

“To steel the heart against itself”: The Influence of Byron on Emily Brontë

James Quinnell

Number 74-75, spring 2020

Romanticism, Interrupted

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1117982ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1117982ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Université de Montréal

ISSN

2563-2582 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Quinnell, J. (2020). “To steel the heart against itself”: The Influence of Byron on Emily Brontë. *Romanticism on the Net*, (74-75), 1–44.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1117982ar>

Article abstract

I argue that the influence of Byron on Emily Brontë’s poetry is far more nuanced than is sometimes recognised in scholarly discussion. Consideration of the ways in which Byron shaped Emily Brontë as a writer is often in thrall to notions of the byronic. Thus, Byron becomes a way of accounting for Emily’s supposed preference for the outsider and privileging of intense emotional states. Through focussing on Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, particularly the third canto, I argue that Byron is present in Emily Brontë’s moments of emotional restraint. Far from being, to use Andrew Elfenbein’s phrase, “an early chapter in the bildungsroman of the Victorian author,” Byron shapes Emily Brontë’s mature consideration, in her later poetry, of the pitfalls inherent in an abandonment to emotional intensity. Byron taught Emily Brontë, to use his own words from Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, to “think less wildly.” Byron’s poetry of emotional stress such as Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage and Manfred is quite rightly heard in Emily Brontë’s writing; however, in the second half, I discuss how Byron’s more satirical voice is also heard. I use Don Juan to explore how Brontë’s reading of Byron may have helped her to, again using Byron’s phrase, “ponder boldly.” So, Byron helps to shape Emily Brontë’s stoicism and philosophical detachment. Throughout the article, my thinking is alive to the different and, at times, competing Romantic voices that make themselves heard in Emily Brontë’s poetry; however, my main aim is to enrich understanding of the different ways in which Byron’s voice is heard.

Copyright © James Quinnell, 2020



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>



Romanticism on the Net

“To steel the heart against itself”: The Influence of Byron on Emily Brontë

James Quinnell
Independent scholar

Abstract

I argue that the influence of Byron on Emily Brontë’s poetry is far more nuanced than is sometimes recognised in scholarly discussion. Consideration of the ways in which Byron shaped Emily Brontë as a writer is often in thrall to notions of the byronic. Thus, Byron becomes a way of accounting for Emily’s supposed preference for the outsider and privileging of intense emotional states. Through focussing on *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, particularly the third canto, I argue that Byron is present in Emily Brontë’s moments of emotional restraint. Far from being, to use Andrew Elfenbein’s phrase, “an early chapter in the bildungsroman of the Victorian author,” Byron shapes Emily Brontë’s mature consideration, in her later poetry, of the pitfalls inherent in an abandonment to emotional intensity. Byron taught Emily Brontë, to use his own words from *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, to “think less wildly.” Byron’s poetry of emotional stress such as *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and *Manfred* is quite rightly heard in Emily Brontë’s writing; however, in the second half, I discuss how Byron’s more satirical voice is also heard. I use *Don Juan* to explore how Brontë’s reading of Byron may have helped her to, again using Byron’s phrase, “ponder boldly.” So, Byron helps to shape Emily Brontë’s stoicism and philosophical detachment. Throughout the article, my thinking is alive to the different and, at times, competing Romantic voices that make themselves heard in Emily Brontë’s poetry; however, my main aim is to enrich understanding of the different ways in which Byron’s voice is heard.

Biographical Note

James Quinnell’s key interest is in Emily Brontë as a post-Romantic writer. This was the subject of his PhD thesis (University of Durham 2016) on nostalgia and homesickness in Emily Brontë’s writing as an aspect of her post-Romantic inheritance, particularly from Wordsworth. More generally, his research interests include Romanticism, particularly Wordsworth and the writing of Sir Walter Scott. Since graduating, James has had academic articles published on Emily Brontë, Anne Brontë and William Wordsworth in a number of journals. He is also writing an article on the Brontës and Romanticism for the forthcoming *Edinburgh companion to the Brontës*. James’s current major project is a book on the Brontës as Gothic writers for the University of Wales Press. James has presented at conferences on Emily Brontë, William Wordsworth and Sir Walter Scott. He works as an English teacher at Farnborough Hill School in Hampshire.

I. Introduction

1. In this article, I argue for the complexity, subtlety and nuance of Byron's influence on Emily Brontë's poetry. Discussion of such influence is often shaped by ideas of the Byronic, which can limit apprehension of the scope of Byron's influence on Emily's work to the grandstanding and melodramatic. Yet the ways in which Byron modifies and disciplines powerful emotion is as important as the forcefulness with which he portrays it. These frequent revisions and reorientations of his feelings are part of his Romantic bequest to Emily Brontë.
2. In the years after the death of Byron, reviewers debated the nature of his legacy. Thomas Carlyle, on hearing of Byron's death in 1824, wrote to his future wife, lamenting a budding poet cut off in his prime: "Late so full of fire and generous passion ... but a young man; still struggling among the perplexities ... of a mind not arrived at maturity or settled in its proper place in life" (Byron, *Critical Heritage* 286). Eight years later, Carlyle's sense of Byron's "generous passion," inchoate as Carlyle thought it was, had changed to a more censorious assertion that "No genuine productive Thought was ever revealed by him to mankind" (Byron, *Critical Heritage* 291). Byron was to become a poet known for his emotional excess rather than deep thought.
3. At the time of Carlyle's later comments on Byron's poetry, the Brontës were creating their imaginative worlds of Angria and Gondal which, with Charlotte in particular, had their own Byronism. So, Emily began her writing career against the backdrop of a debate about

Byron's legacy. Even in the run up to his death in 1824, Francis Jeffrey wrote that Byron was "once hailed the greatest of our living poets" (Byron, *Critical Heritage* 199); Jeffrey's situating of "greatest" in the past suggests that the reception of Byron's work had, even in the final years of his life, become a site of debate. Jeffrey's conception of Byron as a writer with "a tendency to destroy all belief in the reality of virtue" (Byron, *Critical Heritage* 201) with his "hard hearted maxims of misanthropy" (Byron, *Critical Heritage* 201) passes into reviewers' criticisms of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*; for example, one such reviewer wrote in *The Atlas* that "there is not in the entire *dramatis personae* a single character which is not utterly hateful or thoroughly contemptible" (Allot ed. 231). The "misanthropist's Heaven" (*WH* 1) that Lockwood sees in the region of *Wuthering Heights* was, in the minds of many contemporaries, inherited from Byron.

4. Debate over Byron's poetic legacy was complicated by the long shadow of Byron's personality over his writing. In his essay on Byron, T. S. Eliot wrote that "we have come to expect poetry to be something very concentrated, very distilled; but if Byron had distilled his verse, there would have been nothing whatever left" (193-4). Eliot's point is that Byron's verse was full of Byron himself. Eliot explains this prominence of the poet in his work by arguing that Byron's muse was a storytelling one, that as "a *tale-teller* we must rate Byron very high indeed" (196). In making this observation, Eliot emphasises the poet rather than the poetry: "Digression, indeed, is one of the valuable arts of the storyteller. The effect of Byron's digressions is to keep us interested in the storyteller himself, and through this interest to interest us more in the story" (196). The implications of Eliot's influential views for scholars of Emily Brontë's writing are that a narrative poet who put

so much of himself in his poetry could have little of any depth to say in the work of a poet who put so little of herself in her poetry. Byron remains the poet of adolescence, as Eliot calls it: “the first boyhood enthusiasm” (193).

5. Contemporary and early twentieth-century reviewers’ conceptions of a Byron of strong passions and ego, if not strong thought, have shaped the way that scholars have responded to the nature of his influence on Emily Brontë – a sense that his influence was more that of a strong personality than a writer. For example, Margiad Evans argued that Byron was “Emily’s Brother in inspiration” (201). Evans’ phrasing suggests the two poets were kindred spirits. This idea of a kindred spirit is behind Dorothy Cooper’s observation that “Byron, rejected and admired of society and trying to make a glory out of his outlawed position, had much in common with the girl at Haworth Parsonage, who grew up to feel herself in a similar position in her own small world” (109). It is worth noting, in the preceding two quotations, the tilt towards Byron as personality (Byronism) rather than writer; Byron’s influence is more biographical than literary (most accounts of Byron’s influence mention the Brontës’ ownership of Thomas Moore’s *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron: With Notices of his Life* (1832)). The life of the man rather than the poetry does the influencing. In contrast, F. B. Pinion, with Byron’s writing firmly in view, unequivocally asserts that “The greatest literary influence on *Wuthering Heights* was that of Byron. It was from him more than from life or intuition or any other source that Emily Brontë gained those psychological insights which powerfully influenced, and validated, she must have thought, Heathcliff’s almost inhumanly criminal and relentless pursuit of revenge” (195).

6. Pinion's comment focusses on Byron as a "literary influence," which is a step forward from writing as if Emily was merely inspired by Byron's life. I quote it at length to illustrate another tendency in analysis of Byron's influence on Emily Brontë: a way of accounting for the extreme emotions of Heathcliff. This perspective was shared by a contemporary review of *Wuthering Heights*. An anonymous reviewer in *The Examiner* quotes Byron's *The Corsair* to explain Heathcliff: "like the Corsair, and other such melodramatic heroes, he is 'Linked to one virtue and a thousand crimes'" (Allott ed. 220). Their view of the nature of Byron's influence, particularly in their choice of "melodramatic," should come as no surprise when Carlyle characterised Byron's writings as "all these stormful agonies, this volcanic heroism, superhuman contempt and moody desperation, with so much scowling, and teeth gnashing" (Byron, *Critical Heritage* 290). Andrew Elfenbein, in a detailed study of Byron's influence in the Victorian era, follows the lead of *The Examiner's* reviewer when he sees antecedents for Brontë's characterisation of Heathcliff in Byron's *Manfred*, arguing that their similar incestuous relationships "suggest the prominence of Byron's work in Emily's novel" (46). This critical tilt towards Heathcliff being a distillation of the passions in Byron's characters is one reason why Heathcliff as the epitome of the Byronic hero is now embedded in teaching of *Wuthering Heights*.
7. Now, as then, fascination with the Byronic detracts from appreciation of Byron's writing. The same fascination works to shape discussion of his influence on other writers. To quote again from *The Examiner*, such influence is "melodramatic"; consequently, one may conclude, Byron is useful for explaining the disturbing passions in *Wuthering Heights*, but not necessarily other literary qualities such as philosophical preoccupations. Moreover,

reading Byron as a poet of emotional posturing means many scholars view his influence on Emily Brontë's writing as adolescent. For example, Derek Stanford, in a manner reminiscent of Carlyle's comments on Byron, reads Emily Brontë's early Gondal poetry as "Byronic Bombast" (Spark 129). Robin Grove, discussing Brontë's early poetry, argues that it bears the imprint of Byron's *The Giaour* in its "temperament and attitude-striking" (42). Edward Chitham sees Byron as a distraction from supposedly more worthy Romantic influences as he draws "our attention away from her relationships with such Romantics as Coleridge and Shelley" (57). Irene Tayler, in her seminal study of Charlotte and Emily as post-Romantic writers, relegates Byron's influence to a limited sphere: "The Romantic poets all shared Emily's yearning and resentment in greater or lesser degree: Wordsworth and Shelley as we have seen, and Byron in some of his moods" (292) [emphasis added]. Scholars in the last quarter of the twentieth century still wrote about Byron as a transitional influence, one which Emily would outgrow as she internalised other Romantic voices. To use Elfenbein's phrase, Byron was an early chapter in the "Bildungsroman of the Victorian author" (89).

8. In the early years of the twenty-first century, other scholars, often Romanticists themselves, see Byron's influence on Emily's writing as more nuanced, subtle and present in her mature as well as early writing. Michael Cooke cautions against a reading of Byron's poetry (and, by implication, his influence on others) in thrall to the passions: "For all its fierce commitments and abandon in principle, Byron's is a poetry of incessant corrections and enforced reflection" (176). Francis O'Gorman voices this idea when he writes that "Emily Brontë's poetry was in persistent negotiation with its Romantic inheritance" (220). The

idea of “persistent negotiation” involves some shifting of ground, a feature that Michael O’Neill notices when he discusses the influence of Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* on the oscillation between hope and disappointment in Emily Brontë’s poem “Stars”; in O’Neill’s words, “the instability that is potent in Byron” forms Brontë’s talent for using conflicting impulses to productive ends (*Brontë Studies* 62).

9. This essay uses the space opened by scholars such as O’Neill and O’Gorman to explore the complexities of Byron’s influence on Emily Brontë. I argue that Byron influenced Emily Brontë in his restraint as well as his abandon in the first section. In the second section, I develop this idea of restraint to discuss how Emily Brontë’s philosophical detachment is part of her Romantic inheritance from Byron, rooted in his own scepticism, which informs Emily’s stoicism. I argue that this detachment is fundamental in both poets for, using Anthony Howe’s phrasing, ‘the distribution of poetic force (26).’ This diffusion of poetic force is a determination to, in Hazlitt’s words, ‘follow all the infinite fluctuations of thought through all their distinctions’ (Howe 33). Matthew Arnold, in his elegy on the Brontë sisters, “Haworth Churchyard,” imagines Emily Brontë as the inheritor of Byron’s “daring”:

... and she
(How shall I sing her?) whose soul
Knew no fellow for might,
Passion, vehemence, grief,
Daring, since Byron died,
That world-famed son of fire. (92-97)

I use a range of poetry to explore Byron's influence, including early and late works by both poets. Emily Brontë follows Byron from *Child Harold's Pilgrimage* to *Don Juan*; detachment and irony are as much her inheritance from Byron as strong passion.

II. To “curb my own wild will”: Byron's Restraint of Emotion in Emily Brontë's Poetry

10. Aware that one has not only to contend with life *in extremis*, but also a long and drawn-out afterlife of numb grief, Byron explores, in the third canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, how the apocalyptic becomes the quotidian. Byron turns from Romantic agony to explore how Imagination and Nature may aid recovery. Part of this exploration is to struggle with the complexities of how an emotionally scarring past can co-exist with moves towards healing. In this section, I argue that Byron teaches Brontë not only to feel, in line with the commonplace view of Byron as a poet of sensation rather than reflection, but also to interrogate those feelings.

11. It is likely that Emily Brontë read *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*; Byron's phrasing echoes in Emily's poem, “There shines the moon.” Brontë's phrase “at noon of night” (1) recalls Byron's, where he uses the image of Scottish clans preparing for the battle of Waterloo: “how in the noon of night that pibroch thrills” (2.3.229).¹ Other echoes reveal how Byron may have contributed to Emily Brontë's portrayal of visionary release when he imagines a moment of oneness that also echoes in Brontë's poetry:

Then stirs the feeling infinite, so felt
In solitude, where we are *least* alone;

Romanticism on the Net #74-75 (Spring-Fall 2020)

A truth, which through our being then doth melt

And purifies from self: it is a tone,

The soul and source of music, which makes known

Eternal harmony, and sheds a charm,

Like to the fabled Cytherea's zone,

Binding all things with beauty – 'twould disarm

The spectre Death, had he substantial power to harm. (2.3.842-850)

Byron's phrasing and metre touch Emily Brontë's "The Prisoner: A Fragment" (1846):

But, first, a hush of peace – a soundless calm descends;

The struggle of distress, and fierce impatience ends.

Mute music soothes my breast, unuttered harmony,

That I could never dream, till Earth was lost to me.

Then dawns the Invisible; the Unseen its truth reveals;

My outward sense is gone, my inward essence feels:

Its wings are almost free – its home, its harbour found,

Measuring the gulf, it stoops, and dares the final bound.

Oh, dreadful is the check – intense the agony –

When the ear begins to hear, and the eye begins to see;

When the pulse begins to throb, the brain to think again,

The soul to feel the flesh, and the flesh to feel the chain. (45-56)

12. Byron's phrase, "then stirs the feeling," echoes Brontë's, "then dawns the invisible," with its recognition of anticipated bliss. The metre in Byron's "eternal harmony" is heard in Brontë's "unuttered harmony." The moment where Brontë's prisoner "dares the final bound," as well as enacting Byron's conviction that such bliss "'twould disarm / The spectre death, had he substantial power to harm," possibly owes its daring to Byron's rendering, earlier in the canto, of the soul's struggle to free itself from mortality; "clay" as Byron terms it, pulls down the soul striving for transcendence:

envying it the light

To which it mounts as if to break the link

That keeps us from yon heaven which woos us to its brink. (3.124-126)

Byron's vivid rendering of the struggle between aspiring spirit and clay may also have informed Emily Brontë's pained description of the aspiring spirit's recapture by "clay," named by her as "flesh."

13. I use these verbal echoes to suggest that *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* played on and through Emily's mind; Byron's poem, particularly its articulation of desire for visionary harmony in the third canto, helped Emily to articulate her own apprehension of the nature of visionary release. Yet, my argument rests on the conviction that the intensity of vatic Romanticism is not the only site of Byron's influence on Emily's poetry. She follows her Romantic forebear in dwelling on the precariousness of such fleeting bliss. Much of life is more like a dull ache and both poets excel in imaging it.

14. Byron's efforts, towards the end of canto three, "to forsake / Earth's troubled waters for a purer spring" (2.3.799-800), follow an extended reflection on "troubled waters" earlier in the canto where Harold's wanderings involve the mental shock of standing on the battlefield of Waterloo. Byron uses this location to meditate on bereaved relations' struggle to come to terms with their loss:

They mourn, but smile at length; and, smiling, mourn:

The tree will wither long before it fall;

The hull drives on, through mast and sail be torn;

The roof-tree sinks, but moulder on the hall

In massy hoariness; the ruined wall

Stands when its wind-worn battlements are gone;

The bars survive the captive they enthrall;

The day drags through though storms keep out the sun;

And thus the heart will break, yet brokenly live on:

Even as a broken mirror, which the glass

In every fragment multiplies; and makes

A thousand images of one that was,

The same, and still the more, the more it breaks;

And thus the heart will do which not forsakes,

Living in shattered guise, and still, and cold,

And bloodless, with its sleepless sorrow aches,

Yet withers on till all without is old,

Showing no visible sign, for such things are untold. (2.3.280-297)

15. Byron's image of the tree that "wither[s] long before it fall" is the key metaphor in Emily Brontë's poem, "Death." She uses the image of a branch that "brokenly" lives on to juxtapose conflicting voices, one expressing hope of renewal and the other admitting that the branch should be struck down:

Cruel Death! The young leaves droop and languish;

Evening's gentle air may still restore –

No! the morning sunshine mocks my anguish –

Time, for me, must never blossom more!

Strike it down, that other boughs may flourish

Where that perished sapling used to be;

Thus, at least, its mouldering corpse will nourish

That from which it sprung – Eternity. (25-32)

The voice of hope that "Evening's gentle air may still restore," delusive as it is, cannot be fully silenced. Yet Brontë's speaker ultimately considers that perhaps it is better to cut losses with the world of time to "nourish" eternity. Another Romantic voice that competes with Byron's in Emily Brontë's poetry applies the same logic. The prospect of a final rest in "eternity," through an apocalyptic smashing of the world of time, recalls Shelley in "Adonais":

The One remains, the many change and pass;

Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;

Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,
Until Death tramples it to fragments. (lines 460-464)

16. Shelley, like Byron, uses a broken glass as metaphor for life's shattering. Shelley's image ushers in the apocalyptic "white radiance of eternity" as the world of process is trampled "to fragments," granting the desired escape in Byron and Brontë's longings for visionary release, discussed above. Byron, by contrast, has his grieving subject limp through the world of process as they, by dint of perseverance, make their fragments "one." So Brontë's dialogue in "Death" reveals the influence of competing Romantic voices as Byron's acknowledgement that broken people "droop and languish" challenges Shelleyan hope that, ultimately, we are nourished by eternity and that "the One remains." The voice of Hope, that in Brontë's poem "laughed me out of sadness" (15) is a more affirmative Shelleyan echo of Byron's mourners who, in an imprisoning chiasmus that questions the possibility of leaving grief, "mourn, but smile at length; and, smiling, mourn." Yet both poets realise the difficulty of silencing grief, whether manifested in hope or despair, and, while Emily ends her poem insisting on a Shelleyan 'Eternity' (32), I suggest that Byron's portrayal of limping on provided Emily's poem with the vigorous argument between a sorrow that lives on, perhaps nourished by hope, and the desire to make an end.

17. Yet Byron's smashing of the mirror is an image of multiplication as well as division. Byron's insistence that the mirror will "make a thousand images" gestures towards plenitude as well as fragmentation. To turn from Brontë's poetry to prose for a moment,

Heathcliff describes the enduring memory of Catherine in similar terms as the “thousand forms of association” and “dreadful memoranda” (*WH* 287). His insistence that “the entire world is a dreadful collection of memoranda that she did exist” (*WH* 288) reprises Byron’s in his anatomy of a “sleepless sorrow” and portrayal of a collection of fragments, not the initial agony but the persistence of grief over time. Emily Bernhard Jackson’s analysis of Byron’s “broken mirror” seems apposite to Heathcliff’s view of the world after the death of Catherine; she writes that “the mourning heart creates its own world twice over: not only does it fashion a comprehension of life and experience separate from the seemingly objective occurrences of the real world, but it creates and perpetuates that understanding in a self-contained world of its own” (113). Byron’s influence on Brontë is not a Carlylean “scowling and teeth gnashing,” but an apprenticeship on how to represent the twilight persistence of suffering and grief.

18. When Byron writes about the bereaved in the Waterloo section, he is interested not so much in the loss itself but the persisting ache once the first pangs of grief have passed; this is the less vivid but more complex state of mind of those bereaved in succeeding years. Here, as we have already seen, Byron’s thought shapes Emily Brontë’s. Byron’s influence on Brontë’s portrayal of the afterlife of catastrophe is seen elsewhere in her poetry. In perhaps the most remarkable poem of her maturity, “Remembrance,” Emily imagines how someone could “brokenly live on.”

But, when the days of golden dreams had perished,
And even despair was powerless to destroy;
Then did I learn how existence could be cherished,

Strengthened, and fed without the aid of joy.

Then did I check the tears of useless passion –

Weaned my young soul from yearning after thine;

Sternly denied its burning wish to hasten

Down to that tomb already more than mine.

And, even yet, I dare not let it languish,

Dare not indulge in memory's rapturous pain;

Once drinking deep of that divinest anguish,

How could I seek the empty world again? (21-32)

19. Michael O'Neill's language, when he observes that "the poem, like the best of Brontë's work, shows her to be a technical master, capable of mingling emotional depth and bare restraint" can be used to mark the twin poles of Byron's influence (*Cambridge History of English Poetry* 639). The idea of Byron's influence as one of "bare restraint" is one that may come as a surprise. Yes, the heart will break, but it will also, less dramatically, brokenly live on. Brontë recognises this when she writes that existence can still be cherished without emotion. After the outburst of passionate grief, one still limps through life.

20. Michael Wood also senses Brontë's restraint when he writes that "Remembrance" is a "recognition of the empty world's claim" (380). Brontë and Byron, after their dalliance

with surrender to the overwhelmingly emotional, reach a stoical position where despair is “powerless to destroy.” They both suspect that passion, for all its cathartic possibility, is ultimately “useless.” In “Remembrance,” Emily’s repetition of “dare not” expresses her caution concerning the perils of “passion” but, at the same time, she understands its ability to compel. Brontë’s rejection of passion does not reject Byron; instead, it follows Byron’s thought in his sense that, ultimately, as he considers the peaceful Lake Lemman later in the third canto, he is unable to avoid “Earth’s troubled waters” (2.3.800). In this regard, it is worth noting that, as Janet Gezari ponders concerning Brontë’s speaker’s attempt to turn from passion, “Remembrance” ultimately asks “whether such a turning is possible” (*Last Things* 53). This is also a key question in Byron’s poetry, asked in his own poem entitled “Remembrance”:

’Tis done! – I saw it in my dreams;
No more with Hope the future beams;
My days of happiness are few:
Chill’d by misfortune’s wintry blast,
My dawn of life is overcast;
Love, Hope, and Joy, alike adieu!
Would I could add Remembrance too! (1.1-7)

21. Byron gave Emily Brontë a template for exploring the call of “the world’s tide” with its imperative to resist self-indulgent emotion, with the conflicting desire to lose oneself in “divinest anguish.” Byron acknowledges that moments of grief are often not a desired Shelleyan apocalypse: there is a twilit sequel. He imagines the ability to carry on through

the world without succumbing to overwhelming grief. Emily Brontë, as shown by “Remembrance,” follows Byron’s lead. Her realisation that escape cannot be found in either visionary bliss or climatic apocalypse is gleaned from Byron.

22. As the third canto of *Childe Harold* progresses, Byron portrays his narrator’s struggle to overcome difficult emotions that threaten a transient peace. After he leaves Waterloo, in his travels, even the beauty of the River Rhine cannot bring forgetfulness and serenity:

Adieu to thee, fair Rhine! How long delighted
The stranger fain would linger on his way!
Thine is a sea alike where souls united
Or lonely Contemplation thus might stray;
And could the ceaseless vultures cease to prey
On self-condemning bosoms, it were here,
Where Nature, nor too sombre nor too gay,
Wild but not rude, awful yet not austere,
Is to the mellow Earth as Autumn to the year. (2.3.563-571)

23. The narrator experiences solace from Nature, but he knows this respite is precarious. That Nature cannot fully bring peace is emphasised by the indirect question of “could the ceaseless vultures cease to prey.” The implied answer is, of course, that thought will not stop tormenting. The keynote here is resignation in the face of overpowering thoughts; the past will always disturb and agitate.

24. Brontë might have been aided by Byron in her portrayal of the struggle with difficult emotion. Her poetry responds to Byron's in portraying just how hard it is to be successful in this struggle. In an early lyric, she explores her grief arising from Nature's inability to console; the lyric speaker wrestles with Byron's preoccupations in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*:

I know not how it falls on me
This summer evening, hushed and lone
Yet the faint wind comes soothingly
With something of an olden tone

Forgive me if I've shunned so long
Your gentle greeting earth and air
But sorrow withers even the strong
And who can fight against despair. (1-8)

25. Brontë, like Byron, interrogates Nature's ability to bring serenity; she struggles to name the source of her peace, shown in the ambiguous phrasing in "something of an olden tone." While nature may calm, its effect is transient. Emily Brontë asks the same question as Byron in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*: "who can fight against despair." Yet, the tone in the extracts quoted above is more a pragmatic acknowledgement of reality under the sun than an "attitude striking" shaking of the fist against one's lot. There is a magnanimity with both poets: Byron extols the Rhine when he acknowledges that if any place could provide

consolation, “it were here,” while Brontë gratefully acknowledges the “gentle greeting” of nature. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, a perfect consolation is not possible from nature.

26. This anxiety caused by Nature’s inability to fully restore was shared by Wordsworth, another Romantic voice in Brontë’s poetry. Wordsworth shapes Emily Brontë’s feeling for an answering voice in Nature; however, Byron voices her difficulty with subscribing to Wordsworth’s magnanimity in accepting the loss of, to use Wordsworth’s own phrasing in his *Ode: Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood* (hereafter *Intimations Ode*), “the simple creed / of childhood” (lines 139-140) and embracing “obstinate questionings” (line 144). She is unwilling to concede, as Wordsworth does when he faces grief in “Elegiac Stanzas,” that “I have submitted to a new control” (line 34) or adopt his even-handedness as, in the *Intimations Ode*, he relinquishes a more intimate relationship with nature, the “delight” of living “beneath your more habitual sway” (line 194). Byron helps Brontë interrogate her anxiety that Nature no longer affords the same consolation Shelley hoped that Wordsworth would calm Byron’s angst, “a gift from a friend who thought a Wordsworthian ‘feeling of nature’ might help to alleviate the tumult of Byron’s condition” (McGann, *Byron and Wordsworth* 12); however, Wordsworth himself knew (as Byron did) that this “feeling of nature” could not be summoned at will. As Michael O’Neill noted in a comment on the final line of the *Intimations Ode*: “Wordsworth does not bequeath some magically poetic access to serenity; chanciness remains” (*Charles Lamb Bulletin* 90). In Brontë’s admission that she “knows not” how the feeling comes, she inherits from her Romantic predecessors her acknowledgment that she cannot control a “feeling of nature.” She met this admission in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*

with Byron in his realisation that life's existential angst is "ceaseless." Brontë's faith in the mediating power of natural objects is shaped by Wordsworth, yet it is Byron who gives her exploration of the vulnerability of such moments of connection its plangency.

27. Brontë and Byron's writing, with other Romantic poets, tussles with the difficulty of finding healing for the fragmented self. Emily Brontë shares Byron's unease with the absence of those moments of oceanic connection but also his resolve. This resolve is voiced towards the end of the third canto, the poet-narrator voices nostalgic regret that the glories of Ancient Rome have passed:

Thus far I have proceeded in a theme
Renewed with no kind auspices: – to feel
We are not what we have been, and to deem
We are not what we should be, – and to steel
The heart against itself; and to conceal,
With a proud caution, love, or hate, or aught, –
Passion or feeling, purpose, grief or zeal, –
Which is the tyrant spirit of our thought,
Is a stern task of soul: – No matter, – it is taught. (2.3.1031-1039)

Byron has felt the loss of human wholeness, and now feels the loss of human greatness but restrains his "grief" through undertaking "a stern task of soul." This task involves resisting overpowering emotions which, left unchecked, become "the tyrant spirit of our thought."

28. Emily Brontë portrays this struggle to contain overwhelming emotions in an early lyric in which the phrase “tyrant spell” resonates with Byron’s “tyrant spirit.” Margaret Homans notes that Brontë’s phrase may also be a borrowing from *Manfred* (Homans 109), where the eponymous character threatens to use a “tyrant spell” to summon reluctant spirits.

The night is darkening round me

The wild winds coldly blow

But a tyrant spell has bound me

And I cannot cannot go

The giant trees are bending

Their bare boughs weighed with snow

And the storm is fast descending

And yet I cannot go

Clouds beyond clouds above me

Wastes beyond wastes below

But nothing drear can move me

I will not cannot go.

Nature writ large with “giant trees” and “fast descending” storm could be read as Byronic hyperbole, a form of “attitude striking.” Brontë’s lyric speaker is rooted to the spot; the repetition of “cannot” suggests being held by a force out of her control, yet the assertion of her will in the final line, with the phrase “will not” suggests a pained effort to shape the forces around her, rather than be shaped by them. Brontë and Byron’s struggles with “tyrant

spells” show their determination not to be swept away by overwhelming emotional forces but to stand their ground. Brontë’s speaker insists on her immovability, which portrays her as the still centre of an emotional storm and refuses to participate in the surrounding natural drama. Yet, the confusion of tenses in the final line show that emotional collapse may be close.

29. Byron’s trademark dashes perform a similar struggle to keep overwhelming mental states at bay, but his listing of overpowering emotional responses to the loss of past glory, “Passion or feeling, purpose, grief or zeal” shows the difficulty of conducting oneself with “proud caution” in the face of so many contending emotional states. Both poets struggle to undertake this “stern task of soul”; their honesty concerning the precariousness of their emotional firmness, lends their writing psychological verisimilitude – far from simple revelling in Byronic intensity. Angela Leighton, in an analysis of “The night is darkening round me” points out that Emily eschews posturing, arguing that she is not interested in such assertions of “poetic identity” (69). Contrary to early readings of the nature of Byron’s poetry and, by implication, the nature of his influence on Emily, neither is Byron; if anything, he resists revelling in the nostalgia of the heart. Emily Brontë inherits this resistance.

All day I’ve toiled but not with pain

In learning’s golden mine

And now at eventide again

The moonbeams softly shine

Romanticism on the Net #74-75 (Spring-Fall 2020)

There is no snow upon the ground
No frost on wind or wave
The south wind blew with gentlest sound
And broke their icy grave

'Tis sweet to wander here at night
To watch the winter die
With heart as summer sunshine light
And warm as summer's sky

O may I never lose the peace
That lulls me gently now
Though time should change my youthful face
And years should shade my brow

True to myself and true to all
May I be healthful still
And turn away from passion's call
And curb my own wild will. (1-20)

- 30.** The final stanza represents a state aspired to rather than one achieved. Brontë saw the challenges in turning from “passion’s call” and curbing her “own wild will” in Byron.

Byron helped the post-Romantic poet in a northern parsonage imagine a turn from passion, even if this turn was never fully achieved.

III. Emily Brontë's Inheritance of Byron's Stoical Gaze

31. After his famous meditation, in the beginning of the third canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, on imagination's power to create a "being more intense" (2.3.47), Byron immediately restrains his Romantic musings with a determination to "think less wildly" (2.3.55). This determination seems to be undermined by his later exhortation, in the fourth canto, to "ponder boldly" (2.4.1135). This exhortation could be read as an invitation to boundlessness. Yet, "ponder[ing] boldly," where the verb suggests possible philosophical enquiry and accompanying adverb implies courageously staring life in the face, can also be read as a rejection of a Romantic excess of feeling. To face the world in all its unpredictability, Byron must "ponder boldly," to use Hamlet's words, the "heartache and the thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to" (3.1.64-65). The restraint of passion, explored in the last section, creates the room for dispassionate thinking. In the following section, I argue that Emily Brontë inherits the depth of Byron's thinking as much, if not more so, than she does his feeling.

32. My sense of Byron as a thinking writer is indebted to scholars such as Emily A. Bernhard Jackson, who argues for Byron's poetry as the progress of "a well thought-out and articulated philosophy of knowledge" through a process of "gradual intellectual consideration" (2). She reads Byron's poetry as a move towards a scepticism that sees

knowledge as knowledge-claims rather than self-evident truth. This move towards scepticism includes probing the organicist claims of vatic Romanticism to “a being more intense” that can achieve oneness with the world. The way that Emily Brontë, in her poetry, pulls back from fully giving herself to moments of visionary bliss echoes this scepticism that is, in part, her Romantic inheritance from Byron. This inheritance, I argue, is deep calling to deep rather than Brontë’s juvenile reading of Byron’s “ersatz poetry of surfaces” (Howe 2) before she moved on to other Romantics (like Shelley and Wordsworth) who nourished her mature verse.

33. One need only read Emily Brontë’s poem, “To Imagination” to see that, like Byron, she was attracted to the idea of creating a “being more intense,” but saw its limitations. She chose, like Byron, to sceptically and stoically “ponder boldly” her world; this is why I explore here ways in which Brontë may have engaged with Byron’s perambulations in his bold epic, *Don Juan*. Elfenbein argues that, for Victorian writers “*Don Juan* loomed as a road not to be taken,” and states that writers like Emily Brontë “pretended it did not exist” (46). Behind this assertion may be Elfenbein’s sense that, in Paul Douglas’ words, the “chatty, catty, risqué narrator of *Don Juan*” is antithetical to the visionary intensity of Emily Brontë’s writing (15). It should also be borne in mind that, when considering attitudes to *Don Juan* – in particular the idea that the Brontës may have given it a wide berth (as Charlotte Brontë once famously recommended in a letter to her close friend, Ellen Nussey) – there is the view that, while the educated were attracted to the intensity of Byron’s *Turkish Tales*, it was the lower classes that rated *Don Juan* and *Beppo* (St Clair 19); such a view may have influenced scholarly consideration of the nature of Byron’s

influence on the Brontës. Also, there may be an assumption that, just as the shorter lyric was the chosen form for women writing poetry, so it was also for women reading poetry. Yet the stoical, and at times satirical, mood that also energises Emily Brontë's writing could have been inspired by reading *Don Juan*.

34. Jerome McGann traces an affinity between the “convulsion of longing” in Heathcliff and Byron’s portrayal of the eponymous character in *The Giaour* (McGann, *Fiery Dust* 158). McGann’s observation is typical of the tonal key in which Byron’s influence on Emily Brontë’s writing, as well as her writing itself, is discerned. Yet, reading Emily Brontë primarily as a poet of emotional stress and convulsive longing means that we do not hear her drier moods. Perhaps behind this deafness to tone is our sense that Romanticism, with its questioning of the relationship between self and the world, is an inherently intense business. So, we think, it is this intensity to which Victorian writers, as Romantic heirs, responded. Consequently, as McGann notes himself in his introduction to *Don Juan in Context*, a “scholarly interest in High Romanticism,” with its visionary preoccupations, might prejudice consideration of *Don Juan* as it is seen to lack high seriousness (ix). So, *Don Juan* might not seem a natural bedfellow for Emily Brontë’s writing.

35. This frame reflects the tendency in earlier scholarly work on Byron’s influence, discussed above, to place the intense rather than ironic and more reflective Byron as the influence on Emily Brontë’s writing. Yet both writers also cultivated an emotionally distant coldness, even an abstraction from emotion altogether. Angela Leighton writes that Emily Brontë’s poetry is “oddly impersonal” (64). Read this way, Brontë’s poetry is far from an outpouring

of Romantic angst, more a colder exploration of the partiality of a particular point-of-view. In discussing Byron's rejection of Romantic high seriousness with its concomitant vatic intensity, McGann writes that "the dandiacal poet offers the reader the flame from a cold lamp and the reflection from a pitiless mirror" ("Byron's Lyric Poetry" 212). Emily Brontë inherits and uses Byron's "pitiless mirror"; it is what enabled her to "ponder boldly."

36. One example of Brontë's developing use of Byron's "pitiless mirror" is the way her imagery increasingly reflects Byron's own, most notably in the symbolic potential of the ocean. In "O God of Heaven!" the ocean is commonplace Byronism. It is a symbol of escape:

It's over now – and I am free

And the ocean wind is caressing me

The wild wind from that wavy main

I never thought to see again

Bless thee Bright Sea – and glorious dome

And my own world my spirit's home

Bless thee, Bless all – I can not speak

My voice is choked, but not with grief

And salt drops from my haggard cheek

Descend, like rain upon the heath. (21-30)

Romanticism on the Net #74-75 (Spring-Fall 2020)

This sense of exhilaration at being upon the enthusiastically capitalised “Bright Sea” in one of Brontë’s Gondal poems where, according to Stanford, much “Byronic bombast” is to be found, recalls Childe Harold’s escape from ennui:

Once more upon the waters! Yet once more!
And the waters bound beneath me as a steed
That knows his rider. Welcome, to their roar!
Swift be their guidance, wheresoe’er it lead!
Though the strain’d mast should quiver as a reed,
And the rent canvas fluttering strew the gale,
Still must I on; For I am as a weed,
Flung from the rock, on Ocean’s foam, to sail
Where’er the surge may sweep, or tempest’s breath prevail. (2.3.10-18)

37. In these extracts, both speakers are fleeing from a form of imprisonment, Brontë’s more literal than Byron’s. Harold’s “fulness of satiety” (2.1.34) leads, a couple of lines later, to his perception that where he dwelt was “more lone than Eremite’s sad cell” (2.1.36). However, both speakers entrust themselves to the ocean, that, in Brontë’s words, is “my own world.” Both speakers have finally found their element; Byron metamorphoses the ocean into a horse that is familiar with the feel of its rider. Yet these examples from the early work of both poets are open to the charge that the ocean is little more than a commonplace Romantic trope for freedom – so much “Byronic bombast.” Yet reading these poems as a simple paean on Romantic boundlessness masks the reality that this freedom comes at a cost. The mast that is “strained” and the “rent canvas” suggests that

freedom comes at a price. Similarly, in Emily's poem, the "haggard cheek" implies one who has wrested themselves from great trauma, with the image of "rain upon the heath" echoing King Lear's pyrrhic victory over the elements. Even in this early work from both poets, the idea that Romantic freedom is not all that it is cracked up to be calls into question protestations of limitlessness.

38. Perhaps this is why, in Byron's later work, the ocean persists as an image but achieves a different imaginative purpose. During his discussion of "warlike feats" in *Don Juan*'s ninth canto, reflecting upon the eponymous hero's adventures during the siege of Ismail in the previous canto, Byron uses the ocean to figure the destructiveness of war rather than an escape from limitation; it conveys oppression rather than freedom:

And thus Death laughs – it is sad merriment,

But still it *is* so; and with such example

Why should not life be equally content,

With his superior, in a smile to trample

Upon the nothings which are daily spent

Like bubbles on an ocean much less ample

Then the eternal deluge, which devours

Suns as rays – worlds like atoms – years like hours? (5.9.97-104)

The "much less ample" ocean has lost the suggestion of freedom as it is apocalyptically swallowed up in the "eternal deluge" of Death. It no longer connotes hopefulness, as in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, but is burdened with the freight of a meaningless existence: "bubbles on an ocean." Moreover, it is Byron's imagining the "nothings" of human

pretensions that float on the ocean which suggest its next metamorphosis. The ocean becomes an inferior image of the “eternal deluge” of death in the face of which life is powerless. The qualifying of “ocean” as something that is “much less ample” comes as a surprise to any versed in Burkean sublime notions of the ocean’s vastness; such qualifications shows Byron revising what he sees as tired commonplaces.

39. This way of using the ocean possibly influenced the way that Brontë uses it in her most famous poem, “No coward soul is mine.” Her image of “withered weeds” perhaps comments ironically on Byron’s description of himself as a “weed” (2.3.16) flung on the ocean in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* to image his freedom, but also picks up on Byron’s own sense that any such freedom is not one that is untroubled:

Vain are the thousand creeds
That move men’s hearts, unutterably vain,
Worthless as withered weeds
Or idlest froth amid the boundless main

To waken doubt in one
Holding so fast by thy infinity
So surely anchored on
The steadfast rock of Immortality. (9-16)

Brontë clearly figures, through verbal echo, the later Byron’s “nothings which are daily spent”: that is, the flotsam and jetsam of the “thousand creeds” that float upon the ocean for which they share mutual disdain. She shares Byron’s sense that the ways humanity

creates meaning are wanting, so many “bubbles in the ocean.” Brontë shares Byron’s sense, discussed at length by Bernhard Jackson, that these creeds are only “knowledge claims” rather than the truth. Yet, one could argue that Emily Brontë, in a Bloomian swerve, rejects Byron’s open-handedness in *Don Juan*, his “apparent conviction that scepticism lends itself to fecundity” (Bernhard Jackson 183); the hopefulness in Byron’s famous claim in *Don Juan* that “doubt itself is doubting” (9.136) is rejected by Brontë as she sees the “various” creeds as worthless.

40. So, the affinity between both writers in their shared scepticism is far from straight-forward.

Emily Brontë’s more polarised (and arguably less tolerant) vision refuses to be subsumed by the overwhelming and apocalyptic weight of ocean, metamorphosed into death, in the same way as Byron; for her, “idlest froth” is vain to “waken doubt.” Perhaps this is due to the stronger vein of stoicism in Emily Brontë’s writing, which is a clearer vision, in its insistence upon the powerlessness of the ability of “creeds” to affect the poet’s soul, than Byron’s broad-church scepticism, which more puckishly celebrates the way that different beliefs can call each other into question. As Gezari notes in her edition of Emily Brontë’s poems, Emily’s reading of the Stoic philosopher Epictetus may have shaped her writing of “No Coward Soul is Mine,” particularly, the way he counsels against the fear of death in *The Discourses of Epictetus* (*Complete Poems* 279). In the poem’s centring on the human soul, rather than the ocean, life becomes superior to death (through a clear division into what is and what is not):

There is not room for Death

Nor atom that his might could render void

Since thou art Being and Breath

And what thou art may never be destroyed. (25-28)

Brontë's insistence that "there is not room for death" implies a similar negatory attitude to doubt, an attitude that Byron moves towards when he writes that "doubt itself be doubting." Perhaps, for Brontë more than for Byron, even the "worthless ... idlest froth," as it cannot "waken doubt," has its own potential for "Being and Breath." Steven Connor, in the second half of a lecture on the nature of thoughts, considers the bubble (froth in another form) as metaphor for thinking. A something and yet a nothing, the bubble partakes of the quality of air with its mutability yet dynamic potential. Connor asserts that:

Bubbles are vain, impermanent, deceitful, but they are also the extravasating abundance of invention ... foam, froth, sperm, suds, bubbles, are both airy and treacherous nothings ... and yet in many cosmogonies are also the origin of everything.

Connor's take on the bubble as "abundance of invention" recalls Shelley's hopeful image, in *Prometheus Unbound* of the "all sustaining air" (2.5.42). The bubbles that play on the ocean are slippery in their signification: Brontë's echo of Byron's "bubbles on the ocean" in her image of "idlest froth amid the boundless main" contains the tussle between despair and hope.

- 41.** In his treatment of ocean, Byron's scepticism leans more towards despair. He uses the ocean as a stage on which to show human nature in its, to use Shakespeare's *phrasing*, "unaccommodated" (*King Lear* 3.4.95) state through the shipwreck scene in the second canto of *Don Juan*. After Juan, his tutor, Pedrillo, and the ship's crew find themselves on

a raft without means of food or drink, Byron darkly hints at what is likely to ensue, while affecting to provide a rationale for their behaviour:

But man is a carnivorous production,
And must have meals, at least one meal a day;
He cannot live, like woodcocks, upon suction,
But, like the shark and tiger, must have prey:
Although his anatomical construction
Bears vegetables in a grumbling way,
Your labouring people think beyond all question,
Beef, veal, and mutton, better for digestion. (5.2.529-536)

Byron writes firmly, to use the terminology of Northrop Frye's schema, in the ironic mode to portray the frailty of the all-too-human; in his bold pondering, the ironic gaze, to use Frye's phrasing, "takes life exactly as it finds it" (41). When Pedrillo, Juan's tutor, is cannibalised, Byron answers the shock of his readers:

And if Pedrillo's fate should shocking be,
Remember Ugolino condescends
To eat the head of his arch-enemy
The moment after he politely ends
His tale; if foes be food in hell, at sea
'Tis surely fair to dine upon our friends,
When shipwreck's short allowance grows too scanty,
Without been much more horrible than Dante. (5.2.657-664)

Byron's allusion to Dante's writing serves to emphasise that such predatory behaviour has a long pedigree (and also implies that, if esteemed poets such as Dante are so unsparing in unmasking the cruelty in human nature, why shouldn't he?). He also registers the reader's disquiet as he concludes, with mocking irony, that it is "fair to dine upon our friends"; here, for the narrator, all is fair in love and war.

42. Emily Brontë's poem "Why ask to know the date, the clime" [hereafter known as "Why ask"] feels the weight of *Don Juan* in its bleak assessment of humanity's capabilities. The narrator, a war-weary mercenary, who has seen the worst in humanity, ruminates on the all-pervasiveness of conflict. What drives this poem is a narrator's ponderings as much as plot. Thus, "Why ask" bears some of the hallmarks of Byron's digressive manner in *Don Juan* in that, before or after narrating the events, the narrator ruminates on their significance:

Why ask to know the date – the clime?

More than mere words they cannot be:

Men knelt to God and worshipped crime,

And crushed the helpless even as we –

But they had learnt, from length of strife –

Of civil war and anarchy

To laugh at death and look on life

With somewhat lighter sympathy. (1-8)

43. As Byron does in *Don Juan*, the poem's opening lines presuppose a reader who will wish to classify the events the narrator will go on to describe. The opening question shows that Brontë's narrator has designs on such a controlling reader to bewilder such desires for classification and categorization. The mercenary's views might be read as commentary on the shipwreck scene in *Don Juan*: "length of strife" leads to "lighter sympathy." Byron's more "catty, chatty" narrator articulates the same idea as Brontë's ponderous mercenary: people "must have prey." Brontë's use of "somewhat" as a qualifying adjective shows her chariness about defining the precise scope of people's inaptitude for sympathetic identification. It is also euphemistic in its suggestion of reluctance to reveal the true depths of human selfishness. "Somewhat" also gives a certain off-the-cuff tone to the mercenary which approaches Byron's tone in *Don Juan*. His opening question, which is rhetorical, assumes a listener who wants to know when (date) and where (clime) such evil acts happened, and a narrator who believes that we need only look to ourselves to find the answer. This reluctance to define the location and scope of evil shapes Brontë's equivocal phrasing of "crushed the helpless even as we"; the ambiguity as to the referent of "we" leaves us uncomfortably aware that we may be the perpetrators of evil as well as its victims. Byron achieves the same effect through his more urbane argument that "'tis surely fair to dine upon our friends." In "Why ask," Brontë undertakes the same work as Byron, observed by Bernhard Jackson in her consideration of *The Giaour* as jarring "assumptions about knowledge" (75). "Why ask" reveals a more sceptical Emily Brontë emerging with a poem that is more narrative in form. Her final poem eschews lyrical intensity for narrative ambiguity.

44. Such ambiguity brings human failing too close for comfort. Emily Brontë's use of Byron's "pitiless mirror" does not permit her reader the luxury of remaining at a safe distance. Her mercenary, like the narrator in *Don Juan*, is sceptical about the purity of motive, both good and evil, in the human heart. Narrative thus becomes messy and convoluted. Therefore, both narrators evince what Drummond Bone calls "a shrug of the shoulder weariness about the story-telling process of life" (168). One of Byron's many narrative digressions works well as an explanation of the mercenary's style in Brontë's poem:

I perch upon a humbler promontory,
Amidst life's infinite variety:
With no care for what is nicknamed glory,
But speculating as I cast mine eye
On what may suit or may not suit my story,
And never straining hard to versify,
I rattle on exactly as I'd talk
With anybody in a ride or walk. (5.15.145-152)

Yet Emily Brontë's indignation at humanity is far less tempered with a satirical levity than Byron's. She does not have the *mobilité* of Byron, his ability to move easily from one subject to the next, to "rattle on." This comes, at least partly, from her sense of implication in the mess of humanity. One of Brontë's lyric speakers, who challenges the view of her final poem's mercenary narrator, voices caution against slinging mud and taking refuge in a comforting misanthropy. In this poem, Brontë shows the ability to create a sceptical voice that came as her inheritance from Byron:

First melted off the hope of youth

Then Fancy's rainbow fast withdrew

And then experience told me truth

In mortal bosoms never grew

'Twas grief enough to think mankind

All hollow servile insincere

But worse to trust to my own mind

And find the same corruption there. ("I am the only being whose doom" 16-24)

45. Brontë's realisation that she is "part of the scene: a player, a participant, 'doomed to inflict or bear'," nevertheless, is one that she shares with Byron (McGann, 'Byron's Lyric Poetry' 221). She is frank in her admission of the all-pervasiveness of human failing. Critics read "I am the only being whose doom" as Brontë revising Byronic fixations. For example, Hoxie Fairchild, who sees Emily as a 'frustrated Romantic', writes that "Emily was too intelligent to be taken in by her own Byronism" (408). Yet this intelligence, her ability to "ponder boldly" and thus write poetry which "made a virtue of candour and truth-telling" (McGann in Rutherford ed. 47) is one which was shaped by Byron.

IV. Conclusion

46. Byron's vaunted *mobilité* enabled him, partially, to absorb his disturbance at the world into satire and wit; as Jane Stabler puts it, "by enshrining changeability as an art form" (503).

His first biographer, Thomas Moore, in explaining this, stated that Byron had “a natural tendency to yield... to every chance impression, and change with every passing impulse” (646). Moore then quotes from the sixteenth canto of *Don Juan* where Juan tries to discern Adeline’s genuine feelings:

So well she acted, all and every part
By turns – with that vivacious versatility
Which many people take for want of heart.
They err – ’tis merely what is called mobility,
A thing of temperament and not of art,
Though seeming so from its supposed facility;
And false – though true; for surely they’re sincerest,
Who are strongly acted on by what is nearest. (5.16.817-824)

This seems antithetical to Brontë’s portrayal of the consequences of breaking faith in *Wuthering Heights*; Catherine Earnshaw is “strongly acted on by what is nearest” to her cost. Arguably, Brontë ruthlessly portrays the consequences of such mobility in Catherine’s subsequent implosion. Byron’s *mobilité* is possibly one of the moods that Tayler might consider that Emily Brontë did not share with Byron. As I conclude, I consider the possibility that Tayler may be right. Emily Brontë’s desire to, as Virginia Woolf put it, “say something about the eternal powers” (160) and her commitment to, using Wordsworth’s phrasing in the *Ode*, “those first affections” (line 151) means that she could not celebrate changefulness in the same way as Byron. Byron’s changefulness was a matter of experimenting with different poetic voices; yet perhaps, as Leighton suggests when she draws a distinction between the Brontës and their Romantic predecessors, for Emily Brontë

the stakes were higher as her writing was, given her significant early bereavements, “touched by real life” and “the counter-gravity of elegy” (57).

47. Yet, an often-overlooked aspect of Byron’s own comment on *mobilité* is found in his own note to the above stanza quoted by Moore. In this note, Byron defines *mobilité* as an “excessive susceptibility of immediate impressions” but qualifies this immediately by stating, “at the same time without *losing* the past.” Byron’s work can thus be read as a conflict between the transient and the permanent, a reading that perhaps goes some way towards explaining the bewildering tonal shifts in *Don Juan*. It can also be said that Byron’s work is haunted by the past, something akin to the questing of Brontë’s philosopher who has “watched and sought my life-time long” (8). Robert Gleckner, in his seminal study, *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise*, reads Byron’s poetry in a way that evokes the activity of Blake’s Orc, as “hammer strokes ... forging a frighteningly dark and coherent vision of man and life, of the human condition not merely ‘circa 1811’ ... but throughout human history” (xv). Gleckner and Woolf claim for Byron and Brontë a similar preoccupation with universals, a claim that Byron, in his statement that *mobilité* can never lose the past, also implicitly makes. These observations underscore how critical judgement that Byron was responsible for Brontë’s adolescent effusions, rather than her mature work, does not do justice to the richness of his influence. The idea that Byron’s restraint, artful though it may have been, shaped Emily Brontë’s writing shows just how complex his influence on Brontë was. I have long thought that, in her life and writing, Emily Brontë aimed at what W. B. Yeats counselled in ‘Under Ben Bulbin’, which, like the end of *Wuthering Heights*,

is a meditation on a tombstone's inscription. Yeats desired no conventional platitude on his gravestone:

By the road an ancient Cross,
No marble, no conventional phrase,
On limestone quarried near the spot
By his command these words are cut:

Cast a cold eye

On life, on death

Horseman, pass by! (5-10)

Emily Brontë endeavoured to 'cast a cold eye' on what she saw; it was her seeing with Byron's "cold eye that dismisses accustomed supposition" (Bernhard Jackson 95) that shaped her ability to do it.

Works Cited

- Allott, Miriam, editor. *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge, 1974.
- Arnold, Matthew. "Haworth Churchyard." *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, edited by Kenneth Allott. London: Longman, 1965. 395.
- Bernhard Jackson, Emily A. *The Development of Byron's Philosophy of Knowledge: Certain in Uncertainty*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Bone, Drummond. "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage IV, Don Juan and Beppo." *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*, edited by Drummond Bone, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 151-170.

Romanticism on the Net #74-75 (Spring-Fall 2020)

Brontë, Emily. *Emily Jane Brontë: The Complete Poems*. Edited by Janet Gezari, London: Penguin, 1992.

Brontë, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*. Edited by Ian Jack. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Byron. *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*. Edited by Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols, Oxford: Clarendon, 1980-1993.

Chitham, Edward and Tom Winnifrith. *Brontë Facts and Brontë Problems*. London: Macmillan, 1983.

Connor, Steven. *Thinking Things*. Edited lecture transcript, <http://www.stevenconnor.com/thinkingthings/thinkingthings.pdf>.

Cooke, Michael G. "Byron, Pope and the Grand Tour." *Byron: Augustan and Romantic*, edited by Andrew Rutherford, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990, pp. 165-180.

Cooper, Dorothy J. "The Romantics and Emily Brontë." *Brontë Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1952, pp. 106-112.

Douglass, Paul. "Byron's Life and his Biographers." *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*, edited by Drummond Bone, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 7-26.

Elfenbein, Andrew. *Byron and the Victorians*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Eliot, T. S. *On Poetry and Poets*. London: Faber, 1957.

Evans, Margiad. "Byron and Emily Brontë: An Essay." *Life and Letters and the London Mercury*, 57, 1948, pp. 193-216.

Fairchild, Hoxie Neale. *Religious Trends in English Poetry*. Vol. 4, New York: Columbia University Press, 1957.

Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957.

Romanticism on the Net #74-75 (Spring-Fall 2020)

Gezari, Janet. *Last Things: Emily Brontë's Poems*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Gleckner, Robert F. *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise*. Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1967.

Grove, Robin. "'It would not do': Emily Brontë as Poet." *The Art of Emily Brontë*, edited by Anne Smith, London: Vision, 1976.

Homans, Margaret. *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980.

Howe, Anthony. *Byron and the Forms of Thought*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013.

Leighton, Angela. "The Poetry." *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, edited by Heather Glen, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 53-71.

McGann, Jerome. "Byron's Lyric Poetry." *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*, edited by Drummond Bone, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 209-223.

McGann, Jerome. *Byron and Wordsworth: The Annual Byron Lecture given in the University of Nottingham on 27 May 1998*. Nottingham: School of English Studies, University of Nottingham, 1999.

McGann, Jerome. *Don Juan in Context*. London: John Murray, 1976.

McGann, Jerome. *Fiery Dust: Byron's Poetic Development*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1968.

McGann, Jerome. "'My Brain is Feminine': Byron and the Poetry of Deception." *Byron: Augustan and Romantic*, edited by Andrew Rutherford, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990, pp. 26-51.

Moore, Thomas. *The Life of Lord Byron with his Letters and Journals and Illustrative Notes*. London: John Murray, 1844.

Romanticism on the Net #74-75 (Spring-Fall 2020)

- O’Gorman, Francis, ed. *Victorian Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004.
- O’Neill, Michael. “Emily Brontë, Arnold, Clough.” *The Cambridge History of English Poetry*, edited by Michael O’Neill, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 635-648.
- O’Neill, Michael. “‘The Tremble from It Is Spreading’: A Reading of Wordsworth’s ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality.’” *The Charles Lamb Bulletin*, vol. 139, 2007, 74-90.
- O’Neill, Michael. “‘Visions Rise, and Change’: Emily Brontë’s Poetry and Male Romantic Poetry.” *Brontë Studies*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2011, pp. 57-63.
- Pinion, F. B. “Byron and *Wuthering Heights*.” *Brontë Studies*, vol. 21, no. 5, 1995, pp. 195-201
- Rutherford, Andrew, editor. *Byron: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge, 1970.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Norton Shakespeare*. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt, New York: Norton, 1997.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*. Edited by Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers, New York: Norton, 1977.
- Spark, Muriel and Derek Stanford. *Emily Brontë: Her Life and Work*. London: Peter Owen, 1966.
- St Clair, William. “The Impact of Byron’s Writings: An Evaluative Approach.” *Byron: Augustan and Romantic*, edited by Andrew Rutherford, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990, pp. 1-25.
- Stabler, Jane. “Second Generation Poetry 1: Hunt, Byron, Moore.” *The Cambridge History of English Poetry*, edited by Michael O’Neill, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 487-505.

Taylor, Irene. *Holy Ghosts: The Male Muses of Emily and Charlotte Brontë*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.

Wood, Michael. "Crime and Conjecture: Emily Brontë's Poems." *The Oxford Handbook to Victorian Poetry*, edited by Matthew Bevis, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 370-384.

Woolf, Virginia. "Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights." (155-61) Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader: Volume 1s*, edited by Andrew McNeillie, London: Vintage 2003.

Wordsworth, William. *William Wordsworth*. 21st Century Oxford Authors, edited by Stephen Gill, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Yeats, W. B. *The Poems*. Edited by Daniel Albright, London: Everyman, 1992.

¹ All references to Emily Brontë's poetry taken from *Emily Jane Brontë: The Complete Poems*. Edited by Janet Gezari. London: Penguin, 1992. Line numbers given in text.

.All references to Byron's poetry taken from *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*. Edited by Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols, Oxford: Clarendon, 1980-1993. Volume, canto (where appropriate) and line number given in text.