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Reforming Byron's Narcissism

Steven Bruhm

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Lessons of Romanticism

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The Lessons of Romanticism: A Critical Companion. Ed.

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Reforming Byron's Narcissism

STEVEN BRUHM

Narcissism: the tendency to see external objects through the lens of one's own desires, to transform the world egomaniacally into a backdrop for one's private interests. Narcissism: the cluster of symptoms including "an overestimation of subjective mental processes, an intensification of the critical conscience, a preference for isolation, a pervading feeling that life is empty and meaningless, a tendency toward incestuous impulses, and a fascination with beauty" (Boker 3). It is through this cluster that we usually interpret Byron's madness, badness, and danger to women.¹ His "fascination with beauty" coupled with the "preference for isolation" leads Manfred, for instance, to assume Astarte narcissistically into his own ego and thus to obliterate her:

She was like me in lineaments—her eyes,
Her hair, her features, all, to the very tone
Even of her voice, they said were like to mine;
But soften'd all, and temper'd into beauty . . .
I loved her, and destroy'd her!
(2.2.105-17)

We have here the material implications of Shelleyan idealism, where "there is something within us which from the instant that we live and move thirsts after its likeness . . . the ideal prototype of every thing excellent or lovely that we are capable of conceiving . . . a mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness" (Reiman 473-74).² This search for the ideal prototype, defining Shelley's concept of love while at the same time paralyzing his *Alastor* poet, illustrates what Anne K. Mellor has recently called "masculine Romanticism," the male lover's effacement of the female "into a narcissistic projection of his own self" (25). Unable to sustain an existence apart from male psychological energies, the Byronic

female dies, clearing the ontological and poetic space for a (further) narcissistic indulgence of the Byronic hero's agony.

Given Shelley's definition of Romantic male desire, then, the Byronic hero's narcissism is more a matter of degree than of kind—unless, of course, the kind of love Byron is representing has a less idealistic bent than Shelley's, and a less heterosexual one than Mellor's. In *Byron and Greek Love*, Louis Crompton quotes an apocryphal Byron letter that claims, "I expected a while ago to write a drama on Greek love—not less—modernizing the atmosphere—glooming it over—to throw the whole subject *back into nature, where it belongs*. . . . But I made up my mind that British philosophy is not far enough on for swallowing such a thing neat. So I turned much of it into 'Manfred'" (371; italics mine). And if we do not want to see a homoerotic narcissism in a play that is so "clearly" heterosexual and biographical—reflecting the scandalous relationship with Augusta—we can still locate in some of Byron's other narcissistic narratives a connection between narcissism and homoerotic desire: *Childe Harold*, the travelogue more about the poet's psychological fixations than about European vacation spots, inscribes Robert Rushton and John Edleston, two boys with whom Byron had once been in love, into the foreground of the poet's consciousness; and the poem sequence addressed to Thyrza, initially read as Byron's complaint over a lost female love and as the genesis of his "preference for isolation" and "pervading feeling that life is empty and meaningless," as Boker has said, is now accepted as having been written for Edleston after his death in 1810. If these poems, which awakened a nation to declare Byron famous, are actually founded on homoerotic rather than "ideal" and "pure"—namely heterosexual—attachments, then we may locate in Byron the stirrings of a psychological configuration that, by the end of the nineteenth century, would be transmogrified into a direct relation between homosexuality and narcissism, a relation understood to be pathological and diseased. As Freud would write, homosexuals "are plainly seeking themselves as a love object" (14: 88). But in his "Thyrza" lyrics and his late fragmented drama *The Deformed Transformed*, Byron's treatment of this search does something else: by deploying the homoerotic possibilities of narcissistic desire, Byron critiques the kind of masculine Romanticism that Mellor has identified and offers us a prototype of a secretive, yet openly telegraphed, homoerotic subject position that may be a founding principle of male Romantic desire. ("Heathcliffe, I am Nellie")

As Jerome Christensen has pointed out, "Lord Byron learned his homosexuality from books—old books" (54). In those old books Byron would have found the story that has been used to condemn him more than any other male Romantic writer, the story of Narcissus. The allusion to the myth of Narcissus that critics and psychoanalysts are so wont to invoke

when discussing Byron must be centered in Pausanias's version of the story, in which the errant boy looks into the pool and sees not himself (for Pausanias, such a thesis is too silly) but rather his twin sister: "Narkissos," writes Pausanias,

had a twin sister; they were exactly the same to look at with just the same hair-style and the same clothes, and they even used to go hunting together. Narkissos was in love with his sister, and when she died he used to visit the spring; he knew what he saw was his own reflection, but even so he found some relief in telling himself it was his sister's image. (376)

Almost paraphrasing Manfred's description of his relation to Astarte, this version had popular currency in eighteenth-century fictions and aesthetic tracts, and no doubt serves as a source for Byron's literary construction of narcissism.³ But what is most interesting in Pausanias is the way desire for the sister is a latecomer in the original love of oneself: Pausanias changes the original because he cannot believe one might unknowingly fall in love with one's other, reflected self; and Narcissus, moreover, makes the same alteration, since "he knew what he saw was his own reflection, but even so he found some relief in telling himself it was his sister's image." The primary attraction here is for sameness, a sameness that must be transferred onto the other. And in the earlier versions of the tale, that otherness is located precisely *within* sameness, in that Narcissus sees the same-sex reflection as another man. As Louise Vinge reminds us, the sex of the reflected image in Ovid's tale is unquestionably male, *puer*, figuring Narcissus's same-sex desire for another of whose identity Narcissus is quite unwitting (15). For Yves Bonnefoy, this same-sexuality establishes a rich and problematic obfuscation or interchangeability between the love of oneself and the love of another of one's own sex: "Narcissus must first believe that he loves another in order to be able to love himself" (493). Ovid's text, moreover, refuses to moralize on this obfuscation or on the gender preference that underlies it, focusing instead on the whims of the gods (Vinge 19). Another Greek version of the tale, that of Conon, draws a parallel between Narcissus's desire for himself and the situation of Ameinias, a male lover whom Narcissus had spurned and who killed himself because of his unfulfillable desire. "In Conon's version," writes Vinge, "Narcissus is loved exclusively by men. The homosexual element has not, as in Ovid, been mixed with female passion" (20).⁴ What this collection of tales ultimately circles around, then, is the depiction of same-sex desire, one obstructed by compulsory heterosexuality in general and by Byron criticism in particular. In *Manfred*, Byron may not be demonstrating his masculine Romanticism or his narcissistic "murder" of his sister so much

as he may be signaling a destructive version of heterosexual desire that is predicated on a denial of same-sexual desire; in Byron's book-learned sexuality, love of the other sex is a late adjunct to the love of the same.⁵

To describe such homoerotic desire as narcissistic is to cast in Latin, Ovidian, and somewhat anachronistic terms what Byron would have known more thoroughly through that other old literary source of libidinal narcissism, Plato's essays on man-boy love. Byron knew Plato's *Symposium* through a glass darkly, since the only English translation available to him, that of Floyer Sydenham, sanitized the notion of Platonic love by changing the gender of the beloved to female (Crompton 89). (No doubt, Shelley's unbowlerized *Symposium* of 1818 served as a corrective of this translation for Byron.) But as Crompton emphasizes, the one section of the *Symposium* that Sydenham was unable to pervert—or de-pervert—was the speech of Aristophanes, in which he argues that lovers are really seeking their other half, which has been separated by Zeus, so that they may reunite with them in a spiritual whole (90). For Aristophanes, as for Shelley, desire is the seeking out of self, the epipsyche that will join with the psyche to create a whole. Since Peter Thorslev, critics of Byron have held that Aristophanes's speech is the philosophical source of the poet's disastrous treatment of women: these critics focus on the hermaphrodite, the paradigm of heterosexual desire in the *Symposium*, as a prototype for the brother-sister incest theme.⁶ But Aristophanes himself says little about the men who proceeded from the hermaphrodite, other than that they are "lovers of women" and usually "adulterers" (*Symposium* 62). Rather, most of Aristophanes's story is concerned with men who are searching for their other "male" half; the quest is usually homoerotic. And while the myth of Aristophanes is clearly satirical, it ultimately outlines an ideal of same-sex union. This ideal is also articulated in the *Phaedrus*, where the beloved

does not know and cannot explain what has happened to him; he is like a man who has caught an eye-infection from another and cannot account for it; he does not realize that he is seeing himself in his lover as in a glass. . . . He is experiencing a counter-love which is the reflection of the love he inspires, but he speaks of it and thinks of it as friendship, not as love. Like his lover, though less strongly, he feels a desire to see, to touch, to kiss him, and to share his bed. And naturally it is not long before these desires are fulfilled in action. (64)

The outburst of lovemaking that follows in Socrates's description, if an outburst it be, represents for Plato the contemptible carnality that stalls one's search for the higher truths of wisdom. But as the work of Michel Foucault (*The Use of Pleasure*) and David Halperin (*One Hundred Years*)

makes clear, the purpose of these Platonic dialogues is not so much to rule out homoerotic desire as it is to bring it under the control of the will; and Socrates himself argues that for soldiers the consummation of physical desire, though unbefitting a philosopher, "is no mean prize" (*Phaedrus* 65). Their very desire to seek the beautiful results in their partial attainment of it through a fuller, richer military valor (as evidenced by Plato's Theban band, gays in the military writ large). In this reading, male-male love, rather than being the antithesis of truth (as Shelley argues in his "Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks"), is necessary to the search for truth. The principal meaning of narcissism in the gay psychological profile, then, is not self-absorption but the seeking out of the other—the beautiful boy whose desirability leads to higher truth.

It is precisely this valorizing of homoerotic desire that Jerome Christensen warns us against when reading Byron. For Christensen, the "Greek love" about which Byron read led to an investment of "sexual desire only in Greek boys." Byron does not conceive his "pure," platonic relationship to Edleston as lacking or unfulfilled, Christensen argues, because for Byron sexual desire was a political act, directed toward those Greek boys whom he wanted to liberate: in other words, Byron "entered" Greece in order to free it; Greece acted as a site where "'liberation' . . . can be rendered as feeding back just those classically 'Greek' principles that supply the rationale for imperial rule" (55–57). Thus, he concludes, Byron's Greek jargon "artificially creates a body of traders . . . forming the basis for and boundaries of association" (61). Christensen's assumption that "sexual desire" can only be measured by genital contact (which seems to me far too restrictive a register for the kind of diagnosis the critic ultimately makes) begs the question of what kind of homosexuality Byron learned from Plato, and how it might figure in his representation of homo-narcissism. For while Christensen argues that Greek love could mobilize a sense of imperialistic class differences in the powerful Byron, Michel Foucault reads Plato in exactly opposite terms: he argues that it is the effect of male-male love in general and of Aristophanes's definition in particular to posit a mirror-equality between lovers, one that "abolishes the game of dissymmetries that structured the complex relations between man and boy" (233). For David Halperin, this abolition is replayed in Socrates's relationship to Alcibiades, and thus marks the whole tenor of Platonic, homoerotic love:

Plato all but erases the distinction between the "active" and the "passive" partner—or, to put it better, the genius of Plato's analysis is that it eliminates passivity altogether: according to Socrates, both members of the relationship become active, desiring lovers; neither remains a merely passive object of desire. (132)

Byron effects a similar breakdown of power relations when he describes himself as both “*Padrone*” and “*amico*” to the Greek boy Nicolo Giraud, an “oscillation” that, for Christensen, “would remain a constant threat to the stability of the Byronic poetic subject” (59). And we also remember Byron’s giving up his bed to his ill last love object, Lukas Chalandrutosanos, a “weakness,” said Pietro Gamba, that “rose only from a noble source and a generous aim—his pity for the innocent unfortunate” (qtd. in Moore 180–81). Thus if Byron did learn his sexuality from “old books” (and indeed which of us hasn’t?), then perhaps what he learned is not the pathologizing and the eventual eradication of difference—what we have come to designate as “narcissism” in the gay male—nor the exercise of class power. Instead, what we see in Byron’s homoerotic works is the way his classical sources and their queer narcissistic frissons inform and code his own same-sexual expression.

The homoerotic foundations of narcissism not only hover about the Byronic text like a spurned and rejected Echo, but are reflected like Ameinias in the poetry. An interrogation of such reflections might begin with one of Byron’s earliest pieces of Romantic drag, the stanzas to Thyrsa. For the queer reader, the very nomenclature resonates with homoeroticism: Thyrsa is a female biblical name belonging to Abel’s wife. And Abel is, of course, the brother of Cain, a figure who speaks in the Byron canon for the author’s constructed literary persona, a figure who doubles Abel at the same time that he destroys him. These queer energies—my lover is the wife of my brother-enemy, a homoerotic triangle extending from Radcliffe’s gothic to Cronenberg’s *Dead Ringers*—are then redoubled by Byron’s ascription of the name to Edleston, the young chorister of humble birth whom Byron had adored at Cambridge, whose reputation had been clouded by rumors of “indecent” (Marchand 1: 257), and who died of consumption in May 1810. The titular poem, “To Thyrsa,” is a conventional elegy for a man about whom Byron had candidly written, “I certainly *love* him more than any human being” (Marchand 1: 124), and, as Crompton notes, it finds its place in a tradition of elegies ranging from *Lycidas* to *Adonais* to Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*. But unlike these other love lyrics to dead men, “To Thyrsa” registers the early Byronic materialism, the suspicion of a metaphysics that would ensure Edleston’s everlasting life either in heaven or on earth. The speaker has loved the boy “in vain,” for “the past, the future fled to thee, / To bid us meet—no—n’er again!” (7–8). And while the poem moves toward a conventional elegiac *consolatio*, employing Platonic ideals of pure and virtuous love as instruction for how to secure heavenly rewards it resists its own optimism by the emphasis on the limitations of the physi-

cal: “Oft have I borne the weight of ill, / But never bent beneath till now!” (43–44); and by the use of the conditional: “If rest alone be in the tomb, / I would not wish thee here again” (47–48); “if in worlds more blest than this . . .” (49), the boy’s love “fain would form my hope in Heaven” (56). One thinks here of Wordsworth’s great expression of doubt in the midst of “Tintern Abbey”: “If this / Be but a vain belief” (50–51). Like the earlier “Epitaph on a Friend,” Byron’s poem is remarkable for inscribing a refusal of past and future—negating the supposed consolations of a heaven-earth relationship. Instead, it emphasizes the corporeal intensity and vulnerability and ultimately the loss of the relationship between lover and beloved.

But if the poem charts a desire whose *mise-en-scène* is the temporal and the embodied rather than the transcendent and spiritual, then it also comments upon the nature of the embodied transaction. That nature, I want to suggest, is narcissistic in conventional ways. While the poem begins with the usual bewailing of a life cut short and the equally standard inscription of sorrow by the poetic speaker left behind, it then takes a rather audacious turn:

And didst thou not, since Death for thee
Prepar’d a light and pangless dart,
Once long for him thou ne’er shalt see,
Who held, and holds thee in his heart?

(13–16)

The note struck here is reminiscent of that in Byron’s poem to the living Edleston, “The Cornelian,” in which the boy’s virtues are gathered together—or reductively appropriated—in the line, “I am sure, the giver lov’d *me*” (8; italics mine). Here we sense that familiar Byronic narcissism; only this time its “victim” is a male, not a female. In this grieving love lyric we are no longer in the register of the subject’s own virtues, nor are we even to consider the speaker’s sorrow for the loss of the subject’s virtues; rather, we are to consider the *speaker’s* virtues, his desirability as it is imagined, in the figure of prosopopeia, through the dead subject (or shall we now say “object”?). This is a strategy we find repeatedly in Byron’s consolation poems: in “Epitaph on a Friend,” written to an unknown person also of lower birth, the speaker imagines how the “gentle spirit” of the dead boy will “hover nigh” to “read, recorded on my heart, / A grief too deep to trust the sculptor’s art” (11–15). And later, in “To Thyrsa,” the speaker asks “who like [himself] had watch’d thee here? / Or sadly mark’d thy glazing eye / In that dread hour ere death appear” (17–19). Rather than bemoan the loss, the poem seems instead to celebrate the intensity with which the loss is felt, and the intensely individual subject that such loss constructs; Crompton writes that when Byron “held the stricken boy in his arms and

broke down himself, he felt whole at last: Euryalus had rescued Nisus" (191). In psychological terms, the speaker has narcissistically appropriated the prismatic array of desires to focus on himself and his intense lovability rather than on the loss of the other. What death has put asunder, clinical narcissism joins together.

Yet if we understand this narcissism in the terms of its Greek origins, we obtain a different reading of "To Thyrza." What is called egotism in the nineteenth century and narcissism in the twentieth is, in the terms laid out by Aristophanes and the *Phaedrus*, an intermingling of male lovers, a transference from lover to beloved such that it becomes impossible to distinguish between desires. (And wasn't the "crime" of Ovid's Narcissus that he could not tell the difference between himself as a desiring subject and himself as a desiring object?) The reflexive merging of subject and object is for Shelley (as it is for Coleridge, Schlegel, and Schelling) the very heart of Romanticism. In Byron's Thyrza elegy, it defines the boys' erotic life together, a life where "Affection's mingling tears" (28) replicated the "whisper'd thought of hearts allied" (31), as the magnetism of erotic bonds displayed itself in the "pressure of the thrilling hand" (32). And for Louis Crompton, this "affection" is the expression of closeted emotion that is central to Crompton's study. And if this "thrilling" is taken in its eighteenth-century meaning of "[a] subtle nervous tremor caused by intense emotion or excitement . . . producing a slight shudder or tingling through the body; a penetrating influx of feeling or emotion" (*OED*), the "thrill" of the erotic touch does not represent a narcissistic isolation of the Byronic lover so much as a closed-circuit communication of pleasure that moves through the lover and the beloved, and that transforms subject and object into subject and subject. The lorn speaker's "heart-drops" of "Affection" gush over—which is to say, the beloved's sorrow for the world is picked up, appropriated, and sustained by the lover as part of the continuum of male-male interpsychic communication. And this interpsychic communion continues after death: the speaker requests, "Impart some portion of thy bliss" (51), and "Teach me—too early taught by thee!" (53). The speaker here becomes both agent for and recipient of (both "forgiving and forgiven" [54]) the improper emotion of despair (and perhaps other improper emotions?). The speaker is always alone, yet always connected, always a lover and always beloved, always complete and always in process, always erotic and always desiring eros. Thus, the poem becomes not only about loss and frustration, but also about transference and communion as they are inscribed in "narcissistic" desire. And in this sense, Ovid's boy leaning over his image in the pool is recast as Conon's Narcissus identifying with Ameinias. Byron's is a scene of desire for another man, an intense appreciation of beauty and love that is unwitting of—and having no care for—its source in the perceiver.

In fact, if Byron's homo-narcissism inscribes any kind of frustration, it is the frustration of those who watch from outside the closed circle of narcissistic bliss. The speaker describes this union as one that the world cannot penetrate: "Ours too the glance none saw beside: / The smile none else might understand" (29–30). That communication, furthermore, exists even after the boy is dead. In "One struggle more and I am free," the speaker leads a superficial existence that "smiles with all, and weeps with none" (12), as if the social life of surfaces were a game and narcissism really the condition of pondering depths and secrets. These secrets, he explains to the dead lover in "the haunts of men," intermingle the lover and the beloved and exclude the outside world: "I would not fools should overhear / One sigh that should be wholly *thine*" (15–16; Byron's italics). What we learn here, perhaps, is a lesson about our own narcissism. As Byron betrays his "open secret" (to use D. A. Miller's sense of the term⁷), as he tells us he has a secret he won't tell us, he establishes in us an ambivalent relation to his narcissistic disclosure/enclosure. As we read the Thyrza lyrics, we are made aware that we are looking in on the Byronic union, yet we are kept outside it. We find out that the narcissist is condemnable not only because he stares at himself but because he demands to be *stared at*, commanding a gaze that wants to interpret but cannot, because the gazer exists outside the circle of erotic knowledge. The narcissist demands that we stare at him—and what Romantic figure was stared at more than Byron?—if only in order to demonstrate that we cannot know what we are seeing: "none saw beside," "none else might understand." And it is perhaps this thwarted dialogism that Byron's personal physician, John William Polidori, had in mind when he cast his former employer as a vampire, Lord Strongmore. As Polidori's hero, Aubrey, watches the mysterious, Byronic, and narcissistic Strongmore,

the very impossibility of forming an idea of the character of a man entirely absorbed in himself, of one who gave few other signs of his observation of external objects, than the tacit assent to their existence, implied by the avoidance of their contact: at last allowed his imagination to picture some thing that flattered its propensity to extravagant ideas. He soon formed this person into the hero of a romance, and determined to observe the offspring of his fancy, rather than the individual before him. (34–35)

If narcissism is the state of staring at another in order to be thrown back on one's own desires, then perhaps it is the reader, or Byron's phobic contemporaries, whom the Thyrza sequence constructs as narcissistic.

Thus Byron is "queer" not merely in the sense that he entertained a love for boys, a love both "violent" and "pure" in all its Socratic ambiguities

(Marchand 8:24; Byron's italics). Moreover, his queerness resides not only in the fact that he lived in a homoerotic closet from which narcissism caused him to draw the blinds to keep out prurient onlookers. Rather, Byron is queer in that he forces us to reevaluate our very notion of what Romantic male sexuality might be. Contemporary queer theory, following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, has characterized male sexuality in Romanticism as governed by the "transmutability of the intrapsychic with the inter-subjective," a dynamic that leaves "two potent male figures locked in an epistemologically indissoluble clench of will and desire" (*Epistemology* 187). This transmutability is what Sedgwick calls the terrorism of homosexual panic, the fear that a man might know another man too well, that he might get inside him psychologically and otherwise. In both *Between Men* and *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick locates this paranoid terrorism at the turn of the nineteenth century, when the intersubjective agencies of sentimentalism, the rise of the bourgeois family, and the proliferation of capitalist homosocial bonds coalesced to place men in a strikingly magnetic, strikingly panicked relationship to one another. Thus, as Otto Rank makes clear in his early essay on the double, the narcissistic love of oneself is transferred in dream work, and in fiction, into a doppelgänger, the feared and loathed other of one's own desires.⁸ But as Sedgwick's work maintains, this panic is that of a straight sexuality, a regime self-imposed by men who vehemently *want* to keep other men at arm's length. Byron undoes the paranoid terrorism of the panic: his closet transforms the intersubjective into the narcissistic not so as to threaten erotic identity but so as to celebrate it. In "Thyrza" I become my lover and my lover becomes me within the (almost) impermeable confines of a closet that the cold world cannot know. I long for you and you long for me and we do so like no others. In a way very different from paranoid terrorism, it takes one to know one.

III

As its sources in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* would suggest, the reconfiguration of the boundaries of the Romantic closet makes for a political imperative that extends beyond the personal tone of the love lyric. This politics is inscribed in Byron's early meditation on heroic and erotic love, his translation of the Nisus and Euryalus episode from the *Aeneid*. A depiction of a soldier and his boy-lover en route to the sacking of Troy, this poem again evokes Byron's narcissism in the form of his egomaniacal penchant for boys whose inferior age and social status magnified his superiority and influence. And in this sense, it echoes what Jerome Christensen has identified as Byron's imperialistic domination of the Greek boys he was claiming to liberate. Yet the poem also echoes Socrates's speech in the *Phaedrus* by

emphasizing the equalizing effects of love into erotic oneness: "In peace, in war, united still they move; / Friendship and glory form their joint reward, / And, now, combined they hold their nightly guard" (16–18). If Greek—and indeed Byronic—love turns on asymmetries in age and status, Byron's borrowings from Virgil here document the interchangeability of lover and beloved—two becoming as one. When the young Euryalus is captured, Nisus ponders whether he should "rush, his comrade's fate to share!" (334) and "die with him, for whom he wish'd to live!" (338) or whether "His life a votive ransom nobly give" (337). The choices here are to change places with the beloved or to die with him, but either way the noble lover shares the beloved's disempowerment. Both love and war destroy power asymmetries, and as Nisus kills his beloved's murderers, he, too, is mortally wounded:

Thus Nisus all his fond affection prov'd,
Dying, reveng'd the fate of him he lov'd;
Then on his bosom, sought his wonted place,
And death was heavenly, in his friend's embrace!
(397–400)

The poem then ends with a declaration of the soldier/lover's valor and fame, a peroration that feels somewhat facile and hubristic—what we conventionally call narcissistic—in its trading of human life for everlasting fame. But if we read the story with reference to the *Phaedrus*, it becomes a magnetic site for the fragments of narcissistic desire: the man's desire for the beautiful boy transforms into an equalizing erotic bond whose effect is the protection and love of the other through an interchangeability with the other. Narcissism—what is transferred in homosexual panic into paranoid terrorism—is here a mutually embracing and politically efficacious union.

If "Nisus and Euryalus" flirts with the erotic interchangeability of men and its implications for military valor, Byron's dramatic fragment *The Deformed Transformed* begins to analyze that relationship fully. Begun in 1822 and left unfinished, *The Deformed Transformed* presents the hunchbacked and unloved Arnold who escapes his cruel mother and flees to the forest. Here, at a fountain, he sees his own ugliness and, like Frankenstein's monster in a similar antinarcissistic moment, decides to kill himself. He is halted by a Stranger, modeled on Goethe's Mephistopheles, who conjures a string of beautiful male bodies out of the same fountain in which Arnold had seen himself and transforms him into the beautiful, strong soldier Achilles; the Stranger then assumes Arnold's own rejected body and accompanies him as a doppelgänger. Arnold and the Stranger head out to assist in the battle of Rome in 1527, where Arnold meets the hapless Roman maid Olimpia, falls in love with her, and attempts to win her love. The play breaks off with some suggestion that Olimpia momentarily returns

his affections, but that she eventually becomes attracted to the Stranger, who wears Arnold's form, because he is more interesting and witty. When he learns this, Arnold kills Olimpia. In some ways the play follows the conventional narcissistic paradigm as Freud would outline it: the subject's development begins with the narcissistic identification of the reflected self as a way of manufacturing self-love (primary narcissism), which then is transferred onto the other—the female Olimpia. Heterosexual desire is cast as the mature fruition of a desire that begins as eros for oneself. However, the projected *Othello*-like slaying of Olimpia suggests that Arnold never really worked through his primary narcissism and that this retardation results naturally in narcissistic self-loathing and misogyny. *The Deformed Transformed*, then, is Mellor's masculine Romanticism fully and sardonically brought to light.

Yet if we look closely at the first act, which documents the transformation—an act critics agree represents the only real energy and interest in a play that quickly deteriorates into cliché—we see the degree to which homoeroticism structures a number of Byronic agendas in Arnold. Let us consider for a moment the parade of pretty boys that are trotted out before Arnold: the “fair” Caesar (1.1.198), the “lovely” and “beautiful” Alcibiades (212), the “broad brow,” “curly beard,” and “manly aspect” of Mark Anthony (230–31), the shade of Demetrius Poliochares, “Who truly looketh like a demigod, / Blooming and bright, with golden hair, and stature” (246–47), indeed the “Glory of mankind” (256), and finally the winner, Achilles, “The god-like son of the Sea-goddess, / The unshorn boy of Peleus, with his locks / As beautiful and clear as the amber waves / Of rich Pactolus” (266–69). George Steiner contends that as Arnold chooses “the radiant form of Achilles,” “it requires no Freudian to note the covert relation between Achilles’ heel and Byron’s own deformity” (211). Nor, I would argue, does it require a Freudian to note the homoerotic overtones with which Byron infuses Arnold’s desire for Achilles, the lover of Patroclus, in a line like this one: “I gaze upon him / As if I were his soul, whose form shall soon / Envelope mine” (282–84). The queerly charged potential of being enveloped by Achilles’ body is inscribed in the source for Byron’s play, Joshua Pickersgill’s *The Three Brothers* (1802), in which the “various men distinguished for that beauty and grace” are paraded in front of Arnaud (Arnold) and “Arnaud’s heart heaved quick with preference” (quoted in Robinson 180). This heaving preference, this thinly coded cruisy desire enacts a double movement: it conflates the love of another with the narcissistic love of self, and it makes this love of “beauty” intensely physical, corporeal: indeed, the only character to be rejected out of hand is Socrates, who, mental beauty aside, has a body so ugly that, as he puts it, “I had better / Remain that which I am” (219–20).

In Plato and Virgil, this desire for the physical is a manly desire that risks effeminacy at the very moment of its consummation. Byron’s fragment gestures to the same fear. As Arnold pants for the possibilities before him, the Stranger consistently constructs him as female in his desire: “You are far more difficult to please / Than Cato’s sister, or than Brutus’ mother, / Or Cleopatra at sixteen” (198–200); he calls Arnold impatient “As a youthful beauty / Before her glass. *You both* see what is not, / But dream it is what must be” (288–90; Byron’s italics). By constructing Arnold as female, and as narcissistic, Byron hints not only at a misogyny but at a certain representation of the eighteenth-century sodomite as narcissistically female. As early as 1632, Henry Reynolds suggested that the narcissistic boy, pace Socrates, was weakened, unmanly, effeminate (Vinge 185). By 1662, Louis Richer had conflated Ovid’s and Pausanias’s versions of the myth so that when the Narcissus of his *L’Ovide bouffon* looks into the water, he sees himself, but himself transformed *into a woman* (Vinge 191). Such compulsory heterosexualizing (or parodic camping) is also seen in Rousseau, whose narcissistic Valère is represented as female in a portrait (Vinge 278). These continental moments have their English counterparts, of course, on the Restoration stage, with which Byron was extremely familiar. As Randolph Trumbach points out, “The fop’s effeminacy . . . came [in the 1720s] to be identified with the effeminacy of the then emerging role of the exclusive adult sodomite” (134), and if we think of Sir Fopling Flutter, John Harvey, or Colley Cibber’s Sir Novelty Fashion, we can place Byron in a tradition that associates the feminine with the sodomitic. That tradition, as Linda Dowling demonstrates, is predicated on the widely held eighteenth-century equation of the Hellenistic (and homoerotic) with “civic incapacity,” the product of “aimless and self-regarding egoism” (9). Yet Byron’s appropriation of such narcissistic “femininity” represents an attempt to undo the phobic and persecutory associations of male-male love by means of narcissistic softening. If narcissistic desire “feminizes” Arnold, it does so only to embolden him, in that he *becomes* the Achilles he beholds: his cruising, Socratic, yet “feminine” desire for a manly self provides him access to that self. My point is not to applaud an appropriation of the feminine that then destroys the feminine; rather, it is to posit in Byron a conscious transgression, one that effectively contradicts the foundations of Georgian homophobia. Indeed, Arnold’s transformation associates him in that proto-Victorian warrior ideal that Dowling says replaced the effeminate and debilitated and came to constitute in the late nineteenth century a homoerotic masculine ideal.

Part 1 of *The Deformed Transformed*, then, dramatizes a homophilic narcissism that exploits Greek tropes of male possession to demonstrate the ways in which the asymmetries of power, status, and age break down as

one man is enveloped by another; moreover, it dramatizes the jubilant erosion of the self-other division upon which the Romantic egotistical sublime—Mellor's "masculine Romanticism"—is founded. To this end, Achilles serves as an apt figure for Arnold to emulate and to be enveloped by, not only because he is beautiful and strong, but because, as Foucault tells us, it was common Greek practice "to talk about the relationship of Achilles to Patroclus . . . to determine what differentiated them from one another and which of the two had precedence over the other (since Homer's text was ambiguous on this point)" (195).⁹ In other words, one could not tell who in this dyad was the active lover and who was the passive beloved. Such interchangeability, achieved through narcissism, allows Byron to reimagine the potentially panicked relation between men. He dramatizes what it might look like for the transmutable to be erotically welcome between men rather than paranoid or terrifying. He has opened up a space for a queer reading of Romanticism that exploits the dissolution of the self-other boundary, and that revises that boundary from a threatened and policed border to a homoerotically inviting space. Thus Arnold is on the mark when he punctuates his union with Achilles by proclaiming "I love, and I shall be beloved! Oh, life!" (1.1.420).

If the ecstasy of being beloved as one loves accurately describes the homophilic narcissism of the play's first part, it also modifies what will become heterosexual passion in parts 2 and 3 (although the binary opposition between homo and hetero identity was not operative for Byron). As Arnold "becomes" Achilles, the play changes registers from a consideration of the monstrous, homophilic, "queer" hunchback to the overtly masculinist tyrannical soldier¹⁰: for Byron, to be enveloped by masculinity is not only homoerotic but also terrifyingly productive of masculine ideologies. With this transformation, the queer discourse—that which is critical of such masculinist, heterosexual ideologies—is transferred onto the Stranger, now called Caesar, who becomes the critical foil for Arnold's marauding endeavors.¹¹ As they continue, these endeavors complete Byron's sexual allegory, by demonstrating the ways in which military masculinity depends upon the expression of both misogyny and homophobia: misogyny, in that the siege on Rome is an attempt to drive out the "Harlot" of Catholicism (2.3.26) who has rendered Rome "an hermaphrodite of empire," a "Lady of the Old World" (1.2.9–10), and whose femininity has weakened its glory; homophobia, in that corrupt Rome is an ideal target for destruction—"scarce a better to be found on earth, / Since Sodom was put out" (1.1.502–3)—and that one of Rome's representatives who is to be attacked is Benvenuto Cellini, the Florentine sculptor and goldsmith, charged as a "dirty sodomite" (qtd. in Dynes 208). Rome becomes a fitting site for the deployment of such masculinity, since its very founding

depended upon the murder of one twin brother by the other (Romulus's slaying of Remus). And here we see the inversion of the (homo)sexual politics of Byron's earlier lyrics: whereas the Cain-like Byron becomes the victim mourning his dead "wife" Edleston, here the hypermasculine figure recapitulates the slaying of the twin and the destruction of the feminine. Moreover, what Arnold destroys is precisely the figuration of effeminate sodomy that moments earlier had given him the identity he now claims. He severs the erotic possibilities of sameness and symmetry, invoking a compulsory differentiation that becomes, both politically and psychologically, a brutally split and splitting subject. And as the erotic narcissist becomes the pernicious paranoid, Byron makes a startlingly candid critique of his own masculinist heroism, one that contradicts the image of himself that he worked so hard to construct.

For Byron, this is a critique of what Mellor calls the narcissism of masculine Romanticism, but narcissistic masculinity only in its heterosexual register (Mellor does not distinguish between sexualities). Byron renders unto Caesar, the queer, aloof, dispassionate hunchback, the last word on narcissism and its relation to eros:

You would be *loved*—what you call loved—
Self-loved—loved for *yourself*—for neither health
 Nor wealth—nor youth—nor power—nor rank nor beauty—

For these you may be stript of—but *beloved*
 As an Abstraction—for—you know not what—
 (Text of Fragment, 3.61–65; Byron's italics)

"You are jealous," Caesar charges Arnold, jealous "of Yourself" (fragment to 3.69–70). Like the masculine Romantic, Arnold loves, but that love recognizes no external object, no other. Even the final line of the fragment betrays a masculine desire that is at once poignant and sardonically pathetic in its narcissism: "You have possessed the woman—still possess," says Caesar to Arnold; "What need you more?— / To be myself possess—" answers Arnold, "To be her heart as she is mine.—" (Text of Fragment, 3.99–101). For Byron, one must *deserve* love if one is to be beloved; one must *do* the activity that will render one worthy of love. To be beloved (the passive receptivity of the Greek model) is to be the lover, the active pursuer. Whereas the erotic union of Arnold and Achilles produced an immediate jouissance—"I love, and I shall be beloved! Oh, life!"—the heterosexual union is always doomed to be thwarted, partial, asymmetrically disrupted, as Arnold continually bemoans his egotistical inability to be egoless. What the play may ultimately argue, then, is not that homoerotic narcissism is a perversion of "natural" heterosexual desire, but rather that it offers a paradigm by which heterosexual desire itself can be deformed and transformed.

According to Michael Warner, "[T]he theorization of homosexuality as narcissism is itself a form of narcissism peculiar to modern heterosexuality," because it allows heterosexuality to posit the very existence of self and other-object choice, and thereby "*allows the constitution of heterosexuality as such*" (202; Warner's italics). This construction of the hetero through the suppression of the homo is, of course, a phenomenon of the late nineteenth century, not of the 1820s; in *The Deformed Transformed*, Byron is not arguing that one must suppress the love of the same sex in order to be able to love the other. Nor does Byron anticipate the psychoanalytic assumption that same-sex desire is a narcissistic object choice caused by the inability to cathect external objects. What Byron is doing is foreclosing a principle that will later become essential in the diagnosis and pathologizing of the gay man: that is, the connection between the homoerotic, the love of sameness, and the denial of the demands of the outside world. For Byron, homoerotic narcissism is the trope that posits the dissolution of the self-other boundary at the same time that it registers the sexual possibilities of that boundary. It is in the transformation of this narcissistic dialogue from same-sexual to other-sexual that his narcissist becomes destructive and that the masculine Romantic—that is, the Byronic heterosexual male—is born.

Notes

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- 1 Boker is taking this list of symptoms from Freud. For other discussions of Byron, narcissism, and (hetero)sexuality, see D. L. Macdonald and Atara Stein.
- 2 In the "Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love," Shelley argues that the love object really only exists in the lover's mind, "which selects among those who resemble it, that which most resembles it; and instinctively fills up the interstices of the imperfect image, in the same manner as the imagination moulds and completes the shapes in clouds, or in the fire, into the resemblances of whatever form, animal, building, etc., happens to be present to it" (Notopoulos 408). Of course, Shelley did not invent this definition of Romantic desire. For August Schlegel, the only proper poet is a narcissist, enveloped by fascination for himself. (For the full text of Schlegel, see Louise Vinge 305–6.) And for brother Friedrich, the eye sees in the mirror of the river only the reflection of the blue sky, the green banks, the swaying trees, and the form of the gazer lost in contemplation of himself. When a heart full of unconscious love finds itself where it hoped to find another's love, then it is struck with amazement. But soon man lets himself be tempted again, and deceived by the magic of self-observation into loving his own shadow. Then the moment of graciousness has come, then the soul once more constructs its shell, and blows the last breath of perfection through its form. The spirit loses itself in its translucent depths and, like Narcissus, rediscovers itself as a flower. (Friedrich Schlegel 105–6)

- 3 Louise Vinge writes: "The euhemeristic version of Narcissus' love as a love of his dead twin sister was . . . presented in several authoritative works in the 18th century [including the works of Abbé Banier, Benjamin Hederich, and Diderot] as being a more correct and true story than Ovid's invented fable. It was so wide-spread that it can be considered well-known" (266). To this Vinge adds: "Despite the fact that the Greek versions, particularly Pausanias' twin sister version, are commoner in encyclopedias and handbooks in the 18th century than in previous centuries, they do not have any effect on the literary treatments of the theme of that century. The information which is used is still ultimately derived from Ovid" (313). This statement, I suggest, is too categorical. As I will indicate later, Pausanias was not opposed to Ovid in treatments of male gender so much as he was often conflated with Ovid in the representation of the sodomite as narcissistic and effeminate.
- 4 Vinge argues, in fact, that the effacement of the homoerotic motif from the myth only came about in the twelfth century, when Christian moralists transformed the tale into an exemplum on vanity (65). Obviously, such a transformation not only made a moral point about self-knowledge but also managed (temporarily) to confine the bestial implications of same-sex desire to obscurity.
- 5 This conception startlingly recapitulates the emergence of the words "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" in Western usage and diagnosis. As Jonathon Ned Katz reminds us, the term "homosexuality," privately coined by German law reformer Karl Maria Kertbeny, was first used publicly in 1869, whereas the term "heterosexuality" did not appear until 1880.
- 6 For other uses of the hermaphrodite section of the Aristophanes myth, see Caroline Franklin and Diane Long Hoeveler.
- 7 Miller writes of secrecy:
I have had to intimate my secret, if only *not to tell it*; and conversely, in theatrically continuing to keep my secret, I have already rather *given it away*. But if I don't tell my secret, why can't I keep it better? And if I can't keep it better, why don't I just tell it? I can't quite tell my secret, because then it would be known that there was nothing really special to hide, and no one really special to hide it. But I can't quite keep it either, because then it would not be believed that there was something to hide and someone to hide it. . . . More precisely, secrecy would seem to be a mode whose ultimate meaning lies in the subject's formal insistence that he is radically inaccessible to the culture that would otherwise entirely determine him. (194–95)
- 8 Rank writes, "The stage of development from which paranoids regress to their original narcissism is sublimated homosexuality, against the undisguised eruption of which they defend themselves with the characteristic mechanism of projection" (74). This projection, he argues, takes the form of the doppelgänger (85).
- 9 For a more complete discussion of this pairing in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, see ch. 1 of Gregory Bredbeck, *Sodomy and Interpretation*.
- 10 As Samuel Chew noted in 1915, "With the second scene of the play the mood is changed. Arnold no longer *wishes*; he has acquired all his desires save love." See Samuel Chew 147. For Daniel Watkins, this change of mood heralds the downfall of a play that was conceived during Byron's increased republicanism of 1821. Because of his political concerns, Byron "wrote the drama with even less patience and precision than usual, allowing his ego and impulse toward autobiography to obscure other interests" (Watkins 27). In other words, the play is vague for Watkins because Byron was unusually narcissistic at the time of its composition, whereas I would suggest the opposite: the play is fascinating because Byron is narcissistic, and his narcissism does

not work counter to the political republicanism that captures Watkins's attention, but rather is part of it.

- 11 Caesar is, among other things, the beloved of the Bithynian king, Nicomedes, as mentioned in Jeremy Bentham's 1795 essay on pederasty. He may also be the "Caesar of sexuality" Byron uses to describe himself in his relation with Nicolo Giraud (qtd. in Christensen 61-62; see Marchand 2:14).

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