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## Mapping *Childe Harold I and II*

Carl Woodring has described the landscape of *Childe Harold* as 'a palimpsest of political maps'.<sup>1</sup> In the poem's first two cantos maps are invoked that would, if bound together, make up a moderately comprehensive historical atlas of Europe. As he rides over the Greek mainland, or sails through the Greek islands, Byron traces a map of the ancient world; from Troy to Marathon, from the Athens of Pericles to the site of the Battle of Actium. In Spain he understands the indignity of suffering occupation by a foreign power by recalling how Spain's own 'fell Pizarros' had three centuries before subjugated large tracts of South America. All over Europe he notes the sites that mark the slow decline of the Ottoman empire, from its first check with the expulsion of the Moors from Spain to the Battle of Lepanto and its present enfeebled state when a warlord such as Ali Pasha could exercise a rule all but independent of his Turkish overlords. But in the first two cantos one map dominates all others, the map of Napoleonic Europe. This was a volatile map, changing even as Byron wrote, but it controls all of the experience that the poem records.

Harold's pilgrimage closely follows Byron's own travels, and from one point of view the itineraries of both journeys seem haphazard, governed by chance and whim.<sup>2</sup> Byron after all had sailed to Lisbon only because he had arrived at Falmouth too late to catch the Malta packet. He travelled from Greece to Constantinople because naval officers happened to offer him passage, and from Constantinople he returned to Greece rather than continuing his journey to India, as he had once intended, because he had lost interest in the earlier project and because he was short of funds. The course of Harold's journey, even more emphatically than Byron's, seems governed by impulse rather than by plan. From the first Harold travels without a goal,

impelled on his journey not by curiosity but by ennui. But looked at otherwise the journeys of both are controlled at every stage by the contours of the political map of the Europe through which they travel. Byron visited Seville and Cadiz, but had he arrived in Spain just six months later he would have visited neither, for by then Seville had fallen to the French and Cadiz was under siege. He could dally with Mrs Spencer Smith at Malta because Malta was a naval base so important that the British had chosen to risk the breakdown of the Peace of Amiens rather than to withdraw and risk losing the island to the French. From Malta he had planned to sail to Friuli, 'but, lo! the Peace spoil everything by putting this in the possession of the French'.<sup>3</sup> Byron was flattered by his reception by Ali Pasha in Albania, but the warmth of the hospitality he received must surely have owed something to the news that only days earlier four of the Ionian islands had fallen to the British.<sup>4</sup> Byron travelled freely to Constantinople, but three years previously the city had been under blockade by Admiral Duckworth, for Turkey was at war with Russia and Russia was an ally against Napoleon. Since then Napoleon had concluded the Treaty of Tilsit with the Tsar, and the Turks had no option but to accept an alliance with the British.

Harold travels to escape 'the crowd, the hum, the shock of men', he is led 'by pensive sadness' to seek in travel escape from a public world that seems to him hollow and trivial, but he travels through a Europe that allows no such refuge, where all private space has been secured very publicly, by force of arms. Harold affects indifference to military matters:

Oft did he mark the scenes of vanish'd war,  
Actium, Lepanto, fatal Trafalgar;  
Mark them unmov'd, for he would not delight  
(Born beneath some remote inglorious star)  
In themes of bloody fray or gallant fight,  
But loath'd the bravo's trade, and laugh'd at martial wight.  
(2, 355–60)<sup>5</sup>

Scenes of battle leave him unmoved, but when he gazes on the crag from which Sappho plunged to her death in obedience to a passion that is pure because quite private, Harold felt 'no common glow': 'He felt, or deem'd he felt, no common glow'. The qualifying clause admits a suspicion of all claims to highfalutin emotion, but it betrays too a recognition that Harold's contemptuous indifference to 'the bravo's

trade' is a vulnerable attitude in a man sailing in an armed frigate through waters that have been secured for the British by Nelson in the battle that Harold despises. The space within which Harold savours his literary emotions is a space that has been won for him by the 'well-reev'd guns' of the frigate that he is sailing on.

Harold travels without a goal, but he is accompanied on his travels by a poet, and the poet, unlike Harold, is a true pilgrim. He travels not to assuage his own ennui but to visit the holy places of his craft. His ultimate goal is Mount Parnassus, and he interrupts the account of Spain in the first canto to record that the goal has been achieved:

Oh, thou Parnassus! whom I now survey,  
Not in the phrenzy of a dreamer's eye,  
Not in the fabled landscape of a lay,  
But soaring snow-clad through thy native sky,  
In the wild pomp of mountain majesty!

(1, 612–16)

The journey to Parnassus signifies his quest for an authentic poetry, a poetry that will not 'shame' the Muse as have so many 'later lyres', and his journey is prompted by a recognition that he lives at a time when such a poetry has become all but impossible to write. The apostrophe to Mount Parnassus interrupts a tribute to Spanish women, women who have abandoned the 'unstrung guitar', and chosen to sing instead 'the loud song' of war. Byron records their dilemma sympathetically, for it is his own dilemma, too. *Childe Harold* was written at a time when poetry seemed condemned either to be loud or tinkling, either to promulgate shrilly the patriotic fervour of a nation at war or to retreat into a lyric voice fit only for the expression of private sentiment. Byron's prayer to Parnassus, his prayer that he be allowed to pluck 'one leaf of Daphne's deathless plant', is a plea that somehow he be allowed to escape this dilemma.

In his preface Byron insists that any similarities between his own poem and 'the different poems which have been written on Spanish subjects' are only casual. In the poem itself he is a good deal more aggressive. Wellington's victories are fit only to 'shine in worthless lays, the theme of transient song'. Since Croker's success with *The Battles of Talavera* in 1809, every allied victory, and especially any victory by Wellington, had prompted a poem.<sup>6</sup> In his review of Croker's poem, Scott had deplored 'the apparent apathy of our poets and rhymers to the events that are passing over them',<sup>7</sup> but it was an apathy that did

not last. In 1811 *The Battles of the Danube and Barossa*, published by Murray, and *The Battle of Albuera, A Poem, with an Epistle dedicated to Lord Wellington* both appeared, and Scott produced his own contribution to the war effort, *A Vision of Don Roderick*. The appearance of a poem on Spain, written in Spenserian stanzas, by the most popular poet of the day must have impressed Byron forcibly as he set about preparing his own poem for publication. But Scott had, one suspects, been in his mind from the first.<sup>8</sup> According to Lockhart, it was the publication of *Marmion* that had established Scott's character as 'the mighty minstrel of the Antigallican war'.<sup>9</sup> In his early narrative poems Scott's concern is to re-create the martial, chivalric values that were needed to sustain his country in its struggle against Napoleon. Croker's decision to write his poem on Talavera in the *Marmion* stanza would have seemed to him obvious enough for his poem is a continuation of Scott's enterprise by other, more direct, means. Both are concerned to develop a style, derived from the ballad, in which individual sentiment is subordinated to the communal and introspection is absorbed into patriotism, the large sense of the self as embodied within the nation.

The first appearance of *Childe Harold* immediately prompted comparison with Scott.<sup>10</sup> Byron's poem came equipped with notes, some of them elaborate and displaying curious pieces of learning: specimens of Albanian folk songs, a bibliography of modern Greek authors. Byron, it was clear, was appropriating the form that Scott had made his own, but with crucial differences. The historical cast of Scott's learning becomes, in Byron's adaptation, resolutely contemporary, and whereas Scott's notes claim disinterested scholarly authority Byron's are characteristically partisan and controversial. *Childe Harold* is best seen as an attempt to rewrite the poetic romance that had become, in Scott's hands, the most powerful literary expression of the unity of Britain in its struggle against Napoleon.

Scott's whole enterprise is founded on his success in forging a powerfully anachronistic rhetoric, a rhetoric that allows his celebration of the warrior virtues of a feudal society to pass smoothly over the centuries and become a eulogy to the kind of virtue demanded of Britain in the early nineteenth century. Byron takes Scott's anachronism, exposes it, and makes it comic by the simple device of attaching a pastiche archaic language to the utterly modern character of his hero:

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 spoils a name for aye,  
 However mighty in the olden time ...

(1, 19–24)

The comedy exposes Harold as a degenerate representative of the chivalric tradition, and, more significantly, points the absurdity of the attempt by Scott to construe Burke's rhetoric literally, and resurrect the age of chivalry three centuries after the event.<sup>11</sup> But the archaic language is largely confined to the opening stanzas of the poem. Byron's decision to choose as a hero a man alienated from his family, his friends, and his nation serves a wider function: it allows the whole poem to bear witness to a fact of modern experience that it is in Scott's interest to deny, the fact of self-consciousness, the existence of a self that cannot be subsumed within any larger affiliation to a group or to a nation.

Contemporary reviewers noted this as the most striking characteristic of the poem. Scott's friend, George Ellis, reviewing the poem in the *Quarterly*, was enthusiastic, but noted 'faults arising from caprice, or from a disregard of general opinion'. Jeffreys in the *Edinburgh* was more intelligently alert to 'that singular turn of sentiment which we have doubted whether to rank among the defects or the attractions of this performance'.<sup>12</sup> Jerome McGann is the modern critic most sensitive to this aspect of the poem. For him, the true subject of the poem is to be found in the 'shifting sensibilities' of the narrator. His ideas as ideas, are 'strictly of secondary poetic importance: what matters is that they are his, and that in them we read the temper of his mind'.<sup>13</sup> All that is missing from McGann's account is a proper sense of the effrontery of a poet who conducts his reader to the Spanish peninsula, to the arena where the struggle for the whole of Europe was being most intensely contested, only to insist that these events are of strictly secondary importance relative to his own 'shifting sensibilities'. It is an effrontery that lends the poem the bravura dash that so impressed contemporary readers, but it does more than just confirm Byron's predilection for wilful self-display. In a debate on the conduct of the Peninsular war early in 1812 Lord Jocelyn took the opportunity to rehearse an opinion that had become the merest commonplace: 'Unanimity', he said 'was at all times desirable, but particularly when engaged in our own defence as a nation, and still more as a free nation.'<sup>14</sup> The need to preserve freedom requires the suppression of all difference, all dissent, and by 1812 the thought had become so hackneyed that Lord Jocelyn seems quite unaware that it involves a paradox. It was a cast of mind that infiltrated all areas of public life, not excepting literature. The pressures

of the time demanded that notions of literary value, for example, be disregarded in favour of an appreciation of the public utility of literary production. The *Quarterly* welcomed all patriotic poems on Spain 'however deficient these effusions may be in poetical merit', for 'if they be not calculated to excite the public feeling, they may at least be admitted as evidence of it'.<sup>15</sup> *Childe Harold* with its misanthropic, self-absorbed hero, presented within a narrative remarkable for the variousness rather than the consistency of its opinions, is designed as a calculated affront to any demand that the individual surrender to a national 'unanimity', or that the private voice subordinate itself to the voice of 'public feeling'.

At the beginning of the poem there seems a clear enough distinction between the frame of mind attributed to Harold and the frame of mind embodied in the narrative. The attitude towards Harold veers between sympathy and disapproval, but both responses are subsumed within a ground tone of amused indulgence. Harold represents himself flamboyantly as a man without human ties, but the narrator seems staunchly aware of himself as an Englishman abroad. The 'thousand keels' in Lisbon harbour prompt a swell of pride at such a demonstration of Britain's naval power. Ponderous facetiousness fails to mask a very British distrust of the personal hygiene of foreigners:

Ne personage of high or mean degree  
Doth care for cleanness of surtout or shirt ...  
(1, 231-2)

An unsuspecting faith in the rightness of British constitutional arrangements secures the charge that Portugal is a land where 'law secures not life', and a note appended to the stanza records as 'a well-known fact' the surprising information that in 1809 Englishmen were 'daily butchered' by Portuguese assassins, murders that were connived at by British ministers cravenly anxious to avoid antagonizing an allied country. This has the unmistakable ring of an authentic expatriate myth. The church at Mafra prompts reflex references to the Inquisition and 'the Babylonian whore'. The Portuguese are consistently regarded with the contempt that powerful nations have always reserved for their weaker allies. They 'lick yet loath the hand that wields the sword', their virulence checked only by their cowardice. At this point in the poem, the narrator, bristling with English prejudice, seems an embodiment of exactly those qualities that Harold is seeking to escape:

With thee, my bark, I'll swiftly go  
Athwart the foaming brine;

Nor care what land thou bear'st me to,  
So not again to mine.

(1, 190–3)

But rather soon the responses of Harold and the narrator become a good deal harder to disentangle, until, by the end of the second canto, the two are united in a tolerant cosmopolitanism born of a measured judgement that the inhabitants of one nation are not markedly wiser, kinder and less corrupt than the inhabitants of any other.

The stanzas on Cintra are crucial in bringing about this change, for this is the first occasion when Byron employs a syntax that confuses his two characters. The thoughts on the Convention are presented as the narrator's until, at their conclusion, Byron adds, 'So deem'd the Childe'. It may seem an inconsequential confusion because the Convention of Cintra had the peculiar virtue of having provoked a national sense of outrage in which Tory, Whig and Radical seemed to join equally. Any treaty that united in indignation Wordsworth and Cobbett must be granted a rare power to unify national sentiment.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, it is in these stanzas that the 'singular turn of sentiment' that Jeffrey found so distinctive in *Childe Harold* first reveals itself:

And ever since that martial synod met,  
Britannia sickens, Cintra! at thy name;  
And folks in office at the mention fret,  
And fain would blush, if blush they could, for shame.

(1, 306–9)

The mode is satirical, but it is a satire in which anger is less apparent than a kind of levity. The clash between the high-sounding 'Britannia' and the 'folks' who misgovern her does not secure a distinction between the greatness of the nation and the paltriness of the ministers because Britannia herself is a comical figure, caught in one of her periodic fits of moral indignation. A calculated aristocratic hauteur has been developed until it seems to have embraced in its contempt the entire realm of public and political life. It is an attitude recurrent in the poem, though not sustained. But it does alert the reader to the problem that dominates the first canto of the poem.

In travelling through Spain and Portugal Byron was visiting the theatre in which the fate of Europe was being decided, but he travelled as a tourist, as a spectator rather than an actor. The problem that the canto addresses is not in the end the problem of what policy should be

followed in the Peninsula, but the problem of how the events there should be looked at. This becomes clear enough in the stanzas that Jeffrey singled out for praise, the stanzas on Talavera, the site of Wellington's first great Spanish victory, and the site that had prompted Croker to write what had become the best-known poem on the Spanish war. This scene, like most scenes in *Childe Harold*, prompts reflections so various that they end in bewilderment. There is the shame of the non-participant who can only watch helplessly while his 'brethren' die, there is an excited sense that modern warfare with its muskets and cannon has generated a new and terrible sublime, as well as a recognition that such a war in which 'thousands cease to breathe' at each volley has robbed death in battle of all distinction, there is hatred of the 'tyrants' at whose behest such battles are fought, and there is a response to the soldiers themselves compounded oddly of wonderment and contempt. The soldiers of three nations:

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.  
(1, 447–9)

In the end, the point about Talavera is that there is no way of looking at it:

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!  
(1, 432–5)

To respond to such splendour is to be inhuman, to fail to respond to it is to be blind. In the face of such scenes the poet's heroic aspirations are in irremediable conflict with his moral sense, and at that moment the central theme of the first canto is revealed.

As he tours the field, imagining the battle in which so many died, Byron becomes the representative of all those countrymen of his who eagerly scanned their newspapers for the latest bulletin from the Peninsula, who triumphed in the news of each victory and grieved over every fresh defeat; of Scott, for example, who kept a map of Europe on his study wall, marking with flags the positions of the armies, and grounded his faith that Napoleon would ultimately be defeated on Wellington and the Peninsular army. Byron did not simply



travel through Spain, he travelled through the map of his countrymen's imaginings. Like them he is an observer of war, not a participant, and it is his own position as an uninvolved spectator that he eventually turns to scrutinize.

The one extended digression in the first canto is the description of the cockney pleasures of a London Sunday, when the 'spruce citizen, wash'd artizan, / And smug apprentice gulp their weekly air'. Their pastimes seem humdrum but innocent in comparison with the sabbath recreation at Seville, the bull-fight. But Robert Gleckner has suggested that we ought to be more struck by the similarity than the differences: 'The same corruption sits in both societies, and in each it is finally love, the human heart, that is its victim.'<sup>17</sup> But Byron's point is surely more specific. The bull-fight unites the inhabitants of Seville – 'Young, old, high, low, at once the same diversion share' – and it is appalling that any society should find its cohesion in a common relish for witnessed pain, but it is not clear how, in this, Seville is distinct from Britain, where the spruce citizens and the 'ribbon'd fair' of London have found their community in a shared fascination with the carnage on the battlefields of Spain.

Canto 1 is set for the most part on the European mainland, Canto 2 is a sea canto. In Canto 1 the poem is confined to the peripheries of a Europe over which Napoleon's armies held sway, but in Canto 2 Byron records how he travelled freely through the Mediterranean, for Nelson's victory at Trafalgar had made the Mediterranean a British sea, and confirmed Britain's status as the 'ocean queen'. But a more important difference is that in the second canto the focus shifts from violence to power, from war to empire. The salient fact about the Europe through which Byron travelled was that its map had simplified. The old map with its chequerboard of national boundaries had been rendered obsolete by a war in which Europe had been divided into two competing spheres of influence, a state of affairs that is only rendered more apparent by the fact that Byron's travels took place largely within the dominions of a third empire, the Ottoman. Turkey was already the sick man of Europe, enfeebled by long years of war with Russia, and forced to rely for its security on a defensive alliance with either Britain or France, aware that both these powers would sacrifice Turkish interests if the opportunity should arise to secure the more important prize of an alliance with the Russians. The Ottoman empire remained largely intact, but it was preserved not by its own strength but by the refusal of either of the great powers to countenance the Turkish dominions being yielded to the other. Canto 2 is a meditation on the imperial

ambitions of Britain and of France, of the two powers competing to be the dominant force in Europe.

Byron's crucial tactic is to place contemporary history within a vast historical panorama. The imperial pretensions of Britain and of France are seen from the perspective of the debilitated fading empire of the Ottomans and the long ago extinguished empire of Athens. The monuments of Ancient Greece prompt Byron, as they had prompted almost every traveller before him, to ask, 'Where are thy men of might? thy grand in soul?', and to answer 'Gone – glimmering through the dream of things that were'.<sup>18</sup> Greece is for him, as it was for others, a nation shrunk into a memento mori, its ruined temples an emblem of the mortality of the temple of reason, the human skull:

Look on its broken arch, its ruin'd wall,  
Its chambers desolate, and portals foul:  
Yes, this was once Ambition's airy hall,  
The dome of Thought, the palace of the Soul...  
(2, 46–9)

But Byron's meditation is given extra point by all the bodies that 'feed the crow on Talavera's plain' in order that some general can claim a tract of land, when the truth is that no one can:

call with truth one span of earth their own,  
Save that wherein at last they crumble bone by bone.  
(1, 457–8)

And similarly the fate that has befallen the Greeks and that is slowly but certainly befalling the Turks, the thought that strikes Byron as he gazes at the Parthenon, gains a sharper relevance in a Europe that is being torn apart by the rival imperial ambitions of Britain and France:

'Twas Jove's – 'tis Mahomet's – and other creeds  
Will rise with other years...

In the end, Byron's meditations have less in common with the similar reflections that Greece prompted in almost all classically educated travellers than with Mrs Barbauld's reflections in her poem, *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*.<sup>19</sup> For Mrs Barbauld England is a nation exhausted by war and polluted by greed, its place amongst the nations of the world about to be usurped by younger, more vigorous states. She imagines

how some day, in the not too distant future, a pilgrimage to London will inspire in the traveller the same emotions that are aroused by a tour amidst the dilapidated monuments of Ancient Greece:

Pensive and thoughtful shall the wanderers greet  
 Each splendid square, and still, untrodden street,  
 Or of some broken turret, mined by time,  
 The broken stairs with perilous steps shall climb,  
 Thence stretch their view the wide horizon round,  
 By scattered hamlets trace its ancient bound,  
 And, choked no more by fleets, fair Thames survey  
 Through reeds and sedge pursue his idle way.

The second canto of *Childe Harold* is a meditation on the transience of all empires, and hence on the futility of the wars that are fought to secure them.

It is in Greece, too, that Byron finds, as he rides across the plain of Marathon, his type of the just war, the only war to which he can give a wholehearted assent, the war fought by a nation to preserve its own independence. He urges such a war on the citizens of modern Greece:

Hereditary bondsmen! know ye not  
 Who would be free themselves must strike the blow?  
 (2, 721–2)

But, even as it is announced, the stirring sentiment rings disquietingly hollow, and it is soon countered by a weary acceptance that the process of historical decline is all but irreversible:

A thousand years scarce serves to form a state;  
 An hour may lay it in the dust: and when  
 Can man its shatter'd splendour renovate,  
 Recall its virtues back, and vanquish Time and Fate?  
 (2, 797–800)

It is not only, not even primarily, the degradation of the modern Greek character that will prevent the Greeks from reasserting their independence. In the sober medium of a prose note, Byron's optimism extends no further than a hope that the Greeks 'may be subjects without being slaves'. Significantly, he limits his aspirations for Greece to a wish that it may be granted the status of the British colonies, which 'are not

independent, but they are free and industrious'. In 1811, the ideal of nationhood, of Europe as a confederation of free and independent states – the ideal on which Byron's political thought, like the thought of all those who called themselves Whigs and looked back to Fox as their political father, relied for its coherence – seemed already obsolete, an ideal that had become irrelevant in a Europe that was no longer made up of nations, but divided between empires.

If Greece remained for Byron 'haunted, holy ground' it was in part because it was in Greece that his own political ideal of republican independence had first been embodied, but it was also, and more importantly, because Greece was peculiarly the country of poetry, the land of Parnassus. The ideal of art, unlike the ideal of national independence, might seem immune from the war between Britain and France. Lord Elgin's function within the poem is to demonstrate that this is not the case. In stripping the Parthenon of its friezes, Elgin offered a lively demonstration that art offers no sanctuary from a world of power. In Greece Elgin did no more than imitate what Napoleon had done in Italy. The Porte in Constantinople was too reliant on the power of British arms to deny Elgin the permission he needed. Elgin's excuse was that it was necessary to remove the sculptures to preserve them, his motive was that the sculptures might inspire a new school of British art, but he justified his action on the simple ground that if the sculptures had not been seized by him, they would inevitably have been seized by the French. Lord Elgin's activities, the fact itself that the marbles were transported to Britain by British warships, afforded an ample proof that art could no longer claim to transcend politics in a world in which the work of art had become the most prized trophy of success in war.<sup>20</sup>

If in Europe possession of works of art was contested between Britain and France, in Britain itself art, more particularly literature, became a site for the competition between parties. During the war years it seemed impossible to reflect on events in Europe without being accused of subordinating the exalted duty of the artist to the paltry interest of party. In his review of Scott's *Roderick*, Jeffrey began by insisting that it can never be the proper function of poetry 'to celebrate the heroes of the last Gazette'. Poetry, his implication is, should address the timeless and the universal, and therefore 'there can be no successful poetry upon subjects of this description'.<sup>21</sup> His view seems entirely opposed to the position of the reviewer in *The British Critic*, who welcomed *The Battle of Albuera*, a particularly feeble war poem, on the ground that it could not 'fail to please every true patriot and lover of

poetry'.<sup>22</sup> This reviewer seems so confident that love of country and love of poetry are compatible that he is scarcely prepared to distinguish between them. Scott, too, seems quite at odds with Jeffrey when he praised Croker for refusing to share 'the apparent apathy of our poets and rhymers to the events which are passing over them'. For Scott, the avoidance of the merely topical which Jeffrey believed essential if poetry was not to be degraded into a form of patriotic journalism in itself condemns poetry to triviality by preventing the poet from confronting the most important events of the time. But the debate about the proper subject matter of poetry always reveals itself as no more than a pretext for the real dispute, which is not between rival aesthetic principles but rival parties. Jeffrey's real objection to Scott's *Roderick* is not to its subject matter but to Scott's tactic of displaying his partisanship in the guise of simple patriotism. In reserving his praise for Wellington alone, and passing over in silence the heroic death of Sir John Moore at Corunna 'Scott has permitted the spirit of party to stand in the way, not only of poetical justice, but of patriotic and generous feeling'.<sup>23</sup> It was not only Whig reviewers who showed themselves painfully sensitive to 'the spirit of party' as it revealed itself in the work of Tory poets. Mrs Barbauld was roundly advised by *The Quarterly* reviewer who noticed her *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* to go back to writing the children's verse for which a woman was qualified and to desist from writing party pamphlets.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the *Quarterly* interrupted an exuberant demonstration that *Portugal*, a poem reflecting on the Peninsular war by the radical Whig Lord George Grenville, was utterly incomprehensible long enough to indicate that the reviewer had understood the poem very well, and that its defeatism was a lamentable example of how poetry might be degraded by placing it at the service of party.<sup>25</sup>

*Childe Harold* was unmistakably a Whig poem. It would be possible to draw from its first two cantos a fairly full compendium of the opinions that defined the Whig party in the years after Fox's death: a distrust of professional armies, an acceptance of the right of each nation to determine its own form of government, religious tolerance verging on scepticism, a championing of Liberty more remarkable for the confidence of its rhetoric than for the precision with which Liberty is defined.<sup>26</sup> Byron had after all travelled in order to prepare himself to take his place in Parliament, and he seems to have timed the publication of *Childe Harold* so that it coincided with the beginning of his active political career.<sup>27</sup> Byron's publisher, Murray, was evidently concerned that the poem was too explicitly partisan. He urged Byron

fruitlessly to alter 'some expressions concerning Spain and Portugal which ... do not harmonize with the now prevalent feeling'.<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey evidently found the tenor of the poem's politics entirely congenial, but he, like Murray, thought the 'general strain of these sentiments ... very little likely to attract popularity in the present temper of the country'. In particular, he noted that Byron spoke 'in a very slighting and sarcastic manner of wars, and victories, and military heroes in general'. George Ellis in the *Quarterly* was, as Jeffrey predicted, alert to the poem's failure to offer its support to the war effort. He quoted the lines expressing Harold's contempt for 'the bravo's trade', and was 'induced to ask, not without some anxiety and alarm, whether such are indeed the opinions which a British peer entertains of a British army'. Mrs Barbauld and Lord George Grenville had provoked virulent abuse by a rather less emphatic expression of similar sentiments, and yet, surprisingly, Ellis goes on to welcome Byron's poem very cordially. Byron's own response to the reviews of his poem was entirely just: 'it would ill become me to quarrel with their very slight degree of censure, when, perhaps, if they had been less kind they had been more candid.'<sup>29</sup> *Childe Harold*, so far as I have been able to discover, was the single example of a poem that addressed the large public issues of the time, and yet escaped being immediately categorized by reviews hostile to its political sentiments as a mere ebullition of party spirit. Even more strikingly, although its posture seemed, as Jeffrey himself felt called upon to admit, 'very little likely to attract popularity in the present temper of the country', the poem took so immediately that its success was an established fact even before many of the reviews had appeared.

The reviewers chose to present *Childe Harold* as characterized by what Jeffrey calls 'singularity' and Ellis terms, slightly more astringently, 'caprice' rather than by partisanship, and in this they were surely properly responsive to the poem. For Jerome McGann, in the most persuasive account of *Childe Harold* yet to appear, that 'singularity' is the poem's true subject, for in *Childe Harold* opinions function only to map a private space. The poem ends when the death of Edleston unites the narrator and his hero in a bitter misanthropy that accepts the public world merely as a contemptible masquerade, of use only to disguise the unbearable tenderness of an inner life given over to the nurturing of a quite private grief. If, as I have argued, the poem is a pilgrimage to Parnassus, a quest for a stance from which the poet can address the public world in a true poem rather than a 'worthless lay' or 'transient song', then the poem would seem to end in a confession of utter failure. The defining condition of human life is to 'be alone on earth,

as I am now', and the poet can have no other function than to speak out of his own privacy and to find a response, perhaps, from the privacy of his reader. The first canto ends with an elegy for the death of Byron's schoolfriend, John Wingfield, who died in Spain as a soldier, but of disease rather than in battle. Byron honours his 'unlaurel'd death' in a quiet, troubled stanza that recognizes Wingfield both as a friend and as a compatriot, and finds a precarious relationship between the two. But with Edleston's death no such connection is possible. The poem, it seems, has conducted its readers through much of Europe, from Portugal to Spain, Malta, Albania, Greece and Turkey, only to remind them at the last that public affairs are utterly insignificant in comparison with private grief.

It was an accident that Byron, on his return to England, was afflicted by the deaths of three people close to him, 'the parent, friend', and Edleston, 'the more than friend'. His poem can end so appropriately in mourning for those deaths because the tour through Europe has not yielded the firm grasp of international affairs that Byron had hoped to gain: it has resulted only in confusion. McGann prizes the poem's inconsistencies of opinion, because inconsistency is more capable than coherence of charting an idiosyncratic temperament. But Byron's inconsistencies are at least as characteristic of his party as they are of himself: he is never more truly a Whig than in his bewilderment. It was not simply that the Whigs were divided between those like Lord Holland who, following his tour through Spain and Portugal, had become an enthusiastic advocate of the Peninsular campaign,<sup>30</sup> and those like Samuel Whitbread who had demanded ever since 1808 that peace negotiations be entered into at once. It was more significant that such divisions arose because Foxite principles gave no clue as to what European policy the Whigs should recommend. It was unclear whether the presence of the British army on the Peninsula was an unwarrantable interference in the internal affairs of another country or a proper use of British arms to secure the freedom of the Spanish and Portuguese to choose their own governments. A good Whig might plausibly take either view, and the party could maintain whatever unity it had only by seeming to entertain both positions.<sup>31</sup> Nor was this merely a political stratagem. The Whig leader Lord Grey allowed Ponsonby to exercise nominal leadership of the Whig party in Parliament during these years, and chose himself to retire to his estates. Only rarely could he be cajoled into visiting London. His disillusion seems to have arisen less from despair of ever achieving power as despair at the impossibility of finding a foreign policy.

It is not a coincidence that the trajectory of Grey's career in these years, his virtual retreat from public to private life, is reflected in the trajectory of Byron's poem, for Byron's poem frankly displays the humane, intelligent and ultimately incoherent responses to the European situation that Grey despaired of formulating as a policy. *Childe Harold* is a Whig poem that recognizes bitterly that Whig principles cannot be coherently applied to the Europe through which Byron conducts his reader, a Whig poem that fails to find a relation between its Whig principles and any possible exercise of real power. Hence the appropriateness of the poem's hero who travels in a futile attempt to escape himself, and whose travels serve only to confirm him in his own gloom. It was not to be expected that a staunch Tory such as George Ellis would be prompted to any very extreme indignation by a poem that acknowledges so frankly the impotence of the principles that it espouses. In *Childe Harold*, Whiggism has become what Jeffrey recognizes as a 'singularity' and Ellis as 'caprice'. It seems an unpromising accomplishment, but it was the achievement that secured the poem's extraordinary success.

Shortly after the poem's publication, the Duchess of Devonshire wrote to a friend giving the latest London news: 'The subject of conversation, of curiosity, of enthusiasm almost, one might say, of the moment is not Spain or Portugal, Warriors or Patriots, but Lord Byron.'<sup>32</sup> She chose her alternatives carefully. The 'singularity' that Jeffrey 'doubted whether to rank among the defects or the attractions' of the poem secured its success not in spite but because of its failure to 'harmonise', as Murray put it, 'with the now prevalent feeling'. *Childe Harold* offered its first readers an opportunity to escape from communal sentiment, it offered release from the patriotic demand that the nation in wartime consent to an impersonal unanimity. In Scott's hands the romance had become the most powerful expression of the unity of national sentiment. Byron rewrote the romance in a manner that, by removing his readers from the 'crowd' and reminding them that each stands 'alone on earth', bestowed on them once more their own irreducible individuality. It was an achievement born out of despair. A Europe that no longer seemed to admit the possibility of being formed into a confederation of free nations might at least allow the freedom of the individual self.

*Childe Harold* was prompted by Byron's bleak recognition of the impotence of his own political principles and by weariness of a war that seemed as if it would never end.<sup>33</sup> Within a year of the publication of the poem, Napoleon was embarked on his disastrous retreat from



Moscow, and Wellington was preparing to mount the final assault that would end with his army driving into south-western France. The victory of the British and their allies was no longer in doubt, and all that remained to be decided was its extent. But the stance that Byron had developed in response to war, his subordination of public sentiment to individual feeling, proved equally fascinating to a nation at peace. It was Scott's poetry, and the poetry of his imitators, that lost its hold on the public. Scott was himself one of the first to recognize it. In his 1830 introduction to *Rokeby* he recalls how he had been 'astonished at the power' of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold* in their expression of 'those passions which agitate the human heart with most violence'. The time had passed when what was needed was to steel the heart, and to persuade his readers that their individual passions must be subsumed within the expression of a single, all-important national purpose, and, recognizing this, Scott abandoned poetry for the novel, abdicating his position as 'the Monarch of Parnassus' in favour of the man who had dubbed him with that title<sup>34</sup>: 'There would have been little wisdom in measuring my forces with so formidable an antagonist.'<sup>35</sup>