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MARK PHILLIPSON

ONCE Lord Byron settled into an expatriate's life in Italy, the letters he sent back to his London publisher, John Murray, could be most unsettling. At the end of one such letter, dated 21 August 1817, Byron appended verse that signaled drastic and even disastrous change:

So altered since last year his pen is—
I think he's lost his wits at Venice—
Or drained his brains away as Stallion
To some dark-eyed & warm Italian.¹

At first blush, this passage seems to endorse the hoariest clichés about Byron's Venetian life: Mediterranean dissipation, compliant mistresses, a riotous and infamous poet. But we should not let biography distract us from the complication of such lines, their ironizing of a first-person voice. The passage is not confessional, after all, nor does it practice straightforward assertion. Byron here is adopting Murray's persona, and Murray himself may well have balked at reading—let alone saying—such things about his most profitable poet's wits. Even as the

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¹ George Gordon, Lord Byron, letter to John Murray, 21 August 1817, in *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols. (London: John Murray, 1973–94), V, 259. Further quotations from Byron's letters are from this edition, hereafter referred to in the text as *Letters and Journals*.

passage insists that Byron's writing has changed during the sixteen months since his departure from England, it does so with uncertain and shifting authority. Byron, Murray, and an expressive "I" seem to keep stepping in on each other, a scrambling of the exiled writer and his addressee epitomized by the verb "altered." As I detail in this essay, Byron's most concentrated portrayal of exile, the verse-romance *Mazeppa* (1819), is a full presentation of just such alteration, an almost schematic rendering of Byron's shift to a style that critics often term "conversational" and usually identify with the capstone of his career, *Don Juan* (1819–24). In *Mazeppa* Byron incorporates many elements of his jaunty ventriloquism of Murray, such as improvident romance, a wet horse, lost wits, dark eyes, and a foreign mistress. More important, he develops what is nascent in the "lost his wits at Venice" lines: a championing of alteration that performs what it endorses, highlighting, in the process, Byron's subjection to distant reception. It is no small irony that the poet's exile led him to open up his writing to the agency of a readership that he seemingly defied.

In order to set the stage for a discussion of *Mazeppa* and, more particularly, for the indication of an altered pen that so closely attended this pivotal poem's birth, we need to examine the context—ever more a determination in the "that there sort of writing" (as Byron once termed it) of his post-exile days.² In August 1817 Byron, by his own admission, was being "sharp" with his publisher, annoyed by Murray's silence regarding his latest manuscript, the closet drama *Manfred* (1817).³ He was also infuriated by the excision in press of its hero's final line: "You have destroyed the whole effect & moral of the poem by omitting the last line of Manfred's speaking," Byron had fired off to Murray on 12 August, "& why this was done I know not.—Why you persist in saying nothing of the thing itself I am

² See Byron, letter to Douglas Kinnaird, 26 October 1818, in *Letters and Journals*, VI, 232.

³ In a 20 July 1817 letter to Murray, Byron wrote: "I have not received a word from you of the fate of 'Manfred' or 'Tasso' which seems to me odd" (*Letters and Journals*, V, 254). And in a 7 August 1817 letter to Murray, he wrote: "You say nothing of Manfred, from which its failure may be inferred" (*Letters and Journals*, V, 254).

equally at a loss to conjecture. . . .”⁴ In a letter dated 21 August Byron dilates on such frustration: deploring vague complications hindering the sale of his properties, he complains that “all mysteries at such a distance are not merely tormenting—but mischievous . . . my whole life is past [*sic*] in conjectures of what people mean” (*Letters and Journals*, V, 257).⁵ Yet this letter shifts in tone as it ends, closing with couplets commissioned by Murray, or at least fulfilling his request for a politic rejection of material submitted for publication by Byron’s unhappy doctor, John Polidori. In fine satirical style, the couplets take inventory of the publisher’s recent disappointments, skewering luminaries such as Robert Southey, Madame de Staël, and August Wilhelm von Schlegel. “There’s Byron too—who once did better,” Byron-as-Murray writes of himself (*Letters and Journals*, V, 259). Then follow the lines about Byron’s altered pen and those lost wits at Venice. Placed within the context of the touchy correspondence of Byron and Murray in 1817, then, the announcement of an altered pen seems charged with sympathy and defiance in equal parts; any guess at a predominant tone would be, to echo Byron’s complaint about mysteries at a distance, conjecture.

At the least the lines seem a high-wire forecast of Murray’s resistance to work that could disrupt what Jerome Christensen has termed “a self-reflexive machine for producing poems and profit,” the “literary system called Byronism.”⁶ Christensen locates Byron’s disturbance of Murray’s publishing empire—and by extension a “profitable dominance over the market” that would exemplify “Britain’s hegemonic dream”—at a very

⁴ The line in question is Manfred’s acceptance of death: “Old man! ’tis not so difficult to die.” See *Manfred, a Dramatic Poem*, Act III, sc. 9, l. 151, in Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980–93), VI, 102. Further references are by act, scene, and line number and are included in the text; all further references to Byron’s verse are from this edition, hereafter referred to in the text as *Poetical Works*.

⁵ See also Byron, letter to Murray, 7 August 1817, wherein Byron complains about his half-sister Augusta Leigh’s “uncomfortable letter”: “it is very foolish to torment me with ambiguities at this distance” (*Letters and Journals*, V, 255).

⁶ *Lord Byron’s Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 147, 215.

specific point: “The empire conspicuously began to unravel with the publication of *Don Juan*, which, in apposition to Byronism, addressed a strong, ethical challenge to the murmurous complacencies of commercial society” (*Lord Byron’s Strength*, pp. 148, xx). In identifying *Don Juan* with an important shift in Byron’s verse, Christensen is hardly alone: from Byron’s day to ours, accounts of the poet’s career have divided it into two major stages, one dominated by the alienated Byronic Hero (brooding his way through a succession of Eastern Tales) and the other defined by the satirical, conversational style of *Don Juan*.⁷ The standard account is that Byron, anxious to “repel the charge of monotony & mannerism,” adopted a new course once he had settled into Italy—in his verse abandoning Eastern Tales, in his letters denouncing “a wrong revolutionary poetical system” that he would now spurn.⁸ Byron’s letters indicate that he was quite taken with John Hookham Frere’s ottava rima diversion *Whistlecraft* (1817–18), which drew on Italian satire and inspired the stylistic “experiment” of *Beppo* (1818).⁹ Critics have routinely read *Beppo*, in turn, as a warm-up to *Don Juan*: a first venture into ottava rima, and similarly digressive, Continental, funny. Jerome J. McGann, long a dominant voice in Byron criticism, has put it quite succinctly: “*Beppo* begat *Don Juan* and *Whistlecraft* begat *Beppo*.”¹⁰ So familiar is the story of Byron’s shift to a new, *Don Juan* style—and the designation of *Beppo* as the pivot point¹¹—that it comes as some surprise to find Byron

⁷ Andrew Elfenbein observes that in the nineteenth century this split preserved “the familiar eighteenth-century division between sentiment and satire” (*Byron and the Victorians* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995], p. 39).

⁸ See Byron, letter to Murray, 25 March 1818, in *Letters and Journals*, VI, 25; and Byron, letter to Murray, 15 September 1817, in *Letters and Journals*, V, 265. See also Byron, letter to Thomas Moore, 2 February 1818, in *Letters and Journals*, VI, 10.

⁹ In a 25 March 1818 letter, Byron wrote to Murray of *Beppo*: “The style is not English—it is Italian—*Berni* is the Original of *all*.—*Whistlecraft* was my immediate model. . . . but . . . *Berni* is the father of that kind of writing—which I think suits our language too very well—we shall see by the experiment” (*Letters and Journals*, VI, 24).

¹⁰ *Fiery Dust: Byron’s Poetic Development* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 277.

¹¹ See, for example McGann’s assessment of *Beppo* as “the pivotal work in Byron’s career as a poet” (Jerome J. McGann, “‘Mixed Company’: Byron’s *Beppo* and the Italian Medley,” in *Shelley and His Circle, 1773–1822: Volume 7*, ed. Donald H. Reiman [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986], p. 234).

insisting on alteration in his verse before he read *Whistlecraft* in September 1817; before he conceived of *Beppo* in early October; before he penned a single line of ottava rima.¹²

The biggest object of contention between Byron and Murray back in August was, in fact, the mysteriously trimmed *Manfred*. But does *Manfred* represent a substantial alteration of Byron's pen? The question is debatable: labeled a "dramatic poem," *Manfred* seems set apart from the verse-tales that had defined Byron's preexile success, and its treatment of incestuous desire replaces vaguer signals of transgression in the Eastern Tales. McGann, in fact, has pitched a reading of *Manfred* that positions this work on the road to *Don Juan*, highlighting wordplay that is the sign "of a deliberate and imperial artist who can as easily make as unmake his own worlds, and who can observe these acts in many tones and moods."¹³ Yet despite his odd discovery of "a kind of Monty Python stuttering" in *Manfred*, in the end McGann reads Byron's Faustian drama as resonating with the earlier Eastern Tales, conveying the romantically grim message that "aspirations are as doomed to failure—to defect and to spoliation—as human beings are doomed to die" ("Byron and Wordsworth," p. 187). In Christensen's terms, *Manfred* might represent a fresh "statement of the Byronic grammar" (*Lord Byron's Strength*, p. 152)—a new speculative stage in Byron's sequential productions (verse imagined for the first time, in fact, for the stage)—but it seems a questionable gateway to *Don Juan*, the "revolutionary text" (*Lord Byron's Strength*, p. 215) that would mark a true break with Murray's marketing strategy and his expectations, and, in the end, with Murray himself.

¹² The timing of *Beppo*'s composition is hard to pin down exactly, but Byron wrote this poem after he had received *Whistlecraft* from Murray, probably via Douglas Kinnaid, who visited Byron in September 1817. McGann deduces that *Beppo* was written in two nights, 9 and 10 October 1817. See McGann's commentary on *Beppo*, in *Poetical Works*, IV, 482–83. See also Leslie A. Marchand, *Byron: A Biography*, 3 vols. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), II, 709.

¹³ Jerome J. McGann, "Byron and Wordsworth," in his *Byron and Romanticism*, ed. James Soderholm (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), p. 185. McGann draws on Philip W. Martin's reading of *Manfred* "as a preconditioning exercise for *Don Juan*" (see Martin, *Byron: A Poet Before His Public* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982], pp. 116–17).

We can sense, then, in Byron's teasing description of "los[ing] his wits at Venice" an eagerness to seem altered—indeed, to represent alteration—that outpaces both *Beppo*, the work that critics have traditionally read as heralding profound change in his verse, and ill-fitting *Manfred*, a production that seems to fall in line with Byron's earlier verse, at least on the broad levels of tone and message. Could Byron have had something else brewing, a work under way in the summer of 1817 truly emblematic of an altered pen, one prefiguring the "revolution" in this poet's writing that critics routinely identify with *Don Juan*? In the pages that follow I suggest that *Mazeppa* is that work. Its lengthy composition was under way in April 1817, four months before Byron imagined Murray complaining about his altered pen and some six months before he penned *Beppo*. Since Byron continued to work on *Mazeppa* even as he wrote the first cantos of *Don Juan*, their contemporaneity should encourage us all the more to consider *Mazeppa* as a significant turn, a more sustained exploration of alteration in Byron's writing than the dashed-off *Beppo*.¹⁴ In contrast to *Don Juan*, *Mazeppa* is not interrupted by a digressive narrator, is not set in ottava rima, and does not tumble on in picaresque fashion to adventure after adventure. Yet it stages alteration on a variety of levels, systematically exploring the divergence of nonetheless connected entities, and it links this exploration to the condition so central to *Don Juan*: exile.

Both *Don Juan* and *Mazeppa* depict survival in exile. *Mazeppa*'s young hero, having been caught in that most *Don Juan*-like of situations—in *flagrante* with a nobleman's wife—is strapped naked onto a Ukrainian horse and sent off to die in

¹⁴ Byron began drafting *Mazeppa* in Venice in April 1817, as he was finishing corrections on Act III of *Manfred*, and completed it in September 1818, the same month that he finished the first canto of *Don Juan*. He sent *Mazeppa* to John Murray (along with proofs for *Don Juan*, Cantos I and II) on 11 November 1818, and the verse-tale was finally published on 28 June 1819 (8,000 copies), in a volume also containing "Venice: An Ode" and the piece of Byron's vampire novel entitled *A Fragment* (apparently included, despite Byron's wishes, to compete with Polidori's *The Vampyre*, confusingly published under Byron's name in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1819). The slow composition and crawl to publication of *Mazeppa* contrasts with *Beppo*'s speed. See McGann's commentary in *Poetical Works*, IV, 493; and note 12 above.

the wilderness. The maddened horse charges to its homeland even as it carries Mazeppa away from his; the beast dies just after staggering into his native land, and Mazeppa, now fastened to a dead animal, must be rescued (quite like young Don Juan) by a new mistress. Portraying Mazeppa's endurance in exile, then, Byron sets up a number of interactive oppositions. Man and horse, home and wilderness, life and death: enforced linkage invites continual reassessment of such pairings in this adventure, which continually shuttles between unlikely identifications and shocks of disparity. And the poem's most dynamically unsettled pairing, in the end, is that of narrator and audience: the same relationship at the core of *Don Juan's* conversational style.

Framing Mazeppa's tale of survival is the scene of its re-conjuring: a much older Mazeppa relates his story to an exhausted King Charles XII, in a different wilderness, in the midst of the king's humiliating defeat at the hands of the Russian army. This narrative framing ushers into *Mazeppa* yet more oppositions, such as past and present, romance and history, triumph and defeat—and, most fundamentally, speaker and auditor. Like all such pairings in *Mazeppa*, the speaker (serene, garrulous Mazeppa) and the auditor (defeated, stunned King Charles) seem bound together in tense relation. It has long puzzled readers of *Mazeppa* to discover, as Mazeppa wraps up his narration with an emphasis on endurance, that King Charles has nodded off sometime in the middle of the story: is this Byron's way of discounting Mazeppa's self-involved romance, or is it perhaps satirical treatment of insentient historical agents such as Charles? Tracking the persistence of contra-positioning in *Mazeppa* helps us to read the interaction of this pair as signifying more than the curt joke that seems to snap off the poem. Though the scenario of transmission may be complicated or even vexed, narration nonetheless persists in *Mazeppa*, anticipating a disjunctive reception—an anticipation that enlivens Byron's ventriloquizing of Murray in the “lost his wits at Venice” lines and, indeed, much of *Don Juan*.

It is well known that Mikhail M. Bakhtin singled out Byron's verse-narratives—and particularly *Don Juan*—as “novel-

ized” poems.¹⁵ Clearly, Byron cultivates dialogic interchange in *Don Juan*, highlighting interactive opposition and foregrounding “laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and . . . a semantic open-endedness” (*Dialogic Imagination*, p. 7), but *Mazeppa* is his most thorough exploration of the alteration that attends such play. Thus, befitting a pivotal work, *Mazeppa* seems at once representational and liminal. When it was finally published in 1819, a reviewer for the *Literary Gazette* struggled to assess the poem’s position in Byron’s career: it seemed “written in a humour between grave and gay, neither tragic nor comic, a mule and mongrel between Beppo and the Bride of Abydos [one of Byron’s early Eastern Tales].”¹⁶ Of course, something of a “mongrel” character is evident throughout Byron’s career—even in his earliest verse, which tends to yoke together disparate entities. *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage I and II* (1812) fractionally pairs a provocatively impassive protagonist and an insistently nostalgic narrator;¹⁷ *The Giaour* (1813), structured in “disjoined fragments,” depicts antagonists who, in contrast, prove provocatively similar: “. . . o’er him bends that foe with brow / As dark as this that bled below.”¹⁸ Such simultaneous binding and dividing is replayed by the *Literary Gazette* review of *Mazeppa*, in which Byron’s poems clump into a *Bride of Abydos* (1813) mode and an opposing *Beppo* mode and, thus divided, form a dichotomy known as his career—a dichotomy that, in turn, uneasily confronts the neither/nor production that is *Mazeppa*.

¹⁵ See M. M. Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel,” in his *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 5–6, 33.

¹⁶ [Anon.], rev. of *Mazeppa, a Poem*, by Lord Byron, *Literary Gazette*, 3 July 1819, p. 417; rpt. in *The Romantics Reviewed: Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers. Part B: Byron and Regency Society Poets*, ed. Donald H. Reiman, 5 vols. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1972), IV, 1,403.

¹⁷ For a full reading of this tension, see William H. Galperin, *The Return of the Visible in British Romanticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 244–70.

¹⁸ Byron, *The Giaour*, ll. 673–74, in *Poetical Works*, III, 61. McGann overrides fragmentation and insists that “*The Giaour* really has only one narrator, the ballad singer, who assumes different roles at different moments in his performance but who is himself the source of the work’s final consistency” (*Fiery Dust*, p. 144). This reading is part of McGann’s considerable effort in *Fiery Dust* to valorize “self expression” (p. 147) at the expense of discordant voices in Byron’s early verse.

But if divergent tension animates much of Byron's work (and, by extension, the characterization of that work), then *Mazeppa* testifies to a material difference ascribable to his relocation to Italy: it applies the familiar pattern of interactive opposition to audience relations. By distancing himself from his readers, Byron cultivated a conversational style explicitly predicated on interaction over boundaries, thereby highlighting the "addressivity" that Bakhtin, in his late essay "The Problem of Speech Genres," defines as the essence of utterance.¹⁹ Stepping into the position of exile that he had portrayed even in his earliest ventures in verse, Byron became much more explicitly focused on address, writing verse as if it were "like the rejoinder in a dialogue," occurring as "a link in the chain of speech communion" ("Speech Genres," p. 76).

A hallmark of the *Don Juan* style is an address that cultivates and anticipates audience reaction in a variety of ways: seduction, insistence, promise, surmise, insult, even deliberate outrage.²⁰ Such tactics are explored in the laboratory of interchange between narrator and distanced audience that is *Mazeppa*, a poem that in Bakhtinian terms illustrates that "the utterance is constructed while taking into account possible responsive reactions, for whose sake, in essence, it is actually created" ("Speech Genres," p. 94). Conjecture regarding those responses—a projection across "the absolute boundaries created by a change of speaking subjects" ("Speech Genres," p. 76)—became the core condition of Byron's cross-boundary address. The result was submission: long-distance publication all but ensured a rough passage, exposing his poems to alteration of all kinds, such as emendation, loss, mischaracterization, piracy, and unauthorized continuation. Such mangling of his authority proved frustrating, to be sure, and yet the repositioning of

¹⁹ See M. M. Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres" (1952–53), in his *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1986), p. 95.

²⁰ The most notable example is Byron's outrageous claim to have been bribed by William Roberts, conservative editor of the *British Review*. Roberts worked himself into a great lather over the assertion, as Byron knew he would. See *Don Juan*, Canto I, ll. 1,665–80, in *Poetical Works*, V, 76; and McGann's commentary in *Poetical Works*, V, 681. Further references to *Don Juan* are by canto and line number and are included in the text.

exile, as exemplified by *Mazeppa*, brought Byron into direct conversation with his readers and into fresh, dialogic relation to the “wrong revolutionary poetical system” that he affected to repudiate.



Setting aside for the moment *Mazeppa*'s problematic frame narrative, I want to plunge straight into the poem's central story—that of the young Polish page, Mazeppa, strapped onto that wild Ukrainian horse and sent off into the wilderness. In many ways the horse, frantic and driving and unsettled, embodies the power of Mazeppa's story and, in general, Byron's verse in this tale. This was an equation made early on in reviews:

The wild steed, which, in a manner incorporated with his rider, forms the subject of this poem, seems no unsuitable emblem of its author; who, when bearing along some lofty-minded, yet guilty and wretched sufferer, flies with unspeakable grace and rapidity beyond the bounds of all common observation, increasing in his headlong course the suffering of his hero and the sympathy of his readers, till they become, with merely witnessing his flight, as much agitated at first, and as weary and breathless at last, as the rider of the untamed steed.²¹

Though his attention darts from horse to author to hero to reader (and who can blame him? they seem unusually bound together), the *Edinburgh Magazine* reviewer, in his breathless way, here highlights the paradoxical quality of the steed itself: its powerful drive (“headlong course”) tied to unsettled contradiction (graceful yet agitating, redemptive yet harmful, engrossing yet beyond common bounds). But for a fuller sense of how this creature might represent Byron's writing at the time of his exiled address to England, we should attend to the persistently unsettled element that attends it: water.

Not only is *Mazeppa*'s wild horse often drenched, it is also constantly compared to water: a strange comparison in many

²¹ [Anon.], “Remarks on Lord Byron's Mazeppa,” *Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany*, n.s. 5 (1819), 148; rpt. in *Romantics Reviewed, Part B, V*, 2, 106.

ways, but one that brings the tale right into line with a surprising amount of horse-and-water combinations to be found galloping and swimming through Byron's writing during the first two years of his life as an exile. Byron's characterization to Murray of the Venetian alteration of his pen, we might remember, was set in terms of draining stallions. Directly after leaving England, Byron had played with a sublime admixture: a torrent cascading nine hundred feet down the Jungfrau had seemed, as he wrote in the 1816 "Alpine Journal" that he kept for his half-sister, "like the *tail* of a white horse streaming in the wind—such as it might be conceived would be that of the 'pale horse' on which *Death* is mounted in the Apocalypse."²² Byron could play equally with the combination of horse and water in a satirical mode: to him the folly of Austria's domination of Venice was symbolized by Vienna's delegation of a coach and four horses marching in triumph into St. Mark's Square ("how very very '*German* to the matter'").²³ Byron himself, in moments of distracted triumph, was likewise liable to forget that Venetian streets are canals.²⁴

On top of these epistolary flourishes, Byron's bracketing of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* Cantos III and IV (1816 and 1818, respectively), with horse-and-water blending gives this odd concatenation of entities unquestionable prominence: the continuation of *Childe Harold* was, after all, a showcasing of Byron's new voice once he had left England, explicitly marked as the sequel to his early, defining success. Near the beginning of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto III, we read "Once more upon the waters! yet once more!"; this elegiac regeneration echoing Milton's "Lycidas" (1637) gives way to a familiar combination:

²² Byron, "Alpine Journal" [to Augusta Leigh], 18 September 1816, in *Letters and Journals*, V, 101. This same sublime image appears in *Manfred*, as Manfred prepares to call up the Witch of the Alps (see Act II, sc. 2, ll. 1–8, in *Poetical Works*, IV, 70).

²³ This is a joke that, like many of his favorites, Byron repeated in his correspondence: see Byron, letter to Murray, 3 March 1817, in *Letters and Journals*, V, 179; and Byron, letter to John Cam Hobhouse, 7 March 1817, in *Letters and Journals*, V, 182.

²⁴ In a 19 December 1816 letter to Augusta Leigh, Byron wrote: "If you could have seen the gravity with which I was committing [Marianna Segati, one of Byron's favorite Venetian mistresses] to the waves—thinking all the time of something or other not to the purpose;—I always forget that the streets are canals—and was going to walk her over the water" (*Letters and Journals*, V, 145).

“And the waves bound beneath me as a steed / That knows his rider. Welcome, to their roar! / Swift be their guidance, where-soe’er it lead!”²⁵ Then at the climax of *Childe Harold*, Canto IV, Byron’s famous address to the ocean, we discover, yet once more, horses in the sea:

And I have loved thee, Ocean! and my joy
Of youthful sports was on thy breast to be
Borne, like thy bubbles, onward: from a boy
I wantoned with thy breakers—they to me
Were a delight; and if the freshening sea
Made them a terror—’twas a pleasing fear,
For I was as it were a child of thee,
And trusted to thy billows far and near,
And laid my hand upon thy mane—as I do here.
(*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Canto IV, ll. 1648–56)

Treating the ocean as if it sported a mane to caress, Byron here pulls together many of the moods of this flourishing combination in his concurrent letters: apocalyptic threat and promise (“a terror—’twas a pleasing fear”); displacement and survival (“bourne” and reborn, unlike those who sink “with bubbling groan” [Canto IV, l. 1610]); and, finally, a sportive trust and playful echoing (“joy . . . to be . . . a boy”) largely absent in his preexile work.

Mazeppa, in its vivid and extended depiction of exile, showcases a hero strapped onto this remarkably buoyant trope. The wild horse that carries young Mazeppa away is a creature of foam, beginning its mad dash “in the full foam of wrath and dread” and even at the end of its life still “feebly foaming.”²⁶ During the horse’s crazed plunging through a dangerous wilderness, water emanates not only from its mouth but also from its “foaming flank” (l. 415), a flank soaked all the more by Mazeppa’s own “sweat-drops [that] fell like rain / Upon the courser’s bristling mane” (ll. 444–45). It is no wonder that Mazeppa, riding helplessly and on the verge of death, feels

²⁵ Byron, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Canto III, ll. 10–13, in *Poetical Works*, II, 77. Further references are to canto and line number and are included in the text.

²⁶ Byron, *Mazeppa*, ll. 368, 628, in *Poetical Works*, IV, 185, 193. Further references are by line number and are included in the text.

himself to be “as on a plank at sea” (l. 553). This drenched horse’s single purpose is to return to its origin: the Ukraine, land of wild horses—which lies just over a tumultuous river. Desperate to reach its native fields, the horse plunges right into the torrent: “The wild horse swims the wilder stream” (l. 582), emerging with a good deal of the river still clinging to it (“With glossy skin, and dripping mane, / And reeling limbs, and reeking flank” [ll. 601–2]). At this emergence the horse, though it too is on the brink of death, has nonetheless reached its goal: a land overrun by a flood of Ukrainian horses—“A thousand horse, the wild, the free, / Like waves that follow o’er the sea” (ll. 684–85). Vaporous to the last, Mazeppa’s horse sinks “with gasps and glazing eyes” to its death, while the sea of approaching wild horses, sensing the human cargo strapped to its back, begins “plunging back with sudden bound”; these horses then “foam—neigh—swerve aside” (ll. 692, 701, 706).

Water, then, is intrinsic to the portrait of the horse in *Mazeppa*, though not in a stable way. Using variation that mimics fluidity even as he explores the correspondence of water with equine movement, Byron employs a number of imagistic and metaphorical combinations of the two entities. Mazeppa’s horse, in its efforts, gushes sweat as it plunges through water—the element laps it within and without. Yet at times, quite apart from its surroundings, the creature seems to embody a property of water itself, as do its brethren, grouped up into a sea. Even so, the wild river, as the gateway to this horse’s native land, all but overwhelms the reeling beast, which emerges onto land only to die—leaving Mazeppa “rebaptized” (l. 589), yet suddenly alone. In short, no easy equation governs this imagistic interplay. Instead, we can say of horse and water what Leigh Hunt observed of the contrasting tonal modes of *Don Juan*: the entities “are mingled together and push one another about in a strange way.”²⁷



Mazeppa, carried into exile, lives on; the horse that has borne him, having reached its homeland, ex-

²⁷ [Hunt], rev. of *Don Juan*, Cantos I and II, *The Examiner*, 31 October 1819, p. 700.

pires. Even after this divergent fate, Mazeppa remains bound to the horse, “the dying on the dead!” (l. 715). This arresting formula highlights another unwieldy partnership in *Mazeppa*: lashed onto each other, man and beast form a relationship every bit as improbable as horse and water, one that is quite similarly unsettled and persistent. Once the Ukrainian horse dies, the young man on its back carries on in exile, while still harboring a nostalgia that recalls the creature’s charge back to its origins. If the horse had been obsessed with swimming home—similar to a later swimmer in Byron’s verse, Jacobo in *The Two Foscari* (1821)²⁸—then its accidental and most unwilling passenger, carried into exile, survives to perpetuate “the speed of thought . . . in [its] limbs” (ll. 361–62). Even after he has outlived his ordeal and avenged it, even after he has found success in exile, Mazeppa is most liable to speed his thoughts homeward.

From the beginning of Mazeppa’s wild ride, the interaction of horse and man is punishing: the two chafe against each other helplessly and endlessly. Yet as torturously yoked as the errant page and the maddened steed may be, they do share in a general sense the instinct for liberty, and as partners in travel through a nightmarish, wolf-patrolled forest, the two are equally vulnerable through a succession of dangers. Strangely bound, both struggle through a wilderness against their will, determined to outlive the ordeal and return home: “For danger levels man and brute, / And all are fellows in their need” (ll. 51–52). Then again, the sheer agony of their enforced partnership—the way that every motion that Mazeppa makes to free his “swoln limbs from their agony” serves to spur the horse’s “fury and affright” (ll. 454–55)—suggests an association that is as untenable as it may be, in some ways, fitting.

To ignore *Mazeppa*’s uniquely unsettled association of animal and human is to invite the flat allegorizing that some of Byron’s contemporary critics slapped onto the tale—critics who read this adventure as a particularly physical reprise of the Byronic Hero’s standard torment. These critics were quick to em-

²⁸ See Jacopo Foscari’s description of tide-skimming in *The Two Foscari*, Act I, sc. 1, in *Poetical Works*, VI, 131–46.

phasize the corporeality of Mazeppa's adulterous transgression and subsequent endurance: perhaps this hero, whose fall and perseverance were attributable to physical registers like sex and stamina, was in fact of the same order as the horse under him. The ruinous flaws and mysterious power of the Byronic Hero, familiar to hundreds of thousands of readers, might then resolve itself to be little more than physical debauch and agony. A reviewer in the *Edinburgh Monthly Review* asked:

... Upon what a theme has Lord Byron lavished his genius here? Have even *his* descriptions exhausted all the throes and anguish of *mind*, that he must now stoop to be the painter of mere "corporal sufferance?" Is a human being rendered a fit theme for poetry, because in "nature's nakedness" he is lacerated with thongs—and pining with thirst and famine, and sinking under mere bodily exhaustion?²⁹

The adulterous basis of Mazeppa's transgression, according to a reviewer writing in the *Monthly Magazine*, served all the more to define his punishment as a particularly extravagant example of the excesses of the flesh, or of "those libertine frailties on which [Byron] so delights to expatiate." This reader professed himself loath to follow the adventures of such a sense-bound hero, to "sympathize with a class of persons, with whom we should be ashamed to acknowledge any communion of mind."³⁰

Later readings of the poem, while dispensing with such disapprobation, have preserved the simple association between Mazeppa's endurance and animal nature. Graham Hough's mid-twentieth-century interpretation is a good example:

Mazeppa has sinned through passion; he is given a punishment that fits the crime—delivered over to a force more wild and tameless than himself; his own will and power of control is completely suspended. His wild horse carries him to the land of the

²⁹ [Anon.], rev. of *Mazeppa; a Poem*, by Lord Byron, *Edinburgh Monthly Review*, 2 (1819), 216; rpt. in *Romantics Reviewed, Part B*, II, 790.

³⁰ [Anon.], "New Books Published in July" (rev. of *Don Juan*, Cantos I and II), *Monthly Magazine*, 48 (1819), 57; rpt. in *Romantics Reviewed, Part B*, IV, 1,673.

wild horses—the realm that is to say where the untamed passions are at home.³¹

Hough's reading is convincing up to a point, as indeed "wildness" in a broad sense seems to work in Byron's tale as an "instrument of redemption" (*Image and Experience*, p. 140). Yet what gets suppressed in this reading is the instinctive rejection of Mazeppa by wild horses once he is carried into their midst, as well as their frightened retreat once they perceive that their expiring brother is burdened with a very different creature on its back: they "backward to the forest fly, / By instinct, from a human eye" (ll. 707–8). Despite all previous analogy, the force of this aversion reminds us that horses and humans are distinct indeed; cross-species linkage based on attributes such as sexuality or passion remains tenuous, unstable. Even in the land of wild horses, it takes a human gaze (that of the Cossack maid) to meet Mazeppa's—and to rescue him from the ordeal of being tied to a putrefying corpse.

The efforts by critics to reduce Mazeppa's passion to animal instinct ignore his constant attention to distinction: this exiled survivor's tendency to stand apart from passion, however bound to it he may be, and assess difference. Mazeppa describes Theresa, the love object who occasions his exile and who haunts him for the rest of his life, with almost painterly detachment:

She had the Asiatic eye,
Such as our Turkish neighbourhood
Hath mingled with our Polish blood,
Dark as above us is the sky;
But through it stole a tender light,
Like the first moonrise at midnight. . . .
(ll. 208–13)

Theresa, above all else, occasions fantasies of intermixture. This description, formulated by Mazeppa in retrospect, blends not only East and West, dark and light; it even mixes in a much

³¹ Graham Hough, *Image and Experience: Studies in a Literary Revolution* (London: Duckworth and Co., 1960), p. 139.

different night to resonate with the description of the past. The tracking of dichotomous beauty does not stop there: Theresa's brow, in marked contrast to her nightscape eye, is "like a midsummer lake, / Transparent with the sun therein" (ll. 220–21)—yet more admixtures of time and elements. Theresa's harmonious minglings are a stark contrast to Manfred's before her:

. . . he
 Hath all the energy which would have made
 A goodly frame of glorious elements,
 Had they been wisely mingled; as it is,
 It is an awful chaos—light and darkness—
 And mind and dust—and passions and pure thoughts,
 Mix'd, and contending without end or order,
 All dormant or destructive. . . .

(*Manfred*, Act III, sc. 2, ll. 160–67)

Such a destructive vortex seems a world apart from the interplay in *Mazeppa*, exemplified by Theresa's persistently alluring alteration of oppositions. Many years later Mazeppa finds himself still shuttling between her mixed charms, still catching at the blending of presence and absence contained in her evocation. "I loved her then," Mazeppa recalls, juggling tenses, "—I love her still; / And such as I am, love indeed / In fierce extremes . . ." (*Mazeppa*, ll. 225–27).

The fact that his devotion is triggered not by simple gratification, but rather by the fluctuating assessments of Theresa's attributes and even her fitful presence, demonstrates Mazeppa's commitment to alteration even in the throes of passion. The mutual stimulation of distinguished registers—and not simple enthrallment to corporeal abandon—marks Mazeppa's transgressive desire, subsequent punishment, and compensatory memory. It seems less accurate to read the horse as the emblem of Mazeppa's passion than to regard Mazeppa-on-the-horse as the full representation of that impulse: helplessly bound to desire, carried back in his thoughts to the past and his homeland, yet still aloof, still humanly conscious of distinction. In Mazeppa's bondage, man and animal form a kind of centaur. Just as the centaur traditionally embodies an uneasily

coexisting pair of attributes, lust and nobility,³² so too is Mazeppa lashed to the horse as punishment for adultery, while at the same time carried toward a purifying baptism. In Byron's morally ambivalent depiction of a centaur, we are once more aware of the interaction of disparate elements, uneasily yet inexorably bound together in transport.



In an appraisal of *Mazeppa*, a reviewer for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (probably John Wilson) sensed something of “the fiery flow of Walter Scott's chivalrous narrative”; but, at the same time, the reviewer also took note of “the heroic unthinking coldness of the royal madman to whom [Mazeppa] speaks.”³³ Fire and ice—the strangest and most importantly unsettled pairing in Byron's poem emerges in its narrative frame: an impassioned raconteur and his seemingly indifferent auditor. Now allied with King Charles XII and on the run with him after the disastrous Battle of Poltava, a much older Mazeppa relates his long-past adventure amid circumstances that echo its peril yet seem also to render Mazeppa's example of endurance superfluous. Scrambling through another wilderness for very different reasons, with the Russian Army bearing down on him with all of the inexorability of historical fact, Charles seems to have little reason to attend to Mazeppa's Romantic travails. Indeed, as Mazeppa wraps up his tale, the gap between these men expands quite beyond a yawn; we learn, in fact, that Charles “had been an hour asleep” (l. 869). This strange ending has always unsettled readings of *Mazeppa*: it seems a joke (yet a rather weak one), draining Mazeppa's narrative—and any model of endurance it might suggest—of significance.

³² Gertrude Jobes writes that the centaur is “figuratively a person or thing viewed as the incongruous union of diverse forces” (*Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore, and Symbols* [New York: Scarecrow Press, 1961], p. 303). Byron's acid reference to marriage in *Don Juan* (“that moral centaur, man and wife” [Canto V, l. 1,264]) is an interesting counterpoint to Mazeppa's more solitary duality.

³³ [Anon.], rev. of *Mazeppa, a Poem*, by Lord Byron, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 5 (1819), 430, 429; rpt. in *Romantics Reviewed, Part B*, I, 140, 139.

William H. Marshall, in a survey of Byron's work, sets out perhaps the most extensive case for reading Mazeppa's narration to Charles as so much incoherent garrulousness. For Marshall "the essential question of the poem" is "whether experience can yield an organized moral view of the universe such as Mazeppa has appeared to develop."³⁴ Cracks in *Mazeppa's* framework are especially evident to Marshall during awkward correlations in the poem between past and present, such as the moment when Mazeppa interrupts the description of his youthful infatuation with Theresa: "I watch'd her as a sentinel, / (May ours this dark night watch as well!)" (ll. 262–63). How can gazing into a lover's eyes be bound with a parenthetical and perfunctory "as well" to vigilance against surrounding enemies during a full-bore rout? For Marshall *Mazeppa's* soporific ending is final evidence that Byron is portraying an "unconscious travesty" of Romantic redemption stories, featuring "sin but no atonement, rescue but no salvation, recollection but no selfless understanding" (*Structure*, p. 123).³⁵ Mazeppa, according to Marshall's reading, delivers a superficial, involuted homily on the sufficiency of the self on the very eve of general doom. He seems as blindly egotistical as Milton's Satan, vaunting aloud amid a fallen army.

Yet this expectation of "selfless understanding" is generated by Marshall, not by anything in the poem. Charles does not ask for anything like a model of salvation; he merely wonders, in a moment of rare repose, how Mazeppa has developed such a close communion with horses. "Ill betide / The school wherein I learn'd to ride!" Mazeppa demurs (ll. 107–8), yet the king insists on narration:

. . . 'I request,'
Said Sweden's monarch, 'thou wilt tell
This tale of thine, and I may reap,
Perchance, from this the boon of sleep,

³⁴ William H. Marshall, *The Structure of Byron's Major Poems* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1962), p. 121.

³⁵ Robert F. Gleckner echoes Marshall's censure when he calls the contrast between Mazeppa's embrace of revenge and his conflicting faith in humanistic love "evident confusion" (see Gleckner, *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1967], p. 308).

For at this moment from my eyes
The hope of present slumber flies.'

(ll. 119–24)

This offhand commission opens new interpretive possibilities: Charles's drop-off into slumber is more than an undermining of Mazeppa's egotistical rambling, a kind of narcoleptic critique; it is, demonstrably, a desired end.

The conclusion of *Mazeppa*, by these lights, portrays a specific and (given the situation) quite practical application of narration. In soliciting someone else's tale rather than an allegorical recasting of his present situation, Charles has cultivated (knowingly or not) a critical dialogue, built on contraposition that Marshall's metaphoric expectations do not take into account. Charles invites Mazeppa to stock his tale with as much of himself as he might want, to fashion his own understanding of the unexpected outcomes of his desire independent of that understanding's applicability to the world of his auditor. How can Mazeppa's wild ride apply to the king, if Charles's bloodthirsty ambition in no way relates to the sensual paradise from which Mazeppa has been expelled? That paradise, represented by the court of Warsaw, had been presided over by a king who could not have been more different from the famously virginal Charles, as Mazeppa pointedly remarks:

A learned monarch, faith! was he,
And most unlike your majesty:
He made no wars, and did not gain
New realms to lose them back again;
.
He loved the muses and the sex. . . .

(ll. 131–34, 138)

Casimir's court, then, consisted of nothing known to the reeling, overextended, fiercely chaste warrior who commissions its evocation—who in fact licenses the provocation of this unflattering comparison. With the request for Mazeppa's story, Charles releases the hetman from his first offer to act as a "sentinel" for the exhausted army (l. 118), allowing him instead to turn his eye inward: to transform his hard-won and evident in-

dependence from the pressure of immediate surroundings into substantial liberties, extending into implicit ridicule of his own partner in present peril.

The narration of personal travails thus lends to Mazeppa a certain imperviousness from the bloodstained ruin of Charles's ambition. The two men, linked in danger, nevertheless occupy worlds almost as distinct as human and animal, or animal and element. Mazeppa's narrative establishes a wavering communion across such differences, based on surprising, tenuous correlations to the context of its performance. We can compare Charles's drop-off into sleep, once he is dunked into Mazeppa's flowing narrative, to the baptism capping off Mazeppa's wild ride. The king, having commissioned the vehicle of the hetman's story, has been at least temporarily cleansed of the misery of "Ambition in his humbled hour" (l. 21) and carried to a state of free unconsciousness—presumably akin to the "solitary world" (l. 654) where Mazeppa was carried by his dying wild horse (where there was "No sign of travel—none of toil; / The very air was mute" [ll. 660–61]). In that sense the king lifts off from a driving, sensuous, nostalgic, and impervious force, an expiring and self-contained narration—much as Mazeppa once outlived the dead horse. Charles has used his vassal for his own purposes, and he moves on into his own temporary freedom.

But if Charles has ridden Mazeppa's tale to a state of relief, then the inverse is also true: Mazeppa, so much more attuned to the dynamics of loss and endurance, outlasts the comparatively limited consciousness of the king to which he is tied, much as he long ago outlasted the "noble steed" (l. 359) that, like Charles, had one driving ambition and was "struggling fiercely, but in vain" (l. 367). Single-mindedness is no match for the vagaries of narrative, and though Charles is released into the simple relief of sleep, he misses the interplay of hope and irony coursing through Mazeppa's conclusion:

What mortal his own doom may guess?—
 Let none despond, let none despair!
 To-morrow the Borysthenes
 May see our coursers graze at ease
 Upon his Turkish bank,—and never

Had I such welcome for a river
As I shall yield when safely there.

(ll. 853–59)

Mazeppa's story has taken him to a place where the hope for a replication of his personal endurance on a broad, even historical, level crowds in, much like that troop of wild horses that once "Came thickly thundering on, / As if our faint approach to meet" (ll. 686–87). And yet an irreducibly personal element to Mazeppa's story remains, driving away the prospect of communal salvation—much as his body, bound to the back of the dead horse, caused that troop to stop, reverse, and plunge away. The ironic consciousness of needing yet one more river crossing, yet one more bank of relief, is yoked to Mazeppa's hope, betraying it even while lending it increased urgency. The fact that the defeat at Poltava would spell doom for both someone like Charles and someone like Mazeppa only further animates individual experience, so improbably tied onto history's inexorable motion.

This awkward interplay of Mazeppa and Charles is, of course, a reflection of this "mongrel" tale's mongrel genre: the historical verse-romance. Byron prefaced his romance with three paragraphs of direct quotation from Voltaire's *Histoire de Charles XII* (1731), suggesting both that the poem at hand has broad historical resonance and that history is attended by the corruptions of Romantic legend. In the *Histoire* Voltaire had outlined a molestation of history that interested Byron. As soon as Voltaire interrupts his narration of the Battle of Poltava to fill in the legend of Mazeppa's exile, all certainty in Charles's own character seems to drop away: the king becomes suspicious of Mazeppa's fidelity, uncertain of his own route, and wounded in the heel. Voltaire is careful to emphasize that the night in the woods surrounded by Russian troops, when Charles was most dependent on Mazeppa for survival (the moment that Byron later selected for the framework of his poem), was a moment when the king was in a fever, "not himself."³⁶ It is as if the

³⁶ [François-Marie-Arouet de] Voltaire, *Lion of the North: Charles XII of Sweden*, trans. M.F.O. Jenkins (Cranbury, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press and Associated Univ. Presses, 1981), p. 135.

ambitious warrior, who had from childhood trained himself to disdain the lures of women and wine, who strove to rise above the level of personal revenge, who had in fact "lived without frailties" (*Lion of the North*, p. 238), cannot survive as a subject of history, once he is tarnished with a confederate so vividly marked by just such frailties.

Byron's references to Voltaire, in both letters and verse, exhibit a certain amount of uneasiness with the French writer's fidelity to history, suggesting that Byron regarded Mazeppa's corruption of the *Histoire* as endemic: to base a historical romance on this *Histoire* was, for Byron, to dilate on freedoms, sometimes negatively regarded as inaccuracies, already complicating Voltaire's way of representing the actual events of the past. In this sense the French satirist is an important connection between *Mazeppa's* unsettled oppositions and *Don Juan's* freedoms. In 1817 Byron weighed himself down in Venice with a ninety-two-volume set of Voltaire's works, and it was from this set that he plucked out his citations of Mazeppa's adventures. Writing to Hobhouse on 31 March 1817, Byron emphasized ambivalence: "[Voltaire] is delightful but dreadfully inaccurate frequently" (*Letters and Journals*, V, 199). On 14 April, again to Hobhouse, Byron emphasized this dual reaction: "I have read a good deal of Voltaire lately . . . every now and then there is something to kill me with laughing—what I dislike is his extreme inaccuracy" (*Letters and Journals*, V, 215). At the same time, similarly exiled, Byron was happy to tip his hat to Voltaire. He specifically cited Voltaire while defending the liberties of *Don Juan* (whose hero is surely descended from *Candide*) in the letter to Hobhouse, dated 11 November 1818, announcing that Byron had sent to London "an 'Oeuvre' of 'Poeshie'": the first two cantos of *Don Juan*, along with *Mazeppa*.³⁷ Voltaire's *Histoire*, a fitting source for *Mazeppa*, sits on the fault line of delightful inaccuracy and the imperatives of history—setting up romance and history as dynamically opposed entities and

³⁷ See Byron, letter to Hobhouse, 11 November 1818, in *Letters and Journals*, VI, 76–77. Byron also defended *Don Juan* by citing Voltaire in a 19 January 1819 letter to both Hobhouse and Kinnaird: "is there anything in *Don Juan* so strong as in Ariosto—or Voltaire—or Chaucer?" (*Letters and Journals*, VI, 91).

marking the agents of these two realms, *Mazeppa* and Charles XII, as provocative alterations of each other.



Another source of *Mazeppa*, however, gets no explicit citation. Though Byron had recently indicated a debt to Samuel Taylor Coleridge—*The Siege of Corinth* (1816) was published with Byron's acknowledgment of "a close, though unintentional, resemblance" to a few lines in *Christabel*³⁸—*Mazeppa's* resemblance to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798, 1817) is a much more substantial interaction with the elder poet, and indeed with the literary expectations that Byron seemed to scorn in exile. Tracking the ways that *Mazeppa* mimics and clashes against the *Ancient Mariner*, we find Byron staging, with striking prescience, a "theater for the conflicts and interactions of the ideologies of Romanticism" (to cite Jerome McGann's characterization of historical method).³⁹ While it may be too much to claim that *Mazeppa* fully launches "the exploration of alterities" ("Rethinking Romanticism," p. 242) that McGann values in current Romantic studies, Byron certainly predicted an enduring critical challenge: that of defining his place within (or outside of) Romanticism. The task of relating Byron to a field of study that McGann describes as "a specialized theoretical view derived from a Kantian/Coleridgean line of thought" ("Rethinking Romanticism," p. 237) has given rise to a durable debate, one that is unsettling to Byronists yet appropriate for a poet who declared himself "born for opposition" (*Don Juan*, Canto XV, l. 176). This debate operates, if

³⁸ For Byron's acknowledgment in a textual note of "a close, though unintentional, resemblance in these twelve lines" (in *The Siege of Corinth*, ll. 476–87) to Coleridge's "wild and singularly original and beautiful poem," see McGann's commentary in *Poetical Works*, III, 486, n. 476.

³⁹ See McGann, "Rethinking Romanticism," in *Byron and Romanticism*, p. 240. It is particularly interesting that McGann caps off his book *The Romantic Ideology* with a reading of Byron that foregrounds his own alteration: "my initial enthusiasm for Byron's self-representations misled my critical judgment" (Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983], p. 137).

nothing else, as the prod for continual revisitation of Byron's work.⁴⁰

In order to assess *Mazeppa* as charting Byron's relationship to a movement that he identified more or less with Coleridge, it will help to revisit those watery horses; here they are again, attending Byron's complicated repositioning of himself in regards to a "poetical system" that, from the vantage of exile, he seemed to repudiate. In a 2 February 1817 missal to Thomas Moore, his literary ally and designated biographer, Byron referred again to a movement that he had called, in the 15 September 1817 letter to Murray, the "wrong revolutionary poetical system." Particularly striking about the reiteration of this idea to Moore is an inclusivity that persists even as Byron regrets the erroneous turn taken by "all (Lakers included)": Byron himself (or Moore, for that matter) had erred as well. Assessing the worth of "present Poesy," Byron ambivalently maintains that "us youth' were on a wrong tack." "But," he adds, "I never did say that we did not sail well." Here follows an abrupt recasting of imagery: "The next generation (from the quantity and facility of imitation) will tumble and break their necks off our Pegasus, who runs away with us" (*Letters and Journals*, VI, 10). What begins as a standard sailing metaphor shifts into a reference to the mythical, airborne horse: "Talking of horses," Byron continues, again corralling them toward water, ". . . I not only get a row in my gondola, but a spanking gallop of some miles daily along a firm and solitary beach" (*Letters and Journals*, VI, 10). Even if we had not noticed the persistent alterations attending the watery horse in Byron's writings, we might sense something unsettled here: Byron both includes

⁴⁰ Standout moments in the last fifty years include M. H. Abrams sidelining Byron when he writes in his *Natural Supernaturalism*: "Byron I omit altogether, not because I think him a lesser poet than the others but because in his greatest work he speaks with an ironic counter-voice and deliberately opens a satirical perspective on the vatic stance of his Romantic contemporaries" (Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* [New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1971], p. 13). Another such moment is McGann's contradictory situating of Byron at the heart of (an ideologically limited) Romanticism: "Like all Romantic poetry, Byron's work is deeply self-critical, but only as a drama in which its own illusions must be suffered" (*The Romantic Ideology*, p. 138).

and excludes himself with that “*all* (Lakers included)”; his statements enact identification and repudiation all at once.

It is an ambivalence that, in the end, characterizes the interaction of Byron and Coleridge: a relationship of considerable importance to both poets during Byron’s last year in England, played out in public alongside the more scandalous treatment of Lady Byron. The young lord’s providently timed championing of Coleridge in 1815 is a familiar story,⁴¹ one whose highlights include Byron’s intercession with Murray finally to publish seminal work such as “Kubla Khan” (1816) and *Christabel*, his attendance at Coleridge’s lectures, his generous bestowal of £100, and his efforts to stage Coleridge’s *Remorse* at Drury Lane. These acts are evidence of Byron’s deep (and rare) admiration for a Laker Poet; in an 18 October 1815 letter to Coleridge, he called *Christabel* “the wildest & finest I ever heard in that kind of composition. . . . I do not know that even ‘Love’ or the ‘Ancient Mariner’ are so impressive—& to me there are few things in our tongue beyond these two productions” (*Letters and Journals*, IV, 318–19). Byron’s widely quoted endorsement of Coleridge’s “wild and singularly original and beautiful poem” was a mixed blessing for the elder poet, binding *Christabel* to Byron’s notoriety and touching off censure such as this from Thomas Moore in the *Edinburgh Review*:

Great as the noble bard’s merits undoubtedly are in poetry, some of his latest *publications* dispose us to distrust his authority, where the question is what ought to meet the public eye. . . . It seems now-a-days to be the practice of that once irritable race [i.e., poets] to laud each other without bounds; and one can hardly avoid suspecting, that what is thus lavishly advanced may be laid out with a view to being repaid with interest.⁴²

Byron’s subsequent broadsides against Coleridge in *Don Juan*—“like a hawk encumber’d with his hood” (Dedication, l. 14), a turncoat applying his “flighty pen” to the Tory *Morning Post* (Canto III, l. 837), “drunk” (Canto I, l. 1636)—have ob-

⁴¹ For a succinct summary of the two poets’ involvement during Byron’s last year in England, see Walter Jackson Bate, *Coleridge* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 138–40.

⁴² [Thomas Moore], rev. of *Christabel; Kubla Khan, a Vision; The Pains of Sleep*, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Edinburgh Review*, 27 (1816), 58–59.

scured the depth (and even the persistence) of Coleridge's influence on the younger poet. Byron's dramatic recitation of *Christabel* to the Shelleys and others at Diodati, weeks after he left England in 1816, is a worn touchstone of Romanticism: an intragenerational (and cross-channel) conjuring long credited as spurring, among other things, that second-generation staple, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). But it is not often noted that long after Byron had denounced the timid refusal of Lakers to "change [their] lakes for ocean" (*Don Juan*, Dedication, l. 40), he was still conjuring up Coleridgean verse, especially when pondering spiritual exile. A rambling entry in Byron's "Detached Thoughts," begun in Ravenna in 1821, traces his alienation all the way back to 1804:

What a strange thing is life and man! were I to present myself at the door of the house where my daughter now is—the door would be shut in my face. . . . the hopeless attachment to M[ary] C[haworth] began—and continued (though sedulously concealed) *very* early in my teens—& so upwards—for a time.—*This* threw me out again 'alone on a wide—wide sea'.—In the year 1804—I recollect meeting my Sister at General Harcourt's in Portland Place.—I was then *one thing* and *as* she had always till then found me.—When we met again in 1805—(she tells me since) that my temper and disposition were so completely altered that I was hardly to be recognized.—I was not then sensible of the change—but I can believe it—and account for it.⁴³

Byron's swirling meditation on forbidden love, disconnection from progeny, and altered appearance resonates, coincidentally enough, with Coleridge's own concerns in 1804 and 1805.⁴⁴ But of more specific import is Byron's recourse to *The*

⁴³ Byron, "Detached Thoughts, October 15, 1821–May 18, 1822," in *Letters and Journals*, IX, 24–25.

⁴⁴ For background on Coleridge's guilt during this period about Sara Hutchinson (his "Asra") and the abandonment of his children and wife, Sara Coleridge, as well as his "imaginative and imaginary Love" in childhood for Mary Evans, see Richard Holmes's *Coleridge: Darker Reflections, 1804–1834* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), pp. 1–83; and Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, et al., 4 vols. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957–90), II, entry 2,398. Dorothy Wordsworth's appraisal of Coleridge after he had drifted in the Mediterranean for three years foreshadows Byron's recollection of his own alteration: "never never did I feel such a shock as at first sight of him. . . . He is utterly changed" (Dorothy Wordsworth, letter to Catherine Clarkson, 5–6 November 1806, in *The Letters of William*

Rime of the Ancient Mariner in 1821 to depict extreme isolation, well after his disenchantment with Coleridge as a person (“He is a shabby fellow,” Byron had written to Murray on 12 October 1817, “and I wash my hands of, and after him” [*Letters and Journals*, V, 267]). It seems fair to say that long after Byron’s disappointment with Coleridge’s conduct (and after his savage attack on the “continued fusion” of Lakers in the Dedication to *Don Juan* [l. 36]), when Byron seeks to depict expulsion and endurance, “Coleridge hath the sway” (*Don Juan*, Canto XI, l. 469).⁴⁵

This really is not too surprising: Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner* was, then as now, a prominent model of spiritual travail endured far afield from “mine own countree.”⁴⁶ Reissued in the 1817 collection *Sibylline Leaves* with the addition of a gloss, the *Rime*, an established and yet revised poetic model for the depiction of isolated endurance, was freshly in the public eye as Byron penned *Mazeppa*. Indeed, *Mazeppa*’s solitary adventure recalls and frequently even mimics Coleridge’s poem. Eschewing the *Ancient Mariner*’s supernatural interventions, Byron nonetheless draws on Coleridge’s precedent for a variety of descriptions, with a frequency that becomes evident if we lay the *Ancient Mariner* and *Mazeppa* side-by-side. For example, both poems track indifferent celestial bodies:

<i>Ancient Mariner</i>	<i>Mazeppa</i>
The sun now rose upon the right.	As rose the moon upon my right.
(l. 83)	(l. 613)

Similarly, both poems describe stifled cries as mysterious entities advance:

and *Dorothy Wordsworth*, 2d ed., ed. Ernest de Selincourt, revised Mary Moorman, et al., 8 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967–93], II, 86).

⁴⁵ William Hazlitt’s typically acidic appraisal of Coleridge’s *Lay Sermons*, which appeared in the *Examiner* in the fall of 1816, associated Coleridge with the same mix of imagery that Byron would soon draw on for *Mazeppa*: “[Coleridge’s] mind is in a constant estate of flux and reflux: he is like the Sea-horse in the Ocean” ([Hazlitt], rev. of *A Lay Sermon on the Distresses of the Country*, by S. T. Coleridge, *The Examiner*, 8 September 1816, p. 571).

⁴⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1817 text), in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. H. J. Jackson (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), p. 61; l. 467. Further references are to this edition and are included in the text.

BYRON'S MAZEPPA

319

Ancient Mariner

It plunged and tacked and
veered.
With throats unslaked, with
black lips baked,
We could nor laugh nor wail;
Through utter drought all dumb
we stood!

(ll. 156-59)

Mazeppa

In one vast squadron they
advance!
I strove to cry—my lips were
dumb.
The steeds rush on in plunging
pride. . . .

(ll. 674-76)

Byron cribbs from Coleridge a swoon and an uncertain
awakening:

Ancient Mariner

How long in that same fit I lay,
I have not to declare.

(ll. 393-94)

Mazeppa

How many hours of night
or day
In those suspended pangs I lay,
I could not tell.

(ll. 597-99)

Both poems also couch intimations of rescue in questions:

Ancient Mariner

Oh! dream of joy! is this indeed
The light-house top I see?
Is this the hill? is this the kirk?
Is this mine own countree?

(ll. 464-67)

Mazeppa

'I woke—Where was I?—
Do I see
A human face look down on me?
And doth a roof above
me close?
Do these limbs on a couch
repose?'

(ll. 796-99)

As Mazeppa is strapped to a wild horse, his endurance (like the Mariner's) is predicated on submission to vexed nature's every move, and culminates in an exhausted self-identification with one of God's animals: still tied to the expired horse, Mazeppa speaks of himself as "The dying on the dead!" (l. 715) and expects "to mingle there our clay" (l. 765). Coleridge's Mariner blesses the snakes as they track through the moonlit water, and is subsequently baptized by a refreshing rainstorm; in similar but compressed fashion, Byron's Mazeppa is "rebaptized":

My courser's broad breast proudly braves,
 And dashes off the ascending waves
 And onward we advance!"

(ll. 590–92)

Contemporary reviewers were primed to read Mazeppa's voyage as an equestrian variation on the Mariner's, equally controlled by some unfathomable creature beneath, equally stunning in its effects. The reviewer of *Don Juan, Cantos I and II* in the August 1819 *Monthly Magazine*, in mentioning *Mazeppa*, quickly assumed the position of Wedding Guest: "in contempt of all our pharasaical affectations of propriety and decorum, [Byron] lays hold of us as it were with a dreadful hand, . . . compelling us to look inward upon the secrets of our own hearts, . . . shaking us with dread while he does so" (p. 57). And yet such compulsion, of course, is not to be found in *Mazeppa*—the reviewer responds to all of Byron's evocation and none of his revision of the Coleridgean model of survivor-narration. Most unlike the Mariner, Mazeppa never preys on an auditor, never launches an involuntary, spasmodic narrative that replays the nightmarishly "sudden bound" of his journey (*Ancient Mariner*, l. 390). Instead, the old (if not ancient) Mazeppa is notably self-possessed, radiating serenity that counters looming military disaster. Communing with a later horse that "was as hardy as his lord" and that "whate'er was to be done, would do" (*Mazeppa*, ll. 66, 69), the old Mazeppa seems to go about living within a pod of local enchantment; he is able to make his current horse a "leafy bed" (l. 59) near "an old oak's shade" (l. 54), all the while surrounded by "out-worn nature's agony" (l. 34). Such tranquility contrasts markedly with Coleridge's disruptive, stunning loner, who must push his story onto "the man that must hear [him]" (*Ancient Mariner*, l. 589) whenever "that agony returns" (l. 583). Mazeppa, in fact, maintains a venerable courtliness in the night forest; his actions are as thoughtful, provident, and, given the ominous circumstances, unlikely as a picnic—which he actually throws, feeding his nearly ruined auditor and anyone else he can for the night.

The most interesting similarity of *Mazeppa* to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, then, is the relation of solitary travails to an oddly bound listener—yet this is also the most important dis-

parity between the two poems. While Coleridge's survivor must force his tale of endurance onto others in an estranged homeland, hunting down resistant auditors such as the Hermit and the Wedding Guest, Mazeppa's story is solicited, if not fully attended, by King Charles. Coleridge's first scenario is predatory, a vivid suggestion that even though the Mariner makes it back into harbor of his own country, he is banished to the periphery of society, never fully shrived of a crime, an adventure, and a narrative condition that seem to reenact each other. Whether we view Coleridge's mysterious poem as critiquing "interpretation from a limited perspective" or as providing the model of a "heuristic method,"⁴⁷ the Mariner's narration is, in the end, an overwhelming of his auditor, a silencing that shuts down conversational interchange.⁴⁸ Coleridge's 1817 deletion of the Mariner's prediction of his auditor's fate—which had appeared in the 1798 *Rime* ("Sadder and wiser thou wedding-guest! / Thou'lt rise to morrow morn")⁴⁹—only highlights this shutdown. By 1817 the Mariner had become all the more disconnected from the "man that must hear [him]"—as disconnected from those around him as the Byronic Hero "with all that chilling mystery of mien."⁵⁰

Narrative disjunction snaps off *Mazeppa* as well, but its terms are notably gentler: Charles is not stunned but exhausted—or, at worst, bored. It is interesting that Coleridge once worried in his notebooks about putting an auditor to sleep, observing of his own mind:

tho' it perceives the *difference* of things, yet is eternally pursuing the likenesses, or rather that which is common/bring me two

⁴⁷ See Frances Ferguson, "Coleridge and the Deluded Reader: 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,'" *Georgia Review*, 31, (1977), 635; and David Simpson, *Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979), p. 25.

⁴⁸ See, however, Michael Macovski's connection of Coleridge's interest in the "unimaginable" (or noumenal, the unrepresentable) with the "agonistic dialogue" in his poetry between an insistent narrator and a resistant or uncomprehending auditor (Macovski, *Dialogue and Literature: Apostrophe, Auditors, and the Collapse of Romantic Discourse* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994], p. 101).

⁴⁹ See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere* (1798 text), in William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads: The Text of the 1798 Edition with the Additional 1800 Poems and the Prefaces*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones, rev. ed. (London: Methuen and Co., 1965), p. 24; ll. 368–69.

⁵⁰ See Byron, *Lara: A Tale*, l. 361, in *Poetical Works*, III, 226.

things that seem the very same, & then I am quick enough to shew the difference, even to hair-splitting—but to go on from circle to circle till I break against the shore of my Hearer's patience, or have my Concentricals dashed to nothing by a Snore—that is my ordinary mishap.⁵¹

Written in Malta on Christmas Day, 1804 (many years, of course, before Byron's own improvised abandonment of England), Coleridge's notebook entry intriguingly predicts elements of *Mazeppa*: interplay between likeness and difference, connection between uncertainly related material, and a somnambulant auditor. These two poets, likewise adrift in the Mediterranean and uncertain of their connections to England, imagined losing an audience in similar ways. And yet only Byron would use this scenario as the framework of his poem of endurance. Though the Wedding Guest wakes "a sadder and a wiser man . . . the morrow morn" (*Ancient Mariner*, ll. 624–25) as a direct result of the Mariner's tale, King Charles's snooze and the fate that awaits him when he awakens are quite possibly incidental to the narration that he has commissioned. The submission of narrative to unpredictable vicissitudes of reception—ranging from resonance to complete displacement—is Byron's alteration of Coleridge's model from across a "wide wide sea."



In the end, Charles's sleep creates a vacancy that cannot exist for long, given the seemingly inexhaustible contrapositioning in *Mazeppa*. The stubborn persistence of interactive oppositions in Byron's tale recalls for us Bakhtin's emphasis on the continual addressivity of any meaningful statement: "the unique speech experience of each individual is shaped and developed in continuous and constant interaction with others' individual utterances" ("Speech Genres," p. 89). And in fact just when *Mazeppa* ends his narration, a new address emerges:

⁵¹ Coleridge, December 1804, in *Notebooks*, II, entry 2,372. See also his entry on "anti monadic feeling," in *Notebooks*, II, entry 2,471.

. . . The Hetman threw
 His length beneath the oak-tree shade,
 With leafy couch already made,
 A bed nor comfortless nor new
 To him, who took his rest whene'er
 The hour arrived, no matter where:—
 His eyes the hastening slumbers steep.
 And if ye marvel Charles forgot
 To thank his tale, *he* wonder'd not,—
 The king had been an hour asleep.

(*Mazeppa*, ll. 86o–6g)

Suddenly, at its terminal moment, the poem turns to a new audience. This surmise of a reader's reaction ("if ye marvel") is truly a conversational style. Its creation of yet one more partnership—reader and poet, a bond founded on the unsteady basis of expectation and surmise—creates a new dialogue just when our old generators of narration, *Mazeppa* and Charles, are folded together in slumber.

So direct is that "ye" that we may forget the actual distance it covers. In *Mazeppa*, though, Byron is continually aware of the gap between an exile and his home, or a poet and his audience, or a conjecture and its qualification; the poem's address is actually energized by such gaps, which seem the very condition of interchange. *Mazeppa's* horse—represented, enveloped, and overwhelmed by the medium that divides it from its home—meets a suitably contradictory end; its success or failure is open to discussion. In the beast's mixed fate, its achievement in destination and simultaneous loss of existence, we might also sense a conferred license, or at least an acknowledgment of response beyond authorial control—the unpredictable fate of verse sent across borders by an exiled poet. Bakhtin's definition of the utterance, it is worth remembering, hinges on submission, "relinquishing the floor to the other" ("Speech Genres," p. 72). Conversation, Bakhtin repeatedly reminds us, is shaped by passage across "absolute," "clear-cut" boundaries ("Speech Genres," pp. 76, 93).

As Byron developed a conversational style, his newly embraced exile sharpened his sense of just such boundaries. Distance from audience occasions address—but by the same to-

ken, like Mazeppa's watery horse, such address expires at the point of reception, its afterlife in the hands of a new subject. It is therefore prone to unforeseen displacements and unsettled conclusions. Byron's interest in this general process, as modeled and cultivated by exiled writing, would more and more come to shape *Don Juan*, wherein censorship, misreadings, and hostile reviews spur on rather than smother or contain the engaged yet removed artist. The manuscript of *Mazeppa* was begun shortly before Byron's letters from Venice show him rehearsing various formulations of his intention to "expatriate [him]self altogether,"⁵² and it was finished at the conception of *Don Juan*, an epic whose revisionary tendency, despite all digression, drives the later cantos inevitably back to Byron's homeland. On 30 May 1817, in the month after he began drafting *Mazeppa*, Byron wrote to Douglas Kinnaird: "I have no design or desire to return *wittingly* to England" (*Letters and Journals*, V, 230). In continuing to live in Italy and publish verse in England—verse highlighting the bound interactivity of distinct entities—Byron opened up alternatives to that oddly underlined word.

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ABSTRACT

Mark Phillipson, "Alteration in Exile: Byron's *Mazeppa*" (pp. 291–325)

Critics generally note a big shift in Lord Byron's style: the potently gloomy Eastern Tales, showcasing the magnetically alienated Byronic Hero, give way to a sharply contrasting style, that of the conversational *Don Juan* (1819–24). Accounts of Byron's career tend to treat this alteration as sudden or whimsical. In fact, it is intrinsically tied to exile, a connection illustrated by the verse-romance *Mazeppa* (1819), in many ways the forerunner of the contemporaneously begun *Don Juan*. *Mazeppa* is Byron's most elaborate—even systematic—depiction of exile; its hero, tied onto a wild horse and sent off into the wilderness, learns to endure amid dramatically changed circumstances. As its hero describes his travails, *Mazeppa* yokes together a number of entities forced to in-

⁵² See Byron, letter to Kinnaird, 30 May 1817, in *Letters and Journals*, V, 231. See also Byron, letter to Murray, 9 May 1817: "I have no thoughts of coming amongst you yet a while . . . I can assure you very sincerely—that I am much happier—(or at least have been so) out of your island than in it" (*Letters and Journals*, V, 222). And see Byron's comment on the English in his 30 May 1817 letter to Murray: "I prefer hating them at a distance" (*Letters and Journals*, V, 229).

teract, uneasy pairings that include horse/water, man/horse, past/present, history/romance, and narrator/auditor. Dialogic interchange thus shapes Byron's portrayal of exile; the conversational style he developed in Italy underscores M. M. Bakhtin's emphasis on interaction across boundaries. Byron's investment in alteration helps us to frame his seemingly dismissive treatment of some contemporaries, particularly the Laker poets. As *Mazeppa* particularly demonstrates in its elaborate echoing of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798, revised 1817), Byron's denouncement of what he called the "wrong revolutionary poetical system" was not repudiation so much as interchange, from the vantage of exile. Unlike the *Rime*, *Mazeppa* envisions narrative as subject to unpredictable recontextualization, a submission that marks exiled poet and distanced reader as the most important dialogic pairing in Byron's late work.