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**Susan Oliver, [Scott, Byron and the Poetics of Cultural Encounter](#), Basingstoke and
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. ISBN: 1403994749. 264p.**

Chapter Four

Byron's Eastern Tales: Eastern Themes and Contexts

Byron's fascination with the Near East and with the margins of Europe continued after the publication of *Childe Harold* cantos 1 and 2. His series of narrative poems addressing themes of East-West cultural encounter collectively known as the 'Turkish' or 'Eastern' Tales was published between March 1813 and April 1816. These poems consist of *The Giaour* (1813), *The Bride of Abydos* (1813), *The Corsair* (1814), *Lara* (1814) and *The Siege of Corinth* (1816). I shall also comment on *The Island: or Christian and his Comrades*, which Byron published with John Hunt in 1823. Though not an Eastern Tale, *The Island* is relevant to the present chapter because it deals with 'southernness' and 'northernness' through a number of recognisable orientalist configurations. The result is a reconciliation of difference that Byron represents as impossible in the earlier tales, but one that remains problematic. Furthermore, despite its subtitle's suggestion that Fletcher Christian is the protagonist, *The Island* takes a lesser mutineer, a 'blue-eyed northern child / of isles more known to man, but scarce less wild', (2:163-4) as its main character, situating him in a land of exotic, natural abundance and intercultural sexual liberation (a 'bountiful' land, in many senses).¹

Byron's inclination to make casual and dismissive remarks about the worth and sincerity of the Eastern Tales is well-known,² but the extent of his preoccupation with the Near East nevertheless is captured in a letter to Lord Holland dated 17 November 1813. Replying to Holland's approval of *The Giaour* and *Bride of Abydos*, he wrote, 'My head is full of Oriental names and scenes.'³ The 'Orient' had apparently lodged names and scenes firmly within Byron's mind, but was by this reckoning expressible only in the European conventional terms of classification and imagery. If we recall the excitement evident in his letters immediately prior to his departure for Portugal four years earlier in 1809, followed by his writing of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold* – all of which I discussed in my previous chapter – the extent of his interest is seen to transcend superficiality, and in remarkable ways. As I argued in my introduction, borderlands, their transient and debatable status, and the political manipulation of cultural difference were of overwhelming international importance during the early nineteenth century – and on into our own time. A study of the Eastern Tales, examining the ways in which Byron's poetical use of borderlands developed in the second decade of the nineteenth century and into the final year of his life, follows to conclude the present book.

An overall narrative programme and thematic continuity (in spite of the local 'fragmentary' structures of individual poems such as *The Giaour*) is as evident in this series of poems by Byron as it is in Scott's *Minstrelsy* and narrative poems, though Byron's ideological agenda in representing border regions is entirely different. Indeed, the nature of the Eastern Tales is such that they comprise a poetry of continuous traversal, digression, narrative and thematic return. Consequently, it becomes less valuable in a study such as this to deal with the individual tales in a rigidly conventional, sequential manner. My analyses will look at narrative clusters and

recurring themes, variant formal properties and devices, and the political/ideological contexts and displacements that lie behind Byron's poems of transcultural encounter.

Byron's direct experience of the Near Eastern regions in which he set the Eastern Tales gained from his travels in Albania, Turkey and the Levant from September 1809 to April 1811, providing him with the opportunity to claim empirical legitimacy for his narratives to a degree which transcended that of any other canonical British poet of the Romantic period. He repeatedly referred to an East that he knew better than most, and in the case of Albania better than any, British writers of the time. The letter to Lord Holland dated 17 November 1813 which I referred to above continues as follows, with Byron's stressing of Hobhouse's earlier departure for England, and a suggestion that the time afterwards was most memorable in terms of (what we might here call) his own proto-anthropological experience:

It is my story & my *East* – (& here I am venturing with no one to contend against – from having *seen* what my contemporaries must copy from the drawings of others only) that I want to make palpable – and my skull is so crammed from having lived much with them & in their own way (after Hobhouse went home a year before me) with their scenes & manners.⁴

Byron's profession of cultural authenticity is clearly accompanied by a proprietorial claim on his subject matter – it is *his* story and *his* East. On that basis, the Eastern Tales must be seen as a continuation of the appropriation, 'bringing home' and marketing of oriental material that we

saw with *Childe Harold* cantos 1 and 2. Yet, as I argued in my analysis of the active role of hyperbolic description in *Childe Harold*, the experience of exotic ‘otherness’ cannot be understood simplistically in terms of a one-way process of domination and appropriation.⁵ The alternation between exploitation through a form of literary colonialism, and the invasion of Byron’s mind by his ‘lived’ experience of the ‘way’, ‘scenes’ and ‘manners’ of Albania and Turkey, constitutes a dynamically reciprocal relationship. Such a relationship, in which the influence exerted *by* eastern experience counterbalances Byron’s desire to appropriate it, transgresses the one-sided occidental hegemony posited by, for example, Saidian orientalism. For Byron, the Near East was a palpable, living context, not merely a metaphor for despotism and cruelty from which the reality of human existence was excised. It is, for example, the antithesis of constructions such as those by Edmund Burke in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which represent in a patronising and stylized fashion ‘the barbarous anarchic despotism of Turkey, where the finest countries in the most genial climates in the world are wasted by peace more than any countries have been worried by war; where arts are unknown, where manufactures languish, where science is extinguished, where agriculture decays, where the human race itself melts away and perishes under the eye of the observer.’⁶ (Burke was using the state of Turkey, as he believed it to be, as an example with which to counter criticism of the French monarchy as in any way a despotic institution, just as Paine by total contrast used the trope of oriental despotism as an analogue for British political institutions.)

The key concepts here can be argued in wider terms. Clifford Geertz, writing of more recent and specifically ‘anthropological’ studies than Byron’s, makes an incisive point about the wide fascination that the ‘exotic’ may hold for cultural interpreters, in his statement that ‘the famous anthropological absorption with the (to us) exotic ... is ... essentially a device for displacing the

dulling sense of familiarity with which the mysteriousness of our own ability to relate perceptively to one another is concealed from us. ⁷ Geertz's sentence is, in general terms, a corrective to theories based on the inevitability of hegemonising impulses, or the will to dominate, on the part of members of more powerful and purportedly more advanced cultures. In the specific instance, it helps us to put Byron's compunction to write of the Near East into perspective, in the light of his concern about society and politics in Britain. In Geertz's view, we do not need to disassociate the attention to 'exotic' cultural experience from the context of the writer in his own culture. Indeed, we cannot so disassociate it but must, rather, be on constant watch for factors of displacement of the latter concealed in it.

From Jerome McGann's seminal *Fiery Dust* (1968) onwards, a number of scholars have developed and refined a line of allegorical readings that locate the narratives of Byron's Eastern Tales as, precisely, displacements of concerns about British society and politics within the United Kingdom. Collectively, these readings constitute a substantial and convincing body of criticism. Yet, however allegorical, the majority of these studies maintain a real sense of the poems' value as 'Eastern' tales, with at least some representative cultural content. McGann, for example, points out that '*The Giaour* uses the device of 'fragments' to give a ... kind of cultural authenticity to the events of the story', and that the story itself, as Byron states, is a translation of a 'Romaic [or] Arnout' ballad which the poet overheard 'by accident recited by one of the coffee-house story tellers who abound in the Levant.'⁸ Literary convention – in this instance fragment form or the recited tale – and cultural authenticity are seen to be complementary.

Beyond constructions of a recognisable Near East, couched in orientalist terms but with sufficient references to European-style feudalism for parallels to be easily drawn, the rôle of

borderlands in the Eastern Tales as ambiguous stretches of land within which cultures encounter one another and mingle (rather than as exclusive lines of East-West cultural demarcation) thus becomes particularly important. Amongst more recent critical studies focusing on the Tales as allegories, the Marxist sociological perspective of Daniel Watkins's close readings in *Social Relations in Byron's Eastern Tales* takes the analytical bias more decidedly towards British society and politics, with less emphasis on the accompanying foreign nature of the narratives. But Watkins's finely-honed sociopolitical perspective, as he stresses, does not seek to limit the texts to such an extent that it invalidates other kinds of inquiry.⁹ My own readings attempt to move into areas not overdetermined by McGann's or his readings, but without losing the value of many of their arguments. Amongst the questions I seek to answer in my concluding analyses are: just how 'Eastern' are the Eastern Tales, and to what extent did they (or, indeed, do they still) stand as a valid cultural comment, when one looks beyond the obviously oriental storylines?

In terms of their immediate historical and political context, the Eastern Tales engage both with particular and more general events and crises on and around the borders of Europe and the Near East. I want to concentrate on Byron's literary rôle in mediating and responding to these events, with specific reference to the life-altering qualities he affords incidents of encounter. Through his poems' narratives, with their obvious allusions to Eastern oral storytelling and to ballad traditions as alternatives to more regular documentary histories (similar to the 'curious history' that Scott declared theoretically to be retrievable from ballads and folklore), Byron extends the critique of militarism and of the European power struggle that he began in *Childe Harold*. The border regions of the Eastern Tales, however, whilst remaining highly contentious, have shifted eastwards from the Peninsular War terrain of Iberia and the Albanian and Greek frontiers of the

Ottoman territories, almost exclusively to the boundaries of the latter two. Virtually all criticism of the Eastern Tales to date has examined the poems in terms of their construction of the relationship between Turkey and Greece. Byron's poetic angst over the loss of classical virtues and his interest in the struggle for Greek independence have together, understandably, determined such a tradition of philhellenic enquiry. I argue that a definite response can also be seen within the texts to developments on the Arab-Turkish frontier, and around the ports of the Persian Gulf. That response is reflected in a wide range of thematic motifs as well as through linguistic reference, with distinctions made and parallels sometimes drawn between Turkish custom and that existing within states where a more fundamentalist form of Islamic law and government existed. For example, Byron frequently and self-consciously employs diction in the Tales that is taken from Arabic speech, as well as from the more familiar Turkish idiom. Often there are Persian literary precedents for the use of such words, but a theme of heterogeneity that is far from benign nevertheless emerges, and an acute sense of disparity and of fragile relationship is established between different strands of Islamic society. In effect, Byron uses linguistic means to reflect the long-standing historical hybridity of the Turkish lands, where a dominant Ottoman culture was interpreted by means of Arabic, Jewish, Persian and Greek culture and language. The effect may be usefully compared with the treatment of Spain in *Childe Harold* canto 1 as a volatile, ambiguous combination of Moorish North African and Gothic European cultural heritage.

Byron's satirical rejection of the reactionary, patriarchal notion of rigid borders establishing western cultural superiority and exclusivity is made most clear some years later in *Don Juan* (1819), where he mockingly introduces Juan's father as 'a true Hidalgo, free from every stain / of Moor or Hebrew blood, he traced his source / Through the most Gothic gentlemen of

Spain' (1:66-8), whilst the seductress Donna Julia's dark 'Oriental eye' (1:441) accords with her Moorish ancestry. Juan, like Donna Julia's kin, proceeds to leave Spain, travels eastwards and falls in love with the exotic daughter of a pirate (based on Ali Pasha) to become the rebellious product of such a system of belief. To return to the matter of Turkey, however, the heterogeneous form of Islam that is made explicit through the use of linguistically dissimilar forms and variations of custom in the Eastern Tales always hints at potential conflict. Turkey thus has to be regarded as looking with anxiety towards the East as well as to its unstable European, Northern Baltic and Crimean frontiers. A range of close analyses will show, within the context of particular poems, how intricately and consistently Byron works with Turkey as a nation with more than one problematic frontier, although it was popularly regarded within Britain and by other, more simplistically 'orientalist' European literature in a unitary way, as definitive of Eastern power and despotism.

I want to begin with some examples that clarify the literary and political themes of my argument, and which establish that the instability of factors of difference in cultural borders was present from the outset in the Eastern Tales. In this passage from *The Giaour*, which comes immediately after the dramatic fragment concerning the eponymous hero's frantic twilight ride along the Turkish shore, the foreign and supposedly oral narrative of the Turkish fisherman delivers a prophecy of an apocalyptic scenario following the death of slave-girl Leila:¹⁰

But Gloom is gathered o'er the gate,
 Nor there the Fakir's self will wait;
 Nor there will wandering Dervise stay,
 For Bounty cheers not his delay;

Nor there will weary stranger halt
 To bless the sacred “bread and salt.”
 (338-43)

Byron’s choice of language at points in the poem such as this holds the key to our understanding of this conflict. The above lines are laden with rhetorical negativity and concerns about cultural instability. Fakir and Dervise, for example, are both words meaning beggar, or religious ascetic – the former being Arabic and the latter Turkish (Dervish is the more usual English transcription, whilst *dervis* is listed by the OED as the Turkish etymological source).¹¹ *Dervis*, or dervish, as Byron note informs the reader, is more particularly used of Sufi Muslims, and thus pertains to the people of Turkey and Albania that Byron had lived with during his travels (there are many comments in letters and notes on the Albanian servant who attended Byron from Albania onwards in 1809 and 1810, each referring to him using the soubriquet ‘dervish’).¹² Byron’s use of both words at this crucial point in *The Giaour* expresses the fatal paradox of similarity and difference he saw as existing between the two distinct forms of Islamic society.

In the same passage, custom is invoked in a manner that similarly reveals ambiguity. This point is best explained by Byron’s relatively short note to *The Giaour* elaborating on the inviolable sanctity of the Moslem custom of breaking of bread and salt to ‘insure the safety of the guest, even though an enemy.’¹³ In the 4th – 6th editions of the poem he added that, though a pledge of hospitality with all Moslems, the custom was more particular to ‘the Arabs.’¹⁴ The theme of destruction within the Ottoman world, which the narrative deems to be wrought as much by the western invader as by barbarous actions of the Turk, is thus seen to have far reaching repercussions throughout the Islamic world beyond Turkey. Hassan’s palace, a metaphor for the

Ottoman Porte, becomes 'Desolation's hungry den' in line 349. Just two lines later, and concluding the fragment, Hassan's turban is described as 'cleft by the infidel's sabre!' Byron configures the turban as an orientalized crown, symbolic of Hassan's ruling power. I argue that this motif prefigures the crucial splitting by European intervention (recall that the 'infidel' in question here is the European Giaour, and that the narrator is Turkish) of the power of Ottoman rule and of the coherence of Islamic Empire. There is an immediate historical correlative to back such a reading, for a look at the complexity of British involvement with certain Ottoman factions shows how strategically divisive its overall intervention was, not least because aimed at securing commercial and political power over Greece and the Aegean trade routes.

During the first two decades of the nineteenth century the British were aligning themselves with the Turks against Wahhabist Islamic factions, at the same time that they were cultivating friendship with the semi-autonomous renegade Ali Pasha in Albania and along the Ottoman western frontier. A further consolidation of British interests in Egypt was simultaneously taking place, after the defeat of the feudal Mamelukes in that country initially by Napoleon, but finally by Muhammad Ali (an Albanian nephew of Ali Pasha) in 1811.¹⁵ Following the demise of the ethnically Turkoman Mamelukes (who had ruled as the dominant social group in Egypt since the mid-thirteenth century), the nomadic Bedouin tribes had vied for power in an attempt to establish a more hardline fundamentalist Egypt alongside the existing Arabian territories of Ibn Sa'ud and the Wahhabist factions. Muhammad Ali was supported by the British (who sought to prevent the emergence of an Arabic, Islamic fundamentalist power bloc) in his suppression of the Bedouins, to the extent that as part of a 'friendship' package a lenient attitude towards limited piracy was tolerated along the Barbary coast, at his discretion, even though the professed British intention was to rid the region of pirates.¹⁶

Another example of the extent to which Turkey is shown as a central power facing unstable borders to its east as well as to its west and north involves a fragment that engages the more specifically literary aspect of the poem and the politics of representation. As a poetic device, the exquisite extended simile of the Kashmiri butterfly in lines 388-421, which follows the fisherman's account of Leila's death, further emphasizes the onward, eastward projection of *The Giaour*. Byron uses imagery of beauty and exotic extremes within an orient that becomes more elusive and enchanting as it becomes proportionately more eastern and distant. His representation of the ephemeral nature of exotic beauty begins with an image of gorgeous, zoomorphic otherness:

As rising on its purple wing
 The insect-queen of eastern spring,
 O'er emerald meadows of Kashmeer
 Invites the young pursuer near...
 (388-91)

Beginning *in medias res*, the simile subsequently reflects that the butterfly had lured the poet's imagination 'from rose to tulip' (413), or from Turkey and Persia across an exoticized Asian land mass to the mountains of Kashmir, where the image is pursued until it fragments and disintegrates the instant that it is caught. It has been but 'a lovely toy' (404), a plaything or luxurious diversion rather than the embodiment of reality. Conventionally, this simile has been read as an elegiac contemplation on the impossibility of sustaining passionate love, on the fragility of purity and innocence, and on the tragic human propensity to destroy the beauty that it

desires. I argue that the passage has another function, which is entirely bound into Byron's involvement of his poem with popular perceptions of a monocultural, mesmerising East of Turkish harems, sherbert and splendid silk. Upon the disintegration of the 'brightest hues' (407) of the insect, its 'charm' (408) – the glamour (to return to a term used similarly, and also in relation to eastern literary material, in my analyses of Scott's *Lay of the Last Minstrel*) – is gone.

One is immediately reminded of the images cast in *Childe Harold* upon reaching the borders of the various countries that are represented – shimmering literary illusions that, likewise, disintegrate upon the experience of reality, and offer a range of fragmented alternatives that tantalize, dodge and evade the dominant forms and conventions of western understanding. Popular understanding of the Near and Middle East through to India was such at the time that Byron was writing the *Eastern Tales* that few British readers had any sense of a heterogeneous Islamic world. The butterfly simile suggests that, beyond the charm of perceived oriental luxury, beauty, and standard representations of cruelty testified to in the accounts of travellers that I have discussed in my previous chapter, a very different world existed. On the immediate Eastern borders of Turkey, the austere interpretations of shari'a law imposed by the followers of Wahhab and Ibn Sa'ud in the later years of the eighteenth century and the first years of the nineteenth century had banished the saint-worship and opulent rituals of the Sufi Moslems from Iraq and Syria, into Saudi Arabia and eastwards to what is now Pakistan.¹⁷ From Basra and Damascus, Wahhab had preached against the Ottoman Turks as morally corrupt heretics, given to luxury and without virtue.¹⁸ I have already shown that Byron was well aware of the reality of these factions, with their strict interpretations of the Qur'an, pressing in towards the Porte.

Conflict and rivalry within the Islamic world, in the form of Hellenophobic and Arabophobic attitudes, is more directly referred to in *The Bride of Abydos*, where the Turkish patriarch Giaffir contemptuously says of his ward, Selim, ‘I’ll watch him closer than before – / He is an Arab to my sight’ (1:143-4). Selim, who is of Greek origin, reveals himself as a flamboyantly dressed pirate in canto 2, and is subsequently killed in a battle with Giaffir’s men. The ineffectiveness of Greek resistance, and its suppression by the Turks is thus dramatized, but Byron’s aside in the note to line 144 adds further cultural weight to the text, ensuring that the reader does not miss the significance of the few words that might otherwise be lost merely as private expressions of resentment: ‘The Turks abhor the Arabs (who return the compliment a hundred fold) even more than they hate the Christians.’¹⁹

The textual engagements I have just been speaking about show the first of Byron’s Eastern Tales reacting against prevailing attitudes towards Islam as a monolithic and barbarous entity. *The Giaour* works persistently with motifs of the East as exotic, elusive and desirable, from the tantalisingly unpronounceable nature of its title, through the use of foreign words within the text (Fakir, Dervise in the instance recently given), and poetic devices such as fragment narrative and the simile of the Kashmir Butterfly. A method emerges in which Byron seeks to prompt questions about the ethics and motives surrounding the incursions of British trading, political and military activity around the edge of the Arab world, often in collaboration with Ottoman parties (such as Mohammed Ali in Egypt and Ali Pasha in Albania), as well as more immediate intervention in and around Turkey and Greece.

Developments – Borderlands, Piracy and the Arab Middle East

Byron's development of his poetry of borderlands after *Childe Harold* cantos 1 and 2 is perhaps best seen with the help of a resumé of the frequency with which he depicts nations as multi-faceted entities that look in a range of directions. In *Childe Harold* canto 1, Spain was repeatedly configured as a feminine land, simultaneously gazing with sultry, and sexualized dark-eyed face towards Africa, and with its pale, gothic face turned towards Northern Europe. The poem maintains that influences from Moorish North Africa and from Europe have become embedded as part of Spain's own, unique character – in the form of picturesque ruin (the Moorish castle near Cintra), in its living, sexually productive and passionate native population (the gypsies that Harold watches around their campfire), and in its modern, military and commercial identity. In canto 2, Byron used images of Albania – this time gendered masculine – looking to Europe and to the East, as well as northwards towards the Slavonic states and Russia. His brief, three-line mention of the Wahhabis, referring to their sacking of 'the prophet's tomb and all its pious spoil' at Medina, together with the inference that they 'May wind their path of blood along the West', (2:735) takes the gaze momentarily but memorably eastwards beyond Turkey.

Because of their importance to European history, the Napoleonic campaigns of the first decade of the nineteenth century were the dominant current affairs of the period. Some of Byron's readers would have been aware of the Wahhabi Arabs' seizure of the major Moslem holy cities of Karbala (1801), Mecca (1803), and Medina (1804), and of the subsequent rôle of the British navy in assisting Turkey to suppress further fundamentalist expansion from the Gulf ports. C. A. Bayly's historical chronology of these events and his account of the high level of British activity that was involved in suppressing Wahhabism help us to place the narrative of *The Giaour* and the other Eastern Tales amidst the continuous activity taking place along the Near Eastern

frontiers. Furthermore, Bayly's attention to the politics surrounding British and American moves to 'bring to heel the 'Barbary Pirates' of Algiers', which I mentioned earlier, adds to the dimension of poems such as *The Corsair*, in which the hero is by description and definition a buccaneer (although Conrad is clearly a Frank, rather than a Muslim, piracy is the salient issue), but also highlights the need to think carefully about the role of the sea and its relationship with authority more generally in the Tales.²⁰ It is worth bearing in mind that Captain Wentworth, in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, recounts how he and fellow naval men had quickly 'made money' through legitimized piracy on 'a lovely cruise together off the Western Islands' of the Mediterranean.²¹

Amongst the various studies of intellectual reactions to Islam during this period, and of the decline of the Ottoman empire, Albert Hourani's *Islam in European Thought* as well as his *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798-1839* offer a survey of critical perspectives. Based on historical and literary readings, and on developments with which Byron, as a traveller in Albania, Turkey and the Levant during the critical years 1809-10 was familiar, Hourani's accounts also emphasize the magnitude of the Arab fundamentalism pressing on Turkey from the East, and its destabilising effect on the Ottoman Porte.²² Byron's note to *Childe Harold* canto 2 demonstrates his awareness of Arab Islamic expansion: 'Mecca and Medina were taken some time ago by the Wahabees, a sect yearly increasing.'²³ With Ali Pasha running a semi-autonomous state to the West of the Porte, and the Arab fundamentalists threatening to extend their influence from the East, Turkey thus becomes almost a border land in its own right, whilst still constituting the administrative centre of the Ottoman Empire. In the Eastern Tales, Byron writes both explicitly and allegorically of Turkey as a nation that borders on Albania and Greece, but also on the Arab Islamic regions to its own East, in the form of what are now Syria, Iraq, and

(southwards) Saudi-Arabia. Furthermore, his continuous use of these Janus-like representations of nations that constitute debatable regions offered him the opportunity persistently to question stereotypes, and thus the ideologies that produced and perpetuated them. In the Eastern Tales he launches a sustained literary assault on perceptions that the 'Orient' (and thus despotism and barbarism) exists somewhere distant and to the East of a discernible, monumental border. Instead, he substitutes a broad area of cultural liminality and literary *chiaroscuro*, within which East and West cease to be morally exclusive categories.

My arguments in this chapter so far have predominantly been concerned with passages from *The Giaour*, and will progress to cover *The Corsair* and *Lara*. Those poems illustrate the course that Byron's writing of the Near Eastern borders took as it developed. However, I also want to look at features of the Eastern Tales as a group and, indeed, as a series of poems with an overall narrative. Again, a number of factors emerge that link Byron's and Scott's poetry. Like Scott's *Minstrelsy*, Byron's Eastern Tales form a rich repository of cultural material, stories and miscellanea directly related to his experiences of border regions and societies. That material, like Scott's, is retrieved, editorially shaped and reworked in various forms in his later works. Both poets are concerned with issues of gender, indicating its status as a contentious topic at this time. A core of thematic issues involving perspectives on land borders, or borders between land and sea, and narrating their transgression, is always evident. For example, all of the Eastern Tales involve actions that take place around the coastlines of Turkey, Albania and Greece. All narrate plots centring on sensational and violent incidents between opposing Eastern (Islamic) and Western (Christian) protagonists. Each Tale consists of a story or surface narrative involving the fate of women suppressed within Eastern, usually Muslim, society, and in which a particular woman becomes the object of desire for a man from a western culture. As always in Byron's

poetry, a high level of irony within these narratives ultimately turns the themes of cruelty, vice and luxury back onto the European – and, more specifically, British – culture of the reader. The harem is not a surprising choice of theme by Byron, and its imperial analogues for the gender politics of imperialism, both in terms of libidinous reality and as cultural allegory, lie firmly at the heart of the Tales.

The exotic allure of the Seraglio, and the desire of western men to be able to penetrate such a sexualized zone (and a forbidden one that was the property of an adversarial male), was a feature both of heterosexual masculine desire and of one of its political manifestation, imperial ambition. Byron responds to such masculine desire and imperialism as intricately related to one another, and as inextricable. The critique that the Eastern Tales offers as a series of poems of aggressive imperial ambition begins with the cultural devastation set in motion by the predatory sexual desire and faux-morality of the eponymous Giaour, and culminates in the mutual destruction of Turks, Greeks and Venetians, brought about by the cultural cross-dressing Italian Lanciotto/Alp, who turns Turk out of desire and revenge in *The Siege of Corinth*. In that latter poem the motif of the exotic Seraglio and the invasive European male predator is turned on its head, in the configurations of Francesca as the forbidden and secret European woman, and Lanciotto/Alp as the renegado European male who poses as a Muslim invader in the hope of gaining access to her. *The Giaour*, *The Bride of Abydos*, *The Corsair*, and metaphorically, in the final unveiling scene, *Lara*, each involve the penetration of the Seraglio by western protagonists, and thus question notions of the inviolability of the power structures of Despotism. *The Siege of Corinth* completes the correlation of Near Eastern despotism and European Imperialism, radically to suggest that the latter is no less violable than the Ottoman Empire that it seeks to replace. Lanciotto's action, furthermore, takes the Tales in a full circle back to the revenge of the

Giaour, who joins a band of Albanian bandits to destroy Hassan (the association of the British with Ali Pasha is referred to here). In each case, Byron equates the ambitious European on the border with savage behaviour and with passions of revenge more regularly associated with a 'cruel' East.

The paradigm of the unseen, silent, and entirely passive Eastern female spoken briefly of in *Childe Harold* canto 2 is taken to the extreme in the lifeless form of Leila in *The Giaour*. Critics have frequently noted that Leila is allegorically representative of the captive, subject status of Ottoman-occupied Greece. As such, she represents a unified concept, but one entirely lacking the power of self-definition and determination. More generally speaking, Byron configures her as the feminized embodiment of the individual member of society living under any tyrannical system of government. *The Bride of Abydos*, however, breaks with the motif of absolute female passivity. In *The Bride* (where, true to Byron's habit of misleading titles, there is ultimately no such figure) the narrative tells of a Turkish woman's attempts to rebel against patriarchal dictatorship and escape forced marriage into a Harem. It is in *The Corsair*, however, that Byron begins fully to develop the motif of the radically active heroine.²⁴ Gulnare, the seductive harem slave, plays upon Conrad's chivalric spirit, in order to save herself and *him* (thus breaking with the passivity of Leila). But, more importantly, she prompts a series of actions that shatters the authority and sanctity attaching to convention and tradition within the Eastern harem and, through the death of the conventional Medora, on Conrad's feudally managed island.

Integral to Byron's narratives of patriarchal eastern despotic power and the institution of the Harem are the comparisons made in all of the Tales between feudal social systems (associated with the European past) and contemporary perceptions of the East as an older, barbarous world

existing in a stasis of cruelty, slavery and repression. By consistently drawing parallels between these two apparently disparate sociopolitical systems, Byron removes any notion of reassurance that geographical and historical distance keeps the East and the cruelty that it embodies at a safe remove from Britain as a heritage culture.

Nostalgia becomes difficult, or even impossible. Chivalric tradition, romance literature and Scottish Enlightenment philosophy are used within the framework of the oriental tale to build a critique of the ease with which distinctions were commonly made between societies deemed barbarous and those regarded as civilized. Again we see Byron using convention, and turning it around to offer a satirical commentary. Cultural comparisons between existing 'barbarous' societies and past, pre-civil stages in modern, western society had become axiomatic within Scottish Enlightenment stadial models of social development, as we have witnessed in some of Scott's own deployment of those theories. Indeed, it is from Byron's correlation of oriental segregation and the subjugation of women with gothic romance stories of their imprisonment that the powerful philosophical and political dimension of his Tales springs. The predicament of Byron's more conventional Eastern heroines echoes that of their European chivalric romance counterparts in three main ways: either they face ritual execution (as in *The Giaour*), they are rescued by a chivalric hero (Gulnare, as harem slave, in *The Corsair*) or they die of grief following desertion (Medora, in *The Corsair*).

In my first chapter on Scott's *Minstrelsy* I mentioned the progression from Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*, through the socio-historical theories of moral philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, to the contention that the treatment of women within a society was the gauge by which its status either as barbarous or civilized could be determined. According to these theories,

the influence of which had extended far beyond academic and intellectual circles by the early nineteenth century, chivalric feudal society (in which custom idealized women and their virtue) was unique to Western European culture. No analogue to Chivalry was thought to have existed, in any recognisably similar form, East or South of the European frontiers. The consequence, that women in western European society alone came to be afforded superior – and thus civilized and free – status, was used contrastively to deprecate the barbarous conditions of slavery and repression that perpetuated themselves in the East, where it was believed women were thought of as a form of property or as little better than animals. The Eastern Tales confound all their initial simplicity of form to complicate western acceptance of such ideas, ironically presenting them as unsophisticated and unreflective. *The Giaour* mounts an extended critique along these lines, not least in Byron's persistent and ironic references to the commonly held belief that Islam denied women a soul. The motif in *The Giaour* of the Muslim woman as 'soulless toy for tyrant's lust' (1:490) is discussed at length by Caroline Franklin,²⁵ and therefore I shall not pursue it further here, other than to comment that the lines in the poem and Byron's sarcastic note are as much aimed at British and other western European perceptions of Islam as at actual Qur'anic belief and its interpretation by Muslims. Byron's note reads: 'A vulgar error; the Koran allots at least a third of Paradise to well-behaved women; but by far the greater number of Musselmans interpret the text their own way, and exclude their moieties from heaven...'²⁶ Whilst he does not absolve Muslims like Hassan of extreme cruelty and misogyny, nor does he allow the Giaour – who has no conventional Christian belief – moral elevation. By demolishing the precedent of 'liberation' as justification for colonising such societies, and for 'educating' them in Western European customs, Byron subverts the main discursive argument of imperial expansion and contends that, given human nature, the very concept of a liberal superpower is an oxymoronic delusion.

The freedom of women to appear in public in Spain, as represented in canto 1 of *Childe Harold*, was contrasted by Byron with the silent and unseen private space within which they exist in the Tepaleen of canto 2. The Eastern Tales reintroduce the controversy of female passivity or, conversely, activity, and examine the domestic, social and civic behaviour of women, along with their conformity or transgressive natures within severely constraining social systems. Byron's factual base for these representations was partly his own experience of Albania and Turkey, as Islamic Ottoman states in which women were indeed largely segregated. He was also drawing heavily upon accounts of Near and Middle Eastern and Islamic society that he commented on in his notes to *Childe Harold* canto 2, and which I discussed in my previous chapter. As mentioned above, Thomas Thornton's description of Turkey as a feudal society in the European sense, rather than as an orientalised despotic Sultanate, was particularly influential.²⁷ The homosociality depicted in *Childe Harold* canto 2 owed much to Byron's familiarity with Thornton, particularly in its focus upon an exclusively male public and leisure environment. Thornton's argument was that the Turks possessed an '*adventurous spirit of chivalry*' (my italics), in many ways similar to that of Scott's vividly vigorous Borderers in the *Minstrelsy* ballads and *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*. Thornton deprecates the 'almost idolatrous gallantry of the chevaliers deriving from a preoccupation with women', that had defined European chivalric feudalism.²⁸ Byron's European heroes and his Near Eastern 'despots' are characterized with those differences of romantic chivalry and masculine adventure very much borne in mind. The irony that runs through the Eastern Tales works, indeed, by subverting European beliefs that their lineage of gallantry – commemorated in the artifice of romance literature and the gothic revival – had shaped them as entirely morally superior. The generic figure of the harem owner, Pasha or Bey, in any of the Eastern Tales by Byron, is representative of the upholding of

tradition as a means to political power; he is not necessarily evil as an individual, but is always bound by the codes of conduct of his social context. His alter ego is the European hero, whose respect for women stems from feudal tradition and chivalric romance, but which proves equally destructive.

Byron addressed the problems of traditional relationships between men and women, based on fixed power structures, through the example of Conrad in *The Corsair*. His focus, indeed, is on Conrad's downfall as a result of his relationship with the active (and therefore revolutionary) figure of the 'harlot' Gulnare. Nigel Leask's reading emphasizes the tragedy of Conrad's adventurous affair, tracing it to an excess of chivalric pride that prevents him from seeing that he is becoming party to the destruction of traditions of his own.²⁹ I want to take that reading into my own area of research in a specific way, and argue that Gulnare is an individual who dares attempt the kind of self-definition that Leila, in *The Giaour*, cannot even contemplate. By seizing the capacity to define herself, verbally and through her actions, Gulnare also begins to define those around her. Unlike Leila, she is hardly ever depicted as motionless or silent and never as both. She takes opportunity in whatever form it arises and uses it to appear virtually as she wishes, to Seyd and to Conrad. The poem's description of Seyd sitting 'within the Haram's secret chamber' whilst 'pondering o'er his Captive's fate' (3:131-2) seems at first to suggest the absolute power of the patriarch or despot over Gulnare and the imprisoned Conrad alike. Yet we can read the 'chamber' that encloses him as a sexual snare. Conrad, who is steeped in chivalric virtue and its associated respect for women, enters the same chamber and believes he is saving a damsel-figure until, returning to his island, he has time in his 'memory to review' (453).

The action of reviewing – or, more accurately, of seeing anew – is crucial to the poem’s denouement. Conrad’s thoughts, having penetrated and ‘liberated’ the Haram, are of Medora, the inactive and silent wife he believes he can return to, and who is his true ideal. But, as his mind anticipates ‘her afar, his lonely bride: / He turned and saw – Gulnare, the homicide!’ (3:462-3) Conrad cannot perpetuate or reconstruct the chivalric ideal, and the critique Byron offers in *The Corsair* of literature that valorizes chivalry and feudalism to legitimize an expanding empire could not be clearer. Rather, Conrad becomes a tragic figure as, for ‘Medora’s tower: / He looks in vain’ (568-9). Everything that he imagines himself to be at home with is now ‘strange’, (569) and has long since become ‘dark’ (2:270). Byron repeats the motif of strangeness throughout the poem, adding archaic diction that reinforces the effect: ‘’Tis strange – of yore its welcome never failed’ (3:571). When Conrad eventually finds the lifeless body of Medora, he has to face reality: ‘But she is nothing’ (622). *The Corsair* subsides from a romping tale of striking incident into a Romantic exposition of emotion and guilt. In doing so, it shifts from a masculine, heroic mode that is reminiscent of Scott’s Historical Ballads into a feminized genre consistent with the Romantic Ballads. Conrad is left only with Gulnare, the active heroine who has determined events and who, as the result of chivalric respect for women, is now free. He loses his own powers of definition, sinking into ‘exhaustion’, ‘stupor’, and ‘weakness’ (3:646-50), before fading out of the text. The final paragraph re-asserts Byron’s unchanged attitude towards the fashion for chivalric literature. Conrad’s pirate crew ‘long mourned ... whom none could mourn beside’ (691), and they perpetuate the idealized memory of Medora: ‘fair the monument they gave his bride’ (692). The last couplet testifies to heroic literature’s complicity in the tragedy of human ambition and passion, whether it take the form of the French Revolution, the Peninsular War or the more diverse forms of imperial expansion that were topical at the time: ‘He left a Corsair’s name to other times, / Linked with one virtue, and a thousand crimes.’

In short, Byron employs shocking, stereotypical examples of extreme forms of subjection and control to question the legitimacy of the discourses of western civilisation that were being used by conservative writers to elevate the moral self-esteem of Tory Britain, obsessed as they were with their historic, feudal lineage. The Eastern Tales repeatedly suggest that the taxonomies which sought to measure standards of barbarism and civilized behaviour were themselves hegemonically intrusive, and merely justified a different kind of despotism that was manifesting itself in the form of aggressive imperialism and colonial domination. Amongst the interpretations of Grand Tour rhetoric offered by Chloe Chard, the familiar, late eighteenth-century ‘device of constructing binary, symmetrical oppositions between the familiar and the foreign’ as a means of ‘translating foreignness into discourse’ is particularly helpful in summarising the kind of Enlightenment rationalisation that Byron was reacting against.³⁰ In one of the most quoted lines from the Tales, the Giaour makes a guilt-ridden confession that Hassan – the owner/master/executioner from whom he had sought to free Leila – had done ‘but what I had done / Had she been false to more than one’ (1062-3). Byron thus assimilates the Near East and Europe, where the rhetoric of imperial power perpetually opposes them to one another.

Boundaries of literary form in the Eastern Tales

My analyses of Scott’s *Minstrelsy* and his narrative poetry, and of Byron’s *Childe Harold* cantos 1 and 2 have shown how significant the choice of poetic form was to the effect and ideology of each work, and to their invocation of borderland locations. Byron’s use of Spenserian form for *Childe Harold*, for example, and the controversy it generated amongst reviewers, was a means

by which he publicly attacked and subverted fashionable Tory chivalric-gothic revivalism and established his own alternative literary programme of political and social protest. (On a less confrontational plane, I showed the literary link that Byron established between himself and Scott, the Spenserian romantic-gothic poet of *Don Roderick*.) *Childe Harold's* narration of the wandering traversal of a succession of controversial borderlands, based on the digression of a 'Grand Tourist' from approved safe routes, was seen to connect the poem's plot with Byron's eccentric deviation in using a range of literary conventions and protocols. I previously showed how Scott, conversely, sought to uphold literary conventions and protocol, though with a forward-looking, providential outlook. I now want to look more closely at form and structure in the *Eastern Tales*, for again we see Byron using literary features that, in turn, are heavily dependent for their full effect upon the setting of the poems in border regions widely known to be politically and culturally unstable.

There is an immediate and marked difference in metric form within the *Eastern Tales*, in which Spenserian stanzas are dispensed with as Byron explores a range of poetic forms, more suited to the evolving subject matter of his writing. His letter to Lord Holland dated 26 September 1812, for example, suggests that he had been more than comfortable writing in Spenserian form: 'I can weave a nine line stanza faster than a couplet, for which measure I have not the cunning. — When I began 'Ch[ild]e Harold' I had never tried Spenser's measure, & now I cannot scribble in any other.'³¹ However, just over a year later, on 17 November 1813, in another letter to Lord Holland, Byron refers to the couplets he used in *The Giaour* and *The Bride of Abydos* as more suited to the casual telling of an oriental tale: 'I merely chose that measure as *next to prose* to tell a story or describe a place which struck me – I have a thorough & utter contempt for all measures but Spenser's [sic] stanza and *Dryden's couplet*.'³² Spenser still seems to have been

one of Byron's poetic ideals, but not the culturally appropriate one for the narrative of the Eastern Tales.

Byron's mischievous, mocking, and apparently self-effacing irony in remarks such as 'I have here and there risen to the couplet when I meant to be [*vastly*] *fine*' and his flippancy about 'things written in that debauched measure' cast a misleadingly trivial glaze over the deeper issues that form the core of the Tales. Similarly, his suggestion that the 'very *wild* stanzas are more like Southey ... than anything English – but that is thoroughly Eastern & partly from the Koran' seems calculated to stimulate and excite curiosity in both the form and subject matter of his Tales.³³ *The Giaour* and *The Bride* were indeed self-consciously exotic in their appeal, and were anything but unsaleables, the term that Madame de Staël had originally used of Southey's oriental verse in a letter to Byron, and which he onwardly quoted in a letter to Thomas Moore.³⁴ It is, rather, Byron's reference to the 'wild' nature of his stanzas that holds the essential clue to his method, and to the ideological framework within which he was working throughout the Eastern Tales. Wildness, we have already seen, was an aesthetic concept connected with the Sublime, but contained and repeatedly referred to in a picturesque manner by Scott in the notes to the *Minstrelsy* in his descriptions of the Border raiders and their culture.

However, the literary genre with which Byron was most seeking to draw *parallels* in the Eastern Tales was not the 'English' oriental tale, however 'wildly' and exotically it might have been told by Southey, but the German, gothic 'volk' tale that had evolved through Sturm und Drang, into Schiller's, Bürger's and Goethe's tales and onwards into the gothic romanticism of Scott. His transposition of the North-European gothic folk-tale across cultural barriers and onto the problematic borderlands of Eastern Europe and the Near East enabled him to craft poems that

challenged firmly embedded western ideologies of heroism and political morality. It is in the medievalism of Schiller and Scott in particular, and in that of their contemporaries, as Marilyn Butler says in *Romantics, Rebels & Reactionaries*, that the origin of the Byronic hero lies.³⁵

In *Childe Harold*, traditions associated with oral tales and ballad form were dealt with quite specifically in terms of interrelationship with the more complex structure and sophisticated rhyme schemes of the Spenserian stanza. But in the Eastern Tales the engagement with folk storytelling traditions is much more direct. Furthermore, in each of the Tales Byron mediates his verse through narrators who differ vastly from the highly educated, aristocratic English traveller, Harold (who from first publication was regarded as a thinly disguised Byron, in any case). Byron's dispensing with the dignified, distanced stance of Harold, in favour of simpler, more subjective narratives dramatized by 'foreign' characters, casts a sense of greater authenticity and legitimacy onto narratives that purport to come from unsophisticated figures, or renegades, living along the margins of supposedly barbarous Near Eastern Islamic cultures.

With *The Giaour* first being published just a year after the appearance and controversial critical reception of *Childe Harold* cantos 1 and 2, the change of narrative style itself was achieved with dramatic effect. The move towards a more naïve primitivism is established from the outset of the Eastern Tales, and is manifest in the fractured narrative of the Turkish fisherman which forms the central fragment of *The Giaour*, and towards the end of that poem in the testimony of the gothic monk. Oral traditions are therefore posited as equally existent in Near Eastern as in European cultures. The fisherman's fragmentary narrative interweaves the evidence of his own involvement in the incident at the heart of the story. It also begins with a spectacular reversal of the literary convention of an entranced, western public gazing eastwards with amazement

towards the exotic other: for it is the Giaour, a European intruder only referred to in the language of an Islamic culture, who, the Turk recalls, ‘drew / My gaze of wonder as he flew ...like a demon of the night’ (200-3). Whilst Byron was certainly responding to the fashionable interest in, and thus the burgeoning market for, orientalist literature he was also engaging in a classical manner with oral traditions that sought to re-establish purer, lost virtues as a counterbalance to the rise of urban commercialism in Britain. We need to look well beyond the surface narratives and more obvious literary stylistics of the Eastern Tales to understand these ambiguities and to appreciate the true complexity of the poems.

McGann, in *Fiery Dust*, takes his critique of *The Giaour* straight to the relationship between fragment poetry and ballad literature, contending that the adoption of a range of diverse, narrative ‘character’ rôles is part of the overall fiction of an authentic oral, bardic performance. At a literary level, Byron ‘presupposes in his English readers a knowledge [of] ballad-type poetry’, drawing on a plethora of ‘formulaic techniques picked up from the many English ballads, true and bogus, which were so well known.’³⁶ This is unquestionably the case, and extends to the other Eastern Tales, as Byron’s texts reveal. I have been arguing, though, that *Childe Harold* canto 2, and the Eastern Tales, are also *culturally* rooted in Byron’s first-hand lived experience of the Near Eastern Ottoman borderlands, and that they employ a range of ironies to mediate that experience through literature. This does not mean that a contradiction emerges between Byron’s choice of Near Eastern settings and his adaptation of British literary ballad form. We have seen how cultural comparisons were made between older British ‘folk’ cultures that had produced the ballads of antiquarian collections, and existing societies deemed barbarous, such as the semi-feudal states of the Ottoman borderlands. Such comparisons were consistent with the stadial theories that had become intellectual currency following the

eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment – though there were certain major conditions attached, such as the insistence, already mentioned, that ‘true’ feudalism of a chivalric nature had only existed in Europe, whilst the East was tainted by luxury and indolence. McGann continues his critique by further exposing the structural relationship between Byron’s cumulative use of ‘Eastern imagery’, oral tradition and fragment form – a combination which enabled him to circumvent the criticism of purist antiquarian pedants – whilst employing techniques where, quite clearly, ‘the tradition is that of Sir Patrick Spens.’³⁷

Following from McGann, Marjorie Levinson concurs – in her reading of *The Giaour* as a digressive variant of the Romantic fragment poem (which she distinguishes from the antiquarian ballad fragment) – that the narratives of characters such as the fisherman were designed to mimic the different dramatic recitations of oral, bardic poets.³⁸ However, Levinson offers a valuable extra perspective, showing that there is a lineage incontrovertibly connecting Byron’s poem with Herodotus’s classical *History of the Persian Wars*.³⁹ Byron’s use of oral and bardic ballad traditions, his invocation of the evasive nature of eastern storytelling (very like Sheherezade’s perpetually suspended narratives from the *Arabian Nights*, which were seminally influential for him) are, Levinson’s analyses show, ultimately grounded in the world of classical literature and history. Whilst that literature was itself grounded in ‘folk’ traditions and oral witness, in the early years of the nineteenth century the range of references that Byron uses would have been accessible only to the well-educated British (or at the very least, European) reader.

The fragment form of *The Giaour*, and its growth as Byron ‘lengthened its rattles’⁴⁰ over the five months and seven editions from its initial publication on 5 June 1813, has been addressed by

almost every critic. *The Giaour* in fact grew from the 453 lines of fifteen copies struck for private circulation in late March 1813, through the 684-line first edition of 5 June 1813 to the 1334 lines that constitute the 7th edition of November 1813. McGann provides a table that shows when the various lines were composed and included in particular editions.⁴¹ I have covered, throughout the course of this chapter, aspects of the radical ways in which Byron's fragments perpetuate disjunction to deny the reader (and, indeed, himself) the comfort of any closure to parts of, or to the whole poem. In this respect, Byron diverges from the model of Rogers' *The Voyage of Columbus*. Rogers' hero is endowed with a Christian faith, ending his poem on a note of providential optimism similar to that we have seen to be so evident in Scott's poetry.⁴² The extreme fragmentation and incompleteness that occurs at the end of *The Giaour*, however, and the rejection of absolution, is such that the poem concludes without even a conventional identification of the hero, and the eponymous figure disappears with the insubstantiality of a shadow: 'He pass'd – nor of his name and race / Hath left a token or a trace' (1329-30). Those words are attributed to the monk, and they occur six lines before the end both of his narrative and the poem. Uncannily, they recall a similar testimony from the fourth line of the Turkish fisherman's narrative: 'He passed and vanished from my sight' (203). Byron's poem is left straddling the borders of the Near East and West, and his hero, who is neither a Muslim nor a Christian but is associated with both, is as elusive and perpetually problematic to one as to the other. Reflecting upon Scott's Border raiders of the old debateable land, the figure of the Giaour is Byron's incarnation of the subversive 'borderer.' *The Giaour* is a poem that depends for existence upon culturally and politically contentious lands, within which the tragic dramas of man's desire for power are perpetually being acted out. Byron leaves his readers with a couplet that testifies to the apparent inevitability and infinite irresolution of division, conflict and destruction: 'This broken tale was all we knew / Of her he lov'd, or him he slew' (1333-4).

At the heart of Susan Wolfson's study of *The Corsair* is Byron's choice of a 'canonically stamped' poetic form, bound by a formidable array of existing rules and conventions, in order to 'render a tale of an outlaw.'⁴³ The heroic couplet becomes the measure of the anti-hero. The 'tale' in the case of *The Corsair* is that of a man – Conrad – who traverses authority (represented by the metaphor of the sea), to cross and recross cultural boundaries as he sees fit. The beginning of the poem is immensely interesting in its use of stylistic devices, as well as themes and motifs, which suggest authority and, paradoxically, freedom. Enjambment, for instance, was defined by Lord Kames in 1762 as a form of poetic 'license', and subsequently deemed dangerously in sympathy with revolutionary ideals. As hostility to radicalism grew in the years following the French Revolution, and continuing into the post-Napoleonic period, there was a consensus amongst conservative reviews that 'loose versification' connected with 'moral looseness verging on political subversion.'⁴⁴ Byron's self-publicising of his motives in choosing the heroic couplet is revealing. He wrote in his dedication of *The Corsair* to Thomas Moore that he had chosen 'the good old and now neglected heroic couplet' on the basis that it was 'perhaps, the best adapted measure to our language', declaring that 'the stanza of Spenser is perhaps too slow and dignified for [this] narrative.'⁴⁵ I argue that what he refers to as 'our language' – on the surface, a straightforward reference to English – has a subtext implying the voice of literary radicalism, a forward-looking 'good old' cause with only scant regard for the overly-restrictive boundaries of polite form.

I have maintained throughout my analyses of Byron's poetry so far that the sea represents a Burkean revision of the Sublime as the ultimate manifestation of authority. In *The Giaour* it became the manifestation of power to which the passive individual, Leila, was sacrificed. Byron,

of course, represents such tyranny as inviting subversion. Thus in all of the Eastern Tales, the borders between sea and land represent the extreme margins of political and cultural difference that are constantly open to transgression. The link between the sea as such a metaphor, and Byron's use of literary form is easily made. *The Corsair*, for example, begins with an exhortation to freedom. The first couplet advocates the triumph of freedom of thought and spirit, but nevertheless emphasizes the physical bounds conventional to couplet form: 'O'er the glad waters of the dark blue sea, / Our thoughts as boundless, and our souls as free (1:1-2). Wolfson comments on the typicality of the Byronic rhyme of 'sea' (a word associated with military campaigns and commerce, as well as with piracy and slavery) with 'free' (indicating liberty) at this primary point in the poem, as an instance of Byron's use of one aspect of versification to counter another.⁴⁶ Furthermore, she points to the momentum of the verse and the proliferation of similar rhymes in the first 22 lines of the poem, on the basis that they set the pattern for the entire two-canto work. I will return to those rhymes in a moment, but before doing so I want to look at some lines of my own choosing from the same passage, which show the rapidity of the development Byron effects from the opening couplet. A strategically powerful instance of Byron's use of enjambment, in the manner spoken about more generally by Wolfson, enters the poem at this point to break loose in the middle of an otherwise conventionally punctuated stanza:

These are our realms, no limits to their sway –
 Our flag the sceptre all who meet obey.
 Ours the wild life in tumult still to range
 From toil to rest, and joy in every change.
 Oh, who can tell? not thou, luxurious slave!
 Whose soul would sicken o'er the heaving wave.

(1:5-10)

It would be difficult to overstate the significance of those lines, and I argue that they are amongst the most revealing in the Eastern Tales series. Firstly, empire, monarchy and subjection are invoked in a traditionally punctuated couplet. Byron's use of imperial imagery makes this clear, even though the pirate's island initially looks like a paradise of freedom and egalitarianism. Then, in lines 7-8 a wild flourish, couched in the language of passion, tumult and revolution, breaks free from the pattern of physical constraint, with no endstopping between the two lines. Line 7 acts as a perfect counter-statement to line 6. The exultation of joy to be found in 'every change' in line 8 heralds social, political and literary reform as being inseparable from one another, and potentially irrepressible. Byron then returns to heavy punctuation with an endstopped couplet that prompts an ironic critique of apathy towards slavery and eastern despotism (represented by the convention of the 'luxurious slave') and a reassertion that the sea, the ultimate manifestation of authority, invites challenge. The florid Burkean stylistics and rhetorical figures of this last couplet are inverted in the typical Byronic manner.

The examination of rhyme schemes in *The Corsair* offered by Wolfson provides a comprehensive account of the way in which the emphasis on an outlaw dominates the more conventional framework of the heroic couplet. Besides pointing to the subversive use of feminine rhymes at 'heroic' points in the poem, she has identified the 'bounding' nature of Conrad, and the poem's plot involving his transgression of borders and boundaries, as all contributing to Byron's expansive resistance to 'the traditional protocols of heroic couplets.'⁴⁷ Wolfson focuses on the succession of rhymes such as 'sea / free, sway / obey, range / change, fight / delight, zeal / feel, core / soar' in the opening lines as evidence of the radical reform of the

heroic measure that could appeal to ‘aristocratic’ Whig reviewers such as Francis Jeffrey. Jeffrey, in his unsigned review of *The Corsair* and *The Bride of Abydos* for the *Edinburgh Review* dated April 1814, praised *The Corsair* (which he deemed a finer poem than *The Bride*), not least on the basis that Byron had given to the heroic couplet ‘a spirit, freedom and variety of tone, of which ... we scarcely believed that measure susceptible’, and that in doing so had proven ‘that the oldest and most respectable measure ... is at least as flexible as any other – and capable ... of vibrations as strong and rapid as those of a lighter structure.’⁴⁸ Seven years after the *Edinburgh’s* contemptuous review of *Hours of Idleness* had derided Byron’s immature view of an heroic past, the keywords ‘oldest’ and ‘most respectable’ are the defining characteristics here for Jeffrey. Byron’s respect for the poetic integrity of the couplet would have helped greatly in securing his praise.⁴⁹ *The Corsair*, and the Eastern Tales generally, were far more generously reviewed than *Childe Harold* cantos 1 and 2. Partly, this was because Byron appeared more conventional in his telling of tales of ‘striking incident’, and in his construction of heroes who at least on a superficial level of understanding fought against the barbarism of eastern tyranny – until, that is, he complicated the matter, as in each of the tales he does, by showing that barbarism exists also within the actions of Western Imperialism. The embedding of chivalric-style heroes within verse forms consistent with ‘class invested ... literary style’ (these words are Wolfson’s) gained the favour of the *Monthly Review*, which was delighted by Byron’s ‘return to the standard heroic measure.’⁵⁰ George Ellis for the Tory *Quarterly Review* cast Byron in the conventions of the British aristocracy and its Augustan patriarchal traditions, speaking of ‘the striking evidence of this poet’s talent’, and praising his use of eastern imagery as ‘distinct and glowing, as if illuminated by its native sunshine.’⁵¹ Ellis, however, objected to some (unspecified) passages on the grounds that they ‘excited sympathies’ that might lead to the poet being able to ‘possess himself of our imagination and become master of our emotions’, and thus exceed ‘the legitimate

pretensions of poetry.’⁵² His overall verdict was that *The Corsair* and *Lara* were superior to *The Giaour*, because more in keeping with the manner of poetry that reflected the ‘progressive improvement’ of language and manners from one age to another.⁵³ William Roberts in the *British Review*, whose negative criticism of *Childe Harold* cantos 1 and 2 was discussed in my previous chapter, likewise regarded *The Corsair* as an ‘improvement’ in terms of manners and language, and praised Byron’s use of the heroic couplet.⁵⁴

Byron’s use of Heroic form to tell tales of piracy and sexual intrigue in *The Corsair*, though, was less appreciated by some other conservative journals whose investment lay in maintaining the restraining borders of unambiguous morality. For a different perspective, we might look to the *Antijacobin*, whose criticism of *Childe Harold* cantos 1 and 2 was, similarly, discussed in the last chapter. A brief return to *The Giaour* puts the position taken by the *Antijacobin* into perspective. The anonymous reviewer had been prepared to endorse *The Giaour*, but only with qualifying deprecations of the ‘ambiguous’ morality of some of the more sensational subject matter and characterisation. He begins by declaring that ‘Lord Byron is, unquestionably, one of the best poets of the present day’, but then levels him with the defect of ‘the ambiguity cast on his opinions.’⁵⁵ This ambiguity, as I have argued, far from being a defect in terms of Byron’s programme is the pivotal point upon which the ideology of the Eastern Tales turns, and it is entirely dependent upon narratives involving the constant traversing and transgression of Near Eastern borderlands for its success. The *Antijacobin* was not prepared to maintain its brief show of enthusiasm for Byron’s literary skills, and its review of *The Bride of Abydos* and *The Corsair* opens, in contrast, with a tirade against Byron’s ‘extremely prolific’ habit of ‘bursting’ upon the public with poetic examinations of a succession of ‘beauties and deformities.’⁵⁶ The rhetoric of the *Antijacobin* is predictable, but nevertheless interesting, for it accuses Byron through the use

of orientalist conventions, metaphors and allegorical figures that were regularly used to denigrate the East: lack of control resulting in overly prolific issue, and a fascination with exotic beauty that sits disturbingly alongside deformity. The review speaks ironically of the ‘wonderful rapidity’ with which the three Eastern Tales so far published had succeeded each other. Indeed, the *Antijacobin* goes so far as directly to attribute Byron’s literary promiscuity to his ‘excursion to the East.’⁵⁷ The lack of literary willpower and self-control that he is accused of, having crossed the borders of civilisation and rationality into the realm of barbarism and passion, suggests the ongoing nature of the kind of addiction or disease that I referred to in my previous chapter. Again, it is entirely connected with notions of borders as protective barriers between cultures, rather than areas of exchange. The *Christian Observer*, as might be expected, was morally outraged by *The Corsair*, and deplored Byron’s use of the heroic couplet to give voice to ‘the jovial ribaldry of a savage piratical crew.’⁵⁸

As a poem with a pirate hero who lives with his band of outlaw followers on an island in the sea (a metaphor for authority), and who traverses the waves as he sees fit, *The Corsair* offered Byron virtually unlimited scope for advocating alternative forms of government. We have seen that *Childe Harold* cantos 1 and 2 were criticized for the aimless, modern wandering of their protagonist. The theme of the nomadic traveller is picked up time and again throughout *The Corsair*. In lines 15-16 of canto 1, for instance, we read of ‘The exulting sense – the pulse’s maddening play, / That thrills the wanderer of that trackless way.’ The poem moves from its impassioned opening exultation of freedom into a description of Conrad’s island, however, and we enter a familiar feudal domain. The scene, in which the pirates ‘game – carouse – converse – or whet the brand’ (1:48), is instantly reminiscent of Ali Pasha’s palace at Tepaleen (and the Palikar campfire episodes) of *Childe Harold* canto 2, as well as of the hall at Branksome in

Scott's *Lay of the Last Minstrel* and that of the Douglas chieftains' Highland borders home in *The Lady of the Lake*. The society depicted by Byron initially looks like a pantisocratic style democracy, but it becomes readable as a conventional rank-based stronghold. The Corsair, who is constructed as a composite blend of Byron's own rebellious hauteur and Ali Pasha's audaciously flamboyant individualism, is a typically Byronic hero, 'lonely straggler' (1:130) whose 'dark eye-brow shades a glance of fire' (196). It is a prominent case of Byron's blending his highly individualized orientalism with outward forms of masculine feudalism previously noted in Scott.

If we look back to Scott's *Lay of the Last Minstrel* we immediately see the literary precedents that Byron was working with, and which he seeks to challenge in the Eastern Tales. The romance of *The Lay* involves a crucial oppositional interplay between on the one hand the regressive trope of oriental superstition, linked to Roman Catholicism, magic and retrospection in the figures of Michael Scott, the Lady of Branksome and William of Deloraine, and on the other, the enlightened chivalric gallantry that Scott enlisted as the prerequisite for the propulsion of the Scottish Borders forward as a model of morality, epitomized in Henry Cranstoun, Margaret and the re-tuned Bard. Byron brings notions of historic feudalism and perceptions of the contemporary orient together in each of the Eastern Tales, telling his own stories of 'striking incidents.' The stories all draw the reader into scenes of immediate intimacy, along the shorelines of the Ottoman Near East, precisely because these borders constitute areas in which perceptions and prejudices of other cultures are undetermined, and never resolved. By the end of each Tale, the initial clarity with which the oriental and western figures were drawn and distinguished has dissolved and, discomfitingly, the two have all but shaded into one another. Literary precedents are subjected to as much scrutiny and subversion as in *Childe Harold* cantos

1 and 2. The trope of the Harem girl and the ‘romantic’ figure of the damsel in distress of chivalric medievalism each bear heavily upon the themes used in the Eastern Tales, appealing to a female readership familiar with sentimental, modern gothic literature. Byron’s Eastern Tales thus courted a public that had recourse to its own knowledge of a prolific range of contemporary gothic and oriental literature, typified by Scott’s gothic ballads and narrative poems, Mrs Radcliffe’s romances, and eastern fiction such as William Beckford’s *Vathek*.

Shorelines as borders: estrangement and the impossibility of return

In my previous chapter, I argued that Byron constructed *Childe Harold* cantos 1 and 2 around a narrative that traversed and crossed a series of borders separated by seas and rivers. The sea was seen each time to serve as a highly political symbol of authority, presenting the reader with a perspective on the land ahead based on prescriptive definitions and prejudices. In Portugal, for example, we saw how Harold’s first impression is described through a reflection of the land seen in the sea. Albania, noted by Byron as virtually absent from western literature and outside the known landscape of classical Europe, is visible on approach only in terms of its immediate shore, its interior mountains initially shrouded in mist. The Eastern Tales differ notably in the way that borderlands are used structurally and within narrative. Instead of the *interior* of the lands of the Near East providing the main location for the poems’ action, as in *Childe Harold*, it is the margins where the land meets the sea that provide the narrative fulcrum. In *The Giaour*, Leila is taken from the ‘silent shore’ (365) to be executed by being drowned at sea – in ‘channel’d waters dark and deep’ (369). The central narrative of the fragmented poem is that of a fisherman whose skiff is used to convey her to the place, which nevertheless remains in sight of the bank to which the chillingly ironic ‘calm wave’ (375) of her death sends its ripples. The

Bride of Abydos involves a hero who turns pirate. Conrad, the eponymous protagonist of *The Corsair*, is likewise a pirate. (As I mentioned earlier, Byron wrote the poem at a time when British naval forces, having succeeded in suppressing the Wahhabi ports of the Persian Gulf, were attempting to deal with the problem of piracy along the Barbary coast.) Kaled, the cross-dressing page in *Lara*, drowns Ezzelin, and in doing so sets off the chain of events that finally brings about the death of the hero. In *The Siege of Corinth*, a renegade Italian is borne by 'the Adriatic' to 'the Paynim shore' (198-9) where he becomes 'a traitor in a turban'd horde' (399), joining the besieging Turks on the foreshore and initiating the annihilation of both sides. In each of the Eastern Tales, sea and land form distinct areas that can be crossed and re-crossed, sometimes furtively and sometimes aggressively. The sea was crucial to Britain's power structure. As Bayly writes, following the major sea battles of the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by 1815 'British squadrons controlled virtually every major sea route [around the near and middle East].'⁵⁹ Byron's use of the sea in the Eastern Tales connects the aesthetics of the sublime with manifestations of masculine power and ambition, to render the sea an omnipresent metaphor for the deployment of imperial ambition and might.

Whilst the sea is readable as a site of masculine enterprize in the Eastern Tales, at the other pole of gender women emerge from their virtual exclusion from the narrative of *Childe Harold* canto 2 to become another immutable presence within the Eastern Tales. Metaphorically speaking, the more passive and compliant of these women feature as traditional, conservative literary personifications of the *land*. Laws and social codes of conduct are imposed upon them by a male-dominated society. The motif of the Harem, seen from such an allegorical perspective, represents the enforced perpetuation of systems of belief and the enslavement of entire peoples by imposition of customs and laws. Yet whilst Byron takes female vulnerability to its extreme, in

the form of the deaths of characters such as Leila in *The Giaour*, Medora in *The Corsair*, and Francesca in the *Siege*, the women of the Eastern Tales, as we have seen, are by no means all, or always, passive. The rebellious harem-slave Gulnare of *The Corsair*, who ‘becomes’ the transvestite page-figure of Kaled in *Lara*, as other critics have indicated in their readings of Byron’s progressive narration from Tale to Tale, undermines the manner in which ‘tradition’ insisted that male and female social rôles and paradigms should be stable constructs. Recalling the attempts of travel-writers within the Ottoman territories to impose categories, which I mentioned in my previous chapter, these transgressive women break down the formalities of rule that enable knowledge to be converted into power. Although there are clearly many anxieties informing Byron’s creation and development of active women within the Eastern Tales, they undoubtedly challenge the coherence of orientalism, as we have come to see it in Said’s sense, as a discourse and set of paradigms that endorse Western dominance.

Leask’s readings directly relate literary tradition to political controversy in the Eastern Tales. Within that relationship, the passive female figures in the Eastern Tales are seen as representative of an orientalised European ‘narrative past.’ The oriental passive female and the feudal maid within the gothic tower, both literary stereotypes, indeed bear an uncanny resemblance to one another. Leask suggests that the Byronic heroes’ desire for passive women is ultimately a rejection of modernity and all that it stands for; in every case circumstances conspire to reveal it to be disastrous. Thus, the displaced invocations of chivalric ‘courtly love’ that motivate characters such as the Giaour and the Corsair (who becomes Lara when seen in the context of narrative progression), and the ‘old’ virtues of pride and honour which accompany that love, support a critique of political systems and ideologies founded on traditions of rank and hierarchy.⁶⁰ In *The Corsair* Medora, by contrast with Gulnare, cannot exist without her

patriarchal husband-master: rumours of his death destroy her. Her death, in turn, results in Conrad's disappearance from the narrative. Conversely, the active heroines of the Tales represent the seduction of societies by modern concepts such as individualism, revolutionary liberty, and the questioning of authority. Yet even Gulnare, transformed into Kaled, sinks into madness and eventual death following the loss of Lara.

Lara and the East within Europe

Lara, the fourth of Byron's Eastern Tales and the last to be written whilst he was still living in Britain, was published in August 1814. Thus it reached the public six months after the first edition of *The Corsair*, but also just a year after Scott's last commercially successful poem, the six canto Gothic romance *Rokeby*, less than a year after the same author's attempt at Arthurian romance, *The Bridal of Triermain*, and a month after the first of his novels, *Waverley*.⁶¹ I have chosen to conclude with a discussion of *Lara* followed by some consideration of Byron's 1823 poem *The Island* for a number of reasons. Not least amongst these is the manner in which *Lara* brings Byron's Eastern Tales to their natural apogee in terms of the thematic use of borderlands and their rôle in a poetics of cultural representation, whilst *The Island* offers a later, different perspective. *Lara* is the poem in which Byron finally 'makes strange' the East in a European plane of representation. *The Island* reverses that situation by making Europe strange. Ambiguity and illusion, which are main themes throughout each of the Eastern Tales, are at their most significant in the plot and text of these poems. Equally importantly, it is in *Lara* and *The Island* that Byron's indebtedness and response to Scott, to his standing in the literary world of the early nineteenth century, and to his literary politics, is most evidently and eloquently marked. Finally, whilst *The Siege of Corinth* was written later than *Lara*, and is frequently considered one of the

Eastern Tales on account of its treatment of Christian/Muslim conflict on the Ottoman borders, Byron stated in a letter to Murray dated 2 September that *Lara* was the poem that brought the series, as it then stood, to a natural and coherent conclusion:

A word or two of “Lara” which your enclosure brings before me.— It is of no great promise separately but as connected with the other tales — it will do very well for the *vols* you mean to publish — I would recommend this arrangement — Childe H[arold] — the smaller poems — Giaour — Bride — Corsair — Lara—the last completes the series — and it’s [*sic*] very likeness renders it necessary to the others.⁶²

Strategies of communication, language and translation, and their effect upon human understanding, are immensely important in *Lara*. Strangeness, which I showed earlier to be so important to the conclusion of *The Corsair*, dominates the poem as it moves towards the final scene in which the ‘page’ Kaled is depicted tracing her ‘strange characters along the sand’ (2:625). (By this point she has been revealed to be a woman.) Language constitutes both a refuge and a problem, hinting at cultural impasse, from the outset in this most reflective and metaphysical of Byron’s Eastern Tales. Count Lara is unable or unwilling to speak for the first 225 lines of the poem. His taciturn nature contrasts markedly with the disgressive, rhetorical rambling of Childe Harold, and he neither breaks into the confessional mode of the Giaour nor the highly dramatized dialogue of Conrad, the Corsair. When Lara does break his silence, with the exception of a few lines of exchange with Otho, ‘his words are strung / In terms that seem not of his native tongue; / Distinct but strange... / ... accents of another land’ (1:229-32). In the

depth of night, he cries out in ‘strange wild accents’ (276) that frighten those who do not understand them, and in the daytime he speaks in a subdued tone only to his eastern page. Byron makes a great deal of the linguistic barrier that separates Lara and Kaled from the other characters in the poem, and from the reader. Partly, Lara’s muteness in his native language stems from the morally untranslatable nature of the events that have taken place elsewhere, and which are never explicitly revealed. In this respect, *Lara* offers the reader of the Eastern Tales series another key to the problems of negotiating the ambiguous ‘truths’ and alternative accounts presented in *The Giaour*.

Suspicion, pertaining to what the traveller may have become involved in across ‘the bounding main’ (1:12) is similarly a main theme of *Lara*. Byron does not tell his readers what Ezzelin, Lara’s accuser, actually knows. In terms of the poem’s effect it is entirely expedient that the details remain a matter of speculation and imagination. The *withholding* of information thus infects *Lara* with a heightened sense of drama that complements Scott’s *insertion* of explanation into ‘Sir Patrick Spens’ – the difference being that Byron encourages and excites his readers’ individual speculation, whilst Scott prescribes his own, predetermined version of events.

A vital part of the extraordinary atmosphere of *Lara* is the suspense that hangs over the poem because haunted by a sense of an overwhelming East that cannot, or does not, reveal itself in any tangible way until the very end. In the last few lines of the poem, when the mortally wounded Lara finally ceases conversing with Kaled in words that can only be guessed at ‘from the tone’ (2:454), and raises his hand in his last conscious act to point incontrovertibly ‘to the East’ (467), one feels a sense of relief and, even if only vaguely, of explanation. Until that point connection with the orient and with configurations of the Islamic world is manifest in Byron’s

use of cloaked figures such as Kaled, with ‘his’ eastern looks and name, and the mysterious Lara, returned from crossing the ‘bounding main’ (1:12) and with a complexion when angered that approaches ‘blackness in its demon hue’ (2:74). The eastern ‘scimitar’ (2:363) used in the fight with Otto is consistent with conventions of representing oriental savagery. Lara is the traveller who has become so entranced, so changed and – literally – rendered incomprehensible by the experience and witness of ‘barbarous’ culture across the boundaries between Europe and the East that he cannot readily present himself in conventional terms. Indeed, he can only refer in broken sentences that recall the fragment narrative of *The Giaour* (and in the involuntary shrieks of a nightmare, followed by silence) to events that took place in ‘lands where – but I must not trifle....’ (2:50). The reader is led to speculate over the rest, and the imagination leads back to *The Corsair*. Byron’s prefixed advertisement to the three editions in which *Lara* was published anonymously with Rogers’ *Jacqueline* helped this association along, by suggesting ‘The reader ... may probably regard it as a sequel to a poem that recently appeared.... To his conjecture is also referred the name of the writer.’⁶³ Whilst the subsequent editions in which it was printed separately and under Byron’s name did not contain that advertisement, the relationship between Byron’s poems had become incontrovertibly established.

We might well ask why Byron should choose to locate the poem that succeeded *The Corsair* within a European, gothic setting if he wanted to deal with oriental material again. At one level, he was clearly responding once more to the kind of politicized gothic verse romance that *Childe Harold* cantos 1 and 2 addressed, and more specifically to Scott’s poem about return, power, and disinheritance, *Rokeby*, which I will come back to shortly. But one of the points I have been arguing throughout my analysis of Byron’s writing of the Near East is that he constantly works and reworks themes, motifs and figures, turning them into conceits and reversing tropes, to

expose moral complacency and cultural ambiguity. *Lara* enacts the inversion of the familiar figure of the European stranger in the East, so epitomized by the Giaour, Selim in *The Bride of Abydos*, and Conrad in *The Corsair*. Count Lara's 'blacken'd fame' (2:122) operates at an obvious level to reinforce the moral smear brought about by an alleged crime, but at another level it exoticizes the hero as a European who has unmistakably turned Turk.

One of the most immediately 'strange' aspects of *Lara* is the manner in which the understated eastern element manages to dominate the extensive gothic stylisation of the plot and frame text. Nigel Leask has pointed out that the oriental *materiale* of the other Tales is not so much denied as 'condensed or displaced' in *Lara*.⁶⁴ That condensation and displacement provide the base from which my own inquiries seek further to explore how far there is a readable eastern cultural strand to this Tale, and how it represents Byron's frustration with convention, cultural hegemony and the unquestioning acceptance of 'truths' purveyed by authoritarian sources.

From the outset there is tension between two elements – orientalism and gothic feudalism – which hold the poem together. That tension does something more dynamic than draw mere comparisons: it foregrounds fundamentally oppositional cultural prejudices, then undermines them. The opening lines of *Lara*, for instance, consist of a standard literary set-piece of gothic, chivalric revivalism that delineates the full, rank-based feudal system: the first ten-line paragraph contains references to 'serfs', 'slavery', the 'feudal chain', the 'unforgotten lord' and 'chieftain' and a host of 'gay retainers' (1:1-9). The first three couplets are concerned with servitude and vassalage: they are endstopped, conventionally punctuated and contained. Two couplets narrating the celebrations of Lara's return follow, and Byron's abrupt switch into enjambment offers the first hint of the disturbance to order and convention that he brings with

him. The next paragraph begins with a motif of homeland and belonging, followed by a question that introduces the notion of crossing borders as a form of straying, abandonment and the transgression of rule: ‘The chief of Lara is returned again: / And why had Lara cross’d the bounding main?’ (1:11-12) Borders, at this point in the poem, are posited as cultural and moral boundaries, with Byron assuming the voice of a reactionary rhetorician. In answer to the bewildered indignation implied by that initial question, Byron starts to add the references that accumulate to hint at Lara’s experience: upon his return Lara’s sole companion is a ‘page, / of foreign aspect’ (1:47-8). Lines 528-615, towards the end of canto 1, comprise an extended description of the page, in the middle of which he is named. The portrait of Kaled again employs many conventions of gothic romance, but nevertheless refers to him in a manner that testifies to his eastern ethnicity: his face is described as ‘darkly delicate’ from exposure to his ‘native sun’ (1:528-9); his character is of ‘A latent fierceness that far more became / His fiery climate than his tender frame’ (580-1). To the adjectival ‘blackness’ of Lara’s reputation, and the more literal darkening of his physical appearance, these and other motifs link Kaled and ‘his’ master to cultural aspects associated with a presumed orient. In this way, Byron’s text guides the reader eastwards and towards conventions that translate orientalism into ‘understanding.’ The reality, however, is that no one is able accurately to read the strange page, for he/she is not what prejudice might lead one to suppose. Byron again sets up conventions and images in order to reveal them as deceptions, just as he had in *Childe Harold* cantos 1 and 2 – Kaled is uncovered, and revealed to be a woman in canto 2, lines 514-19.

It might be considered reasonable to speculate that Kaled’s late revelation as a woman was designed by Byron to insure against accusations of extreme immorality in the form of homosexuality. If we recall the lines withdrawn from *Childe Harold* canto 2, which were

replaced by an account of women within the Harem, and reconsider the homophobic social climate within which Byron was living and writing, such an explanation seems plausible and likely. Indeed, Leask has drawn attention to the extent to which Kaled's late exposure as a woman seems almost an afterthought to the homoerotic charge that exists in the relationship between 'him' and Lara up to that point.⁶⁵ However, the secrecy, impenetrability and exotic mysteriousness of Kaled's and Lara's relationship, whilst it builds a powerful homoerotic frisson within the poem, also approximates to the codes of conventional gender segregation associated with the East from which it has come.

The complexity of gender relationships and their place within social systems in *Lara* become clearer when the poem is read in the light of Byron's earlier poems and Scott's poetry. With *Lara*, Byron indeed returns his Eastern Tales to an exclusively male public domain. Other than Kaled, there are no female characters in the poem. The motif of the Hall that opens the text once again recalls the feudal aspect of Tepaleen in *Childe Harold* canto 2 and, by definition, Scott's Branksome from *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* with its *mise en scène* of 'bright faces in the busy hall, / Bowls on the board, and banners on the wall' (1:5-6). However, within the Hall of Lara the exuberance and *joie de vivre* that emanated from the homosocial and multiethnic world of Tepaleen (and, by inference, that of Scott's Hall of Branksome) immediately evaporates. A miasmatic gloom descends on a public world that (contrary to that of Ali Pasha) does not admit foreigners, and within which a power struggle emerges from inside the immediately local, patriarchal society when it is realized that one of them – Lara – has become 'changed.' As I have indicated, the truest approximation of *Lara* to Scott's poetry is to *Rokeby*. In chapter two I looked at the scene in Scott's opening canto, which depicts the Baronial Hall and its company into which the dark-skinned and treacherous 'stranger' (1:v:20; vi:1; viii:1), Sir Bertram

Risingham, is admitted after his return from a career buccaneering in the Spanish Main and central America. The similarities between Risingham and Lara, the subsequent ways in which Scott and Byron deal with estrangement and material return, and the poems' different conclusions, now re-emerge as factors of central comparative importance in this penultimate section of my study.

Conducted in an incomprehensible language, the 'import' of which can only be guessed at from its 'tone' (2:444), the *private* world of Lara and Kaled is veiled both by physical and linguistic clothing, obscuring Kaled's true gender till almost the last moment of the tale. Byron's text becomes increasingly effeminized as his poem draws towards its conclusion. Lara's death and Kaled's madness employ the tropes of women, hysteria and the need for patriarchal authority. But feudal masculinity and oriental femininity are shown to be unstable – the peasant's narrative suggests that Kaled, far from being a passive companion, is a self-motivated killer like Gulnare. If we look at the Eastern Tales as a series, this is history repeating itself as Byron establishes a direct link with the homicidal Gulnare. The suppression of 'truth' in *Lara* results not in the perpetuation of western systems and their supremacy, epitomized by the country to which Lara has returned and Kaled has been brought. For Lara and Kaled undermine these in the motif of the peasant's revolt and liberation. Instead, Byron allows his Tale to subside into maladjustment and illness, represented in the terminal form of Kaled's mad tracing of 'strange characters' along the borderline of the shore. The disordered script of the woman who subverts all the conventions of womanhood remains indecipherable, and *Lara* concludes with 'her tale untold – her truth too dearly prov'd' (2:627). The final feminisation of *Lara* enacts an inversion of the remasculinisation that concludes Scott's *Minstrelsy*.

Scott and Byron: some endings and some beginnings

The chronological proximity of *Rokeby*, *The Bridal of Triermain*, *Waverley* and *Lara* is significant in a number of ways. Firstly, there is the turning point in British literary history in which Scott fully diverted his attention away from the established masculine genre of verse romance and towards the writing of the historical novels for which he would be best remembered, leaving Byron as Britain's foremost poet. In that respect, Scott crossed a literary border from which, apart from the occasional foray back into poetry and verse drama, he would not return. Secondly, the ideological splitting of the two main genres of literary production – poetry and the novel – between these two writers was such that at this point poetry became dominated by a controversial aristocratic, republican, radical Whig ideology whilst the novel, which would develop as the dominant literary form in the nineteenth century, became the domain of the nation's most celebrated traditionalist, pro-Imperial and monarchist literary giant. The reality of Scott's historically progressive programme, in stark contrast with Byron's frustration over the failure of ideals of individual freedom, is perhaps never more clearly delineated than in this generic split. Thirdly, and inseparable from all I have just been saying, the influence of *Rokeby* on *Lara* is such that Byron's poem is directly readable as a response to Scott's last major poem of borderlands, and constitutes a highly public form of literary dialogue.⁶⁶

The influence of *Rokeby* on *Lara* is at its most textually obvious in the extended description of Lara in canto 1:289-382, where the Byronic hero's many similarities with Scott's swarthy and misanthropic villain are both a tribute to the other poet and an inversion of his moral code. The haughtiness and silent pride of Byron's mysterious character, for instance, are a sign of

individualism against the crowd and disdain for public opinion in a man whose nature has been irrevocably changed by travel in foreign lands: whereas for Scott the same features prefigure a ruthlessness that threatens to subvert the social cohesion of a Britain whose very foundations are laid in lineage, descent and legitimate succession. It is no coincidence that Lara is orphaned, or that he abandoned his destined bride in order to wander abroad and return with a young boy as a companion (although that boy is subsequently revealed to be a woman). Lara's involvement in an event too appalling to be articulated, recalling the 'memory of some deadly feud / Or disappointed passion' (*Childe Harold*, 1:66-7) adds to his status within the context of a poem that continually hints at the exotic East but which remains in its dark, gothic, European setting. Furthermore, the Spanish location returns Byron's *Tales* to the European/Islamic borderlands first encountered in the opening canto of *Childe Harold*. But as I have been exemplifying, Byron's use of the full costume of baronial chivalry unmistakably invokes Scott's *Rokeby*. Lara, like Bertram Risingham, has been irrevocably changed by experience. Unlike Scott's buccaneers, however, he cannot bring his foreign 'treasure' (Kaled) home and convert it into a European heritage. At the end of the poem, Lara dies rejecting absolution as he steadily fixes his gaze on Kaled and raises his arm in a final gesture towards the East, cast as a man whose last conscious act is a rejection of his own culture and all that it holds to be sacred. On the other hand, Scott's Risingham – who is portrayed as a ruffian from the outset – is redeemed through a litany of confession and remorse prior to his death.

Once again, the concept of borders and the creation of heroes that cross them in order to foray and bring home cultural curiosities from the other side is key to the structures and plots of both writers, as is the homage to oral culture that by this point seems almost to have become obligatory to each. *Rokeby* achieves the effect of an oral element through the character of the

harper, and a succession of interpolated ballads that include ‘To the Moon’, ‘Brignal Banks’, ‘The Cypress Wreath’, ‘The Harp’, and ‘And whither would you lead me then.’⁶⁷ In *Lara*, the ‘peasant’s tale’ at the end of canto 2 (550-97), which tells of the murder of Ezzelin, has a similar effect and also refers Byron’s readers back to the Turkish Fisherman’s narrative that was central to *The Giaour*. A profound difference between the two poets’ approach to oral literature is evident. Scott uses songs with themes of patriotic lament, whilst Byron’s ‘peasant’s tale’, told after feudal authority has been subverted through the revolt, is a narration of revolution and murder. Byron’s Ezzelin represents authority, and the bringing of Lara to account for his dalliance with piracy in the East, but before he can complete his testimony he is assassinated by the invasive and subversive presence of that East, embodied in the hermaphroditic figure of Kaled. Piracy, which is such a favourite theme with Byron, also figures in Scott’s poem. But whilst Byron’s pirates – most notably in the configuration of Conrad, the Corsair, and his development into the returned wanderer, Lara – are flamboyant renegados whose chosen ‘spoils’ remain illicit and corrupting, in the form of the highly sexualized women they attempt to steal away but never make into lawful wives, Scott’s *Rokeby* legitimizes the spoil of buccaneers and subsumes it into the respectable estate and inheritance of the British aristocracy. Robbery on the high seas, for Scott, can be approved as long as it is given the sanction of the state and returns with its gains to Britain, where they can become part of the heritage of the nation. Buccaneering, therefore, displaces and re-enacts the exploits of the Border raiders of the *Minstrelsy* at an Imperial distance.

Configuring the future of Cultural Encounter

I wish in conclusion to acknowledge some further lines of development in both Byron's and Scott's careers, that provide the groundwork for more extended study of the configuration of cultural encounter. The present book is concerned primarily with poetry, but Scott's importance as a novelist is such that a full consideration of his treatment of the themes I have been discussing would necessarily involve tracing their ongoing development throughout his prose. Scott's novels turn on figurations of cross-cultural encounter and debatable lands as surely as does his poetry, but his career as a novelist was so prolific and his fiction so rich in details that I am unable to follow those lines of enquiry adequately here. Needless to say, Susan Manning's work on the debatable lands of the Netherlands, both in actuality and where 'Dutchness' or configurations of low-country cultural stereotypes appear in Scott's novels, extends crucially into areas that place Scott's fiction in the broad picture of European, British and American transatlantic relationships.⁶⁸ Her consideration of the sea as an ever-threatening natural force, sociopolitical agent and metaphor in novels such as *Guy Mannering* (1815), *The Antiquary* (1816), *The Abbot* (1820) and *The Betrothed* (1825) adds further insight to the comparative perspectives on Scott's and Byron's poetry that I am aiming at here. Likewise, Caroline McCracken-Flesher's work at the time this book is going to press, on memory and the problems encountered by characters returning to Scotland from exotic locations in Scott's later novels, confronts issues that will interest my readers.⁶⁹ McCracken-Flesher's interest in the changing nature of Scotland, and the impossibility of simple return to a 'known culture' in works such as *Chronicles of Canongate* (1827), looks in intriguing ways at the changes wrought both in Scottish characters who have lived, or been born, in distant countries such as India and in those

who have remained in Scotland. She furthermore explores the cultural encounters of such differing Scots with one another.

Returning to Byron and poetry, if we extend our perspective beyond the Eastern Tales to the larger picture of Byron's overall career, themes of East-West encounter similarly persist.

Typically, he continued to work with themes of a protagonist's subversion of codes of normative behaviour and with the transgression of established physical boundaries. Analyses of Byron's later works again extend beyond the scope of this book, but it is important to acknowledge that the 'Haidee' and Seraglio episodes of cantos 2 to 6 of *Don Juan*, and the Russian cantos 7 and 8 adapt and rework earlier oriental and Near Eastern material, both from *Childe Harold* and the Eastern Tales, into the mature satire and burlesque of his final years.

Byron's late poem *The Island, or Christian and his Comrades* (1823) is set in the South Pacific, and therefore is not an 'Eastern Tale' in the Turkish sense. However, it treats primitivist tropes that have many affinities with processes of orientalism, and uses a narrative of cultural encounter and erotic politics between a highly sexualized, southern woman (this time free and empowered) and a British man (in this instance, a mutineer, and thus a fugitive criminal). The normal gender roles are reversed. Furthermore, despite his choice of a South-Sea setting Byron returns to a Scottish theme in *The Island*, casting a Hebridean outlaw as his protagonist, using Ossianic imagery of wildness, and once more gesturing towards Scott. Austere Gothic motifs, culminating in the resemblance of a subterranean cavern to a Cathedral in Canto 4, sit alongside descriptions

of luxuriance and South-Sea primitivism. Configurations such as these are persistently reinforced by Byron's choice of language and rhyme, within a narrative of cross-cultural romance. I shall say more about Byron's dialogue with Scott soon, because this poem treats strangeness in ways that allow conclusions not available from the Eastern Tales alone. Firstly, I want to look at some thematic issues in *The Island* which relate to those discussed throughout the course of this book, and which offer variant representations of cultural encounter.

Most critics now include some discussion of *The Island* with analyses of the Eastern Tales. Nigel Leask shows how Byron finally 'reworks many of the themes and narrative techniques' of the earlier oriental poems. He points out that the utopian ending offers a complete reversal of something more general, pervasive and profound, the 'normal discourse of colonialism.'⁷⁰ Indeed, Leask's and also Caroline Franklin's readings of *The Island* illumine the extent to which Byron continued to respond to social and literary conventions concerned with sexuality and the subjugation of women, and to the hegemonies of colonialism, as ideological formulations that fed off one another.

Much of my discussion has concerned notions of South, East and North insofar as Scott's and Byron's poetry responded imaginatively to Enlightenment codes of categorisation and cultural comparativism. I have looked at the ways in which Scott celebrated heterogeneity only to confirm the separateness between Highland and Lowland Scotland in poems such as *The Lady of the Lake*, whilst Byron's rebellious characters saw eastern eyes looking out from southern

European faces, and northern, European feudal mannerisms in the behaviour of Ottoman Beys and Governors. The short extract from Captain Bligh's *Narrative of the Mutiny and Seizure of the Bounty* that Byron included as an appendix to *The Island* makes clear that the mutiny was led exclusively by men from the North of England.⁷¹ The extract also gives more coverage to Fletcher Christian than does the poem, for Byron subverts his subtitle to make one of Christian's comrades the effective protagonist.⁷² In Byron's poem, the fictitious Torquil's Hebridean status takes northernness to geographical extremes, but in literary terms it has other functions. Torquil is born of an ordinary family, but whilst he is no chieftain he nevertheless embodies Ossianic characteristics: emerging from a wild, natural environment in a manner also reminiscent of Scott's Highlanders in the *Lady of the Lake*, he is introduced as a 'fair-hair'd offspring of the Hebrides' who has been 'rock'd in his cradle by the roaring wind' (2:165-7) and 'nursed by the legends of his land's romance' (176). Byron conjures 'visions' of him as the 'patriotic hero' or 'despotic chief' (204) that he might have become, under different circumstances and in another age, gesturing towards the vogue for translated epic at a time when such literature was highly popular in Britain.⁷³ Further references to the Firth of 'Pentland with its whirling seas' (166) and to 'Loch-na-gar' establish markers of place that proceed to combine 'Celtic memories' with epic legends of 'Troy' and the 'Phrygian mount' (291). Torquil, indeed, joins a pantheon of heroes and anti-heroes from every known continent – Ishmael, a Chillean 'cacique', a 'rebellious Greek', Tamerlane, Nero. Unlike Scott's Highland hero Roderick Dhu, and indeed Fergus McIvor and Even Dhu Maccombich of *Waverley*, he keeps his life. Fletcher Christian's death – he plunges from a cliff-top onto jagged, wave-lashed rocks rather than face trial and execution -

serves instead as the heroic sacrifice. Furthermore, unlike the heroes of Byron's *Eastern Tales*, Torquil remains with the woman he loves.

Byron's configuration of Southernness in *The Island* is very different from the *Mezzogiorno* interpretation of Southern Europe that I mentioned earlier. He repeatedly uses motifs of a lack of corruption in the South Seas, before encounter with Europeans brought vice, property ownership and sexual inequality. There is an obvious 'fall' theme operating in these instances, and Byron's play on the sailors' desire for paradise involving disobedience towards an authoritarian master is entirely transparent. But I want to concentrate on the ways in which this poem develops and mutates ideas that appeared in the earlier *Tales*, and which are similarly elaborated on in Scott's move from poetry into the novel. Originating from far beyond the fusion of Europe with North Africa or the Near East, *The Island's* heroine, Neuha, is represented as sharing more cultural similarity with Torquil than with the dark-eyed Spanish maids or the harem women of the Ottoman Empire. Amongst the many lines that emphasize the sympathies uniting the south and north in this idealized situation, the following compound the effect through the added impetus of repetition and rhythmic drive:

Of these, and there were many a willing pair,
 Neuha and Torquil were not the least fair:
 Both children of the isles, though distant far;
 Both born beneath a sea-presiding star;
 Both nourish'd amidst natures native scenes,
 Loved to the last, whatever intervenes...
 (2:272-7)

In canto 4, as the pair take refuge from the naval party sent to bring Torquil to justice, Neuha lights their cave with a brand of fire representing the enlightening experience of mutual understanding as well as love. The brand is the most elemental and ultimate fusion of north and south, a 'pine torch, strongly girded with gnatoos' (4:138) that emits its sparkle to reveal the natural splendour of the 'gothic canopy' (146) affording the couple cover until they are able to return to Neuha's idyllic Island. The unlikeliness of the entire scenario is striking. It is incredible that the brand would have remained alight after submersion in the sea, despite its 'plantain-leaf' covering. Allegorically, the sea as a sublime force which carries Imperial authority *and* facilitates its subversion, and Neuha and Torquil as heroic figures of resistance become components of a fairy-tale, as the magnificently cavernous bolt-hole is illuminated by a gleam of other-worldliness. The question remains as to whether Byron was still contending that in reality, cross-cultural encounter was doomed to end either in one-sided exploitation or in alienation?

The idealistic resolution of *The Island* leaves Torquil in a utopian location and in an apparently complete union with his South-Sea wife. The fusion of a tropical landscape with wild, Ossianic seas is again emphasized as the poem draws to its close in ways that underwrite the eroticized transcultural ending of this encounter of extreme north and extreme south. As such, the conclusion of *The Island* is the exact inverse of the desolate close to *Lara*, where Lara and Kaled/Gulnare are separated by death, with Kaled left stranded in a hostile wilderness of complete cultural isolation. The 'sand' in which the latter silently scrawls her indecipherable characters, bounded by the sea of authority which forbids her from becoming a character of her

own definition, takes on a new resonance when seen retrospectively from the perspective of *The Island*. The crucial lines which begin the final verse paragraph of *The Island* reveal Byron's vision of the retreat of authoritarianism:

Again their own shore rises on the view,
 No more polluted with a hostile hue;
 No sullen ship lay bristling o'er the foam,
 A floating dungeon:—all was hope and home!
 A thousand proas darted o'er the bay,
 With sounding shells, and heralded their way
 (4:401-6)

The sea is again associated here with authority, in earlier works appropriated – ‘polluted’ – by tyranny and oppression. It shimmers like the Bay of Lisbon in *Childe Harold* canto I, which I discussed earlier, but the effect here is reversed because the imagery is changed from that of hostility and disappointment to that of an idyll. Whereas for Leila and the Giaour the horror of a watery grave prevailed, and for Conrad the Corsair the transgression of authority by way of piratical activity led to the loss of all self-expression, for Torquil and Neuha the sea is more complex because it ultimately unites rather than separates their cultures.

Figurations of ambiguity run through *The Island*, and their structural positioning is such that they offer radical views of colonial activity and the function of contact zones. For example, we need to consider differing attitudes towards east/west and north/south relationships. Firstly, the sea brings the male British sailors to Otaheite in a conventional form of colonial encounter. However, from an early point in the poem conceptions of ‘strangeness’ are configured as the prerogative of the islanders rather than of the sailors: ‘Their [the Tahitians] strangest sight’ is ‘an

European face', and their country is one for 'which these strangers [Europeans] yearn'd' (1:47-8). By the end of canto 2, the mutineers have sufficiently integrated themselves into the culture of the islands that they, too, have come to regard Europe as strange. When the British ship sent to bring them to justice appears on the horizon, it is not represented as ominously familiar but, rather, as 'a strange sail in the offing' (503). This imagery again recalls Scott's description of Roderick Dhu and the Highlanders, as they appeared from the end of Loch Katrine in *The Lady of the Lake* (see chapter 2). Indeed, the allusion is sufficiently recognisable as to suggest a deliberate reference through which Byron prepares the way for his reversal of the fortunes of British authority and renegado, in this alternative zone of cultural contact.

Unlike the Eastern Tales, *The Island* is not a poem that Byron wrote from any experience of place, and its utopian vision is inconsistent with the earlier works I have discussed throughout this book. Literary sources alone provided the background material that informed the poem, including various accounts of South-Sea voyages, of the mutiny on the *Bounty*, and of other 'exotic' travels. Byron had read the sixteen novels by Scott that were published before *The Island* went to press. For the full significance of the continued literary engagement between Scott and him it is necessary to look beyond the former's poetry and into his development of prose fiction. As I have said, there is insufficient scope here to consider the substantial body of Scott's novel output, but I would like to introduce a few salient points of reference which open the way for further inquiry. I discussed earlier how the disappearance into the heather of the Highlanders in the *Lady of the Lake* meant that continued cross-cultural encounter on the

Highland fringe became impossible. Scott drew a line at the Trossachs, leaving the reader with a picturesque view of a land beyond inhabited only by wildlife and the echoes of Romantic legend. *Waverley* concludes with the Highlands similarly consigned to a picturesque future and a romantic past, for with Fergus McIvor and Evan Dhu executed and Flora entering a convent they are no longer able to regenerate. David Gellatly's 'new' clothing is so mesmerising that he can no longer remember the simple, older songs he once knew. Waverley marries Rose, the passive and impressionable daughter of the reformed Baron Bradwardine. In short, the remaining characters are shown to toe-the-line in a carefully revamped conclusion to their Highland fling.

Houses are significant enough to require some comment here because they, too, become changed when they are located in marginal or contact zones. Bradwardine's castle, situated on the Highland/Lowland fringe and in ruins after the unsuccessful Jacobite rebellion of 1745-6, is confiscated and rebuilt in a more modern style before being restored to its owner. Several other characters in Scott's novels experience similar makeovers of property and person. *Guy Mannering; or, the Astrologer* (1815), Scott's second novel, concludes with the estate of Ellangowan inherited by a hero whose travels have taken him from the 'debatable' Lands of the Netherlands to India before he finally returns to settle in South-West Scotland near the Solway Firth. Ellangowan has itself become 'debatable' because of a plan to thwart its true Scottish heir, in a modern plot that nevertheless bears some comparison to *Rokeby*. Scott incorporates a wealth of narrative material in this novel, concerning encounters between characters from cultures as different as Gypsies, the Dutch, Indians, Englishmen and Scottish Borderers. The final chapter

involves the building of a replacement for the 'auld' castle, a 'large and splendid house [...] to be built on the scite of the New Place' in 'a style corresponding to the magnificence of the ruins in its vicinity' in which the heir and his bride, along with the faithful family retainer Dominic Samson, are to live.⁷⁴ Scott includes a suggestion that the tower might imitate the Eagle Tower at Caernavon, where Edward II is alleged to have been born, and, whimsically comments that a 'few bags of Sicca rupees' could be used as ballast to anchor the entire building to the ground. As P. D. Garside notes, Sicca rupees were new rupees minted by the Government of Bengal between 1793 and 1836, being heavier and more valuable than those of the East India Company because they contained more silver.⁷⁵ Thus, Scott again uses the notion of treasure brought home from Empire and converted into the 'heritage' of property that we saw earlier as central to *Rokeby*. The vignette of newness and the future in *Guy Mannering* continues to the last. The nearby 'Singleside-house' is to be 'repaired for the young people and to be called hereafter Mount Hazelwood.' Other reconstructions are planned. Only an observatory (the novel is subtitled *The Astrologer*) is rejected.⁷⁶

Torquil, in Byron's *The Island*, by contrast with Scott's homecomers, relinquishes any hope of returning to promotion in a modern Britain when he becomes a 'truant mutineer', exchanging the ordered cabin life of the *Bounty* for his dream of life in a native hut. Bligh's *Narrative* states that promotion would have been recommended for the crew of the *Bounty*. Byron's poem suggests that the mutineers seek a return to a simpler life, where child-like memories and sexual

freedom irrespective of rank might prevail. His own experiences and observations meant that he knew this simpler life was not possible in a modern world.

We may do well to consider some observations concerning the poetics of space and simplicity, as signified by our polarized conceptions of houses and of the hut. For Gaston Bachelard, the house is a manifestation of our obsession with sociality, rank and identity. Its verticality requires, ideally, a cellar and an attic, symbolising memories and ambitions, and it should have space around it (this space can be in front, behind or adjacent to the building). We build our houses on memories, in order to take them with us into the future in much the same way that Scott's rebuilt castles incorporate selected features from the past and from his characters experiences. The hut, by contrast, is 'so simple that it no longer belongs to our memories – which at times are too full of imagery – but to legend; it is a center of legend [which] becomes centralized solitude.'⁷⁷

Torquil has everything to live for but no ambition – he is no tropical island Crusoe. His memories become isolated and frozen in time. Furthermore, the cottage he and Neuha build 'beneath the palm... / Now smiling and now silent, as the scene' (2:403-4) and the cavern which provides their sanctuary are each places of solitude. Torquil ceases to be himself in order to become his own legend, a character whose story will be recited over and again by the bards of the Island. There is no metaphorical cellar of the kind suggested by Bachelard's theorisation, in which he can store selected memories in the way that Scott's characters so characteristically do, in order that they can be retrieved and updated. Nor does Byron allow Torquil to covet the ruins of a lost past in the manner of *Childe Harold*, *The Giaour*, *The Corsair*, or *Lara*. The finality of

his situation is made clear by Byron's choice of the definite article and past tense: 'the tale was told' (4:411). The impossibility of Torquil's return to Europe involves him both in the solitude associated with exile and the society of the other culture with which he is united, ambiguities which add to the instability of Byron's vision. We might conclude that Byron finally draws as clear a line as Scott, and that his idealistic vision of cross-cultural encounter is inevitably unrealistic. The difference is that Byron's Mutineer hero finds himself on the 'other' side of the line. Bernard Beatty has aptly identified as a central theme of Byron's poetry, from *Childe Harold* to *Don Juan*, the paradoxical relationship between the desire for libertarian world citizenship and transient fascination with particular cultural experiences.⁷⁸ The temporary nature of serial encounter, as Beatty points out, has a negative effect on the value accorded the subjects of such encounter. Intriguingly, *The Island* is a tale of a hero's refusal to move onwards in an endless cycle of loving and leaving. Byron experimented in *The Island* with a destination that forces an endgame from which there is no way backwards *or* forwards.

I have looked at the structure, form and literary convention of all the poems discussed so far, so will offer some brief comments on those aspects of *The Island*. The voices of Torquil and Neuha generate a legend of their own – a 'new tradition' (4:413) which the islanders throng to hear and which Byron, as poet, exports back to Britain. We might read another, more familiar consolidation of encounter here: oral storytelling is united with contemporary, western literary form and production in ways similar to those suggested by Scott twenty years earlier in the Imitation Ballads of *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. Indeed, *The Island* is an extended ballad

tale – an anti-Imperial, yet in many ways colonial, answer to the patriotism of *Sir Patrick Spence*. Even the oxymoronic qualification of Byron's phrase 'a new tradition', which he uses just eight lines from the end of the poem, should be sufficient to warn against taking his vision too seriously. Byron's representation of paradise is qualified, for it requires permanent exile from western culture, rather than suggesting any possibility of change. Biographical readings of *The Island* examine the parallels with Byron's own situation of self-imposed exile, but there are more profound matters of human history at stake in this late poem. *The Island* offers a vision of the possibilities of cultural encounter within a world driven by post-Napoleonic Imperial ambitions. But the vision is itself made 'strange.'

As my dealings with Byron's cultural poetics in the last two chapters have indicated, he could not have remained politically content with such sanction and closure as Scott promoted. Byron holds to his implied premise that there are certain things that can only be well spoken about by means of poetic terminologies of displacement, and for the most part from the far side of cultural borderlands from where he began. He and Scott each made 'forays' into their respective forms of debateable land, crossing geographical boundaries, and those of class and culture in so doing. Byron was unable to maintain the discreet distance that he accorded to Childe Harold, and, like Lara and Torquil, he was never able comfortably to return and live within British society again. Whereas Scott constitutes his borderlands as places where the British Union and its institutions might be represented at their strongest and most heroic, Byron's experiences led him to write descriptions and narratives that challenged the agendas of imperialism and promoted values of

individual freedom. Always controversial, Byron's actual experience of the cultures of which he wrote informed his descriptions, narratives and the body of notes that accompanied his writing, to an extent that set his poetry of the Near East apart from that of other writers of the period. To appreciate these aspects of his poetry, and those of Scott's (whose poems receive far less attention than his novels), we ourselves as readers in our own age of cultural instability have to negotiate certain thresholds of taboo and received interpretation.

Notes

¹ Byron, *The Island, Or Christian and his Comrades* (London: John Hunt, 1823).

² The instances are too many to quote, but see, for example, Marchand, *BLJ*, vol. 3, p. 208.

Byron speculated (wrongly, as was soon proven) in his journal entry dd. 16 November 1814 that Lord Holland would not like *The Bride of Abydos*: 'I sent Lord Holland the proofs of the last 'Giaour', and 'The Bride of Abydos.' He won't like the latter, and I don't think that I shall long. It was written in four nights to distract my dreams.... Heigho!' Byron frequently remarked to the effect that the Eastern Tales were casually dashed off, as a diversion from other matters or on impulse. He later became far more deprecatory, referring to their 'false, stilted trashy style' and describing their content as 'exaggerated nonsense.' See *BLJ*, vol. 7, p. 182 and vol. 9, p. 161.

³ *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 168. Lord and Lady Holland were express admirers of *The Giaour* and *The Bride of Abydos*, both of which had been published prior to this letter. See also *BLJ*, vol. 3, p. 208 for Byron's journal entry of 17 November 1813 for his comments on Lord Holland's letter on the matter.

⁴ *Ibid.* Byron may have been alluding, also, to homosexual experience after Hobhouse's departure.

⁵ See chapter three.

⁶ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (1968; London: Penguin, 1986), p. 231.

⁷ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1st pub. New York: Basic Books, 1973; London: Fontana, 1993), p. 14. Ch. 1, 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture.'

⁸ Jerome J. McGann, *Fiery Dust* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1968), pp. 142-3.

⁹ Daniel Watkins, *Social Relations in Byron's Eastern Tales* (Cranbury: Associated UP, Inc., 1987), p. 34, p. 146, n. 1.

¹⁰ *CPW*, vol. 3, p. 417. McGann refers to lines 218-19 of *The Giaour* as alluding to Scott's *Lay I*. 17.1-3. Indeed, the entire fragment of the *Giaour's* ride is indebted to Scott (*Lay*, I.21-31) and owes a great deal to the account of William of Deloraine's near-fatal mission into the terrain of the *Borders'* superstitious past, in a quest for a book of Palestinian magic spells. The allusion is entirely typical of the ways in which Byron establishes recognisable, and crucial, links between his *Eastern Tales* and European romantic-gothic literature.

¹¹ *OED*, vol. 4 p. 506; vol. 5, p. 681.

¹² *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 506. See Byron, *CPW*, vol. 2, pp. 192-5 for note to *Childe Harold* on Albanians and with an account of Byron's servant, Dervish. The latter is spoken about more specifically in terms of his role after *Hobhouse* had returned to England.

¹³ *CPW*, vol. 3, p. 417.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Bayly, pp. 57-8, 170; Wolf, pp. 286-7; Albert Hourani, *Islam in European Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), pp. 87-8, 159-63.

¹⁶ Bayly, pp. 227-34.

- ¹⁷ Tariq Ali, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms. Crusades, Jihads and Modernity* (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 74-8, Bayly, pp. 180-1.
- ¹⁸ Ali, p. 74; Hourani, *Islam in European Thought*, pp. 162-3.
- ¹⁹ *CPW*, vol.3, p. 436.
- ²⁰ Bayly, pp. 226-8, 233.
- ²¹ Austen, *Persuasion*, pp. 66-7.
- ²² Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age. 1798-1939* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1962), pp. 37-8, 53, 106-8.
- ²³ *CPW*, vol. 2, p. 290.
- ²⁴ Franklin, pp. 72-98.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-7.
- ²⁶ *BLJ*, p. 419.
- ²⁷ Thornton, *passim*.
- ²⁸ Thornton, vol. 2, p. 56.
- ²⁹ Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), pp. 45-54.
- ³⁰ Chard, p. 40.
- ³¹ *BLJ*, vol. 2, p. 210.
- ³² *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 168. Letter dd. 17 November 1813.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 168-9. Letter dd. 17 November 1813.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 101. Letter dd. 28 August 1813.
- ³⁵ Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels & Reactionaries: English Literature and Its Background 1760-1830* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1981), p. 118.
- ³⁶ McGann, *Fiery Dust*, p. 146.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

- ³⁸ Marjorie Levinson, *The Romantic Fragment Poem: A critique of a form* (Chapel Hill and London: U of North Carolina P, 1986), pp. 115-28.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-28.
- ⁴⁰ *BLJ*, vol. 3, p. 100. Letter to John Murray, dd. 26 August 1813.
- ⁴¹ *CPW*, vol. 3, p. 411.
- ⁴² Leask, *British Romantic Writers...* pp. 31-2.
- ⁴³ Susan Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997), p. 134.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- ⁴⁵ *CPW*, vol. 3, p. 149.
- ⁴⁶ Wolfson, p. 137.
- ⁴⁷ Wolfson, pp. 145-63.
- ⁴⁸ *Edinburgh Review*, vol. XXIII (April 1814) 206. Jeffrey's complete review is on pp. 198-229.
- ⁴⁹ Jeffrey was notably altogether less sanguine in his response to Southey's and Keats's use of the Heroic couplet, accusing them of exoticising and corrupting the form.
- ⁵⁰ *Monthly Review*, II (February 1814) 190.
- ⁵¹ *Quarterly Review* (July 1814) 455. The complete review of *The Corsair* and *Lara* is on pp. 428-57.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 457.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, (July 1814): p. 429.
- ⁵⁴ *British Review*, V (February 1814) 507.
- ⁵⁵ *Antijacobin Review*, XLV (August 1813) 127.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, XLVI (March 1814) 208.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Christian Observer*, XIII (April 1814) 246-7.

⁵⁹ Bayly, pp. 226-7.

⁶⁰ Leask, *British Romantic Writers...*, p. 46-7.

⁶¹ Leask sees the poem as seminal in its use of suspense, narrative deferral and – above all – resolution of the unfinished story of *The Corsair*. Franklin explores the Byronic heroine with a reading of Kaled, rather than Lara, as the most significant figure in the poem. See Leask, *British Romantic Writers...*, pp. 54-63 and Franklin, pp. 56, 77-8, 86-9.

⁶² *BLJ*, vol. 4, p. 165.

⁶³ *CPW*, vol. 3, pp. 452-3.

⁶⁴ Leask, *British Romantic Writers...*, p. 55.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-8.

⁶⁶ *Rokeby* is relevant as a precursor to Scott's novel *Ivanhoe* (1819). I have sufficient latitude here to treat the many factors of influence, but they are concerned with exotic encounter, disinheritance, travel abroad, homecoming, cultural restitution and the prevention of miscegenation. In *Ivanhoe* the characters of Isaac and Rebecca, a Jew and his daughter, and their involvement with the hero *Ivanhoe*, an Anglo Saxon Crusader returning to find his inheritance displaced, require careful and detailed consideration.

⁶⁷ *Rokeby*, 1:xxxiii, 3:xvi, 5:xiii, xviii, xxviii.

⁶⁸ Susan Manning, *Fragments of Union*, pp. 65-106. The chapter 'Finding the Boundaries' offers much of interest to readers of the present book.

⁶⁹ Caroline McCracken-Flesher, 'Over the Water to Memory Loss: Foreign Exchange and Literary Aphasia from Chrystal Croftangry to Morven Callar', Discussion Group on Scottish Literature Session, 'The Scottish Empire Writes Back: Pictland to Postmodernity', MLA Convention, Marriott Hotel, Philadelphia, 29 December 2004.

⁷⁰ Leask, *British Romantic Writers...*, pp. 63-7.

⁷¹ Byron, *The Island*, pp. 81-94.

⁷² Byron did not keep to the recorded events surrounding the mutiny, although his narrative is loosely based on the story. The mutineers fled to Pitcairn Island, part of the Friendly Islands group and not too distant from Tahiti, with a small group of Polynesian men and women. Only one mutineer, John Adams, survived beyond 1800. Pitcairn Island is still home to a community directly descended from the mutineers, and the Pitcairnese language (still spoken, although English is the official language) is a mixture of eighteenth-century English and Tahitian.

⁷³ See Keats' 'On First looking into Chapman's Homer', (1816) for another example of poetic engagement with the fashion for epic in translation. Henry Francis Cary's *Vision, or Hell, Purgatory and Paradise of Dante Alighieri*, the first full English translation of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, had become an important Romantic text in its own right since its initial publication in 1812.

⁷⁴ Walter Scott, *Guy Mannering; or, the Astrologer*, ed. P. D. Garside (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1999), p. 353.

⁷⁵ P.D. Garside, exp. note, *Guy Mannering*, p. 578.

⁷⁶ Walter Scott, *Guy Mannering*, p. 353.

⁷⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Transl. Maria Jolas, Fwd. Etienne Gilson (Boston: Beacon, 1969. 1st pub. *La Poétique de l'espace*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1958), pp. 31-2. I am indebted to Stephen Cheeke's *Byron and Place: History, Translation, Nostalgia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) for drawing my attention to Bachelard's work, and for some invaluable insights into theories of literary geography. As mentioned in my previous chapter, Cheeke's book will be of particular interest to readers wishing to consider Byron and his fascination with place and history.

⁷⁸ Bernard Beatty, 'Byron and the Paradoxes of Nationalism', in *Literature and Nationalism*, ed. Vincent Newey and Ann Thompson (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1991), p. 152.