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CHAPTER 18

The Lake Poets

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"If Southey had not been comparatively good," writes Herbert F. Tucker, "he would never have drawn out Byron's best in those satirical volleys that were undertaken, at bottom, in order to reprehend not the want of talent but its wastage."[1] And if Wordsworth and Coleridge had not been dangerously talented, Byron might have spared them some of his stinging sallies. In Table Talk Coleridge proclaimed the conclusion of the "intellectual war" Byron threatened in Don Juan (XI. 62: 496), declaring Wordsworth the poet who "will wear the crown,"[2] triumphing over Byron and his ilk for the poetic laurels of the Romantic period. But Byron was not simply an opponent of his contemporaries. His responses to the Lake poets, particularly to Wordsworth, ran the gamut from "reverence" (HVSV, 129) then "nausea" (Medwin, 237) to Don Juan's comical though cutting disdain, in under a decade. Focusing on Byron's relationship with Wordsworth and Coleridge, I will show how Byron's poetry and drama reveal the range and complexity of his dialogue with his older peers, where, even at their most apparently divergent, the conversation between the poets reveals the depth of the engagement across their works.

The simmering personal enmity between the Lake poets and Byron is well known. Byron had attacked, amongst many others, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey in his English Bards and Scotch Reviewers (1809), despite claiming a "reverence" for Wordsworth's poetry, donating £100 to a literary fund for Coleridge and presiding over the Drury Lane committee that accepted Coleridge's play, Remorse. The animus grew between the poets, especially after Southey labeled Byron and Shelley members of "the Satanic school" and accused them of writing poetry which "betrays the wretched feeling of hopelessness wherewith it is allied" (Southey X 206). But Byron's relationship with Wordsworth was more remote than his relationship with Coleridge. Though Byron and Coleridge wrote some, if few, letters to one another, Byron and Wordsworth never corresponded. Wordsworth also never responded directly to Byron about his mockeries of or close resemblances to

Wordsworth's work in epistolary or in poetic form. But Wordsworth had a hand in perpetuating what Jerome McGann terms a "campaign of vilification" against Byron.[3] Coleridge, too, after Byron's death, wrote that the dead poet would not be "remembered at all, except as a wicked lord who, from morbid and restless vanity, pretended to be ten times more wicked than he was" (Rutherford 266). Both provoking and provoked, if Byron was "born for opposition" (BLJ 4: 82), he grew to relish clashing verbal swords with the "shabby fellows" who were "poets still" ("Dedication to DJ," VI. 47), despite his censure.

Byron's "conversational facility" (DJ XV. 20. 155), showcased with witty verve and creative zest in Don Juan, has attracted the lion's share of modern plaudits of his work. Although he attacked Wordsworth and Coleridge along with Southey in the "Dedication" to Don Juan, they were more than the butt of his jokes. Seizing upon Wordsworth's maxim that the poet should write like a "man speaking to men" ("Preface to Lyrical Ballads (1802)," Byron, in Don Juan, insists on specifying the type of men speaking and listening, namely, himself and his chosen allies. Claiming that his method is: "never straining hard to versify, / I rattle on exactly as I'd talk / With any body in a ride or walk" (DJ XV. 19. 150–2), Byron carefully constructs the impression of a living, breathing and, above all, Byronic presence, speaking in his work. Yet Coleridge had managed a similar feat in his conversation poems, which move seamlessly from the personal, the domestic and themes warm with human touch to the philosophical, the divine and the poetic. Though Coleridge was gently self-mocking on the topic of his own possible contribution to the evolution of the epic, his conversation poems offered Byron possibilities for how the poet might weave together disparate strands of thought and emotion in wittily distinctive poetry. Influenced by the "divine Chit chat" of William Cowper (Rutherford 279), Coleridge might be said to have created the conversation poem, and Richard Holmes includes nine poems under this banner in his edition.

These poems, which Michael O'Neill aptly terms "performances,"[4] prefigure Byron's own exuberant exhibitionism in Don Juan and Beppo. Their conversational and philosophical beauties offer models for Don Juan's musings on philosophy and religion. "The Eolian Harp" encapsulates Coleridge's ability to move effortlessly between levels in his conversation poems:

> And what if all of animated nature
> Be but organic harps diversely framed,

That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of all?

But thy more serious eye a mild reproof
Darts, O beloved Woman! nor such thoughts
Dim and unhallowed dost thou not reject,
And biddest me walk humbly with my God.[5]

("The Eolian Harp," 44–52)

Capturing the reader's attention by both its dazzling philosophical and religion musings, the poem also anticipates our attempt to understand the relationship between its speaker and its interlocutor, "My pensive Sara" (1). Coleridge's verbal gymnastics betray the restless intelligence of the poem even as the poetry never strains for but smoothly achieves its pantheistic heights. Philosophy's dizzying possibilities, where Coleridge dreams of "one intellectual breeze," is half-comically curbed by a "mild" glance from Sara, as the poem expands with his meditative excitement and deflates from her silent reproof. The poem's lightness of touch hints at (but does not utter) accusations of marital strife, as "The Eolian Harp" hovers above leaden pronouncement, maintaining mobility even as it remains affectingly tethered to the heights and depths of Coleridge's shifting thoughts.

Don Juan takes up such Coleridgean thinking in verse. After condemning his own self-proclaimed "tired metaphor" (DJ XIII. 36. 285), Byron gives the impression of fashioning his poetry before the reader, conjuring up "another figure in a trice" to offer us, in lieu of his hackneyed volcano image, "a bottle of champagne" (DJ XIII. 37. 289–90). The poetry brims with effervescent brio as comic spontaneity meets poetic mastery, attesting to Byron's creative and dramatic powers. Seeming almost to wing it before his reader, Byron swiftly yokes metaphor to moral precept, claiming that such "moral lessons" are precisely those upon "which the Muse has always sought to enter" (DJ XIII. 38. 301-2). Gathering all possible elements into his capacious epic, Byron follows and innovates upon Coleridge's model in his serio-comic masterpiece.

Wordsworth, though pilloried in Don Juan's cutting mockeries, is also a vital presence in Byron's poetry. Philip Shaw notes that the competition between the poets extends into the present day, where "modern critics tend, on the whole, to prefer the

unerring honesty of Byron to the uncertain equipoise of Wordsworth."[6] Yet the difference between Byron and Wordsworth is less profound than either poet would admit. By the time Shelley met Byron and dosed him with "Wordsworth physic even to nausea" (Medwin 237), Byron was already aware of and in dialogue with Wordsworth's poetry, as English Bards and Scotch Reviewers reveals; critics have noted and even complained of Byron's use of Wordsworth's poetry in poems such as the "Epistle to Augusta." But the similarities between the two poets led both to sharpen their differences before their reading public. Wordsworth espoused a teaching ethic, claiming that "Every Great poet is a Teacher: I wish either to be considered as a Teacher, or as nothing."[7] By contrast, English Bards and Scotch Reviewers, Byron's energetic satire on the literary landscape, aims to dazzle dunces into silence in a manner that recalls Alexander Pope's The Dunciad. According to Byron, Wordsworth's example proves that "Poetic souls delight in prose insane" (CPW 1: 236). Wordsworth had introduced Lyrical Ballads as the site of "experiment[s]," which he says, might create both "feelings of strangeness and aukwardness [sic]," and Byron seemed to agree[8] But Wordsworth's presence in Childe Harold*'s* Pilgrimage tells a different story. In poems such as "Lines Composed [originally "Written"] a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth creates a model of the self transfigured by nature against which Byron offers his own competing version. "Tintern Abbey," line by line, soars beyond pain to affirm, against all suffering, that "Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her" (123–4). *Childe Harold's* Pilgrimage III's dialogue with nature is rather different:

> 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 fleshy 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.
>
> (CHP III. 72. 680-8)

Byron's method of avoiding linear trajectory, refusing the solving and simplifying temptation of systems, and standing firm against untried axioms, shimmers in the above quoted lines. Byron opens the stanza with a blaze of self-transcendence. Though the urban world is firmly rejected as "torture," Byron is nevertheless forced to deal with it, even in lines that had seemed to promise Nature as a means of escape, admitting the painful temporariness of transcendence. The stanza declines from its original height, where the blurring of self and world gives way to the speaker seeing "Nothing to loathe in nature," as the understatement underwhelms. Hating all that is creaturely here, Byron is selective in terms of the Nature he would seek and find, and the alexandrine limps into the hushed hope that to mingle with "the sky, the peak, the heaving plain / Of ocean, or the stars" is "not in vain." The self-transcendence that had been affirmed at the start of the stanza leads only into doubt by its close. The poem seems locked into its presiding Byronic myth, that "to sorrow I was cast / To act and suffer" (CHP III. 73. 692–3). Swithering between hope and doubt, aspiration and loss, Childe Harold*'s* Pilgrimage shapes itself as moving away from the Romance genre's linear quest and away from the affirming structure of the Wordsworthian ode, where, as James Chandler writes of "Immortality Ode," by the final section of the poetry, "forms are all redeemed."[9] Byron denies his poetry the redemption that Wordsworth finds. Though Wordsworth is a vital presence in Childe Harold*'s* Pilgrimage, particularly in canto III, Wordsworth's solutions cannot be Byron's.

"Wordsworth's imagination," writes McGann, deals in "forms of worship," Byron's in "poetic tales"."[10] Byron's imagination, with its determined individuation of the self, sees him depart from Wordsworth's generous universalizing gestures into meditations on the singularity of the poet. The Prophecy of Dante (published in 1821) and The Lament of Tasso (published in 1817) see Byron fashion a myth of the poet based on his poetics of personality. Even when writing from another perspective than his own, Byron's Dante and his Tasso are always primarily Byronic rather than distinctly separate from the self. Byron performs what he describes in Childe Harold*'s* Pilgrimage as "gaining as we give / The life we image" (III. 6. 48–9). This emphasis on creation in the present tense, alight with excitement and potential that stem from the self, became a key part of the Byronic credo. If The Excursion was "singing old themes as though they were something new,"[11] Byron's imagination sought to quicken the epic to a new birth by insistently personalizing poetry's themes. Poetry, and its themes, would be made new by being colored by Byron's personality.

Byron would rethink and individuate Wordsworth's and Coleridge's themes to achieve his ends, veering between challenging and adapting their works to make his work new.

Auden perceptively observes that "[w]hat Byron means by life – which explains why he could never appreciate Wordsworth or Keats – is the motion of life, the passage of events and thoughts."[12] But Byron also saw that life could be infused into poetry by transforming and adapting genres, from the satire and epic to the gothic, into Don Juan's forgivingly capacious structure. One of those elements was the supernatural. Christabel and The Rime of the Ancient Mariner claimed Byron's admiration for their evocation of gothic mystery, and Byron would draw upon their ambiguity in poems such as "Darkness," The Siege of Corinth, and Manfred. But in Don Juan, Byron restyles the darkness of Coleridge's gothic poems, with Juan ending up at a Norman Abbey, the seat of Lord Henry Amundeville. Byron makes use of Coleridge's Gothic machinery and Matthew Lewis's The Monk by making his stanzas sway between mockery of and immersion in the genre. Juan, having heard Lady Adeline's song about the ghostly Black Friar who stalks the halls, sits apprehensively, expecting and then receiving its visitation:

> Again — what is 't? The wind? No, no, — this time
> It is the sable Friar as before,
> With awful footsteps regular as rhyme,
> Or (as rhymes may be in these days) much more.
> Again, through shadows of the night sublime,
> When deep sleep fell on men, and the world wore
> The starry darkness round her like a girdle
> Spangled with gems — the monk made his blood curdle.
>
> (XVI. 113. 945–52)

Studded with Shakespearean allusions, these stanzas revel in the supernatural, drawing out its absurdity and terror, as the thrilling danger of the Black Friar's ghostly appearance assails Juan. Just as Christabel's narrator asks: "Is it the wind that moaneth bleak? / There is not wind enough in the air" (1. 44–5), Don Juan also holds out the immediately arrested possibility that the wind might be responsible for the sounds. Rather than dwelling upon or heightening the scene's uncanny atmosphere,

the narrator insults contemporary poetry by claiming that poets do not use rhyme as well as they used to, before returning to its theme. The night's sublime, as Byron reminds us, to borrow Burke's definition, is "astonishing,"[13] and beyond the merely beautiful or simply terrifying. Likewise, Byron's ghost is not only ridiculous. Byron slips the yoke of completely undercutting the supernatural or satirizing the Coleridgean or any other form of the gothic. Though the Black Friar turns out to be "her frolic Grace – Fitz-Fulke!" (XVI. 123. 1032), Byron does not render Juan's intimations absurd. The gothic shiver of the stanzas may culminate in farce, but not in a rejection of their emotional possibility. Byron brings "the motion of life" into Don Juan by packing verbal brio, ironic wit, and wide-eyed fascination with the uncanny.

Though on the surface a thoroughgoing debunker of the Lake Poets' "sect" and their "followers" (DJ III. 95. 852, 851), Byron was far from ignorant or dismissive of their work. And he was highly attuned to their work's potential to be transformed into the Byronic mode. Though pulling in different poetic directions, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Byron attempted to mold poetry into their own image. Byron, like the Lake Poets, aimed to dominate their shared poetic age, and each poet was profoundly invested in reaching and reshaping their respective audiences. Rather than viewing their relationship as Byron versus the Lake Poets, instead, it seems that Byron and the Lake Poets better encapsulates the nature of their complex dialogue.

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[1] Herbert F. Tucker, "Southey the Epic-Headed," Romanticism on the Net 32–33 (2003–04) at <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/009263ar>

[2] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Specimens of the Table Talk of the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge in Two Volumes, Harry Nelson Coleridge (ed.) (London: John Murray, 1835), II. p. 271

[3] Jerome McGann, Byron and Wordsworth (School of English Studies, University of Nottingham, 1999), p. 9.

[4] Michael O'Neill, "Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Conversation Poems," in Michael O'Neill and Madeleine Callaghan (eds.), The Romantic Poetry Handbook, (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), p. 179.

[5] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Eolian Harp," in H. J. Jackson (ed.), Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works, (Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 28-29. All quotations from Coleridge's poetry are from this edition unless specified otherwise.

[6] Philip Shaw, "Wordsworth or Byron?" The Byron Journal 31 (2003), 38 (38–50).

[7] William Wordsworth, letter to Letter to Sir George Beaumont, February 1808, in Ernest de Selincourt (ed.), The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years, Part 1, 2nd ed., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 195.

[8] William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Advertisement to Lyrical Ballads," in Stephen Gill (ed.), William Wordsworth: The Major Works, (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 591. All quotations from Wordsworth's poetry are from this edition unless specified otherwise.

[9] James Chandler, "Wordsworth's great Ode: Romanticism and the progress of poetry," in James Chandler and Maureen N. McLane (ed.), The Cambridge Companion to British Romantic Poetry (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 150 (pp. 136–54).
[10] Jerome McGann, Byron and Wordsworth, p. 18.
[11] Seamus Perry, "Coleridge's Disappointment in The Excursion," The Wordsworth Circle 45.2 (2014), 147 (147–51).
[12] W. H. Auden, The Dyer*'s* Hand and Other Essays (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 405.
[13] Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, Adam Phillips (ed.), (Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 53.