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CHAPTER 25

Byron

Chris Beyers

When Thomas Holley Chivers asked Edgar Allan Poe to identify "the present Pantheon of English poets," Poe named Alfred, Lord Tennyson as the greatest living poet, disparaging the English Romantic poets Chivers revered and adding that most of the corpus of George Gordon, Lord Byron (among others) is not really poetic. This assertion may seem odd considering the obvious influence the British poet exerted on Poe's works. Poe openly admitted using Byronic materials for a few works, and many references in his letters and essays demonstrate a more than passing knowledge of Byron's works. Poe used lines from Byron to exemplify excellence in both "The Rationale of Verse" and "The Poetic Principle," and the standard edition of Poe's verse lists some sixty quotations, allusions, adaptations of, and parallels to Byron.¹ That Poe should know Byron's poems well is not surprising, since in Poe's life, Byron was the most read, richest (at least most people assumed so), and most famous poet alive. In Poe's time, by one estimate, Byron outsold all other authors five to one.² Poe's borrowings have often been taken to indicate a mental or moral defect. Time and again, critics assert that Poe wanted to be Byron.

Nineteenth-century Poe biographer George Woodberry, among others, censured poems "affected by the artificiality and turgidity, the false sentiment, the low motive, and the sensational accessories of the Byronic model." More sympathetically, Charles Baudelaire claimed Poe was "a Byron wandering in an evil world." Such claims are still common. Kenneth Silverman suggests, "Byron offered Edgar a perspective from which to evaluate his own life and legitimized his experiences as authentic for a young poet to have." And Burton Pollin claims Poe was obsessed with the British poet and felt at times that he was "an avatar of Byron."³

Some find Byronic influence only in Poe's early works because they take Poe at his word when he told John Allan in 1829, "I have long given up *Byron* as a model."⁴ Yet Poe says this as he is begging for \$100 from a guardian who shared Woodberry's low estimation of the British poet;

moreover, many of Poe's references to Byron come after 1829. Still, the claim that Poe was trying to turn himself into Byron Redux is based on evidence more often repeated than scrutinized. Some, for example, point to a supposed portrait of Poe by British artist Thomas Sully, in which Poe is posed in a Byronic way – overlooking the fact that 1) the portrait was probably never painted, and 2) the anecdote that mentions the painting also indicates the pose was Sully's idea, not Poe's. Likewise, Poe's great athletic feat, swimming six miles against the current in the James River, presumably emulated Byron's famous swim from Sestos to Abydos. But the connection was suggested by others, not Poe, who scoffed at the comparison, saying that Byron's swim was "nothing" compared to his feat.⁵ It seems Poe's contemporaries were at least as active in trying to liken the two poets as Poe was to model himself on Byron. Indeed, the autobiographical note Poe wrote for Rufus Griswold, in which he falsely claimed that he had tried to join the Greek fight for independence (as Byron had earlier), is more likely an attempt to mock those who would make him into Byron than it is a case of self-fashioning. If Poe did envy Byron, perhaps it was for the latter's seemingly endless access to credit.

Instead of the unconscious result of identity formation, Poe's use of Byronic materials appears to be a very conscious and far-reaching intellectual reaction to Romantic ideas and motifs. For instance, Poe dismisses Byron in his conversation with Chivers because he saw British Romantic poetry as a record of overflowing emotion – rather than what Wordsworth claimed, an overflow recollected in tranquility (and with a philosophic mind). "You are mistaken in supposing that passion is the primum mobile of the true Poet," Poe tells Chivers, "for it is just the reverse. A pure Poem proper is one that is wholly destitute of a particle of passion." He goes on to say that a true poem "is a rhythmical creation of Beauty wholly destitute of every-thing, but that which constitutes purity, namely etheriality." Rather shocked, Chivers remarks that, if this were true, then two-thirds of Shakespeare's works would be "good for nothing." Poe rejoins, "Certainly it is good for nothing. Nothing is good for any thing except that which contains within itself the essence of its own vitality." He adds, "Otherwise it is mortal and ought to die."⁶

Poe here proposes the organic theory of poetry (and artistic production in general) most famously articulated by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in which the work of art grows naturally out of itself and not according to a preconceived form. Some have taken this to mean that the true poem is the inevitable emanation of the poet's true self, yet Poe insists the poem is an integral aesthetic object growing as a seed grows in the

ground: it is tended by the poet, perhaps, but it finds material and form entirely from within itself. For this reason, most of "Byron, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Montgomery, Southey" are not really poetry at all, and would benefit from severe pruning. Indeed, this attitude makes Poe impatient of all narrative poetry, since, he tells James Russell Lowell in a letter, it is too often interlarded with "connecting links of a narration."⁷ For Poe, opera is all about arias.

Further, Poe's theory of organic unity insists that work should be short enough, as he says in "Philosophy of Composition," to be "read in one sitting." When a reader puts down the book, inevitably "the affairs of the world interfere, and every thing like totality is at once destroyed."⁸ Poe's theory of unity is thus ultimately affective, focusing on the reader's experience. Poe assumes that the perception of unity is limited by the human mind, which cannot retain its integrity for very long, a phenomena evident in many of his tales.

Just as Poe's poetic theory partakes of and departs from Romantic theory, so do his works demonstrate a divided reaction to Byron's mystique. This is most evident in the tale "The Assignment," the source of which is Thomas Moore's *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron*. Some of Poe's descriptive passages clearly derive from Moore, and the central love triangle connecting a mysterious English poet, a beautiful young Italian woman named Aphrodite, and her cruel husband, Count Mentoni, are modeled on the triangle of Byron, Countess Guiccioli, and the count. Still, the tale's two outstanding events – the drowning baby and the lovers' deaths at the end – are not part of the story portrayed in Moore.⁹ The two episodes, in fact, demonstrate Poe's recoil from aspects of Byronism.

Poe's story begins with the narrator hearing the "wild, hysterical, and long continued shriek" of a mother, whose baby has fallen into a Venetian canal. The narrator wants to believe the whole thing is a terrible accident, and he tries hard not to be troubled by many details. For example, he points out that the mother was not gazing "downwards upon that grave wherein her brightest hope lay buried" (that is, the canal), but at a building where the Byron character resides. The narrator assures the reader (and himself) that "at such a time as this, the eye, like a shattered mirror, multiplies the images of its sorrow, and sees in innumerable far off places the wo which is close at hand."¹⁰ This rather far-fetched explanation is one of many such rationalizations in the tale, showing that the narrator is a precursor of Lambert Strether: he is the careful observer whose sense of decency keeps him from seeing what is obvious to everyone else. Similarly, after the Byron character bursts out of his residence to save the child,

the marchesa starts trembling and blushing – “the entire woman thrills through the soul” is how the narrator characterizes it – and the narrator tries to explain this by suggesting the marchesa is embarrassed about being seen without her shoes and wrap. The narrator does not want to say that she is filled with erotic longing for her lover.

Poe’s source for the near drowning incident is revealing. It probably was drawn from another part of Moore’s documentary biography of Byron, the story of Margarita Cogni, a married woman who became infatuated with Byron, the kind of person we would call a stalker today. She simply showed up to live in his house, but Byron did not throw her out because of his own “indolence,” as well as her “other powers of persuasion,” which she exerted with “the usual tact and success of all she-things; high and low, they are all alike for that.”¹¹ *Cosi Fan Tutte*, of course, might be said to be Byron’s motto as far as most women go.

Eventually, she becomes very jealous and “ungovernable,” and Byron tells her she must leave. She reacts by throwing herself in the canal. “That she intended to destroy herself, I do not believe,” Byron remarks coolly; the incident only shows that “she had a devilish spirit of some sort within her.” He suffers her further presence only enough for her to recover, then kicks her out for good. Byron’s lack of real concern for the apparently drowning woman mirrors that of Count Mentoni’s similar emotional distance when his child is submerged in the canal – he was “occasionally occupied in thrumming a guitar, and seemed *ennuyé* to the very death, as at intervals he gave directions for the recovery of his child.”¹²

Reading “The Assignment” alongside the Cogni narrative, the tale takes a very dark turn typical of Poe’s critique of Byron. When Margarita Cogni throws herself into the canal, she is trying to say, “I can’t live without you.” However, when the marchesa cares more about her lover than her child, she is saying, “I will give up everything for you.” She is not moved by what the narrator assumes is the most basic impulse for all women – the maternal instinct.

One other anecdote in Moore’s biography resonated with Poe. In an episode that apparently happened around that time, Byron asks Moore, “Have you any notion – but I suppose you have – of what they call the parental feeling? For myself, I have not the least.”¹³ Moore is quick to say that this was an example of Byron “falsifying his own character,” pointing to his tender regard for his daughter, Ada, yet Poe likely read this as another attempt by Moore to whitewash the unpleasant aspects of Byron’s character. “The Assignment” does indeed pay homage to the tale’s romantic (small “r”) aspects – the risks the lovers take for each other, the intensity

of their ardor – but Poe explores aspects of such relationships that Byron and Moore seem to gloss over. Given his own feelings of being abandoned by his guardian, Poe cannot condone the neglect of a child. In the final paragraphs of “The Assignation,” we find that the end of sexual freedom is death, not self-fulfillment.

Poe’s other obvious borrowing from Byron’s life shows a similar suspicion of physical relationships. “Byron and Miss Chaworth” describes Byron’s early infatuation with Mary Chaworth, which Poe calls “boyish poet-love.” It is the “human sentiment which most nearly realizes our dreams of the chastened voluptuousness of heaven,” standing in the stark contrast to the unchastened (and unchaste) voluptuousness of “The Assignation.”¹⁴ Poe describes the relationship as “romantic, shadowy, and imaginative” and, implicitly, unconsummated – and more beautiful because of this. Byron’s poems about the relationship are conspicuous for their “spiritual tenderness and purity” as opposed to the “gross earthliness” of Byron’s other love poetry. Love is beautiful, apparently, so long as it is unconnected to flesh.

For this reason, Poe’s general approach to beautiful female flesh is to idealize it beyond recognition, a technique he shares with his British precursor. The main figure in Byron’s “She Walks in Beauty,” to take just one example, is praised for her night-like walking, her “nameless grace,” her raven tresses, and more generally her purity and innocence. She does not need to talk since her cheeks and brow are “eloquent” (lines 8–9). Apart from a general notion that she has dark hair and a light complexion, there is no description of her beauty. Poe’s poems about female beauty likewise include very little physical description. Although in “The Philosophy of Composition,” Poe tells us “The Raven” is about the death of a beautiful maiden, the only trace of her appearance in the poem is the speaker’s assertion that Lenore was a “rare and radiant maiden” (line 11). Likewise, in “To Helen,” the title character has “hyacinth hair,” a “classic face,” and somehow embodies Greek glory and Roman grandeur. The description is so idealized that it really cannot be called a visual image – it is really just the idea of beauty.

Manfred is a key text for understanding both Byron and Poe’s approach to women. Thinking of Astarte, Manfred says, “She was like me in lineaments; her eyes / Her hair, her features, all to the very tone / Even of her voice” (II.105–7). Astarte is in fact just an improved female version of Manfred, with his same Faustian thirst for knowledge tempered by Christian virtues. Byron’s friend Percy Shelley depicts a similar lover in *Alastor*. The poem’s hero spurns the silent devotion of an “Arab maiden” in

order to pursue the "veiled maid" of his imaginings, who is only described as having a voice "like the voice of his own soul" (line 129, 151-2). She is a female version of him. Tragically, Alastor can only join with the veiled maid in his dreams and eventually dies in futile pursuit. Similarly, after Manfred conjures up Astarte from the dead, he does not get a flesh and blood paramour, just a phantom who tells him he will die the next day, bidding farewell without giving him either forgiveness or the simple assurance that she loves him.

In these and other stories, it seems that Romantic poets stumbled upon a key feminist observation unaware that they had done any such thing. Men in these stories fall in love not with actual people but projections of their imagination. Like Narcissus, they adore reflections of themselves. Even in stories in which the beloved is not a female version of the male, there is a good deal of projection in lieu of observation. For example, in Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," the lonely and palely loitering knight meets a beautiful fairy and romps around with her all day, certain that she loves him as much as he loves her. Unfortunately, she speaks only a strange fairy language, so her apparent statement, "I love thee true" (line 337) is really just his uncertain interpretation. When she bursts out crying a stanza later, the speaker's reaction is to kiss her four times. With communication like this, is it any wonder he ends up sad and alone? He translates her ambiguous sounds into a straightforward declaration of love and ends up desolated when it turns out the words did not mean what he thought they meant.

While British poets tended to leave open the question of whether we love our illusions or our fellow humans, Poe offers a clearer answer. In "The Oval Portrait," for instance, an artist is married to a "maiden of the rarest beauty," yet he neglects her in order to depict her in paint. She dies the moment the painting is complete, only to have her husband remark of his own creation, "This is indeed *Life* itself!" Turning to his wife's corpse, he adds, "*She was dead.*"¹⁵

For Poe and the British Romantics, this problem of understanding women as embodiments of their own ideas is compounded by the fact that they have trouble coming to grips with themselves. Byron generally depicts the self in the Hegelian state of becoming. In *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, the speaker asks, "What am I?" only to answer his own question with one word: "Nothing." Yet this stance is not nihilistic since it anticipates the existential idea that the self and meaning must be created through action. By creating – and by this the speaker seems to mean both artistic creation and the imaginative act of making something out of experience (that is, interpreting it meaningfully) – we can "live" and become a "being more intense" (3.6.1-5.)

Byron here posits a malleable self subject to potentially infinite expansion, yet this concept has a Janus face. The speaker tells us not that he has been created by experience so much as he has been created by his *reaction* to experiences. Put another way, he creates a self by rebelling against that which society and life seems dedicated to reducing him to. Finding himself close to being absorbed into the "agony and strife" of human existence only spurs the speaker to mount again on fresh wings to soar above it all, "spurning the clay-cold bonds" of earthly, material existence (3.73.3-9), imagining a day when his mind might be totally freed from "carnal life" (3.74.3). But such is a futile hope, because leaving carnality behind leaves him subject to his own mind. "I *have* thought / Too long and darkly," the speaker remarks, "till my mind became / In its own eddy, boiling and o'erwrought" (3.7.1-3). The spectacle of a speaker lost in confusing convolutions of his own thought processes is reminiscent of Coleridge and Thomas De Quincey, and anticipates contemporary conceptual frameworks for clinical depression.

Thus, when Byron's speakers reject physical existence, they find themselves caught in the downward tending mazes of their own minds. They live a dialectic in which every gesture toward transcendence hearkens to its opposite, dissolution. The famous description of Napoleon as a man whose "spirit" is "antithetically mixed" (3.36.2) is extended by the speaker of *Don Juan* to all humanity: "flesh is formed of fiery dust" (II.212), the speaker tells us ruefully. We are part divine spark, part clay – or perhaps, part burning, part already burnt out.

This antithetical mix is very much in evidence in *Manfred*. The fiery, spiritual side of his nature makes him scorn the sorts of things, such as earthly power, that might suffice a lesser man, yet his clay demands the sorts of things ethereal beings do not need – an actual embrace with his beloved, assurance of love, and forgiveness for earthly failings. Unfortunately, the world of *Manfred* operates on binaries, and the spirit world can offer only intellectual benefits, the material world only material ones, and *Manfred* needs a combination of both. He rejects the ethereal offers of the various spirits and the joys of the simple earthly life offered by the chamois hunter. *Manfred*'s antithetical nature suits him neither for this world nor the next, keeping him on the Faustian task of endless questing, ironically scouring the empyrean to satisfy his very human need for forgiveness and love. A strong desire for affection from a dead loved one makes no rational sense, of course, but it makes a great deal of psychological sense, and many a person has gone into therapy to deal with these feelings.

Thus Byron portrays the individual mind as perpetually upsetting its own ease, and this drama appears time and again in Poe's works. Poe had good reason to connect this notion of the mind against itself to Byron. In "An Unwritten Drama of Lord Byron," the sketch that inspired "William Wilson," Washington Irving identifies the drama's doppelganger as "an allegorical being, the personification of conscience," which the second William Wilson represents in Poe's story.¹⁶ Poe's narrator scorns the double that literalizes the speaker's moral conscience. As the speaker becomes dissolute, drinking too much and cheating at cards, his double more and more asserts himself, albeit speaking in a whisper. This secret voice that only the narrator can hear is an obvious symbol of conscience, yet the speaker conceptualizes it as something alien and destructive to the self. In the end, the narrator confronts his nemesis and runs him through with a sword. In his dying breath, the second William Wilson tells the first that he has killed himself.

This disassociation of the divisions within the self is evident in many of Poe's stories. While Byron's characters recognize the deep divisions within themselves, Poe's main characters see their other half as outside themselves, as a treacherous nemesis. Their confessions release the tensions building inside, but do not otherwise bring relief – the narrator of "The Imp of the Perverse," for instance, remarks that confessing has "consigned me to the hangman and to hell."¹⁷ A more conventionally spiritual person might find confession a step toward heaven.

This unacknowledged division is evident even for one of Poe's most self-possessed narrators, Montessoro of "The Cask of Amontillado." Like the speaker of "The Tell-Tale Heart," he assumes, unrealistically, that his reader will agree that his adversary's provocations are an adequate reason to kill. Without an interlocutor to object, he leads Fortunato to his death in the catacombs. Shortly before placing the last stone that will entomb his enemy, Montessoro remarks, "My heart grew sick – on account of the dampness of the catacombs."¹⁸ The pang of conscience is projected outside the self, and the speaker implicitly tells himself that as soon as he leaves the dank crypts, the heartsick feeling will dissipate. The fact that he feels compelled to tell a story now fifty years old suggests that it has not.

Thus Poe's narrators have divided consciousness at least as antithetically mixed as Byron's Napoleon. There is a part of the self that, if expressed, means death and dissolution to the other part, and the speaker's only antidote is to keep it bottled up. The inability to keep that other self from bubbling up leads to the dissolution of such characters as Roderick Usher and the narrator of "The Raven," who, at the poem's end, shrieks at the bird and contemplates his own soul that, he says, will never be lifted.

In all, Poe went much further than Byron, more seriously considering the psychological implications of Byronic solipsism. Simply put, Byron opened the door but only peeked in, while Poe went in to stay. Byron, finally, was trying to explore the possibilities of the infinite expansion of consciousness; Poe, on the other hand, says it is all about the consequences.

NOTES

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3. George E. Woodberry, *Edgar Allan Poe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1885), 33; Edgar Allan Poe, *Nouvelles Histoires Extraordinaires*, trans. Charles Baudelaire (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1857), viii; Kenneth Silverman, *Edgar A. Poe: A Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 41; Burton R. Pollin, *Discoveries in Poe* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), 95.
4. Poe to John Allan, May 29, 1829, *The Collected Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. John Ward Ostrom, Burton R. Pollin, and Jeffrey A. Savoye, 2 vols. (New York: Gordian, 2008), vol. i, 30.
5. Poe to Thomas W. White, April 30, 1835, *Collected Letters*, vol. i, 84.
6. Chivers, *Life of Poe*, 48.
7. Poe to James Russell Lowell, October 19, 1843, *Collected Letters*, vol. i, 413.
8. Edgar Allan Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 15.
9. Richard P. Benton, "Is Poe's 'The Assniation' a Hoax?" *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 18 (1963), 193–7.
10. Poe, *Collected Works*, vol. ii, 151–3.
11. Thomas Moore, *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron, with Notices of His Life*, 6 vols. (London: John Murray, 1854), vol. iv, 116.
12. Poe, *Collected Works*, vol. ii, 153.
13. Moore, *Letters*, vol. iv, 242.
14. Poe, *Collected Works*, vol. iii, 1122.
15. *Ibid.*, vol. ii, 664–6.
16. Washington Irving, "An Unwritten Drama of Lord Byron," *The Gift: A Christmas and New Year's Present for 1836* (Philadelphia: E. L. Carey and A. Hart, 1835), 169.
17. Poe, *Collected Works*, vol. iii, 859.
18. *Ibid.*, vol. iii, 1263.