Explaining the explanation: Byron's notes to Childe Harold's Pilgrimage

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EXPLAINING THE EXPLANATION:
BYRON’S NOTES TO
CHILDE HAROLD’S PILGRIMAGE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of English

by
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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I show that Lord Byron’s notes to Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage are an integral part of the poem itself, not to be read as added material, but to be read as material that comments upon and deconstructs the poem. I examine the first two cantos of the poem, reading the notes as Byron’s own answers and questions to the stylistic and political ramifications of the romance verse. By scrutinizing Byron’s use of the romantic hero, the romance verse, the romantic quest and the text of romance for his reading public, I show Byron’s own subversion and questioning of his poem. I draw upon the works of Bakhtin and Patricia Meyers Spacks to follow Byron’s poetry as well as his prose in this work. Both critics emphasize the author’s reliance upon a willing reading public to interpret the poem as a work both dependent and independent of the author. Byron’s notes encourage the reader to complete certain aspects of the poem he left particularly “unfinished.” For example, the hero, though influenced by the stock characters of eighteenth century prose and poetry, does not have a concrete past. Readers supplied this history according to their own experience of literature and the basic tropes of what a Regency or Romantic hero should be, relying upon the presentation of such heroes by the poets and writers of the time. The notes further complicate this completion by readers because of the insistence of Byron as a character within the poem itself. Byron’s fame and charismatic personality encouraged readers to conflate him with his poetic characters; his notes emphasized his voice in the creation of his poem and in the questioning of his own creation.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Lord Byron, after completing his Grand Tour of the East and Mediterranean, returned to England in 1811 faced with massive debts, the death of close friends during the continuing Napoleonic Wars, and his first attempt at participation in the House of Lords. The twenty-three-year old was not in the giddiest of spirits. The responsibilities he had been ignoring during his undergraduate romp through Europe stared him down mercilessly, the admonitions of his mother, Catherine Byron, and his solicitor, John Hansen, acting as chorus to his woes. Byron still had not completed his degree at Cambridge; after two years spent in utter freedom, he had no desire to drag himself back to his examinations. Byron had carried back with him from the East his first major work of poetry, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. His friend, R. C. Dallas, had read the work and had encouraged the young man to publish, even though the failure of *Hours of Idleness*, published when Byron was eighteen, and the nasty aftermath of *English Bards and Scots Reviewers*, his personal attack in verse upon all critics, still smarted. Dallas showed the manuscript to publisher John Murray. Believing the poem to show promise, Murray agreed to print it, and on March 12, 1812, he offered the first two cantos to the public. Byron’s poem proved to be an instant commercial success. With this publication, Byron was thrust onto the public stage as the Romantic figure of the day, and thus able to forget, for a few years of intense celebrity, his pressing duties toward remedying his precarious financial situation and his inchoate political career.

From its very first reviews, *Childe Harold* has suffered both the praise and odium of various critics. Byron’s contemporary critics, even those old enemies at the *Edinburgh Review* who so excoriated the teenager’s first publication in 1808 of *Hours of Idleness*, praised the
poem’s vigor and originality while others complained of the seeming lack of point of a poem whose subtitle, *A Romaunt*, led readers to believe that Byron had produced a typical romance quest. But Walter Scott, the other best-selling poet in Regency England, voices the most interesting statement of Byron’s contemporaries: the poem was “the novelty of an author speaking in his own person.” This assessment however, was not quite accurate in determining the originality of Byron’s work. Wordsworth had already admonished his fellow writers to compose in the personal vernacular, rather than in the highbrow affectedness of the poets of eighteenth century, most notably Alexander Pope. Wordsworth does not attain a “natural” poetry; he writes in various verse forms, adopts stylized rhyme schemes and he presents constructed stories in his works. Byron’s *Childe Harold* operates poetically in the same way, but Byron adds a particularly personal element to the poem that Scott and his readers reacted to: Byron is simply not one of three voices running through the poem itself, but a commentator on the poem and the themes discussed in the poem through his copious notes, prefaces, and appendices.

When I first began to explore Byron’s notes, I conceptualized them as most critics have: a study in the role of autobiography, self-reflexivity, and self-disclosure. I theorized that the prefaces, notes, introductions and appendices to the first two cantos, and later in the final two, all bore the mark of a young poet intimately speaking with his readers and inviting their participation in his conversation. Rather than studying the notes through the eyes of Byron’s contemporary critics, which would only illustrate the hold Byron had over his reading public during the height of his popularity—an exercise that has been thoroughly documented by Donald H. Reiman in his *Romantics Reviewed*, I proposed a more explicit reading of the notes in relation to the poem and to Byron’s readers. I argued that Byron included his notes as a way of directly
communicating with his public about ideas pertinent to the political and social realities in which they lived.

But as I began to research the political and social and artistic institutions Byron comments upon in the notes, I saw that my first argument was too simplistic. Byron’s notes are not merely cosmetic, narrative commentary on the states of various parts of the world or an impressive list of works cited, as, for example, Shelley’s notes to *Queen Mab* are, continually listing the theory behind the product poem. Byron understands that if he were to analyze the elements present in his own poem he would, in effect, be analyzing the composition of the poem and the origin of the very ideas and concepts that weave through the Spenserian stanzas of *Childe Harold*. The notes are Byron’s deconstruction of everything he asserts, challenges and references.

Unfortunately, current criticism offers scant material on Byron’s notes. The common practice of editors working on critical editions of Byron’s oeuvre or anthologies is the removal of most of the notes, except for the few that seem to enhance the poem in a footnote. Although critical practice emphasizes the necessity of reading poet and poem together, such as the scholarship of Jerome McGann and Leslie Marchand, there have been many detractors who insist that Byron’s failure as a poet lay in his inability to forget himself enough to create great “art,” thus questioning the usefulness of examining notes that seem to force Byron the poet/writer/social being on the reader. In the past century, Paul West, T. S. Eliot, Paul Martin and Andrew Rutherford have argued this idea of Byron’s poetic sterility¹. West calls the poet a “spewer” who assimilated his surroundings into poetry written with very little thought or purpose. Eliot stands firm in his claim that Byron offered nothing to the English language and

¹ See Francis Berry’s “The Poet of *Childe Harold*” and Leslie Marchand’s “Byron in the Twentieth Century” for a more detailed examination of these critics, both included in the Norton edition of Byron’s poems edited by Frank D. McConnel.
that his mind was devoid of a sensitivity to both philosophy and words. Rutherford accuses Byron of composing “really good bad art,” and Martin encourages “the sincere student of Byron [to] accept that a large proportion of his time will be spent examining poetry without serious intent” (7). M. H. Abrams’ *The Mirror and the Lamp* expressly excludes discussion of Byron, even though it is a systematic theory of Romanticism, which, according to the accepted canon, includes Byron. Luckily, the re-examination of Romanticism in the late 1960’s provided Byron with a new literary reputation. Critics began to examine both his life and work interdisciplinarily, creating a huge corpus of scholarship on the major works, and in particular *Don Juan*. But the amount of scholarship on the notes, letters and journals as literature in their own right is surprisingly sketchy. Only those whose main interests tend toward history or biography, such as William St. Clair’s work on the Elgin Marbles, seem to take these works as literature deserving of criticism.

I have separated my analysis of Byron’s poem and notes into four chapters. In the first chapter, I discuss the romance verse genre as a traditional, conservative poetic form that writers relied upon as a reaction to the social and political shifts occurring most blatantly in France and America. These shifts appeared to be invading Britain and posed a definite threat to the eroding, yet tenaciously persistent, social stratifications in the United Kingdom. However, the philosophy behind the American Revolution had its roots in Britain—the colonists were, at the beginning of their revolt, pressing for their rights as Englishmen. France, the traditional enemy of the British, began its democratic republic first as the overthrow of an unjust, anachronistic feudal order but then progressed to converting Western Europe to the new regime through warfare. This threat of a French invasion, either through the exchange of ideas or through a naval invasion via the English Channel, put Britain on edge. The romance genre thus served as a comforting glance to
a simpler time when each person knew his proper place in the grand scheme of things. But Byron does not present material germane to a traditional romance: his setting is contemporary and European, rather than English; his hero is “most unhknightly”; and the traditional pilgrimage or quest of the hero does not seem to have a final destination.

I turn in my second chapter to an analysis of Harold as the hero of a verse romance distilled through Byron’s contemporary setting. Byron’s hero refutes his status of knight by turning his back on his duties as the inheritor of a patriarchal system. He leaves his estate, his mother, and his political responsibilities behind him as he embarks on a tour that does not educate him as being member of the British ruling class, but exposes him to cultures alien to his own. He tours through Catholic countries and what was then considered “the East,” Greece and Albania. Interestingly, Harold’s itinerary does not include France or Italy, but this has more to do with Napoleon’s theatre of war than with a pointed effort on Byron’s part to avoid the corrupting influence of France. My main argument in this chapter concerns Byron’s own relativistic theory of the hero. I show, by using Byron’s later work, Don Juan, that the poet did not agree with the idea of a heroic absolute, where the hero is defined according to strict, unchanging criteria. Byron presents historical examples that illustrate that heroes are defined by the political and social climate in which they lived, not by any sort of absolute idea. By questioning the patriarchal systems of old through an experimental verse romance, Byron cannot supply the poem with a hero directly descended from faultless knights. Harold himself is not faultless, but Byron also refuses to supply Harold with a definite sin or fault that condemns him to his rather gloomy and truant nature. The reader must complete the omission, and readers, particularly Byron’s female admirers, fabricated rather scandalous pasts for Harold, and, by association, for Byron himself.
In my third chapter, I examine the actual pilgrimage/quest Harold espouses. Harold does not seem to arrive anywhere but Greece. Frederick Shilstone views the entire point of the pilgrimage as Greece. But I see Byron’s purposes as far more complicated. Greece is not “Greece” because it is under Turkish rule. Byron’s notes, and the voice of the narrator, show that the conception of Greece that Englishmen had is a purely literary one, constructed from the reading of ancient philosophers and historians and contemporary historiographers under the influence of this corpus of literature. The quest, then, is also a fabrication, where Harold journeys to a land that differs completely from the one he would have read about in school. I use Byron’s attack on Lord Elgin to illustrate this further, showing the difference between Elgin’s plunder of the Parthenon Sculptures as a localized act of thievery and comparing it to Byron’s more literary act of plunder. Byron does use Greece to write a poem that makes money for his publisher, as much as Elgin enacts a commercial transaction for the marbles’ transport to London. But Byron works within the construct of an imagined community of Greece, to use Benedict Anderson’s term, where Elgin operates on an entirely different level, plundering in a context where Greeks cannot challenge him because they do not themselves participate in the transaction. They have no political bargaining power whatsoever because the transaction is completed by an Englishmen and Turkish officials.

In my final chapter and conclusion, I relate how the book *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* was presented to the public through John Murray’s publishing house. I examine some of the textual details of the book, explaining whom Murray was denoting as his audience through the use of art, advertisements, quality of the publishing materials themselves, and the publication of the notes along with the text. *Childe Harold* was a bestseller and ran through seven official editions in its first run. Byron, contrary aristocrat-*cum*-writer that he was, refused to take any of
the royalties for his work, instead giving his copyright away to R. C. Dallas. I describe a few instances of the critical reception of the work. Then I show how readers reacted to the work, especially the most common reaction of collapsing Byron and Harold into the same person, a detail Byron himself did not discourage among his readers, despite his seemingly futile protests in his preface to the second edition. Two readers in particular I examine: Anabella Milbanke, Byron’s bride-to-be, and Lady Caroline Lamb, with whom he carried on a brief affair. Murray asserted, through the results of his sales, that Byron’s readers were primarily women. Murray would encourage Byron to continue writing his Eastern romances and closet (melo)dramas to keep sales steady with his female readership. These two important women in Byron’s life reacted to Harold, and to Byron, as literary constructs. Caroline Lamb wished to conduct their affair as a sort of Regency Les Liaisons Dangereuses, and Annabella Milbanke wished to conduct their marriage as a sort of mission where she saved him from himself and his sins—sins that she, for the most part, constructed from the characters present in his poems. My conclusion ties together these constructions and deconstructions into a reading of Byron that explores his artful blurring of temporal “realities” with poetic “formalities.” Byron’s romance is not a story of sentimental values affirmed, but a process where omissions are purposefully set in place by the poet and then filled in by willing readers, whether those omissions are an actual “Greece” or “Byron” or “Harold” or even an actual quest romance. The irony of the argument itself lies in the fact that I am supplying explanations where Byron, even adding his notes to explain his own poetic explanations, deftly keeps them absent.

For my critical examination, I use a number of texts, most notably Bakhtin’s work on epic and Patricia Meyer Spacks’ work on gossip. In the Dialogic Imagination, Bakhtin stresses the idea of “novel” in this work, not as a book but an artistic creation which forces the reader to
participate in the making of that creation. The novel presents characters who develop, and forces the reader to recognize that development as a change in the reader’s perspective and the creative continuation of the work itself. He compares the idea of novel with “moribund” genres, such as the epic, where characters do not develop because they are so constrained by their existence in the past, a past so distant that it seems to lack a human element. Bakhtin cites the work of Byron as a part of this shift from dead genres to the living genre of novel. For my purposes, namely the examination of the notes as evidence of Byron’s movement away from the stale romantic verse dramas of his contemporaries, this critical base is fairly crucial. Byron knew his audience, and he ensured that he connected with that audience not only through his narrative experimentation in Childe Harold, but with his communication with them through his notes and prefaces. The sense of immediacy, the idea that a reader may take part in the history of ideas and the discussion of the world around them through literature and the discussion of literature is present in the poem, but asserts itself through the notes. Byron forces the reader to examine what he has seen, and what he knows. He offers his experience as an example and starting place for the reader’s own forays into individual thought and development of ideas.

Spacks feels that the impulse to gossip is the natural impulse to create literature. When we gossip, we banter ideas about, we create dialogue about viewpoints that illustrates the possibilities of existence. I feel that Byron gossips with his readers by publishing his personal notes and experiences in Childe Harold, inviting his readership to make their own stories and to create their own images by using his material as a starting point for discussion.

For my biographical material, I have referenced the works of Benita Eisler and Leslie Marchand, using the former as an overview of Byron’s life and the latter as a more reliable source of information. Marchand’s work is the hallmark of all biographies. Marchard is the
most objective of all biographers. He offers us no psychoanalysis, no sexual analysis (if that is not redundant), no strange speculations or definitive assertions—just good scholarship that concentrates on what is there: the letters, the journals, other people's memoirs and remembrances, the historical record. The poetry is mentioned as part of Byron's life, not as his life. The life is separated into three stages: youth and years of fame; marriage, scandal, separation, and early exile; Italy and death in Greece. Why is a biography necessary for this project? Jerome McGann claims that critics cannot ignore the biographical record when they write about Byron. Byron’s relationship with Greece is not the simple appreciation of Romantic philhellenist to a culture being stripped of its artifacts, this most notably apparent in his own involvement in the removal of the Parthenon Sculptures from the Acropolis. Despite his protests against Elgin’s actions in Athens, he witnessed the removal of the marbles from the Parthenon and failed to do anything about it. Servants in Byron’s employ worked for Elgin as middlemen and bargainers with the Turkish government². These biographical facts complicate Byron’s own relationship with Greece: and ardent supporter of freedom and eventual organizer of the Greek Revolution, Byron continually wrote in journals, letters and notes to poems that Greece would never be free.

The edition of Byron’s poetry I cite throughout this paper is the 1996 Penguin annotated edition of the selected poems, edited by Susan J. Wolfson and Peter J. Manning. Wolfson and Manning have used Jerome McGann’s “definitive” edition to guide them in their editorial decisions. I have read the McGann edition, but I have decided to use the Penguin edition for one very specific reason: Wolfson and Manning’s presentation stays true to John Murray’s original practice of publishing Byron’s notes on the same pages as the poetic texts. McGann’s recent Oxford edition shunts the notes to appendices, making the analysis of notes and poem together a

² See Benita Eisler’s biography.
significant difficulty. The numbering of Byron’s notes and the separating of the poet’s work from McGann’s textual commentary is also confusing. After examining both editions of the poetry and weighing the assets and liabilities of each, I feel that Wolfson and Manning have presented a far more workable scholarly edition of for my purposes.

As for the title of my thesis, I paraphrase Byron in the dedication of Don Juan, asking Coleridge to further articulate his theories in the Biographia Litteraria with these words:

“Explaining metaphysics to the nation,/ I wish he would explain his explanation” (2.7-8). Byron criticizes Coleridge’s seeming lack of meaning in his work, hinting that the Biographia is a long explanation of ideas that cannot be absolutely explained. Byron plays with this very hint in his own notes to Childe Harold, circling around his own ideas and his own poetics to produce a work that continually questions the approximate explanations of the ideals of his time.
CHAPTER 2

“THE NARRATIVE OF THE MODERN TOURIST”: BYRON’S ROMANCE

Byron entitled his poem *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage: A Romanut*. By the title alone, Byron forced his readers to form naturally specific preconceptions of the work: the story of a pilgrim’s travels, the pilgrimage itself implying a definite destination; a young, male, upper class hero, the “childe” an archaism referring to a young knight; and the basic tale of the romance quest, where the knight overcomes great dangers and travels large distances to rescue or find the woman of his desires, usually represented by a virgin symbolizing purity and chastity. The plot line of the romance is linear, reiterating the progress of the knight’s quest from beginning to end, or perhaps starting *in medias res* and developing toward the conclusion. Romance verse was an inflated fairy tale, relying upon formulaic plot devices and characterizations to tell a story everyone already knew. The word “romance,” deriving from the French *roman* (story or novel), clearly implies that the tales presented in verse romances were not to be espoused as truthful recordings of any real human experience. The emphasis of the verse romance was not so much on the realistic representation of plot or character, but on the emotions the representations of plot and character evoked in the reader. Verse romance was a sentimental art, appealing to the desires of the reader and presenting a reassuring ordering of the universe to the audience.

The particular order of the universe of verse romance is a conservative one. The primary actors are knights, fighting battles, outwitting enemies, and constantly persevering for the sake of a passive, usually imprisoned or otherwise neglected woman. The woman is always a pillar of purity who suffers incredible acts of manipulation, most
often enacted by her captors. At first analysis, the relationship between male and female in the story is the typical relationship of the active, masculine hero and the passive, feminine heroine. The female protagonist rarely acts or even appears as a character until the final scenes of the romance, where knight and fair damsel finally unite. Since the romance genre involves a knight of a medieval past, the protagonist’s title and power lie in his connections to the land through a hierarchical system established by the church. Having inherited his title as a first-born son or direct heir, the knight possesses the privileges and responsibilities held by his ancestors: he owns land, and therefore can be an active member of the courts and government system of both secular and religious spheres, he is the head of his household, responsible for the well-being and protection of his family (if he has one), his servants, and the tenants who farm his land. The role of the knight mirrors the typical patriarchal role of the Christian God, the knight possessing both the power to protect and grant permission in his own family and the power to deny and condemn. This male-oriented power structure of course assumes that women lack agency and thus have no real power beyond that of the domestic sphere. The woman, therefore, becomes a character with a role to play in this patriarchal structure only through the actions of the men surrounding her. She is transferred from the house of her father to the house of her husband, and then becomes the medium through which the next generation of men is to come into being. The romance insists upon female sexual purity and chastity to ensure that the following generation is legitimate, perpetuating the conservative power structure further. In such gendered terms, the romance, then, is the story of patriarchal power system saving itself by saving a woman in need. The knight
must go out to find his female companion to make absolutely certain that his existence will be justified in the future through his offspring.

The verse romance had always been a popular genre, but the verse romance form takes on a particular force when put into the context of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The defining moment of the canon of literature known as Romanticism is the French Revolution. Although the old feudal systems of Europe had slowly been degenerating through the centuries, the storming of the Bastille in July of 1789 effectively toppled the entire social, political and religious structure of the last vestiges of a medieval Europe. Nothing of the past could be taken for granted in this volatile environment; the privileges of the former social order could not be relied upon to serve and protect the upper classes when the lower classes had assumed power through the logic of reason, completely eschewing their old reliance upon tradition. In this new world of class fluidity and increased opportunity for social advancement, every man was literally on his own to either improve his station or to tenaciously clutch on to what he considered the rights of his social class.

In his book *Romantic Imperialism*, Saree Makdisi views the fluctuating power and social structures in Europe at this time as the first evolutionary steps toward modernization. The literary movement that would be labeled Romanticism in the latter half of the nineteenth century is both a critique of the movement toward modernization and a component of that movement. Makdisi sees Romanticism addressing the following issues that the changes in society as a whole effected:

The enclosure movement; the newly significant question of debt; the development of modern urban culture of dissolution and apparent degeneration; the erosion and
destruction of traditional forms of family and social production; the possibilities opened up by the emigration to the colonies; the transformation of agriculture; the emergence of a new way of thinking and experiencing time; and a new modern sense of national, as opposed to local, culture, custom, and identity. (6)

Romantic writing is then partly an examination of the modern way of the world by writing about the way of life before—an anti-modern literature. Makdisi’s thesis implies then that the use of the verse romance by Romantic poets is an anti-modern form of poetry that questions and critiques this new, post-American and French Revolutionary world. Considering the social anxieties present in this new structure, the return to the topoi and conservative values of the verse romance is a reactionary response from the poets. The familiar strains of the verse romance assuage the social unease all people experienced in the environment of increased opportunities for monetary gain and social advancement.

From a purely literary standpoint, the demands of these romance tales on the reader are few: the plot structure is linear, the characters are flat and do not develop into something better or worse than their general descriptions of noble knight, depraved villain or innocent lady. Upon reading the narrative the reader knows the ending will be a happy one or a tragic one, depending on the tone of the work. These works are the modern equivalent of Romance novels, where the plot develops, climaxes, and ends according to a tight formula. Each reader already expected the praise of chivalry, the general outline of the tales of old, and the picturesque landscapes described in the pages of romantic verse narrative. Thus these works were seen on the same level as the Gothic “novels” of Ann Radcliffe and Monk Lewis, considered inferior to the Classical works
taught in the schools and universities, and were mostly read by those who did not have the privilege of such an education, namely, women. Accordingly, Mr. Thorpe chastises Catherine Morland in Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* upon learning that she read novels: “*Udolpho!* Oh Lord, not I; I never read novels; I have something else to do” (53). This attitude toward novels and verse romance is evident in the production of the Romantic poets themselves, who saw the denigration of the romance into the novel form as the denigration of poetry in general; they all sought to save the verse romance, even though they felt its demise acutely and espoused the salvation of poetry to lie in the creation of epic.¹ The composition of epic, however, had become a serious problem for these poets. The Regency period witnessed the first general theorizing of canon formation, most prevalently in the writings of William Hazlitt. The actual formation of the English literary canon, as opposed to the Classical canon taught in schools and universities, became an issue of definition. One did not read Shakespeare or Milton in English courses in prep school or at college; one studied Horace and Virgil, and Plato and Pindar. Until this period where Englishmen began to consider their own national identity (ies?), the formation of a body of accepted English literature was not an issue. With Hazlitt leading the critical way, critics identified specific poets as particular examples of English writing. Hazlitt was a strong proponent of Shakespeare as the master of the English language. But Milton’s *Paradise Lost* would become the accepted national epic of

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¹ For an extensive account of the Romantics’ use of the Spenserian form, especially by Keats and Shelley, see Kucich, Greg. *Keats, Shelley, and Romantic Spenserianism*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1991. Unfortunately Kucich does not include Byron in his study, even though the poem that launched him into the literary arena was written in the style of Spenser. Perhaps because Byron states himself in letters that *CHP* “was intended to be a poem on *Ariosto’s plan*, that is to say on *no plan* at all” (letter to William Miller, 30 July 1811) critics have attempted to qualify his use of the Spenserian verse narrative as merely his appropriation of a stanza form, rather than a true romance on the model of *The Faerie Queene*. According to Byron, the radical experimentation within the genre of Spenserian verse narrative is the whole point.
England. The Romantic poets in general could not compete with Milton in their attempts to compose epics.

Despite these protests against the verse romance as a flimsy genre worthy only of the readership of women, the poets themselves continued to compose romance quests exactly for the reactionary reasons Makdisi has commented upon. The romance quests of these poets, however, became more internalized, rather than allegories of the triumph of traditional anti-modern modes of thought over modern contemporary philosophy and practice. As Aidan Day explains in his overview of the literary movement (even though he continually asserts, along with Marilyn Butler, that to systematize Romanticism in any way is to oversimplify a multi-faceted and seemingly wayward period, continually at odds with any attempts to define it in absolute terms), one of the heaviest charges against the Romantic poets was their seeming, although not unanimous, withdrawal from the world of men—the political realm-- to the world of individual and the interior. The quests of these poets usually gravitate toward female figures who are not necessarily defined as the bearers of the next patriarchal generation (but naturally will become the mothers of inheritor sons), but women who will bring some “completion” to a spiritually starved poet’s existence. Shelley’s *Alastor* is the prime example of this. The poet/hero of the poem goes in search of his female compliment only to find that she doesn’t exist. He destroys himself in the search. The verse romance of the Romantic is, then, a failure, but it is a completely self-conscious failure. Where the original verse romances of the Medieval period presented tales for a self-perpetuating system of patriarchal tradition, and the conservative reactionary poems of the early nineteenth century espoused the past
as a return to a lost paradise, the romance of Romanticism recognizes that it is a fictional quest doomed to failure should one set out on it for any sort of redemption or epiphany.

And so we come to Byron’s romance, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. The romance form was a formula well-known to readers. Byron, however, took the genre one step further and used the verse form of Spenser. Byron’s reasons for using this verse form are purely pragmatic. In the headnote the first canto, Byron writes:

> The stanza of Spenser, according to one of our most successful poets, admits of every variety. Dr. Beattie makes the following observation:—“Not long ago I began a poem in the style and stanza of Spenser, in which I propose to give full scope to my inclination, and be either droll or pathetic, descriptive or sentimental, tender or satirical, as the humour strikes me; for, if I mistake not, the measure which I have adopted admits equally of all these kinds of compositions.” (57)

Byron establishes Spenser as a worthy poet to emulate for the authority Spenser lends to his work (as well as the authority of the poet Beattie, whose success stemmed from his success as a poet who sold his work, rather than as a poet who actually garnered any lasting critical success, even in our time—he’s not included in any of the scholarly anthologies used in universities today). Spenser’s verse form provided Byron with a rhyme scheme that easily managed the typical moods and descriptions of romance: the picturesque, the exotic, the love story with all its varied components, the moodiness of knights, and the pastoral or gothic landscapes that are the setting for most tales. Not only does Byron compose his romance in the stanza of Spenser, he also peppers his verses with archaisms to make the poem evoke a specifically medieval timbre: “wight,” “whilholm,” “ee,” “mote.” Basing his poem on Spenser’s verse structure also implies
that Byron is, in part if not in whole, attempting to relate his story to Spenser’s in content. Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* was itself a “courtesy book,” where a man learned to fashion himself into a gentleman by following the qualities exhibited in the narrative as right and proper. When Byron’s public picked up the volume for perusal, they no doubt expected to find such a tale—a story of chivalric romance previously explored in Scott’s *Marmion* and *The Lady of the Lake*, where the good medieval knight gets his girl and goes on adventures for fortune and glory—a fairy tale for adults that presented the conservative ideals of human behavior in a formulaic plot that put the world to rights, either by presenting a happy ending or excoriating the depraved behavior of men who rejected the tried-and-true social traditions.

The romaunt of Byron, however, places special demands on the reader completely alien to the simple narration of the verse romance. The tale is told from the viewpoint of a narrator who comments upon Harold and his travels, not as a bard retelling the events of the past, but as a participant-observer. The narrator does not look backward for his material but metahistorically, completely contemporaneous with the experience of Harold and with the experience of the Europe Harold observes. The romance does not progress from point A to point B, and so on; thus the reader is required to actually involve himself in the work, because the world of Harold and the narrator is the world in which he himself lives. There is no distance of the past to put the reader into “the reverent view of a descendent” with the capability of hindsight, where he knows the completion of a work before he has even begun to read it (Bakhtin 13).

This change from the typical narration of past events is a change from what Bakhtin calls the change from the epic to the novel. The epic as a theorized idea--
different from the *epic form* of Milton or the *epic* of Homer, but including these two
works in the theorized definition—includes the verse romances because “the epic as it has
come down to us is an absolutely completed and finished generic form, whose
constitutive feature is the transferal of the world it describes to an absolute past of
national beginnings and peak times” (15). Thus the reader experiences no demands in the
verse romance except to actually sit down and read it, for he already knows how the plot
will develop and he already knows where he stands in relation to that plot—the
descendent looking backward at something he had no part of, but now can experience
vicariously in the pages of a book and as the inheritor of the ideals espoused in the epic
itself (a process of self-identification with the material and recognition that the material is
also skillfully constructed as a story). Byron on the other hand forces the reader to
experience the poem contemporaneously as a fellow participant, not as one who has the
benefit of history on his side. The notes to the poem add to this metahistorical
relationship of narrator to protagonist, and writer to reader. The notes are not merely
explanations of ancient rites and customs because there is nothing ancient about the
poem; they address issues that every aware reader of the early nineteenth century would
recognize: the Convention of Cintra, the subjugation of the Greek people, the
importation of the Elgin Marbles to the British Museum. Not only does Byron present
the experience of his narrator and his protagonist, but also the experience of the English
during those times of Napoleonic warfare and cultural oppression. He sets up a
relationship between reader and writer that is pervasive throughout the work, where he
never allows the reader to fall into the complacency of the past and where he requires him
to consider the issues he records.
Byron’s critics immediately were puzzled by this turning away from the accepted definition of verse romance.

When we first heard of the poem of Childe Harold—a Romaunt—what could we expect, but a new assortment of chivalrous tales, of amours and battles, of giants and deliverers, of Knights and Sara—cens, of dwarfs and demons? In this we were mistaken. And our puzzle is now to account for those portentous titles of a poem, the subject of which is certainly neither chastity, nor valour, nor truth; nor fairies, nor damsels, nor deliverers; nor heroes baptized, or infidel; but the narrative of a modern tourist.²

By the exacting definition of the verse romance, composed in the vein of medieval adventures and the praise of chivalry, Byron’s contemporary romaunt was not a traditional verse romance, and the expectations of the public upon reading the title page seemed to be have been disappointed. However, the effect of Byron’s experimentation with the form of romance hints at the moribund quality of the romance epic Bakhtin describes. The undemanding quality of the verse romance had been abandoned, and Byron forced his public to pay attention to what he was writing in this transgression of the accepted poetic form. The work was the “radical revolution” that Bakhtin argues is implicit in the “[portrayal of] an event on the same time-and-value plane as oneself and one’s contemporaries” (14).

Later critics also have had problems with Childe Harold’s claim of being a verse romance. Andrew Rutherford in particular finds Byron’s labeling of his poem to be the

² *British Review*, 3 (1812) 275-302. This passage is quoted in Peter J. Manning’s “Childe Harold in the Marketplace.” To see most of the reviews of Byron’s work, see Reiman, Donald H. *The Romantics Reviewed*. 9 vols New York: Garland, 1972. Byron’s reviews alone are collected in five volumes, and these are only *most* of the reviews—a total bibliography of all extant contemporary reviews has not been published.
poet’s pandering to his public in order to enter into the society that was to lionize him in 1812. By recognizing the popularity of the verse romance among readers Byron thus labeled the poem to appeal to the popular reading audience. Rutherford considers the popularity of the poem to be based upon its commonness, for “he was so successful with the common reader because he was such a common man himself . . . and the consequent limitations of his romantic poetry contributed in fact to its popular success, since they made it so immediately acceptable to ordinary readers” (9). The biography tells otherwise. Byron had already made his literary debut with *Hours of Idleness*, which was ruthlessly lambasted by critics in 1808. His response was *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, an equally vicious attack on those who had damaged his poetic honor. Two years traveling about southern Europe and the Levant produced *Childe Harold* and *Hints from Horace*, the latter never published in Byron’s lifetime and the former published reluctantly at the advice of his friend, R. C. Dallas. If the popularity-hunting motives Rutherford argues are to be taken seriously, one must ignore the history of the production of the work and the letters of the poet and publisher and the notes and prefaces of the poem itself.

Thus critics saw Byron’s genre experimentation as a “disadvantage,” not understanding why a romance, in the traditional definition of the term, treated current events and lacked the religious pilgrimage or quest romance so often associated with the genre. The critics also had a very serious objection to the characterization of Harold, who seems to float through the poem as a gloomy misanthrope. Byron answers these critics in his addition to the preface of the fourth edition:
on one point alone I shall venture an observation. Amongst the many objections justly urged to the very indifferent character of the ‘vagrant Childe’ (whom, notwithstanding many hints to the contrary, I still maintain to be a fictitious personage), it has been stated, that, besides the anachronism, he is very *unknightly*, as the times of the Knights were times of Love, Honour, and so forth. Now, it so happens that the good old times, when “l’amour du bon temps, l’amour antique” flourished, were the most profligate of all possible centuries. Those who have any doubts on this subject may consult Sainte-Palaye. Whatever other objection may be urged to that most unamiable personage Childe Harold, he was so far perfectly knightly in his attributes—“No waiter, but a knight templar.” By the by, I fear that Sir Tristrem and Sir Lancelot were no more better than they should be, although very poetical personages and true knights “sans peur,” though not “sans reproche.” If the story of the institution of the “Garter” be not a fable, the knights of that order have for several decades borne the badge of a Countess of Salisbury, of indifferent memory. So much for chivalry. (58)

Byron recognized the novelty of his genre experimentation but had to defend himself from the narrow-minded reading of his critics in his notes. The note itself does something completely new to the verse romance itself: it presents the author acutely aware of audience and critics, responding to their puzzlement and confusion by pointing out the obvious thing they missed in their analysis. Not only did they miss the obvious in the novelty of the work itself, but they also do not seem to have read Byron’s notes and prefaces, where Byron himself claims to have had no plan to the “pretension of regularity” (56). He has stated himself the transgression of the verse romance form; the
preface addition to the fourth edition quoted above is Byron’s annoyed response to the critics’ misreading—or lazy perusal--of his material.

But in the statement above, Byron also recognizes that the romance genre is itself a fiction. Byron even hints that history could be a fiction, citing the story of the establishment of the Order of the Garter as a possible chivalric romance tale based on a much more mundane (and possibly sordid) event. He presents this possible historical fiction as a counterargument to Edmund Burke, whose *Reflections on the Revolution in France* expressed regret that the days of chivalry were over and had been replaced by the social order within which Byron and all of his contemporaries operated: “Burke need not have regretted that it’s days are over, though Marie-Antoinette was quite as chaste as most of those in whose honours lances were shivered, and knights unhorsed” (58). “The monstrous mummeries of the middle ages” are a conservative defense mechanism against the changes experienced by all Englishmen in the wake of the French Revolution. Byron here comes into direct conflict with Saree Makdisi’s insistence that the romantic poem was, for the most part, anti-modern and anti-historical. Byron does not accept that the past or cultures living in a state of pre-modernization were or are any way superior or more salubrious to men’s well being. Only a man who claims the chastity of Marie Antoinette in the face of facts could believe otherwise. But how does Byron differentiate between history—and literary history is included in this term—and fact? Byron views history as a written concept, and therefore history is as much a production of art as a poem. History may include facts about a particular person or place, but history cannot present a full and complete record of the realities of existence in the past. The perspective of the researcher and writer can only frame the historical representation of
facts. Facts, on the other hand, can be documented empirically: the population of a specific area, the date of a particular battle, the measurements and descriptions of terrain. The observer and researcher of facts also provides a frame for them, but he does not claim to present the absolute truth in his record. He only claims to record what he sees before him. The historian cannot claim such a thing; the historian must make sense of the material before him, and for him to claim that he is presenting a truthful representation of the past is to ignore the fact that he is constructing the past from what he observes. Burke did this in his condemnation of the French Revolution—he structured the past as benevolent, chivalrous, and devoid of any venality. Frederick Garber’s article on self, text and romantic irony talks about Byron’s criticism of his fellow poets in their attempts to project the self, unadulterated, onto the page as their “sincere sentimentality.” Byron could not accept the artificiality of language put forth before the public as the representation of a true natural self. Byron, in his role as politician and celebrity, knew of the demands society places upon a man in such a role. Thus he understood that language is an artificial means by which we present ourselves, and therefore does not offer a pure example of our individual selves. The assumption that one could force language to accomplish this impossibility provided Byron with most of his subject material for both his satires and his serious works. Byron applies this criticism to the writing of history itself as an artistic, i.e. “structuring,” project. So much for the verse romance.

So, if history is suspect because writers create history as they write it, and if the verse romance depends upon a historical setting to be a verse romance, then the entire quest of the historical verse romance is brought into question. The historical setting
assumes a patriarchal structure where a knight will go in search of a woman to save her from whatever was considered the major threat at the time. But if the historical structure is suggested to be false, or rather, fictionalized, in the first place—perhaps the knights just wanted to raid their destination for booty; perhaps the woman was really an opportunistic charlatan who used her sexuality for social advancement and favors—then the quest becomes something totally different from its prior incarnation as a pilgrimage for fortune and glory. The quest, in Byronic terms, is tainted with the facts of history.

As I have noted earlier, critics quibbled over the fact that Byron presented a contemporary setting for his romance. But critics also saw no objective of the romance; the quest, the destination of Harold’s pilgrimage, was unclear. Calling Byron’s romance the “narrative of the modern tourist” is quite possibly the most perfect description of the romance quest Byron presents to his public. Byron presents to his readers his own contemporary romance, with his protagonist as a Regency everyman traveling through the contemporary world of war-torn Europe. Harold is a pilgrim of Byron’s cosmopolitan, polyglot, and sliced-up Europe, not a world of the past filled with obsolete ideals that seemed anachronistic in the current experience of industrialization and political revolutions. How could a man fight for the ideals of monarchy, church and the land of his forebears when these very ideals were being questioned on the Continent and in America, especially when these ideals were being put to the test by the most important thinkers of the day? Thomas Paine, Jeremy Bentham and Adam Smith put the ideas of monarchy and agrarian life so prized by the upper classes to the scrutiny of the lens of the age of reason. Thus reliance upon the land, forced apprenticeships and the staunch upholding of rank based on one’s family history became threatened by the rise of the
middle class—investors, inventors, merchants, factory owners, and, in the case of Byron’s contemporaries, artists and writers of renown and wealth. Thomas Moore, Byron’s friend and a fellow poet, was the son of an Irish grocer who became the darling of Regency society, enjoying the fame of a celebrity among the upper classes. Moore’s rise to fame and fortune would have been impossible if not for the changes in perspective caused by these revolutions in thought.

Ellen Moers makes the point that Byron in his social rank was the exception to the rule among his fellow artists: Wordsworth, Coleridge and the poet-banker Samuel Rogers all were firm members of the middle class, as was Shelley, and Keats and Leigh Hunt were members of the “Cockney School” of writers who had their origins in the lower classes. Byron himself would espouse the cause of the common man, not necessarily as a radical reformer, as Leigh Hunt and his brother John became, but as a man aware of his duties as a noble to offer what influence he could to aid the unfortunate members of society thrown into the economic upheavals of the industrial revolution. His maiden speech in the House of Lords was an adamant argument opposing the death penalty for the Luddites, the “frame breakers” who destroyed factories built for the mass marketing of the stockings and linens they used to make by hand. The factories imposed the benefit of technology upon these people by putting them out of work and putting them off their land, thus leaving them destitute and desperate. ³

The revolutions of industry and politics, though eradicating an obsolete system of economics and government, were also displacing people, both in the upper classes, who could no longer compete with the wealth of their middle-class neighbors, and in the lower classes, who lacked the training and education to adapt to the changing technologies.

³ See Byron, the Erotic Liberal by Jonathan Gross
Thus the rule of reason, at once so liberating and intellectually sound, also showed its
double edge in forcing a social upheaval that affected all classes of society, from the
lowest to the highest. This is the Weltschmertz of the Romantic era, the individual’s
feeling of having no place in a society which had experienced vast and irrefutable
changes.

Peter J. Manning claims that Byron’s experimentation with the genre of verse
romance reflected the uneasiness of English critics to accept something new in the realms
of literature: “Such widespread sensitivity to the proprieties of genre, and resistance to
their violation, betokens a crisis of moral authority that overflows the boundaries of the
literary” (173). As Marilyn Butler argues in Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries, the
state of Regency England existed as one that was affected by the revolutionary spirit of
France and America but tenaciously held onto its traditions and political conservatism in
reaction to those upheavals. However philosophically the people may have discussed the
new ideas of the revolutions, the discussion remained philosophical and rarely developed
into a radical action against the state. The fear of Napoleon’s possible invasion of
England and the ever-present state of warfare kept the conservative political government
on its guard until Napoleon’s final defeat at Waterloo in 1815, with the subsequent
restoration of the French monarchy hailing the victory of England’s traditionalist values
over those of the revolutionary zealots who destroyed the European monarchist political
systems. In England “novel” ideas could get one thrown into prison, as in the case of
John Hunt, the newspaperman. Or it could have one’s experimentation in a genre seen as
subversive and thus meriting critical condemnation, especially from Tory (conservative)
reviewers. Therefore, “the revival of romance that Childe Harold both grew from and subverted was inseparable from the larger political issues” (Manning 174).

Thus Byron’s poem features a pilgrim without a faith lacking a definite destination in his travels. Everything the Childe—a member of the upper, landed and titled class—knows has been thrown into question. He has no money prospects because his income benefits from his land, which cannot compete with the enterprises of the middle class factories and merchant houses. The traditions involved in his social rank are no longer exclusively the privilege of the upper class, which now shares company, albeit reluctantly, with those able to either buy their way into society or to become the celebrity artists of the age based upon their talents and merits alone. The Church, that once stalwart touchstone of civilization, has been replaced with the bourgeois morals of economy and the intellectual ponderings of the rising literacy among the people of England. The cult of nature espoused by Shelley and commented upon by Wordsworth in his poems also filled this ecclesiastical void. Thus faith among the Regency upper classes was exchanged for fashion and travel. Parties and balls, most exclusively the Wednesday night meeting of the London ton at Almack’s, replaced the weekly ceremony of churchgoing.4 The Childe has no religious quest, for religion is no longer a part of his life. The shrines to fashion and celebrity he has experienced, and they have left him empty, even though “He felt the fullness of satiety” in his revels, drinking and whoring (I.iv.7).

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4 Almack’s was the weekly meeting hall for the balls of Lady Blessington, one the most fashionable hostesses of the time. Essentially the balls were the meeting place of Regency ladies and gentleman, where most of society’s scandalous affairs were enacted. At Almack’s Byron met Lady Caroline Lamb, with whom he had an affair for four months in 1812 and who dubbed him in her journal as “mad-bad-and dangerous to know.” See Lamb’s Glenarvon for the mythologizing of Byron as the antisocial misanthropic ladykiller.
Byron and the Childe embark on a continental Grand Tour, but must avoid the usual places of travel because of the Napoleonic wars. Instead of the mandatory trip through France and Germany, the itinerary includes Spain and Portugal, Greece and areas of Turkey—all very exotic places far removed from the quotidian travels of most wealthy Englishmen. Because the major travel destinations of the continent were cut off from travelers, travel literature became the only means of getting out of England. Travelogues were immensely popular, and the Baedeker travel books were continuous bestsellers during the middle and latter halves of the nineteenth century. Byron’s publisher, John Murray, sold his own travel books and used Byron’s poems as copy. Not only does Byron treat his own experience but he also draws from the standard Mediterranean travel guide of the nineteenth century, Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Therefore, in presenting his work to the reader-tourist as a pilgrimage through contemporary Europe, Byron speaks to his island-logged countrymen who long to travel elsewhere but cannot.

If the quest of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* is the “narrative of the modern tourist,” then the usual prize of that quest of pilgrimage is nowhere to be found. If anything, Byron’s hero is running away from his women, and he is running away from his patriarchal responsibilities to his women, tenants and servants:

- His house, his home, his heritage, his lands,
- The laughing dames in whom he did delight.
- Whose large blue eyes, fair locks and snowy hands,
- Might shake the saintship of an anchorite,
- And long had fed his youthful appetite;
His goblets brimm’d with every costly wine,
And all that mote to luxury invite,
Without a sigh he left, to cross the brine,
And traverse Paynim shores, and pass Earth’s central line. (XI)

Byron presents the typical young responsibility shirker, the young kid who is
“unknightly” and slumming on an extensive road trip. Harold is not searching for a wife
or mistress who will complete him in any way—either fulfilling some lack in his soul, as
in Shelley’s Alastor, or marrying him and fulfilling his responsibilities to the next
generation of English noblemen. Harold does not quite know what he is searching for.
But he does know that he is fleeing the conservative societal pressures of Regency
England: duty to church, children and country simply makes no sense to him anymore,
and the opportunities for pleasure in England have been exhausted. So he crosses the
channel and becomes the typical tourist, consuming the culture (in all senses of that term)
of other countries. He is a “vagrant Childe” (an absolutely perfect description for the
hero) because he literally has no place to go, and, as I’ve noted earlier, the places he
could possibly visit are limited due to the wars he refuses to participate in. Unlike the
usual romance genre, this hero has no defined quest; therefore he has no defined function.
The quest in romance is inseparable from the characters. Without a destination or goal,
Byron’s narrative subverts the genre and turns it into the narrative of a hero undefined by
his assumed characterization. Byron does not permit Harold to be a knight in shining
armor because Byron cannot exactly state what Harold actually is this world that wants to
embrace romance as the way things ought to be but clearly are not:
I now leave ‘Childe Harold’ to live his day, such as he is; it had been more agreeable, and certainly more easy, to have drawn an amiable character. It had been easy to varnish over his faults, to make him do more and express less, but he never was intended as an example, further than to show, that early perversion of mind and morals leads to satiety of past pleasures and disappointments in new ones. And that even the beauties of nature, and the stimulus of travel (except ambition, the most powerful of a all excitements) are lost on a soul so constituted, or rather misdirected. (58-59)

But Byron does not attempt to state what Harold should do to become a better person, nor does he offer Harold as an example of what a goodly knight should be in his own day and age. He merely records that Harold made mistakes (just as anyone else had who was honest enough to admit so) and that the escapist theory of romantic travel and nature could not alleviate the consequences of those mistakes. Harold, despite his “pastoral truancy” and his rejection of conservative expectations of him, does not escape to the interior of himself. He instead tries to escape from the interior of himself, but fails miserably. The destination of Byron’s romance is not the fulfillment of the duty of the hero, but the actual definition of the hero himself.
CHAPTER 3

I WANT A HERO, BUT WHERE IS HAROLD?: THE CHILDE AS ANTI-HERO

A fictitious character is introduced for the sake of giving connection to the piece: which, however, makes no pretension to regularity. It has been suggested to me by friends, on whose opinions I set a high value, that in this fictitious character, ‘Childe Harold,’ I may incur the suspicions of having intended some real personage: this I beg leave, once for all, to disclaim—Harold is the child of imagination, for the purpose I have stated. In some very trivial particulars, and those merely local, there might be grounds for such a notion; but, in the main points, I should hope, none whatever. (58)

In his own preface, Byron contends with the criticism leveled at this hero and his romance. Adroitly addressing the charges of Harold’s unknightly behavior and Grand Tour vagrancy, Byron claims for his hero one purpose: to give his poem some connecting element while recognizing that the poem offers no systemized pretensions to the genre of romance. Byron does not present Harold as any worthy knight, nor does he give an adequate explanation of what that knight is supposed to do. But the question of Byron’s organizing his poem around a central character that operates within, for what appears to be a romance by the title alone, remains: if Harold is not the typical knight, and if he is not based upon an actual living person, what is the point in framing the poem around him in the first place? Does he have a particular purpose in going on this pilgrimage? Does Harold himself even know the purpose of his journey?

Here, we are faced with examining the exact function of a hero, and the definition of what a hero is. Byron himself would continually play with this idea of the heroic throughout his
poetic development, coming to a full exploration of the topic in his mock-epic masterpiece, *Don Juan*. The first stanza of the poem relates the seeming relativism of the definition of a hero:

I want a hero, an uncommon want,

When every year and month sends forth a new one,

Till after cloying the gazettes with cant,

The age discovers he is not the true one (I.i.1-5)

Byron then lists the various heroes of his own age, touching upon Cumberland, Keppel, Bonaparte, Danton and Marat and the others who have participated in revolutions and reactions, wars and summits. Byron remarks in the fifth stanza that the only reason why these men have the claim to the title of hero is because someone was there to record their deeds. They have, in effect, been made heroes by the writers of their age, historians and poets alike:

Brave men were living before Agamemnon

And since, exceeding valorous and sage,

A good deal like him too, though quite the same none,

But they have shone not on the poet’s page,

And so have been forgotten. I condemn none,

But can’t find any in the present age

Fit for my poem (that is, for my new one) (I.v.1-6)

The artist makes characters as much as the historian makes heroes, establishing a particular form in which to place a man according to his deeds within a particular space of time—the “great man” theory of historiography. Byron makes absolutely certain to articulate that our “true” heroes are as fictionalized as our poetic ones.
In his first epic poem, Byron creates a hero who is not a hero, a knight who refuses to claim his ancestral responsibilities and who wanders the earth in a seeming emotional daze. Harold is, in fact, the first manifestation of the “Byronic hero” of the canon. The Byronic hero—moody, moping, running away from an undefined, ambiguous sin, young and romantic to a fault—appeals because of his lack of exact definition. Byron claims that Harold “felt the fullness of satiety,” and that he had run “through Sin’s long labyrinth,” but he does not offer any specific details about what the fullness of satiety actually is or what exactly Harold encountered as he wandered through Sin’s corridors. Readers can therefore supply their own rendering of the Childe’s sordid past. In 1818, Walter Scott described this relationship between reader and protagonist that Byron developed:

But it was not merely to the novelty of an author speaking in his own person, and in a tone which arrogated a contempt of all ordinary pursuits in life, that Childe Harold owed its extensive popularity: these formed but the point or sharp edge of the wedge by which the work was enabled to insinuate its way into the venerable block, the British public. (qtd. in Christenson 80)¹

Byron conceals the vices of his protagonist, allowing for a varied supply of those vices by his reading public, who were, for the most part, women. Later in this chapter, I will examine some of the ways in which Byron’s female readership interpreted Harold’s history, and how they invariably collapsed Byron with Harold—a consequence of the poem that Byron himself did not alleviate, despite his protestations that he and Harold were not one and the same in these two cantos.

Despite the seeming originality of Byron’s heroic creation, there is much evidence arguing for the literary sources of Harold. In The Byronic Hero, Peter Thorslev provides a

¹ See Lord’s Byron’s Strength by Jerome Christensen, p.80.
history of Harold’s literary ancestors. Just as Byron works within the construct of the verse romance and the Spenserian stanza to give his work authority, he also draws upon the presentation of heroes past to situate his own protagonist. Since Byron relies upon the romance to solidify his relationship with his readers through their own familiarity with the genre, he acts upon the same gesture of familiarity with the literary formula of the hero to establish Harold. Thorslev first considers Harold as the eighteenth-century’s romanticized Child of Nature. Harold is a young man who plays his music by ear, through his natural capacities, rather than through intensive musical schooling, “He Seized his harp, which he at times could string,/ And strike, albeit with untaught melody,/ When deem’d he no strange ear was listening . . .” (I.xii.2-4). Harold reacts to nature in the guise of his literary prototype by extolling the values inherent in the observation of nature:

O’er vales that teem with fruits, romantic hills,

(Oh, that such hills upheld a freeborn race!)

Whereon to gaze the eye with joyance fills,

Childe Harold wends through many a pleasant place.

Though sluggards deem it but a foolish chase,

And marvel men should quite their easy chair,

The toilsome way, and long, long league to trace,

Oh! there is sweetness in the mountain air,

And life, that bloated Ease can never hope to share (I.xxx)

Byron presents Harold in similar stanzas as the classic rebel of the system of industry that grew out eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophy. Thorselv then shows Harold to share characteristics with the Gothic Villain in his ownership of secret, unnamable sins: “The
glamour, the irresistible romance of a secret past was one of the prime attractions of the original Gothic Villain. [along with . . .] the intensity of [his] remorse” (134). Readers were therefore familiar with this hero of questionable past and were prepared to supply their own writing of history for him, openly participating in this literary sentimentality.

Harold resembles the Gloomy Egoist or Man of Feeling more so than the two other categories of heroes. The marking characteristics of this hero are a longing for an idyllic, innocent past and a suffering of unrequited love. The love that the Man of Feeling seeks is usually an idealized love not easily found within the mundane realms of human experience. The prime example of this sort of hero is the poet-hero of Shelley’s *Alastor*. Shelley describes the hero in his preface as

a youth of uncorrupted feelings an adventurous genius led forth by an imagination inflamed and purified through familiarity with all that is excellent and majestic, to the contemplation of the universe. He drinks deep of the fountain of knowledge, and is still insatiate [. . .] So long as it is possible for his desires to point towards objects thus infinite and unmeasured, he is joyous, and tranquil, and self-possessed. But the period arrives when these objects cease to suffice. His mind is at length suddenly awakened and thirsts for intercourse with an intelligence similar to itself [. . .] He seeks in vain for a prototype of his conceptions. (69)

The Man of Feeling is therefore a seeker of what cannot be and what was only in the past—a past he has only experienced through the stories in history books.

The *ubi sunt* theme that Byron carefully weaves through the stanzas of the first two cantos comes into question when we recall that Byron questions the recording of history as a form of truth in his notes. Byron views history as much a literary invention as his own poetry. If
history is merely a function of creativity, where historians construct the past through fragments in an attempt to present a fully formed whole to their audiences, then the very virtuous times of old the Man of Feeling mourns are, for all purposes, false. They never existed in the romanticized, fictionalized fashion the Man of Feeling contemplates. Consider this stanza in the first canto where Byron describes the ruins of an old abbey, praising it for its picturesque Gothic dilapidation and the simple lives of the monks who live there, seeming at peace in their balanced relations with nature, learning, and the “contemplation of the universe” (as Shelley has deemed religious contemplation):

The slowly climb the many-winding way,
And frequent turn to linger as you go,
From loftier rocks new loveliness survey,
And rest ye at “Our lady’s house of woe,”
Where frugal monks their little relics show,
And sundry legend to the stranger tell:
Here impious men have punish’d been, and lo!
Deep in yon cave Honorious long did dwell,
In hope to merit Heaven by making earth a Hell. (I.xx)

Byron presents the scene to the reader in a historicized fashion, having the monks tell the legend of St. Honorious to tourists. But the important theme in the passage is not the picturesque treatment or the quasi-medieval lifestyle of the monks, but the manner in which the tourists are to react to the stories the monks tell: the appeal of the convent lies not in the fact that it’s a convent alone, but in its associations with St. Honorious, a historical figure a tourist would have known of only through the perusal of historical, and therefore literary, documents.
Byron’s note to the stanza furthers his consideration of the historical versus the poetical: The convent of our ‘Lady of Punishment,’ *Nossa Senora de Pena*, on the summit of the rock. Below, at some distance, is the Cork Convent, where St. Honorious dug his den, over which is his epitaph. Form the hills the seas adds to the beauty of the view.—[Since the publication of this poem, I have been informed of the misapprehension of the term *Nossa Senora de Pena*. It was owing to the want of the *tilde*, of the mark over the *n* which alters the signification of the word: with it, *Pena* signifies a rock; without it, *Pena* has the sense I adopted. I do not think it necessary to alter the passage; as though the common acceptation affixed to it is “Our Lady of the Rock,” I many well assume the other sense from the severities practised there—*Note to the 2d Edition.*] (69)

The convent in actuality has a name far different from the one Byron originally attributed to it. Byron as writer has fictionalized his own experience within a poetical framework and has used the name of the convent as a rhetorical device to describe the severe asceticism practiced by its denizens. When Byron corrects himself in his note, he does so not only to reinforce the picturesque view of the convent itself, but also to explain his reasons for not changing his original poetic intent by correcting the spelling of the convent’s name. He recognizes the form of the poem to be as important as its content, and the construction of the poem itself to be as historicized as any other historical document. Thorslev’s treatment of Harold as a Man of Feeling, viewed in Byron’s juxtaposition between facts and art, seems reductive. Byron refuses to take history for granted in his notes; Harold’s character as he stares upon tombs and graves, and looks to the past for comfort in his alarmingly unstable world, cannot be taken on such reductive grounds. If Harold is the stock Man of Feeling Thorslev shows him to be, then
Byron’s notes effectively criticize the sentiments of the Man of Feeling as mere futilities in the face of how and why history is written.

Thorslev’s treatment of Harold as hero becomes even more reductive when we look at the many voices in the poem itself. Thorslev admits that *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* has, in the first two cantos, at least three seemingly separate protagonists: the narrator, Byron writing as himself, and Harold. Thorslev does not elaborate upon the three characters at work within the poem, but Jerome McGann treats this topic at length in *Fiery Dust*, his study of Byron’s poetic development. McGann argues that the poem “exists somewhere between narrative and drama, for while the poet comes forward in propria persona, he also presents himself as ‘living and moving before us’ in a phenomenal setting” (34). Thus the poem is not a Wordsworthian reverie, the past recollected in tranquility, but a poem where the narrator and the protagonist move and develop in tandem while one reads the poem. Harold journeys through the poem and the narrator journeys through the composition of the poem. One journey is the narration of Harold’s escape from his homeland onto the continent to find some sort of peace from his full but empty life, the other is the journey of the narrator while composing the poem itself, a mental journey through what he has seen and known and experienced. This idea of narrative-dramatic journey relates to the pilgrimage’s lack of stated destination: the writer has not completed the journey of writing the poem, thus he does not know where he will eventually arrive when the poem is complete. McGann explains:

Because *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* is fixed within a realistic environment; and second, because the act of narration and the narrated events occur simultaneously in a virtual present; and finally, because the poem tells the story of the psychological modifications that the narrating poet undergoes during the four cantos, the poem demands that the
narrating poet be considered a participant in the action whose future progress he cannot know and whose ultimate issue he is, at all points prior to the climax, only partially aware of. (35)

The narrator does not have the omniscience of an author whose work proceeds from beginning to middle to end, with a tight climax that explains the development of the story. The narrator wanders, his hero wanders, and the destination of such wandering becomes the wandering and the experience and knowledge such literary floating affords, rather than on the strict linear narration of verse romance. This is the drama of the poem, where the audience must travel along with the narrator and hero in order to understand the whole of the journey. Byron’s abandonment of the typical development of the verse romance requires the reader to focus on the process of the narration, rather than on the product (and thus climax-denouement) of the tale. The reader must follow the narrator; he cannot assume anything about the story because the narrator is as ignorant as he is about the climax of the poem. Childe Harold is very much a poem of process rather than product, as Byron himself admits to his reader: “these two cantos are merely experimental” (56).

The focus on process forces the distinction between poet, narrator, and protagonist. If, as McGann argues, the poem unfolds as a dramatic process, then the process itself would indicate where the splits among the various characters occur and why they occur where they do. Byron claims that “Harold” is merely the connective tissue of the poem, and, as Thorslev has shown us, an amalgam of various stock hero forms existing in the literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the first drafts of the poem, and even in the holograph manuscript of cantos I and II, Byron named his protagonist “Childe Burun,” a medieval spelling of his own last name. Byron did not change the hero’s name to Harold until R. C. Dallas had completed the fair
copy for the printer. Critics and biographers who indulge in the Romantic fallacy of associating Byron’s characters with his own self tend to treat this fact as evidence that Byron and Harold and the narrator are all the same person. In the letters and journals, Byron gives no reason for this sudden editorial change in his work. Leslie Marchand suggests in his biography that Dallas and Murray may have convinced Byron to change the name because of the intensely personal tone of the work. Other than such a suggestion, there is no recorded reason for Byron’s change of mind. But at some point Byron decided to divorce himself from his protagonist. Again, we return to Byron’s preface and lengthy explanation of himself:

It has been suggested to me by friends, on whose opinions I set a high value, that in this fictitious character, ‘Childe Harold,’ I may incur the suspicion of having intended some real personage: this I beg leave, once for all, to disclaim—Harold is the child of imagination, for the purpose I have stated. In some very trivial particulars, and those merely local, there might be grounds for such a notion; but in the main points, I should hope, none whatever. (56)

Byron is making a distinctive point here between himself—who is the narrator, and in canto II the man who speaks in his own voice, as in the notes—and the hero, who is Harold. He admits that he uses his two years of traveling as the setting of the poem, but he insists that the relationship between his hero and himself ends there, and at the local level.

But McGann does not argue that the narrator is different from Byron the poet. I do, however, believe the narrator of the poem to be a character different from Byron in propria persona because of his role as narrator in a dramatic poem that Byron has written, and has thus enacted. As McGann himself states, “The narrator of 1812 never influences events himself, but is always acted upon” (49). The narrator is mainly a reactionary voice throughout his telling of
Harold’s pilgrimage. He does not force Harold through a particular series of events to get to a specific goal. He rather comments upon what Harold sees as he travels, and comments upon the behavior of Harold himself. The narrator is therefore not only a character that Byron presents to his readers as working within the structure of the poem itself, but also an observer of another character, Childe Harold. Byron presents his protagonists like Russian dolls, with Harold being the outermost superficial character because he is the most representative of a literary creation, and the narrator becoming larger on another level, with the ability to criticize both Harold and what Harold encounters. But the narrator, much like Harold, does not act throughout the poem. They are not heroes of action sequences. The only member of Byron’s cast who does act is Byron himself—but more on this later.

Richard Gleckner distinguishes narrator and Harold in the opening stanzas of the poem by examining the narrator’s judgments upon Harold (55). Gleckner claims that these judgments proclaimed by the narrator serve as Byron’s ventriloquistic portraiture of the Childe and thus distinctly differentiate between narrator and Harold. The notes serve this purpose as well, to interject Byron’s voice into the poem in asides when his voice does not enter into the poem itself. And thus another distinction is apparent immediately between the Childe and the poet: the Childe, who is shunning the world and finding no source of contentment in his travels, regardless of where he wanders or whom he meets, differs greatly from the man who writes in his “Additional Note, on the Turks”:

It is hazardous to say much on the subject of the Turks and Turkey; since it is possible to live amongst them twenty years without acquiring information, at least from themselves. As far as my own slight experience carried me, I have no complaint to make; but am indebted for many civilities (I might also say friendship), and much hospitality, to Ali
Pacha, his son Veli Pacha of the Morea, and several others of high rank in the provinces. Suleyman Aga, late Governor of Athens, and not of Thebes, was a bon vivant, and as social a being as ever sat cross-legged at a tray or table. During the carnival, when our English party were masquerading, both himself and this successor were more happy to ‘receive masks’ than any dowager in Grosvenor-square. (150)

Harold would not be masquerading with his fellow Englishman and making jokes about the trashy rich widows of the upper classes. But Byron most certainly did, and presents himself here as capable of having the good time his Harold has lost the heart to experience. The notes act as commentary upon the text but also draw up the differences between the three characters so enmeshed within the poem—Byron the poet, the narrator, and that unamiable creature Childe Harold.

If there is a primary actor in the poem, that actor is Byron in his own person. The playwright-poet has written himself into his own dramatic treatment of a fictitious character and that character’s narrator. It is a self-conscious act of authorship for a poem that is a self-conscious attempt to show the movement from one set of values to another set of values and then back again by presenting the typical hero of contemporary literature, Harold, against the commenter-narrator of the poem, himself reiterating the dominant moral themes in philosophical vogue, those of liberty, equality and fraternity, as well as the apotheosis of nature in the face of the rampant industrialization of the age. The narrator even presents Harold for the combination of clichés he is, but the narrator, being a character in a dramatic poem, does not comment upon himself. Byron comments upon him, and thus upon Harold once removed. The notes absolutely deconstruct the structured relationship of narrator and protagonist, history and poetics, and heroes and writer. Here are three instances of one character’s experience commented upon by
two different voices: in stanza XXI of Canto I, Harold makes his way through the Portuguese
countryside. He has just past the convent of “Our Lady of Punishment” and proceeds onward,
which the narrator describes in this fashion:

And here and there, as up the crags you spring,
Mark many rude-carved crossed near the path:
Yet deem not these devotion’s offering—
These are memorials frail of murderous wrath:
For wheresoe’r the shrieking victim hath
Pour’d forth his blood beneath the assassin’s knife,
Some hand erects a cross of mouldering lath;
And grove and glen with thousand such are rife
Throughout this purple land, where law secures not life.

The narrator’s description is a pretty standard rendering of the sights around the convent, causing
McGann to comment that “most readers […] regard Cantos I-II as a versified travel book […]
because he narrator is so ‘impressionable’ to them” (49). The narrator is merely impressionable
because, as I’ve noted, he does not act. He merely reacts to Harold’s experience. Byron, on the
other hand, comments himself upon what he experienced on his own travels near this convent,
and we are left with a view of Byron that wholly separates him from the narrator. Byron is an
actor, and presents himself as such:

It is a well known fact, that in the year 1809, the assassinations in the streets of Lisbon
and its vicinity were not confined by the Portuguese to their countrymen; but that
Englishmen were daily butchered: and so far from redress being obtained, we were
requested not to interfere if we perceived any compatriot defending himself against his
allies. I was once stopped in the way to the theatre at eight o’clock in the evening, when the streets were not more empty than they generally are at that hour, opposite to an open shop, and in a carriage with a friend: had we not fortunately been armed, I have not the least doubt that we should have ‘adorned a tale’ instead of telling one. (70)

In these examples, there are three characters contributing to the overall picture we make of Portugal: Harold on his tour, looking upon ruins; the narrator, commenting upon Harold’s tour; and Byron, commenting on his own travels and offering an alternative reading of Harold’s travels and the narrator’s descriptions. Harold is never in any danger, the narrator reports Harold’s progress, and Byron shows the facts of traveling through a country in political turmoil and under the constant military threat of Napoleon’s rapidly charging and retreating armies.

Byron never allows us to know if Harold is armed, or if the narrator will ever report of anything untoward on Harold’s travels. Byron, pistols always at the ready in case of danger, freely discloses that Portugal, however pretty and picturesque and Gothically Catholic it may be, is still a really dangerous place to travel within, even if you are a native of a country whose armies recently helped to keep Napoleon at bay for the time being.

As I will discuss further in chapter four, Byron’s own persona as a hero within the work establishes an intimacy with the reader that his critics and audience were both very quick to comment favorably upon it as unique and innovative. Jerome McGann’s criticism of *Childe Harold* as a dramatic poem causes readers to be interested in the poet’s “existential condition” (33). The characters of the poem, including the poet himself, are in a continual state of becoming. McGann compares Wordsworth’s *Prelude* to Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* as “what a reflective autobiographical essay is to a journal or series of letters” because Wordsworth’s poem works from the framework of hindsight and cognition while Byron’s poem
“presents a series of actions and reactions in a natural order that we conveniently refer to as ‘realistic’” (33). In the first two cantos of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, poet, narrator and Harold remain three separate entities almost entirely, very rarely exhibiting the fusion of poet, narrator and hero into one in the last two cantos. Byron is very careful about maintaining the distinctiveness of his own voice separate from that of the narrator, and having his narrator carry the burden of describing and reacting to Harold and his environment. But the uppermost hurdle for all Byron scholars is the simple fact that Byron never allows us to forget him as one of the characters in his poems, if not *in propria persona*, then as a commentator upon his own writing in his notes, from *Hours of Idleness* to *Don Juan*. It is not so simple a fact as claiming that Byron always presented himself in his heroes, considering the bulk of Byron criticism, from the earliest readers to Andrew Rutherford, Paul West, and most recently, the biographical work of Benita Eisler. As I have shown, Harold and the narrator are not Byron *per se*, but characters that Byron interacts with in the poem. Byron is himself a character; the notes, when presented in full with the text, do not allow for a reading of the pilgrimage of Byron’s travels under the assumed name of Harold. They force a re-examination of Byron’s purpose in presenting the heroes of the tale in such a dramatic fashion and on such a realistic level, contemporaneous with the experience of the reader of the poem.

Because of Byron’s insistence upon the factual in his poem, and his equal insistence upon the autobiographical in his poems, I would postulate that the heroes of *Childe Harold* operate within a narrative autobiographical framework that can be examined from the perspective of a cultural psychology defined by Jerome Bruner in *Acts of Meaning*. Jerome McGann’s description of the narrator-poet as “a character in a novel or play, [who] has neither the author’s prevision no the audience’s objectivity, but is immersed in the immediacy of the events he
himself recounts” echoes David Polkinghorne’s explanation of the self within the structure of cultural psychology:

We achieve our personal identities and self-concept through the use of the narrative configurations, and make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing story. We are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives. Self, then, is not a static thing or substance, but a configuring of personal events into an historical unity which includes not only what one has been but also anticipation of what one will be. (qtd. in Bruner 115-116)²

Byron’s heroes follow the same circuitous, non-linear paths as they are presented in the story. Byron as author is just as much in the middle of his story as Harold the traveler and the narrator who comments upon Harold. Byron must add details and subtract details as he goes along with each published edition of the poem, adding notes here, removing them there, commenting upon his own errors and lacunae. McGann further elaborates, “Not only can he not see beyond any particular event; he may be equally unaware of the full significance of an event while it is taking place, or even after it has passed” (35). Byron can only be sure of what he has written only when he revisits the material himself at a later date. The natural ending of the poem, in Cantos III-IV, where Harold and Byron and narrator finally fuse into one narrative voice, situates the self-descriptive narrations and cultural criticisms via the narrator, Harold as seeming straw-man in the first two cantos, and the notes themselves, into a whole that presents Byron as an integrated persona fully aware, in hindsight, of all that he has written.

But back to Harold and the question of what makes a hero a hero in the first place. I have presented in the first chapter the reasons why critics deemed Harold “unknightly.” He is not on a

quest that can be defined within the very specific martial or amorous goals of typical romances. Harold, is, in fact slumming on the Continent while his fellow countrymen fight wars on numerous fronts, both in the New World and in the Old. Harold, as a young nobleman, should have purchased his commission in the army and served in Spain and Portugal rather than touring around the countryside, looking at ruins and moping over his own youthful mistakes. But he does not join the army, and Byron does not tell us why he refuses to wear scarlet on the battlefield. But the narrator comments upon why Harold possibly did not join up like a good lad should have done once he had reached the proper age:

And ever since that martial synod met,

Britannia sickens, Cintra! at thy name;

And folks in office at the mention fret,

And fain would blush, if blush they could, for shame.

How will posterity the deed proclaim!

Will not our own and fellow-nations sneer,

To view these champions cheated of their fame,

By foes in fight o’erthrown, yet victors here,

Where scorn her finger points through many a coming year? (XXVI)

The Convention of Cintra the narrator refers to was a particular embarrassment to British policymakers. After forcing the French to surrender at Vimiero, the British promptly convoyed them home with their booty—booty taken from the towns and villages of Portugal. Britain was Portugal’s ally; the actions of the Convention of Cintra effectively allowed the French to regroup and to attack again. Not only did the British offer their enemies a sound escape from martial
imprisonment, but they also left their allies open to further threats, after they had defeated the French in the first place.

Despite these political and martial catastrophes, Harold still cannot bring himself to join the side of the mighty in these wars, even if Napoleon has been shown to be a power-hungry, politically sadistic monster. He sees the reasons for fighting in the first place as vain, as empty as pursuing the life of debauched sensuality he once lived:

And must they fall? The young, the proud, the brave,
To swell one bloated Chief’s unwholesome reign?
No step between submission and a grave?
The rise of rapine and the fall of Spain?
And doth the Power that man adores ordain
Their doom, nor heed the suppliant’s appeal?
Is all that desperate Valour acts in vain?
And Counsel sage, and patriotic Zeal,
The Veteran’s skill, Youth’s fire, and Manhood’s heart of steel? (LIII)
The very causes for which he is supposed to fight—bravery, patriotism, and the coercion of the government upon him—do not appeal to Harold. In this case, Byron puts Harold in the guise of a British liberal, a Whig whose actions infuriate the conservative and reactionary Tory government and the sentiments of the patriots in his native land. Harold’s refusal to fight is, in Byron’s historicized and therefore politicized narrative, a direct expression of his liberal sentiments. His tourist’s romp through Portugal and Spain rather than fighting in those countries takes on a political dimension as he visits the battlefields, taking in those who have died for a cause most recently reversed by the ineptitude and poor judgment of political and military
officials. Byron and Harold here share political ideas, but, to reinforce the differences between
Harold’s tour and Byron’s tour, Byron could not have made Harold’s pacifist decisions to not
join the army so easily. Byron was prevented from joining the army on medical terms because of
his limp; Harold, on the other hand, freely chooses to remain a noncombatant. Thus his refusal
to fight, and Byron’s presentation of direct criticisms of British victories and foreign policy,
angered critics, particularly at the *Anti-Jacobin Review.*

Another aspect of Harold’s characterization that is interesting in these moments of his
rebellions against his elders is the fact that his father is nowhere to be seen in this poem, save for
one remark made by Harold in his “Good Night” lyric: “My father bless’d me fervently,/ Yet did
not much complain” (5, 1-2). Considering the political environment of the time, and the fact that
Harold and Byron are operation within a highly stratified patriarchal system of powers, Harold’s
father’s blessing is suspect. Consider Byron’s traveling partner, John Cam Hobhouse, as an
example of what one had to do in order to get a father’s blessing for your Grand Tour during a
time of war, even though one is of age and is in perfect health to join some branch of the military
(or stay at university). Upon returning to England, Hobhouse entered the militia, both to put his
father’s nerves at the political inactivity of his son to rest, and to prepare for his political career,
where voters would see wartime inactivity as cowardly shirking. That Byron has Harold’s
father offering a blessing seems oddly incongruent with the characterization of the elders of
Britain. For the most part, Byron excoriates their conservative politics and haphazard relations
with other countries, be they allies or otherwise. He tends to present the previous generation as
one tenaciously clutching to outmoded ideologies, as his roundabout attack on Edmund Burke in
his preface makes apparent. But here Byron wants Harold to have the blessing of a father who,

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3 Referenced in the appendix notes to *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* by the editors.
4 In Benita Eisler’s *Byron* (1999)
although mentioned by Harold himself, is completely absent. Any other father of the landed
gentry and aristocratic classes at the time would be urging their sons to do something with
themselves, particularly if said father was (unfortunately at the time) blessed with more than one.
George III himself would force all of his younger sons into military positions, simply to get them
involved in the country’s politics through the military. The Hanovers, however much they have
been maligned in the history books, did serve as the first family of Britain in the late eighteenth
century. The treatment of their children was considered the standard. Byron, therefore, is not
quite truthful when he presents Harold’s father as only mildly complaining about his son’s Grand
Tour through a verified war zone.

Again, this example serves not only to illustrate Harold as politicized in his idling, but
also to differentiate Byron from Harold. Byron’s father was absent from his son’s life. The
surrogate fathers who came into Byron’s life were the elders whom he criticizes at every turn in
the poem. Byron’s naïve presentation of Harold’s father is as much a projection of the sort of
father Byron would have wanted himself as a further criticism of the fathers of all the young men
who died in the Peninsular Wars and on the fields of France.

Even though Byron politicizes Harold’s refusal to fight as a positive trait, Harold’s
character still suffers under the characterization of the Maid of Sargoza. I have explained that
Harold’s purpose in the poem is not martial; Harold has no dealings with women in this poem,
either, except to mention that he had his experiences in England that left a great sadness upon
him. Whether this is a failed affair or a marriage refusal or a simply inability to find his proper
mate we are never told. But Harold most certainly is not on the lookout for a mate of any sort in
these two cantos. He collapses into himself, removing himself from international politics as
much as he removes himself from sexual politics. But Byron refuses to allow Harold to flee
completely from the influence of women. He presents the Maid of Sargoza as a foil to Harold’s
noncombatant involvement in Spain.

Her lover sinks—she sheds no ill-timed tear;
Her chief is slain—she fills his fatal post;
Her fellows flee—she checks their base career;
The foe retires—she heads the sallying host;
Who can appease liker her a lover’s ghost?
Who can avenge so well a leader’s fall?
What maid retrieve when man’s flush’d hope is lost?
Who hang so fiercely on the flying Gaul,
Foil’d by a woman’s hand, before a batter’d wall? (LV)

This description immediately follows the stanzas on the seeming vanity of war, where the young
men of Harold’s generation, on both sides of the battlefield, have thrown their lives away for the
empty promises of a few words bestowed upon them by their father, both actual and
metaphorical—bravery, patriotism, pride. Since the young men are dead, a woman arises to take
their place in battle, even though Byron’s narrator admits that battle seems no place for the maids
of Spain, who are “no race of Amazons” (I.lvii.1). Harold does not fight like this woman, who
seems to show more bravery and character than Harold ever could in her decision to fight. But
Byron undercuts her bravery by offering the narrator’s indirect criticism of her in comparing her
to her counterparts who did not fight. The maids of Spain are “form’d for all the witching arts of
love:/ And in the horrid phalanx dare to move,/ ‘Tis but the tender fierceness of the dove,/
Pecking the hand that hovers o’er her mate” (I. Lxii.2-5). The Maid’s behavior is then merely a
rendering of her obedience and chastity to the male relative who cares for her, be he father, son
or brother. She is brave, yes, and seems of more political character than Harold, but the reality reveals that she is as politicized as much as Harold is. She fights to preserve the relative who by necessity must take care of her because she has no rights without their protection. Her decision to fight is made out of love and out of self-preservation. Harold’s decision not to fight is made out of his assertion of an ideology that questions the very worth of fighting itself.

And so Byron presents Harold as one of three heroes, along with narrator and the person of Byron himself. Now that we understand who the heroes are, and where the heroes essentially came from, we must now look to what the heroes are supposed to accomplish on this pilgrimage. McGann sees the function of the heroes within the poem as dramatic developments of the character of one man, Byron; Bruner’s reading of autobiographical narrative lends credence to this critique. But, as we shall see in the next chapter, the quest—the heroes’ ultimate goal and function—cannot be reduced to these arguments, compelling though they may be. The presentation of Harold, narrator and Byron presents a drama of becoming, but also a drama of explaining what system this pilgrimage of becoming operates within. Byron will show that the self narrated onto the page is not only an impossibility, but a complete literary fiction—just like the quests of the knights of old and the processing of narrative through memory.
CHAPTER 4
THE QUEST: BYRON, GREECE AND ENGLAND

“Of the Ancient Greeks we know more than enough; at least the younger men of Europe devote much of their time to the study of the Greek writers and history, which would be more usefully spent in mastering their own.”—Byron’s second appendix to Childe Harold

Thus far, Byron has questioned the romance genre and the stock character of the romantic hero. Directly related to these two elements of poem is the romantic quest, which requires both a purpose and a hero to enact that purpose. Since Byron shows that the genre and the hero are not so easily pigeonholed within the confines of the definition of romance, the quest also becomes a questionable idea.

Critics such as Philip Martin, Andrew Rutherford, and Paul West have argued that Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage has no quest because of Byron’s refusal to maintain one specific, and therefore unifying, theme within his narrative. Byron’s poetic nihilism makes his protagonist an aimless wanderer, unable to reach a specific goal because Byron will not allow him to choose one. Byron’s rejection of systematic composition lies in his reading of the verse romance quest as he inherited it and as it stood from his perspective as a young man coming of age in the post-Revolutionary era. As I have explained in the two previous chapters, the verse romance was a conservative response by poets to assuage the uneasiness of the English reading public’s observations of the revolutions in Europe and America and the rapidly changing theories of commerce at work in the market. These ideological shifts affected not only the trade exchange of goods and services at all levels, but they also changed the interactions between people of all classes and the very face of the English countryside, farm enclosures being the most obvious result of the newly-introduced method of mass producing livestock and crops. The aristocracy
became less assured of their monetary worth when faced with the inordinately wealthy middle class, leaving them with only their pedigrees to differentiate them from lucrative businessmen, traders and farmers. Byron grew up in this climate of rapid, irrevocable change as a pauper-aristocrat, poorer than his friends whose fathers were bankers and businessmen. He matured recognizing the contradictions inherent in the new political atmosphere. The verse romance, however, refused to acknowledge these contradictions and instead looked backward to emphasize a time when they supposedly did not exist. The Middle Ages, so said the poets, were happier times because each man and woman knew his or her proper place and had faith in God to keep them well. The proper place of the knight was in war, fighting for his homeland because God was on his side. He protected his kin and provided for his dependents.

Byron did not have the patience for the false sense of security provided by these myths in romance form. He inherited a rather minor aristocratic position after a series of unfortunate deaths in his father’s family put him in immediate succession to the title Baron of Rochdale. His father, a wastrel at the best of times, left his mother with such little income she had to appeal to the crown to provide for the welfare of her young, sickly son. Experience alone showed Byron that he did not live in the same world as the knights and ladies of past centuries. The verse romance could not accommodate the type of protagonist Byron situated within his poem. He needed to manipulate the genre to suit Harold, his unknighthly truant and assumed alter ego. And so Byron changed the goal of the verse romance, that of the knight errant off to rescue his lady from evildoers and infidels, to the seemingly unfocused ramblings of a kid on an extended and expensive holiday. Without the conservative patriarchal guidance of an unquestioned authority figure, and without the unyielding faith of his forebears, Harold himself is adrift in the world,
doing his best job to avoid making the absolute choice between his inherited aristocratic duties and a life spent perpetually unattached to any system of ideas.

Byron’s “narrative of the modern tourist,” however, lends itself to interesting readings of what sort of action that narrative describes. Frederick Shilstone believes the goal of Byron’s romance to be Greece. His work presents Byron’s oeuvre as the interaction between two contradictory values systems, that of the “myth of tradition” of the feudal past idealized in verse romance and the consumer, almost mercenary culture of a society on the brink of a full-scale industrial and social revolution. There are two voices in the poem that enact a “struggle for control between allegorical narrator and allegorical pilgrim,” where the narrator serves as the voice of “regressive conservatism” and “parodistic excesses of regressive classicism” and Harold is the pilgrim “who simply will not recognize the imperatives of myth in any form, whether myths of religion or family, heritage or patriotism or even of pastoral love” (18-19). Shilstone recognizes cohesion in the work in this dialectic between obsolete traditional conservatism and modernistic values based upon the ramifications of a changing culture, where Greece serves as both the origin of Western values and the example of the rejection of those values by the sovereign Turks.

As Jerome McGann has insisted in The Romantic Ideology, the study of any poem of the Romantic period, and the study of Byron’s works in particular, forces the critic to consider the historical circumstances under which a work was composed and completed. Byron’s early poems force this issue by the inclusion of his notes. The poem read alone presents topics in the highly stylized form of the Spenserian stanza. The notes, however, present a very different view of the poetic subject. In Childe Harold, Byron sets up the distinction between Greece as poetic subject and Greece as contemporary reality:
We can all feel, or imagine, the regret which the ruins of cities, once the capitals of empires, are beheld; the reflections suggested by such objects are too trite to require recapitulation. But never did the littleness of man, and the vanity of his best virtues, of patriotism to exalt, and of valor to so defend his country, appear more conspicuous in the record of what Athens was, and the certainty of what she is now. The theatre of contention between mighty factions, of the struggles of orators, the exaltation and deposition of tyrants, the triumph and punishment and generals, is now become a scene of petty intrigue and perpetual disturbance, between bickering agents of British nobility and gentry. (85)

Byron anticipates the reactions of his readers to the contemporary plight of Greece in this passage. Byron’s readers are Englishmen and women of the early nineteenth century. They are, for the most part, members of the upper and middle classes. The men have been educated in the Classical tradition of Latin and Greek. Therefore, the image of Greece for these men consists of a very specific set of associations: the epic of the Iliad and the Odyssey, the pastoral of Pindar’s odes and, through the Latin translation, Virgil’s Eclogues and Georgics. He understands Greece as the birthplace of philosophy and democracy, where personal freedom and leisure were unencumbered by the coercion of political forces; where the decision to act depended upon one’s sense of duty to family, home, and state. He would have recognized the first sentences of Byron’s note employing the ubi sunt theme, asking the reader to recall the glories of the past by questioning their ruins in the present. Many of these readers had not traveled to Greece; their knowledge of the realities of Turkish occupation was limited, and their understanding of what the Greeks faced in attempting to overthrow their current political system was overshadowed by the successful revolutions of France and America. The idea of contemporary Greece for Byron’s
readers was a skewed reading of the texts of ancient Greece embedded in the revolutionary
timbre of recent European history.

To understand why Greece plays such an important role in the poem is to understand the
English political climate and foreign policy of the early nineteenth century. Due to the ongoing
wars with France, the English government had severely restricted the liberties of all citizens,
only granting permission for travel to those who either had business on the Continent or the
money and/or titles to avoid asking for permission in the first place. The common people of
England, already locked in by the seas, could not wander away from the island. Byron’s poetry
served as travelogues for those unable to leave the mother country. Second, whichever country
won the war would, in effect, become the protector of Western Civilization. Not only were
England and France battling over territories, they were fighting over who would lead Europe
through the nineteenth century. The English readers of Byron’s poetry would claim the Classical
world as the foundation of their civilization, a civilization at the time tenaciously defending its
right to exist against the challenges of the American and French Revolutions and, albeit a failure,
the Irish Rebellion.

Both countries made skillful use of Classical themes to bolster their political superiority
over each other. England claimed Greece as the birthplace of art, philosophy, and refined
sensibility; France viewed the Greek democratic system of government as the direct predecessor
to her own newly instituted democracy. Under the command of Napoleon Bonaparte, all of
Europe would reap the benefits of such a Classical model of government. Both England and
France set off on a race to reclaim the Ancient World as their own, resulting in the removal of
antiquities discovered by the representatives of both nations in Southern Europe and the Levant.
Napoleon’s army in Egypt found the Rosetta Stone; England sent Thomas Bruce, Lord Elgin, to
Athens to recover original antiques that would improve the arts in Britain. Greece and her culture, both contemporary and ancient, became the focus of the age, seen from many differing perspectives and used for many differing motives.

Considering the historical record and the interpretations of Greece and its connotations, Byron’s own recognition that the Greece his countrymen knew was a largely fictionalized construct disseminated through books renders Shilstone’s analysis reductive, for Shilstone does not allow that Greece is itself a construct. Shilstone merely sees Greece as a sort of battleground for the contradictory ideas Harold must somehow understand about his own country. The excessive classicism of the narrator exists to iterate the conservatism expressed by an Englishman for another Englishman. But Shilstone does not apply this myth creation of the narrator to the myth of Greece itself. The epigraph to this chapter shows that Byron clearly saw the difference between what the histories presented as Greece and how Greece actually operated politically in the early nineteenth century. The travelogues published at this time did not help to explain to readers the reality of Greece as a specific locale existing under an Eastern political and social system. In a long note about the current travel literature that encourages a revolution in Greece to remove the fetters of Turkish rule, Byron attests that travel writers cannot know of the true Greek situation because they refuse to acknowledge that the Greek situation is in fact a Turkish one:

The fact is, we are deplorably in want of information on the subject of the Greeks, and in particular their literature; nor is there any probability of our being better acquainted, till our intercourse becomes more intimate, or their independence confirmed: the relations of passing travelers are as little to be depended on as the
invectives of angry factors; but till something more can be attained, we must be content with the little to be acquired from similar sources.

The intimacy Byron calls for is not necessarily a greater Western influence in Greece but a greater understanding of Greece separate from the literature of the ancients all young men of considerable income had read. These young men were, of course, the politicians, ambassadors, writers and teachers of Britain. The independence of Greece would allow Westerners to examine the contemporary literature and culture of the country more thoroughly, but the result of those examinations would be problematic in themselves: Greece could not attain independence until it recognized itself as a nation separate from the Turks who currently ruled over it. This idea of Greek nationhood would draw on the literature of ancient Greece to assert itself. Therefore, anyone studying the Greeks after a revolution would be confirming Greece as the rightful inheritor of its own past and completely justified in overturning the Turkish government. The revolution would be an approximate return to a very literal past. Shilstone’s dialectic does not consider the idea that the myths Harold rejects are not merely the romance myths of his homeland, but also the myths his countrymen have extended to other territories based upon their interpretations of literature rather than on first-hand empirical knowledge.

The English reading of Greece tended to omit important details from the historical myth of the idealized Greek nation. First, there was no singular, unified concept of “Greece” in the ancient world. What we now know as Greece was a loose conglomerate of city-states that bickered constantly and frequently wage war against each other, the prime example of this being The Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta in the fifth century B.C.E. Second, xenophobia, the fear of outsiders, is an Attic term for an Athenian distrust of foreigners. The universal and democratic theme of brotherhood among all Greeks would have been laughable to
an Athenian living during Socrates’ time, not only because of an Athenians inherent mistrust of those beyond his own city state, but also because the idea of nationhood-universality simply did not exist. Third, ancient cultures were slave-based cultures. Athenians would enslave fellow “Greeks” captured in war or by pirates. Most Western European countries had emancipated their slaves and had outlawed human ownership by the time Byron wrote his poem, England in particular in 1808. But the fact remains that the ancient Greeks did not hold true to freedom for all men all of the time. And finally, The Greek democratic system allowed for the death of the foremost philosopher of Athens, Socrates, however manipulated and perverted that act actually was. The ideals of the past were, and still continue to be, subject to human error. But in their own idealist fervor in espousing the values of the ancients, students, historians, political figures and travelers glossed over these details as they perpetrated their own fictional myth of Greece.

The Greece these readers and travelers constructed is best described by Benedict Anderson as an imagined community. Although Anderson’s arguments relate to an American espousal of nationhood, his explanation of how nations define themselves apply to how outsiders imagine the nation of an entirely different culture. Anderson describes nations as arising out of large landmasses filled with people of differing social, religious and cultural backgrounds. Because these people do not unify tribally, by family ties, or by the limits of their locale, they must construct an ideology general enough to suit all its members. Inherent in this developing sense of nation is not only a process of creating and accepting myths of origin, but also forgetting the details of the past. For example, the American imagined community accepts the fact that the founding fathers revolted against the British crown for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but few Americans beyond prep school history would argue that the colonists’ main complaint against the crown was one of a lack of representation in Parliament. The revolutionaries were
initially pressing for their rights as Englishmen, completely aware of their secondary status as citizens based upon their measured distance from London. As the myth of American origins became more codified and dissipated in the first half of the nineteenth century, when writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Washington Irving attempted to define some separation of America from England through literature, this detail became forgotten. To differentiate America from England—a very difficult task, considering there was no real linguistic or severe cultural schism between the colonies and the motherland—writers and historians had to create a myth of America that would unify the many different cultures existing in the newly formed United States.

Europeans enacted a very similar process in constructed a Greece totally alien to contemporary Greeks. William St. Clair, in his book *Lord Elgin and The Marbles*, details the state of Greece under Turkish rule extensively:

> As a guide to the contemporary political situation in Greece, the notes to *Childe Harold* are more reliable than the verse. And it was by no means obvious that the future of a land inhabited for hundreds of years by peoples of different traditions and religions in conditions of social harmony lay in driving out the minorities and trying to establish a homogenous nation state. Capodistria, the most eminent Greek of the time, put his faith in a gradualist approach, relying on the spread of education to liberalize the institutions of the Ottoman state. Others looked forward to the day, which did not seem far distant, when the Greeks would supersede the Turks as the dominant group within the Ottoman empire, would gradually take over more and more of the positions of power, and establish a new Byzantium. The educated Greek classes, who, apart from a large diaspora in western Europe, mostly lived in Constantinople were strong upholders of the Ottoman system in which they filled many positions of wealth and power. Few of the Greeks
living in the territory of modern-day Greece shared the views set out in the verse part of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, and would not have understood the allusions. They did not, in Elgin and Byron’s time, think of themselves in nationalist terms. They were not Hellenes, but the Orthodox Christian inhabitants of a large multicultural empire. When Western travelers heard stories about the great men and women of ancient times, they thought they had picked up a genuine continuous tradition, but in most cases, it is likely that they were repeating back stories derived from previous travelers. (189)

The Greeks did not have a conceptualized imagined community for themselves when Byron wrote his poem. Europeans, however, did have their own imagined Greece, effectively divorcing the current political situation of Greece as a political entity from the classical literature they had absorbed both at school and through popular literature and histories. Byron’s epigraph to this chapter illustrates this point by forcing the reader to attempt to understand that the Greece of the written word is a far different entity than the Greece under the Ottoman Turks.

Byron’s own relationship with Greece at this point in his career also provides an example of the Byronic split between artistic formality and temporal reality. A brief history of Byron’s relationship with Lord Elgin and Byron’s involvement in the removal of the Parthenon sculptures illustrates this convoluted dichotomy between poet and poem. From 1809-1811, Byron completed his Grand Tour of Southern Europe and the Levant. In 1810, Byron arrived in Athens with his traveling partner John Cam Hobhouse. They had just ended a tour of Albania, a land few Englishmen had actually traveled through extensively. Byron and Hobhouse had been guests in the courts of various eastern potentates and had befriended exotic robber barons whose armies were the scourge of travelers throughout the East. Athens did not have the rare luster of unknown lands when the two twenty-two-year-olds entered the city in early January. English
Classical scholars, artists and antiques dealers formed a society enclave; the Napoleonic Wars diverted young men on their Grand Tours from Rome to Athens. Lord Elgin, the British Ambassador in Constantinople, was working on the project that would yield the jewel of the British Museum: he was in the process of systematically removing the endangered friezes of the Parthenon to England. To aid him in this project, Elgin hired Giovanni Lusieri, a landscape painter and antiquities expert. Byron received a visit from Lusieri upon his arrival in Athens; the two cultivated a business relationship that would, once Byron and Elgin had both returned to England, require Byron to deliver papers of the sale and transfer of the Parthenon friezes to Elgin’s solicitors. Byron and Elgin never met, but the two were involved, however directly or indirectly, in the purchase and removal of cultural artifacts from their country of origin to London. Byron even traveled on the ships Elgin used to transport the marbles to England, the sculptures themselves effectively used as ballast during the voyage.

Despite this business relationship with Elgin, Byron refused to recognize Elgin’s actions as a form of art preservation:

At this moment (3 January 1810), besides what has already been deposited in London, an Hydroit vessel is in the Piraeus to receive every portable relic. Thus, as I heard a young Greek observe in common with many of his countrymen for, lost as they are, they yet feel on this occasion—thus may Lord Elgin boast of having ruined Athens. And Italian painter of the first eminence, named Lusieri, is the agent of devastation; and like the Greek finder of Verres in Sicily, who followed the same profession he has proved the able instrument of plunder . . . when they carry away three or four shiploads of the most valuable and massy relics that time and barbarism have left to the most injured and celebrated of cities; when they destroy, in a vain attempt to tear down, those works which
have been the admiration of ages, I know no motive which can excuse, no name which
can designate, the perpetrators of this dastardly devastation. (85-86)

Byron is most disturbed by the removal of the relics from their specific locale. Timothy Webb
refers to Byron’s insistence upon fact and location as the “empirical experience of Greece”
(158). The moving of relics from one country to another, Byron feels, will instigate a translation
error between what Greece is and what the English observer of the marbles in a museum will
assume Greece to be. In recognizing this, Byron actively participates in one of the critical
problems recognized by his own contemporaries: “a critical engagement with a tradition that is
fragmented and suggestively open to interpretation, development and revision” (Webb 150). By
presenting (and experiencing) both realities of Greece to his readers, that of the literary and that
of the historical, Byron effectively begins to unravel and deconstruct his own poetic output and
his own empirical experience.

In Self, Text, and Romantic Irony, Frederick Garber analyzes Byron’s struggle between
presenting fact and performing fiction as an inherent problem within the Romantic ideal of
sincere sentimentality, where the self (or the reality) is presented uncompromised onto the page.
Byron’s frustrations arose from his acceptance and criticism of this ideal in his early poetry. By
insisting upon fact, Byron

[places] the events of the narrative [in any of his poems concerning Greece] very tangibly
in a society that is a contemporary reality rather than a literary reconstruction or an
abstract ideal. Byron’s decoding of the Greek language [by his insistence that the
language of Modern Greece is Romaic, rather than Attic Greek] is related to his
demystifying of Greek mythology; both are part of a philosophy that insists on the value
of the present and the immediate, on life experienced directly rather than refracted
through literature, and on the strength of the vernacular rather than the more exclusive attributes of classical literature. (Webb 159)

But Byron (and not Webb) recognizes that the recording of empirical experience and the historical records are just as much artifacts as a work of poetry. Byron’s historical record of Greece forces interpretation as much as his poetry does, simply because it is a written work. The words on the page can only relate to other words; there is no true capturing of history while one writes, as much as there is no sincere sentimentality as one composes a poem. Byron’s poetry and notes circle round one another, reflecting back on each other as historiography and poetry. Because poem and notes continually demand reinterpretation from readers, the resolution of the dichotomous relationship between fact and fiction is impossibility. If anything can be concluded from the dialectic between Byron’s representations of form and history, it is that both are fictions awaiting the interpretation of a willing reader.

Because of Byron’s attack on Elgin, critics have attempted to claim him as a staunch supporter of the Greek right to reclaim the marbles as their own. As Benita Eisler has paraphrased Edward Said in her most recent biography of Byron, the revivalist mission of Orientalism is “the belief that the writer ‘speaks for’ a people understood as silent, without a collective consciousness, and hence, in political and historical senses, dead” (244). Greece stripped of her artistic glories and the original government of its ancestors was dead in the European consciousness. The European powers thus attempted to save Greece through removing her artworks to ensure their protection in other countries. This was Elgin’s mission in a higher ideological sense, along with his insistence upon the sculptures of Greece as the grand saviors of English art and industry. As we have seen, Byron did not agree with Elgin’s projects, and considered them acts of plunder worth cataloguing and haranguing in print for all the public to
read. But something sticks out as a bit disingenuous in Byron’s treatment of Elgin, not merely because of Byron’s involvement, however minor, in the removal of the Parthenon sculptures from Athens. Byron criticizes Elgin’s removal of the marbles and reconstruction of them in the British Museum (where they have been removed from their original structure and context of “Greek Temple”), but Byron uses Greece himself to perpetuate the notion that ideas and narratives and histories are “constructs” of some sort. He attempts, like Elgin, to save Greece from such plunder by attacking Elgin in print, but Byron plunders Greece as much as Elgin does by presenting, in his poetry, the same European ideals of saving the birthplace of civilization as his peers. By “saving” the marbles from the Greeks who no longer seem to value them anymore, Elgin merely offers them to the English public, who will construct and reconstruct histories around them that never truly existed. The same danger lies in reading Byron’s poem alone without the notes to serve as a check on what Shilstone regards as the excesses of philhellenism.

There is a danger of conflating Byron’s words with Elgin’s deeds in this instance. But there is also support for such a reading in Byron’s biography. When he published Childe Harold, Byron was embarking on a political career that would prove to be rather useless in the long run. His support for the Framebreaker’s bill and his speeches for Catholic Emancipation in the House of Lords were dismissed by his peers as youthful performances of rhetoric. Byron would abandon his career and concentrate on his writing, discouraged by his reception and the incredibly conservative reactionary government he found himself a participant in. Byron, unable to change the world as a political force, would focus on his writing as an active voice of dissent in the literary conversation around him. Byron was always a proponent of satire as a vehicle of truth and change; the later works of Beppo and Don Juan would cause more reactions from the public than his political career could ever hope to cause. For Byron, the words would become
the power he could not have politically. His wife would even refer to him as “the Napoleon of rhyme.”

But this example of Byron’s poetic force brings up questions concerning the word “plunder.” Does the act of composition actually use manipulative imperialist means to exploit another culture for some sort of profit? As the historical record indicates, Byron was a bestseller in his lifetime, particularly when he published his Eastern tales. John Murray made enormous sums from Byron’s sales. But Byron saw not one penny of his royalties, because he gave his copyrights away to relatives and friends. The standard mores of the Regency dictated that a gentleman does not toil for his lucre, and Byron, himself socially and politically ambitious, was not about to question this dictate by accepting money for his work. Since Byron did not benefit financially from his Eastern tales, would his work still be considered cultural plunder if his reputation benefited from their publication? Byron did not gain entrance into the Regency ton because of his title, which was a rather minor and recent one in that environment filled with Elgins and Marlboroughs and Spencers and Wellings. Byron became socially prominent because of his artistic output. The social stratosphere clamored after him because he was the new literary superstar. But again, is Byron’s use of the Eastern tales the same act of plunder as Elgin’s use of the marbles to buttress the flagging English art and industry scenes?

Michael Macovksi in his Bakhtinian reading of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage would disagree. He sees Byron as carrying on a detailed conversation with the poetry and ideas he alludes to the poems, a set of poetry and ideas that every educated Englishman would have been familiar with. This forces the reader to also participate in that conversation by recognizing the allusion and applying it to the work itself. Macovski also views Byron’s work as an exercise in historical reconstruction, where Byron translates through his poetry “what the original text
cannot” (30). For my purposes, Byron’s original text is the idea of “Greece” and how that idea operates within his contemporary framework. Byron presents *The Giaour* as fragmented poem and Greece as fragmented history. A reader or traveler’s interpretation of snippets of narration or eroded Greek temples translates them into a whole, however flawed or ill conceived that whole may be. The original text of Greece cannot supply a whole text entire of itself; its fragmentary nature demands translation and reconstruction. Macovksi asserts that Byron works within an already-established literary canon that he uses for his own poetic purposes.

If Byron is already operating within a literary framework, he cannot stand accused of plundering anymore than Milton, who would have plundered Classical, Hebrew and Christian texts and cultures to compose *Paradise Lost*—all works that are not of a particularly “English” canon. Byron merely wrote within the conventions of the Regency period, and those conventions included citing Greece as the originating place of Western civilization. And then there are the copious amounts of notes that Byron included in his works that undermine and support this literary framework, first by presenting the foil of the reality of Greece and then by revealing the fictions Englishmen had constructed about that reality, which were themselves based upon a literary tradition they had been steeped in throughout their academic careers. If Byron’s acts of composition are the plunder of a culture, then nearly every single poet at the time is guilty of that plunder as well. Keats’ “Grecian Urn,” based wholly on ideas about beauty and art via Greek sculpture, would be an act of cultural imperialism. The Bakhtinian heteroglossia inherent in all of these examples nullifies the accusation of artistic plunder. Instead, it supports my thesis that “Greece” for the English, exemplified in Byron’s poetry, is a construct made up of many influences, some based entirely on literary foundations, such as the reading of Herodotus, and some based on the recording of realities, such as Byron’s notes and travelogues. The
reconstruction of Greece relies upon the reader and the observer who operates, as much as Byron
did himself, within the social, historical and literary conventions of his particular age.

But even more so, Byron’s poem and notes work within the limits of a literary
framework. That framework includes texts of all sorts, including the imagined community of
Greece and the imagined community of England arising as an imperialist nation-state of its own.
Texts have the wonderful trait of being open to interpretation and re-interpretation. They can be
challenged, re-written in revisionist historian fashion, and completely reconceptualized by
readers. Byron’s comment on the English not knowing enough about Greek literature is
important here: once the Greeks establish a contemporary literature of revolt, of their history and
origins, and enact their own process of mythologizing and forgetting aspects about their own
ideas of Greek-ness, then an even literary exchange between cultures can take place. Byron is
himself performing an act of literary exchange by both affirming and questioning the European
ideas of Greece. Lord Elgin, on the other hand, does not operate in such a flexible environment.
His purchase of the Parthenon Sculptures is a transaction completed around a literary framework,
conducted with Turkish officials and unchallenged by Greeks en masse because they have no
artillery with which to fight Elgin’s actions. The desires of Greeks to keep the sculptures in
Greece cannot be formulated until the Greeks can establish their own need for them. Byron
plunders Greece, but recognizes that his words are not a permanent structure upon which Greece
hangs, unlike the marbles, housed in the British Museum as a quite permanent gesture of one
culture assuming the guise of another unchallenged.
CHAPTER FIVE

TO PLEASE THE LADIES: THE BOOK OF CHILDE HAROLD

To understand the book Byron presented to his public, we must examine how the book evolved from manuscript to published copy. Even though Byron was already published before the sensation that was Childe Harold, these previous works, Hours of Idleness and English Bards and Scots Reviewers, were vanity publications financially supported by Byron’s family and friends. Byron did accrue a reputation, however, with the publication of the second poem, which was a direct reaction against the critics who lambasted his first effort. Byron attacked all the critics at all the major journals in Popean couplets, engaging his audience in a very public catfight between a Lord writing verse and critics who viewed that aristocrat as a Cambridge-educated, rather spoiled young dilettante. When he returned from the Levant, Byron had Childe Harold ready for distribution among friends, but really had no desire to publish and incur the simmering wrath of critics yet again, especially in the context of English Bards and Scots Reviewers’ aftermath. His friend R. C. Dallas convinced him otherwise, and John Murray published the first edition in March of 1812.

Two complete manuscripts of Childe Harold exist: on holograph copy in the Murray collection and a printer’s copy housed at the British Museum. Jerome McGann has examined both of these manuscripts, as had E. H. Coleridge for his previous edition of the complete works. McGann’s bibliographic descriptions in the commentary of his complete works makes no mention of the physicality of the MSS; there are no descriptions of ink, type of paper used, artistic marginalia (of which Byron was rather fond). The dating of the MS is approximately from 1809-1811, relying on letter and journal entries, and the memoirs of R. C. Dallas as evidence. No stemma is available. As far as the notes are concerned, these pose a particular
problem: while the vast bulk of the notes are in the MSS copies, later editions of CH include
notes added by Byron for that particular edition. Thankfully, McGann’s Byron and the Complete
Poetic Works cite when these notes were added, based on the publication copy of a specific
editions but do not cite the whereabouts of the particular MS or proof sheets of these notes,
which can be quite lengthy. The number of editions—both authorized and unauthorized—after
Murray’s seven editions between 1812-1824 is unknown.

The first edition is a quarto edition priced at thirty shillings. Murray publications were
issued to booksellers with a rather unusual element: the books always included some sort of
advertisement on the title page. This edition of Childe Harold bears an ad for a “T. Davison,
Lombard Street, Whitefriars.” Murray had the book bound in black drab paper boards and
pasted a white label on the back strip with “Childe Harold, A Romance. By Lord Byron” written
in black. An examination of the physicality of the book itself gives an idea of the sort of reader
Murray intended as the purchaser of his publications. The first edition denotes that Murray felt
he was taking a risk publishing this rambunctious aristocrat, but also realized that anyone
interested in romance would probably give the book a fair chance if it were produced cheaply
and priced reasonably, attesting to the publishers’ conception of the anticipated audience “to be a
wealthy one, people interested in travel books and topographical poems, people with a classical
education and with a taste for antiquarian lore and the philosophical musings of a young English
lord” (McGann, Beauty of Inflections 259). Murray’s decision proved to be a cleverly
considered business transaction.

After the initial publication, Murray would re-issue the book seven times in the same
year, in seven separate editions, with the addition of several new poems and notes. Although
only 4,500 copies sold within the first six months of publication, Lord Byron had clearly caused
a literary ruckus. Critics both praised and chastised him in the most respected literary journals of the day, the *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly Reviews*. *Blackwood’s* magazine covered his literary and social debut as if he were one of Napoleon’s most important diplomats. He received invitations to the richest and most exclusive parties and salons. Amidst all this attention he would semi-facetiously reflect that he awoke one morning and found himself famous.

There are many reasons why Byron became such a celebrity in his own time: his rank, his beauty, his genius, his seeming aloofness. Bergan Evans facetiously has remarked, “this unfailing aphrodisiac has never been more successfully mixed” (“Lord Byron’s Pilgrimage”). But what I wish to examine here is not an audience’s instinctual reaction to a good-looking young man lucky enough to have been born a lord and talented enough to get himself published—any current film star or pop star owes his celebrity to a combination of the same characteristics. I want to examine how Byron became the institution of Byron through this first widespread publication, and the most proper way to approach this idea is through a discussion of the stylistic elements of Byron’s writing—his interaction with his public—that produced such an institution in the first place.

The title of my chapter refers to a remark made to Byron by Murray later in the poet’s career, after the self-exile of 1816 and before the rather thorny publication negotiations of the first cantos of *Don Juan*. Murray had reluctantly published Byron’s closet dramas, frequently lecturing the poet in letters of their unmarketability. Murray encouraged Byron to write more in his “Corsair” style to continue to connect with his female audience. Byron, of course, did not listen and continued to produce more unstageable plays and began to mature his style through the use of *ottava rima* in *Beppo* and *Don Juan*. His business relationship with Murray soured, and he eventually sought other means of publication. But that comment about the ladies stands out not
so much for its brutal assertion that Byron, even though an artist, was a business investment for Murray and subject to basic rules of the market, but that Murray and Byron both recognized the importance of a female readership in developing the poet’s career.

As I have documented in the first chapter, Bakhtin’s assertion that Byron’s experimentation with form leads to a more novelistic reading of his works because of the relationship Byron assumes between himself as writer and his readers as audience. The relationship between reader and writer is immediate and intimate. But Byron makes the work even more intimate by forcing his readers to supply much of his hero’s past according to their own inclinations. Byron, in effect, allows his readers to gossip about Harold. From Chaucer’s description of the Wife of Bath as a nagging, gossiping harridan to Jane Austen’s portrayal of her heroines as readers of novels, women have been branded with the rather pejorative term “gossip.” Thusly, in her book Gossip, Patricia Meyer Spacks considers this intimate relationship between reader and writer as a form of “serious gossip [...] which takes place in private, at leisure, in a context of trust, usually among no more than two or three people. Its participants use talk about others to reflect about themselves, to express wonder and uncertainty and to locate certainties, to enlarge their knowledge of one another.” (5) Furthering her argument Spacks also draws upon Bakhtin’s insistence that all forms of the printed word take into account the idea of a concrete listener (21). For the purpose of this essay, Spacks’ ideas on biography and collected letters serve to illustrate the social implications of Byron’s notes: “The pleasure of reading biography, like that of reading letters, derives from the universal hunger to penetrate other lives,” a hunger satiated by the “kind of interpretation [of those other lives] that ‘makes sense,’ a story about human life fitting our convictions about the shapes life assumes.” (93)
Byron’s notes to his poem are little snippets of autobiography, inundating the reader with what he has seen and experienced and what he now thinks of those experiences. The notes serve as further examples complementing the poem as a whole, a poem that is about a pilgrim with no destination and no faith living in a world that seems to have been suffering from a sort of communal pandemonium for the past decade. The pilgrims of the poem—Harold and the narrator—exist with Byron, the pilgrim of the world and of the notes, and the reader, also a pilgrim of the world. The exchange between reader and poet is explicitly required for the poem to make sense: the reader must participate, for this is not a completed verse narrative, but a progressing one, where the Childe and the narrator change as the world changes around them, and where the reader changes as well because he lives in the world of the poet, Childe and narrator.

Considering Spacks’ criticism, the lines become easier to trace when attempting to understand why Byron became so easily collapsed with Harold in the minds of his audience. Byron demands a history for Harold but does not supply a definitive one in the story. Readers complete the poem by giving Harold a point of origin for his sins. And because Byron’s tour of Europe is the source material for Harold’s tour, Byron and Harold become synonymous in the minds of a reader intimately acting in the development of the story. So much in the poem is left to the reader that Harold and his quest become the bare outlines of a story that must be fleshed out through the reactions of the audience. Harold’s sins became literary exercise in the minds of female readers. Defining the quest also became an exercise. What is Harold actually searching for? Is it a woman, or a faith, or a purpose in the tumultuous world of changing social and political mores? Harold is the everyman each reader could reconstruct and deconstruct at will, and because of the similarities in “trivial particulars” to Byron’s own history, Byron also
suffered the construction, reconstruction and deconstruction of his audience. Two members of that female audience provide insight into the construction and eventual deconstruction of Byron: Lady Caroline Lamb and Anabella Milbanke.

Caroline Lamb met Byron through her husband’s political contacts in early 1812. She had devoured *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and was quite prepared to throw herself into an affair with the poet as soon as she met him. Two years younger than Caroline and desperate for political allies, Byron quickly became a regular at William Lamb’s home, conversing with other members of Parliament and flirting with Lamb’s brilliantly engaging wife. Not one to ever pass up a relationship with a charming woman, Byron quickly became Caroline’s lover. The actual affair lasted three months. But Byron and Caroline continued a serious epistolary relationship with Caroline’s mother-in-law, Lady Melbourne, acting as go-between for the two lovers. Caroline first conceived of Byron as the living embodiment of Harold, conferring upon him all the fictional trappings of Byron’s misguided hero. Her journal entry records her thoughts, originally expressed by Lady Blessington at a ball, describing Byron for all time as “mad, bad and dangerous to know.” She added afterwards, casting herself in the role of a romantic heroine, “That beautiful pale face will be my destiny” (qtd. in Evans).

Caroline had transferred her own sentiments about Harold onto her erstwhile lover, demanding that he act the part to fulfill her expectations. Their letters, as biographers from Marchand and Eisler and critics such as Nicola Watson have commented, read as if they were guided in spirit by Choderlos de Laclos’ *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. Byron served as Caroline’s Valmont, and Lady Melbourne stands in as a particularly vicious version of Madame de Merteuil, passing along letters from one address to another, reading each one, and disseminating their contents to her friends. Byron and Caroline’s letters found their way into social circles.
Not only were the two enacting a fictionalized romance in highly stylized prose, but the Regency ton were devouring the fiction as if they were receiving installments of a novel published in magazines. After a half-year spent swapping love notes, Byron felt the need to disentangle himself from his ardent admirer. Caroline became obsessive, breaking into Byron’s rooms and reading through his letters and journals, attempting to find documentation to support her suspicions of infidelity, and stalking him around London, inquiring after his movements at his clubs and following his carriage as he paid his daily visits to associates. Byron, nearly at his wits end, called the romance off in a letter. Caroline reacted by inundating him with letters of her own. When her refused to answer her, she played out her outrage and grief in a melodramatic gesture worthy of a gothic novel: at a ball both were attending, she managed to break and glass and then attempted to slice into her wrists with the broken slivers. William Lamb, appalled and embarrassed, asked for Byron’s aid in sending Caroline to her relatives in Ireland to avoid further scandal and to get Caroline as far away from Byron as possible. Once she was there, Caroline gathered a group of village girls, dressed them in white, and ceremoniously burned Byron’s letters in a bizarre exorcism ritual. But Caroline only burned copies of Byron’s letters; the originals she kept until her death in 1828. To further damn Byron in the eyes of his public, Caroline presented her own version of their affair in her novel Glenarvon, depicting Byron as the corrupting Lord who leads her heroine astray. The thinly veiled roman a clef was immensely popular. After reading it, Byron would offer this terse criticism: “I read Glenarvon, too, by Caro Lamb/ God Damn!”

Caroline’s actions, both as a spurned lover and as a novelist, depict her relationship with Byron, aside from the actual “affair,” existing on a purely literal level. This is not to defend Byron’s actions in any way. Any sensitive reader will admit that Byron was not the most
wholesome of individuals and could not really ignore accusations of sexual libertinism. But the
depiction of Byron as hero within a literary context reveals that Caroline’s reaction to him was
not only a reaction to his beauty or his rank—her husband outranked Byron—but to her own
construction of him as a Harold-like figure. In chapter two, I traced Harold’s predecessors
through the existing literature to show that Harold already was a literary institution. Caroline
reacted in kind, but also envisioned and enacted a literary relationship with Byron based upon
her prior reading of novels and poems. Whether or not Byron actually fit the role did not matter;
Caroline would have supplied the traits she needed to satisfy her preconceptions.

One of the avenues available to Byron to distance himself from Caroline was marriage.
Lady Melbourne introduced Byron to her niece in a letter in 1812 as the affair with Caroline was
winding down. Anabella Milbanke also conducts her initial relationship with Byron through
letters. Byron considered her a welcome change to Caroline: patient, logical and calm, Anabella
seemed, in her writing, to be the woman Byron could actually think of as a suitable wife.
Anabella was quite prepared to reform the wayward young man her aunt had placed in her path.
She, already acquainted with the exploits of Childe Harold and the gossip from London that
reached her ears concerning Harold’s creator, set herself on a mission to save Byron from
himself.

Anabella and Byron were married in January of 1815. The marriage would last a little
over a year, producing one child, Ada. The moment the two met, Byron knew that the
relationship with Anabella could not last. His wife treated him as a fictional character awaiting
revision and polishing. He in turn reacted in the extreme, espousing the worst traits of his
literary creations, drinking, gambling effusively and dallying about with prostitutes and actresses
in Covent Garden. Anabella left Byron and pressed for separation in early 1816, six weeks after
the birth of their daughter. Then followed a month of frantic negotiations, not in person but again in letters. To help Byron through this period, and perhaps to save her marriage, Anabella frequently advised her husband not to write poetry. She seems to have quickly realized that Byron was acting out his literary creations in their marriage. These admonitions were a massive blow to the writer. His reputation rested on his creative output alone; stopping would effectively remove him from any position of power and prestige he had. The separation proceedings went forth, Byron attempting to heal the rift by asking Anabella what her exact grievances were to atone for them in private. But, in a clever stroke that Jerome Christensen claims out-Byroned Byron, Anabella refused to name her exact allegations against her husband. She could neither iterate sexual perversions in the marriage bed that would have placed Byron squarely in prison (sodomy has been the most frequently theorized possible crime), nor name his infidelities, either hetero-or–homosexual in nature, without implicating herself in the process simply by her knowledge of them. Refusing to name the crime, like Byron’s refusing to give Harold a past full of concrete transgressions, allowed friends, solicitors, family members and the public to openly speculate upon Byron’s sins. It was never a question of if Byron had committed unspeakable crimes, but an explicit absence of the relating of those crimes. Unable to match Anabella’s challenge without necessary self-disclosure, Byron signed the separation documents and left England, never to return.

These two instances of Byronism taken into the personal realm of relationships show the extremes of the interpretation of Byron’s creations. But on a more universal level, Byron’s contemporary critics were quick to pick up on this heavily intimate, personal tone of his works. John Wilson iterates the pull of such a personal tone in his review:
Each of us must have been aware in himself of a singular illusion, by which these disclosures, when read with that high and tender interest which attaches to poetry, seem to have something of the nature of private and confidential communications. They are not felt, while we read, as declarations published to the world—but almost as secrets whispered to chosen ears. Who is there that feels, for a moment, that the voice which reaches the inmost recesses of his heart is speaking to the careless multitudes around him? Or, if we do so remember, the words seem to pass by others like air, and to find their way to the hearts for whom they were intended,—kindred and sympathizing spirits, who discern and own that secret language of which the privacy is not violated, though spoken in the hearing of the uninitiated,—because it is not understood. There is an unobserved beauty that smiles on us alone; and the more beautiful to us, because we feel as if chosen out from a crowd of lovers (Edinburgh Review, 30 (1818): 87-120)\(^1\)

Naturally Byron’s writing in his own voice, as Walter Scott commented, contributed to this reaction from the critic. This intimate chat, this idea of serious gossip as literature, has led W. W. Robson to postulate that Byron is acutely aware of his audience on an individual level, where “his sociable tone, his friendship with the reader, is founded on the tacit agreement that he too is a fellow sinner” (93). Byron never would assume a self-righteous attitude in his writing, even in the satire of Don Juan, where society in all its beautiful and corrupt glory is analyzed from the viewpoint of someone who has lived through it and in it, both as the literary lion of 1812 and the social and literary outcast of 1816.

Byron creates further intimacy by emphasizing the fact that his audience is a reading audience—not literary dilettantes, but readers who follow the works of authors in the literary magazines. Perhaps the following note is a catty attack on the critics who ripped apart his Hours

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\(^1\) Quoted in the Peter J. Manning, “Lord Byron in the Marketplace”
of Idleness in 1808; the note nevertheless alludes to a specific edition of the magazine that would either have been kept in a reader’s library for reference or would have been remembered by the reader.

In a former number of the Edinburgh Review, 1808, it is observed: “Lord Byron passed some of his early years in Scotland, where he might have learned that *pibroch* does not mean *bagpipe*, any more than duet means fiddle.” Query,—Was it in Scotland that the young gentlemen of the Edinburgh Review learned that *Solyman* means *Mahomet II*, any more than *criticism* means *infallibility*? The mistake seemed so completely a lapse of the pen (from the great similarity of the two words, and the *total absence of error* from the former pages of the literary leviathan) that I should have passed it over as in the text, had I not perceived in the Edinburgh Review much facetious exultation on all such detections, particularly a recent one, where words and syllables are subjects of disquisition and transposition; and the above-mentioned parallel passage in my own case irresistibly propelled me to hint how much easier it is to be critical than correct. The gentlemen, having enjoyed many a triumph on such victory, will hardly begrudge me a slight ovation for the present. (147)

Not only does Byron rely on his readers’ familiarity with the magazine and its contents, he also warns them about taking such journals on their reputation alone than on their accuracy in reporting on a work and in criticizing it. In talking about the assumed infallibility of such journals, Byron invites his readers to re-evaluate the reasons why these journals seem so infallible. As much as the editors of the *Edinburgh Review* criticized Byron’s work, Byron criticizes them by using their same arguments. The critical attack places Byron as much among the readership of the journal as his audience. He does not pose as an outside author who does not
comment upon such matters; Byron is very much involved in the world around him, and that
stance of being in the world associates him with his fellow readers. Consider this second note,
where Byron comments upon the work of Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan, one of the most
prominent authors of the day:

Before I say anything about a city of which everybody, traveler of not, has thought
necessary to say something, I will request Miss Owenson, when she next borrows an
Athenian heroine for her four volumes, to have the goodness to marry her to somebody
more a gentleman than ‘Disdar Aga’ (who by the by is not an Aga), the most impolite of
petty officers, the greatest patron of larceny a Athens ever saw (except Lord E.) and the
unworthy occupant of the Acropolis, on a handsome annual stipend of 150 piastres (eight
pounds sterling), out of which he has only to pay his garrison, the most ill-regulated corps
in the ill-regulated Ottoman Empire. (note D)

Byron takes issue with her misinformed use of a particular hero for her heroine Ida. Only fellow
readers of Owenson’s books would understand this note, and Byron obviously places himself
among them, both as reader and as critic willing to revise his own ideas of Owenson’s work
based on his own experience. This is a literary dialogue taking place among Byron, reader and
critic, where each has his own say about a poem set in the world where each man and woman
naturally has his or her own say.

In conclusion, Byron’s notes to Childe Harold do not advocate the poetical and
ideological nihilism Rutherford or Martin would lay at the poet’s feet. Rather, they demand a
freer interpretation of all ideas included in the poem and the notes themselves. The notes and
poem also create a persona for the poet that changes with each reader, the examples of Caroline
Lamb and Anabella Milbanke showing exactly how different that person becomes as each reader
decides upon which qualities to confer upon the poet and the poet’s hero. Byron blurs the
distinctions between the actual, temporal realities of life and the form we place upon those
realities as we attempt to make sense of the world, constantly moving among the extremes of
experience and prior knowledge, uncertainty and ignorance. He operates within a poetic that
includes omission and encourages his readers to fill that omission with their own narrative.
Absence denotes uncertainty and uncertainty leads to hypothetical theorizing. This
contradiction, that the presence of absence elicits a response to automatically fill that absence, is
the nature of Byron’s notes and poem when read together. Byron does not preach, nor does he
offer easy answers, but he allows for the flourishing of narrative around and within his works, for
better or for ill—the exact negotiation of the contradiction.
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