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Madeleine Callaghan

'I ne'er mistake you for a personal foe': Byron and Wordsworth

The polarisation of Byron and Wordsworth takes on a slightly cartoonish tinge in the light of their poetic enmity. Byron's bombastic lines, 'Thou shalt believe in Milton, Dryden, Pope; / Thou shalt not set up Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey', claim a rejection of Wordsworth's circle in favour of an earlier triumvirate.¹ Readers are, only half-mockingly, required by Byron to choose between one school and another. This stark choice often sets the tone for critical debates.² Yet the gulf between Byron and Wordsworth, as Jane Stabler and Philip Shaw have shown, is less wide than either poet would admit.³ Wordsworth and Byron converge upon and diverge from markedly similar points. The epic genre, Milton and his influence, and the shaping of poetic tastes and influence, become key areas of contestation in for both poets. Both poets claim Milton, in particular (and many of their fellow Romantics) as a very different kind of influence. Milton, for Byron, is an ethical and political figure that sponsors his own self-image, where Wordsworth's 'reverence for his great original' extends from his blank verse epic to his introspective mode.⁴ What remains, despite the significant similarities between Wordsworth and Byron, is the sense that each poet sets himself up in opposition to the other, from their political allegiances to their formal choices. If Byron dealt in public sallies against Wordsworth and the Lake School, Wordsworth's animus against the younger poet led him to participate in and encourage what Jerome McGann calls a 'campaign of vilification' against Byron.⁵ Rather than the 'still continued fusion' ('Dedication to *Don Juan*', 5) of minds that characterised the Lake School for Byron, both he and Wordsworth shape and define themselves against one another. Poetic enmity is as potent or a more vital form of influence than alliance as Byron and Wordsworth fought to set the taste of a nation.

¹ George Gordon, Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, I, 205 in *CPW*, vol. V, p. 74. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be given in the text.

² For more on this, see Philip Shaw, 'Wordsworth or Byron?', *The Byron Journal* 31 (2003), p. 38 (pp. 38-50).

³ Shaw, 'Wordsworth or Byron?', pp. 38-50; Jane Stabler, 'Transition in Byron and Wordsworth', *Essays in Criticism* 50.4 (2000), pp. 306-28. Though Stabler focuses on the poetic transitions and the 'deviance' introduced into their respective works and Shaw on redemption in their work, both reveal profound connections between Byron and Wordsworth.

⁴ James Rieger, 'Wordsworth Unalarm'd', in Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr. (ed.), *Milton and the Line of Vision* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), p. 192 (pp. 185-208).

⁵ Jerome McGann, *Byron and Wordsworth* (School of English Studies, University of Nottingham, 1999), p. 9.

In the *Letter to Lord Byron*, W. H. Auden memorably refers to Wordsworth as a ‘most bleak old bore’,⁶ cementing his alignment with Byron via a negative characterization of the older poet. Yet Auden, as Michael O’Neill points out, echoes Wordsworth’s own repeated use of the word ‘bleak’,⁷ betraying an engagement with his predecessor that moves beyond mere rejection. Auden’s portrayal of Wordsworth himself as boring rather than his poetry suggests, in part, the difference between what Byron and Wordsworth offered their reading public. Byron placed personality in the foreground of his work, making a drama of the self that refused to tame its *mobilité*, or creative chaos, into order. Though Wordsworth’s poetry often makes inwardness and withdrawal from the social world its hallmark, Byron was equally given to self-conscious poetry that privileges thought rather than action. But Philip Martin offers a useful insight: ‘it is quite likely that Byron would have defined a Lakist poem as a poem about a non-event’.⁸ Wordsworth’s refusal to turn a ‘non-event’ into a drama of irresolution makes his most impressive poetry pivot on its ability to find or to fashion resolution after conflict. This is a key point of departure in Byron’s poetics.

In ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality’, Wordsworth’s poetry traces a route from loss to recovery, even as the anxieties of the poetry are never fully muted by its conclusion. Beginning in the first person, Wordsworth’s deceptively simple language plumbs the depths of a feeling made personal to the poet:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;—
Turn wheresoe’er I may,
By night or day,

⁶ W. H. Auden, *Letter to Lord Byron Part III*, *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson ([1977] London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 183.

⁷ Michael O’Neill and Madeleine Callaghan, ‘William Wordsworth: *The Prelude*’, *The Romantic Poetry Handbook* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2018), p. 167.

⁸ Philip W. Martin, *Byron: A Poet Before His Public* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 86.

The things which I have seen I now can see no more.
 ('Ode', 1-9)⁹

Recalling though not recreating his personal Eden, the vividness of Wordsworth's earlier heavenly vision is quickly stopped in its tracks. What Wordsworth had seen bears no comparison to what he sees now, no matter what he may attempt, and the final quoted line 'The things which I have seen I now can see no more', in its simplified and almost stumbling syntax, conveys the numbed horror of the loss. The rhymes, so carefully but unobtrusively wielded, create patterns of meaning felt and rendered by the poet where the rhyme of 'yore' and 'more' sees Wordsworth affirm the despair of the content through sound.

Making no attempt to unify with his reader, the experience Wordsworth describes is irreducibly personal, and remains so for the first four original stanzas of the 'Ode' composed in 1802. It is with his revisions, completed in 1804, that Wordsworth introduces the collective pronoun so as to universalise his experience. Part of Wordsworth's achievement is to create a union between the self and the audience without compromising the poet's special status.¹⁰ The final section of the poem affirms a bond uniting humanity:

We will grieve not, rather find
 Strength in what remains behind,
 In the primal sympathy
 Which having been must ever be,
 In the soothing thoughts that spring
 Out of human suffering,

('Intimations Ode', 182-7)

Drawing reader and poet together, the lines suggest something of Timothy Webb's description of the Shelleyan speaker of the Odes: 'the personality of the poet is

⁹ William Wordsworth, 'Ode', *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 297. All quotations from Wordsworth's poetry will be from this edition unless otherwise stated.

¹⁰ See Wordsworth, 'Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*', p. 607.

transcended, so that he becomes a bard, *vates*, a prophet through whom the spirit may speak and whose personal experience is archetypal or representative for the whole community'.¹¹ Along with Wordsworth, we must, and will, face and survive the loss of vision, standing guard over our own crushed feelings through inner strength. Sympathy and soothing thoughts remain within us as our suffering offers a balm against its own ravages. Inclusive and radically democratic as Hazlitt wrote of Wordsworth's 'levelling muse',¹² in his Ode he makes loss, suffering, and pain profoundly human and above all, shared, experiences.

This trajectory from loss to resolution is the 'shaping spirit' ('Dejection: An Ode', 86)¹³ of Wordsworth's poetry of '[a]bundant recompence' ('Tintern Abbey', 89). It was poetry for which Byron felt a clear affinity. Jerome McGann notes that 'the "reverence" Byron felt for Wordsworth, registered in 1815, collapsed in the course of the 'intellectual war' (*Don Juan* XI. 62) that Byron undertook against the Lake School under the twin banner of the traduced genius of Pope and the betrayal of enlightened political ideas. That such a reverence existed, however, and that it was genuine, seems very clear'.¹⁴ Byron's 'intellectual war', but specifically his poetic struggle, was based, at least in part, on fighting the proliferation of Wordsworthian or Lakist poetics in the poetry mainstream. Despite Wordsworth's apparent hesitance in describing *Lyrical Ballads* as 'experiments', even the first edition seems sure of its artistic principles, warning the reader to expect 'feelings of strangeness and awkwardness [sic]'.¹⁵ Aiming to affect a revolution in taste, Wordsworth sought to teach his audience how to read his poetry.¹⁶ Correctly sensing Wordsworth's pedagogical intent and representing it as bordering on religious,¹⁷ Byron sought to

¹¹ Timothy Webb, *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood* (Manchester University Press, 1977), p. 38.

¹² William Hazlitt, *Mr Wordsworth, Liber Amoris; The Spirit of the Age, The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. Duncan Wu, vol. 7 (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998), p. 161.

¹³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works*, ed. with introd. and notes by H. J. Jackson (Oxford University Press, 2008). Coleridge's poetry and prose will be quoted from this edition.

¹⁴ McGann, *Byron and Wordsworth*, pp. 10-11.

¹⁵ William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Advertisement to *Lyrical Ballads*', p. 591.

¹⁶ '[E]very great and original writer in proportion as he is great or original, must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished; he must teach the art by which he is to be seen'. (*The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, 2nd ed., rev. Mary Moorman and Alan G. Hill, 2 vols. (Oxford University Press, 1969-70), 1. p. 150).

¹⁷ 'Every Great poet is a Teacher: I wish either to be considered as a Teacher, or as nothing'. William Wordsworth, Letter to Sir George Beaumont, February 1808, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years*, Part 1, 2nd ed., ed. by Ernest de Selincourt, rev. by Mary Moorman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 195.

resist such an education and forward a competing model. As early as in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, Byron paints Wordsworth as ‘dull disciple’ (*English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, l. 235 in *CPW*, vol. I, p. 236) and ‘mild apostate’ (l. 236), underscoring that, as Gavin Sourgen puts it, Wordsworth ‘has not deviated boldly enough to excite his readers’.¹⁸ Not only does Wordsworth lack daring, but Byron also characterises Wordsworth as a poet:

Who, both by precept and example, shows
That prose is verse, and verse is merely prose,
Convincing all by demonstration plain,
Poetic souls delight in prose insane;

(*English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, ll. 241-44)

For Byron, Wordsworth’s blank verse and eschewal of ornament came dangerously close to a rejection of poetry. That Wordsworth’s aims resemble Milton’s in *Paradise Lost* only emphasise, for Byron, that Wordsworth is no Milton. Byron insists that the reader realise that Wordsworth’s talent for writing ‘verse’ that is ‘merely prose’ was the poet’s design, not an accident of execution. Here, Byron foreshadows *Don Juan*, where even at his most vitriolic, he cannot quite deny the talent of the Wordsworth circle, ‘You’re shabby fellows—true—but poets still’ (‘Dedication to *Don Juan*’, 6). Byron accepts Wordsworth as a ‘poetic soul[s]’ but reduces him from a poetic authority to an example, among many, of the kind of poetic trends that he would satirically skewer. Byron shapes himself as the alternative to his satiric targets. If each poet’s fans are sects, with ‘his separate tabernacle of proselytes’ defending any slight on their high priest, Byron himself assumes the position of medic, applying a ‘caustic’ to those ‘patients afflicted with the present prevalent and distressing *rabies* for rhyming’ (*CPW*, vol. I, p. 228 and p. 229). But the mockery of Wordsworth seems ‘mild’ (l. 236), to borrow Byron’s word, rather than vicious, with the lines suggesting Byron’s self-styled difference from his older peer rather than rejecting Wordsworth’s achievements wholesale.

¹⁸ Gavin Sourgen ““In a manner that is my aversion”: Byron’s objections to Romantic blank verse’, *Byron Journal* 44.1 (2016), p. 5 (pp. 1-13).

By the time Shelley met Byron and famously dosed Byron with ‘Wordsworth physic even to nausea’,¹⁹ Byron was, as *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* reveals, already well acquainted with Wordsworth’s poetry, having met the poet himself and felt ‘reverence’.²⁰ But Shelley’s converting zeal perhaps helped Byron to embed Wordsworth into *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* III more profoundly than he might have without Shelley’s influence. Yet even when ‘poaching on [Wordsworth’s] Manor’,²¹ Byron retains his individualism. Many critics have compared Byron’s rendering of nature with Wordsworth’s, beginning with John Wilson’s celebration of what he perceived as Byron’s victory over Wordsworth: ‘He came into competition with Wordsworth upon his own ground, and with his own weapons; and in the first encounter he vanquished and overthrew him’.²² While the comparison reveals similarities, the differences become still more significant. Despite his focus on the natural world in canto III, Byron is no Wordsworth *manqué*. Flirting on the borders of Wordsworth’s imaginative scheme, Byron never gives himself over to writing from an entirely Wordsworthian perspective.

Wordsworth had recently published *The Excursion*, and this epic became a significant precursor for Byron as he worked on another canto of his own long poem. *The Excursion*, which Gavin Sourgen, following John Bayley, describes as ‘exceedingly undramatic poetry’, neither aims at nor achieves a dramatic form of tension.²³ But the drama of the human mind is precisely what Byron aims to represent in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, and this is perhaps the reason for Byron’s half-fascinated, half-repulsed sense that Wordsworth’s ‘natural talent’ ‘stands & stagnates’ in his epic.²⁴ Byron’s hybridised romance performs its turmoil through the lens of the self, weaving personal, political, and historical strands together from stanza to stanza, line to line,

¹⁹ Thomas Medwin, *Conversations of Lord Byron: Revised with a New Preface*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. [1824] (Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 194.

²⁰ Lady Byron’s comments, reported by Henry Crabb Robinson, *His Very Self and Voice: Collected Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. with introd. and notes by Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1954), p. 129.

²¹ Letter to Henry Crabb Robinson, June 24 1817, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, Arranged and ed. Ernest de Selincourt, Vol. 3, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 394.

²² John Wilson, review of *Manfred*, *Blackwood’s Magazine*, I (June 1817), pp. 289-95, cited from *Byron: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Andrew Rutherford (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; New York, NY: Barnes & Noble, 1970), pp. 111-14 (pp. 112-13).

²³ Sourgen, p. 5, following John Bayley, *The Romantic Survival: A Study in Poetic Evolution* ([1957] London: Constable, 1969), p. 29.

²⁴ Byron, Letter to Leigh Hunt, 30 October 1815, in *BLJ*, vol. IV, p. 324.

endlessly deferring rather than feigning any longed for transcendence. If Byron used the Spenserian stanza ‘to magnify and complicate his drama of self-debate’,²⁵ it is the performative element of his work that signifies his departure from Wordsworth’s method. By the end of canto III and its tortured self-exploration, Byron had moved through his endless and incomplete ‘internalized quest romance’ to reveal the self as both a source of freedom and limitations.²⁶ Having flitted through a series of potential doubles that range from Childe Harold, to Wordsworth, to Rousseau, to Napoleon, Byron is thrown back upon tracing the contours of the fragmented self. Byron writes that ‘to feel’:

We are not what we have been, and to deem
 We are not what we should be—and to steel
 The Heart against itself; and to conceal,
 With a proud caution, love, or hate, or aught—
 Passion or feeling, purpose, grief or zeal—
 Which is the tyrant-Spirit of our thought,
 Is a stern task of Soul—No Matter—it is taught.

(*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* III. 111)

The ‘we’ barely veils the tone of personal avowal. If Byron had *The Excursion* in mind, he had certainly not forgotten Wordsworth’s shorter lyric poetry. No universalising gesture in the manner of Wordsworth’s ‘Intimations Ode’, the ‘we’ absorbs and overwhelms the reader rather than including them as equals. The rhyme in this quoted stanza ‘agitates rather than calms’, as O’Neill shows,²⁷ and this agitation forces the reader to pause over the halting words, and hear the rhymes pressing up against each other. When ‘feel’ leads on to ‘steel’, Byron suggests that this hardening takes place owing to a surfeit of feeling, not its lack. The stanza draws attention to itself as a created and deliberately artificial monument to suffering. These ‘words, thus woven into song’ (III. 112), prove to be knitted together so tightly so as

²⁵ Greg Kucich, *Keats, Shelley, and Romantic Spenserianism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), p. 127.

²⁶ ‘*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* is truly an internalized quest romance, whose ringing notes of triumph at the end signal the improbable recovery of a genre, a mode of apprehension, from its ruins’. Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 157.

²⁷ O’Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem*, p. 99.

to prevent any untidy spilling out of feeling without the aesthetic steel of form. Words both express and repress the void that lies beneath the voice. This double gesture defines the Byronic ‘stern task’ to steel and conceal the self while writing poetry even as self remains the unifying principle of the canto. If Byron admits that in this moment, ‘I stood and stand alone’ (III. 112), he insists on the poem recording his transmutation of troubled isolation into dramatic art and on the reader following every moment of his performance. ‘Wordsworth’s imagination’, writes McGann, deals in ‘forms of worship,’ Byron’s in ‘poetic tales’.²⁸ Byron’s self, transfigured into poetry, becomes the tale he would tell, but it is a self that is presented through ‘mental theatre’. Byron’s poem reveals his deliberate difference from Wordsworth’s *Excursion*, where even momentary similarities draw out their profound unlikeness.

Though it is often assumed that Wordsworth’s antipathy to *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* rests upon his anger at how Byron cuts dangerously close to adopting and adapting the older poet’s nature poetry, Byron’s representation of his private life may also have provoked Wordsworth. Each poet had a different amount of freedom to write his life, with Wordsworth with far less scope to do so than Byron. Matthew Bevis insightfully shows the presence of Wordsworth’s mother in his poetry,²⁹ and Heidi Thomson draws attention to the number of faint allusions to Wordsworth’s lost daughter in his poetry.³⁰ These flickering glimpses of Wordsworth’s often hidden personal life rather than his ‘public’ self suggest a darker, even unsettling, undertone to poetry apparently spoken by a figure who is not the poet in *propria persona*. Jerome McGann goes so far as to refer to Wordsworth’s claims for the authenticity of *The Prelude* to render it ‘another masterpiece of another common human frailty: bad faith’.³¹ However, Wordsworth’s choice not to write about his illegitimate daughter or his abandoned lover seems less to reveal the poet, or his attempts at authenticity, as false, than to reveal the very real social constraints suffered by the grieving poet. Any possible fears that impropriety might overshadow the poetry were not overblown. Wordsworth’s hands seemed tied. But Byron’s lost daughter was another matter.

²⁸ McGann, *Byron and Wordsworth*, p. 18.

²⁹ For a reading of Wordsworth’s engagement with the loss of his mother, see the chapters on ‘Idiots’ and ‘Oddities’ in Matthew Bevis, *Wordsworth’s Fun* (The University of Chicago Press, 2019).

³⁰ Heidi Thomson, ‘The Legacy of Annette Vallon in Wordsworth Studies’, *The Wordsworth Conference*, Grasmere, UK. 15 August 2017.

³¹ McGann, p. 44.

Byron enjoyed the dubious privilege of being able to be open about his estranged child, and canto III of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* even uses this loss as a unifying principle, of a sort, for the canto. Byron experiments with those porous boundaries between art and life, aestheticizing life and enlivening art. Byron's fame meant that his reading public were aware of his personal circumstances, and such awareness of his audience's knowledge sponsored his decision to place personal circumstances in the foreground. Byron's personality almost overwhelms the structure of the Spenserian form:

Is thy face like thy mother's, my fair child!
 Ada! sole daughter of my house and heart?
 When last I saw thy young blue eyes, they smiled,
 And then we parted,—not as now we part,
 But with a hope.—

Awaking with a start,

The waters heave around me; and on high
 The winds lift up their voices: I depart,
 Whither I know not; but the hour's gone by,

When Albion's lessening shores could grieve or glad mine eye.

(*CHP* III. 1)

Breaking the stanza in two, Byron offers a desolate poignancy in his lines. The questions seem—against the will of the poet—to be open-ended, as he cannot hope for Ada's returning voice to answer him. Seeking to recreate Ada in his memory, the uncertainty of how she would now look leaves Byron bereft. The smile in the 'young blue eyes' [emphasis added] points to both her love of her father and her youth, encapsulating the amount Byron stands to lose while capturing the sense that it has already been lost. The original hopeful parting becomes still more affecting in the face of their new manner of parting. The dashes score an impassable line between the promise of then and loss experienced now. Where Harold is celebrated as a creation of the Byronic imagination, to consign Ada to the same status as one of the 'the airy

children of our brain' is a painful shift.³² Her permanent loss makes her memory, or any attempt to guess at her development, a function of the imagination rather than a true picture.

This realisation forces Byron to break the stanza apart; poetic progression requires him to exorcise Ada from the poem in a brisk, willed way, before he moves on and on. The final two lines acknowledge a change that has nullified formerly opposite states; 'grieve or glad', alliteratively paired, show Byron bidding goodbye to a country that can only offer him numbness. Byron removes the reader and the self from the intractable and aching loss to the present tense. The past seems dreamlike as nostalgia and pain threaten to overpower the opening lines, and the imperative of rhyme compels Byron to continue, to awake, and to experience the waters and the winds that separate him from his old life. Yet the movement away from the first part of the stanza is not as emphatic as the stanza's layout seems to suggest. By manipulating the Spenserian rhyme scheme to his own ends, Byron makes the ABABBCBCC seem more like an ABABBABAA form, as the A rhymes of 'child' and 'smiled' seem close to the sounds of the C rhymes 'high', 'by', and 'eye'. This subtle change unites the two parts of the stanza, creating an aural union even in the midst of the semantic shift. By making the C rhymes so reminiscent of the A rhymes, Byron makes the almost deadened emptiness of the final couplet link to the hopeful longing of his questions to Ada. Byron refines his life into poetry; if *Don Juan* is a 'flirtation at the borders between art and life',³³ *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* uses art to elevate life, and life to infuse and vivify art.

No such opportunity existed for Wordsworth. Wordsworth was not in a position to write overtly about the personal and also seems more reserved of nature than Byron. The secret of the existence of his daughter meant that she remained a haunting, only rarely glimpsed, absent presence in the poetry. The driving necessity for Wordsworth to be, and remain in the more censorious Victorian period, 'a *respectable* genius',³⁴

³² Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'On Love', *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 631.

³³ Peter J. Manning, 'Don Juan and the Revisionary Self', in Robert Brinkley and Keith Hanley (eds.), *Romantic Revisions* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 217.

³⁴ Stephen Gill, quoting Mrs Humphrey Ward, in Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 234.

meant that the poet could not expose his fathering of an illegitimate child before a potentially hostile public. Peter Spratley characterises Wordsworth's response to 'the whole matter' as 'so emotionally resonant that it became impossible to address directly'.³⁵ But he did address it indirectly, and Richard Gravil's attention to the possible relationship between the 'Lucy' of the Lucy poems and his illegitimate daughter, Caroline, offers a fascinating perspective on the poetry.³⁶ But it is the ambiguity of any possible reference to his lost girl and Lucy's own elusiveness that prevents any certainty that this interpretation can stand. Wordsworth's claim that England's 'is the last green field / Which Lucy's eyes surveyed' ('I travelled among unknown Men', 15-16) suggests that his daughter Caroline was not, or only tangentially in the poet's mind when we realise that Caroline had never seen Wordsworth's cherished country. The 'theme of the abandoned woman', so significant to Wordsworth's poetry, can only ever be broached obliquely.³⁷ Obliqueness, however, neither prevents emotional charge, nor does it alienate a reader, particularly Byron. 'For all the younger poet's jokes about 'drowsy' poetry', writes Jane Stabler, 'it was Wordsworth who provided Byron with the poetic knowledge of people living with (not dying of) broken hearts'.³⁸ What Byron could face directly, Wordsworth was forced to shroud in secrecy. *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and its apparent openness was a world away from the poetry that Wordsworth would or could write.

With Byron's level of celebrity reaching stellar heights with *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron became what he would later refer to as, only half-mockingly, '[t]he grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme' (*Don Juan* XI. 55). Though his popularity began to decline amid various scandals and critical coolness about his later works, Byron remained one of the pre-eminent figures on the British literary scene. It was with *Don Juan*, a hybridised epic that seemed a rebuke to and the antithesis of the seriousness with which the Lake poets approached the genre, that Byron forged a

³⁵ Peter Spratley, 'Annette, Caroline and Reclaiming Liberty: Wordsworth in Calais', *Romanticism*, 16.3 (2010), p. 293 (pp. 293-304).

³⁶ Richard Gravil, *Wordsworth's Bardic Vocation, 1787-1842*, 2nd ed. (Tirril Hall, Penrith: Humanities-Ebooks, 2015), pp. 235-6.

³⁷ Judith W. Page, 'Wordsworth on Gender and Sexuality', *The Oxford Handbook of William Wordsworth*, ed. Richard Gravil and Daniel Robinson (Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 650 (pp. 647-661).

³⁸ Stabler, p. 318.

competing and fully rendered poetics before his reader. Byron seemed to have *The Excursion* in his sights. Wordsworth's Preface to *The Excursion* reframed the epic's appeal to the Muse by asking for a higher or 'greater Muse' ('Preface to *The Excursion*', 26) than Urania,³⁹ Milton's chosen guide. Wordsworth concentrates on justifying not the ways of God to men but the ways of the poet to his reader. Though he describes the daunting passage that he will take, he evinces no dread, and instead states the inevitability and necessity of his passage. Wordsworth's calm in *The Excursion* as he witnessed 'All strength—all terror, single or in bands' and then 'pass[ed] them unalarmed' ('Preface to *The Excursion*', 31 and 35), sees him already overcoming the hardest trials imaginable. Such seriousness played into Byron's satiric hands, with the younger poet gleefully describing *The Excursion* as 'drowsy frowsy poem' that is 'my aversion' (*Don Juan* III. 94: 847-48). And it also crystallised for Byron that if Wordsworth would render the epic cerebral and high-minded, Byron would make satire a keynote in his epic. In *Don Juan*, the epic muse herself seems almost burlesqued, and Byron's abrupt invocation to his own muse, 'Hail, Muse! *et cetera*.' (*Don Juan* III. 1. 1), is suggestive of his dancing poetic intelligence, and his refusal to behave in his epic as Wordsworth had in *The Excursion*. If, as Byron claims, 'Cervantes smiled Spain's chivalry away' (*Don Juan* XIII. 11: 81), Byron threatened to laugh away, or at least completely refashion, the Wordsworthian ideal of epic along with Wordsworth's grasp on the British public.

Wordsworth was not unaware of the possible effects of Byron's performance in *Don Juan*. He records his own fears for Byron's increasing dominance in the poetry scene, writing to Henry Crabb Robinson to '*Don Juan* will do more harm to the English character, than anything of our time', and Jane Stabler quotes this before suggesting that 'Wordsworth's desire to loosen Byron's hold on the reading public seems to have influenced his decision, in autumn 1819, to publish the River Duddon sonnet sequence and, more surprisingly, 'Vaudracour and Julia'.⁴⁰ Asking 'what avails it to hunt down Shelley, whom few read, and leave Byron untouched?',⁴¹ Wordsworth

³⁹ William Wordsworth, 'The Excursion, Preface', l. 31 and l. 35, *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye, with the assistance of David García, the Cornell Wordsworth (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 40.

⁴⁰ Stabler, p. 319.

⁴¹ William Wordsworth, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, 2nd ed., *The Middle Years, 1812-1820*, rev. Mary Moorman and Alan G. Hill (Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 579, quoted in Stabler, p. 319.

actively sought to lessen Byron's influence over the public, little realising that in John Murray and his coterie's opinion, Byron was capable of achieving that without Wordsworth's assistance. When he began canto III, Byron was forced to attend to the concerns of the Murray circle, and the letter of August 12 1819 is more than a defence of *Don Juan*. It is a hardening of Byron's poetics that eventually sharpens into a warning to Murray that 'I have read over the poem carefully—and I tell you *it is poetry*' (*BLJ* VIII. p. 192). *Don Juan* reads as a manifesto of what Byron stands for as a poet, and whom he stands against. With *Don Juan*, Byron chose a form, genre, and mode that showcased his formidable poetic talents to their fullest. Critics have read *Don Juan* as an undercutting rather than an earnest poem, with Herbert Tucker's characterisation of it as 'the spoiler's *pièce de résistance*; a scoffer's manual, apostate's bible, and rake's progressive supper in one' representing this view, before he affirms that *Don Juan* possesses 'an heroic purpose, hard as flint, to summon the English public to its senses by a reclamation of English that renewed in epic idiolect the common tongue'.⁴² Laughter, in *Don Juan*, is often at the service of a 'doubly serious' (*Beppo*, st. 79) purpose. Mockery, contemptuous as well as gentle, along with Byron's sallies aimed at Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey, have made their mark on the lasting reputation of each poet.

Byron does not mock Wordsworth for mockery's sake. Though Gavin Sourgen sees Byron's distaste for blank verse as showing the poet choosing not to follow in Milton's footsteps,⁴³ this ignores Byron's profound engagement with Milton's legacy. If Milton rejected the currents of his day, choosing blank verse instead of rhyme to separate himself from his peers, so Byron would choose to differentiate himself from Wordsworth, who had become synonymous with blank verse.⁴⁴ Wordsworth had seemed to anoint himself the Miltonic inheritor with 'London, 1802'. This sonnet, with impressive brevity, details and asserts its poetic independence through its identification with Miltonic individuality. But Byron will not allow his fellow Romantic to become Milton's epic inheritor. Instead, Byron chooses to challenge Wordsworth. Byron's version of the Miltonic mode in the Dedication to *Don Juan*,

⁴² Herbert F. Tucker, *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse 1790-1910* (Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 222 and p. 223.

⁴³ Sourgen, p. 2.

⁴⁴ William Keach, *Arbitrary Power: Romanticism, Language, Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 49.

features, as James Rieger notes, Milton conscripted as Byron's Whig crony.⁴⁵ Byron seems to draw on the *Areopagitica*, particularly Milton's praise of active virtue: 'I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat'.⁴⁶ For Byron, Wordsworth's version of the introspective Milton ignores Milton's classical combative authority. With Miltonic 'dust and heat', Byron fights for the immortal garland. To deny Wordsworth his Miltonic mantle makes Byron his proper heir.

In the Dedication to *Don Juan*, Byron sets himself in opposition to the Lake School. Denying Wordsworth poetic individuality, Byron accuses the Lakers of forming a sect, cloistered away from the world. Wordsworth is cut down in size, shrunk from individuated authority to a member of a collective, and a 'shabby fellow' whose political creeds precluded his poetic greatness. 'Byron began *Don Juan* as a literary and political manifesto to his age' writes Jerome McGann,⁴⁷ and this suggests the intimately bound quality of the personal and the poetic in the poem. Byron draws on Milton's strength by as he draws parallels between his predecessor and himself. Beginning in stanza ten with an avowal of Milton's unshakeable political principles, Byron praises Milton for a virtue he considers his own:⁴⁸

If, fallen in evil days on evil tongues,
 Milton appeal'd to the Avenger, Time,
 If Time, the Avenger, execrates his wrongs,
 And makes the word '*Miltonic*' mean '*sublime*',
He deign'd not to belie his soul in songs,
 Nor turn his very talent to a crime—
He did not loathe the sire to laud the son,
 But closed the tyrant-hater he begun.

('Dedication to *Don Juan*', 10)

⁴⁵ Rieger, 'Wordsworth Unalarm'd', p. 192.

⁴⁶ John Milton, *Areopagitica, Milton's Prose Writings*, ed. K. M. Burton, Everyman's Library (London: Dent, 1958), p. 158.

⁴⁷ Jerome McGann, *Don Juan in Context* (University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 57.

⁴⁸ Byron wrote to John Murray in 1813, 'I never was consistent in anything but my politics', (*BLJ* III, p. 204).

The fluency of the stanza, and *Don Juan* as a whole, shows Byron prove that rhyme, in his hands, is no ‘troublesome and modern bondage’.⁴⁹ If Byron does not follow Milton’s formal choices, he respects the substance of his complaint, and the admiration for Milton’s consistency draws the poets into a sympathetic union of Byron’s making. Immediately following the stanzas that had mocked the Lake School’s insistence on posterity as their ultimate vindicator, it seems odd that here, Byron should refer to time as the great avenger that has made ‘the word “*Miltonic*” mean “*sublime*”’. Yet here, Byron insists on time’s power in a rather different sense than the narrow definition of poetic posterity he sees as beloved of his poetic rivals. According to Byron, time will judge the whole man, and time, which exonerated Milton, will condemn Wordsworth, Southey, and Coleridge, who have, according to Byron’s poem, sold their souls to line their purses. The word ‘*Miltonic*’ comes to mean more than ‘*sublime*’; the word comes to mean ‘*poetic*’ and to be *Miltonic* requires a steely brand of political consistency as much as it needs technical skill. Apostasy prevents Wordsworth from achieving greatness, and, for Byron, Wordsworth turning his political coat also turns his verse to dross. Byron does more than simply condemn Wordsworth to praise Milton. Milton’s example furnishes a model to all poets, and it is in Milton’s uniqueness that Byron can locate his individuality and chart how Wordsworth lost his poetic claim on Milton and his age.

Byron’s attempt to fix Wordsworth’s reputation had echoes far beyond this particular historical moment as he sought to curb Wordsworth’s growing influence. Byron sought to alter the public’s estimate of the older poet by asking them to judge the difference between Wordsworth and Byron’s poetics. Despite his jabs at how ‘puberty assisted’ (*Don Juan*, I. 93) Wordsworthian philosophy, for Byron the problem with Wordsworth’s reputation and increasing authority becomes posterity. Byron seems most chary of the effect of Wordsworth’s school on a future generation of poets and readers rather than loathing Wordsworth’s actual poetry. His public letter to John Murray on the Bowles/Pope controversy sees Byron act not just as a Yeatsian

⁴⁹ John Milton, ‘*Paradise Lost: The Verse*’ *John Milton: The Complete Poems*, ed. John Leonard (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 119.

‘pol[e]cem[a]n of language’ [sic],⁵⁰ but as a policeman of poetic tradition and development. Though Coleridge could complain that Wordsworth’s poems ‘have well-nigh engrossed criticism, as the main, if not the only, butt of review, magazine, pamphlet, poem, and paragraph’ (*Biographia Literaria*, IV. p. 198),⁵¹ Wordsworth’s influence on contemporary poetics was growing. Byron sought to intervene in the debate, not simply to derail Wordsworth’s personal reputation, but to affect the course of poetic influence.

Byron and Wordsworth vied to dominate their shared poetic age,⁵² and both poets were profoundly invested in shaping inheritors who would share and even promulgate their values. Wordsworth would inspire and had inspired many readers, including Shelley, and Byron feared for the pretenders to Wordsworth’s throne who were unequal to his skill, as he made evident with his jibe against the ‘under-school’.⁵³ Byron chose to turn their differences, as well as their similarities, into a power struggle between two poetic giants. Byron, and the cult of Byronism, ‘designed to out-Bonaparte Bonaparte’, wielded a dangerous, even extra-literary, power.⁵⁴ Byron did not simply fashion a self in his works. He created a self that was capable of enacting allegiances and excoriating enemies, conscripting his readers into his ‘right-royal’ poetry, where it is ‘the individual for the species, the one above the infinite many, might before right’ in the Byronic system.⁵⁵ Despite the many connections between Byron and Wordsworth, in the end, Byron asks us to choose: Byron or Wordsworth. And yet even as we are asked to choose, we also perceive how both poets’ responses to one another offer a spur to enliven, to excite, and to be a goad to their own work. Their clash of swords made each poet more individual as their individuality grows out of being indebted to their dangerously talented peer.

⁵⁰ W. B. Yeats, letter to Ellen O’Leary, February 3 [1889], *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats, Volume One 1865-1895*, ed. John Kelly, associated ed. Eric Domville (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 140.

⁵¹ Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, IV. p. 198.

⁵² ‘The emergence of Byron as an audible counter-voice in late Wordsworth suggests a reversal of the literary influence hitherto only seen to flow from the older poet to the younger.’ (Stabler, p. 317)

⁵³ Lord George Gordon Byron, ‘Letter to John Murray Esq.’, *Lord Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Andrew Nicholson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 149.

⁵⁴ Jerome Christensen, *Lord Byron’s Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 147.

⁵⁵ William Hazlitt, *Coriolanus, The Fight and Other Writings*, ed. Tom Paulin and David Chandler, introd. by Tom Paulin (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 52 (pp. 51-55).

Eventually each might have seen in the other that ‘Hypocrite lecteur—mon semblable — mon frère!’⁵⁶

Suggested Reading

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⁵⁶ T. S. Eliot, ‘The Burial of the Dead’, *The Waste Land, Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber, 2002), p. 55.