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Byron and Shelley's Poetry of 1816

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Byron and Shelley's literary and personal relationship has attracted much critical discussion. Their meeting in 1816 was extremely significant for the development of both poets, and Charles E. Robinson encapsulates the nature of their association when he affirms that "Byron and Shelley's letters to and about each other demonstrate the thoroughness of their literary association: in a very real sense, each was a student of the other, whose works he read, criticized, and remembered" (Robinson 4). Such "thoroughness" included scrutiny of one another's poetics, but most crucially, it allowed them to isolate their own unique powers as poets. Informed by their deepening understanding of each other's artistic preoccupations, each achieved uniqueness through their dialogue. Byron and Shelley achieve poetic independence rather than co-dependence through their relationship as witnessed by the distinctive poetry produced by both over the course of the "Year Without a Summer."

Shelley's artistic direction centers on transforming experience into poetry. The poetry of 1816 seeks to record the interaction of self and world in language alert to the quicksilver nature of perception. The challenge of transmuting words into experience, the excessiveness of which experience seems to prevent any straightforward description, becomes the animating force of the Scrope Davies Notebook. The lyric self, biographical experience as also recorded in the letter to Thomas Love Peacock, and the impersonal observance of genre makes the Scrope Davies notebook (quoted from *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, hereafter *CPPBS*) both intensely

personal and coolly detached from the self as Shelley seeks to find words adequate to his perceptions in his poetry. The recent nature of the discovery of “To Laughter” and “Upon the wandering winds” has meant that they have received slighter critical attention than *Scene—Pont Pellisier in the vale of Servox*, the Scrope Davies Notebook version of *Mont Blanc*, and “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty.” (Shelley, *CPPBS* 69-70) “Upon the wandering winds” reveals a pressure to reflect and to embody the power of nature.

Upon the wandering winds that thro' the sky
Still speed or slumber; on the waves of Ocean,
The forest depths that when the storm is nigh
Toss their grey pines with an inconstant motion,
The breath of evening that awakes no sound
But sends its spirit into all, the hush
Which, nurse of thought, old midnight pours around
A world whose pulse then beats not, o'er the gush
Of dawn, and whate'er else is musical
My thoughts have swept until they have resigned
Like lutes inforced by the divinest thrall
Of some sweet lady's voice that which my mind
(Did not superior grace in others shewn
Forbid such pride) would dream were all its own.

(Shelley, *CPPBS* 71)

The inconstancy of the motion that Shelley observes seems deliberately antithetical to the sonnet's formal structure. Stuart Curran notes how “Shelley is always conscious of the traditions against which his sonnets resonate and masterful in his use of form”

(Curran 54), and the self-conscious decision to shape his sonnet in relation to the content even as it is fixed within the limits of the conventional sonnet reveals Shelley attempting to rewrite, albeit subtly, the logic of the form. Shelley has his ideas mingle from line to line, where the frequent enjambment is suggestive of the wandering winds themselves. Shelley attempts to capture the essence of the natural world's winds as he "sends its spirit into all" the lines of the poem. The sleeping world's silence overwrites "whate'er else is musical," threatening the poem itself, recalling *Scene—Pont Pellisier in the vale of Servox*'s question as to the nature of the '[s]ilence and solitude' (*Scene—Pont Pellisier in the vale of Servox*, l. 145) with which the poet is faced. Shelley's letter to Peacock notes that "[i]n these regions every thing changes & is in motion," (*Letters: PBS* 1: 500) and "Upon the wandering winds" represents an attempt to mimic such motion. Yet, such an attempt suggests the controlling force of nature. The poet's thoughts are "[l]ike lutes inforced by the divinest thrall / Of some sweet lady's voice" that Shelley can only "dream" are independent from the natural world.

Molded by rather than molding nature, Shelley's sonnet seems to express a loss of confidence in the parentheses that briefly draw attention to his lack in comparison to "others" and their "superior grace." For Judith Chernaik and Timothy Burnett, Byron is the subject of Shelley's comparative gesture, as they view the sonnet as "quite possibly inspired by Shelley's first reading of *Childe Harold*." (Chernaik and Burnett 39) Despite this reading drawing attention to Shelley's "regard and affection" for Byron (Cameron 86), rather, it seems the challenge of responding gracefully to nature is the animating problem in the lines. Shelley, by his own estimation in "Upon the wandering winds," cannot "vanquish[ed] and overthr[o]w" Wordsworth or Byron.

However, the “superior grace” of others does not quite override the experience of “divinest thrall,” nor does it offer a solution to the problem of nature as a controlling rather than controllable force. Seeking not to master nature but to mimic it, as Michael O’Neill notes in his commentary in *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, “Upon the wandering winds” “chimes with preoccupations” in *Scene—Pont Pellisier in the vale of Servox* and “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” (CPPBS 467), where issues of power, influence, and poetic achievement mingle in the poet’s confrontation with nature.

Scene—Pont Pellisier in the vale of Servox shows Shelley approaching the Power through nature. Approaching the mountain, the site of the “Power in likeness of the Arve” (*Scene—Pont Pellisier in the vale of Servox*, l. 16), Shelley’s imagination and perceptive faculties combine, as in the letter to Thomas Love Peacock, where articulation of the “awful scene” (*Scene—Pont Pellisier in the vale of Servox*, l. 15) becomes the ultimate challenge to the poet’s powers. The letter, like the poem, begins by describing the waters of the Arve, the “vast ravine” that dominates the initial view of the scene, a river that “appears to have forced its way” (*Letters: PBS I*. 496) through the landscape.

Thus thou Ravine of Arve, dark deep ravine,
Thou many coloured, many voiced vale!
Over whose rocks and pines and caverns sail
Fast cloud shadows and sunbeams—awful scene,
Where Power in likeness of the Arve comes down
From the ice gulphs that gird his secret throne
Bursting through these dark mountains like the flame

Of lightning through the tempest—thou dost lie
Thy giant brood of pines around thee clinging
Children of elder time, in whose devotion
The charmed winds still come, and ever came
To drink their odours, and their mighty swinging
To hear, an old and solemn harmony;

(Scene—Pont Pellisier in the vale of Servox, CPPBS, ll. 12-24)

Reminiscent of Coleridge’s “Hymn Before Sunrise, in the Vale of Chamouni,” as Michael O’Neill, among others shows (O’Neill, “The Gleam of Those Words” 76-96), Shelley’s *Scene—Pont Pellisier in the vale of Servox* deftly weaves echoes of “Hymn” into the fabric of his own poem. Where Coleridge’s poem, in its occasionally shrill address to the imagined mountain, seeks to affirm his claim that “I worshipped the invisible alone” (“Hymn before sunrise,” l. 16), this section of Shelley’s poem shows the poet imaginatively exploring his vision, describing while gesturing to how the poet imagines nature’s power. Metapoetic in the extreme, the poem’s openness and interaction with other poems and poetics allows Shelley imaginative scope to muse on his own “various phantasy” (*Scene—Pont Pellisier in the vale of Servox*, l. 38) while remaining self-conscious of the influences that inform his vision. Drawing the reader’s attention to Shelley’s presence and the poem as created by and creative of the scene he would convey, *Scene—Pont Pellisier in the vale of Servox* restlessly re-explores the mountain and the ravine where he is both active and passive before the power of nature, and the poet’s perception takes center stage:

Ravine of Arve! and when I gaze on thee
I seem as in a vision deep and strange
To muse on my own various phantasy,

My own, my human mind... which passively
Now renders and receives fast influencings
Holding an unforeseeing interchange
With the clear universe of things around:
A legion of swift thoughts, whose wandering wings
Now float above thy darkness, and now rest
Near the still cave of the witch Poesy;
Seeking among the shadows that pass by,
Ghosts of the things that are, some form like thee,
Some spectre, some faint image; till the breast
From which they fled recalls them—thou art there.

(Scene—Pont Pellisier in the vale of Servox, CPPBS, ll. 36-49)

Hailing nature as beyond the “divinest,” Shelley’s iconoclasm is transformed in the poetry into a meditation on the nature of the relationship between nature and the divine. But if Shelley allows nature to be “the poet” in the letter to Peacock, *Scene—Pont Pellisier in the vale of Servox* sees the poet wrest this role back for himself. Focusing on the “unforeseeing interchange” between man and mountain, Shelley, anticipating his later claim in *A Defence of Poetry* that “Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will,” (Shelley, *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose* 531), *Scene—Pont Pellisier in the vale of Servox* draws attention to the fluid and inspired nature of poetry. The poet cannot create in a vacuum, but nor can Mont Blanc represent Power without the imagination’s active as well as passive response. Shelley’s unique response to the mountain, where his “legion of swift thoughts” moves towards the “still cave of the witch Poesy” before “the breast / From

which they fled recalls them” shows the poet insist on the power of the poet’s mind to equal that of nature.

Despite Shelley’s assertion of the power of the poet’s mind, Mont Blanc remains an emblem of eternity that shapes and is shaped by the poet’s thought. The problem of how to express that which seems beyond expression draws attention to the scale of the poet’s ambition and the sublimity of the mountain. *Scene*’s final section increases rather than decreases the sense of mystery that pervades the poem. Subtly responding to the earlier section’s claim that “Power dwells apart in deep tranquillity, / Remote, sublime, and inaccessible” (*Scene—Pont Pellisier in the vale of Servox*, ll. 97-98), the final section shows Shelley refusing to rest content with doubt as his ambitious poem, like “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” questions rather than sings amidst its uncertainty:

Mont Blanc yet gleams on high—the Power is there,
The still and solemn Power of many sights
And many sounds, and much of life and death.
In the calm darkness of the moonless nights
Or the lone light of day the snows descend
Upon that mountain—none beholds them there—
Nor when the sunset wraps their flakes in fire
Or the starbeams dart thro’ them—winds contend
Silently there, and heap the snows, with breath
Blasting and swift—but silently—its home
The voiceless lightning in these solitudes
Keeps innocently, and like vapour broods
Over the snow. The secret strength of things

Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome
Of Heaven is as a column, rests on thee,
And what were thou and Earth and Stars and Sea
If to the human mind's imaginings
Silence and solitude were Vacancy?

(*Scene—Pont Pellisier in the vale of Servox*, CPPBS, ll. 128-45)

The solemn, though mysterious, close to the poem prompts I. J. Kapstein to lament the “hidden” (Kapstein 1046) tensions that pervade *Scene—Pont Pellisier in the vale of Servox* that Shelley does not dispel in the concluding lines. Yet the conflict Kapstein rightly senses is not hidden but on display. The lines show Shelley testing the limits and possibilities of the human mind, creating myth after myth while withholding any final affirmation from any one of his constructions. Referring to it as the Power of “much of life and death,” Shelley leaves ambiguous its precise nature and function, and imagines what he cannot perceive, with the arresting image of the snowflakes which the “sunset wraps their flakes in fire” suggestive of the pleasure Shelley finds in the imagined scene. Yet silence and the voiceless come to threaten the poem, disrupting Ralph Pite’s clean cut sense of “the mind and the world... as reflections of one another, indistinguishable and innately harmonious” (Pite 51). John Pierce’s sense of the struggle between “a silence of plenitude and a silence of nihilism” (Pierce 104), goes some way as to suggesting the conflict in the poetry, but though this essay departs from the thrust of John Rieder’s argument here, “[i]nstead, the mountain’s voice, while it clearly provides Shelley’s poet with the authority of a prior, as-if-sacred text, must also submit itself to the poet’s authority as translator” (Rieder 781), his emphasis on the struggle between poet and mountain for authority is central to the poem’s process and Shelley’s epistolary awe. Referring to the mountain

range as seeming to “pierce the clouds like things not belonging to this earth” in the scene of “dizzying wonder,” Shelley continues, “[o]ne would think that Mont Blanc was a living being & that the frozen blood forever circulated slowly thro’ his stony veins” (*Letters: PBS* I. 500). Though conscious of the mystery that the “secret strength of things / Which governs thought” cannot be understood or explained, Shelley’s restless imagination closes with the open-ended and philosophically acute question: “And what were thou and Earth and Stars and Sea / If to the human mind’s imaginings / Silence and solitude were Vacancy?” Despite being unanswerable, the question is not rhetorical, as the poet’s responsibility to ask and the reader’s duty to consider the question make this demanding poem, like the other poems collected in the Scrope Davies Notebook, an experience rather than a description of an experience (O’Neill, *Human Mind’s Imaginings* 45).

If Shelley insists on the power of experience, Byron draws attention to the singularity of the mind which experiences. By 1816, Byron’s life becomes, by artistry not accident, the raw material out of which he makes his art where his “everlasting centos of himself,” act to half-reveal and half-conceal the self (Hazlitt, *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, vol. 7, 136). Stanza one of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* III reveals how Byron alchemizes the private into the poetic, from base metal into gold through poetic technique. Eighteenth-century Spenserianism had provided the second-generation Romantic poets with a relatively unthreatening and fertile example of formal dexterity (Kucich 5), and Byron exploits the possibilities of the genre with aplomb (Vicario 103). Though the stanza lacks Byron’s later nonchalant conversational tone, the rhythms of “common personal speech” sound through the

first stanza (Yeats 710), as Byron almost takes over the Spenserian form to inhabit the stanza form entirely:

Is thy face like thy mother's, my fair child!
Ada! sole daughter of my house and heart?
When last I saw thy young blue eyes, they smiled,
And then we parted, — not as now we part,
But with a hope. —

Awaking with a start,

The waters heave around me; and on high
The winds lift up their voices: I depart,
Whither I know not; but the hour's gone by,

When Albion's lessening shores could grieve or glad mine eye.

(Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* III. 1: ll. 1-8)

Breaking the stanza in two, Byron offers a desolate poignancy in his lines. The questions seem—against the will of the poet—to be open-ended. Seeking to recreate Ada in his memory, the uncertainty of how she would now look leaves Byron bereft. The smile in the “young blue eyes” points to both her love of her father, and her young age, encapsulating the amount Byron stands to lose, while capturing the sense that it has already been lost. The original hopeful parting becomes still more affecting in the face of their new manner of parting, and the dashes score an impassable line between the promise of then, and loss experienced now. Where Harold is celebrated as a creation of the Byronic imagination, to consign Ada to the same status as one of the “the airy children of our brain” (“On Love,” *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* 503) is a painful shift. Her permanent loss makes her memory, or any attempt to guess at her development, become a function of the imagination rather than a true picture. This

realization forces Byron to break the stanza apart; poetic progression requires him to exorcise her from the poem in a brisk, curiously willed way, before he moves on and on. Here, as Susan Wolfson writes, Byron uses form as an “instrument of critical investigation” (Wolfson 134), but in a more imaginative than analytical sense as the poetry embodies rather than describes the complexity of Byron’s feeling. Byron removes the reader and the self from the intractable and aching loss to the present tense. The past seems dreamlike as nostalgia and pain threatened to overpower the opening lines, and the imperative of rhyme compels Byron to continue, to awake, and to experience the waters and the winds that separate Byron from his old life. Yet the movement away from the first part of the stanza is not as emphatic as seems suggested by the layout of the stanza. By manipulating the Spenserian rhyme scheme to his own ends, Byron makes the ABABBCBCC seem more like an ABABBABAA form, as the A rhymes of “child” and “smiled” seem close to the sounds of the C rhymes “high,” “by” and “eye.” This subtle change unites the two parts of the stanza, creating an aural unity even in the midst of the semantic shift. Byron, by making the C rhymes so reminiscent of the A rhymes, makes the almost deadened emptiness of the final couplet link to the hopeful longing of his questions to Ada. This manipulation of the possibilities of the Spenserian stanza catches the sense at both removes as Byron has complicated what could have been pure apathy. Byron refines his life into poetry by his embrace of the Spenserian form. If *Don Juan* is, as Peter Manning writes, a “flirtation at the borders between art and life” (Manning 217), *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* uses art to elevate life, and life to infuse and vivify art.

Unlike Wordsworth, who created his poetic personality to further his poetry’s ability to trace “the Mind of Man— / My haunt, and the main region of my song”

(Wordsworth, "Preface," *The Excursion*, ll. 40-41), Byron creates his poetry to further his exploration of himself. He explores, experiments, and refines his ability to present himself throughout his poetry. The Byron legend shapes itself before the reader's eyes, performing itself through teasingly intricate layers. The "Epistle to Augusta" shows that Byron's artistic trajectory is less a gradual shift from the tragic notes of his rendering of the Spenserian stanza into the comic brio of the *ottava rima*, than a display of the poet's continual fascination with the possibilities of figuring himself in his poetry. The "risky relationship between poet and reader" (Stabler 4) is at the heart of the "Epistle to Augusta." Every line of the "Epistle to Augusta" sixteen-stanza poem carefully draws attention to the relationship between the man and the world, and the poet and his audience. Augusta is a spectral figure in the lines, as she possesses a ghostly quality of being conjured, being both present and absent in the lines. Addressed to her in the form of an epistle, Byron writes, not speaks to her, as he removes the immediacy of her presence from the poem. In Robert R. Harson's article on the relationship between "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798" and the "Epistle to Augusta," Harson shows Byron's debts to Wordsworth's earlier poem. Yet he does not emphasize the extent to which Byron takes pains to indicate Augusta's untraversable distance from Byron. The intensity of the bond affirmed between the two puts the reader in the position of the peeping tom, inelegantly encroaching on to a private moment. Aware of the potency of the poem's presentation of their relationship, Byron allowed Augusta the right to refuse publication. At her behest, the poem was not included in his collections of published poetry. Unpublished until 1830, the "Epistle to Augusta" has been thought of, with some reason, as one of Byron's

“far more intimate” poems (Marchand 645), releasing it from the scrutiny afforded to Byron’s “public” efforts.

Despite its apparently intimate quality, Byron would have published the poem but for Augusta’s opposition, suggesting that the poem was written as less a confessional outpouring, and instead as an artistic creation. Even as Byron seems to disclose to Augusta the depths of the emotional tumult within him, the poem remains all poem, a self-consciously “highly wrought *piece of art*” (*Letters: PBS II*. 294). Profoundly aware of its status as poetry, Byron experiments with the creative possibilities afforded to him, possibilities for writing the self, affecting the reader, and conjuring an interlocutor. The poem deliberately shapes a “self” in its lines as Byron writes a poem more interested in self-fashioning than self-revelation. In their notes to the “Epistle to Augusta,” Michael O’Neill and Charles Mahoney observe that the poem reflects Byron in an uncharacteristically honest mode, where he uses the epistolary conventions to “catalyse in turn a more open revelation of his feelings” (O’Neill and Mahoney 246). Yet Byron’s embrace of the possibilities of *ottava rima* prevents him using the poem as a confessional vehicle.

Byron foregrounds his poetic artistry rather than private truth in “Epistle to Augusta.” Even where Byron seems to suggest culpability for private woes, it is his delivery of his confession that arrests the reader, rather than the confession itself:

If my inheritance of storms hath been
In other elements, and on the rocks
Of perils, overlooked or unforeseen,
I have sustained my share of worldly shocks,

(Epistle to Augusta III: ll. 17-20)

Ostensibly addressing Augusta, Byron suggests their troubled mutual ancestry in the two preceding stanzas, and then moves to blaze into the reader's consciousness with a self-lacerating confession of his wrongs. Maritime metaphors implicitly continue to link Augusta and Byron by way of their familial ties, but Byron moves away from their shared history. He describes himself in isolated terms; it is "my inheritance of storms" and "my share of worldly shocks" [emphasis added] that make up the emphasis of the stanza. Continuing in this vein, Byron seems to reveal himself before his reader:

The fault was mine — nor do I seek to screen

My errors with defensive paradox —

I have been cunning in mine overthrow,

The careful pilot of my proper woe.

(Epistle to Augusta III: ll. 21-24)

Byron claims to refuse the screen of "defensive paradox," and the combination of alliteration and assonance in "seek to screen" shows Byron creating an elegant music from his confession. The dignity built into Byron's avowal of his errors seems to attempt to alchemize them into successful endeavors. As Jerome McGann writes, the final two lines "draw Byron into the Miltonic company of the self-fallen and self-condemned." (McGann 28) Recalling Satan's soliloquy in book four of *Paradise Lost*, Byron mingles pain with pride. Satan-like, Byron claims to have brought his pain upon himself. Veering between the wretched cry, "Me miserable! which way shall I fly / Infinite wrath, and infinite despair?" (Milton, *Paradise Lost* IV: ll. 73-74) and the defiant resolution "Evil be my good," (Milton, *Paradise Lost* IV: l. 110) Byron self-

consciously ranges through the Satanic spectrum, where art and life brush up against one another to create a troubling yet electric charge.

This allusion to Milton indicates just how careful a pilot Byron is. By placing his poem into an explicitly literary tradition, and channeling Milton, he is able to distinguish his poetic “confession” from a simple outpouring. Byron claims not to “seek to screen,” implying that he shall lay bare his “errors” before the reader. Yet this avowal is as close to confession as the “Epistle to Augusta” ever gets; claiming transparency is not the same as delivering it. Byron’s poetic cunning becomes increasingly apparent at this moment in the poem. The poem vacillates between a mocking ironic version of the “defensive paradox” and heart-felt confession, and this hybrid creation generates a powerful forcefield in the poem that both draws in and alienates the reader. Byron’s *ottava rima* contains the sentimental and the mocking, the private and the public, as the two, like oil and water never mix, but merely co-exist. Toying dangerously with binaries, Byron comes close to exploding as he exploits the boundary between antitheses.

Byron and Shelley’s meeting in 1816 had serious consequences, both artistic and personal, for both poets. Yet it is striking how far both poets, despite their profound interest in each other’s work, remained unique artists that avoid the “still continued fusion” (‘Dedication’, *Don Juan* V: l. 35) that Byron would later mock as a flaw of the Lake Poets’ relationship. Shelley, in his intense interest in embodying experience in poetry, seeks to create forms capable of embodying experience rather than merely describing it. Byron’s self-reflexive art thrives on exploring the contours of the mind, transforming the epic, refiguring the lyric, and challenging dramatic writing in his

writing. Though both poets are, as Charles Robinson writes (Robinson 4), students of one other, they remain independent, able to say with Prometheus, that they are “king over myself” (*Prometheus Unbound* I. l. 493, *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*).

Paradoxically, their 1816 meeting helped the poets to become more unique, less dependent than distinctive in the nature of their mutual poetic achievements.

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