MANFRED and WORDSWORTH

To trace the serpentine changes in Byron's attitude to Wordsworth during the months before and during the writing of *Manfred* is a complicated business. To Leigh Hunt he sent, on October 30th 1815, a brief but damning criticism of *The Excursion* (which had been published the previous year) saying, among other echoes of the *Don Juan* Dedication, "... who can understand him? – let those who do make him intelligible" and taking Wordsworth to task on his depiction of Greece at Book IV, 719-20:

> He says of Greece in the body of his book – that it is a land of
>
> "*rivers – fertile* plains – & *sounding* shores
> Under a cope of *variegated* sky"
>
> The rivers are dry half the year – the plains are barren – and the shores still & tideless as the Mediterranean can make them – the Sky is anything but variegated – being for months & months – but "darkly – deeply – beautifully blue."[1]

The line "darkly – deeply – beautifully blue" is from Southey's *Madoc in Wales*, V 102 (see also *Don Juan*, IV Stanza 110); to tar Wordsworth with such a brush is an economical way of damning him, and his ignorance of nature in Greece, at least. However, it is a commonplace to state that by June 1816, as Byron writes *Childe Harold III* (partly while in the company of Shelley) he has taken on a Wordsworthian optimism in the face of nature:

> I live not in myself, but I become
> Portion of that around me; and to me
> High mountains are a feeling, but the hum
> Of human cities – torture – I can see
> Nothing to loathe in Nature, save to be
> A link reluctant in a fleshly chain,
> Classed among creatures, when the Soul can flee,
> And with the sky – the peak – the heaving plain
> Of Ocean, or the Stars, mingle – and not in vain.[2]

This slightly *ersatz* feeling may be less from reading *The Excursion*, and more from reading such earlier works as *Tintern Abbey*: but Byron's note to Stanza 99 might seem to state the debt unambiguously:

> ... the feeling with which all around Clarens, and the opposite rocks of Meillerie is invested, is of a still higher and more comprehensive order than the mere sympathy with individual passion; it is a sense of the existence of love in its most extended and sublime capacity, and of our own participation of its good and of its glory: it is the great principle of the universe, which is there more condensed, but not less manifested; and of which, though knowing ourselves a part, we lose our individuality, and mingle in the beauty of the whole.

No-one can really calculate how much such moments owe to Wordsworth *tout court*, how much to Wordsworth as mediated through Shelley, and how much to *La Nouvelle Hèloïse: The Prisoner of Chillon*, written at exactly the same time, has several touches which are either Wordsworthian or Rousseauesque. Whatever the case, by September 28th, at the end of his Alpine tour with Hobhouse, the weight of life's reality has reversed Byron's intuition, and nature is no longer, for him, something in which one can lose oneself:

1: BLJ IV 325.
2: CHP III stanza 72.

> In the weather for this tour (of 13 days) I have been very fortunate – fortunate in a companion (Mr. H[obhous]e) fortunate in our prospects – and exempt from even the little petty accidents & delays which often render journeys in a less wild country – disappointing. – I was disposed to be pleased – I am a lover of Nature – and an Admirer of Beauty – I can bear fatigue – & welcome privation – and have seen some of the noblest views in the world. – But in all this – the recollections of bitterness – & more especially of recent & more home desolation – which must accompany me through life – have preyed upon me here – and neither the music of the Shepherd – the crashing of the Avalanche – nor the torrent – the mountain – the Glacier – the Forest – nor the Cloud – have for one moment – lightened the weight upon my heart – nor enabled me to lose my own wretched identity in the majesty & the power and the Glory – around – above – & beneath me. – I am past reproaches – and there is a time for all things – I am past the wish of vengeance – and I know of none like for what I have suffered – but the hour will come – when what I feel must be felt – & the –– –– but enough. –– –– To you – dearest Augusta – I send – and for you – I have kept this record of what I have seen & felt. – Love me as you are beloved by me. –– ––[3]

Nature is now a painful reminder of one's own limitations and suffering. But oddly, it is a section of *Manfred* written prior to the play, and now re-used, that expresses this deeply un-Wordsworthian idea. It is not clear whom we are to hear making the Incantation at the end of Act I, but we may guess it to be chorused by the Seven Spirits whom Manfred has just summoned, and who have – as he interprets – mocked him with the apparition of the "beautiful female figure". They represent different aspects of Nature, and chant lines which Byron is re-using from the *Prisoner of Chillon* volume, published earlier in the year, and, according to Jerome McGann[4] written earlier still:

> By thy cold breast and serpent smile,
> By thy unfathomed Gulphs of Guile,
> By that most seeming virtuous eye,
> By thy shut soul's Hypocrisy;
> By the perfection of thine Art
> Which passed for human thine own heart:
> By thy delight in others' pain,
> And by thy brotherhood of Cain,
> I call upon thee! and compel
> Thyself to be thy proper Hell!
>
> And on thy head I pour the vial
> Which doth devote thee to this trial;
> Nor to Slumber, nor to die,
> Shall be in thy destiny;
> Though thy death shall still seem near
> To thy wish, but as a fear;
> Lo! the spell now works around thee,
> And the clankless chain hath bound thee;
> O'er thy heart and brain together
> Hath the Word been passed – now wither! –[5]

(... lines which read to me as if they are intended as the climax of an extension to Coleridge's *Christabel.*) But the influence of *The Excursion* does not, paradoxically, cease here, with the apparent realistion of nature's inexorable unfriendliness. It has to be exorcised, in part by the Incantation itself, but also, in part, by Manfred's scene with the Witch of the

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3: BLJ V 104-5.
4: CPW IV 464.
5: *Manfred*, I i 242-61.

Alps in II ii (written after Byron and Hobhouse had visited the Staubbach falls on September 22nd-23rd). Here are his words to her about his boyhood:

> I said, with men, and with the thoughts of men,
> I held but slight communion; but instead
> My joy was in the Wilderness, to breathe
> The difficult air of the iced mountain's top,
> Where the birds dare not build, nor insect's wing
> Flit o'er the herbless granite; or to plunge
> Into the torrent, or to roll along
> In the swift whirl of the new-breaking wave
> Of river-stream, or ocean, in their flow.
> In these my early strength exulted; or
> To follow through the night the moving moon,
> The stars and their development; or catch
> The dazzling lightnings till my eyes grew dim:
> Or to look, listening, on the scattered leaves,
> When Autumn winds were at their evening song.
> These were my pastimes ...[6]

If there is an immediate Wordsworthian influence here (and Byron may more recently have read the deeply Wordsworthian *Alastor* – see previous section) it is from the *Song at the Feast of Brougham Castle:*

> He knew the rocks which Angels haunt
> Upon the mountains visitant;
> He hath kenned them taking wing;
> And into caves where Faeries sing
> He hath entered; and been told
> By Voices how men lived of old.
> Among the heavens his eye can see
> The face of thing that is to be;
> And, if that men report him right,
> His tongue could whisper words of might.[7]

For Manfred the boy, nature had been what she had been to Young Clifford here – a friend, teacher and parent-substitute. But when in Act III (written in Italy at the end of 1816, or the start of 1817) Manfred addresses the Sun, he speaks to it not as an equal, or as a being in communion with which he can lose himself, but as one who, even though he may partake somewhat of its nature, is far above and beyond him:

> Glorious Orb! the Idol
> Of early nature, and the vigorous race
> Of undiseased mankind, the giant sons
> Of the embrace of Angels, with a sex
> More beautiful than they, which did draw down
> The erring Spirits who can ne'er return –
> Most glorious Orb! that wert a worship, ere
> The mystery of thy making was revealed!
> Thou earliest minister of the Almighty,
> Which gladdened, on their mountain tops, the hearts
> Of Chaldean Shepherds, till they poured
> Themselves in Orisons! thou Material God!

6: Ibid, II ii 60-75.

7: Wordsworth, *Song at the Feast of Brougham Castle*, 128-37.

> And representative of the Unknown
> Who chose thee for his shadow![8]

The reference to "Chaldean Shepherds" again echoes *Childe Harold*:

> Like the Chaldean, he could watch the Stars,
> Till he had peopled them with beings bright
> As their own beams …[9]

or

> Not vainly did the early Persian make
> His altar the high places and the peak
> Of earth-o'ergazing mountains, and thus take
> A fit and unwalled temple, there to seek
> The Spirit, in whose honour shrines are weak,
> Upreared of human hands.[10]

E.H.Coleridge (and, coincidentally, CPW) both refer, in their notes to *Childe Harold*, to Herodotus' description of the Persian religion at *Histories*, Book I 131, and to *The Excursion*, IV 671-6. But neither point out that the odd phrase "Chaldean Shepherds" from Manfred's address to the Sun (no-one believes the Babylonian astronomers literally to have observed and calculated the stars' courses while herding flocks) is also from *The Excursion*. Here is IV, 694-706:

> Chaldean Shepherds, ranging trackless fields,
> Beneath the conclave of unclouded skies
> Spread like a sea, in boundless solitude,
> Looked on the polar star, as on a guide
> And guardian of their course, that never closed
> His steadfast eye. The planetary Five
> With a submissive reverence they beheld;
> Watched, from the centre of their sleeping flocks,
> Those radiant Mercuries, that seemed to move
> Carrying through ether, in perpetual round,
> Decrees and resolutions of the Gods;
> And, by their aspects, signifying works
> Of dim futurity, to Man revealed.

So, even though Byron may have rejected the Wordsworthian concept of nature as comforter, and as extension of one's being, the less intimate awe in the face of nature expressed by such Wordsworth passages as this was still powerful enough – and powerfully enough supported by Byron's Alpine experiences – to continue echoing in *Manfred*, even when other Wordsworthian ideas had been rejected. Man, Manfred's (and Byron's) experience suggests, could no longer be the child of nature, but he might mature into being its Magus, or interpreter. Thomas Taylor had expressed a high opinion of the Chaldean astronomers:

> I know, indeed, that the Chaldeans, and Magi of the Indians, were the first that asserted the soul of man was immortal; and this opinion was embraced by some of the Greeks, and particularly by Plato the son of Ariston.[11]

8: *Manfred*, III ii 3-16.
9: *CHP* III, 14, 1-3.
10: *CHP* III, 91, 1-6.
11: Taylor's Pausanias, I 430.