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Randall Sessler's attachment to poetry and ardent faith in its power as a heuristic device arose out of his engagement with music. Music revealed the power of the written word and laid the groundwork for his interest in lyric poetry. Randall is studying 18th Century and Romantic verse at the University of Cambridge and plans to pursue a doctorate within the field. Ultimately, he hopes to show that the world will always need its poetic commentators. For, as Lord Byron tells us, "Words are things, and a small drop of ink, / Falling like dew, upon a thought, produces / That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think."

Key Terms

- ♦ Acheron
- ♦ Dissolution
- ♦ Intimation(s)
- ♦ Lethe
- ♦ Romantic/Wordsworthian Transcendence

Intimations of Romantic Transcendence: Reexamining Lord Byron's Negotiation of the Poetics of William Wordsworth in Cantos I and II of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

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Abstract

The relationship between the British Romantic poets William Wordsworth and Lord Byron has been the topic of many critical studies. For most critics, the poets' objectives are separated by a clear generational and ideological gap. Wordsworth, an architect of first generation Romantic ideology, creates and implements a poetic program that Byron reads, reacts to, and ultimately refutes. This research project enters the existing critical debate by suggesting that the gap dividing the two poets is not as wide as has been previously thought. By focusing exclusively on the poetry of these seemingly opposed figures, I reconstruct their formal relationship to expose an underlying commonality. Through a close reading of Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" and Cantos I and II of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, I show that Byron comes away from Wordsworth's work with a specific understanding of the goals of his poetic predecessor. I argue that *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* represents Byron's frustrated attempt to implement his own understanding of Wordsworthian ideology. This new approach suggests that Byron's work should be seen as a negotiation of Wordsworth's poetic enterprise and first generation Romantic thought.

Faculty Mentor



Many critics have explored the explicitly "Wordsworthian" passages in Canto III of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Randie set himself the more complex task of examining the ways in which, almost unconsciously, Byron's locodescriptive poetry in the first two cantos set about testing certain kinds of Wordsworthian presuppositions about the relationship of the observer to the natural world. Particularly exciting in Randie's thesis is its refusal of easy answers. He neither sets Byron up as the "anti-Wordsworth" correcting the "errors" in the Wordsworthian poetic, nor does he try to say that Byron is revealed as a "covert Wordsworthian." Rather, he examines the ways in which Byron puts pressure upon certain kinds of Wordsworthian topoi, neither quite willing to declare them valid, nor quite willing to abandon them as "exploded."

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Introduction: Wordsworth's Possibilities for Transcendence

The textual relationship between Lord Byron and William Wordsworth has been the subject of numerous critical studies. M.H. Abrams casts Byron as the “ironic counter-voice,” and claims that the poet “deliberately opens a satirical perspective” on the “stance of his Romantic contemporaries” (13). For Abrams, Byron reads, reacts to, and criticizes the objectives and poetics of the High Romantics, with emphasis on Wordsworth’s poetry and goals. Jerome McGann also recognizes a tension between Byron and Wordsworth, but attributes it to a fundamental misunderstanding. In *Fiery Dust*, McGann argues that Byron criticizes Wordsworth due to a misreading of the earlier poet’s work: “[Byron] anathematized William Wordsworth from the ranks of ‘feeling’ poets. To the end of his life he was unable to see that Wordsworth’s moral, poetical, and philosophical speculations were not the end of his poetry” (4). According to McGann, Byron fails to recognize that Wordsworth uses his poetry to express the “radically personal struggles in his own soul” (4). Alan Rawes builds upon McGann’s ideas in *Byron’s Poetic Experimentation*. Rawes explicates Cantos I and II of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* to reveal Byron’s extensive experimentation with Wordsworth’s philosophy. According to Rawes, Byron’s work resonates with many of Wordsworth’s poems, including “Tintern Abbey” and “Ode: Intimations of Immortality” (20). The author concludes that Cantos I and II expose the obstacles that hinder the implementation of Wordsworth’s vision, and the poem ultimately becomes a “part adoption and part rejection of Wordsworthian practice” (20). McGann’s and Rawes’ arguments begin to shed light upon Byron’s understanding of Wordsworth’s poetic objectives. The contrast between the poets arises because Byron approaches Wordsworth’s poetry with a set of expectations that ultimately are not met. Cantos I and II of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” show that the tension between Byron and Wordsworth results from a clash of two contrasting poetics that have related objectives.

A principal objective of Wordsworth’s poetry is to show that transcendence is possible through a communion with nature. Within *The Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth argues that mankind lives in a “fallen” condition where “the discriminating powers of the mind” have been reduced to a “state of almost savage torpor” (Baker 7). In Wordsworth’s poetry, literary critics have recognized that the fall of Adam functions as a pattern for a cognitive fall that divorces the mind from nature. The arch Romantic believes that

mankind’s fall destroyed the original organic totality and alienated man from God, from himself, and from the world around him. According to Wordsworth, “by conversing with particular parts of nature,” mankind will come to understand its connection to the world as a whole and regain a greater sense of identity (Baker 18). The idea of returning to unity with nature and the larger world is evident within Book I of *The Prelude of 1805*. Here, Wordsworth disappears into the enveloping landscape: “Oh, many a time have I, a five years’ child, / A naked boy, in one delightful rill, / A little mill-race severed from his stream” (I, 293). As the passage continues, the poet immerses himself into the larger stream through the use of an indeterminate ‘he’; it becomes uncertain whether ‘he’ is a reference to the stream or to Wordsworth. The poet recognizes himself as inseparable from nature. Personal communion with nature allows Wordsworth to attain “complete composure,” “happiness entire,” and offer a totalizing vision of the world (I, 121–122). Such instances enable Wordsworth to realize that it is possible to transcend his fallen condition and attain a deeper sense of self. Wordsworth consistently taps these types of inspirational moments throughout *The Prelude*, and this continual returning reveals a key aspect of Wordsworth’s ideology: the transcendence Wordsworth offers is not an alteration that occurs once and leaves one forever changed. Rather, the moments when Wordsworth can see himself as a “mill-race” restore his poetic capabilities and show that transcendence is possible; for the poet, this possibility is sufficient.

Within “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” the “intimation” of transcendence through time sustains Wordsworth. As in the episode in *The Prelude* when the poet casts himself as part of the larger “stream,” the Ode recalls moments when transcendence seemed possible. However, Francis Ferguson and many other literary critics recognize several tensions within the poem and offer less hopeful readings. Ferguson claims that the Ode presents a Wordsworth who resigns himself to accept what remains of his past “visionary gleam.” The author believes that Wordsworth’s work speaks of decline, loss, and a distinct separation from restorative nature. Ultimately for Ferguson, the Ode displays Wordsworth’s struggle to overcome obstacles that challenge his vision. Rawes expands Ferguson’s argument by suggesting that the Ode describes a present that has lost its connection with the “glorious past” (21). According to such interpretations, the poem functions as a lament for what has been lost rather than a celebration of possibilities. While the “intimations” of transcendence resolve the apparent conflicts within the Ode, Ferguson’s and Rawes’ readings are crucial to my

argument. Both critics outline key problems that reemerge in Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Therefore, their readings of the Ode guide us to a better understanding of how Byron negotiates Wordsworth's poetics and the notion of Wordsworthian transcendence.

According to Ferguson, Wordsworth strives to establish a clear connection between the past and the present throughout his poem. This desire is evident in the opening epigraph, in which Wordsworth attempts to link childhood to manhood: "The Child is Father of the Man; / And I could wish my days to be / Bound each to each in natural piety." Within these lines, the poet seeks to establish a logical connection between his child-self and his man-self. By labeling the "Child" as "Father of the Man," Wordsworth attempts to create a clear continuity in which childhood functions as the period of education and development that will ultimately lead to manhood. Yet, the "wish" that the days were "bound each to each" begins to question, as Ferguson claims, "if continuity of the self over time" is possible (99). The start of the poem itself reveals disjunctions in time that complicate the connection between the past and the present: "There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream, / The earth, and every common sight, / To me did seem / Apparell'd in celestial light" (1-4). The poet shows that even the common sights within the natural world appeared glorious. However, this vision of nature belongs to "a time" which has passed and Wordsworth's perception of the natural world "is not now as it has been of yore" (5). The early lines of the poem convey a sense of decline and speak of a present that has lost its connection with the once "glorious past" (Rawes 21). The first stanza culminates with the poet again lamenting about what he can no longer perceive: "Turn wheresoe'er I may, / By night or day, / The things which I have seen I now can see no more" (7-9). Wordsworth speaks of the loss of his vision and his inability to "see," and such descriptions further question the poet's ability to perceive nature. In Ferguson's reading of the Ode, the "wish" for connection and the loss of vision hinder Wordsworth's objective.

As the poem continues, it also appears that Wordsworth no longer has a harmonious relationship with the natural world. In the fourth verse paragraph, the poet once more expresses a feeling of loss:

I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!
But there's a Tree, and of many, one,
A single Field which I have looked upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone:
The pansy at my feet

Doth the same tale repeat:
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream? (50-57)

The passage begins optimistically with the speaker joyfully listening to the "Tree" and "single Field." But, instead of helping growth and guiding the poet to a higher sense of self, nature asks the poet what has happened to his "visionary gleam." As in the opening of the Ode, Wordsworth confronts emptiness. Ferguson attributes this lack of development to the idea that within Wordsworth's poem, "the past refuses to disclose how past it is, or, on the other hand, how firm its connection to the present and future is" (101). Wordsworth questions whether he can have an educational journey and reach a higher sense of identity when it is uncertain how his past will affect the present and the future. Like the loss of vision discussed in the first verse paragraph, the "hearing" of sights also raises doubt about the poet's access to the natural world. Commenting on his Ode, Wordsworth describes his engagement and communication with the world around him: "I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature" ("Critical Opinions" 435). Wordsworth sees himself as a fragment of a greater whole. Therefore, sight and hearing, working together, should open up a new world of experience to allow Wordsworth to engage with the natural world in a novel way (Ferguson 111). Engagement with nature is, as Wordsworth outlines in his *Preface*, the key to understanding one's relation to the world. Yet, the "Tree," "single Field" and "pansy" all tell of loss and vacancy. Wordsworth perceives only emptiness, and this challenges the role of nature and mankind's perceptive capabilities. Ferguson argues that the uncertain connection of the past and the poet's apparent inability to perceive the natural world unite in the fourth verse paragraph and prevent Wordsworth from disappearing into the landscape.

Despite these obstacles, Wordsworth closes his Ode on a celebratory note. While I see this as evidence of the possibility of transcendence being enough for Wordsworth, Ferguson claims that the tensions within the Ode make the conclusion of the poem "less consolatory" than many have recognized (122). In the tenth verse paragraph, the poet calls for a discourse between the mind and the natural world. After Wordsworth celebrates the "joyous song" of the birds and the bounding of the sheep, he claims that mankind will be part of the natural scene and engage with the world at large when he asserts, "We in thought will join your throng" (172). However, after he introduces the

possibility of a union between the mind and the external world, the poet shifts and again tells of what he has lost. Unlike earlier parts of the poem, the sense of loss conveyed here appears to be permanent: “What though the radiance which was once so bright / Be now for ever taken from my sight” (177–178). The poet is resolved to “find / Strength in what remains” of his past visionary glory (181). As he moves to the final section of the Ode, the poet once more celebrates his connection to nature: “And O ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves, / Forbode not any severing of our loves!” (188–189). In line with Ferguson’s argument, the celebratory quality of these lines is offset by the mention of “severing” the connection between the poet and the landscape in which he rejoices. The closing lines of the Ode try to establish a clear universality and also reestablish the accessibility of nature:

Thanks to the human heart with which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.
(201–204)

The phrase “the human heart” suggests everyone is capable of a universal experience and of undergoing a journey similar to that of the poet. Wordsworth also claims that even “the meanest flower” can “give” deep “Thoughts” to reestablish the connection between the mind and the natural world. Ferguson and Rawes look upon the close of the poem as Wordsworth’s attempt to reconcile the tensions that run throughout his work.

While I disagree with the “less consolatory” reading of the conclusion of the Ode, the tensions that other critics outline speak to a different conception of Romantic transcendence and begin to explain how Byron negotiates Wordsworth’s poetry. Within Cantos I and II of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Byron pursues and expands upon the problems that Ferguson and Rawes recognize within Wordsworth’s Ode. The reader sees Byron confront the uncertain role of the past and question mankind’s ability to perceive and engage with the natural world. Byron asks whether it is possible for Harold to overcome his corrupt past and for nature to serve as the teacher of mankind. Although Harold aspires towards a higher sense of self, engages with the natural world around him, and experiences intimations of Wordsworthian transcendence, these moments of possibility alone are not enough to sustain Byron. *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* contains many instances of frustrated possibilities. I suggest that the tension and frustration within the poem expose Byron’s understanding of Wordsworthian transcendence.

Unlike his predecessor, Byron demands something of the intimations: an actual transfiguration or re-conception. For Byron, Wordsworth promises something which he does not deliver. This understanding of Byron alters our approach to Cantos I and II of *Childe Harold*. The poem is not Byron’s attempt to expose the inadequacy of Wordsworth’s vision, but rather Byron’s attempt to implement his understanding of Wordsworthian ideology.

The Purgative Streams of Lethe: Harold’s Days of Decadence and the Weight of History

The past’s uncertain connection with the present and impact on the future presents an obstacle that emerges throughout Cantos I and II of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. Within the poem, Byron cannot adequately conceptualize Harold’s corrupt history. The poet struggles with the implications of Harold’s past and how they challenge the quest for a greater sense of identity. This struggle creates tensions and frustrations that guide the poet to a dire conclusion. Toward the close of Canto I, Byron suggests that mental oblivion may be the only way for Harold to attain complete forgetfulness and overcome his corrupt past:

Oh! many a time, and oft, had Harold lov’d
Or dream’d he lov’d, since Rapture is a dream;
But now his wayward bosom was unmov’d,
For not yet had he drunk of Lethe’s stream;
And lately had he learn’d with truth to deem
Love has no gift so graceful as his wings.
(I, 810–815)

The opening line of the passage references Harold’s former life of indulgence and excess. Now, Childe Harold finds himself “unmov’d” by love and beauty. Byron questions whether, after living a life of sexual decadence, one’s appreciation for love and beauty can be restored. The poet suggests that drinking from Lethe’s forgetful streams would allow Harold’s “wayward bosom” to once more be moved. In other words, the complete dissolution of the past is necessary to restore Harold. Despite the dismal tenor of the passage, Rawes argues that the closing two lines suggest the possibility of growth. Harold appears to have “learn’d” to be “grateful” for love’s wings, and this indicates a type of “reconciliation to the fact that ‘he lov’d but one / And that lov’d one, alas could ne’er be his’” (Rawes 15). Harold’s intimation of progress reflects the moments of possibility which Wordsworth offers within his Ode. While such a moment would be enough for Wordsworth, Byron desires the absolute, even if that absolute is oblivion. This is evi-

dent when Byron follows the possibility of progress and growth by comparing Harold to the eternal wanderer Cain: “Pleasure’s pall’d victim! life-abhorring gloom / Wrote on his faded brow curst Cain’s unresting doom” (I, 826–827). These lines recast Harold as the “victim” of his decadence and doom him to endlessly wandering the lands bearing the mark of his past corruption. Byron closes Canto I with a sense of hopelessness when he tells the reader that he shall return to write more of Harold and the lands “where he was doom’d to go” (I, 951). Harold cannot escape his past and the idea that he is “doom’d to go” to new lands suggests that the landscape will not assist him in his quest for a Romantic transfiguration.

Over the course of the poem, Byron grows increasingly frustrated with mere possibilities and partialities that lead him to his dismal conclusion. In the opening stanzas, Byron offers very few details about Harold. The reader learns that Harold has “spent his days in riot most uncouth” and his actions have led to the decline of his ancestral “fame” (I, 12, 21). In stanza five, Byron also tells how Harold:

Had sigh’d to many though he lov’d but one,
And that lov’d one, alas! Could ne’er be his
Ah, happy she! To ‘scape from him whose kiss
Had been pollution unto aught so chaste.
(I, 39–42)

These scanty details display Harold’s very limited selfhood at the start of the pilgrimage. It is crucial to place Byron’s minimal description within the context established by the title. The reader expects that Harold’s self will develop and become complete by the close of the pilgrimage or, in the words of Frederick Garber, “self-making and text-making” will be “parallel acts” (7). But this ideal relationship is not possible because the details also show that Harold has led a decadent lifestyle and has glutted himself far past satiety. The poet exposes Harold’s state of corruption when he tells us that Harold’s kiss “had been pollution” to anything “chaste” and pure. As the poem progresses, the poet finds that he is unwilling to use poetry to further illustrate Harold’s decadent past: neither “florid prose, nor honied lies of rhyme / Can blazon evil deeds, or consecrate a crime” (I, 26–27). For Byron, to use verse—inherently pleasing and in High Romantic thought “divine”—to describe Harold’s transgressions would be to extol “evil deeds,” transforming Harold’s crimes into something sacred. Byron’s unwillingness to use poetry to provide more information complicates the relationship between “self-making and text-making.” The poet’s depiction of Harold sets up an obstacle that recurs throughout the poem. Harold’s connection to his

past is uncertain and the “few shadings” of identity that Byron provides all indicate Harold’s potential for immorality (Garber 6).

It is the unclear role of this corrupt past that forces Byron to consistently qualify Harold’s desire to attain a higher sense of identity. Similar to Ferguson’s reading of the Ode, Byron questions whether it is possible for Harold to undergo an educational journey and reach a higher self-hood when it is uncertain what impact his corrupt past will have on the present and future. In stanza six, Byron counterbalances Harold’s aspirations for a better self with his capacity for future evil:

And now Harold was sore sick at heart,
And from his fellow bacchanals would flee;
‘Tis said, at times the sullen tear would start,
But pride congeal’d the drop within his eye:
Apart he stalk’d in joyless reverie. (I, 46–50)

Harold’s flight from his “fellow bacchanals” indicates a longing for moral growth and change. Rawes points out that Byron offsets this hope for betterment through the terms “sullen,” “pride,” and “stalk’d,” which all “carry forward the suggestion of villainy” (5). While Wordsworth endeavors to “bind” the days together, Byron directly acknowledges the indefinite connection between the past and present. The tension within the passage continues when Harold resolves to leave his homeland and see the “scorching climes beyond the sea” (I, 52). The conflict with his native land and the desire to visit new climes suggests that exposure to new landscapes may restore Harold and help reconcile him to his homeland. However, the term “scorching” describes a harsh, potentially destructive world and foreshadows the complications Harold will encounter when he attempts to enter into dialogue with new landscapes. Harold has also glutted himself on the pleasures of life to such an extreme that he “almost long’d for woe / And e’en for change of scene would seek the shades below” (I, 53–54). In the words of Rawes, Byron “checks the idea of spiritual growth with the idea of villainy” (5). The longing “for woe” implies the possibility of future crimes and displays Harold’s desperation for any type of change. Harold’s corrupt past frustrates Byron and makes the end result of the pilgrimage uncertain.

The poet further exposes the tension between Harold’s past and present selves when Harold’s ship arrives at the city of Lisboa. Lisboa is a new land and, following the language of Byron’s epigraph, offers a new page from the “Book

of Nature.” The change in scene appears to affect Harold greatly and improve his character:

Though here awhile he learn'd to moralize,
For Meditation fix'd at times on him;
And conscious Reason whisper'd to despise
His early youth, misspent in the maddest whim;
But as he gaz'd on truth his aching eyes grew dim.
(I, 319–323)

This is the first instance when the reader encounters a move towards maturity. But it is important to recognize the transience of Harold's growth. Rawes points out that Harold “learn'd to moralize” only for “awhile,” “Meditation fix'd” on him only “at times” and “Reason” merely “whisper'd to him” (10). Although briefly, Harold experiences a moment when transcendence seems possible and there is a renewed hope for growth and a higher identity. The acknowledgment that Harold “misspent” the days of his youth at “the maddest whim” again suggests the desire for growth. Yet, this moment of possibility does not satisfy Byron. The stanza shows an attempt to reconcile Harold's corrupt past with the present moment; however, the poet challenges the viability of such reconciliation. “Reason” strives to make Harold fully aware of his past transgressions, but the term “despise” raises doubt on whether a union between the past and the present is possible. Byron asks if Harold's maturation is dependant upon the hatred and rejection of his former days of decadence. This abhorrence of the past creates a clear self-division. Such disjunction and animosity between Harold's present-self and past-self hinders Byron's desire for a complete re-conception. Ultimately, the tension becomes too much for Harold and he flees: “To Horse! To horse! He quits, for ever quits” (I, 324). The poet follows this violent reaction by confessing that it is unclear how or why the pilgrimage will come to an end: “And o'er him many changing scenes must roll / Ere toil his thirst for travel can assuage, / Or he shall calm his breast, or learn experience sage” (my emphasis, I, 330–332). Where Wordsworth would celebrate possibility, Byron confronts uncertainty, inadequacy and incompleteness. The uncertain impact of Harold's corrupt past challenges Byron's desire for an absolute transfiguration.

The episode at Lisboa shows Harold attempting to engage with the landscape and establish a dialogue with the natural world. His ultimate flight raises doubt about the restorative ability of the landscape and its role in the quest for a higher sense of self. The pilgrimage takes Harold away from his family, home, and many other things that helped define him. Childe Harold the pilgrim lacks the relational support of his

homeland. The distance from his past corrupt surroundings and his attempt to engage with nature should help Harold, like Wordsworth, disappear into the landscape that surrounds him and recognize that he is a part of the larger whole. However, as Harold moves from Lisboa to Spain, he confronts the weight of history. Within the stanzas about Spain, Harold engages with a landscape that, like himself, has a troubled relationship with the past. At the start of the Spanish stanzas, Byron praises the natural scene: “Oh, lovely Spain! renown'd, romantic land” (I, 387). The poet immediately shifts from this admiration, asking where the once brave and noble defenders of Spain have gone: “Where are those bloody banners which of yore / Wav'd o'er thy sons, victorious to the gale, / And drove at last the spoilers to their shore?” (I, 391–393). Jerome McGann shows that the poet calls for the grand, romantic heroes of the past to rise up and fight the hosts of the invading Napoleon (*Fiery Dust* 50). Yet, the reference to the “bloody banners” waving over the victorious sons of Spain evokes the violent history of the nation. There is a tension between the honor of Spain's past glory and the violence and bloodshed that was required to achieve it. Here, the reader begins to see Byron's conflicted attitude towards Spain and its history. The poet goes on to show that the story of Spain's former greatness is now the subject of countless songs: “Teems not each ditty with the glorious tale? / Ah! Such, alas! the hero's amplest fate!” (I 396–397). The great events of the past are still celebrated but the “fate” of the grand and noble heroes of the days of yore is to be commemorated only in the ditties of the peasants. This implies a clear sense of decline and a diminishment of Spain's past great heroes. The poet recalls the time when Spaniards fought for their country and laments the nation's decline from its once “glorious past.”

As the stanzas to Spain continue, Byron's conflicted feelings toward Spain's glorious but violent history become increasingly evident. Byron calls upon the sons of Spain to rise up and asks why the Spaniards fail to hear the cry of their land:

Awake, ye sons of Spain! awake! advance!
Lo! Chivalry, your ancient goddess, cries,
But wields not, as of old, her thirsty lance,
Nor shakes her crimson plumage in the skies:
Now on the smoke of blazing bolts she flies,
And speaks in thunder through yon engine's roar:
In every peal she calls – ‘Awake! arise!’
(I, 405–411)

Byron appeals to “Chivalry” and forcefully cries out for the men of Spain to rise to defend their nation. The gendered

language of the passage appeals to gentlemanly courtliness and demands action. Though Chivalry, “your ancient goddess cries” and “speaks in thunder,” Spaniards fail to wield “her thirsty lance.” However, the passage is not a simple call to arms. The phrase “thirsty lance” suggests a desire, or even lust, for bloodshed. This description of Spain, as well as Byron’s reference to “crimson plumage,” reveal the carnage of the nation’s history. The passage once more exposes the tension between glory and violence. As Jerome McGann argues, “the poet wants to see Spain’s “well-asserted right” (I, 921) to freedom from the “curst oppressor” (I, 898) achieved, but throughout the canto he finds himself recoiling at the savagery of the spectacle” (51). Within *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, it is uncertain whether the “sons of Spain” will rise up or if they will remain oppressed and let the nation decline even further. In other words, it remains unclear what role Spain’s past will play and how it will impact the present and future. Byron’s conflicted feelings towards the violence of past glory and honor further complicates his call to arms; the poet qualifies the restoration of Spain’s glory with the violence that would be necessary. The weight of Spain’s history prevents Harold from fading into the landscape. Harold reads the natural world around him only to discover that the landscape is a problematic source of identity.

While history complicates Harold’s discourse with nature in the Spanish stanzas, within Canto II, Byron appears to present a landscape that is free from the bonds of the past. However, if history is problematic in the earlier sections of the poem, the escape from history that Byron provides in Albania is also problematic. The wild lands of Albania are a far cry from Spain and the civilized cities to which Harold has grown accustomed. As he enters this new land, Harold says goodbye to the modern world: “Now Harold felt himself at length alone, / And bade to Christian tongues a long adieu; / Now he adventur’d on a shore unknown” (II, 379–381). In the words of Philip Martin, the landscape of Albania provides Harold with “a region of wilderness bereft of familiar sights, customs, and values” (86). Harold resolves himself to confront what may come his way and ventures into a new and wild terrain: “The scene was savage, but the scene was new; / This made the ceaseless toil of travel sweet” (II, 385–386). While the pilgrimage takes Harold away from the identifying power of his homeland, the savage newness of the scene in Albania completely removes him from the modern world. Harold’s distance from civilization appears to benefit his pilgrimage and provide him with a restorative environment. The idea that the new environment makes “the ceaseless toil of travel sweet” appears to provide a rewriting of the close of Canto I where

the poet tells of the other lands Harold “was doom’d to go.” Not only does Albania seem to refresh Harold, it also seems to operate outside of history: “Childe Harold pass’d o’er many a mount sublime, / Through lands scarce notic’d in historic tales” (II, 408–409). The reader encounters a moment where “momentarily at least, the weight of history is lifted” (Martin 87). The poet seems to be offering this savage and uncivilized landscape as an alternative to Lisboa and Spain. For the moment, Byron appears to leave open the possibility that Harold will be able to “converse” with this new land and come to recognize himself as part of the larger world.

However, Byron counters this idea by going on to draw a parallel between Harold’s entry into the savage lands of Albania and the descent into Hades. The poet compares the streams of Albania to the streams of the underworld: “Beneath, a living valley seems to stir; / Flocks play, trees wave, streams flow, the mountain-fir / Nodding above: behold black Acheron!” (II, 455–457). The landscape that “made travel sweet” now appears menacing and Harold asks himself “if this be hell I look upon” (II, 459). The reference to “Black Acheron,” which is river of woe in the classical underworld of Hades, returns the reader to the discussion of Lethe and death as the only means of forgetfulness. The episode at Albania does provide a moment that is free from the bonds of history, but that moment mirrors the descent into oblivion and death. Such a moment of mere possibility and restoration is also insufficient for Byron. The poet again demands an absolute and asks if oblivion is the only way to overcome the past’s uncertain connection to the present and future. After describing Harold’s journey into the “underworld” of Albania, the poet, as he does in the stanzas on Spain, mourns the passing of the land’s former glory:

Oh! where, Dodona! is thine aged grove,
Prophetic fount, and oracle divine?
What valley echo’d the response of Jove?
What trace remaineth of the thunderer’s shrine?”
(II, 469–472)

The weight of history does return for Byron, who now laments a present that has lost its connection to the celebrated past when Jove spoke and the valleys echoed his reply. The poet wonders “what trace remaineth” of the center of worship for ancient Greece. The comparison to journeying down to the underworld as well as Byron’s eventual lament for former glory both question the possibility of disengaging from the weight of history.

Byron consistently shows that Harold's past hinders his pursuit for a higher sense of identity. Harold's days of decadence and their uncertain impact on the present and future create a tension and disjunction that Byron finds himself unable to overcome. For Byron, we can never fully disengage from the weight of the past. This reduces transcendence to a mere possibility and, for him, possibility alone is inadequate. The Spanish episode shows that the weight of history challenges Harold's attempt to enter into dialogue with the natural world. Harold's descent into the ahistorical underworld of Albania also fails to aid him in his pilgrimage. Unlike Wordsworth, Childe Harold is unable to fade into the landscape and situate himself within the world at large. These frustrated attempts begin to expose the inharmonious connection between nature and humanity.

Nature as the Teacher of Humanity: The Corruptive Capability of Mankind and the Problem of Perception

The episodes in Spain and Albania question whether the natural world, fettered by the bonds of the past, can guide Harold to a greater sense of identity. However, Byron not only challenges the role of nature but also asks whether mankind is capable of being a proper student of nature. The poet describes a natural world that stands ready "To teach man what he might be, or he ought; / If that corrupted thing could ever be taught" (II, 324–325). The claim that nature can teach man what he can or "ought" to be, as well as the mention of mankind's corruption, acknowledges Wordsworth's idea that mankind lives in a type of "fallen condition." But these lines also ask if even nature can lead such "corrupted thing" as man to a higher sense of self. This doubt reemerges when Byron casts nature as the mother of humanity:

Dear Nature is the kindest mother still,
Though always changing, in her aspect mild;
From her bare bosom let me take my fill,
Her never-wean'd, though not her favour'd child.
Oh! she is fairest in her features wild,
Where nothing polish'd dares pollute her path.
(II, 325–330)

This passage appears to establish nature as the "kindest" and most-willing nurturer of mankind. Byron elevates the natural world by explaining that even though the seasons are "always changing," the same "aspect mild" remains. Such a description implies that nature is dependable and constant. Within the stanza, Byron sets Harold up as a babe of the natural world. The poet describes a nature that presents her

"bare bosom" to Harold but, despite this exposure, Harold has never been "wean'd." It is important to recall the earlier discussion of Childe Harold where Byron speaks of Harold's "kiss" as "pollution" to "aught so chaste." Nature is still a fair and able teacher because Harold's corrosive lips have yet to "pollute" her beauty. The poet expands upon this idea of corruption when Harold claims nature is "fairest in her features wild" where "nothing polish'd dares *pollute* her path" (my emphasis). In other words, nature is at its most beautiful when it is free from the influence of mankind. While Byron presents nature as a willing and constant teacher, he shows that mankind mars the landscape and cannot perceive the lessons of the natural world. The discordant relationship between mankind and nature upsets Byron's desire for a Romantic transfiguration.

Like Wordsworth, Byron attempts to depict nature as the gentle teacher and guide that will lead humanity to a higher sense of self. However, within the poem, Byron finds that he is unable to create a Wordsworthian union between the mind and the external world. The conflicted relationship between mankind and the natural world emerges early on in the poem. During the episode at the city of Lisboa, Byron establishes humanity as the contaminant of the natural world. Upon reaching the new clime, Childe Harold lyrically praises the cityscape:

Oh, Christ! it is a goodly sight to see
What heaven hath done for this delicious land!
What fruits of fragrance blush on every tree
What goodly prospects o'er the hills expand!
But man would mar them with an impious hand.
(I, 207–211)

These lines describe Lisboa as a place of great beauty that has been crafted by the heavens. Harold's exclamation and initial shock upon viewing Lisboa and the fact that "fruits of fragrance" adorn "every tree" reinforce the splendor of the scene. Harold wonders "what goodly prospects," prospects in this case meaning possibilities, await him in this seemingly beautiful and abundant land. But, as the stanza progresses, Byron shifts to tell how mankind mars and destroys such idyllic scenes. Mankind's "impious" hands corrupt the natural world and all that "heaven hath done" for the land. The term "impious" emphasizes the corruptive influence of humanity and casts mankind as a type of religious transgressor. Within Byron's poem, the relationship between mankind and nature is neither harmonious nor symbiotic.

Though Harold celebrates Lisboa and labels it a “delicious land,” the reader soon recognizes that Harold is observing only the reflection of Lisboa. Childe Harold rhapsodizes about and elevates the mere image of the land: “What beauties doth Lisboa first unfold! / Her image floating on that noble tide, / Which poets vainly pave with sands of gold” (I, 216–218). Lisboa is beautiful when it is reflected in the “noble tide” of the ocean. In other words, the cityscape appears to be exquisite when it is mirrored within the natural frame of the sea. Childe Harold believes he perceives an ideal image of Lisboa that is in reality a distorted reflection. As the poem continues, the reader sees that Lisboa also seems beautiful from a distance: “But whoso entereth within this town, / That, sheening far, celestial seems to be” (I, 225–226). The term “celestial” resonates with “Ode: Intimations of Immortality” in which Wordsworth laments a time when everything “to me did seem / Apparell’d in celestial light” (I, 3–4). Within *Childe Harold*, Byron uses Wordsworth’s term to expose the disparity between what Lisboa appears to be and what it actually is. When Harold moves through the city, he discovers a landscape that has been marred by mankind’s “impious hand,” where “hut and palace show like filthily” (I, 229). The “dingy denizens” of Lisboa corrupt the natural beauties of the land (I, 230). Byron shows that Harold’s perception misleads him and the “goodly prospects” of Lisboa are far from beautiful.

When Harold continues on and engages with the imperfect and marred Lisboa, his perception once more proves to be problematic. The reflection of Lisboa is out of time and, therefore, free from the bonds of the past. But, this imagined ideal space is immaterial and therefore useless to Harold; he cannot establish a dialogue with a mere image. Although Lisboa is a far cry from the heavenly landscape which Harold first sees, the lessons of nature can still be read. This is evident when Harold, as discussed earlier, “learn’d to moralize” for “awhile” and “Meditation fix’d” on him “at times” (I, 319, 320). Harold is unable to maintain this dialogue with nature: “as he gaz’d on truth his aching eyes grew dim” (I, 323). Lisboa still has truths to offer Harold, but the fact that Harold’s “aching eyes” quickly grow “dim” implies that he is unable to maintain his interchange with the natural world. The term “gaz’d” also displays a clear distance that Harold’s vision cannot bridge. It is this limited perception that dooms him to but gaze “on truth.” Byron’s discussion of Harold’s inadequate vision resonates with a key aspect of Ferguson’s reading of Wordsworth’s Ode. Within the Ode, Wordsworth’s “hearing” of sights should allow him to enter into discourse with the natural world and perceive nature in a new way. In Ferguson’s argument, however, the natural world speaks only of loss and vacancy.

Though the poet is able to commune with nature, he can only perceive emptiness and loss. Byron recognizes and plays out this doubt regarding the capability of mankind’s sensory perception and shows that Harold can only briefly gaze upon truth. For Byron, mankind pollutes the natural world and is unable to perceive the lessons that remain within the marred landscape.

The tension and doubt present within the episode at Lisboa appear to be rewritten on two different occasions within Canto II. Early on in the second canto, Byron returns the reader to a type of Wordsworthian engagement with the natural world and it looks as if Harold enters into a discourse with the natural world. The reader sees Harold celebrating the natural scene that surrounds him:

To sit on rocks, to muse o’er flood and fell,
To slowly trace the forest’s shady scene,
Where things that own not man’s dominion dwell,
And mortal foot hath ne’er, or rarely been;
To climb the trackless mountain all unseen,
With the wild flock that never needs a fold;
Alone o’er steeps and foaming falls to lean;
This is not solitude; tis but to hold
Converse with Nature’s charms, and view her
stores unroll’d. (II, 217–225)

According to Rawes, Byron appears to invite the reader to “recall the kind of poetic transcendence offered up by Wordsworth” (21). The pilgrim Harold carefully takes in the landscape and “slowly” traces “the forest’s shady scene.” Harold is able to “converse with Nature’s charms and “view her stores unroll’d”: the landscape appears to be not only accessible but presenting itself to Childe Harold. Contrastingly, the stanza also shows that the landscape is beautiful because it is far from “man’s dominion” and “mortal foot hath ne’er, or rarely” tread upon its ground. The mountain scene that Harold muses over remains free from the corrupting effects of mankind’s “impious” hands. Byron’s use of the term “trackless” implies that mankind has yet to “mar” the landscape and reinforces nature’s distance from humanity. Within the passage, Byron describes a perfect natural scene, but it is predicated upon the illusion that man can interact with the natural world and leave it unaltered and unharmed. This illusion of interaction without alteration emerges again when the poet states, “Pass we on the long, unvarying course, the track / Oft trod, that never leaves a trace behind” (II, 244–245). The poet imagines a type of self-erasure. Byron suggests that oblivion may be the only way to overcome the constraints of the past, and now suggests that the complete dissolution of the self

is necessary to prevent the corruption of the natural world. The idea that mankind can pass over paths “oft trod” and “never” leave “a trace behind” exposes the impossibility of mankind reading the landscape and engaging with the natural world without negatively impacting it.

The reader encounters another ideal and totalizing image of nature when Harold travels through Albania. We have already seen the poet draw a parallel between Harold’s journey through Albania and the descent into the underworld. Within *Childe Harold*, Albania not only appears to provide Harold with an ahistorical moment, but appears to give the weary pilgrim an ideal natural scene. This is evident when Byron celebrates the beautiful and bountiful land of Albania:

Monastic Zitzal! From thy shady brow,
Thou small, but favour’d spot of holy ground!
Where’er we gaze, around, above, below,
What rainbow tints, what magic charms are found!
Rock, river, forest, mountain, all abound,
And bluest skies that harmonize the whole.
(II, 424–429)

“Where’er” Harold turns within this new landscape he sees the “charms” of the natural world. This passage moves a step beyond the earlier musing “o’er flood and fell” where nature “unroll’d” her “stores.” In this, Byron offers a vision of wholeness and totality. The passage brings together all the aspects of nature from “around, above, below” to form a harmonizing “whole.” It is also important to recognize that the passage resonates with Wordsworth’s Ode. In Albania, Harold cannot help but “gaze” upon the “charms” of the natural world. In the first verse paragraph of the Ode, Wordsworth speaks of his loss of vision and “Turn wheresoe’er I may, / By night or day, / The things which I have seen I now can see no more” (7–9). Byron depicts a natural scene where one cannot help but be greeted and overwhelmed by the natural “charms” that “abound” in every direction. However, the poet offers this totalizing vision and rewriting of the Ode during Harold’s “descent” into Albania. Byron also wants his readers to recognize that this natural scene has yet to be corrupted by the influence of mankind and no “city’s tower pollute[s] the lovely view” of the landscape (II, 459). Byron once more establishes mankind as the pollution of the natural world. Ultimately, the episode in Albania reinforces the corruptive influence of humanity and questions whether it is possible for nature to guide humanity to a greater sense of identity.

Throughout *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, several obstacles challenge Harold’s reading of the “Book of Nature.” At Lisboa, Byron displays the corruptive capability of mankind, the false image of a directly accessible and uncorrupted nature, and the possibility that our perception is not only limited but capable of being misled. Byron’s poem enacts a key concern presented in Ferguson’s reading of Wordsworth’s Ode. At the close of his poem, Wordsworth expresses a fear that his connection with the landscape will be severed: “And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves, / Forbode not any severing of our loves!” (188–189). While Wordsworth longs to remain connected to the natural world, Byron shows that mankind’s interaction with the landscape destroys the ideal vision of nature that Wordsworth outlines. For Byron, mankind’s “impious” hands corrupt the “Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves,” destroy the Wordsworthian image of nature, and sever the connection between humanity and nature.

Conclusion: Paving the Way for Canto III

Like Ferguson and Rawes, Byron looks upon Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality” as a poem rife with tension and conflict. In Cantos I and II of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Byron expands upon the problems present in the “less consolatory” reading of the Ode. The reader sees Harold confronting the past’s uncertain impact on the present and future, the corruptive capability of mankind, and the possibility that mankind is unable to perceive the truths that nature has to offer. Despite these obstacles, Harold does experience intimations of progress. However, Byron looks upon the mere possibility of Wordsworthian transcendence as problematic. Possibility alone makes the end of the pilgrimage uncertain. Harold may grow and come to recognize himself as part of the larger world or he may commit future crimes and continue his life of immorality. The poet responds to this uncertainty and the apparent problems in Wordsworth’s Ode with a suggestion that would outrage his predecessor. Unlike Wordsworth, intimations of transcendence do not sustain Byron and he consistently demands an absolute. For Byron, the complete dissolution of the past and the self are necessary for Harold to overcome his corrupt past and engage with the natural world without corrupting it. In the end, the poet’s desire for a Romantic transfiguration remains unfulfilled, and the only absolute the poem offers is oblivion.

Byron’s extensive engagement with Wordsworth’s ideology in Cantos I and II paves the way for the famous Wordsworthian stanzas of Canto III. Within the third

canto, the poet seems to describe a moment of unity with the landscape and offer a totalizing vision:

Are not the mountains, waves, and skies, a part
Of me and of my soul, as I of them?
Is not the love of these deep in my heart
With a pure passion? (III, 707–710)

These lines speak of rooting oneself within the natural world and attaining a deeper sense of identity. Such a description of perfect harmony between humanity and nature parallels the celebratory close of Wordsworth's Ode. Although Byron appears to present an ideal moment, the fact that the lines are questions—not definitive statements—undermines this vision of hope and the idea of reaching an ideal unity with the natural world. Wordsworthian transcendence remains only an uncertain possibility. Lord Byron's frustrated attempts to implement his understanding of Romantic transcendence also suggest that there is a measure of defeat when he closes the Wordsworthian stanzas by proclaiming "But this is not my theme" (III, 716).

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