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Lyric Writing in a Byronic Perspective

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Romantic studies since 1960 have made great recoveries, as we all know, not the least having been the recovery of Byron’s work. But such recoveries also always involve certain corresponding losses. “Blindness and Insight” has aesthetic and historical, as well as hermeneutic, applications.

I mention that famous scholarly rubric to recall another book in which De Man figured prominently. *Romanticism and Consciousness*, published in 1970, was perhaps the single most influential volume in Romantic Studies of the past 50 years. It achieved its eminence for two reasons. First, the book’s editor, Harold Bloom, grouped his own and other advanced critical work, including De Man’s, in an eclectic anthology with essays by important academic precursors of the previous generation. Second, it organized the collection so that the new work established the intellectual context for the earlier work. In this instance the child was very much father of the man.

Let us remember, however, that this book by no means set the course for the succeeding 25 years of Romantic Studies. The book was majestically silent about women writers and feminist theory, it had little sense that an historical perspective would soon become imperative, and it was clueless about how important Byron and Byron studies were soon to be. But its conceptual and philosophical approach – “Romanticism and Consciousness” – would inflect much of the most important work that was coming.

Today I have time to look at only one major consequence of that book’s approach. And of course I have to be brief, if not grotesquely elliptical. An influential essay in Bloom’s anthology will hold my particular attention because it clarifies so much of what we came to know and came to forget about Romantic poetry. This is Abrams’ celebrated “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric”, first published in 1965, but reprinted in Bloom’s anthology.[[1]](#endnote-0)

It is a beautifully constructed essay – no small reason for its influence. But it says things that, in certain cases, aren’t in fact true, and in other, more important respects, are so misleading that they obscure what Abrams calls his principal subject: “the manner of proceeding in Romantic poetry” (203). One of its key ideas, for instance, is seriously debatable: that Abrams’ Greater Romantic Lyric was “the earliest Romantic formal invention”. Various poems in Burns’s Kilmarnock volume might claim priority here, as might Sir William Jones’s Hindi transliterations, or – even more clearly, perhaps – the sophisticated literary ballads that began to proliferate in the 1790s.

As to matters of fact, consider the last sentence of Abrams’ first paragraph: “Only Byron, among the major Romantics, did not write in this mode at all” (201). In fact, the one canonical Romantic poet who did not write in this mode at all was William Blake, not Lord Byron, and Blake’s highly innovative lyric writing figures not at all in Abrams’ essay. His absence is completely understandable, however, since he regarded Nature as the whore of Babylon and a “delusion of the perishing vegetable Memory”.[[2]](#endnote-1) But for Abrams’ “Greater Romantic Lyric”, Nature is an essential productive element.

As to Byron, even if we take Abrams’ specialized formal view of a “Greater Romantic lyric”, he produced notable examples. “To the Po” undertook the form seriously, “Churchill’s Grave”, parodically. Abrams perhaps overlooked the latter because – like the closely related *Manfred* -- it satirized the form of Greater Romantic lyricism. As for “To the Po”, it perhaps slipped Abrams’s attention because it is less “extended” than the poems he thought of as “Greater”, like ”Tintern Abbey” and “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison”.

Besides, if we want to investigate the most distinctive forms of Romantic poetry, including the period’s most important formal innovations, our focus ought to be on ballad poetry and Romantic tale-telling, both narrative and dramatic. Not without reason has *Lyrical* ***Ballads*** been seen as a pivotal book. “Michael”, “The Idiot Boy”, and “We Are Seven” are epochal works of Romantic consciousness and meditative reflection. But then at least as innovative in this respect are *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, *The Giaour*, and *Manfred* – three works whose historical influence on the subsequent course of Romantic and Post-Romantic poetry and culture at large would be far more consequential than Wordsworth’s great book.

But the differential represented by Blake and Byron exposes a much more serious faultline in Abrams’s argument about the distinctive “manner of proceeding” in Romantic poetry, including Romantic lyric poetry. The poems that illustrate Abrams’ “Greater Romantic Lyric” are indeed period-original, and he tracks their formal precursors with great skill, though applying the term “Greater” is mostly a rhetorical move. Whether they exhibit a “New lyric form” (203) is arguable. That they represent “*the* manner of proceeding in Romantic poetry” (203) is plainly wrong, though it is certainly *a* manner of proceeding.

Moreover, it is manifestly not the most prevalent manner of proceeding, nor the one that had the greatest impact on subsequent practice. That distinction falls to the wildly proliferating variations on ballad and narrative that the Romantics invented. Wordsworth’s “Lyrical Ballads” would later emerge as the normative instance of such forms. But that emergence had a paradoxical result in the academic reception of Romanticism. The period’s clear obsession with the poetic opportunities offered by ballad and narrative slipped from attention, as did the influential aftermath of those obsessions and achievements.

Abrams’ Greater Romantic Lyric is not the feeding source for the most important work of Tennyson, the Brownings, the Rossettis, or Swinburne, nor for the innovative work in 19th century European poetry from Pushkin and Heine to Mallarmé, and least of all for 20th century poetic practices. Indeed, if one were to hazard a single notable precursor for that eclectic narrative masterpiece *The Waste Land* – surely the paradigmatic work of the last century -- it would be *The Giaour*.

Some years ago I tried to open this general subject of Romantic poetry with an essay on “Byron and the Anonymous Lyric”. The essay took as its point of departure the arresting view of “lyric” writing that Baudelaire constructed out of his reading of Pindar, Byron, and Tennyson.[[3]](#endnote-2) Reviewing a scholarly work on Pindar, Baudelaire proposed that these poets found ways of translating intense personal experiences into non-subjective and impersonal registers. A poetry of masks and theatricalities, these lyrical forms perfected themselves when the form of expression as such displaced the authorial source as the center of attention. Writing this way Rimbaud would later declare: “Je suis un autre”. In that non-subjective but decidedly personal poem, “Thalassius”, Swinburne wrote even more to the point of becoming “now no more a singer, but a song”. All of Blake’s poetry has a similar structure and style, and it is historically pertinent to remember that his work only became culturally accessible when it was mediated by the Pre-Raphaelites and their (Symbolist) Circles.

We also want to remember that Abrams’ essay is explicitly a reprise on Louis Martz’s celebrated 1954 study of the seventeenth-century *Poetry of Meditation*. Abrams’ description of his Romantic lyrics mirrors Martz’s description of certain seventeenth-century poems that shaped themselves to the structure of formal religious exercises, especially the exercises of St. Ignatius. But Abrams rightly points out a “conspicuous and significant difference” (228) between Martz’s seventeenth-century poems and his Romantic poems. Though “composition of place” is in each case essential, the Romantic “landscape” of meditation is “present, particular, and always precisely located” (228), whereas the other was “not a specific locality. . .but . . .a typical scene or . . .allegorical landscape” (228). Not until he published *Natural Supernaturalism* did Abrams explain the significance of that difference, which involved what he called “a sustained dialogue between mind and landscape” (2 ). A famous passage from Wordsworth’s *Recluse* project describes that reciprocity.

How exquisitely the individual Mind

(And the progressive powers perhaps no less

Of the whole species) to the external World

Is fitted:--and how exquisitely, too--

Theme this but little heard of among men--

The external World is fitted to the Mind;

And the creation (by no lower name

Can it be called) which they with blended might

Accomplish:--this is our high argument.

(*The Recluse* Part I. Home at Grasmere, 816-824)[[4]](#endnote-3)

I note in passing that when Blake read those lines he annotated them severely: “You shall not bring me down to believe such fitting & fitted I know better & Please your Lordship”. The structure and style of Blake’s poetry, even his short lyric poetry, is a highly critical revelation of human illusions about “the external World”, both natural and artfully manufactured. For Blake, that reciprocity was not benevolent, it was demonic. He called the reciprocity an action of “dark Satanic mills”. In his matured theoretical ([reversed wheels etc].

Blake’s “manner of proceeding” with Romantic narrative would eventually become important – indeed, at least as important as the special form of lyric that interested Abrams, and arguably far more important. Blake’s remarkable “Auguries of Innocence” looks like nothing so much as a forecast of Wallace Stevens or Hart Crane or William Carlos Williams.

But I must set that interesting subject aside and focus on something I think will better clarify the subject of Romantic and post-Romantic lyric form.

When Abrams remarked that Byron alone of the Romantics didn’t cultivate the “Greater Romantic Lyric”, he neglected to consider a work that was staring him in the face -- *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*.[[5]](#endnote-4) The neglect is important because it obscures a different and, historically speaking, an even more consequential approach to Romantic expression.

Abrams summarizes the “structure and style” of his “new form” in this way:

Wordsworth’s *Prelude* can be viewed as an epic expansion of the mode of “Tintern Abbey”, both in overall design and local tactics. It begins with the description of a landscape visited in maturity, evokes the entire life of the poet as a protracted meditation on things past, and presents the growth of the poet’s mind as an interaction with the natural milieu by which it is fostered, from which it is tragically alienated, and to which in the resolution it is restored. (203)[[6]](#endnote-5)

Crucial to this poetic model is the “resolution” it drives toward. *Childe Harold* is different, and its four cantos are exemplary for the structure and style of Byron’s lyrical work in general. *Childe Harold*’s extended meditations on “the external World” move seriatim, being marked affectively by eruptive moments of fury, satisfaction, boredom, insight, despair, disgust, and even a kind of ecstatic self-annihilation. The list of feelings, like the experiences they reflect, could be indefinitely extended because they do not yield to philosophic or theological resolution. To “ponder boldly” (*Childe Harold* IV. 1135) is Byron’s interminable determination.

Romantic scholars understand all of that. What we haven’t studied with sufficient care is the special kind of structure and style, Romantic as well as post-Romantic, that emerges from this “manner of proceeding”. It isn’t often enough observed that, with some notable exceptions, Byron’s greatness as a lyric poet is incompletely realized in contained set piece poems, whether they might be poems in his own style, in Blake’s style, or in the style explicated by Abrams. Like *Don Juan*, *Childe Harold* is a glorious anthology of lyric writing, with a host of discrete passages that rise out of the loose narrative, run for some uncertain time, and then cease, sometimes gradually, sometimes abruptly. But the same is true for all the long works, including the plays but most of all the tales. “The Incantation” in *Manfred* is one of the period’s (and one of Byron’s) greatest and most complex lyric works. Lucifer’s arresting reflections on intellectual freedom at the end of Act II scene 2 of *Cain* in another, and so is dreadful curse that Eve hurls at her surviving son at the end of the play. The scorpion passage is only perhaps the most famous of the many lyrical effusions in *The Giaour*, and the other tales generate similar examples.[[7]](#endnote-6)

A distinctive feature of these lyrical passages is their relation to the immediate literary context, typically a narrative context, that generates them. But a dramatic context, as in *Manfred*, Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, or Beddoes’ *Death’s Jest Book*, will do as well. The key thing is that the context be highly dynamic. In these conditions, running narrative or plunging dramatic action function much like what Abrams calls, after Martz, the “composition of place”. But in this kind of lyrical environment -- Byron’s work in particular -- the poetic place is not only highly volatile and morphogenetic, it is primarily historical and trans-historical rather than natural or transcendental.

Abrams rightly speaks of his Wordsworthian lyrical mode as a “dialogue of the mind and landscape”. Out of such dialogues comes an experience of what Wordsworth called a “central peace subsisting at the heart/ Of endless agitation” (*The Excursion* Book IV. 1146-47). Thinking of Canto III of *Childe Harold*, Abrams briefly remarks that “Even Byron” wrote of having an experience “as if the surrounding universe were absorbed into [his] being” (224). But “central peace” does not characterize the Byronic geosphere, which is always uncertain and brinked to sudden change. That is the Nature into which Byron is occasionally “absorb’d” (*Childe Harold* IV. 689). The experience makes him what he calls “A sharer in [the] fierce and far delight” (*Childe Harold* IV. 871) of an endless agitation subsisting at the heart of the volatile natural order.

Even when Byron’s verse assumes a naturalist setting – by no means his most characteristic move – the result is a structure and style of unsettled recurrent experiences. Thoughts on Nature come intermittently to *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and they settle nothing. Indeed, they keep throwing into relief the historical crises, past and present, that are Byron’s tormenting preoccupation. So the restless narrative keeps moving until it finally comes to a halt in that stoical vision of endless mortal passage, the “Address to Ocean” (*Childe Harold* IV. stanzas 179-184).[[8]](#endnote-7)

*Childe Harold*’s lyricism is built from this structure of resolute irresolutions. The narrative propagates a set of discrete and recurring expressive units, each of which emerges from what has been previously lifted to instability, each of which then drives on to a succession of ensuing unsuccesses. Once initiated, the narrative augments itself through such an intense lyrical dilation that the narrative line gets engulfed in a process Byron describes as

The unreached paradise of our despair,

Which o’er-informs the pencil and the pen,

And overpowers the page where it would bloom again.

(*Childe Harold* IV stanza 122)

The style is also well illustrated in Byron’s greatest and most modern lyrical ballad, that “snake of a poem”, *The Giaour*, which grew, literally piecemeal, from 344 lines in the first fair copy MS to 1334 in the seventh edition. One might say, correctly, that these extensions augment the reflective depth of the poetry. But significantly, the extensions do not turn the action toward closure and resolution. In this respect we can see why lines 68-102, *The Giaour*’s famous meditation on the fatal gift of beauty (“He who hath bent him o’er the dead”, etc.), fairly define the poem’s lyrical style. The passage is a sentence fragment of thirty-four lines cast in an impersonal third-person syntax (Baudelaire’s “*lyrique anonyme*”). Trailing out a never-to-be-completed lament for all never-to-be-mitigated experiences of loss, the lines forecast the tale’s series of set-piece lyrical effusions on what Byron called “defeated care” (“Lines Written Beneath a Picture”). The long late additions that comprise the Giaour’s tortured memories – the poem’s structural climax -- speak for themselves, as does the narrator’s enigmatic final reflection on Leila, Hassan, and the Giaour: “This broken tale was all we knew/ Of her he loved, or him he slew.” So while *The Giaour* is well characterized, like Wordsworth’s “Michael”, as a lyrical ballad, its structure is entirely different from Wordsworth’s poem – as different as the structure of *Childe Harold* is from *The Prelude*, that epic version of the Greater Romantic Lyric.[[9]](#endnote-8)

These distinctively Byronic verse procedures help to illuminate the character of Byron’s short, set-piece lyrics. Compare, for example, the structure and style of his “Prometheus” lyric with Wordsworth’s “The Solitary Reaper”. Both open with an arresting expressive immediacy, but Wordsworth uses the occasion to extrude from it a tense internal colloquy. When the last stanza shifts to the past tense, we recognize the structure and style of Wordsworthian lyrical ballad: having begun in a gesture of spontaneous overflow, the poem resolves to a final state of tranquil recollection: “The music in my heart I bore/ Long after it was heard no more”.

“Prometheus”, however, never leaves its tense present tense and imperative mood. Furthermore, because the first two stanzas read like an Aeschylean Chorus, they implicitly summon a context of portentous cultural and literary reference. Those stanzas could be a speech lifted from Aeschylus’s lost *Prometheus Unbound*. Exactly because we are expected to know they’re *not*, we are arrested by what we know they are, by the scale of their visionary pretense. The exposure of the poetic illusion raised in the first two stanzas arrives with the equally theatrical third stanza, where the poem’s impersonal choral voice turns from the ancient Titan to address the reader. The poetic daring of the first two stanzas has licensed the “impenetrable spirit” that fills the last, where Prometheus gains his long-delayed cosmic triumph through an act of modern poetry that Edward Bostetter long ago called “poetic ventriloquism”.[[10]](#endnote-9)

“Prometheus” illustrates in brief lyric form what Baudelaire had in mind when he discussed Byron’s “anonymous lyric” style. Byron’s first person singular address is constantly slipping into the second or third person or aspiring to the rhetoric of a first person plural. Because the first person singular never appears in “Prometheus”, the poem does not have to undergo the transformation to first person plural that occurs so often in Byron’s work. His regular moves to narrative and dramatic forms signal this “way of proceeding” in his work, and it can be tracked as well in certain key short lyrics like “Prometheus”. Begun anonymously, as an imitation choral fragment from ancient Greek drama, the poem creates another impersonal voice able to speak at large “To Mortals of their fate and force”.

“Messalonghi, 22 January 1824. On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year”, one of Byron’s signature lyrics, pivots at line 22 on just such a first person transformation. The first person singular organizes the address of the poem’s first five stanzas. But in stanza six the poem turns.

  The Sword, the Banner, and the Field,

       Glory and Greece around us see!

The Spartan borne upon his shield

                      Was not more free.

For over 150 years that passage was printed “Glory and Greece around me see”. But that first person “me” is a mistaken transcription of Byron’s MS.[[11]](#endnote-10) The shift to the first person plural signals the dramatic change that overtakes the five concluding stanzas, where the poem moves to claim allegiance with certain imposing Western cultural authorities.

The first of these is Sappho. Byron initially appears to identify with the love-possessed poet through her legendary home, Lesbos, an extinct “volcanic isle”. But this psychic identification turns out far less consequential than the verse form that calls it to our attention. Byron’s poem is an anglicized recovery of Sappho’s signature prosodic form. Sappho’s suicidal “fire” points Byron and his poem toward a very different history – a tradition of martial self-extinction – that descends to Byron primarily from Homer. The third stanza of his poem is meant to recall the ancient Greek method of communicating by signal fires, a practice Homer alludes to in *The Iliad* (Book 18). Homer constructs a simile to describe the glory of Achilles in war. He imagines men fighting to save their city from an enemy, and

at the going down of the sun the line of beacon-fires

blazes forth, flaring high for those that dwell near them to behold,

if so be that they may come with their ships and succour them –

even so did the light flare from the head of Achilles. (*Iliad* 18. 210-14)

Like “Prometheus”, the literary background of this poem is the mythic history of Greece, with which Byron so persistently identified. Here the identification climaxes with the reference to “the Spartan, borne upon his shield”. Byron locates himself among the legendary 300 taking up their suicidal mission at Thermopylae. He has come to this poem to “give/ Away *thy* breath”.

That second person – ambiguously singular or plural – is fulfilling the rhetorical shift that began in line 22. Sappho and Homer are moving Byron to summon

an absent presence, his impersonal self -- “Awake, my spirit” -- for “us”. Keying off a play on words (“borne”), the four final stanzas veer sharply into their second person rhetoric (“thee. . .thy. . .thy. . .thee. . .thy. . .thy”). The stanzas come as if both Byron and his readers were being addressed by the poem, or perhaps as if that summoned “spirit” now had license to speak on its own, without Byron’s mediation.

These kinds of moves toward lyric anonymity reflect Byron’s lifelong preoccupation with what he perceived as the “malady” of “egoism”.[[12]](#endnote-11) The attitude shapes juvenilia like “Lochin Y. Gair” and “A Fragment” (“When to their airy hall”) and is explicit in poems like “The Isles of Greece”, a splendid example of Byron’s polyphonic lyric. Because the ballad is simultaneously “spoken” by three very different voices -- Lambro’s camp poet, Robert Southey, and Byron – it shifts into a different register: anonymous, linguistically absolute. A supreme example of this way of poetic proceeding comes at the end of Act I of *Manfred* when “A voice” speaks an “Incantation” over the prostrate body of Manfred. This new, impersonal voice is the formal cognate of the “spirit” wakened in Byron’s thirty-sixth year poem. The Incantation declares that “a magic voice and verse” haunts the action of *Manfred*, a fatality we glimpse in the poem’s uncanny textual moments: the moment when we discover that the “one word, for mercy” is the word “Manfred”; the moment when prosody conjoins the words *des*ert and de*sert*; most dramatically, the moment when the final word of the Incantation has its concealed import exposed in the final line of the poem. ‘A magic voice and verse ‘finally invests an otherwise simple wordplay, “Wither” and “whither”, with Nietzschean significance.

All these poems show why Byronic lyric style is, paradoxically, so impersonal, why Baudelaire called it an “anonymous” style, and – most important of all -- why it requires the continuities of narrative and dramatic action to discover its full potential. The composition of place in “Prometheus” and “On This Day” is not a natural *locus amoenus* (as in Wordsworth) or an allegorical design (as in Donne), it is the inheritance of the historical and legendary narratives of Greek antiquity. Not without reason was Byron, far more than the other English Romantics, so committed to translation and transliteration. The “Tambourgi” ballad in Canto II of *Childe Harold*, like “The Isles of Greece” in *Don Juan* (III. 698-784), are complex acts of lyric ventriloquism – lyrical ballads in a Byronic mode. They emerge through a process that Keats called “negative capability” and that Byron called “mobility”. Byron finds his own voice by channeling voices that call out to him from his poetic inheritance.

Byron’s “anonymous” style works to depersonalize those voices because he is interested in recovering not literary precursors but literary forms, as his imitations and translations from Ariosto, Tasso, Dante, Berni, Martial, Horace, Sappho, and Aeschylus show. A medieval Spanish ballad will draw his attention as quickly as Martial’s epigrams or a vulgar Italian street song. That the forms can be modern as well as ancient is clear from cases like the Suliote song “Tambourgi”, the Wordsworthian “Churchill’s Grave”, or the homage to Pope in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. Or consider *The Siege of Corinth* where we watch Byron trying to mimic the prosodic innovation that Coleridge introduced with his experimental masterpiece *Christabel*.

But *The Giaour* is perhaps the most brilliant and complete example. Like Wordsworth’s “Michael”, *The Giaour* is a lyrical ballad. Unlike “Michael”, however, Byron is not trying to show with his poem “that there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition” (“Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads*). Wordsworth’s quarrel with “poetic diction” drove his revolutionary prosodic experiments to establish “a plainer and more emphatic language” for poetry. This move is without question a signature innovation of Romantic verse practice – a move that Byron would himself make when he unrolled the colloquial manner of *Don Juan*. For its part, *The Giaour* is Byron’s attempt to mimic the epic mode, that massive act of redacting an archive of ballad verse. Crucially, Byron does not take Homer as his model. He turns instead to the latter day inheritors of oral epic whom he heard at first hand reciting their verses in Levantine coffee houses in 1809-1810. What fascinates Byron is that this ancient verse tradition of oral verse is still being practiced in post-Enlightenment Europe. And yet, as he reflects in his lyrical preludium to *The Giaour*: “’Tis Greece, but living Greece no more”. *The Giaour* is Byron’s attempt to revive the dead by saving certain of their cultural appearances in transliterated English forms.

As an amateur classicist, Byron recognizes that the contemporary Levantine coffee house performers are perpetuating an oral practice dating back to the “Singers of Tales” of ancient Greece. *The Giaour* therefore involves a thankless and even a ludicrous pretension, a fact amply demonstrated through the poem’s inimitable prose notes. As his alter-ego, the ballad singer on Haidee’s island, laments: “And must thy lyre, so long divine,/ Degenerate into hands like mine”? Yet if Byron mocks his own poetic effort, as he often does, *The Giaour* undertakes the effort still, and the poem has some of his finest lyric poetry, not least in its three great epic similes: the butterfly passage, the scorpion passage, and the breathtaking description of the mortal combat between Hassan and the Giaour. Each is a set-piece lyric addressing three of Byron’s central preoccupations: love as an unreachable paradise, guilt as a self-crucifixion, and Romantic will as a struggle to the death. While the figural terms in each case are drawn from the natural world, the composition of place is not Nature. It is rather anti-nature, it is art, it is finally what a poetic “mind can make when nature’s self would fail” (*Childe Harold* IV. 439). Here, strictly: what Byron’s mind makes from its reciprocal exchange with both Nature and his poetic inheritance.

What distinguishes Abrams’ greater Romantic lyric and Byron’s anonymous lyric gets sharply exposed when we realize that, in Byron’s view, “nature’s self” *can* fail – that is to say, can fail the best aspirations of human beings. Nature neither betrays nor keeps faith with human minds and hearts. More than that, for Byron the human “mind can make” forms that throw Nature’s into eclipse. He cites the Venus de Medici as one such form, and he spends the fourth canto of *Childe Harold* citing many others. But the canto is itself a performative demonstration of the difference, and the indifference, between Nature and what Hannah Arendt called “Mind” or the “vita activa”. So far as Nature is concerned, Krakatoa (or Chernobyl) simply represents morphogenetic change. But so far as Byron is concerned – the “Stanzas to Ocean” are his climactic argument – those ceaseless processes of change can be enlisted to build, unbuild, or rebuild worlds. In each case, Byron’s Nature could, as it were, care less. That is why Nature can be important for Byron. Nature’s power over and indifference to human endeavor turns the screw on Byron’s desperate humanism and his commitment to his defeated care for all that human beings love and lose. In Byron, Nature has no interest in or capacity for human endeavor. It is Byron who watches over the rise and fall of “Assyria, Greece, Rome, Carthage”. Indeed, in Byron’s view of the reciprocity between Man and Nature, the obligation of care is all on the human side, for it is Man who, “enamour’d of distress/ Would mar it into wilderness” (*The Giaour* 50-51).

Being clear about Byron’s work is not the main reason I’ve brought forward this subject of his Romantic “manner of proceeding”. My chief interest is in using Byron to help us gain greater clarity about styles of poetic address developed between Cowper, Burns, and Wordsworth at one end, and (say) Merrill, Howe, and Prynne at the other. Different figures at our immediate *terminus ad quem* could be easily named, just as others – George Crabbe comes immediately to mind – would also serve for a *terminus a quo*. The point is that all the territory comprised by and between 1780 and the present is dominated by balladic and, even more, by narrative procedures, whether linear or nonlinear, narrative or non-narrative, paratactic or syncretic. While significant short-form lyrical writing appears throughout Romantic and Post-Romantic writing, “story” and what Laura Riding Jackson called *The Telling* -- however truncated, elliptical, or dramatically rendered -- continues to dominate poetic aspiration to the present day.[[13]](#endnote-12)

1. “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric”, in *Romanticism and Consciousness. Essays in Criticism,* ed. Harold Bloom (W. W. Norton: New York, 1970): 201-229. [↑](#endnote-ref-0)
2. Blake: “Nature has no outline: / but Imagination has, Nature has no tune, but Imagination has! / Nature has no Supernatural & dissolves. Imagination is Eternity” *The Ghost of Abel* plate 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. “Byron and the Anonymous Lyric”, *The Byron Journal* (1992), 27- 45 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. Blake’s Annotation to this passage in Wordsworth is famous: “You shall not bring me down to believe such fitting & fitted I know better & Please your Lordship” (Blake’s Annotations to Wordsworth’s Prewface to *The Excursion*, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, commentary by Harold Bloom. Newly Revised Edition (Doubleday: New York, 1988): 667. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
5. Thinking of Canto III of *Childe Harold*, Abrams briefly mentions (224) that “Even Byron wrote of having an experience “as if the surrounding universe were absorbed into [his] being”. But Abrams does not press an investigation of this matter. I suspect he could see how alien a Natural Supernaturalism was to Byron’s argument in Canto III. Instead of representing a “central peace subsisting at the heart/ Of endless agitation” (*The Excursion* Book IV. 1146-47), *Childe Harold* Canto III tells a very different story. Byron is “absorb’d” (689) in be Blake: coming “A sharer in [the] fierce and far delight” (871) of the endless agitation subsisting at the heart of the natural order. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
6. See as well this account from later in the essay: “the poet’s mind, momentarily revitalized by a correspondent Inner breeze, moves from torpor to violence to calm [in an] evolving meditation on the relation of mind to nature [that culminate[s] in the figure of the one life as an eddy between antitheses” (223). The result is a dynamic resolution that Abrams calls, recollecting Coleridge, the “Coalescence of Subject and Object”. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
7. I take the term “effusions” from Coleridge, who used it to characterize some of his most characteristic early poetry – poetry, it should be remembered, that was deeply influenced by Della Cruscan poetry. Coleridge’s expressivist “effusions” would soon mutate into the form of the Conversation Poem, which for Abrams served as the initial and in many ways the exemplary form of his Greater Romantic Lyric. I would only remark in passing that Coleridge’s greatest and perhaps most significant poems were not the Conversation poems but his two great narrative works and “Kubla Khan”, all three far from examples of Greater Romantic Lyric. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
8. Byron reflected on the poetics of such places and such writing often, but particularly in his exilic period from 1816. Not the least memorable of these reflections come at stanzas 96-97 of *Childe Harold* Canto 3 and stanzas 104-106 of Canto 4. The former culminates and defines the unresolved cycle that began – or I should say, began *again* -- in stanza 85. In this kind of lyrical writing, the expressive movement feeds off a narrative sequence. I say “began again” because the structure and style of this lyric writing in a cycle whose continuance is marked in the canto’s forecast of the move from Switzerland to Italy. The latter foreshadows the last canto’s “Address to Ocean” (stanzas 179-184), where the poem halts in a vision of endless mortal passage – the Pilgrim of Eternity indeed. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
9. But like “the storm whereon [his poetry] rides”, the volatile weather of his verse does keep starting and stopping, though its logistics remain beyond his control, if not beyond his recognition. So the poetry rides its weather, sunshine and storm. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
10. See E. E. Bostetter, *The Romantic Ventriloquists. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Byron*. (U. of Washington Press: Seattle, 1963). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
11. The passage was first corrected in 1992 in the text published in *CPW* VII. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
12. See the *Conversations with Lady Blessington* and *Don Juan* [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
13. *The Telling* (Harper and Row: New York, 1973). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)