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Heroism and history: *Childe Harold* I and II and the Tales

For generations of readers, the experience of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* has been caught up with a reading of Byron's psychology, for the poem has commonly been seen as the expression of an incompletely repressed *alter ego* to be read in parallel with Byron's own life and expressed opinions. It therefore finds itself firmly placed within the bounds of an interpretative frame whose constant reference point is the concept of a flawed and melancholic psyche. Within this, approving critics may note the perspicuity of the poem's dark opinions, or the fascination of its psychology, while disapproving critics might censure the indulgence of high Romantic self-expression or dramatisation. These approaches, and their approving or disapproving reflexes are not misreadings. In many ways, they constitute a meta-narrative which is historically continuous, amply echoing the response of Byron's contemporary audience, which enjoyed the poem precisely because it seemingly alluded to the authentic experience of its author. But in general, such a view is likely to eclipse other of the poem's achievements, for it tends to reinforce the Romantic cult of introversion wherein the isolation of the private poet is seen as a necessary condition of a gifted perception. I will argue here for an understanding of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* I and II as a profoundly public work written in a style designed to appeal to a new audience sympathetic to its coherent and anti-teleological explorations of history, politics and contemporary affairs. It is an ambitious poem which constructs a world-view for the modern – that is to say 'Romantic' – post-revolutionary intellectual, a view which in turn produces the psychology of the Byronic hero as a dramatisation of its effects. Significantly, its perspective is European, discarding orthodox or nationalistic understandings of history and empire, in favour of an all-embracing scepticism, which interrogates ideals of civilisation's progress and nationhood through a series of meditations around posterity's judgements on heroism, fame and achievement. I will argue that the verse tales that followed the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* may be read in continuity with it, but that the nature of this continuum

constitutes displacements, in which the significance of history is at best vestigial. The reading offered here is not radically disruptive of established views, but it does require the reader to look again at *Childe Harold's* most familiar characteristics – its scepticism, and its vision of a devastated Europe – and regard them darkly, as if they were being seen for the first time.

The publication of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in 1812 marks a defining moment in literary history. It is the point at which, effectively, second-generation Romanticism took root in the culture of the age, and it is the moment at which the best-seller poem gave notice that it had emphatically arrived. The poem inaugurated a fresh rage for poetry which exceeded even that of Scott's highly popular romantic narratives. Byron capitalised on his popularity in the rapid publication of the poems commonly known as the Turkish Tales (1812–16) and his fame in these years was such that it led to the streets being blocked because of the multitude's eagerness to catch a glimpse of him, and to his publisher, so flushed with the success of *Childe Harold*, offering him 1,000 guineas for a sequel.¹ This period was an era which saw the commodification of literature increase at an unprecedented rate, one in which literature came to be regarded as a profession, and in which success, fame and regard were attributed not by literary coteries, but by the combination of sales, marketing and the influence of the powerful reviewing journals. *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* successfully negotiated this complex of influences to become an outstandingly popular poem on account of its novelty, and its innovations were both influential and important in their establishment of poetry's civic function.

Byron's poem gave a distinctly new turn to the movement that we now know as Romanticism and, simultaneously, it interrupted the modes of the popular poetry of the day. First, its style and location were markedly unusual. Above all else, *Childe Harold* is a rhetorical *tour de force*, in which the artistry of declamation assumes primacy. While the poem develops a meditative dimension, its style of thinking is a long way from the ruminative introversion of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Byron's interest in contemplation is not that it might lead to some inner wisdom, vision or higher morality greater than those inhabiting the common frames of thought: it is vitally concerned with the position of the individual in the world ('the world' at that time meaning largely, but not exclusively, Western Europe). Where the early Romantics' poetry constructed for itself a domestic landscape, in which the home figured large, Byron's poem announced an utterly different location and stimulation for the poet's ideas, in which the settled traditions of domesticity figured not at all. This is a poem of unconventional travel and exile, a poem whose scenery is that of Europe, and more particularly a Europe defined by two distinct features: its history, and its boundaries. The first two

cantos of *Childe Harold* construct a world riven by political and military strife that is bounded by regions of wilderness and exotic barbarism. This is a new world for the Romantic poet, or indeed the popular poet of the opening decade of the nineteenth century, and it was one that Byron made his own, and in a way, never left. Indeed, his rejection of Romantic metaphysics is announced here no less forcefully than in *Don Juan*, even if that announcement is implicit rather than declared in *Childe Harold's* modern, first-decade assumption that to be in the world is primarily a political and not an ontological matter.

The poets that are commonly placed alongside Byron as second-generation Romantics, Shelley and Keats, owe more to this defining moment than is commonly acknowledged. Neither of these authors wrote anything like *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, but their poems have important genealogical roots here. For Shelley is a poet whose identity is more European than English, and his position as an exile whose perspective on the norms of British society is sceptical, atheistic and informed by theories of history, owes much to the political and civic precedents created by Byron's poem. In another region entirely, Byron's creation of a poetic voice that is strongly inflected by what was seen at the time as a form of sickness or morbidity and simultaneously able to acknowledge the sensual regions of human experience may be very different in tone to anything found in Keats, but its emotional or affective structures are replicated there. In so many of his poems, Keats depends heavily on the interchange between satiety and the incapacity to feel on the one hand and the stimulation of dream, sexuality and excess on the other. That dynamic has its foundation in the emotional spectrum of *Childe Harold*, and even more significantly perhaps, *Childe Harold's* fostering of the public's taste for liberal, yet polite (as opposed to 'vulgar' or radical) poetry.

It is as well to acknowledge that *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* I and II is a difficult poem, particularly for the modern reader. This difficulty inheres not so much in the devious archiving of hidden meanings, as in its surface, and it is compounded by a current (and late twentieth-century) interpretative habit which has a strong preference for the discovery or creation of subtexts. The poem's originality, and its political and historical relevance, are ironically too readily obscured by its allusive, topical difficulties on the one hand, and the distractions offered by the emerging figure of the Byronic hero on the other. In addition, the poem's complex movements back and forth through time, place and mode initially militate against the clarity of its abiding concerns. Frequently seen as a medley (or 'a hodgepodge', as a recent critic has put it),² it is, in fact, as I will argue, a consistent engagement with a series of connected themes and ideas revolving around a fascination with

the making of history: war, empire, tradition, loyalty, heroism and, perhaps above all, the judgements of posterity. These topics are not simply convenient romantic themes for a young poet; they are the subjects which this poem is reviewing and re-evaluating in the political chaos of Europe at the end of the nineteenth century's first decade. It is the extent of that political chaos, and its devastating consequence for the significance of history, that presents the appearance of a medley or formlessness, for it distends the poem, wrenching it away from the stable structure of a travelogue into something less neat, more ambitious and more distorted, an irregular procession of declamations which deny the ordinance of reasoned argument, but present together a disillusioned evacuation of history's significance, the status of heroism and the historical agency of great men. At the same time, these declamations effectively dramatise the disappointment that attends such a loss.

When Byron left England to travel to the Peninsula and the Levant in 1809, Europe was in a state of turmoil. 'The Continent is in a fine state!' he wrote to his mother shortly before leaving Falmouth, 'an insurrection has broken out at Paris, and the Austrians are beating Buonaparte, the Tyrolese have risen' (*BLJ*, I, 206). His journey through Spain and Portugal was to take him to countries which perhaps exemplified more than any other the chaotic state of European international affairs. The recent history of both nations was strewn with broken treaties and internal and external treacheries. Some understanding of this is necessary if we are to appreciate the nature and tone of much of the political commentary that the poem embodies.

Since 1792, when the French Assembly required Spain either to form a close alliance with France or to enter into open hostilities, Spain's position had been strongly compromised by the political intrigues of its monarchy and Prime Minister, Manuel de Godoy.³ Charles IV of Spain was a conservative Bourbon king, who had staunchly supported Louis XVI and had gone to war with France in 1793 after Louis's execution. After significant defeats and the ascent of Godoy to a position of greater influence (he was also the Queen's lover), Spain had signed the Treaty of Ildefonso in 1796, effectively an offensive alliance with France against England. The succeeding years were disastrous for Spain and the country's relations with Portugal. Napoleon ruthlessly exploited Godoy's compliance, and Spain suffered continuous defeats in the war with England, while being constantly under threat of French invasion. Godoy attempted to create a principality for himself in southern Portugal, paying Napoleon 24 million francs for the privilege, before realising that he was being played along, at which point he tried to form an alliance with England. This was rebuffed, and incurred Napoleon's displeasure. When Portugal refused to declare war on England in 1807 to

reinforce the continental blockade at Napoleon's behest, the French took the opportunity to agree with Godoy that they could march across the Pyrenees through Spain into Portugal. Having installed a brutal and exploitative government of generals in Portugal, Napoleon's troops then invaded Spain, and the ensuing struggle resulted finally, after Charles IV's farcical abdication and reclamation of the throne, in Napoleon's capturing of the crown for his brother, Joseph Bonaparte. On 2 May 1808, the day after the monarchy departed for safe havens in France, the Madrid populace rose in revolt, a rising that not only proved to be a turning point in the history of Spain, but also led eventually to Napoleon's downfall. Portugal and Spain united against the French invaders, bringing the British generals Wellesley (shortly to become the Duke of Wellington after the victory at Talavera) and Moore into the Peninsula. After a series of terrible battles and the controversy over the Convention of Cintra (in which Britain's agreement with Napoleon sacrificed the Spanish popular cause), France was driven out of Portugal, and Wellington advanced up through Spain, taking Madrid in 1812, and then marching on to France. Within fifteen days of the last French defeat in Spain, Napoleon abdicated to Elba in April 1814.

Byron left England on 2 July 1809, arriving in Lisbon four days later. He was in Portugal and Spain for no more than a month, leaving Lisbon in mid-July, and riding horseback quickly to Cadiz, and then by boat to Gibraltar. His presence in the Peninsula followed the popular risings, and coincided with Napoleon's successes at Saragossa and Corunna. By the spring of 1810, Cadiz was besieged. It is hard to imagine a more politically volatile location for Byron's travels, and the poem that granted him fame, than Portugal and Spain in 1809, and Byron's journey was a long way from the conventional Grand Tour commonly undertaken by the aristocratic gentlemen of the eighteenth century upon coming of age. His original plan, to travel to Constantinople via Malta was thwarted by his having missed the boat to Malta from Falmouth, and he and his travelling companion, John Cam Hobhouse, took the alternative route to Lisbon, travelling thereafter overland through Portugal and Spain to Gibraltar, and then on to Malta, Albania, Greece and Turkey. Reading Byron's letters from this brief period (he was in Spain and Portugal for around five weeks) provides only a partial view of his reactions to his journey. Political and military affairs are given relatively scant attention ('This country is in a state of great disorder, but beautiful in itself, the army is in Spain, and a battle is daily expected' (*BLJ*, I, 214–15) he writes casually from Lisbon to his solicitor, John Hanson, in July 1809); more prevalent are remarks on manners, personalities and the appearance of Spanish women (*BLJ*, I, 216–19). Yet almost the whole of the first canto of *Childe Harold*

is given over to a retrospective meditation on Spain, in which, alongside the descriptions of the landscape and the people, the current condition of the country is related to its history, and to the common condition of a Europe ravaged by war. Spain may have been an unexpected detour for Byron's travelling schedule, and he may have lost no time in passing through it, but this projection into the unstable and bloody theatre of European warfare forces the poet to confront the momentous subject of national histories, and develop forms of poetic utterance equal to the challenge of historical commentary. There is no doubt that when Byron came to write the first canto between October and December 1809, he recognised Spain as the *locus* of European chaos ('the land of war and crimes' (*BLJ*, II, 16)) in which a recent history of continuous betrayal, imperial ambition and popular resentment provided the context for a revision of international affairs to be rendered on behalf of – in the terms of the poem's epigraph – a citizen of the world, whose extensive, sceptical views are not constrained by national boundaries or patriotic affiliation.

In accordance with this wider view, one of the strongest features of this poetry is its consistent attempt to insert the consequences of present and past times into a context governed by the judgements of posterity. These judgements are offered as hypotheses (since posterity is always in a state of impending arrival) and, simultaneously, as verdicts filtered by historical perspectives informed by distance and better understanding. Thus, the Childe ruminates on the Convention of Cintra and expostulates, 'How will posterity the deed proclaim! / Will not our own and fellow-nations sneer', and throughout both cantos there is a sustained concern with the gaining and status of fame and notoriety, ranging from that of the ancient heroes and writers to the degenerate infamy earned by such as Lord Elgin, whose deeds make Europe 'blush' (*CHP*, II.13.2). Byron uses the spectre of posterity as a means of censoring the degraded politics and actions of the present day, but the device is more than a satirical trick, for the vision of *Childe Harold* is one concerned to situate the modern liberal mind contemplating the imperial ambitions of France and other nations in an historical perspective. Posterity is Byron's rhetorical means of imagining the future judgements of history. It is also realised as the active agent in contemporary revisions of previous actions and ideologies.

This poem has a ubiquitous concern with a re-reading of the historical landscape through which its wanderer proceeds. The crosses by the roadside (1.xxi.2) are not 'devotion's offering' but marks of the continuous violence in a land where 'law secures not life'. The Catholic Church at Mafra, which Byron describes as 'superb' in his notes to the poem, is interpreted as an emblem of Catholicism's bloody history:

But here the Babylonian whore hath built
A dome where flaunts she in such glorious sheen,
That men forget the blood which she hath spilt
And bow the knee to Pomp that loves to varnish guilt.

(*CHP*, I.29.6–9)

The better view of posterity is rendered more conventionally in the re-reading of another edifice in the landscape in the apostrophe to William Beckford (*CHP*, I.22–3), in which Beckford's wrecked hopes of 'paradise' are to be recognised in the deserted halls of his one-time residence, now the classic image of mutability with its overgrown passages and 'gaping portals'. At the simplest and most orthodox level, *Childe Harold* deconstructs the illusory permanence of architectural ambition through the readily available motif of decay, and advances, similarly, the view that Time ('accursed time' (*CHP*, I.66.1)) rules over all things. The poem moves a long way beyond this, however, in its attempt to apply historical perspectives to the overwhelming events of contemporary Spain.

The sceptical interrogation of grandeur is repeated, with more weight and immediate topical reference in Canto I, stanzas 40 to 44, in which the great battles of Talavera and Albuera are invoked. Here, famously, Byron casts the renown of victory in the longer perspective provided by the history of imperial ambition's folly, acknowledging the honour attending the dead ('Yes, Honour decks the turf that wraps their clay') but simultaneously reading this as a 'vain sophistry' through which the dead may be recognised as 'ambition's honour'd fools'. The battles of Talavera and Albuera were indeed successes for the British, but they incurred massive, unprecedented casualties on both sides. The losses at Albuera, together with the tactical failures of the Spanish after Talavera, made both battles pyrrhic victories, even while they remained landmarks in the liberation of the Peninsula and the eventual defeat of Napoleon. In its representation of these battles, *Childe Harold* evolves a polyphonic register capable of simultaneously evoking the heroic and the satiric:

By Heaven! it is a splendid sight to see
(For one who hath no friend, no brother there)
Their rival scarfs of mix'd embroidery,
Their various arms that glitter in the air!
What gallant war-hounds rouse them from their lair,
And gnash their fangs, loud yelling for the prey!
All join the chase, but few the triumph share;
The Grave shall bear the chiefest prize away
And Havoc scarce for joy can number their array.

Three hosts combine to offer sacrifice;
 Three tongues prefer strange orisons on high;
 Three gaudy standards flout the pale blue skies;
 The shouts are France, Spain, Albion, Victory!
 The foe, the victim, and the fond ally
 That fights for all, but ever fights in vain,
 Are met – as if at home they could not die –
 To feed the crow on Talavera’s plain,
 And fertilize the field that each pretends to gain.

(*CHP*, 1.40–41)

There is a lot of movement here, as Byron mobilises a vocabulary which can invoke the pageant of warfare as well as its patriotism, while steadily working the stanza towards a withdrawal of the values it seemingly endorses, in a manner that predicates *Don Juan*’s mastery of the technique. But like that later poem, the poetry is not concerned simply to undermine itself through such qualifying ironies. While there are moments which effectively cancel out the heroic statements, *Childe Harold* also operates in an oxymoronic frame of reference, to hold opposites in suspension, as in the phrase ‘Oh, Albuera! glorious field of grief!’ (*CHP*, 1.43.1), or indeed, in its broad historical vision, which recognises the competing claim of the immediate and the contemporary within the great span of time and the judgements of the future.

So deeply suffused is the long view of posterity that even poetry is vulnerable to its penetrating scrutiny:

Childe Harold was he hight: – but whence his name
 And lineage long, it suits me not to say;
 Suffice it, that perchance they were of fame,
 And had been glorious in another day:
 But one sad losel soils a name for aye,
 However mighty in the olden time;
 Nor all that herald rake from coffin’d clay,
 Nor florid prose, nor honied lies of rhyme
 Can blazon evil deeds, or consecrate a crime.

(*CHP*, 1.3)

Rhetoric is given a very uncertain status here. Its capacity to deceive, Byron suggests, is countered by the more lasting effects of criminality, which cannot be erased. *Childe Harold* may be a poem that invests heavily in its own declamations, but it is also a poem consistently informed by its own suspicion of rhetorical propagandas and the metaphors of fame and reputation. There is a sense, therefore, in which the poem is founded upon a conflict between

its medium and its message but, for the most part, such a conflict is avoided by way of a consistently articulated scepticism which requires its readers to look beyond the facades of grandeur or patriotic rhetoric to the wider view.

The first canto of the poem ends in an extravagant development of Spain's allegorical significance which, taken together with the opening of the second canto, offers the widest view of all, in the form of the history of civilisation as Byron knew it. Not only is Spain the epitome of contemporary political chaos, in which 'They fight for freedom who were never free, / A Kingless people for a nerveless state' (*CHP*, I.86.2–3), it also defines the very condition of imperial warfare and struggle in its incorporation of all previous histories of violent struggle (*CHP*, I.87.1–4).

Even more startling perhaps is the poem's vision of Spain as an Armageddon. Its 'reeking plain' and 'bleach'd bones, and blood's unbleaching stain, / Long mark the battle-field with hideous awe' (*CHP*, I.88.7–8) and yet are, in a sense, only the beginning, as Napoleon's campaign took the sheer numbers of men engaged in European battle to unprecedented heights:

Nor yet, alas! the dreadful work is done,
Fresh legions pour adown the Pyrenees;
It deepens still, the work is scarce begun
No mortal eye the distant end foresees.

(*CHP*, I.89.1–4)

Byron has brought his readers to the borderlands of contemporary civilisation, here mapped as the dire conflation of imperial expansion, political intrigue and barbarism. It is no coincidence therefore, that the opening of the second canto traces this rhetoric on to the history of Greece to redefine classical civilisation within a history of barbarism before crossing the borders to enter the undiscovered regions outside the Europe which defines modern experience. What is found there is identical, but – in a way – it assembles itself the other way round.

The pilgrimage of the poem, it turns out, is to the Parthenon at Athens, the origin of civilisation which, in the conventional Whig accounts of the eighteenth century, spread through an imperial expansion justified by an enlightened understanding of civic freedom. Athena, apostrophised here as the origin of all things in the scriptural phrase 'The Ancient of days' (*CHP*, II.2.1) and also as Homer's 'blue-eyed maid of heaven' (*CHP*, II.1.1), stands as the emblem of human potential that, in the context of *Childe Harold's* new history, is now unrealisable. The goddess of wisdom has inspired, in this retrospective view, no mortal songs (*CHP*, II.2.2), and her temple bears the marks of 'war and wasting fire'. Worst of all, it stands now in the Ottoman Empire ('men who never felt the sacred glow'), its ruined grandeur ironically

enclosed by an imperial power whose ideology is diametrically opposed to that attributed to the Greek Republic. At the centre of these two cantos, the irony of the poem's title is most deeply marked. Here is a poem which announces itself as an indulgent and sacred journey into the arcane and quaint, a poem which will perhaps withdraw into the past, but, of course, the opposite proves to be the case. The 'pilgrimage' forces a radical revision of the liberal historical view. Greece is not the beginning of a gradual and progressive spread of freedom, but only a false dawn, a 'wonder of an hour' in a longer, continuous history of tyrannies. The opening stanzas of the second canto condemn the conventional understanding of Greece's afterlife as fully as the subsequent stanzas deny Christian immortality. *Childe Harold* has come to the beginning of things only to find the end: the apocalypse of Spain is succeeded by the 'sepulchre' (*CHP*, II.3.3) of Greece. He stands at the edge of Europe, and the end of history, with nowhere to go but across the border.

The poem's entry into Albania leaves its reader in no doubt about the liminal nature of this experience.⁴ The landscape itself denotes a region of wilderness bereft of familiar sights, customs and values:

Morn dawns; and with it stern Albania's hills,
 Dark Suli's rocks, and Pindus' inland peak,
 Rob'd half in mist, bedew'd with snowy rills,
 Array'd in many a dun and purple streak,
 Arise; and, as the clouds along them break,
 Disclose the dwelling of the mountaineer:
 Here roams the wolf, the eagle whets his beak,
 Birds, beasts of prey, and wilder men appear,
 And gathering storms around convulse the closing year.

Now Harold felt himself at length alone,
 And bade to Christian tongues a long adieu;
 Now he adventur'd on a shore unknown,
 Which all admire, but many dread to view:
 His breast was arm'd 'gainst fate, his wants were few;
 Peril he sought not, but ne'er shrank to meet,
 The scene was savage, but the scene was new;
 This made the ceaseless toil of travel sweet,
 Beat back keen winter's blast, and welcom'd summer's heat.

(*CHP*, II.42-43)

These two stanzas announce a number of symbolic transitions. A new morning finds a dark, obscure and largely dehumanised landscape in which predatory nature and an even wilder form of human life are revealed. A closing

year, marked out by storms, accompanies a new condition of isolation, and a frontier whose novelty is welcomed alongside the anticipation of seasonal change. This, then, is a very different place from the Europe which defined Harold's modernity within its history. For here, momentarily at least, the weight of history is lifted (Harold passes through 'lands scarce noticed in historic tales' (*CHP*, II.46.4)) and the cosmopolitan environment of the citizen of the world is equally remote ('Ne city's towers pollute the lovely view' (*CHP*, II.52.1)). The Childe's travels have brought him to a kind of no man's land. Byron's editor rightly remarks that the poet's apostrophe to the river of Hades ('behold black Acheron!' (*CHP*, II.51.6)) indicates an intention to place this section of his poem in parallel with the epic descent to the underworld.⁵ At the same time, this is a place of excessive delight ('pure pleasure' (*CHP*, II.1.6)), and hence the odd reversal:

Pluto! If this be hell I look upon,
Close sham'd Elysium's gates, my shade shall seek for none!
(*CHP*, II.51.8-9)

And it is in this landscape, this strange ahistorical place of otherness, that Byron presents to his readers the Court of Ali Pasha, whose exotic inhabitants are of no fixed country or place. The poem makes much of what it describes as the 'strange groups' gathered here:

Some high-capp'd Tartar spurr'd his steed away:
The Turk, the Greek, the Albanian, and the Moor,
Here mingled in their many-hued array,
While the deep war-drum's sound announc'd the close of day.

The wild Albanian kirtled to his knee,
With shawl-girt head and ornamented gun,
And gold-embroider'd garments, fair to see;
The crimson-scarfed men of Macedon;
The Delhi with his cap of terror on,
And crooked glaive; the lively, supple Greek;
And swarthy Nubia's mutilated son;
The bearded Turk that rarely deigns to speak,
Master of all around, too potent to be meek.

Are mix'd conspicuous . . .

(*CHP*, II.57.6-59.1)

This passage accomplishes a number of effects. It is clearly a fetishising of the exotic and, as such, it belongs to the commodification of the East, a major effect in Byron's poetry. At the same time, it belongs to the literature of encounter, in which the orthodox view (here that of the reader) is

confronted with a scene of marvellous unfamiliarity which has the effect of disturbing and perplexing orthodox assumptions. Here those assumptions are those of nation and nationhood, religion and culture, gathered together in a 'conspicuous mixture'. Along with the rich novelty of this section of the poem – the 'many things most new to ear and eye' and the luxury of 'Wealth and Wantonness' – it is tempting to read the Kingdom of Ali Pasha as serving the function of a conventional eighteenth-century satiric utopia, wherein all the follies of the European nations might be exposed by way of the more civilised mores of an ostensibly barbaric culture, and, indeed, Childe Harold's symbolic passage across the frontier into this new world would give precedent to such a reading. But of course this is not the case. Byron is using the symbolic crossing of frontier ironically, for all that is discovered here is, in a way, a mirror image of that left behind. Thus, the virtues of Albanian loyalty, courage and friendship are extolled, and, famously, Ali Pasha himself is marked as a man of violence and bloodshed with 'a tyger's tooth'.

Although the poem's depiction of the Suliotes exploits the trope of the noble savage, it does so without idealism. Childe Harold notes that the hospitality and generous protection offered him by Ali Pasha is in contrast to that which might be offered by 'less barbarians' or 'fellow-countrymen . . . aloof' (*CHP*, II.66.8), but such kindness blinds neither him nor the narrator to the carnage which is an integral part of Ali's life and history. In Albania, as in Europe, courageous deeds and heroic actions may be found, but they are actions and deeds without cause or principle. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the Childe's benign regard for the spectacle of the Albanian warrior dance is succeeded by the famous meditation on Greece, which moves beyond its opening lament ('Fair Greece! Sad relic of departed worth!' (*CHP*, II.73.1)), and its romantic questing for great men ('Who now shall lead thy scatter'd children forth' (*CHP*, II.73.3)) to confront without delusion the baleful facts of recent imperial history. Thus, while the struggle for power may bring down the Ottoman Empire in Greece, this will not be a liberation ('not for you will freedom's altars flame' (*CHP*, II.76.6)), but only one more chapter in the continuous cycle of repressive regimes. Childe Harold's experience in Albania has returned him to the ruination of empires, and the double defacing, by history, and by pillagers such as Elgin, of the Greek landscape where the vestiges of its glory still remain. In the light of the broad sceptical history that *Childe Harold* develops, there is no prospect of an improved future, and no heroes or great men to bring it forward.

Childe Harold's discovery of the border of Europe and its history may be regarded as a precedent for Byron's turn to narrative in the Turkish Tales.

The change of location represented in the Tales is another border-crossing: a move into a geographical and historical paradigm, which, as will be seen, resists incorporation into Western models. This intractable otherness limits the possibilities of reading the Tales as allegories, yet this will, in a strongly modified way, be part of my intention in the argument that follows. First, it is necessary to provide a description of the Tales, noting their distinction from *Childe Harold*, so that we can better understand the metamorphoses they effect in Byron's representations of history and heroism.

In some ways, the Turkish Tales are discontinuous with the poetry of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Where *Childe Harold* is a thoroughly modern poem with intellectual ambitions, the Tales are novel, but not original, and without pretension for the most part. They demonstrate Byron's understanding of popular taste in their oriental setting and in their exploitation of heroic stereotypes, and they also tell us something about his developing interest in, and experiments with, narrative verse. Up until this time, Byron had been a writer of lyrics and satire. *Childe Harold* might be seen as a poetic structure combining these genres while touching on narrative in its travelogue. But the Tales are completely different, being primarily narratives. And while they all tell much the same tragic, swashbuckling story, they do it in different ways: in *The Giaour* we discover a narrative constructed through fragmentary points of view in octosyllabic verse; *The Bride of Abydos* is a paragraphed third-person narrative with an irregular oscillation between iambic pentameter and octosyllabics; *The Corsair* and *Lara* are rendered in more regular heroic iambs with a proliferation of dramatised speech; *The Siege of Corinth* and *Parisina* return to the octosyllabic line. Although the tales are to some extent formulaic, and while they undoubtedly pander to the public taste through such repetition, they also show Byron's expert facility as a teller of stories, as a poet determined to move beyond his proven success in lyric and satire, the genre of his previous publications as well as the genealogical source of the idiom of *Childe Harold*. Like Shelley, Byron's early career demonstrates a determination to develop a series of different forms and modes; and in parallel again, these encounters produce not virtuoso performances, but certainly remarkable facility in the production of poetry. Yet there is something more here too, for in such experimentation, we might detect the precedents for the extraordinary narrative of *Don Juan*, not only in the developing technique of telling stories, but also in the consciousness of the overbearing presence of a consuming public. Of course, there is little evidence of the self-conscious irony that produces and protects the comic vision of Byron's masterpiece.

A form made popular by Walter Scott and Robert Southey, the verse-tale commonly sustained a lengthy narrative of exotic adventure, and while Byron

was always careful never to make large claims for his own tales, the mode bears something of an epic ambition about it. These are all poems about heroes. There have been attempts to read them as allegories, or as works with a profound philosophical undercurrent but, in the first instance, it is more profitable to read their surface rather than their imagined depths, for here we can realise more of their historical significance, the nature of their allegorising, and understand better the culture that fostered heroic exotica. These aspects are not discrete: what we are concerned with here is the new environment of the 'modern' poet, an environment that is commercially sophisticated in its marketing and consumption of cultural commodity; one that is concerned with the importation of exotic stories as part of an expanding horizon of such cultural (and colonising) expansion; and one that is historically ripe for a redefinition of the poetic constructions of modern heroism.

With the exception of one or two lyric interludes, asides or oblique commentaries, these poems do not aspire to the political or historical sonority of *Childe Harold*, neither do they overtly embrace its modernity, its sense of being of the European moment. They are, as it were, written from the 'other side' of *Childe Harold's* border, where the fantasy of the end of history may be temporarily indulged in the strangeness of the other place. And, until the last decade or so, they were rarely seen as poems of political content or relevance, and were read largely within the critical story of the Byronic hero, as thematic revisions of Gothic or Shakespearean themes, or dismissed, perhaps, as bad poems, evidence of Byron's equivocal exploitation of an audience.

In recent years, there have been allegorical reclamations of the Tales that are rather more subtle. The interventions of historicist critics have argued against reading the Tales with political innocence, demonstrating their politically disruptive treatment of gender, for example, or their deeply engaged intertextual relations which place them centrally in the cultural discourse of imperialism. My argument here will, to some extent, concede to these readings (the most important of which are summarised below), but with a qualified regard for the notions of allegory they implicitly propose, and in a modified theoretical frame. For, in the context of the reading of *Childe Harold* I have offered, there is no rationale for the implied political unconscious that such radical, allegorical readings propose. While it is clearly the case that any writing may be considered to bear (in some encoded way) the politics of the period, there are specific questions which arise in Byron's case. The most obvious, and urgent, is this: why, given the political extroversion of *Childe Harold*, and its highly conscious engagement with history and politics, should these preoccupations suddenly be driven underground in the

Tales? What is the instrument or apparatus of repression that intervenes at this point, to produce either a subversive Byron who consciously encodes his stories in these ways, or a remarkably unconscious Byron who fails to recognise the political relevance of his own work?

Part of the answer may be seen to lie in the nature of *Childe Harold's* success. Received by the public as an autobiographical poem with a developed psychological dimension, its historical dimension was effectively sidelined. The reviewers compounded this effect by their relatively gentle admonition of the poem's political and religious heterodoxies alongside a broad endorsement of its topological descriptions and its 'manly' strength and impetuosity, which Jeffrey, for one, read as stern medicine for what he regarded as the sickly affectations of the day.⁶ The poem's centre (its discourse of history and politics) was thus displaced to its margin, but in the name of a certain masculine authenticity, located in the immediacy of the poem's present tense, its rhetorical power, and in its sense of place. *Childe Harold* represented itself, and was duly read, as the poetry of experience and, more, it offered to the reader a vicarious appeal in its engagements with the exotic. This emphasis on experience is one that is entirely consistent with Byron's ambitions and his aesthetics. As is well known, he set much store by his poetry's accuracy, and by its veracity grounded in the first-hand experience of a travelled man of the world. The Tales offered him the further opportunity of experimentation in the limits of fiction bounded by the voice of experience, through which he was to become the symbolic cultural representation of occidental and oriental relations. His poetry was that which encountered the other place, the strange region of unfamiliar mores, and it did so not through the transports of the imagination, but with the authenticity of ethnographic experience.

The new arguments about the Tales begin from the well-founded proposition that the broad frames of reference in which the poems are situated – those of empire, tyranny, despotism, struggle, revolution, freedom and so on – were of particular volatility in the period 1812–1816. Marilyn Butler and Caroline Franklin after her have both noted that 1813, the year of *The Giaour's* publication, was the year in which attitudes to the conduct of the British Empire in India changed by way of a legitimation of proselytising Christianity.⁷ This, in turn, was sanctioned by a refutation of the indigenous status of Hinduism, now recast as an historical and oppressive imposition to be contested by a liberating Christianity. Butler argues convincingly that such proselytising had substantial literary endorsement in Southey's popular poem, *The Curse of Kehama*, wherein the culture of the East is represented as a form of barbarism in need of the better knowledge of Christianity. She reads *The Giaour* as an emphatic *riposte* to the assumptions of Southey's

poem and its style of Orientalism, noting that Byron's poem, far from setting up one religion as more enlightened than another, condemns the oppressive tyrannies of Christianity and Islam. In common with other historicist critics such as Kelsall, Butler has revealed that the ideology of empire in the period is shot through with a series of complex relations, and, in particular, the relations between notions of empire and ideas of liberty were of a vexed kind. Following the Whig version of the history of British liberty, to which I have referred above, Britain was viewed by many as the most recent incarnation of political formations whose constitution and practice exemplified the progressive spread of freedom, standing in a line of inheritance moving from Greece, through Rome to Venice. Its imperial ambitions were thus also viewed, in such a perspective, as embodying the potential for liberty's further expansion. Yet, in the sphere of international affairs, Napoleon's campaigns were seen as testimony to a tyranny endemic in imperial systems, and such a view was ratified by the Turkish Empire's subjugation of Greece, a tyranny easily represented (as in Byron's work) with all the resonances of a symbolic history. Historiography also contributed to such thinking: both Gibbon and Volney had given strong intellectual endorsement, in their different ways, to a sceptical regard for imperialism. Thus, while the British Empire in India was beginning to relocate its ideological justifications, the whole question of empire and its relation to the principle of liberty was being questioned (and not least, in the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*). In such an unstable matrix, it is not possible to model Byron's Tales as the cultural embodiment of a particular political view. They cannot be read, for example, simply as the cultural equivalent to a form of political colonisation, any more than they can be seen as championing native liberties over Ottoman oppression.⁸

The Tales draw on a semiology of the Orient that resonates powerfully with the discourse of despotism, but unlike *Childe Harold*, they do not participate directly in political commentary, neither is there much room here for overt political commentary. For the Tales' engagement with the East is of an anthropological kind: their setting is so overtly another place that connections with European history seem irrelevant. This anthropological neutrality or innocence has been read by Saree Makdisi as the effective construction of a discursive space that is agnostic to contemporary British assumptions. Makdisi understands Byron as remote from the dominant tradition of British imperial philosophy. Arguing with specific reference to the early *Childe Harold*, he reads the journey to the East as a refutation of a modernist tendency to homogenise histories into a Western diachronic model, and a recognition of the East's alterity: 'indeed, he [Byron] could conceive of the

Orient as a spatial alternative to Europe precisely because he sees European and Oriental histories as distinct – as synchronic *histories*, rather than one diachronic *History* narrated and controlled by Europe'. This alterity places Occident and Orient in parallel relations, not hierarchies, and is therefore entirely compatible with the anthropological caution found in Byron's letters, or indeed, in the Notes to *Childe Harold*. For Makdisi, Byron's notions of imperialism are riven and complex, but the poetry offers to preserve the East as non-Western, anti-Modern, and a place therefore, of 'liberatory possibilities for the critique of . . . Western concepts'.⁹ Such a reading is consonant with that of Caroline Franklin, who achieved the first thoroughgoing re-reading of the Tales in her study of Byron's heroines. Franklin interprets the Tales as powerful revisions of gender politics working in a number of different directions. Thus they may offer women as passive victims of heroic romance, but they also make vigorous claims for female sexual autonomy. They may demonstrate the barbarism of Eastern tyrannies and inequalities, but they also disrupt Western patriarchal assumptions through implicit critiques of the verse romance structure, as well as through active heroines who serve as antidotes to the feudalism of Scott, or the imperialism of Southey.¹⁰

If we are to take Byron at his word, he placed a higher premium on his anthropological veracity than his poetry in his representations of the East. Writing to the distinguished Eastern traveller, Professor E. D. Clarke, who had complimented him on his accuracy, he remarked:

Your very kind letter is the more agreeable because – setting aside talents – judgement – & ye. 'laudari a laudato' &c. *you* have been on ye spot – *you* have seen and described more of the East than any of your predecessors – I need not say how ably and successfully – and (excuse the *Bathos*) *you* are one of ye very few who can pronounce how far my *costume* (to use an affected but expressive word) is correct. – As to poesy – *that* is – as 'Men Gods and Columns' please to decide upon it – but I am sure that I am anxious to have an observer's – particularly a *famous* observer's testimony on ye. fidelity of my *manners & dresses*.
(BLJ, III, 199)

Where 'poesy' is subject to critical fashion and the shifting tastes of posterity, the 'fidelity of . . . manners & dresses' can only be authenticated by the experienced traveller's eye, and especially when (as here) such experience is underpinned with scholarly expertise. It is clear that Byron set great store by such accuracy, which served as a constant touchstone for his judgement of self and others. Further, his understanding of this 'fidelity' extends to a refusal to assume, or incorporate, the Other into Western stereotypes or

better knowledge. He would have interpreted such a reflex as an amateur response. We may see Byron's pride in this aspect of his poetry as something which sits comfortably alongside these new political readings of the Tales by recognising in them those qualities of anthropological narrative which James Clifford has argued are 'inescapably allegorical'. For Clifford, all ethnographic texts tell at least two stories: that of the surface or intended description, and that which is inherent in the act of narration itself, which necessarily embodies structures of meaning that make sense of difference by way of the familiar.¹¹ He regards the quality of allegory as a deep structure in the narrative; it consists of the familiarity in the act of telling. This does not transfer directly into the mode of the Turkish Tales, but it has a partial, and an important purchase there. Going back to the surface of the tales with which I began, and casting them again as representations of heroic exotica for an historically specific reading public, we can recognise Byron's act of telling as one that is primed by his audience's familiarity with such texts as the *Arabian Nights* on the one hand, and tales of epic heroism on the other. These mediations intervene strongly, I suggest: they do not permit us to ignore the form in which those concerns with history or heroism are concealed. The quality of allegory here, then, is not so much a deep structure, but a shimmering presence in the narrative. It can be seen in the peripheral vision, but it disappears when subjected to full scrutiny.

To render this more specific, we can assert that Byron's narratives are politically encoded at least in part by way of the allegorical structure which drags the otherness of the East back to revisions of epic heroism. The extent to which this happens in the Tales is different in each case. In a Tale such as *Lara*, which Byron claimed was set 'on the moon', the revision of heroism has no real purchase in the contemporary debate. The poem is, like Keats's 'The Eve of St Agnes', deliberately ahistorical: the vague references to baronial history have the effect of unmapping and dehistoricising human and political relations, so that the narrative is played out on the level of psychology, sexuality and desire. Here the redefinition of heroism has a dual aspect, comprising Kaled's loyalty (through which is asserted the greater value of woman's love (*Lara*, II.1158)), and Lara's heroic championship of the oppressed. A crude allegory pertaining to contemporary political events could, of course, be made of this, but the stronger allegorical axis is to be located in the disruption of conventional gender roles in heroic romance. But in *The Giaour*, *The Bride of Abydos* or *The Siege of Corinth*, that concern with the redescription of heroism is immediately inserted into the unstable chemistry of Occident and Orient or, indeed, the reading of historical events, and it is this far more allusive context which provides the precedent for political interpretation.¹²

The Tales address a similar problematic to that realised in the troubled scepticism of *Childe Harold*: how, in recent and contemporary history, are we to regard the place of agency, and in particular that apogee of agency – the making of history by great men? How, in the confused ethics of a post-revolutionary, Enlightenment Europe, are we to see the conventional virtues of epic heroism operating in relation to the affairs of the world? In these Tales, the question is displaced out of contemporary history into a more abstract, cross-cultural context, but one that is not so remote as to occlude references or parallels.¹³ In *The Giaour* and *The Bride of Abydos*, the answer is tied into the romance plot, so that each hero, and heroine, is admired for his or her loyalty to his or her own nature, or what he or she sees as his or her own ineluctable task. Thus, famously, the Giaour admits within his confession that he stands outside morality, understanding Hassan's execution of his lover as a necessity – 'Faithless to him – he gave the blow; / But true to me – I laid him low' (*The Giaour*, 1064–5), and the poem seemingly celebrates this integrity. In *The Bride of Abydos*, Selim reveals his true nature, and his enduring love, and dies in a manner that testifies to both: glancing round at Zuleika in battle, he is fatally wounded. Yet despite this consistency, found equally starkly in *The Corsair* and *Lara*, the Tales also incorporate equivocal representations of heroism in their use of the device of disguise or masks. These heroes and heroines are never quite who we think they are and, what is more, they seemingly operate in an anarchic universe of their own making, eschewing connections with states, nations, ethics or family.

The Siege of Corinth, however, presents a break with the predominant pattern, while also developing this sense of anarchism. Here Alp's loyalty to his own creed is based on a 'deep, interminable pride' (*Corinth*, 609); his hatred of the Venetian state originates in the defiling of his name rather than some deeper principle. Similarly, Minotti's denial of him might be read as a form of religious intolerance, and the ghost of Francesca's pleading, as a further instrument of such intolerance.¹⁴ The poem incorporates all the features of heroic romance (courage, loyalty, undying love) but it seemingly denies their value or effect in its apocalypse. Indeed, the conflagration with which the poem ends symbolically represents the destruction of political freedom itself. The poem is set in 1715, when Venetian control of Corinth was lost to the Turks; it was written in 1815, after Venice had been incorporated into the Napoleonic Empire. With the exception of the Ottoman Empire, each of the regimes and nations here had strong symbolic associations with liberty (Greece, Venice, post-revolutionary France) and, tellingly, the poem is haunted by the ghost of Francesca, whose figuring clearly alludes to the Goddess of Liberty.¹⁵ The narrative seems set on denuding these states of their ancient virtues:

From Venice – once a race of worth
 His gentle Sires – he drew his birth;
 But late an exile from her shore,
 Against his countrymen he bore
 The arms they taught to bear; and now
 The turban girt his shaven brow.
 Though many a change had Corinth passed
 With Greece to Venice' rule at last;
 And here, before her walls, with those
 To Greece and Venice equal foes,
 He stood a foe, with all the zeal
 Which young and fiery converts feel,
 Within whose heated bosom throngs
 The memory of a thousand wrongs.
 To him had Venice ceased to be
 Her ancient civic boast – 'the Free';

(*Corinth*, 70–85)

Alp's condition seems designed precisely to deconstruct the conventional political allusions in the symbolism of Greece and Venice, and the centre of the poem is occupied by his wandering and musing, within sight of Delphi's eternal shroud, upon the 'mighty times' (*Corinth*, 345) of Greek freedom and heroism, and the 'glorious dead / Who there in better cause had bled' (*Corinth*, 349–50). His journey takes him only to the dogs of war tearing the corpses apart under Corinth's walls, and the graphic descriptions of their mauling shocked Byron's contemporary readers (Gifford, for example, struck the lines out).¹⁶ But this is an important part of the poem. It charts the journey of the course of freedom from its mythological beginnings to the chaotic carnage of modern imperial warfare, and in this poem, eventually, to the apocalypse of Minotti's blowing up of Corinth itself, a monument, perhaps, to the combined histories of Greece and Venice. *The Siege of Corinth* fights shy of attributing heroic virtues to its actions, and ends with an apocalyptic conflagration of republican freedom.

It might be thought that the opening words of *Don Juan's* first canto ('I want a hero: an uncommon want, / When every year and month sends forth a new one') announce a new turn in Byron's poetry, a reversal into a quizzical and sceptical mode. But there is no doubt that, from the beginning, Byron had questioned the notion of the heroic in his verse, and *Childe Harold* is the prime example of this interrogation, which commences with the sceptical accounts of the carnage of modern warfare, and proceeds from there to repudiate teleological, imperial accounts of the progress of liberty, and to doubt the future possibility of histories made by great men. It is

thus a post-revolutionary poem impelled not by the disillusion which leads to conservatism, but by a late-Enlightenment scepticism that is liberal, cosmopolitan and representative of a new freedom of thought. The Childe, or the Byronic hero, so uncertainly sketched by Byron in the poem, is perhaps best read as the psychological consequence of this alienation from the meaningful progress of history, a piece of self-fashioning which, however equivocal and awkward, represents a detached and wounded psychology that Byron understands as appropriate to the modern condition of historical and political bafflement. The Tales offer a further displacement of this condition, projecting it into exotic, unmapped and partially ahistorical locations where heroes and heroines contest extreme forms of prejudice and tyranny, their great acts remaining, for the most part, outside history, emptied of direct contemporary political reference, yet defiantly full of *potentia*, and generously suggestive of broad allegorical allusion. Taken together, *Childe Harold* I and II and the Tales may be seen as Byron's great engagement with the intellectual and historical crisis of his time. The pilgrimage represents the will to discover history's consequence and the manner of its continuous defeat in the face of a devastated Europe; the Tales represent the precarious afterlife of this desire in heroic acts evacuated of historical significance. In this period of Byron's writing there are no structural possibilities for history, and heroic acts are rendered ever more remote from the goal of civilisation's improvement.

NOTES

1. Samuel Smiles, *A Publisher and his Friends: Memoir and Correspondence of the Late John Murray*, 2 vols. (London, 1891), I, 215.
2. Jerome Christensen, *Lord Byron's Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 76.
3. See Byron's reference at *BLJ*, I, 508.
4. For an interesting discussion of this border and its significance in *Childe Harold*, see Saree Makdisi, *Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 124–8.
5. Jerome J. McGann, *CPW*, I, 288.
6. Francis Jeffrey praised the poem for exhibiting a 'plain manliness and strength of manner, which is infinitely refreshing after the sickly affectations of so many modern writers', *Edinburgh Review* (February 1812), 19, 466–77, in Andrew Rutherford, *Byron: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1970; New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970), p. 39.
7. Marilyn Butler, 'Byron and the Empire in the East', in Andrew Rutherford (ed.), *Byron: Augustan and Romantic* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 70–1. Caroline Franklin, "'Some samples of the finest Orientalism': Byronic Philhellenism and Proto-Zionism at the Time of the Congress of Vienna', in Tim Fulford and Peter J. Kitson (eds.), *Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing and Empire, 1780–1830* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 222–4.

8. Franklin rightly notes that Byron 'has proved a trickier writer to fit into the binary model of Said's thesis than government polemicists like . . . Southey', 'Some samples', p. 221.
9. Makdisi, *Romantic Imperialism*, pp. 123–34.
10. Caroline Franklin, *Byron's Heroines* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).
11. James Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Allegory', in James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 99–100, 120–1.
12. The Tales differ considerably in the manner of their historical allusions. *The Giaour*, for example, makes no direct reference to a particular historical moment in the narrative itself, but the poem's detailed Preface sets the date of the poem's action 'shortly after 1779' and it is quite particular in this regard (McGann, *CPW*, III, 415).
13. See Jeffrey's review of the Turkish Tales (*Edinburgh Review* (April 1814), 23, 198–229), in Rutherford (ed.), *Byron: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 53–64: 57.
14. Franklin, *Byron's Heroines*, p. 70.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
16. *CPW*, III, 485. See also Rutherford, *Byron: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 70–1, for Gifford's note on Byron 'outdoing' Caravaggio, and Byron's wasting himself in 'rank growth'.