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## Mingling with the Universe: The Nature of Byronic Morality

Adeline M. Macioce

University of Pittsburgh, Oakland, amm474@pitt.edu

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# Mingling with the Universe: The Nature of Byronic Morality

Adeline M. Macioce

*University of Pittsburgh, Oakland*

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This paper is an excerpt from a larger, on-going project contributing toward my Bachelor of Philosophy thesis at the University of Pittsburgh. I shared a presentation on the second phase of my project, which deals with the legacy of Byronic morality in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy. As I have not yet drafted a paper on this topic, I am sharing an excerpt from the first part of my thesis, which discusses the works of Romantic poet Lord Byron.

## **Abstract**

Having studied the major works of the Romantic poet Lord George Gordon Byron (1788-1824), I have become familiar with his unique and passionate language of rebellion and tracked its presence in literature from the Victorian Era (1837-1901) all the way to our contemporary moment. I have spent time working closely with the Byronic hero in the context of Byron's own writing instead of the Victorian adaptations of his hero; something that has not been done often or at length previously. His heroes are self-exiled figures casting an ultra-critical eye on their society, while simultaneously looking inward at the faults of the self. I contend that Byron's poetic project is to create a new morality, which I call Byronic morality, as distinct from that of his social milieu; one that is focused on principles of truth, knowledge, and rebellion against corruption and convention in his society. His Byronic hero, frequently adapted and incorporated into many literary works, spreads this Byronic morality across generations of writers and readers. He creates a space for spirituality that serves the individual, promotes knowledge and truth, and reveres nature. In my thesis, I engage in a detailed study of Byron's poetic project that begins with but is not limited to a study of the Byronic hero. By situating his hero back in the worlds that Byron creates, I hope to highlight a large piece of Byron's argument which has been previously neglected. The second phase of my project, previewed in my conference presentation will analyze the emergence of

Byronic morality in Pullman's trilogy, and consider how his series can illuminate Byron's project as well.

*Keywords:* Literature, Romanticism, Poetry, Theology/Religion, Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *Don Juan*

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## Section I

*“There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,  
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,  
There is society, where none intrudes,  
By the deep Sea, and music in its roar:  
I love not Man the less, but Nature more,  
From these our interviews, in which I steal  
From all I may be, or have been before,  
To mingle with the Universe, and feel  
What I can ne'er express, yet can not all conceal”*  
~ *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Lord Byron

Lord George Gordon “mad, bad, and dangerous to know”<sup>1</sup> Byron spent his rather short life constructing a public persona which has remained one of the most fascinating and radical celebrity personalities across nearly two centuries of Western culture. Byron's scandalous series of affairs with men, women, and a half-sister as well as an aggressive and unfiltered individualistic attitude have earned him the attention of countless biographers. While his Byronic hero has inspired adaptations from dozens of authors, his poetry has garnered scarce scholarly attention. Byron scholar Peter L. Thorslev calls attention to this oversight in Romantic criticism in his own work *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes*: “The vast post-Byron literary and cultural influence would alone justify a study of the origins and development of the Byronic Hero...but [there is] no

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<sup>1</sup> This is a famous comment from Lady Caroline Lamb often quoted by Byron's contemporaries as well as Byron critics. Biographer Fiona MacCarthy explains in *Byron Life and Legend* that Lamb first recorded the comment in her diary after her first encounter with Byron at a social gathering.

definitive study of the Byronic Hero's antecedents in the literature before Byron, or of the hero in Byron's poetry itself" (4). I concur with Thorslev's call for a "definitive study" of Byron's poetry, which acknowledges the Byronic hero as one piece of a larger, more nuanced poetic project. Since the moment of Byron's death, writers have taken the image of the Byronic hero, a symbol of ideological revolution, to fight their own battles against society. Victorians, Modernists, and Post-Modernists alike have all taken the general image Byron presents to the world and used it toward a literary and cultural revolution sending the hero down thousands of paths to be molded and adapted<sup>2</sup>. However, to remove the Byronic hero from his environment is to miss half of Byron's poetic project. The Byronic hero seeks to liberate body and mind by pursuing truth, especially when it means violating arbitrary boundaries set on knowledge. His mission positions him as an outcast in the society he is born into, forcing him to seek sanctuary in new worlds which Byron writes into existence. The Byronic hero travels into these natural worlds, opening himself to the voice of the universe, its song of chaos and beauty. Therefore, the environments through which they travel are part of Byron's heroes, tangible visible evidence of the soul, not just backgrounds for their journeys inspired by Byron's own travels. I propose that resituating the hero in Byron's literary worlds allows us to see with clarity what Byron meant to achieve with his writing. Byron's major works – including *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *Manfred*, *Cain*, and *Don Juan* – all function as sketches attempting to illustrate the ancient power and knowledge that nature can bring the individual soul. When positioned in successive order, Byron's texts form a rich, unexplored multiverse which only the Byronic hero has the power to traverse freely.

Each piece of Byron's writing contributes to what Peter A. Schock calls Byron's "ideological war" (96). As a young Whig in the House of Lords, he voiced initial discontent with

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<sup>2</sup> Notable adaptations of the Byronic hero include the Creature from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Heathcliff from Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847).

England's colonial endeavors and the conditions of the working classes in England<sup>3</sup>. However, his support for victims of England's domestic and foreign politics was not entirely selfless. Despite being born into the aristocracy, Byron's desire to live a life free from the Western norms of domesticity and heterosexuality left him permanently and passionately at odds with his society. One of his more recent biographers Fiona MacCarthy captures this struggle beautifully: "England labelled as degenerate the instincts that Byron experienced as natural. The sense of his departure from accepted sexual mores increased his tendency to automatic opposition" (61). By the time his first major work *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is published and he emerges as a celebrity in England, the rebellious tendencies of his youth and young adulthood ripple into an explosive war between Byron and cultural authorities of the Western world; a war that is much bigger than even he could dream of winning alone. Byron conceptualizes the extent of his efforts in *Don Juan*: "And I will war, at least in words (and – should / My chance so happen – deeds) with all who war / With Thought; - and of Thought's foes by far most rude, / Tyrants and Sycophants have been and are" (*Don Juan* IX.185-8). He frames his own writing as a manifesto of rebellion and liberation from the society that raised him. The image he cultivates for himself as liberator and revolutionary does indeed turn him toward activism – or "deeds" to use Byron's terminology – later in life when he resides in Italy and Greece. Suddenly, his rather local concern with the political climate of England becomes a universal battle cry against "Thought's foes," those who restrict the individual's body and mind. In his first work of satire *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809), Byron imagines "a keener weapon," a source of power that is mighty enough to topple his trinity of foes, the enemies of Thought who, in his imagination, restrict body and mind: Church, state, and society. A

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<sup>3</sup> Fiona MacCarthy explains these events in great detail in *Byron Life and Legend*. Specifically, I am referring to his support of English emancipation of Irish Catholics as well as his support of a bill meant to soften the treatment of working-class protests and riots.

much clearer picture of Byron's ideological revolution emerges later in *Childe Harold*, *Manfred*, *Cain*, and *Don Juan* as his sketches grow fuller and more detailed, but the skeleton of his work is evident even this early in Byron's career; he writes: "Such is the force of Wit! But not belong / To me the arrows of satiric song; / The royal vices of our age demand / A keener weapon, and a mightier hand" (*English Bards* 17-20). In Byron's major works, he forges this weapon in the fires of myth and legend, rewriting tradition with a radical twist; his pen as his sword and his Byronic hero as his shield. Schock highlights a theory proposed by Marilyn Butler that the younger Romantics tended to "mythologize their disagreements with the Church and State" (99). Byron certainly engages in said mythologizing in his writing, imagining his work as part of a cataclysmic battle between Olympians or Fallen Angels plummeting to earth where they must create new life. However, he goes beyond simply evoking the images of Cain or Prometheus in his work and instead repurposes Biblical and Pagan myth, formulating an entirely new spiritual experience. This spiritual experience, which I call Byronic morality, foregrounds beliefs which promote truth, individuality, and knowledge as well as the rebellion that Byron maintained as fundamental to his nature, and which acknowledges Nature as the only authority in the universe. In order to create the ultimate product that is Byronic morality, Byron's words function both as a destructive weapon and a creative tool; he is at once rebelling against the authorities by deconstructing a culture rooted in hierarchical relationships meant to serve a select few who, and using the familiarity of myth to rebuild new worlds where his hero can be free.

Byron's own moral truth emerges from the thunderous clash of ancient lore and Christian teaching. His first objective is to break from the literary tradition, sifting through thousands of years or writers for inspiration as well as enemies. As it so often happens in Byron, he begins this work with a challenge, a layered critique and revolt, because, "For men like Byron...rebellion

against the social, political, and theological system [is] imperative” as Truman Guy Steffan argues in “An Apology for Revolt” (49). In the very first Canto of *Don Juan*, Byron writes a blatant and crafty set of new commandments undoubtedly meant to anger and provoke:

Thou shalt believe in Milton, Dryden, Pope;  
Thou shalt not set up Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey;  
Because the first is crazed beyond all hope,  
The second drunk, the third so quaint and mouthy:  
With Crabbe it may be difficult to cope,  
And Campbell’s Hippocrene is somewhat drouthy:  
Thou shalt not steal from Samuel Rogers, nor  
Commit – flirtation with the muse of Moore.

Thou shalt not covert Mr. Sotheby’s Muse  
His Pegasus, nor any thing that’s his;  
Thou shalt not bear false witness like ‘the Blues’,  
(There’s one, at least, is very fond of this);  
Thou shalt not write, in short, but what I choose:  
This is true criticism, and you may kiss –  
Exactly as you please, or not, the rod,  
But if you don’t, I’ll lay it on, by G-d! (I.1633-48)

Byron launches his first attack in his ideological war against fellow Romantics, no doubt drawing attention to himself as he uses Christianity’s holy commandments as a template for mockery, displaying his skills in wit and satire. He dives headfirst into his invective, unraveling the authority such authors have in the cultural consciousness. He mentions other poets by name to establish sides in the conflict: Milton and Pope as honest, Wordsworth and Coleridge as dishonest. We cannot visualize a battle unless we are aware of the opposing forces, opposing ideologies, and opposing goals. Though Byron calls upon allies such as Milton and Pope, he still denotes himself as different from those he respects: “The consequence is, being of no party, / I shall offend all parties” (*Don Juan* IX.201-2). Unlike the youthful and eager member of the Devil’s party<sup>4</sup>, Byron

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<sup>4</sup> Diana Basham discusses Lady and Lord Byron and their daughter, Ada, in her text *The Trial of Woman: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society*. She writes that “Byron took his own daemonism seriously, and so did his contemporaries” (11). As a young man, Byron proudly professes his Satanism publicly and often, and while this does not necessarily disappear as he ages, his connection to Satan and demonism becomes more nuanced.

in his thirties realizes the advantage of being of his own party. Jerome J. McGann makes a note of this change as well in his analysis of Byron's retelling of the Cain and Abel myth, *Cain* (1821): "[*Cain*] represented neither the devil's party nor God's, for Byron had no intention (not any inclination) to choose forms of worship with his poetic tales" ("Milton and Byron" 22). He does not choose a side or agree wholeheartedly with one particular religion, and in doing so he is afforded the ability to develop his own morality.

Byron's only true ally on the ideological battleground is his Byronic hero. He extends a challenge to readers with his rebellious actions and musings and ventures into nature for truth and knowledge. He constructs Byron's morality before our eyes, calling attention to what is flawed and what we have been missing. In creating his hero, Byron draws upon a rich literary history introduced by the Miltons and Popes of the past. McGann suggests in "Byron and 'The Truth in Masquerade'" that Byron draws upon previous writers for inspiration: "...like all poets and artists, Byron is often found re-using earlier work in later circumstances – manipulating and changing it for different purposes" (1). Byron manipulates Biblical and Pagan myth primarily to develop an argument that is new yet carries tones of familiarity. In *Cain* and *Don Juan*, there are numerous references to the Old Testament stories of Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel specifically, with references to Noah's ark and the Tower of Babel as well. Similarly, it is well-known that Byron and his close friend Percy Bysshe Shelley "regarded Satan as the hero of *Paradise Lost*" the epic poem by John Milton<sup>5</sup>. For Byron, the Romantic reading of Milton's Satan, the first murderer, Cain, and the Greek mythological figure Prometheus in particular serve as excellent models of rebellion against omnipotent authorities to serve as inspiration for his hero. They foreshadow the Byronic hero's steadfastness in the face of hellish sorrow as well as his service to humanity in his

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<sup>5</sup> Various critics and biographers reference Byron's Satanic obsessions, but this particular quotation is from Truman Guy Steffan's "The Re-Creation of Genesis."



defense of knowledge and rebellion. Moreover, Byron translates their epithets devil, murderer, and fiend to the term *hero*, repurposing tradition in order to elevate his battle against authority to a nobler order.

In *Don Juan* Byron announces that “’Tis time that some new Prophet should appear, / Or old indulge man with second sight” (XV.717-18). His Byronic hero functions as a sort of prophet, a collation of past and present meant to pave a way forward for Byron and readers. As previously mentioned, Byron and his hero share an intimate connection in the narrative space, but, as Thorslev maintains, “Byron is not his heroes, in spite of a hundred years of confusion of the two” (9). He certainly includes biographical moments in his texts<sup>6</sup>, but his hero is a manifestation of Byron’s revolutionary spirit mobilized in a grand and mythic environment. When the Byronic hero enters the literary space, he takes on his own life. Byron uses his hero to chart the waters of ideological revolution, which necessarily positions Byron himself and his hero as outsiders or wretches. After establishing the self as an outcast and being labeled as such by humanity, the hero must then undergo a pilgrimage to find a new space outside of the hero’s native land which he can call home. Byron likens the transition from normative life to the life of an outcast to death and in a sense it is a social death that allows transformation to occur and opens the window to a new world. Such transformation is essential for the hero in order to pursue paradise on earth, outside of Eden and outside of England.

After turning away from the familiar world of their birth, the heroes embark on their journey into the natural world; in *Childe Harold* he experiences war-torn landscapes in Europe and remnants of ancient civilizations; in *Manfred* he travels high into the mountains reaching toward the sky, away from the bustling world below; in *Cain* the play ends with the hero journeying into

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<sup>6</sup> *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* in particular is referred to as a semi-autobiographical text, though Byron weaves his opinions and concerns with life into each poem and play.

the wild, untouched plains of earth; and, in *Don Juan* our hero travels across seas from Spain to England to Russia and more. At the outset of the Byronic hero's journey, they seek means by which they can heal their grief, their discontent with the world, and the guilt associated with a life that rejects all they have been taught about love, religion, and the self. They each quickly find, however, that they are not entirely alone in the natural world: "This is not solitude; 'tis but to hold / Converse with Nature's charms, and view her stores unroll'd" (*Childe Harold* II.224-5). It is this absence of fellow human beings which allows the hero to feel the presence of nature and hold conversation with it. Nature is a place of comfort and enjoyment, pleasing to the eye and the soul. Byron evokes the familiar image of Mother Nature in *Childe Harold* as well to begin forming an intimate relationship between his hero and the natural world; one that quickly becomes reminiscent of what Christine Kenyon Jones terms "kinship" in her work "Byron, Darwin and Paley: Interrogating Natural Theology." The hero finds peace in the flora and fauna which is the very antithesis of Western society's obsession with the artificial and the material:

Dear Nature is the kindest mother still,  
Though always changing, in her aspect mild;  
From her bare bosom let me take my fill,  
Her never-wean'd, though not her favour'd child.  
Oh! she is fairest in her features wild,  
Where nothing polish'd dares pollute her path:  
To me by day or night she ever smil'd,  
Though I have mark'd her when none other hath,  
And sought her more and more, and lov'd her best in wrath. (II.325-33)

The image of Nature as ever-changing and wild comforts the heroes who fled a system of fixed and corrupt morality. Civilization has starved them and rejected their desire, but in Nature they find endless nourishment. The Byronic hero has no place in the domestic structure of society, much as Byron himself did not. Often, Byron depicts an unhealthy relationship between the hero and his birth mother, using the mother as a symbol of this toxic domestic and heteronormative tradition.

For example, Cain is vehemently cast away by his mother after he murders his brother, and Don Juan is essentially disowned by his mother for his affair with Donna Julia. Consequently, nature offers a maternal guidance to the hero in his first moments of new life. There is familiarity perhaps in her wrathful, violent storms akin to the treatment from the birth mother, but there is also softness and beauty in the wildness of nature which is free from the structures of humanity.

Furthermore, nature teaches of a love that is wild and has the ability to take on endless forms. In his new environment, the hero learns of a new, natural love that becomes a foundational principle of Byron's universe. Such unbound love is a gift from nature meant to liberate the soul so that it can mingle freely with other souls in their world. By connecting himself with the wildness of nature, the hero is able to accept his desires and practice love that is free from the codes set in place by a heteronormative society and the rules about sexual relationships enforced by the Church. In Byron, this wild, formless love is often conceptualized through dramatically taboo love relationships, namely ones with hints of incest<sup>7</sup>. Certainly, in *Cain* this is not quite as shocking because the audience is already aware that in the Biblical myth Cain marries his sister, who Byron names Adah. However, these taboo themes are prevalent in *Manfred* as well, though perhaps more subtly. Manfred describes his deceased lover Astarte to the Witch of the Alps as part of his grieving process; he says: "She was like me in lineaments – her eyes, / Her hair, her features, all, to the very tone / Even of her voice, they said were like to mine" (II.106-8). Manfred calls attention to their shared features, establishing both himself and his lover not necessarily as blood relations, but as children of the universe, of Byron's universe, which does not obey the rules and restrictions created by man. As children of the natural world, Byronic heroes are able to pursue desire freely and

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<sup>7</sup> It is of course important to note that Byron made it known to his wife that he shared an incestuous relationship with his half-sister Augusta Leigh, and likely fathered her child Elizabeth Medora Leigh. Though less dangerous than accusations of sodomy, his relationship with Augusta is likely one reason he fled England.

without guilt or anxiety about the consequences of breaking with societal expectations<sup>8</sup>. Again, Byron expands upon this form of free love, which I will refer to as Byronic love for shorthand, in his final epic *Don Juan*. After nearly dying following a shipwreck, Juan is saved by a young woman called Haidee, with whom he quickly falls in love. As Juan recovers from his injuries in a cave on the shore, Haidee makes regular visits to help him heal. In this intimate natural space, they are bonded not through the vows of Christian marriage, but by their shared awe of nature's beauty: "...the stars, their nuptial torches, shed / Beauty upon the beautiful thy lighted: / Ocean their witness, and the cave their bed, / By their own feelings hallow'd and united, / Their priest was Solitude, and they were wed: / And they were happy, for to their young eyes / Each was an angel, and earth paradise" (II.1626-32). Nature offers up herself – in the stars, the ocean, the cave – to the young lovers providing them with a physical and beautiful space to experience desire and pleasure. The notion that romantic connection through nature is more honest and pure than Church-sanctioned marriage is not new to *Don Juan*. Byron argues in *Childe Harold* that despite his hero not being married to his love interest from youth: "*That* love was pure, and, far above disguise" suggesting that there is deceit and corruption within the marital system in his society (III.490). Specifically, he remarks on the inability to love in a social environment focused on wealth and status: "[Malthus'] book's the eleventh commandment, / Which says, 'thou shalt not marry,' unless well" (*Don Juan* XV.298-9). Byron knows that in amongst humankind, he cannot find the kind of love described in his poems because his civilization is an aristocratic and imperialist one where love cannot thrive. The beauty of nature bestows power for intimacy upon the hero and allow for him to realize that his world is a paradise, both when it is wrathful and when it is beautiful.

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<sup>8</sup> It is well-known that Byron pursued relationships with both men and women in his life. Therefore, exploring a life where love and sexual experience are not restricted or punished when they do not conform to the binaries and heteronormative laws aligns with Byron's desires as an individual.

In Byron's worlds, his characters are able to pursue without flinching knowledge, pleasure, and a spirituality which does not recognize a hierarchy of beings in the universe. He makes this experience accessible to readers by reframing Biblical lore; he reimagines what we are taught to be the exile of Adam and Eve as a journey to a new, unexplored and beautiful world. Eden is not the paradise because it restricts those within its bounds. The true paradise is the world beyond which Adam and Eve turn to in exile. While his use of these stories "remain[s] fairly traditional" as Wolf Z. Hirst argues in "Byron's Revisionary Struggle with the Bible,"<sup>9</sup> Byron applies a radical, Romantic lens to them in the same way he and Percy Shelley apply a Romantic lens to *Paradise Lost*. *Don Juan* in particular includes frequent references to Adam and Eve that remain rather true to known myth. In Canto I, Byron shares a rather crude and humorous introduction of Adam and Eve into the text: "Where our first parents never learn'd to kiss / Till they were exiled from their earlier bowers, / Where all was peace, and innocence, and bliss, / (I wonder how they got through the twelve hours)" (l.139-42). For Byron, there is no existence of a blissful world without even a hint of sexual indulgence, and he argues that the lack of sexual freedom for two individuals lounging intimately in the garden of Eden is precisely what makes such a myth illogical, and what makes God a sort of tyrant similar to the British government. It exposes the Church's use of Adam and Eve as self-serving in an attempt to control desire that may otherwise foster subversive tendencies. Moreover, he goes on to equate sexual expression with a special kind of knowledge that offers power to the individual soul:

But sweeter still than this, than these, than all,  
Is first and passionate love – it stands alone,  
Like Adam's recollection of his fall;  
The tree of knowledge has been pluck'd – all's known –

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<sup>9</sup> In his text, Hirst is speaking primarily about *Cain*, which does offer a very traditional, submissive image of Adam and Eve living for the sake of repentance. The focus is on Cain's individual rebellion against his passive, subservient relatives and the inheritance of his parents' sins. However, Hirst does go on to acknowledge *Don Juan* as the best example of subversion, and it is *Don Juan* which offerings the following images of Adam and Eve in my discussion.

And life yields nothing further to recall  
Worthy of this ambrosial sin, so shown,  
No doubt in fable, as the unforgiven  
Fire which Prometheus filch'd for us from heaven. (I.1009-16)

In this moment, Byron writes sexual experience untouched by arbitrary moral codes and heteronormative traditions meant to limit the power and reach of individual sexuality. Byron dealt extensively with the legal and social codes in England labeling homosexual sex and desire as criminal<sup>10</sup>. In *Don Juan* however, he proves that sexual experience privileges immense and beautiful knowledge reminiscent of that delectable apple or that burning fire, which Byron would have available in bushels and bonfires for all of humanity. Byron's belief is that the Church and state hoard such knowledge, imagined in myth as tangible creations of nature such as apples and fire, to maintain their authority over beings in the universe that their doctrine denotes as lesser. They are wrongfully claiming creations of the natural world which should be available to all beings in the universe – not just the omnipotent beings, or the wealthy, white men, but to all spirits, humans, and non-human animals as well. Each subsequent reference that Byron makes to Adam and Eve functions in a similar fashion using two of the most famous literary figures as his weapon for breaking the shackles of theological doctrine. Byron takes back the knowledge given to us by the natural world and shares it with his readers so that they too can free their body and mind and prepare to journey into that same natural space to fully realize the self.

The early sketches of Byronic morality in *Childe Harold*, *Manfred*, and *Cain* focus on the gifts that Nature bequeaths to the hero as he enters the new world. She accepts him as her kin, provides a new home that is beautiful and wild, and teaches the hero what life and love can look like when liberated from the hold of theological and social systems. However, by the time *Don*

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<sup>10</sup> In *Byron Life and Legend*, MacCarthy explores the possibility that rumors of Byron's male lovers were the ultimate reason he fled England following his separation from Annabella Milbanke.

*Juan* is being written, Byron's sketch emerges as a colorful and detailed painting of a new life. He expands upon the significance of nature even further, naming it the locus of spiritual experience for his hero: "My altars are the mountains and the ocean, / Earth, air, stars – all that springs from the great Whole, / Who hath produced, and will receive the soul" (III.926-8). In this moment, which to a modern audience bears notes of Darwinian philosophy, Nature is given the role of creator, not one God or multiple gods and goddesses, but the natural universe which creates and reabsorbs life after death. Nature is more than just a pseudo-mother figure; it is a beautiful, wild reminder that this world is the only world; our soul remains here forever. Therefore, in Byron, one can learn about spiritual truth by engaging with the world around them, the world that made them.

Let us turn first toward *Manfred* to see how Byron articulates such an experience. In *Manfred*, Byron's hero learns from nature on his treks through the mountains in solitude as he is grieving over the death of his lover, Astarte. While speaking with the Witch of the Alps, he describes these moments with nature:

My joy was in the Wilderness, to breathe  
The difficult air of the iced mountain's top,  
Where the birds dare not build, nor insect's wing  
Flit o'er the herbless granite; or to plunge  
Into the torrent, and to roll along  
On the swift whirl of the new breaking wave  
Of river stream, or ocean, in their flow.  
In these my early strength exulted; or  
To follow through the night the moving moon,  
The stars and their development; or catch  
The dazzling lightnings till my eyes grew dim;  
...  
– and with my knowledge grew  
The thirst of knowledge, and the power and joy  
Of this most bright intelligence, until – (II.62-72 & 94-6)

Manfred describes at length the moments of nature's power and beauty he witnesses in the mountains; the harsh landscape that no bird or insect can bear, the mighty waves crashing below,

or the strikes of lightening blinding to his eyes. On this particular mountaintop altar, Manfred finds answers to his questions about life and death, but also joy in the realization that this world is the ultimate destination of the soul. It is only when he is stricken by grief that he loses sight of this beauty, knowing that he must face Astarte again in this world when he blames himself for her death. In the final act, he argues against the spirits' mythologies about death:

I do not combat against death, but thee  
And thy surrounding angels; my past power  
Was purchased by no compact with thy crew,  
But by superior science – penance – daring –  
And length of watching – strength of mind – and skill  
In knowledge of our fathers – when the earth  
Saw men and spirits walking side by side,  
And gave ye no supremacy. (*Manfred* III.112-19)

Byron uses his hero to disprove the mythologies about the final judgement and existence of Heaven and Hell. He continues to deconstruct the theological doctrine that has created a culture of anxiety, limitation, and ignorance. When concerns about the destination of the soul are removed, it privileges a new perspective about the present world; life becomes about experience, action, and desire instead of about securing a place in the realm of Heaven or avoiding a place in the realm of Hell. Byron constructs a spirituality where the soul remains part of the universe which bore it, even after it transcends corporeal form. His hero Manfred does not fear death. In fact, his final words in the play confirm this truth as he admits, "'tis not so difficult to die" (*Manfred* III.151). Death becomes a simple transition once the anxiety about the destiny of the soul is eliminated. Priya N. Kisson and Paul Simpson-Housley discuss the role of mountains in *Manfred* as well in "The Evaluative and Spiritual Dimensions of Mountains in 'Manfred.'" In their analysis, "the Alps were a place where [Byron's] instinctual love of physical activity and adventure, his conscious appreciation of their majesty and solitude, and his subconscious need to transcend the harsh petty life below and lose his consciousness in the bliss of nature's heaven, could wrestle amongst



themselves for dominance” (92). The mountains certainly offer the chance for the hero to reconcile emotions associated with humanity and mortality with his concerns about life and death. However, their analysis is limited to considering what Byron is writing as within the confines of Christian belief; they refer to the mountains as “an intermediate purgatory between a miserable earthly existence for the misanthropist and unknown higher forces” (Kissoon and Simpson-Housley 93). Manfred does seek healing from grief and the unknown in nature, but by the end of the text the forces he speaks to are no longer unknown. In fact, they are no longer considered in Manfred’s mind to be higher beings. Manfred’s memory is extended beyond the normal limitations of humankind because in nature he learns of a time “when the earth / Saw men and spirits walking side by side” (118). He remembers a time when there was no artificial hierarchy of beings in the universe. Moreover, he recognizes the slow progress of humanity’s realization of this fact, a realization which requires “length of watching – strength of mind – and skill / In knowledge of our fathers” (*Manfred* III.116-7). The mountains are undoubtedly a location of evaluation and spirituality as Kissoon and Simpson-Housley suggest, but they are not an intermediate purgatory. They cannot be a purgatory because, as Manfred professes, such realms do not exist. The mountains are an altar, as Byron terms them, and the hero is one with them in the universe.

Childe Harold is one of the best examples of Byron’s hero becoming one with the natural world. The entire story of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* is our hero traveling through nature. He is our guide and our introduction to practicing Byronic morality. Moreover, by the end of *Childe Harold*, our hero is rather suddenly pronounced dead, as though the natural world we have been exploring resorbed him into its beauty leaving only its magnificent glory to be seen. Byron demonstrates this beautifully in the final moments of *Childe Harold*, after our hero is professed dead:

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,  
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,  
There is a society, where none intrudes,  
By the deep Sea, and music in its roar:  
I love not Man the less, but Nature more,  
From these our interviews, in which I steal  
From all I may be, or have been before,  
To mingle with the Universe, and feel  
What I can ne'er express, yet can not all conceal (IV.1594-1602)

Childe Harold, and Byron in his own way, leave us while they “mingle with the Universe” in spirit and through language respectively. He does not hate his fellow man – though he does not belong in their society. Therefore, Childe Harold’s decision to leave what is familiar is primarily a sacrifice. He offers up all of himself, what he has been and may become, to the universe in order to find understanding there. Even early in the text while Childe Harold is still alive, the narrator remarks: “Are not the mountains, waves, and skies, a part / Of me and of my soul, as I of them?” (III.707-8). Byron again elevates the connection between individual and nature as one of kinship. Not only are mountains, waves, and skies altars where knowledge and truth can be accessed, but they are also part of the self because it all is produced from “the great Whole,” Nature (*Don Juan* III.927). The beauty and magic of nature allow for emotions and pleasure unimaginable to be accessible through the senses. Childe Harold sacrifices himself in corporeal form to guide Byron’s exploration of earthly paradise. He is a symbol of hope, proof that the natural paradise exists and is accessible to humankind. *Childe Harold* bursts open the gateway to Byronic morality and Byron ushers the hero out of the falsely constructed world he left behind and into our world, the world of the future.

In one of the frequent and introspective tangents of *Don Juan*, Byron questions the purpose of writing and publishing. At first, he nonchalantly suggests that it is simply a pastime meant to excite a dull existence. However, he ends the stanza with a somewhat subtle moment of hope:

“And what I write I cast upon the stream, / To swim or sink – I have at least my dream” (XIV.87-8). Whether it is false modesty or a rare moment of self-doubt, Byron here admits that all he can do as a poet is to share his ideas with the world and hope that it catches the current. Despite the lack of literary criticism on Byron’s writing, his influence and his hero have kept afloat long enough for his literature to be realized once again. Alan Rawes suggests in his companion text to *Childe Harold*, “1816-17: Childe Harold III and Manfred,” that “Byron is glimpsing the beginning of a way forward and he is offering it as a beginning. It is a beginning that rejects transcendental answers to human problems but looks instead to resources to be found within human existence” (8). Byron’s articulation of a new spiritual experience considers the “resources” provided by the present moment and our present world. His death does perhaps mark the end of Romanticism as McGann suggests<sup>11</sup>, but it also marks the emergence of a new ideology that will in turn be repurposed for similar revolutions in the years to come.

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<sup>11</sup> In his Introduction to *Lord Byron: The Major Works*, McGann remarks that students of Romanticism often consider Byron’s death to be the end of the movement “because the career of Byron seemed at once its summary and its climax” (xi).

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