign
 Our right of thought — our last and only place
 Of refuge; this, at least, shall still be mine:
 Though from our birth the Faculty divine
 Is chained and tortured — cabined, cribbed, 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)

The same tone of skeptical self-assertion and humanistic self-reliance forms the keynote of *Manfred* and *Cain*, and this, I believe, is Byron's last word, and the typical stance of the Byronic Hero. This is also, after all, the position of the narrator-persona of *Don Juan*, although in that case the vision of the cosmic tragedy of human self-assertion in an alien universe has been reinforced by the

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resurgence of Byron's capacity for "Romantic" irony. *Don Juan* illustrates that life must be conceived as tragedy (as Yeats says), and the human predicament may be an absurdity (as Sartre says), but the poem also asserts that life is infinitely varied, intensely exciting, and at times even invigoratingly comic.

This is to anticipate a resolution of the conflict, however, which the Hero of Sensibility in *Childe Harold* never achieves. The tension remains, and in the closing stanzas of Canto IV the mood again returns, and Harold longs once more for that obliviousness of self, that annihilation of the ego:

I love not Man the less, but Nature more,
From these our interviews, in which I steal
From all I may be, or have been before,
To mingle with the Universe . . . (IV, 178)

But in the splendid rhetoric of the address to the sea which follows—"Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean—roll"—this first English Hero of Sensibility gives a vivid impression of a natural world impersonal and alien, totally indifferent to man and all his aspirations.

This agonized Hero of Sensibility was Byron's legacy to the literature of the age which succeeded him—not the healthy, ironic but life-affirming message of his great satire. Until almost the end of the century, both in England and on the Continent, Byron was remembered primarily as the author of *Childe Harold*, not of *Don Juan*. The agonized Hero of Sensibility appears again and again in the literature of the succeeding age: sometimes morbidly analytic of his own emotional and spiritual states, and in his *Weltschmerz* longing for some engagement to absolute truth which will rid him of his painful self-consciousness; longing to "mingle with the universe," but being continually frustrated in this desire by the reassertion of his skeptical, sometimes cynical, and sometimes remorseful ego. This hero and his central problem reappear in the poetry of De Musset, for instance, or in Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, and certainly this problem of commitment, this intense and longdrawn self-analysis, the agonized passiveness (some kind of "engagement" being necessary for action) reappear in England as the dominant traits

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of heroes in Arnold's *Empedocles*, in much of Tennyson's work (see *The Ancient Sage*, or passages of *In Memoriam*), especially clearly in Clough's *Dipsychus*, and even in Pater's *Marius*.

But I think it is not going too far to say that the climax of this hero's passion, and perhaps of his poetry, appears in Byron's *Childe Harold* III and IV.