

‘Living in shattered guise’:  
Doubling in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* Canto III

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Abstract

This article explores how Canto III of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* stages a process of self-division. Centring on the depiction of Napoleon and Wordsworth as doubles for Byron as poet, it suggests that the poem crafts doubles that deliberately fail to correlate with Byron’s self, consciously undermining an affected movement towards self-transcendence. In doing so it argues for a reassessment of Byron’s use of the figure of the double, proposing that the poem offers ambivalent and fractured doublings inflected by Byron’s desire to present himself as a poet of imaginative mobility, formal ingenuity and intellectual independence.

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*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* Canto III subjects both quest and selfhood to scrutiny. It achieves this by manipulating the doubling trope within a set of Spenserian stanzas that hold true to Harold Bloom’s suggestion that quest, for the Romantics, is an ‘internalised’ process motivated by an ‘acute preoccupation with self’.<sup>1</sup> Developing Bloom’s view, Greg Kucich emphasises how Byron’s readings of the Spenserian imitations of Beattie and Thomson prompted him to ‘associate the Spenserian heritage with self-division’.<sup>2</sup> This influence is manifest in the way Byron uses quest-narrative to explore his own conflicted relationship with the self. Yet what the accounts of Bloom and, less so, Kucich risk downplaying is the poetry’s ability to perform this process of division, a quality that comes to the fore throughout the doubling of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* III.

Though Alan Rawes and Mark Sandy have thoughtfully focused on Canto III as an exercise in forgetting,<sup>3</sup> the poem’s proliferation of figures that act as potential doubles for Byron as poet suggests a quest for something more radical than forgetfulness. Affecting a drive towards leaving the Byronic self behind entirely, the poet presents not ‘everlasting centos of himself’,<sup>4</sup> to quote Hazlitt’s complaint, but instead, in Napoleon and Wordsworth, a pair of selves that Byron might become.<sup>5</sup> Yet the intensity of this yearning for self-transcendence jars with the poet’s acute awareness of the problems inherent in assuming an alternative self. Refusing to ignore or assuage such doubts, I want to argue that Byron adopts the technique of doubling only to repeatedly and deliberately sabotage his own designs, consciously undermining his claims to leave the self behind. Vincent Newey writes that

‘Byron commits himself progressively to the extinction of any self prior to the word and the image, and chooses the freedom—and the instability—of living through others and in constantly changing guises’.<sup>6</sup> The poetry is, however, marked by a refusal to commit wholeheartedly to any such scheme. Deborah Forbes captures the duality of this movement in her description of the poem as ‘both sharply inward-turning and sharply outward-turning’,<sup>7</sup> usefully acknowledging Byron’s ability to blend introspective meditation and a drive beyond the self. Forbes frames her discussion of the poem’s ‘unrecognised doubles’ and ‘unassimilated voices’ in terms of Harold’s inability ‘to recognise himself definitively in the fallen heroes, desolate landscapes and ruined buildings that he encounters on his travels’, a failure that is seen to parallel ‘Byron’s own refusal to identify himself completely with Harold’.<sup>8</sup> Yet the way Byron prevents the invoked figures from ever cleanly meshing with the Byronic self suggests an alternative motive for this disrupted doubling, as individuals who might act as doubles for Byron become an opportunity for the poet to foreground virtues that are uniquely Byronic.

In the case of Napoleon, Byron cites his own potential to become Napoleonic as evidence of an imaginative mobility that the fallen conqueror now lacks. When Canto III later moves to adopt Wordsworthian rhetoric, form acts as the crucial counter-balance to the poet’s drive beyond the self. Capitalising on the inherent discontinuities of the Spenserian stanza, Byron has form undermine content in order to affirm the impossibility of his assenting to a Wordsworthian notion of self. Focusing on these self-sabotaged doublings with Napoleon and Wordsworth as evidence of the kind of ‘conscious orchestration’ that Vincent Newey finds lacking in the canto,<sup>9</sup> this essay will argue for the way *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* III allows Byron to position himself at the centre of his remodelled quest-romance.

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Napoleon has long been regarded as one of Byron’s favourite doubles. John Clubbe posits him as the poet’s ultimate obsession, describing a man that ‘seize[d] Byron’s imagination more than any other living human being [...] and never relinquish[ed] his grasp until Byron’s dying hour’.<sup>10</sup> Simon Bainbridge foregrounds Napoleon’s centrality to the self-fashioning present throughout Byron’s oeuvre, explaining how the poet’s ‘struggle to grasp and formulate Napoleon’s political and imaginative meaning played an important part in his own continuous process of self-assessment and self-representation’.<sup>11</sup> However, if *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* shows Byron exploring the possibility of becoming Napoleonic as a route out of the Byronic self, Canto III sets out to complicate its already conflicted

engagement with a notoriously complex individual. Byron's effort to negotiate the dichotomy of poetry and action is central to this disruption. The distinction often occupies Byron's thoughts; 'Who would write, who had anything better to do?',<sup>12</sup> Byron comments archly in early 1813, followed swiftly by the declaration that 'No one should be a rhymers who could be anything better'.<sup>13</sup> This sentiment manifests itself more extremely in Byron's claim that 'I have no ambition; at least, if any, it would be *aut Caesar aut nihil*',<sup>14</sup> which, according to Jerome McGann, shows how Byron in early 1814

still clung to a naïve conception of what constituted greatness of soul. *Aut Caesar aut nihil* he said for himself, thus insuring an impasse, and his nihilism. Poetry alone seemed to remain, and yet it rankled that this should be so. For poetry was nothing next to a life of action, and even if it were something, he was unfit for its tasks.<sup>15</sup>

In describing poetry as 'nothing' to Byron, McGann maps the dichotomy of poetry and action onto *aut Caesar aut nihil*, equating poetry with *nihil*. Yet *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* III reveals a greater degree of ambivalence in Byron's thinking. Though the portrait of Napoleon allows Byron to scrutinise *aut Caesar aut nihil* by questioning what it is to be Napoleonic and what it is to be nothing, it also reveals the poet muscling his way into this equation, in spite of Byron's apparent effort to leave the self behind. Napoleon acts as a means for Byron to consider the possibility that while he might be nothing or he might be Napoleonic, he might also be irrevocably Byronic. The poem gestures towards reconciling the poetry and action dichotomy as a way of aligning Byron and Napoleon, but it also shows Byron embracing such a distinction as evidence that he, as poet, possesses qualities that Napoleon does not. In stanza 37 the doubling disintegrates at the point that Napoleon begins to resemble a failed Byronic poet, rather than Byron himself:

Conqueror and captive of the earth art thou!  
She trembles at thee still, and thy wild name  
Was ne'er more bruited in men's minds than now  
That thou art nothing, save the jest of Fame,  
Who wooed thee once, thy vassal, and became  
The flatterer of thy fierceness, till thou wert  
A god unto thyself; nor less the same  
To the astounded kingdoms all inert,  
Who deem'd thee for a time whate'er thou didst assert. (III, 37)

For Deborah Forbes, 'this description would apply equally well to Harold or to the reputation that Byron has made for himself, but he goes on to criticise Napoleon, without in any way implying that he applies these criticisms to himself'.<sup>16</sup> Yet the stanza is more ambivalent and

ambiguous than Forbes allows. Byron's image of the fallen Napoleon as paradoxically both 'Conqueror and captive' suggests that his demise has not entirely effaced his previous achievements, which, according to this stanza, lay in a capacity to create and dictate a version of the self to others. However, as the lines begin to blur critique with admiration, the poet vacillates between associating with and disassociating from the figure of Napoleon. With Byron experiencing unprecedented fame at the time of the poem's composition, the rhyme of 'name' and 'Fame' speaks to two undeniably Byronic concerns.<sup>17</sup> While their presence in the portrait of Napoleon suggests a shared preoccupation with heritage and reputation, to be 'the jest of Fame' is a Byronic pose that is true of the self-surrendering Napoleon but less so of Byron at this time, despite him writing in the aftermath of the separation scandal of 1816.<sup>18</sup> While his description of a man who became 'a god unto thyself' has the air of a critique, Byron places greater stress on the fact that Napoleon's belief in his own godly status was shared by his 'astounded kingdoms'. The alexandrine celebrates a former version of Napoleon who had absolute control over what he was 'deem'd' to be and used this ability to facilitate his ascent.

As the closing couplet suggests, language, or the ability to 'assert' one's self through words, allows its agent to craft a self of their own making and in turn to render their foes 'inert'. In this opposition between 'assert' and 'inert', Byron comes teasingly close to collapsing his poetry-action dialectic by implying that utterance, the poet's ultimate tool but here deployed by the quintessential man of action, is a powerful form of action in its own right. The sentiment gains additional potency from being housed in the increased articulatory space afforded by the alexandrine. Crucially, however, the couplet also recalls the rhyme's previous iteration, 'thou wert', and this use of the past tense looms over the stanza, instilling Byron's observations with an elegiac quality. The tone of the alexandrine, and ultimately the stanza as a whole, is dictated by 'for a time'. Having refused to condemn the fact that Napoleon was 'a god unto thyself', the poet instead laments the cessation of Napoleonic assertion, deploring the loss of this power to 'assert' a god-like persona. The accusatory direct address of 'Now / [...] thou art nothing', laden with bitterness and regret, resonates with the pronouncements of stanza 6 in its use of the term 'nothing', with the earlier stanza confirming that Byron, too, knows what it is to be 'nothing':

'Tis to create, and in creating live  
A being more intense, that we endow  
With form our fancy, gaining as we give  
The life we image, even as I do now.

What am I? Nothing; but not so art thou,  
Soul of my thought! (III, 6)

Napoleon, at the peak of his powers, could be 'whate'er [he] didst assert', as if enacting the process described above: 'Tis to create, and in creating live / A being more intense'. Yet this is no longer the case. The resemblance between the two stanzas magnifies the impression that stanza 37 is honing in on Napoleon's now diminished skills of self-creation, but it also highlights the fact that though Byron and Napoleon are aligned through their mutual nothingness, they respond to their nothingness in fundamentally different ways. In the description of Napoleon as 'Conqueror and captive' (III, 37), the proximity of the word 'still'—'She trembles at thee still' (III, 37)—to the term 'captive' in the previous line imbues the temporal adverb 'still' with an adjectival sense of a physical 'still[ness]', characterising the dethroned emperor as an immobilised force. Napoleon seems to succumb to the very inertia that once paralysed his foes, presenting a stark contrast with the imaginative mobility attributed to the Byronic self. Whereas stanza 37 dishearteningly qualifies its 'nothing' by stating that Napoleon is 'nothing, save the jest of Fame' (III, 37), stanza 6 altogether more optimistically qualifies 'nothing' through the conjunction 'but', which acts as the catalyst for Byron's envisioned movement beyond the self. 'Gaining as [he] give[s]' (III, 6), the poet's self is shaped, in part, by his creation as it comes into being. Byron's enjambed lines teem with activity and vigour through the use of the present tense 'even as I do now', enacting the interdependent process they describe. As it was in Canto III's earlier image of the broken mirror that 'makes / A thousand images of one that was' (III, 33), creativity is the force that allows the self to 'brokenly live on' (III, 32).

Jerome Christensen argues that the cult of Napoleon was indebted to 'his own astonishing improvisations, his gifted impersonation of a monarch',<sup>19</sup> but when Michael O'Neill observes that stanza 6 'spurn[s] and send[s] packing identity as empirically fixed' allowing it to emerge 'as a "Nothing" crying out for imaginative and aesthetic replenishment',<sup>20</sup> he suggests a compelling reason for Byron's rejection of Napoleon as a potential double. For Byron, Napoleon's ultimate failure was, in his surrender, to stop creating, and to eschew the self's demands for 'imaginative and aesthetic replenishment'.<sup>21</sup> The poet of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* stops aspiring to be Napoleon not because of any belief that he as mere poet lacks the required 'greatness of soul',<sup>22</sup> but upon the recognition that Napoleon ceased to 'assert' (III, 37) 'the life we image' (III, 6). If those who encountered Napoleon deemed him 'whate'er [he] didst assert' but only 'for a time' (III, 37), Byron

differentiates himself from his potential double by claiming a continued ability to transcend nothingness through his apparently ceaseless creativity.

Napoleon exemplifies the fate that will befall Byron, too, should he stop creating. As a result, Byron disrupts the pairing of himself and Napoleon not because of his own inability to be Napoleon or even because of Napoleon's failure to be Napoleonic, but because of Napoleon's failure to be Byronic. While McGann writes of Byron's doubling that 'Byron puts on a mask [...] and seems to invite it to exert its own power over him',<sup>23</sup> here the opposite is true. The power of the mask is checked and challenged at every juncture. The poem's drive beyond the self is stymied by Byron's realisation that he does not want to become Napoleon, and a determination to succeed where Napoleon failed charges the quest of Canto III. If Forbes's sense that Harold's myopia renders him unable to draw lessons from Napoleon invites further discussion, her reading of the structural implications of this failed doubling is acute: 'if Byron (or his surrogate Harold) were to explicitly recognise himself in one of the figures he invokes, the sequential finding of new counterparts—the substance of the narrative—would be arrested'.<sup>24</sup> In fact, in its vacillating movements towards and away from the self, the incessant motion of Canto III is evidence that lessons have been learned from Byron's portrait of Napoleon. Here, the Byronic quest exists in the ongoing process of questing rather than the reaching of any final destination; to settle on such a resting point would render one susceptible to the kind of shackles that the 'still' Napoleon must now endure (III, 37).

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While Napoleon exemplifies the poet's uneasy edging towards, even as he seems to drift away from, each of the historical figures that appear throughout Canto III, it is Wordsworth who, as a fellow Romantic poet, represents Byron's most challenging potential double. Wordsworth is not subject to the kind of ambivalent but partially distanced portraiture seen in Byron's responses to Napoleon and Rousseau. Though this doubling shares the half-formed quality seen in Byron's fractious coupling with Napoleon, Wordsworth occupies an altogether more complex position in the poem. This owes to Byron's decision in stanzas 71-76 to more directly embody his double by speaking in a register indebted to that of Wordsworth's own poetry. The assumption of a quasi-Wordsworthian voice suggests that Wordsworth should, regardless of any antipathy between the poets, be read as one of the numerous 'maskings' that McGann finds present throughout Byron's oeuvre. McGann argues that

because [Byron's] *figurae* are consciously manipulated masks, one has to read them [...] in terms of a "sameness with difference." The poetry lies exactly in the relation, in the dialectical play between corresponding apparitional forms: on one side, the spectacular poet, [...] on the other, the various fictional and historical selvings.<sup>25</sup>

Yet this discussion of 'corresponding forms' implies a clean-cut quality to Byron's doublings that is not borne out by the poetry. Byron's adoption of Wordsworth's voice creates an ambivalent and ambiguous blurring of himself and Wordsworth that destabilises any reading based on the principle of 'sameness with difference', complicating McGann's readiness to draw a line between 'the poet' and his 'various selvings'.

Contemporary reviewers commit a similar misreading in suggesting that Canto III houses Wordsworth and Byron as two distinct presences. John Wilson's 1817 review echoes the sentiments of Francis Jeffrey, who reads Canto III not as Byron attempting to become Wordsworth but as him successfully confronting Wordsworth on Wordsworth's own terms.<sup>26</sup> Wilson argues that Byron 'came into competition with Wordsworth upon his own ground, and with his own weapons; and in the first encounter he vanquished and overthrew him'.<sup>27</sup> This claim misleadingly posits Byron as the victor of this encounter, failing to account for the tensions of poetry that, despite its Wordsworthian inflections, is shot through with equivocation. Rather than going to war with Wordsworth, Byron more subtly undercuts the Lake poet's rhetoric by wearing his mask, as is evident in the following lines:

I live not in myself, but I become  
Portion of that around me; and to me,  
High mountains are a feeling, but the hum  
Of human cities torture: I can see  
Nothing to loathe in nature, save to be  
A link reluctant in a fleshly chain,  
Class'd among creatures, when the soul can flee,  
And with the sky, the peak, the heaving plain  
Of ocean, or the stars, mingle, and not in vain. (III, 72)

The poet dons the mask but in doing so he points up the fact that this is and only ever will be a mask; one that will never correspond fully with Byron's poetic self. The mask seems ill-fitting; despite a strongly affirmative opening statement that might set the tone for the poetry to follow, what gains prominence here is the persistence of Byron's qualifications. Veering between the curiously over-assertive and the strangely tentative, the poet betrays his discomfiture with his subject matter as early as the second line, which stumbles through its heavy caesura into the inelegant repetition of 'around me; and to me'. Metrical stresses

appear to enact a process of self-formation, with the shift from the unstressed initial 'me' to the stressed 'me' of the final syllable suggesting the growth enabled by an embrace of the natural world.<sup>28</sup> This movement from unstressed self to stressed self broadly mimics the conceptual movement of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's 'poem on the growth of my own mind',<sup>29</sup> but the fact that Byron condenses the formative experience of Wordsworthian epic into just four syllables knowingly invites scrutiny in its brevity and superficiality. The emphasis placed on the individualised nature of Byron's perceptions through the repetition of 'me', seen again in the subsequent iteration of the *b* rhyme 'I can see', jars against the way that the poet, in these stanzas, is reaching beyond that which comes naturally to him, as if trying to see through someone else's eyes. Settling on the rather gnomic declaration that 'to me, / High mountains are a feeling', the lines grope vainly towards a kind of Wordsworthian profundity.

Yet the absence of descriptive clarity means this statement fails to convince. While such a formulation might be defended as indicating the ineffability of the poet's love for 'high mountains', to label mountains as a 'feeling' seems carelessly but deliberately nonchalant. The impression is of Byron paraphrasing a poet whom Hazlitt celebrates as poet of the mountains and Shelley calls 'Poet of Nature'.<sup>30</sup> The claim that 'I can see / Nothing to loathe in nature' more openly invites suspicion through its negative structure, which implies that the poet is actively seeking reasons to spurn nature, as well as the term 'loathe', which seems overly charged in the context of a denial. The listing syntax of the final couplet renders the alexandrine cumbersome, stifled by the delaying of the sentence's main verb, 'mingle'. As the verb gets lost in the irregular, lumbering rhythm of this elongated line, there is the sense that its agent, the poet, is himself merely an afterthought, an insignificant speck in the vastness of 'the sky, the peak' and 'the heaving plain / Of ocean'. The connotations of 'mingle' capitalise on this implied disjunction. In this context, to 'mingle' is not to be fully integrated, disrupting the earlier more confident claim that 'I become / Portion of that around me'. In a move typical of the canto, the demands of form appear to place Byron under duress, with the additional syllables of the alexandrine creating additional space for prevarication. With the line petering out into a meek qualification that this mingling will not be 'in vain', this apparently defiant alexandrine, like the stanza as a whole, collapses suspiciously easily under any kind of critical inspection. Byron resists the mask of Wordsworth even as he seems to embrace it, with the lines affecting embodiment but actually committing only to ventriloquism. Carefully positioning himself outside of a perspective he initially seems to



endorse, Byron's effort to transcend the self is undercut by an apparently deliberate failure to attain Wordsworth's style.

Thomas Moore writes that Wordsworth objected to these stanzas on the grounds that 'the feeling of natural objects which is there expressed, [was] not caught by [Byron] from nature herself, but from [Wordsworth] and spoiled in the transmission'.<sup>31</sup> The notion that these sentiments are 'spoiled in transmission' is vital to the writing and illuminates Byron's method. Form proves vital in disrupting the apparent affinities between Byron and his 'corporeal enemy', to use Jerome McGann's phrase.<sup>32</sup> With the Lake School having 'popularised blank verse as the vehicle of natural feeling',<sup>33</sup> Byron's choice of the Spenserian stanza colours his engagement with nature with a sharply Byronic hue. Wordsworth's own attitude towards the form was ambivalent. 'The Female Vagrant' reveals a desire to attune the Spenserian measure with the rusticity and simplicity prized by his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, which bemoans poets who 'indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes, and fickle appetites, of their own creation'.<sup>34</sup> Despite his praise for a 'fine structure of verse', Wordsworth's letter to Catherine Grace Godwin laments her decision to model her writing on 'the broken and more impassioned movement' of Byronic Spenserianism, arguing that 'it is a form of verse ill adapted to conflicting passions; and it is not injustice to say that the stanza is spoiled in Lord Byron's hands; his own strong and ungovernable passions blinded him as to its character'.<sup>35</sup>

Though unduly critical in suggesting that Byron's style is gratuitously uncontrolled, Wordsworth correctly identifies the emphases on 'conflict' and rupture that contribute to Canto III's deliberate tendency towards division. That such techniques prevail throughout the poem's invocation of Wordsworth suggests that despite his desire to transcend the self and adopt Wordsworthian rhetoric, Byron is refusing to abandon his own poetic territory. The resulting clash allows Byron to achieve his fullest realisation of the link between the Spenserian heritage and self-division, seen by Greg Kucich as central to the Romantic engagement with Spenser.<sup>36</sup> The Byronic inclination towards disrupted doubling and the Wordsworthian emphasis on man's harmony with nature bleed into one another, so that opposing drives towards unity and self-division become 'antithetically mixt' (III, 36). Rather than simply staging a clash between Byron as he is now and Byron as he would like to be, Canto III presents the fractious encounter of two competing projects of self-representation; Byron's desire to be Wordsworthian collides with the poetry's need to refute the Wordsworthian model of representing the self.<sup>37</sup>

The movement between stanzas 72 and 73 demonstrates this conflict. Seeming to force square pegs into round holes, Byron uncomfortably accommodates Wordsworthian poetics within the fabric of his own poetry:

And thus I am absorb'd, and this is life:  
I look upon the peopled desert past,  
As on a place of agony and strife,  
Where, for some sin, to Sorrow I was cast,  
To act and suffer, but remount at last  
With a fresh pinion; which I feel to spring,  
Though young, yet waxing vigorous, as the blast  
Which it would cope with, on delighted wing,  
Spurning the clay-cold bonds which round our being cling. (III, 73)

John Hughes, an eighteenth-century editor of Spenser, spotlights the inherently fractured quality of the Spenserian stanza implied by George Saintsbury<sup>38</sup> in commenting that ‘the same Measure, closed always by a full Stop, in the same Place, by which every Stanza is made as it were a distinct Paragraph, grows tiresom by continual Repetition, and frequently breaks the Sense, when it ought to be carry’d on without Interruption’.<sup>39</sup> This remark, alongside O. B. Hardison’s suggestion that the form ‘segment[s] [...] narrative into arbitrary chunks’,<sup>40</sup> illuminates Byron’s method. Far from ‘arbitrary’, however, ‘segment[ing]’ is here a deliberate artistic technique, as the poet uses the contours of the Spenserian stanza to disrupt the progression of his poetry. Given that this immediately follows the previous assertion that Byron will ‘mingle, and not in vain’, the opening line of this stanza, ‘and thus I am absorb’d’, seems a false and illogical leap, one accentuated by the stanza gap, as if the poet is claiming a victory that he has yet to truly achieve. The presumptuous ‘thus’ assumes that the poetry has demonstrated the absorption it describes, but the line’s conclusive tone makes it oddly out of place as an opening to a stanza, standing out in a manner that might not be so apparent in continuous blank verse. If taken at face value as an indicator that transcendent aspirations have been fulfilled, the proclamation seems better suited to the final line of the stanza, if not the entire poem.

The opening line of stanza 73 has consequently been called ‘the most unconvincing Byron ever wrote’ by Jerome Christensen, who sees it as abbreviating ‘the Wordsridgian doctrine of the “one life”’ with typical ‘Byronic negligence’.<sup>41</sup> However, Michael O’Neill writes engagingly on the way the line’s failure to convince ‘is its dramatic justification’, with the upbeat emphases that fall on ‘this’ and ‘life’ failing to disguise a ‘downbeat inflection, as though to say, “And this is “life”, this process of needing to escape from what I know only

too well as “life”<sup>42</sup>. This implausibility is crucial to Byron’s intended effect. Groping for conclusion and for comfortable sanctuary beyond the self, Byron implies that he has successfully become a Wordsworthian poet: ‘and thus I am absorb’d’ (III, 73). Yet the air of prematurity that accompanies the line’s arrival renders its achievement facile, staining Byron’s evocation of Wordsworth with an air of condescension. In defining Byron as ‘a lordly writer’ who ‘is above his own reputation, and condescends to the Muses with a scornful grace’, Hazlitt captures this aspect of Byron’s tone,<sup>43</sup> but Canto III suggests a condescension borne out of poetic difference rather than class-consciousness or ‘aristocratic individualism’.<sup>44</sup> The poem’s emphasis on a disruption antithetical to Wordsworthian synthesis positions the quest of Canto III in a post-Wordsworthian landscape. Its treatment of Wordsworth is not straightforwardly derisive. Rather, implicit in these stanzas is Byron’s belief that he is too great to become Wordsworth or to succumb to the delusion of unifying with nature, regardless of his own yearning for self-transcendence. ‘Could he have kept his spirit to that flight / He had been happy’ (III, 14); though Byron wishes he could suspend his disbelief and commit to such a ‘flight’, he presents himself as possessing greater knowledge than the ‘Poet of Nature’,<sup>45</sup> and the effect of the writing commands assent. As the alexandrine sets up only to qualify the possibility of transcending earthly ‘clay’ within a single line, the poet juxtaposes a defiant ‘spurning’ with tacit recognition that mortal bonds will inevitably always ‘cling’ (III, 73).

Byron spotlights the antonymic relationship of these two heavily stressed verbs by using them to bookend the alexandrine through internal rhyme, typifying the insistent self-negation that Vincent Newey identifies in this section of the poem.<sup>46</sup> Gradually building throughout the preceding three lines in ‘spring’, ‘waxing’ and ‘wing’ (III, 73), the sound of the proliferated *c* rhyme overbearingly ‘cling[s]’ to the stanza, culminating in the double ringing out of ‘being cling’. With this repetition comes a sense of shackling that undermines the vision of flight, recalling stanza fourteen’s description of ‘the link / That keeps us from yon heaven which woos us to the brink’ (III, 14). There, as transcendent aspirations are forced into battle with the limits imposed by form, the alexandrine flaunts its ability to accommodate the twists and turns of a poem that seems to engage in questing even as it questions the legitimacy of quest. Likewise, even in Byron’s invocation of Wordsworth, the act of recalibrating Spenser’s nine-line stanza redirects the spotlight to the resourcefulness and individuality of Byron as poet.<sup>47</sup> By continuing to ‘cling’ to his own artistic blueprint, Byron confirms the link between himself and Wordsworth as the product of a ‘broken mirror’ (III, 33), rather than a viable doubling that might allow him to leave the self behind.

Earlier in Canto III Byron muses that ‘there are wanderers o’er Eternity / Whose bark drives on and on, and anchored ne’er shall be’ (III, 70). The enjambment suggests the poet’s own proclivity for such a ‘wander[ing]’ beyond the self, as seen in his encounters with Napoleon and Wordsworth, and the technique is mirrored in stanza 42’s account of those who cannot ‘tire / Of aught but rest’ and possess ‘a fire / And motion of the soul which will not dwell / In its own narrow being’ (III, 42). However, rather than offering merely a self-reflexive celebration of Byronic mobility, these run-on lines, in their air of obligation and momentary flicker of frustration with the soul’s stubborn refusal to ‘dwell’, instead come to reveal Byron’s ambivalence towards his own existential wanderings. Swirling dizzily around ‘the arena of self-consciousness’,<sup>48</sup> the quest of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* funnels the poet back and forth, this way and that, initially away from but always back towards the self he wishes to transcend. Yet this does not represent defeat. The trajectory of Canto III is aptly reflected in Byron’s exclamation from Canto IV: ‘But my soul wanders; I demand it back / To meditate amongst decay, and stand / A ruin amidst ruins’ (IV, 25). It is by the poet’s own design that the poem impedes his affected march beyond that which is Byronic, and Byron eschews nihilism in presenting his discovery that ‘there woos no home, nor hope, nor life, save what is here’ (IV, 105). Having proposed a pair of potential doubles that only ever remain half-formed, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* III instead affirms the sovereignty of the self that endures through all of Byron’s travails, like the broken heart, ‘living in shattered guise’ (III, 33). In the act of swerving away from potential doubles, imaginative mobility, formal ingenuity and intellectual independence become the hallmarks of a distinctly Byronic poetic self.

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Bloom (ed.), ‘The Internalization of Quest-Romance’, in *Romanticism and Consciousness* (New York, NY & London: W.W. Norton & Co), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Greg Kucich, *Keats, Shelley & Romantic Spenserianism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), p. 81.

<sup>3</sup> See: Alan Rawes, ‘1816-17: *Childe Harold* III and *Manfred*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*, ed. by Drummond Bone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 119 (pp. 118-132); Mark Sandy, *Romanticism, Memory, and Mourning* (Oxford and New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), pp. 79-96.

<sup>4</sup> William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age: or, Contemporary Portraits* (London: Henry Colburn, 1825), p. 165.

<sup>5</sup> My decision not to consider Harold as one such double stems from the fact that this is already well explored in extant criticism. Jerome McGann devotes a chapter to close examination of the poem’s intricate shifts between narrator and Harold, as well as Byron’s blurring of the two. Philip W. Martin offers a more contentious account, suggesting that ‘this caricature [Harold] is so imperfectly and inconsistently sketched that neither the distinctions from Byron nor the similarities to him are made sufficiently clear’, concluding that ‘the Childe has been used as a device by which Byron can watch himself perform’. Conversely, Andrew Rutherford views Harold and Byron as ‘clearly differentiated’ to the extent that the poem features ‘two central characters instead of one’. See: Jerome J. McGann, ‘The Twofold Life: Harold and his Poet’, in *Fiery Dust: Byron’s Poetic Development* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 67-93 (especially pp. 68-9); Philip W.

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- Martin, *Byron: A Poet Before His Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 21; Andrew Rutherford, *Byron: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1961), p. 28.
- <sup>6</sup> Vincent Newey, 'Authoring the Self: *Childe Harold* III and IV', in *Byron and the Limits of Fiction*, ed. by Bernard Beatty and Vincent Newey (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988), p. 157 (pp. 148-90).
- <sup>7</sup> Deborah Forbes, *Sincerity's Shadow: Self-Consciousness in British Romantic and Mid-Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Cambridge, MA. & London: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 127.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.
- <sup>9</sup> Newey, 'Authoring the Self', p. 156.
- <sup>10</sup> John Clubbe, 'Byron, Napoleon, and Imaginative Freedom', in *Liberty and Poetic Licence: New Essays on Byron*, ed. by Bernard Beatty, Tony Howe and Charles E. Robinson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), p. 181 (pp. 181-92).
- <sup>11</sup> Simon Bainbridge, *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 135.
- <sup>12</sup> 'Journal' 24 November 1813, in *BLJ*, 3, p. 220.
- <sup>13</sup> 'Journal' 23 November 1813, in *BLJ*, 3, p. 217.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> Jerome J. McGann, *Don Juan in Context* (London: John Murray, 1976), p. 22.
- <sup>16</sup> Forbes, *Sincerity's Shadow*, p. 128.
- <sup>17</sup> Citing the lines 'I twine / My hopes of being remembered in my line / With my land's language' (*CHP*, IV, 9), Jerome Christensen emphasises the way that Byron utilises his aristocratic heritage to enhance the quality of his poetry: 'Committing his memory to his "line", Lord Byron now acknowledges that he has a line, rather than just a given name—a poetic profession with a line of work and a line of products'. Jerome Christensen, *Lord Byron's Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society* (Baltimore, MA.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 211.
- <sup>18</sup> 'To read Byron biographically is to oversimplify; what does need to be recognised is that the poem depends for its effect on our knowing that Byron knows that we know that he is writing this canto in the aftermath of the separation scandal; creativity may result in the escape from self into text, but the text frequently persuades us we are in touch with the self that wishes to die itself and end up as text'. Michael O'Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 115.
- <sup>19</sup> Christensen, *Lord Byron's Strength*, pp. 170-71.
- <sup>20</sup> Michael O'Neill, 'The Fixed and the Fluid: Identity in Byron and Shelley', *Byron Journal*, 36:2 (2008), p. 113 (pp. 105-116).
- <sup>21</sup> O'Neill, 'The Fixed and the Fluid', p. 113.
- <sup>22</sup> McGann, *Don Juan in Context*, p. 22.
- <sup>23</sup> Jerome McGann, *Byron and Romanticism*, ed. by James Soderholm (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 155.
- <sup>24</sup> Forbes, *Sincerity's Shadow*, p. 128.
- <sup>25</sup> McGann, *Byron and Romanticism*, p. 106.
- <sup>26</sup> 'It would afford us still greater pleasure to find these tuneful gentlemen [Wordsworth and Southey] returning the compliment which Lord Byron has paid to their talents, and forming themselves on the model rather of his imitations, than of their own originals'. Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review* (December 1816, published February 1817), XXVII, pp. 277-310, cited in Rutherford (ed.), *Byron: The Critical Heritage*, p. 99 (pp. 98-109).
- <sup>27</sup> John Wilson, *Blackwood's Magazine* (June 1817), I, pp. 289-95, cited in Rutherford (ed.), *Byron: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 112-13 (pp. 111-14).
- <sup>28</sup> I am grateful to Bernard Beatty for his observations on the interplay of the stressed/unstressed 'I' offered in response to part of this essay given as a paper at the 41<sup>st</sup> International Byron Conference, Gdansk, 1-6 July 2015.
- <sup>29</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Letter to Sir George Beaumont, 25 December 1804', in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. by Ernest De Selincourt; rev. Mary Moorman and Alan G. Hill, 8 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 1, p. 518.
- <sup>30</sup> Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age*, p. 239; Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'To Wordsworth', in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. by Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 90-91.
- <sup>31</sup> Thomas Medwin, *Conversations of Lord Byron: Revised with a New Preface*, ed. by Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. ([1824] Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 194.
- <sup>32</sup> McGann, *Byron and Romanticism*, p. 8.
- <sup>33</sup> Jane Stabler, *Byron, Poetics and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 98.
- <sup>34</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*, in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 597 (pp. 595-615). Coleridge similarly argues that the Spenserian stanza facilitates a 'frequent descent to the phrases of ordinary life'. Samuel Taylor Coleridge,

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Chapter IV, *Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. with intro. by George Watson, Everyman's Library (London: Dent, 1977), p. 48.

<sup>35</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Letter to Catherine Grace Godwin', in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. by Ernest De Selincourt, 1, p. 439 (pp. 438-440).

<sup>36</sup> Kucich, *Romantic Spenserianism*, p. 81.

<sup>37</sup> Geoffrey Hartman foregrounds the Wordsworthian emphasis on unity, writing that 'Wordsworth's recovery is therefore a rediscovery of inner continuities'. Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth*, foreword Donald G. Marshall, *Theory and History* 34 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1987), p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Saintsbury privileges the alexandrine for providing balance in a stanza predisposed to 'vignetting', promoting continuity by 'launch[ing] [the stanza] on towards its successor *ripae ulterioris amore*'. However, this analysis exposes the Spenserian stanza as a site of conflicting impulses, suggesting that the alexandrine can only battle for continuity in an inherently discontinuous form. George Saintsbury, cited in David Scott Wilson-Okamura, 'The Formalist Tradition', in *The Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser*, ed. by Richard A. McCabe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 725 (pp. 718-32).

<sup>39</sup> John Hughes, cited in David Scott Wilson-Okamura, 'The Formalist Tradition', p. 725.

<sup>40</sup> O.B. Hardison, *Prosody and Purpose in the English Renaissance* (Chicago, IL: Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 217.

<sup>41</sup> Christensen, *Lord Byron's Strength*, p. 189.

<sup>42</sup> Michael O'Neill, "'A Very Life in Our Despair": Freedom and Fatality in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Cantos III and IV', in *Liberty and Poetic Licence*, ed. by Bernard Beatty, Tony Howe and Charles E. Robinson, p. 41 (pp. 37-49).

<sup>43</sup> Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age*, p. 163.

<sup>44</sup> The phrase comes from J. Michael Robertson, 'Aristocratic Individualism in Byron's *Don Juan*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 17:4 (Autumn, 1977), pp. 639-55.

<sup>45</sup> Shelley, 'To Wordsworth' (1).

<sup>46</sup> Newey, 'Authoring the Self', p. 160.

<sup>47</sup> Greg Kucich valuably highlights the way *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* III and IV utilise Spenser's own 'prosodic strategies for dramatizing the mind's conflicts' to create a 'new kind of [Spenserian] adaptation' based on 'strengthening what is already manifest in Spenser'. Kucich, *Romantic Spenserianism*, pp. 120-21.

<sup>48</sup> Bloom, 'Internalisation', p. 6.