

# “‘Twas nature gnaw’d them to this resolution”: Byron’s Poetry and Mimetic Desire

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## 1. Introduction

We all know Lord Byron, I presume. Know him as a paradigmatic object of cultural desire, as the quintessentially *romantique* individualist whose haughtily transgressive rejection of his society turned him into one of its most compelling models and objects, the endlessly provocative rival of a multitude of young men to follow—still following—all to differing degrees blind to or writhing in the anxieties of his influence. I myself belong to that somewhat smaller group who actually read his poetry.

(Admiring it as I do, and hoping readers of this document will get some pleasure from it whatever they think of the argument, I have quoted more fully below than is probably appropriate either for a published paper or an oral presentation. Readers interested in the mere gist, however, might read the present section and skip down to section 3.)

Passing through the little deification of celebrity—he was on something of a downslope of fame, and knew it, before he put the matter past all doubt by dying almost-young for liberty in Greece in 1824--Byron, perhaps not surprisingly, developed into something of an expert on desire. Almost alone amongst the major *Romantics*, he came to understand this most basic force in human experience not only as mediated and mimetic, but as increasingly a function of a new kind of market whose commanding value was apparent autonomy *from* the market. It is not too hard to see how he figured this out. Those whom Byron defied adored him; those whose petty gratifications he evaded in spectacular suffering emulated him; those to whose desires he declared himself indifferent desired him--as few have ever been desired. For all his very real faults he was an intelligent man, and an observant one. He reflected on what had happened to him

## 2. Reading Byron's Poetry for Nature and Desire

In his earlier poetry the natural scene, at least in his privileged experiences of it, acts as an ally against other people, and a source of Byron's difference--an apparent replacement for, rather than object of, mediated desire.

Almost the first words of the preface to his fame-making *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812) tell us that the poem was "written, for the most part, amidst the scenes which it attempts to describe" and a coy disquisition on the identity of the Childe follows close on the heels of a spate of place-name dropping. They are sexy places, too, hard to get to, exotic, naturally beautiful, and dangerous. Soon the note of human pollution is of course sounded--man "mars" the beauties of Cintra the hero is experiencing (1.15)--reminding us of the prototypical alliance between the alienated Romantic solitary and the unspoiled, or spoiled natural world, alike menaced by sociality, by the Other. This alliance is powerfully reinforced by an identification with the bovine victim of the Seville bull-ring, vivid sacrifice at the center of--in the young poet's chillingly fine phrase--"the silent circle's peopled walls" (1.75). Does man scapegoat nature? There could hardly be a handier metaphor. And the Childe makes common cause.

Mainly, though, "Dear Nature" is the particular solace of her "never-wean'd" favourite son, the one who never "pollutes her path", he who, as he rather complacently notes, "mark'd her when none other hath" (2.27). He does at least make good on such a claim by going to Albania, a wild, inaccessible place which he with some justification boasts "all admire, but many dread to view" (2.43). He writes some stirring descriptive poetry, leavened with occasional homilies on the smallness and nastiness of man and the grandness and beauty of nature, sentiments that would not sound out of character on the lips of young backpacking development-deploring kindred spirits of a later age. Again, it is to be remembered that the first complained-of besmirchment of the natural world is not material, but social, in particular by the Romantic rebel's own society--not chemicals and chainsaws but the poisonous presence of overly familiar people and practices. The language of protest remains much the same after the products of industrial economic activity are added to the score, and indeed a good part of the complaint is still a complaint against the presence of the traveller's own peers and their influence. Mind you, then as now, this is often expressed in very general terms: "Art, Glory, Freedom fail, but Nature still is fair" (2.87).

The much-to-be-anthologized "beauties of Byron" studded throughout *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* do tend, however, to focus on the singularity and specificity of each scene, rather than their general properties, thus emphasizing the perspective of the intrepid solitary who finds and views and flaunts them. Here and there unflattering comparisons are made to his readers' range of reference, the paltrier natural phenomena of their more limited experience--the river Laos is as wide as the Thames but, obviously, more beautiful and more exotic (2.55n). The tone darkens but the substance does not change five years later in the third canto, as this "most unfit / Of men to herd with Man" seeks his only

friends in the mountains, his new home on the wide sea (3.12-13). In his relations to others, the “self-Exiled” hero is no longer a slain bull, but a “barr’d-up bird” beating itself against its cage till “the heat / of his impeded soul would through his bosom eat” (3.15). This despite the fact both Byron and his hero are on extended holiday in Switzerland, largely alone in the scenery, and far from the stifling social disapproval of England (where it is true a spectacular marital separation amidst rumours of incest and other crimes have made life rather hot). But *readers* of course, are far from being left behind, and various appeals to desire glint constantly through the comparative beauties with which they are serenaded. All comparison, ultimately, threatens the violence of human rivalry, even as it is crucial to the establishment of identity. But there is often something naively disarming about Byron’s open exercise of this function. At times *Childe Harold*’s connoisseurship seems unintentionally comic. The note to a stanza describing a Swiss storm reads:

The thunder-storm to which these lines refer occurred on the 13<sup>th</sup> of June, 1816, at midnight. I have seen, among the Acroceraunian Mountains of Chimari, several more terrible, but none more beautiful. (3.93n)

What needs a man who can toss off comparisons to the unimaginable meteorology of the Acroceraunian Mountains of Chimari with *our* desires or admiration?

In general, there is rather an obvious vaunting of experiential virtuosity running through all his descriptions, amplifying the tourist’s mere claim to having been there. Not only was I there, not only was it more impressive than what most of you have experienced, but see what it inspired in me!

An experience is a possession, of course, and therefore an object of mediated desire. Its power, from the naive imposition of an endless slide show of our last vacation, to the subtle but perceptibly distant look in a man’s eyes at the mention of some exotic place-name he need not even be so overt as to say he has visited, is social. One need not make one’s own clearing in the woods, or spit or shit on one’s own snippet of the natural earth, in Michel Serres’s image; one need not hold title deed to it or over-run it with armies in order for it to be in play as one’s own in the market of desires. In *Childe Harold* there is a certain amount of tactical denial of this, of the I-let-it-be-free-and-look-it-came-back-to-me variety, and no doubt this more developed kind of internal mediation has its virtues. An experience also can be represented, and as Eric Gans has taught us, can therefore be at least temporarily shared—although the subsequent portioning out of the feast, the hordes of tourists tramping through the paradises of original experience, must be managed. Byron and the other Romantics, one may at least say, made an invaluable contribution to the representation of the natural world as desirable in a certain way. Where would we be, in this business of trying to save nature, without them? The minerals and materials extracted from the earth are certainly in circulation in the global market, but so also are experiences of its Romantic beauty. The latter, too, are recognised as not necessarily renewable resources. When we say we want to save nature

we are saying we want *their* market value to rise beyond their competition. We want to encourage greed for *them*. Byron certainly did.

As Byron matures as a poet of nature and a poet of experience, however, there is some mellowing of what might be called this early possessiveness, this ferocious defence of an obviously precarious identity. Famous passages on Lake Lemman in the third canto are closely associated with the concession that “to fly from, need not be to hate, mankind” (3.69) and although the “wanderers o’er Eternity” may have seen and feel compelled to tell us about a perfectly amazing range of colours of water (3.71n), there is a hint, even in the Wordsworthian claims of identity with such splendid natural scenes, of a lordly new tolerance of the rest of us—as long as we keep our distance. Perhaps this just reflects a more subtle strategy, or we might call it a more developed aesthetic judgement or taste. It is, after all, low and obviously weak too forcefully to condemn one’s supposedly unimportant rival. As Tennyson’s Ulysses will say with similar condescension of his plodding son, “he works his work, I mine.” Mine just happens to be “to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield” (“Ulysses” 43, 70).

But I think it is also a question of the changing internal dynamics, as it were, of the poet’s alliance with the power of nature. Nature, one might say, begins to have on him the kinds of effects he was hoping it would have on others.

Like his friend Percy Shelley, Byron asks nature to allow him to be a “sharer” in her “fierce and far delight” (3.93)—with obvious implications for his relations to those with whom he pointedly does not share. Interestingly, however, at the end of a powerful sequence of stanzas, we have this:

Could I embody and unbosom now  
That which is most within me,—could I wreak  
My thoughts upon expression, and thus throw  
Soul, heart, mind, passions, feelings, strong or weak,  
All that I would have sought, and all I seek,  
Bear, know, feel, and yet breathe—into *one* word,  
And that one word were Lightning, I would speak;  
But as it is, I live and die unheard,  
With a most voiceless thought, sheathing it as a sword. (3.97)

This is not just a trope of inexpressibility, I think, but a concession of superiority and a partial ceding of power. It remains within an alliance against the Other. But it does not say, as Shelley famously does to his West Wind, that Byron is “One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud”. Byron does not pray for the “Spirit fierce” to blow through his lips “to unawakened earth / The trumpet of a prophecy!” (“Ode to the West Wind 56, 61, 68-69). His approach looks rather more like a posture at least of humility—I recognise the glory of nature and I realize how impossible it really is to make it metaphorical for myself. Albeit, I am in this (always) unlike others; I alone realize this impossibility. The model is beyond rivalry, but by modelling myself upon it—establishing

thus a kind of partnership with it--I attain even in my primary futility a secondary ascendancy over my human rivals. My "voiceless thought" is replaced by lightning, not by inadequate expressions. The lightning speaks for me, as it were. To it I bow, but of course to none other. To put this in René Girard's terms, not for the first time is an explicit appeal to external mediation a tactic in the struggles of internal mediation. My humility, my religiosity, distinguishes me from, indeed trumps your worldly pride.

This is very much the approach in one of Byron's best middle-period works, the "mental" drama *Manfred* of 1816-7. Perhaps the most impressive Byronic hero, the mage Manfred associates himself with the Alps--their blasted pines as reduced as he--but not with any sort of ascendancy over them *or* through them. Indeed, he is first shown vaingloriously challenging the spirits of the natural world, summoning them and loudly telling them "not to scoff at his will". The very universe is instinct with such scoffing, though, as we see in his immediate and humiliating collapse. He is at once chastised in the celebrated "Incantation", his Byronic heroism itself is subjected to a scathing critique: its hypocritical strategies of domination, even indeed of what we might call passive aggression, are laid bare. This is rather a new note in Byron. Not that there is any sort of suffering, even this sort, that cannot be recuperated into power, and Manfred does re-assert himself. But it is clear that, at the very least, the external world of nature can no longer provide him with the transcendence he cannot help but aspire to. At the most, it can bear witness, as does the lightning in *Childe Harold*, to the scale of his failure and thus to his superiority to every mere success, every craven tactic of desire practised upon him by the Other. At the climax of the play he is besieged by both Mephistophilian demons and, I think more importantly, by a human representative of consolatory submission, a Christian Abbott. He triumphs over both.

*Thou* didst not tempt me, and thou couldst not tempt me;  
I have not been thy dupe, nor am I thy prey--  
But was my own destroyer, and will be  
My own hereafter.--Back, ye baffled fiends! (3.4.137-40)

This is the old Byronic vaunting, at its best. But, although he is also able to withstand the power of natural beauty to make him want life--the setting sun is apostrophized with great grandeur, and then bid farewell--he does seem to acknowledge the sway of a greater desire, another desire rooted also in the natural. This acknowledgement never quite coalesces, in *Manfred*, into a clear formulation, because the poet of *Manfred*, I think, has not yet quite admitted it to himself. But the knowledge is there, and not just in the "Incantation". It is present in the heartbreaking awareness of the price to be paid for every attempt to triumph through indifference, the terrible paradox of internal mediation, the withering of all value in rivalrous struggle:

If I had never lived, that which I love  
Had still been living; had I never loved,  
That which I love would still be beautiful--  
Happy, and giving happiness. (2.1.193-5)

And it lurks even in his defiance:

I could not tame my nature down; for he  
Must serve who fain would sway—and soothe—and sue—  
And watch all time—and pry into all place—  
And be a living lie—who would become  
A mighty thing amongst the mean, and such  
The mass are; I disdained to mingle with  
A herd, though to be leader—and of wolves.  
The lion is alone, and so am I.

(3.1.116-20)

There was never a better place, I think, to recall Girard's excellent dictum about every "despite" being a "because"—or Shakespeare's commentary on those who protest too much. What has the play shown us except Manfred's extraordinary "sway" over his human Others? Not indeed as alpha-wolf, but *as* self-proclaimed solitary lion. This is the "nature" he could not tame down, the "living lie" he accuses himself of being.

He does not go on living the lie, however. Even if the deeper insights of the poem are not openly acknowledged, Manfred does show us that it is possible to refuse all but the very finest essence of power, the absolute zero degree of enviable indifference. He does not kill himself—that would be to betray desire—but he does somehow willingly turn his back on nature, not in a glory of imagined transcendence, but with a simple and clearly exemplary gesture of human solidarity. Taking the hand of the Abbott whose theology he still spurns, he says, "Old man! 'tis not so difficult to die" (3.4.151). And does.

In short, the tactic which has helped make Byron famous, the alliance he has struck with the inhuman as it were—not a devil's bargain because he's seen through the devils' tricks, they are too much creatures of desire themselves to give him any serious trouble—this alliance with the seeming external mediator has begun not so much to unravel, as to mutate into something rich and strange, something rather grander and less handy. The pose of lordly humility has willy-nilly been slipping towards humility in truth. A humility rooted, it seems to me, in an increasingly ineluctable awareness of how the process actually works, or as we might say with Girard, in the *romanesque*.

If indifference to others is power in the market of desires, the greatest of all models of power is all around us. The natural world thus seems the only truly external mediator left, the ultimate model of heedless alterity, the sublime indifference to which all aspire.

The *only* external mediator? The question of Byron's religious faith has been debated, but I think it is actually not too complicated, despite a smattering of references throughout his poetry to the deity or fates or demiurges. One of the best places to find Byron's mature view of the matter is the short lyric "Prometheus", also from the creative transition year 1816. The poem is really rather fine, so I will take the liberty of quoting it whole.

Titan! to whose immortal eyes  
The sufferings of mortality,  
Seen in their sad reality,  
Were not as things that gods despise;  
What was thy pity's recompense?  
A silent suffering, and intense;  
The rock, the vulture, and the chain,  
All that the proud can feel of pain,  
The agony they do not show,  
The suffocating sense of woe,  
Which speaks but in its loneliness,  
And then is jealous lest the sky  
Should have a listener, nor will sigh  
Until its voice is echoless.

## II

Titan! to thee the strife was given  
Between the suffering and the will,  
Which torture where they cannot kill;  
And the inexorable Heaven,  
And the deaf tyranny of Fate,  
The ruling principle of Hate,  
Which for its pleasure doth create  
The things it may annihilate,  
Refused thee even the boon to die:  
The wretched gift eternity  
Was thine--and thou hast borne it well.  
All that the Thunderer wrung from thee  
Was but the menace which flung back  
On him the torments of thy rack;  
The fate thou didst so well foresee,  
But would not to appease him tell;  
And in thy Silence was his Sentence,  
And in his Soul a vain repentance,  
And evil dread so ill dissembled,  
That in his hand the lightnings trembled.

## III

Thy Godlike crime was to be kind,  
To render with thy precepts less  
The sum of human wretchedness,  
And strengthened Man with his own mind;  
But baffled as thou wert from high,  
Still in thy patient energy,

In the endurance, and repulse  
Of thine impenetrable Spirit,  
Which Earth and Heaven could not convulse,  
A mighty lesson we inherit;  
Thou art a symbol and a sign  
To Mortals of their fate and force;  
Like thee, Man is in part divine,  
A troubled stream from a pure source;  
And Man in portions can foresee  
His own funereal destiny;  
His wretchedness, and his resistance,  
And his sad unallied existence:  
To which his Spirit may oppose  
Itself--and equal to all woes,  
And a firm will, and a deep sense,  
Which even in torture can descry  
Its own concenter'd recompense,  
Triumphant where it dares defy,  
And making Death a Victory.

In Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, with which Byron was almost obsessively familiar, the chained hero is voluble, the deity is silent and unmoved, and Prometheus in the end will capitulate and be unbound. Some two thousand years later Byron is responding to--or announcing--a changed situation, in which the relation to the sacred center is more intimate and, indeed, can be conceived of not just as rivalrous, but as reciprocal. In the universe of this poem there is no monopoly of power; the Titan struggles directly with "the Thunderer", and not without success. This surely is the essence of internal mediation, that the nearby model must participate with the subject in a duel of desires, the goal of which is to make the other the subjected imitator of one's own desire.

The desire that Byron's poem describes, and that is the virulent core of internal mediation, is of course what Girard calls "metaphysical" desire: mimetic desire in which the explicit, external object has dropped out of the triangular structure, leaving the two subject-models face to face. Since an absence of desire for external objects can only be interpreted as a (triumphantly gratified) desire for oneself, real power lies with those who can most persuasively demonstrate indifference to the other, who can betray less desire. In such a situation even a sky god's desires will no longer automatically attract those of earth-dwellers. And even the indifference of the merest crawling worm might be able to disconcert and hollow out the power of gods, at least if the gods betray desire themselves through their acts of oppression. As the second stanza of the poem tells us, Zeus takes "pleasure" in creating the beings he will annihilate--it is "the ruling principle of Hate"--a signal weakness that leaves him vulnerable to the defiant refusals of his intended victims.

One such refusal is Prometheus's "Silence"--imagined to be a most powerful weapon. In it is his Olympian foe's "Sentence", in the sense that Prometheus is refusing to reveal the

details of his prophecy of Zeus's downfall. This refusal has its own kind of power, its very absence of expression apparently persuading the oppressor of the accuracy of that prophecy, and filling him therefore with anxiety, with "evil dread". But this is also still the suffering-in-silence of the first stanza, and to the oppressor's knowledge of his future defeat is added another sentence of punishment: the immediate emptying out of his power as a result of Prometheus's defiant unwillingness to acknowledge it. This brings on the Thunderer's "vain repentance", which is clearly linked to his treatment of Prometheus rather than to the impersonal workings of fate. That the two aspects of Promethean silence combine in triumphant rivalry with the oppressor is never better demonstrated than by their final result. By the end of the second stanza, it is Zeus who is striving, and unsuccessfully, to conceal his feelings, to "dissemble"--one of a telling sequence of symmetries, of exact reversals, that are the inevitable indicators of metaphysical desire. We are even to imagine--a highly satisfactory projection of the subject's desire upon the defeated model--that the once-omnipotent hand holding the lightning bolts "trembles", as his victims once trembled before him.

As the stakes in the struggle here are also metaphysical in the related and more familiar, philosophical sense of that word, the ability to resist the attraction of the other, to defy the other's power, is connected to the transcendence of spirit or mind over materiality. Two strikingly paradoxical phrases draw attention to the grandeur of the claim being made against the power of the sky-god: Prometheus, bound and immobile, possesses "patient energy", and repulses his oppressor with an "impenetrable Spirit". Energy, in fact, is only ever potential in Byron; once released, it is oppressive power, or dissipation and loss. And spirit is here celebrated for the quality, impermeability, which is actually only of use in physical things, and is futilely longed for by consciousness. But the import of these expressions is clear: Prometheus has what his oppressor lacks, what his oppressor has lost in the self-betrayal of desiring hatred whilst oppressing him. It is the oppressor's spirit, the once "inexorable Heaven" whose "soul" has been pierced with "repentance", that is the penetrated thing, the trembling physical being, while it is the ostensible victim whose motionless body has allowed him to become invulnerable spirit, whose (fortunate) inability to act has enabled an apotheosis of his "will" and "mind". He and the sky-god have changed places.

Prometheus's "boon" to "Man", is his promise that if we imitate his response, thus strengthening ourselves in our own mind, we can achieve, in and through our suffering mortality, a similar triumph. As noted, Prometheus's theft, in effect, of the Thunderer's spirituality, of his immaterial invulnerability, must be laid at the door of the oppressor himself, of his desire-betraying attack on the Titan. (For this to have been a desiring action on the Titan's part would of course have cost him that advantage.) The Thunderer has handed Prometheus his victory, clearly enough, by refusing him "the boon to die", by making him the "wretched gift of eternity", which the Titan has "flung back" in powerful irony and to the discomfiture and defeat of his opponent. To mortal man, the Titan is "a symbol and a sign", and the poem is most original in its reconfiguring of Prometheus's gift to us from the actively useful fire to the more passively inspiring prophecy and model. In his immobility Prometheus permits us to see both our "funereal destiny" of

death and suffering, and the strategy of passivity by which to exploit it. In torture itself, with all that it demonstrates of the victim's irresistible attraction for the torturer, we are to "descrie" our "own concentered recompense"--a splendid phrase, richly suggestive of the claims of autonomy in connectedness, and the rewards of a centrality defined by those who are drawn towards it. The Thunderer now reduced to helpless materiality, we are "triumphant" over him not when we suffer in eternity as Prometheus does, but when we contemptuously spurn our own materiality and all the promises of gratified desire it holds out. We are triumphant when we deliberately make the Thunderer's desire-betraying oppression permanent and defy his implicit invitation to imitatively desire his own immortal freedom of action ... in short, when we make "Death a Victory". Prometheus teaches us not to want life, and thus to want less than our opponent(s). The patriarchal deity is now enmeshed in the reciprocal effects of desire. Which of course is to admit he is no deity at all, but merely other human beings, whose power is to be resented and resisted.

But real lightning bolts don't tremble at human indifference, at human stoicism and suffering. And they are immune to resentment. Another measure of Byron's sense of the reciprocity between external model and human subject at about this stage in his career is his poem "Darkness" (again, 1816). It begins:

I had a dream, which was not at all a dream.  
The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars  
Did wander darkling in the eternal space,  
Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth  
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air; (1-5)

Byron was not the only person to imagine such an apocalypse at about this time, but his treatment focuses interestingly on the violence triggered by the disappearance of the sun, and upon the utter indifference of these celestial processes to human responses of any kind, and especially towards the sufferings of those who "looked up / With mad disquietude on the dull sky" (28-9). As everyone and everything dies, even the once distinguished and personified elements fade out of identity--"The winds were withered in the stagnant air, / And the clouds perish'd" (80-1)--until a primal homogeneity is established, like the collapse of all matter and light into a black hole: "Darkness ... was the universe" (81-2).

There is a complete absence of moralism in this. The sun did not go out for our sins. It did not go out because we were insufficiently respectful, or because we had no contract with it. It just went out. If it had anything to do with us, nature does not deign to provide a sign. And nature does not notice our absence any more than it does our cries, our pathos, or our "needs". In Byron, increasingly, one senses the smallness of man, and even of our earth, in the scale of the cosmos. His Lucifer, a few years later, will challenge the last of the Byronic heroes to scale his desires, especially his desire for difference, to the universe as it really is:

And if there should be  
Worlds greater than thine own, inhabited  
By greater things, and they themselves far more  
In number than the dust of thy dull earth,  
Though multiplied to animated atoms,  
All living, and all doom'd to death, and wretched,  
What would'st thou think?

(*Cain* 2.1.44-  
50)

(This, we might remind ourselves, a perspective from a good long while before the Mt. Palomar or Hubble telescopes.) Where Manfred was still able to imagine some sort of alliance between the power of natural indifference and his own dark glamour, this later Byronic hero will be entirely nonplussed.

*Don Juan* (1819-23) recognizes more openly what was only partially or indirectly grasped in the poems we have been looking at. That is perhaps to say, Byron's later work acknowledges what the principles and tactics described above might imply in universal application. It is reasonably clear what it means to worship, or defy, a power which can be influenced by such subjection. But what does it mean to worship nature?

*Don Juan* is a social poem, a tragicomic satire. It is Byron's great survey of European civilization in his own day, very much including but not primarily concerned with the role in it of his own Byronic self, now viewed with a calm, but pervasive irony. Nature or natural description is therefore not a frequent focus, but on a couple of occasions it is crucial, the very center of the world view the poem expresses, the guarantee or anchor of the system of internal mediation it describes. Nature is shown, that is, as it surely must always now be shown, as both completely indifferent to desire, and (thus) its source.

In the second canto young Juan, for no particular reason, amidst a random selection of his fellow men, finds himself drifting in an open boat, "at mercy of the waves, whose mercies are / Like human beings during civil war" (2.42). This is a "waste of waters; like a veil, / Which, if withdrawn, would but disclose the frown / Of one whose hate is masked but to assail" (2.49). The most fitting metaphor for the nature without is the nature within--both kinds of nature as savage as they are loving. But this is not pathetic fallacy, even if we, like the castaways, might be tempted to think it is. The anthropomorphic note, which tantalisingly recurs through these passages, is a tease, really--nature's tease as much as Byron's. It is a metaphor, not a reality, and to Byron now only realities matter. Byron's mariners, like mankind, gaze out as they must at something all-beneficent one moment, haughtily destructive the next, emptily enigmatic the moment after that. When what they most want is not so much good or bad treatment, as meaning, a sign. There are references to Noah, and then that most familiar of all metaphors in this context, the most scriptural of pathetic fallacies:

Now overhead a rainbow, bursting through  
The scattering clouds, shone, spanning the dark sea,

Resting its bright base on the quivering blue;  
And all within its arch appear'd to be  
Clearer than without ... (2.91)

Byron's sharp eye is at its best here: through the arch, because of its framing, clarity, and promise. Men look for a sign, for deliverance, of course. But through this arch they can never pass, any more than Tennyson's Ulysses ever can—hard not to think the later poet remembered this passage when he wrote of a similarly unattainable and nautically inflected desire:

Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough  
Gleams that untravelled world whose margin fades  
Forever and forever when I move. ("Ulysses" 19-21)

Juan is certainly having an experience, but unlike Childe Harold's or Manfred's lakes and alps, nature no longer mirrors his soul, or proffers him a distinction from the rest of us. I think there is no verbal irony here, either. Let us not make a discovery that many others have made sound unduly original or profound. But Byron's lines, like *Don Juan* as a whole, are at any rate perfectly unambiguous on the matter: there is no omnipotent controller of nature, either dependent or independent of our desires or deserts. There is no deal, no bargain, no sign and no God. The irony was always in the anthropomorphism. To put it another way, from the perspective of the internally mediated world it is not the deity's vengeful hostility that prevents redemption, but just the elusive mobility of the clarifying, desire-inducing phenomenon itself. The rainbow is not static.

It changed of course; a heavenly cameleon,  
The airy child of vapour and the sun,  
Brought forth in purple, cradled in vermilion,  
Baptized in molten gold, and swathed in dun (2.92)

Not that it isn't good to be affected by such desires, to take, for example, such effects as omens. "It is as well to think so, now and then" (2.93). Hope can help, as long as hope, or for that matter, desire, is kept general, ready and able to respond to any of the infinity of promptings offered by the "celestial kaleidoscope" (2.93). The "desire of life / Prolongs it" (2.64). A "bird of promise" is good too, because it may really mean land is nearby, and in any case if it perches it can be eaten (2.95). Which brings us to the notorious manifestation of desire most pertinent to our purposes. Bird or no bird, starvation looms in the little boat.

The lots were made, and mark'd, and mix'd, and handed,  
In silent horror, and their distribution  
Lull'd even the savage hunger which demanded,  
Like the Promethean vulture, this pollution; (2.75)

Byron's history with Prometheus, as noted, is extensive. What we are being told here is that divine resentment has become automatic, impersonal, and is now called by a different name: "'Twas nature gnaw'd them to this resolution" (2.75). It takes a different form, also: not a divinely dispatched vulture, or any other external oppressor, but ourselves, each other.

None are excepted, none are "permitted to be neuter" (2.75), in the sense that no one can escape the lottery, or the hunger. One *can* say no, however, to this deity, as Manfred or Prometheus or later, Byron's Cain say no. One can say no, and take one's chances, as in fact Juan does. And he guesses right, as the cannibalism turns out poorly—interestingly, it seems that it generally does, although perhaps not in the spectacular, immediate way of Byron's sailors, "tearing and grinning, howling, screeching, swearing" (2.79) and then dying. Cows do go mad, mankind does not prosper, eating their own. On the other hand, it is pure luck that Juan, and only Juan, eventually survives. Others who forbear dining on their boat-mates—"three or four / Who were not quite so fond of animal food" (2.78)—drown anyway.

So, before the famous but, by comparison, somehow almost plaintively surprised lines—Tennyson again--about what is "red in tooth and claw", there was this. Why do we eat each other? Because nature leaves us no choice, except to die.

Byron's knowing depiction of the operation and effects of desire, in combination with his mature belief in the human ability not so much to attain Byronic indifference to desire as to be capable of the Promethean *no* in answer to its inducements, implies that he sees no fundamental difference between its appetitive and cultural forms. Both are mediated, and we know this because we can identify both sufficiently well to defy them. Nature is not an environment, a stage upon which things happen. It is a gnawing power, an all-purpose mediator, an imperious model—the ultimate model. And of course, when one considers Nature's centerless structure and constant adaptive mobility, its pervasive capacity to evoke desire and its admittedly unreliable but still observable capacity to at least temporarily satisfy it, this is Nature itself *as* market. Or at least, the analogy, the homology, insists upon itself. This diffuse structure is what most clearly distinguishes nature from singular external mediators of the past, at any rate, even from pantheistic or pagan systems of nodal deities whose powers, if only locally powerful, were still magical and beyond direct rivalry. Indeed, given that the shift in the focus of desire is from the singular and far-off to the plural and immediate, perhaps it is inaccurate to speak of nature's "external" mediation at all. Nature is not necessarily so far-off, as Byron's mariners know all too well. It is everywhere; in T. S. Eliot's beautiful phrase, "more distant than stars and nearer than the eye" ("Marina" 20). The "external" quality of this mediation turns out to be the illusion of Childe Harold's exoticism, a projection of his aspiration to difference.

Juan eventually washes ashore on a remote island and is rescued by the beautiful pirate's daughter, Haidée—perhaps his most interesting and emotionally invested female portrait.

They have a love affair, under circumstances that Byron insistently describes in the language of paradise and Eden. There is much to be said about this, but their love, to be brief about it, is inextricably natural *and* cultural in its provenance. In keeping with its seemingly paradisaical character and location, however, Byron's takes great pains to develop Haidée's desires as both powerfully inherent and pure, that is to say, unmediated in any obviously social way. In a remarkable passage, he tells us what the function of such implausible desires and perfect love is in an internally mediated context:

Oh beautiful! and rare as beautiful!  
But theirs was love in which the mind delights  
To lose itself, when the old world grows dull,  
And we are sick of its hack sounds and sights (4.17)

Haidée and Juan's love is a focus for thought, where the mind can lose its social bearings, can escape the hack sounds and sights of the mimetic world, the mercenary world of imitation, of a stale and never successful struggle for originality. The idea of non-mimetic desire, like the idea of paradise, is a crucial refuge, a touchstone--a transcendent signified if one prefers--a necessary angel. The renovating virtue of this spot before time, of course, is the desideratum of much Romantic imagining, but Byron now dissociates the figure of the poet or poet-like hero from this project--this is not the special preserve of the specially sensitive, but something rarer and more general, "what we mortals call romantic / and always envy, though we deem it frantic" (4.18). Here is where Haidée differs from her male predecessors: she is no poet, and when she falls, she falls silent, as Prometheus teaches us to do. Before that fall, she is what we in the fallen world-- in the market of "petty passions" (4.17) ever trying to be grand passions--she is what we *all* envy and desire. She models for us what we cannot help but want but cannot ever successfully imitate. She makes that market hum. This she can do because she is not of it, and can never be out-moded..

Her death, therefore, perhaps comes as close to the genuinely tragic as any Romantic death can come. Her "piratical papa" returns unexpectedly, indeed, mutates out of Juan himself in one of Haidée's dreams, shattering the idyll with the inevitability of human mediation and human rivalry. Actually, we discover, he was there all along--the model and blocking figure par excellence, not only in Juan but in Haidée herself--we are repeatedly reminded of how much daughter resembles and doubles father. Lambro, the father, is of course a rival for his daughter's sexuality, but his reasons for destroying it are interesting. He thinks it is market-driven. He thinks Juan is an adventurer, a poacher, a bargain hunter, and the spectacle of the fire-sale dispersion of both his daughter and his ducats, it must be conceded, does give him quite a good reason to think so. Very much an operator in the market himself, he nonetheless regards his patriarchal will as sacral authority--it is rather a Tory problem actually. He wants to believe he can keep an island of this sacredness to himself, but comes home to find pillage and secular excess dancing in the heart of his sanctuary. He does not take it lying down. Juan is contemptuously flung from the garden and back onto the open market, back into slavery, where he belongs. Literally, he ends up on the Istanbul slave-block, where he is bought by an

imperious sultaness. But Haidée does not take it lying down either, and true to the line of Byronic heroes whose continuation she is, refuses to live with anything less than perfection. Father and daughter share a grave in a paradise whose abandonment and sterility colours our last glimpse of the natural world as such. The great poem moves on, to history, and to the world we actually live in.

Here, in the context of Juan's rudely forced re-entry into the market, is one of Byron's most succinct descriptions of how that world works--"works like a sea", in his enemy Wordsworth's resonant phrase--through internally mediated desire:

'Tis pleasant purchasing our fellow creatures;  
And all are to be sold, if you consider  
Their passions, and are dext'rous. Some by features  
Are bought up, others by a warlike leader,  
Some by a place--as tend their years or natures;  
The most by ready cash--but all have prices  
From crowns to kicks, according to their vices.

(5.27)

### 3. Summing Up

“All are to be sold, if you consider / Their passions, and are dext’rous.” These are certainly the words of a man who has learned something about “passions” and the market. “Ready cash” may be the most flexible and common device, but it is the desires, the passions, which are the actual medium of exchange, and Byron, perhaps stumbling into it at first, but in the end with considerable self-knowledge, *was* “dext’rous”. Power is the goal, the buying up. The objects of desire are unimportant, changeable, convertible from one to another. Modelling and avoiding subjection is the thing. *Don Juan* is the great poem of the market, announcing its inevitability and diagnosing its operations, as well as modelling for us a wide range of strategies--almost all of which operate in the general mode of irony--by which to live and (more or less) prosper within it.. *Don Juan* is the epic of so grand a thing as “the shift to internal mediation”, of the triumph of commercialization if one prefers, even of what Karl Popper calls the “open society” with all its always eventually inadequate solutions.

As the mediation of desire passes irrevocably from conscious beings—even the most powerful of which can be resented, eroded by comparison, subjected in their turn-- Byron’s poetry recognises nature for the only truly unmoved mover, the primary model. That is to say, he recognises in ways the other Romantics do not the social implications of the new love of nature.

Byron, it might also be put, made the move, in René Girard’s terms, from *romantique* to *romanesque*: he rejected the Romantic merging of subject and object, rejected Romantic epistemology, rejected anthropomorphic nature and natural supernaturalism. The world of *Don Juan*, as is often remarked, is a world without a center and a world without authority, only desires and losses--contestations and at best temporary victories. Nature, to the human a limitless periphery, exerts maximal power on our desires without offering any single target of resentment. Our attempts to co-opt it, or parts of it, into alliances against our human Others, are bound not to abject failure so much as to eventual inadequacy. If an alliance is otherwise to be defined as any arrangement between players in a market whereby rivalry is less within the arrangement than in the market generally--marriages, companies, nations, are examples--then the imagined alliance with nature is bound to be revealed as illusory, a deception for the eyes of others or for one’s own, not a real alliance. Nature allies itself to no one. One may profess one’s love and respect for nature, to other human beings. But nature will not echo such professions. The solitary Byronic hero on his alp succeeds in the market in the sense that he attracts considerable imitation, and experiences the exaltations of his difference. But Byron himself came to recognise the concession of his own lack of autonomy implied by the strategy. T’was nature gnawed him to the recognition.

The waves on *Don Juan*’s ocean are like human beings in a civil war, their mercies are as tender. The poem as a whole is primarily concerned with desire and constantly reveals an understanding of desire as mimetic. Nature’s promptings--sexual, gustatory, combative--

are not categorically different those of acknowledged culture. Byron depicts a wide range of human attempts to cope with desire, sometimes with comic effects, sometimes tragic, but never to our permanent gratification. It is thus a poem full of human strength and weakness, but completely devoid of scapegoats. There is irony, and lordly amusement, and lordly anger. But no authorial resentment—and this absence is its clearest badge of the *romanesque*. Byron knows better—from having provoked and been their object, perhaps—than to indulge the fantasies of resentment. It is as if he has learned from and gone beyond Prometheus. If the lightning bolts tremble even in the hands of the father god, who is to be imagined so powerfully beyond our desires as to be able to poison our very being?

Nature, only. And nature cannot be resented. Nature best resembles, in Byron's mature poetry, that infinitely various and infinitely provoking source of desires we can call the market. It is the origin of the desires, of the promises, and also is the deliverer of whatever temporary relief and gratifications we are to achieve. In *Don Juan* the operation of the market, or nature, is the same in an open boat, on a paradisaical island, in the Istanbul slave market or its Sultan's harem, on a gruesome battlefield, in the Russian court, or at a country house full of bored English aristocrats.

This perhaps marks the limit of what I can usefully develop as this poet's contributions to the issue of mimetic desire and nature. Questions are certainly raised, of course, if we take his vision seriously, and implications proliferate. I will limit myself to one of each.

There is more than a hint of the old pathetic fallacy, of the aspiration to an alliance with nature, in many modern attempts to come to grips with the risks of environmental degradation. For example, in arguments for something like a "natural contract", in Michel Serres' phrase. Byron's poetry might ask: what can it possibly mean to establish a contract with a mediator—or a "subject"—who by definition cannot establish any kind of reciprocity? If one were to say, "I will try not to act on my desires to your detriment if you try not to inspire so many of those desires in me," what possible answer could one expect to receive? And if there is no answer? Eventually our sun will indeed go nova, and go out. A particle of dust in the immensity will drift out of the light.

The problem of preserving the tiny fragment of the natural world we inhabit is perhaps finally a social problem, like dividing a very limited feast so that all are (more or less) satisfied and violence is avoided. It is not best thought of in terms of a one-to-one relationship between man and some equality called Nature. The feast will best be preserved for everyone not through some once-and-forever renunciation of our natural desires or imperious re-conception of our relationship to them, but through the *development* of internal mediation, which is to say, the ongoing management and refinement of desires through representation, the continued leaving-behind of the zero-sum game of sacrificial society, and the growth of the kind of self-awareness *about* our desires that a poet like the maturer Byron models for us.