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THE REJECTION AND REDEFINITION OF ROMANCE IN BYRON'S EARLY POETRY

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In spite of his extraordinary popular success in and his lifelong attraction to the form, Byron never felt thoroughly comfortable about his involvement with romance. In 1817 he wrote to John Murray: "With regard to poetry in general I am convinced the more I think of it — that ... all of us — Scott — Southey — Wordsworth — Moore — Campbell — I — are all in the wrong — one as much as another ... I am the more confirmed in this — by having lately gone over some of our Classics — particularly Pope — ... and if I had to begin again — I would model myself accordingly [i.e. after Pope]."¹ In many of the poems written before the years of his romantic popularity, Byron is openly suspicious of romance and its implications — so much so, that occasionally his skepticism erupts in outright hostility. His successes with romance and romantic narratives, then, could only have resulted from his having made some accommodation with the form and with his own generally antagonistic attitude toward the kind of world that romance implied.

In his "Preface" to Childe Harold's Pilgrimage I-II (the "Romaunt" that began it all), Byron hinted broadly at what that accommodation was: "The following poem was written, for the most part, amidst the scenes which it attempts to describe. It was begun in Albania; and the parts relative to Spain and Portugal were composed from the author's observations in those countries. Thus much it may be necessary to state for the correctness of the descriptions."² Then he added almost casually: "these two cantos are merely experimental."² Because these two remarks come so close together, it is tempting to infer that Byron saw his efforts in Childe Harold as a self-conscious attempt to introduce real landscapes, realistically and faithfully described, into the structures and materials of romance; that is, he conceived of the poem, at least in part, as a formal experiment.

When George Ellis reviewed Childe Harold's Pilgrimage for the Quarterly Review, he noted the importance of Byron's suggestion. Because travel books are always much admired and since "the materials offered by a traveller's journal" are perfectly appropriate for heroic poetry, Ellis wondered: "by what accident has it happened that no English poet before Lord Byron has thought fit to employ his
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talents on a subject so obviously well suited to their display?"5 In his subsequent narratives, Byron capitalized on this successful combination of romance and realism, and time after time (from 1812 to the present) critics have observed how skillfully Byron managed his scenic descriptions. When Walter Scott, for example, reviewed the third canto of Childe Harold for the Quarterly Review, he observed that the powerful impression which Byron's tales (1813-1816) had produced confirmed him in a principle: "that every author should, like Lord Byron, form to himself, and communicate to the reader, a precise, defined and distinct view of the landscape, sentiment, or action which he intends to describe to the reader." Scott specifically praised the descriptions in Childe Harold III for their "original tone and colouring."4 The association of landscape with romance, then, which Byron first made explicit in his "Preface" to Childe Harold's Pilgrimage I-II, clearly figured importantly in the warm reception that greeted his most popular narratives.

Although Byron obviously implied "newness" by calling Childe Harold "experimental," the pose he adopted in the "Preface" is misleading. During the period before 1810, romance evidently figured often in his thoughts. Shortly before the publication of Hours of Idleness (1807), for example, he wrote in a tantalizingly fragmentary letter to his friend Edward Noel Long: "my Stanzas, have a Colouring of Romance."5 In comparison with his later poetry, among his juvenilia the words "romance" and "romantic" appear in what seems like a disproportionately high number of separate works. Byron even tried his hand at two short romantic narratives in Hours of Idleness: "Oscar of Alva" and "The Death of Calmar and Orla."6

All this evidence of Byron's interest in romance before 1809 suggests that the grounds of his experiment in Childe Harold's Pilgrimage had been well prepared before he began to compose his first "Romaut." Indeed, the "experimental" Childe Harold I-II can just as well be seen as the culmination of a series of experiments that Byron had started to conduct at least as early as 1806. In his youth he evidently did not hold the form very highly in his esteem, yet his early concern for romance and romantic fictions explicitly anticipated the mature formal experimentation of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage. Even as Byron explored in his early works the reasons for his dissatisfaction with romance, he prepared the way to create new alternatives that overcame what he believed were the inherent deficiencies of the form as it was traditionally defined.
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To be sure, in his early poetry Byron did not generate anything close to a systematic argument about romance. Nor was a definition of the form his only (or even his principal) preoccupation in his *juvenilia.* In a few clusters of poems, though, Byron does seem to carry on something resembling an indirect discussion about the meaning and appeal of romance. Together, his few direct comments about romance and the relations between various select poems suggest some important possible reasons that the experiment of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* I-II took the form that it did.

Unfortunately, Byron has nowhere left us an exact and comprehensive statement that defines what he meant when he used the words "romance" and "romantic" in his early works. In that regard, though, he more or less reflected the critical uncertainty of the whole period, for, as Ellis remarked when he reviewed *Childe Harold* I-II, romance "has been always used with a considerable latitude of meaning, and may be considered as applicable to all the anomalous and nondescriptive classes of poetical composition." Nevertheless, from his usage in a few specific instances, we can infer much about what Byron seems to have understood "romance" to imply.

In a letter to his sister Augusta, dated 9 April 1804, Byron playfully described his plans for a party his mother was to give that night:

I intend to fall violently in love, it will serve as an amusement pour passer le temps and it will at least have the charm of novelty to recommend it, then you know in the course of a few weeks I shall be quite au desespoir, shoot myself and Go out of the world with eclat, and my History will furnish materials for a pretty little Romance which shall be entitled and denominated the loves of Lord B. and the cruel and Inconstant Sigismunda Cunegunda Bridgetina &c&c princess of Terra Incognita. — Don't you think that I have a very Good Knack for novel writing?

Two points about Byron's idea of romance emerge clearly here. First, he associates it with love, particularly the variety with turbulent emotional excesses and tragic consequences. Second, he considers it artificial, a mere collection of empty literary clichés that have no concrete or meaningful relation to real human life. Scornfully ironic, he satirizes the implicit idealism of the form by representing it as stereotyped sentimentality, extravagant posturing, and predictable affectation.

In another letter (25 October 1804), Byron tried to console Augusta, who was then distraught about obstacles (principally finan-
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cial) in the path of her engagement to Col. George Leigh:

I sympathize in your distress, and hope that things will turn out better than you yourself expect. But really after all (pardon me my dear Sister,) I feel a little inclined to laugh at you, for love in my humble opinion, is utter nonsense, a mere jargon of compliments, romance, and deceit; now for my part had I fifty mistresses, I should in the course of a fortnight, forget them all, and if by any chance I ever recollected one, should laugh at it as a dream, and bless my stars, for delivering me from the hands of the little mischievous Blind God.9

This linking of romance with love, nonsense, jargon, and dreams continues the same track of the earlier letter. He still implies that romance involves affected posing and verbal conventions empty of genuine feeling, and he further adds the edge of an implied moral judgment when he includes “deceit” in that series of associations. Derisive laughter, indicative of responsible disillusionment, is the appropriate response to the fraudulent artifice and dishonest illusion into which romance would convert human experience.

One other comment, from a third letter to his sister (30 January 1805), makes more explicit some of these general notions. Byron first tells Augusta that he has heard a remarkable story about her riding skill; then he adds: “I hope you recollect the circumstance, and know what I allude to, else, you may think that I am soaring into the Regions of Romance.”10 With the metaphor of flight, which anticipates later statements in the poetry, he finally and unequivocally identifies romance as an airy, illusory nothing — different in kind from the material reality which we customarily consider truth. The spatial distinction and separation of those vaporous regions from solid earth utterly disconnect romance from real experience. Such fictions are pure fabrications of imagination and artifice, unrelated to substantial fact. Byron’s self-conscious irony in this reference indicates what little sympathy he entertains for this ideal.

For the most part, Byron is consistent about his conception of romance in these letters (i.e. referring it regularly to ideas of illusion, unreality, affectation); moreover, his usage conforms generally to prevailing critical ideas about the nature of romantic fictions. In 1750 Samuel Johnson observed that “heroic” romances were characterized by a “wild strain of imagination”; “every transaction and sentiment was ... remote from all that passes among men.” His definition of “romance” in the Dictionary (1755) held to the same line: “a tale of wild adventures in war and love ... A lie; a fiction.”11 Through the end
of the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century, this same general idea or some near variation of it predominated in most critical discussions of the form. In the "Preface" to the second edition of *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), for example, Horace Walpole argued that in the "ancient" romance: "all was imagination and improbability: ... The actions, sentiments, conversations, of the heroes and heroines of ancient days were as unnatural as the machines employed to put them in motion." Similarly, James Beattie (*On Fable and Romance*, 1783) maintained that romantic poetry so formalized love that the passion became nothing but "a verbal parade of admiration and attachment, in which the heart had little concern"; he concluded that in medieval romances: "nature, probability, and even possibility, were not much attended to." In *The Progress of Romance* (1785), Clara Reeve's Euphrasia precedes her own precise definition of "romance" by soliciting these views from Horntensius and Sophrania: "By Romance I understand a wild, extravagant, fabulous Story"; and: "I understand it to mean all those kind [sic] of stories that are built upon fiction, and have no foundation in truth."12

During his youth, then, Byron's conception of romance echoed critical commonplaces. The precedents for his association of the form with imagination, love, excessive affectation, and unreality were solidly established in tradition. So far Byron's attitude toward this constellation of characteristics has appeared to be one of irony and mockery. In his early poetry he retains the same general definition of romance, but his responses to its significance and its appeal cover a larger range.

In *Fugitive Pieces*, Byron's first collection of *juvenilia* (1806), two poems specifically draw upon the idea of romance that Byron implied in his letters:

These locks, which fondly thus entwine,
In firmer chains our hearts confine,
Than all th' unmeaning protestations
Which swell with nonsense, love orations.
Our love is fix'd, I think we've proved it;
Nor time, nor place, nor art have mov'd it;
Then wherefore should we sigh and whine,
With groundless jealousy repine;
With silly whims, and fancies frantic,
Merely to make our love romantic?

("To a Lady Who Presented to the Author a Lock of Hair Braided With His Own, and Appointed a Night in December to Meet Him in the
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Garden,” ll. 1-10)
I will not advance,
By the rules of romance,
To humour a whimsical fair;
Though a smile may delight,
Yet a frown won’t affright,
Or drive me to dreadful despair.
(“To the Sighing Strephon,” ll. 31-36)

Although the objects of his mockery differ, the satirical tone remains constant. In the first poem, Byron ridicules his lover for her foolish and selfish expectations of him; in the second, he ridicules a friend for his ludicrous posturing. In both, Byron’s targets are false sentimental-ity and affection; the ideals of that romantic world upon which lover and friend have modeled their values and behavior are wholly artificial and fictional. By attaching themselves to those stereotypes, they merely indulge themselves in a self-flattering illusion.

As before, Byron is here especially conscious of the material differences that separate romance from reality. Applied to real life, the “rules of romance” are foolishly arbitrary: romantic cliches demand a midnight meeting in a garden, regardless of the temperature; unrequited love must express itself in extravagantly excessive protestations of despair. Neither response, of course, faithfully represents the feelings of a breathing mortal, no matter how much it might mimic the imaginary passion of a literary character. As Byron objects to the Strephon: “Such love as you plead,/Is pure love, indeed,/For it only consists in the word” (ll. 52-54). Byron understands clearly that fictions are not life, and to the fraudulent illusions of romantic affectation, he contrasts the real gratifications (emotional and physical) that he expects from love: “Think on our chilly situation,/And curb this rage for imitation./Then let us meet, as oft we’ve done,/Beneath the influence of the sun;/Or, if at midnight I must meet you,/Oh! let me in your chamber greet you” (“To a Lady ...,” ll. 31-36); “Though the kisses are sweet,/Which volup­tously meet,/Of kissing I ne’er was so fond,/As to make me forget,/Though our lips oft have met,/That still there was something beyond” (“To the Sighing Strephon,” Stanza 8). In each of these passages, Byron apparently emphasizes that he has not surrendered the reality of his human passion to illusory idealism. At least he is honest about his feelings and has not deceitfully disguised his physical desire. Such sincerity led to the erotic candor of the poem “To Mary” — and subsequently to the self-righteous outrage of some Southwell matrons and to Byron’s suppres-
No doubt at least partly in response to that criticism of *Fugitive Pieces*, Byron included "The First Kiss of Love" in *Poems on Various Occasions* (1807), his second and chaster edition of *juvenilia*. In his first volume he had not obliged his audience with romantic illusions to flatter their distorted notions of love, but had dared to offer them uncompromised expressions of real feelings. Now he answered the objections of their outraged sensibilities: "Away with your fictions of flimsy romance, / Those tissues of fancy Moriah has wove; / Give me the mild beam of the soul-breathing glance, / Or the rapture which dwells on the first kiss of love" (ll. 1-4). This outright rejection of romance carries Byron a step beyond the good-humored satire of his earlier statements, but the grounds for this more hostile attitude are the same. He continues to associate romance with fiction, imagination (fancy), and folly — a series of associations that he made more emphatic in a later version of the poem. After *Poems on Various Occasions*, Byron altered the second line to read: "Those tissues of falsehood which Folly has wove." He thus clarified the obscure reference to "Moriah," the goddess of Folly, and strengthened his point by substituting an effect (falsehood, hence deceit) for a cause. Although his antagonism seems to be growing sharper, his general characterization of romance is consistent. Romance involves hackneyed illusions that have no material counterpart in what we know as truth. The alternative to which Byron turns is again a tangible reality — the tactile experience of a kiss, that combines both emotional intensity and physical gratification. Mere art is frigidly indifferent to the warmth of such delight: "Your shepherds, your pipes, those fantastical themes, / Perhaps may amuse, yet they never can move: / Arcadia displays but a region of dreams; / What are visions like these, to the first kiss of love?" (ll. 25-28). In his letter to Augusta more than a year and a half earlier, Byron had indicated that within the limits of idleness, amusement could be satisfactory enough; now it is clearly an insufficient reason for absorption into a romantic delusion.

In "The First Kiss of Love," the metaphors for romance not only extend the imagery suggested in the first letter to Augusta; they also look forward to an even more explicit statement of hostility and rejection. Byron represents romantic fictions as "tissues" and "dreams," which are "flimsy" — necessarily so — in form and substance. Such disembodied visions prove elusive and ultimately deceitful. The specific vehicle of his spatial metaphor emphasizes his point: romance
differs in kind from reality.

The same sense of disjunction between the illusions of romantic fiction and the palpable realities of human experience informs his use of the word in “Egotism. A letter to J. T. Becher”: “At School I thought like other Children; /Instead of Brains, a fine Ingredient, /Romance, my youthful Head bewildering, /To Sense had made me disobedient” (ll. 37-40). In the light of Byron’s other comments about romance, it seems likely here that by “Sense” he intends us to understand both sensation (as in his contrasts between fiction and touch) and good sense or common sense, that is, level-headed disillusionment, or the kind of pragmatism that sees through deceitful illusions. Thus, romance diverted him from his responsibilities to the real world; the substitution of fictions for brains confused and deluded him. Although Byron has resumed a more playful, ironic tone in this poem, he has also left intact a hint that some danger may be the consequence of capitulating to romance — especially since the young are the most vulnerable to romantic fraud.

Byron’s most explicit statement about romance appears in a poem first published in Hours of Idleness (1807). I think it is fair to read “To Romance” as a continuation of his answer to the self-righteous critics of Fugitive Pieces:

Parent of golden dreams, Romance!
    Auspicious Queen of childish joys,
Who lead’st along, in airy dance,
    Thy votive train of girls and boys;
At length, in spells no longer bound,
    I break the fetters of my youth;
No more I tread thy mystic round,
    But leave thy realms for those of Truth (ll. 1-8).

Romance! disgusted with deceit,
    Far from thy motley court I fly,
Where Affectation holds her seat,
    And sickly Sensibility;
Whose silly tears can never flow
    For any pangs excepting thine;
Who turns aside from real woe,
    To steep in dew thy gaudy shrine (ll. 33-40).

The same characteristics that Byron elsewhere associates with romance — affectation, dreams, deceit — here appear more decidedly undesirable. The consistent spatial metaphor again emphasizes the
irreconcilable differences between illusion and reality. Romance's court lies in a “hall of clouds” (l. 18) in “realms of air” (l. 21): it is therefore a kingdom as unsubstantial and inconstant as the “airy” fictions created under the “boundless reign” of the “Fancy” (l. 13). Spatial distance (underscored by the necessity of willfully active movement to escape the bondage of Romance) and differences in kind thoroughly dissociate romance from actual human experience. That false queen rejects real woe in favor of self-flattering delusion as surely as the speaker denounces her deceits.

As in “Egotism,” Byron again associates romance with youth and immaturity (e.g. ll. 2, 6, 15), and he uses his spatial metaphors to imply this temporal dimension. With the advent of age comes the responsibility necessary to abandon romantic illusion and accept truth. The closing stanza illustrates how time yields to space in the relations between metaphors:

Adieu, fond race! a long adieu!
The hour of fate is hovering nigh;
E'en now the gulf appears in view,
Where un lamented you must lie:
Oblivion's blackening lake is seen,
Convuls'd by gales you cannot weather,
Where you, and eke your gentle queen,
Alas! must perish altogether (ll. 57-64).

Time (“the hour of fate”) is the first motive and cause for his rejection of romance, but Byron shifts attention quickly to spatial representations of that time. The perilous gulf and blackening lake that occupy the intervening space between the cloudy realms of romance and the more solidly material realms of truth suggest two things: first, the illusions of romance simply cannot survive the severe exigencies of real life in an adult world but must “perish altogether”; second, once lost, the world of romance (and all the “golden dreams” it contains) cannot be recovered or resurrected. The realms of Truth are evidently not easy, like the indolent and self-indulgent fantasies of romance.

It is perhaps this element of finality in romance’s “fate” that summons the unmistakable note of nostalgia in Byron’s farewell to romance — that and the very nature of romantic ideals, even though they be illusory. By moral and material necessity, romance is doomed to destruction, and he is fated to the encroachment of age. He lingers over his last “fond” goodbye to romance, and once he even questions the necessity of disillusionment that he elsewhere accepts with appar-
ent magnanimity: "And must we own thee, but a name,/And from thy hall of clouds descend?" (l. 17-18). The illusions of romance are, after all, "golden dreams," which one leaves with the utmost reluctance (l. 1, emphasis mine); and the deceitful ideals of romance — faithful love and undying friendship — are compellingly attractive regardless of one's age or experience. Byron already knows that beyond the kingdom of romance, "woman's false as fair,/And friends have feeling for — themselves!" (ll. 23-24); and at the extreme, disillusionment looks foreboding and sinister (e.g. "blackening lake"). Byron certainly does not deny the need to abandon romance; nor does he resist the moral imperative of maturity that demands he reject illusion for reality. But ambivalence replaces his unequivocal antagonism to that illusory world. Given the realizations that the abandonment of romance means the relinquishment of youth, that the loss of youth means the loss of even the illusion of a better world, that departure from the kingdom of romance means entry into a material reality of tempest and storm, and finally that the journey from youth and romance can never be retraced — given all that, who would not linger fondly and nostalgically over a last "adieu"?

A similar conception of the romance-world and a like ambivalence regarding it appear in two poems about Byron's youth. The first is "On a Distant View of the Village and School of Harrow on the Hill, 1806": "Ye scenes of my childhood, whose lov'd recollection/Embitters the present, compar'd with the past;/Where science first dawn'd on the powers of reflection,/And friendships were form'd, too romantic to last" (ll. 1-4). Two characteristics typical of the way Byron treats his childhood emerge in these lines. First is his consistent association of time with setting: when he recalls the former days of his youth, he refers his readers (and his own memory) to relevant scenes. The second is his compulsive habit of idealizing the past. The sort of Friendship that he called illusory in "To Romance" (l. 20), he celebrates here as a (personally experienced) historical reality. Although his memory draws him back to that once-real attachment, Byron still suggests a fatality inherent in the romantic world. Because his childhood friendship was romantically ideal, it must inevitably have failed; a lesser affection, he intimates, might have survived longer.

Although Byron incorporates his preoccupation with scene and locale directly into his recollections, the world he recalls actually no longer exists in material space and time. The time is past; the place is
internalized in his memory; and the experience itself survives only by its recollection. Byron’s relation to physical location, therefore, becomes equivocal. Those beloved memories of scenes from his romantic youth are disembodied visions, as airy and insubstantial as the kingdom of Romance in “To Romance” or Arcadia’s “region of dreams” in “The First Kiss of Love.”

In “Childish Recollections” Byron repeats the same two tendencies that led him to this uncertain relation with material place; he refers time to locale, and he idealizes his youth. When he recalls the past, scenes rise up like enchanted images: “Remembrance sheds around her genial power,/Calls back the vanish’d days to rapture given,/When Love was bliss, and Beauty form’d our heaven;/Or, dear to youth, pourtrays each childish scene./Those fairy bowers, where all in turn have been” (ll. 12-16). This “fairy realm” (l.184) of his own childhood is none other than the timeless world of romance, which Byron has at last located internally — that is, in the exclusively interior world of his memory.23 Consistency of metaphor confirms the identification. The power of mind that provides his consciousness access to the “fairy” world is the Fancy, also one of the principal ruling powers in the kingdom of Romance (“To Romance,” l. 13). The landscapes of his interior reality are as vapidous and unsubstantial as the “realms of air” in “To Romance.” In the introductory section of “Childish Recollections,” Byron adumbrates the process by which his mind actively creates a romantic reality within:

Oft does my heart indulge the rising thought,
Which still recurs, unlook’d for and unsought;
My soul to Fancy’s fond suggestion yields,
And roams romantic o’er her airy fields.
Scenes of my youth, develop’d crowd to view,
To which I long have bade a last adieu!
Seats of delight, inspiring youthful themes;
Friends lost to me, for aye, except in dreams;

These, with a thousand visions, now unite,
To dazzle, though they please, my aching sight (ll. 27-34, 41-42).

Byron’s actual apostrophe to the location that supposedly evokes these recollections — “Ida! blest spot”(l. 43) — does not come until the next line. In fact, Byron has described a process of disengagement
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from tangible reality rather than significant interaction with it. Once stimulated, the mind recovers the materials contained within the memory, but the stimulus need not originate in any perception of external scene. In the instance he has described here, it begins with an interior motion: a “thought” — and at that, one which is not even brought to consciousness through an act of will, but surfaces “unsought” — initiates the activity of his “Fancy.” That power in turn recreates the landscapes in which the soul temporarily delights.24

On another occasion in the same poem, Byron indicates once more that the reality which his memory can restore is wholly internalized and effectively owes nothing of its immediate existence to the presence of a corresponding scene in external nature. His visions, therefore, become independent of the time and space in which their materials originated. Accordingly, Byron observes that even in the splendid world of fashionable society, far away from the Harrow that is the subject of these reminiscences, the chance meeting of an old friend can transport him to another existence: “My thoughts bewilder’d in the fond surprise,/The woods of Ida danc’d before my eyes” (ll. 203-204). Here the mind recovers the scene internally, even though the landscape is far distant in time and space. So complete is the mind’s independence of the material settings of reality that any semblance of mutual interaction or connection between interior and exterior worlds functionally disappears.

Thus, whether romance be mere literary cliché and affectation or a fond metaphor for childhood, Byron inevitably finds something unsatisfactory about it. The interior world of memory and the illusory realms of fiction are both insubstantial and airy, and thus ultimately inaccessible in the material reality of time and space. On moral grounds, maturity demands the unequivocal rejection of irresponsible escapist fantasies, but it cannot correspondingly eliminate nostalgia. Byron is no less wistful about the loss of his childhood than he is sorrowful about the necessity of giving up romantic illusions. Since both are without material embodiment in physical nature (real landscape), however, he cannot realistically pursue the full implications of the spatial metaphors any farther. The unequivocal distinction between romance and reality that he insists upon denies him the possibility of return to the world that fate required him to abandon. His ambivalence is deeply imbedded in the poetry: for persuasive reasons, he recognizes the need to reject romance; for other compelling reasons, he cannot relinquish his profound emotional and even intel-
lectual attachment to it. In another cluster of poems about his romantic childhood, Byron finds an alternative to this frustrating dilemma: he embodies a romantic reality in material landscapes.

In three important poems — “Lachin y Gair,” “When I Roved a Young Highlander,” and “I Would I Were a Careless Child” — all from his later collections of juvenilia (Hours of Idleness, 1807; Poems Original and Translated, 1808), Byron remembers fondly and nostalgically his childhood in Scotland. As in other accounts of his earlier days, in these too he compulsively idealizes his past and represents this particular world of his childhood as “romantic.” In the rugged northern country of the Highlands, the days of his youth were distinguished by uncompromised joy. The scenery of the Scottish mountains resembles clearly the romantic setting in “The Death of Calmar and Orla”; that is, it had a literary referent in his own mind, however tenuous the connection might be.25 The Highland landscapes that he depicts also embody the pre-eminently romantic ideals of faithful love, sacred fidelity, truth, legend, and heroic tradition (e.g. “Lachin y Gair,” ll. 3-4; “I Would I Were a Careless Child,” ll. 5-8; “When I Roved a Young Highlander,” ll. 7-8, 21-24). And in a letter of 1805 to Charles David Gordon, Byron even referred to certain aspects of the Highland scenery that found their way into these poems as explicitly “romantic.”26

In his other poetic treatments of romance, Byron created a particular kind of landscape to serve as metaphor for the romantic world that he associated with youth generally, and with his own life specifically. Yet he found it necessary to reject these settings, regardless of his fondness for them or attraction to them, because of their inherent inadequacies — that is, their lack of substantial reality and their corresponding disjunction from real human life. Byron also associates the Scottish Highlands with an idealized childhood. By virtue of that association and the physical nature of the countryside itself, Scotland becomes for him a newly realized or newly discovered landscape of romance, suitable to replace the others that he repudiated. In substituting material nature for insubstantial landscape (i.e. airy fictions and interior visions), Byron opens the way to resolve his earlier dilemma of being simultaneously attracted to romantic idealism and obliged to reject it as irresponsible illusion. When the landscape of romance is defined as real nature, the most objectionable characteristics of romance, as it is traditionally understood, disappear; more specifically, they are transformed into aesthetically, morally, and psychologically desirable objects.
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The Scottish landscapes for which Byron voices so much profoundly felt attachment are solidly physical natural forms that exist in the continuum of time by which we measure human experience. Conversely, the romance worlds of fiction and memory for which Byron has otherwise longed have been tantalizingly incorporeal. Illusory fictions and disembodied memories are creations of the fancy, not discoveries of sensation. What Byron describes of the Highlands, on the other hand, are not diaphanous settings constructed of clouds or air, but palpable rocks and torrential cataracts. Those rugged mountains of the north are not exclusively contained within the limitations of his mind, but are rather parts of a visible nature which he cannot dismiss absentlly as vaguely realized "fairy bowers" ("Childish Recollections," 1.16).

In each of these three poems about the Highlands, Byron casts himself in the pose of a displaced Scot. No longer a child, he now lives amidst scenery far distant and far different from the landscapes he admired and enjoyed as a boy. By departing from Scotland, he lost or relinquished the romantic world of his youth. With this configuration of ideas, Byron repeats the pattern of the other poems, like "To Romance." His spatial separation from his mountainous home signals here, as elsewhere, both temporal change and moral-psychological dislocation (see "When I Roved a Young Highlander," ll. 25-26; and "I Would I Were a Careless Child," ll. 21-24).

Because the landscapes of Scotland are palpably real, Byron's continuing relation to them differs quite remarkably from his equivocal relation to those other disembodied visions. One method by which Byron insists on the tangible reality of these Scottish landscapes is to identify them uniformly as sublime. And to them he juxtaposes the milder, domestic and cultivated beauty of England (see, for example, "I Would I Were A Careless Child," ll. 1-8; "When I Roved a Young Highlander," ll. 1-4; and especially "Lachin y Gair," ll. 1-8, 35-38).27 The rocks and mountains of Scotland imply difficulty, austerity, and danger; the domesticated gardens of England, indolent luxury. Accordingly, the Scots are hardy and independent; the English, servile and slavish. Scotland is a land of tempest and storm (see "Lachin y Gair," ll. 21-24), and these metaphors Byron variously uses for maturity and responsibility.28 Indeed, the sublime Highlands are the landscapes of "Nature's wild luxuriance," where, Byron explains in "The Cornelian," the "flowers of truth" bloom (ll. 19-24).

Perhaps most importantly, sublimity belongs in some way to the
Scottish landscape itself: the sublime is not something within Byron’s mind, but rather a quality of the scenery that operates on his mind. It implies thereby a power that allows the landscape a presence and a force all its own, independent of the mind of the observer. Whether or not the poet consciously remembers them or (more directly) actually sees them, these settings exist, and the other landscapes of romance could not make the same claim. In “To Romance,” the romantic world perished when the poet descended from her kingdom of clouds; in “Childish Recollections,” the romantic scenes of childhood were the functional creations of the memory and the fancy. Because of their independent status, the Highland landscapes provide the poet with opportunities to recover the romantic world that were not available in his regressively solipsistic relation to the other settings of romance.

Although the landscapes of the Scottish Highlands exist temporally, they nonetheless have a permanence that cannot be found in human experiences. As a maturely disillusioned adult (i.e. that is the pose in which he casts himself), Byron recognizes that in mortal time, life proves to be inconstant; for love fades, friends betray, and human sympathies prove mercurial.29 But Byron is confident that were he to return to Scotland, he would discover it “unchang’d as before” (“When I Roved a Young Highlander,” l. 43). Superficial appearances are vulnerable of course to the ravages of time (see “Lachin y Gair,” l. 35), but what makes those landscapes sublime in the first place — their forms and their solidly material masses — are not.30 Here, too, the romantic Scottish landscapes differ from their insubstantial counterparts in disembodied vision. As long as they endure unchanged in their material sublimity, these landscapes of romance may await the return of a hero — that is, the poet who recalls his past in these poems. By contrast, when the fictions of romantic illusion dissolve, as in “To Romance,” they cannot be recovered; and those memories of romantic attachments that failed in mortal time (“Childish Recollections” and “On a Distant View of... Harrow”) cannot be re-embodied in material existence. The Scottish Highlands offer a potential alternative to the inaccessible world of traditional romance and romantic idealism. The Highlands are “out there,” available for recovery in human life.

In “When I Roved a Young Highlander,” Byron rejects the possibility of returning to Scotland: “Yet the day may arrive, when the mountains once more/Shall rise to my sight, in their mantles of snow;/But while these soar above me, unchang’d as before,/Will Mary be there to receive me? — ah, no!/Adieu, then, ye hills, where my
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childhood was bred! / Thou sweet flowing Dee, to thy waters adieu” (ll. 41-46)! He declines to return to Scotland, therefore, not because of some deficiency in the landscape or because of some undesirable characteristic inherent in the setting, but because the girl he loved as a youth no longer lives there. In other words, the landscape has not failed him. Reliably and constantly, it is still the sublimely rugged terrain of his past. But typically the inconstancy of human affections has left him disconsolate.

When Byron does express an unequivocal wish to return to Scotland, he explains it in terms of his attraction to the landscape, especially inasmuch as it may be a viable alternative to human society:

Fain would I fly the haunts of men —
   I seek to shun, not hate mankind;
My Breast requires the sullen glen,
   Whose gloom may suit a darken’d mind.
Oh! that to me the wings were given,
   Which bear the turtle to her nest!
Then would I cleave the vault of Heaven,
   To flee away, and be at rest.
(“I Would I Were a Careless Child,” ll. 49-56)

The flight metaphor here may recall the image from his earlier letter to Augusta, in which he spoke of “soaring into the Regions of Romance.” Yet because of its place in the context of his treatment of romance in this and other poems and letters, the call for solitude and freedom from human entanglement that he here voices does not strike us as regressive or escapist. After all, he has made landscape — real nature, not some false illusion fabricated by an overstimulated imagination that is vainly attached to empty cliches, and not some irresponsible idealistic fiction or mournfully impossible memory of faithful love or undying friendship — the object of his wish and the end of his quest.

Obviously “I Would I Were a Careless Child” anticipates Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage I-II in some important ways. In the tone and language of the closing stanza surely sounds the voice that matured in the later “Romaunt,” and the whole complaint of the early lyric appears again in the opening stanzas of Childe Harold, Canto One. More important, a quest for nature has become the answer to the speaker’s dilemma, and this brings us back to the formula that Byron so successfully exploited, not only in Childe Harold I-II, but also in the romantic narratives that followed. Sublime landscapes, like those for which he misses the early lyric, remain dominant in his affections for
scenery in the tales and afterwards, and the appeal of self-exile in "I Would I Were a Careless Child" also points toward later variations of the Byronic romance. In hero after hero Byron presents more sophisticated types of this alienated sensibility, whose relation to landscape becomes more complex, partly because the character fails to discover in nature the consciousness-easing solace for which the early lyric voice pleads. In "I Would I Were a Careless Child," Byron sets himself a distinctive aesthetic and psychological problem, which subsequent narratives vary: the landscape toward which he inclines is not idealized as an especially appropriate setting for heroic action or magnificent enterprise; rather, it is a setting or a context for the hero himself. The relation between hero and scene, then, is not defined by externalized activity but by aesthetic and psychological suitability. Apparently Byron is moving towards a change in the very premises of romance; heroic action matters less than heroic consciousness and the organic integration of interior and exterior realities — the reconciliation of the mind and nature through self-participation in the romantic reality. The ends of romantic quest, therefore, become pre-eminently ego-centric, in keeping with the disposition towards self-exile. Byron has consequently suggested an important redefinition of romance, one that accommodates his other objections to the illusory world that romance traditionally implied.

In the drift of thought that informs his early poetry (it is too indirect to call it an explicit pattern), Byron implies that nature is the appropriate object of the romantic quest; therefore, real landscapes become part of the necessary materials of romance. This new formal requirement perhaps accounts for the relative failure of the two short romances in Hours of Idleness. Both "Oscar of Alva" and "The Death of Calmar and Orla" trade on the popularity of medieval romance imitations, but neither is memorable. In particular, neither evidences the attention to setting that marked Byron's later, successful romances — in part, I should think, because in those two works Byron was not describing a palpable nature that he knew from his experience but was primarily imitating literary sources. Indeed, Byron suggests in some letters that without the materials of real landscape, his imagination was handicapped. Even before Childe Harold I-II was published, he wrote to Robert Charles Dallas that he was "honoured" by those who urged him to continue the poem; "but to do that," he went on: "I must return to Greece and Asia; I must have a warm sun and a blue sky; I cannot describe scenes so dear to me by a sea-coal fire. I had
projected an additional canto when I was in the Troad and Constantinople, and if I saw them again it would go on; but under existing circumstances and sensations, I have neither harp, 'heart nor voice' to proceed." 32 Later in his life he referred to the East as "the greenest island of my imagination," 33 and until the very end of his life and career, he seems to have kept intact this inseparable association of romance and place. Trelawney reported that on his last voyage to Greece in 1823, Byron watched on deck throughout the night as their ship lay off Stromboli; in the morning he told his fellow travelers: "If I live another year, you will see this scene in a fifth canto of Childe Harold." 34 Even then Byron referred the scene to a poem which he had begun fourteen years earlier as a "Romaunt."

Now we are in a position to assess more certainly the genuine importance of the experiment that Byron said he was making with Childe Harold's Pilgrimage; and we are also in a position to see why that "Romaunt" may be regarded as the product of a series of earlier experiments with the relation between romance and place. In Childe Harold Byron created a fictional self, Harold, who enacts the quest that is partially defined in "I Would I Were a Careless Child." Harold, that is, fulfills the longings of the speaker in the earlier lyric; he goes forth, not in eager search of adventure, but in quest of landscape and reintegration with the romantic vision. This quest, furthermore, aligns Byron's poetry in a very general way with one of the chief aesthetic concerns of his age. Whether it appears as Wordsworth's "high argument" in his "Prospectus" to The Recluse, as Coleridge's "beauty-making power" in "Dejection: An Ode," or as Blake's Proverb of Hell: "Where man is not, nature is barren" — however it appears, the integration of the mind and nature is one of the characteristic preoccupations of Romanticism. Finally, it does not really matter that Harold, who pursues the quest outlined in the early poems, goes to Portugal and beyond rather than to Scotland, as the earlier speaker had hoped to — in one sense the route of Harold's quest was mapped out for him in Byron's early poems. The formal requirement of landscape in romance was the principle that motivated his venturing forth at all.

Notes

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4 Review of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage III, Quarterly Review, 16 (1816), 180-181, 189. See also, Francis Jeffrey, review of The Corsair and The Bride of Abydos, Edinburgh Review, 23 (1814), 198; anonymous review of The Bride of Abydos and The Corsair, Antijacobin Review, 46 (1814), 234; and reviews of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage I-II, by Francis Jeffrey in the Edinburgh Review, 19(1812), 468; and by George Ellis in the Quarterly Review, 7 (1812), 191.

5 To Long, 23 February 1807 — BL&J, 1:110.

6 See the entries for ROMANCE and ROMANTIC in Ione Dodson Young, ed. A Concordance to the Poetry of Byron (Austin, Texas, 1965), 3:1222-1223. Neither of the short romances in Hours of Idleness could be considered new or "experimental" in any meaningful way; in a note Byron acknowledged that part of "Oscar of Alva" was taken from Schiller (his unacknowledged model was certainly Walter Scott), and "The Death of Calmar and Orla" was frankly subtitled "An Imitation of Macpherson's 'Ossian'" — Poetry, 1:131n and 177. Although "Oscar of Alva" and "The Death of Calmar and Orla" received mixed reviews from the periodical critics, Byron must have realized quickly that neither form was particularly congenial to the kind of romance toward which his experimentation was leading him; he turned to neither type a second time in any of his serious experiments with romance.

7 Review of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage I-II, Quarterly Review, 7 (1812), 180.

8 BL&J, 1:48.

9 BL&J, 1:52.

10 BL&J, 1:61.


13 This stanza was suppressed in editions that followed Fugitive Pieces.

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15 See letter to John M. B. Pigot, 13 January 1807 — BL&J, 1:103.

16 Poetry, 1:82 and n.

17 On the importance of the “Fancy’s” role in creating false illusions, see also “To Romance,” l. 28 and ll. 51-52.

18 Compare, for example, “Youth has flown on rosy pinion,/And Manhood claims his stern dominion” (“To Edward Noel Long, Esq.”, ll.23-24; also, l.26); and “the sterner voice of truth” (“To the Duke of Dorset,” l.30). In his actual practice as a romancer in Hours of Idleness, Byron did not always create a world of “golden dreams” such as he described in “To Romance.” The theme of “Oscar of Alva” is deceit, betrayal (by lover and brother), and murder. Yet even in this poem Byron managed to include an indirect statement of opposition to romance. At the very end, the narrator declares with consummate irony that no minstrel or bard will ever “dare” to sing the story of Allan’s treachery, which he has just recited (see stanzas 77, 78, and 79).

19 See also “Lines, Addressed to the Rev. J. T. Becher, on his Advising the Author to Mix More with Society,” ll. 25-28.

20 See also “I Would I Were a Careless Child,” ll. 21-24. In this passage, too, spatial metaphors carry the burden of Byron’s complaint.

21 The number of early poems in which Byron uses the phrase “scene of my youth” or some near variation of it is noteworthy; for example, “Lines Written Beneath an Elm in the Churchyard of Harrow,” “To Caroline (When I Hear),” “On a Distant View of the Village and School of Harrow on the Hill, 1806,” “The Tear,” “Childish Recollections,” “L’Amitie est l’Amour sans Ailes,” “I Would I Were a Careless Child,” and “To George, Earl Delawarr.”


23 Elsewhere in the poem Byron calls Harrow “A home, a world, a paradise” (l. 218).

24 Compare the process that Byron describes in “To Edward Noel Long, Esq.” (ll. 1-4) and “L’Amitie est l’Amour sans Ailes” (ll. 41-44). Although the initial stimulus is external scenery actually present, the result is the same: disengagement and estrangement from material setting, withdrawal into an interior world.

25 Compare the description of Calmar, rolling “his form in the whirlwind” (Poetry, 1:77), with “Lachin y Gair,” ll. 15-24.

26 To Gordon, 14 August 1805 — BL&J, 1:74-75.

27 Byron applies this distinction consistently. In a note to “Lachin y Gair” in Hours of Idleness, he explicitly describes the mountain as “sublime and picturesque”; in the poem itself he reserves the word “beauties” for England alone (l. 37) — Poetry, 1:171n. In “The Adieu,” he speaks of Loch na Garr’s “snows sublime” (l.23).
28 See, for example, “To Romance,” ll. 61-64; “Love’s Last Adieu,” ll. 13-16 and ll. 33-36; and “To George, Earl Delawarr,” ll. 9-12.

29 See “I Would I Were a Careless Child,” ll. 25-26; also, “To Romance,” ll. 17-24; and “Love’s Last Adieu,” ll. 33-34.

30 In this matter, Byron perhaps anticipates later statements in Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage. See, for example, Childe Harold II. lxxxvii; III. xci; IV. iii.

31 Compare “I Would I Were a Careless Child,” ll. 25-48, with Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage I. v-vi, ix, xi. See also Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage I. xxviii, lxxxiv; II. xxv-xxvii; III. lxix, cxiv; IV. clxxviii.

32 To Dallas, 7 September 1811 — BL&J, 2:92. See also Ernest J. Lovell, Jr., Byron: The Record of a Quest (Austin, Texas, 1949), p. 97n.

33 Letter to Thomas Moore, 17 November 1816 — BL&J, 5:129.

34 The Last Days of Shelley and Byron, ed. J. E. Morpurgo (Garden City, N.Y., 1960), p. 158.