

## Chateaubriand and Byron: *Atala and Childe Harold's Pilgrimage I and II* Stephen Minta

It might seem that there is nothing very new or interesting to be said about the coupling of these two important figures in European Romanticism. Individually, of course, they are limitless in the possibilities they offer, but what can be gained from placing them side by side? While they share obvious points of reference, not least in terms of social class, fame, and the degree of controversy that surrounded them, any reader will be more struck by the immediate differences in the writing than by any similarities, whether of tone or form. I suggest here that, while direct comparisons between the two, at the level of the supposed influence of one on the other,<sup>1</sup> are not very productive, there are contexts which are common to both writers and which throw interesting light, particularly, on the composition of the first two Cantos of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

It is well known that Byron had little to say of Chateaubriand. Chateaubriand, on the other hand, appeared at times obsessed with Byron. Byron's engagement with Chateaubriand, such as it was, found expression exclusively in political terms. He never talks about Chateaubriand as a writer. Chateaubriand, on the other hand, is concerned only with Byron as a poet. So there is no obvious meeting ground between the two: 'les deux hommes n'étaient pas faits pour s'entendre. Leur vision du monde était à l'opposé l'une de l'autre', as one critic says.<sup>2</sup>

In all of Byron's correspondence there is only a single reference to Chateaubriand. In the midst of profound marital problems, Byron wrote to James Perry on February 26th 1816, enclosing a poem:

If you dare publish the enclosed—that is—if it is worth publishing—& will not bring you into any scrape—print it as a translation from some recent French poetry—but keep my secret—for obvious reasons.<sup>3</sup>

He added that it 'would not be bad fun to call it Chateaubriand's provided it be not detrimental to you or too unfair to him—the dog deserves no quarter, and of course no one would seriously suppose it to be of his writing'. The poem duly appeared, with an anonymous note (written by Byron), suggesting that it might indeed be Chateaubriand's, in the *Morning Chronicle* for March 15th 1816. The poem begins:

We do not curse thee, Waterloo!  
Though Freedom's blood thy plain bedew;<sup>4</sup>

Byron's joke in seeking to incriminate Chateaubriand is in bad taste; mildly amusing, perhaps. Certainly there is no recognition that he is talking of one of the most famous figures in French Romanticism.<sup>5</sup> For Byron, Chateaubriand is the unforgivable figure of the political renegade and betrayer of principle, one incapable of consistency. Chateaubriand had dedicated the second edition of his *Génie du christianisme* (1803) to Napoleon.<sup>6</sup> Ten years later, he began to write a violently anti-Napoleonic pamphlet. It subsequently appeared in April 1814,<sup>7</sup> one day before Napoleon's abdication. Chateaubriand then went on to serve the restored Bourbon Louis XVIII as ambassador to London (April 1822).

1: L. Reynaud, *Le Romantisme* (Paris, 1926), for example, is one of a number of attempts to see Byron as an imitator of Chateaubriand.

2: M. Maréchal-Trudel, *Chateaubriand, Byron et Venise: un mythe contesté* (Paris, 1978), 166. 'The two men were not made to get on. Their vision of the world was totally dissimilar'.

3: BLJ V 33-4.

4: *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, edited J.J. McGann, 7 vols (Oxford, 1980-93) III no. 283, 'Ode (From the French)', 375-9. Hereafter CPW. Byron's anonymous head-note to the poem in CPW III 492.

5: There is another joke at Chateaubriand's expense in Byron's note to 'The Age of Bronze', line 716 (CPW VII 129).

6: 'On ne peut s'empêcher de reconnaître dans vos destinées la main de cette Providence qui vous avait marqué de loin, pour l'accomplissement de ses desseins prodigieux' (In *Essai sur les révolutions* and *Génie du christianisme*, edited M. Regard (Paris, 1978), 1284). Hereafter *ER* or *GC*. 'One cannot but recognise in your destiny the hand of the Providence that had marked you out from afar, for the accomplishment of its prodigious designs'. At this time (1803-4), Beethoven planned to call his third symphony *Bonaparte*, changing his mind after Napoleon became emperor in May 1804. So Chateaubriand was not alone.

7: *De Bonaparte et des Bourbons*. The genesis of the pamphlet goes back to October 1813. It appeared on 5 April 1814. See the discussion in J.-C. Berchet, *Chateaubriand* (Paris, 2012), 542-5. In his *Memoirs*, Chateaubriand boasted that Louis XVIII had declared that the pamphlet 'lui avait plus profité qu'une armée de cent mille hommes' ('had done him more good

Byron had a particular concern for consistency in political thinking. In a letter to Murray of December 27th 1813, he wrote: 'I never was consistent in anything but my politics ... my redemption depends on that solitary virtue'.<sup>8</sup> By this standard, Chateaubriand, as he said, deserved 'no quarter'. Chateaubriand, however, was equally clear about the consistency of his own political position: 'Je n'étais décidé qu'en matière politique: sur ce seul point je n'ai jamais varié.'<sup>9</sup> In fact, both writers changed their political positions over time: both, for example, came to accept, with greater or lesser enthusiasm, the possibility of republican government.<sup>10</sup> But Byron was clearly unable or unwilling to see that Chateaubriand had to negotiate a political landscape that bore no relationship at all to the English. There is a political debate to be had in this area, but it is not one with which the two writers ever engaged.

It is Teresa Guiccioli who plausibly fills in the otherwise almost complete silence on Byron's part about Chateaubriand. Here is part of what she says:

His [Byron's] passion for strength and consistency ... went so far as to make him feel a sense of repulsion for those people in whom he did not find that strength, and that unity of action which he considered to be a sacred duty.

His silence on Chateaubriand, she goes on, was not simply due to their radically different natures. Certainly, what she refers to as Chateaubriand's literary affectations, his lack of sincerity, his theatricality, his overbearing pride: none of these would have endeared him to Byron. But, she says, the feeling of repulsion was caused, above all, by the sceptic who yet made himself the champion of Catholicism, the liberal, who made himself the champion of royalism and the divine right of kings. 'When Lord Byron', she writes, 'heard it said of someone: he had changed his colours ... you felt that his natural indulgence, that was normally so great, left him; he regarded this fault as a despicable variant of the vice that he never pardoned: lying'.<sup>11</sup>

If Byron's silence was, according to Teresa, a calculated one, Chateaubriand had plenty to say about Byron and, specifically, about that silence. There is a well-known chapter on Byron in the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* that had its origins at a time (1822) when the English poet was still alive, but which is substantially the work of a later period. It is clear that Chateaubriand was unable to come to terms with Byron's neglect. *Childe Harold*, *Conrad*, *Lara*, *Manfred*, and *The Giaour*, were all, Chateaubriand believed, influenced by him and owed something to his *René*. So why, Chateaubriand writes, did Byron have the 'faiblesse' (the 'weakness') never to mention his name? Then comes the famous, embarrassing, sentence: 'J'étais donc un de ses pères qu'on renie quand on est arrivé au pouvoir?' ('I was, then, one of those fathers who are disowned when the son has come to power?'). Even more embarrassing and self-pitying, are the sentences that follow: 'Could Lord Byron have been completely unaware of me, he, who quotes almost all the French writers of his generation? Has he never heard anyone speak of me, when the English newspapers, like the French newspapers, have resounded in his ears for twenty years with the controversy surrounding my works?'<sup>12</sup> Reading all this, it's hard not to feel that Chateaubriand would have done well to imitate Byron's silence.

This brief account says quite a lot about the psychology of both writers, but I think the area has been adequately mined by critics. The similarities between the two lives can certainly be interesting, sometimes at the level of simple coincidence: both men saw their private libraries publicly auctioned to pay off debts, for example.<sup>13</sup> Both loved dressing up: Chateaubriand had a great Turkish sabre for ceremonial use, and, when he left for the east, he dressed his servant in a blue turban; Byron's Albanian dress, in the painting by Thomas Phillips, was no less remarkable.

At a more fundamental level, both were, of course, noblemen and both self-consciously so, jealous of their status, complexly insecure, even though Chateaubriand could trace his pedigree back to the eleventh century and Byron to at least the sixteenth. Both had passionate relationships (of uncertain trajectory) with an elder sister: Chateaubriand with Lucile, four years older, who died in November 1804, seemingly by suicide;

than an army of one hundred thousand men'), *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, edited M. Levaillant and G. Moulinier, 2 vols (Paris, 1951), 1, 868. Hereafter *MOT*.

8: BLJ III 204.

9: *ER*, 16 (Préface). 'I had made up mind only so far as politics is concerned : on that point alone I have never changed'. Cf. earlier in the same preface: 'je n'ai jamais varié dans mes principes politiques', *ER*, 14. 'I have never varied in my political principles'.

10: *ER*, 23 (the 1826 preface, looking back on the first publication of *ER* in 1797); BLJ IX 49 ('Detached Thoughts', no. 112).

11: T. Guiccioli, *Lord Byron jugé par les témoins de sa vie*, 2 vols (Paris, 1868), 2, 75-7. Cf. I, 488: 'It has been said of Chateaubriand, that, if he was going to do a generous act, he would rather do it on his balcony; one might say, on the contrary, that Lord Byron would rather have done it in his cellars'.

12: *MOT*, I, 418.

13: Byron in April 1816, Chateaubriand in April of the following year.

Byron with his half-sister Augusta, five years his senior. Both were supporters of the Greek cause in the 1820s.<sup>14</sup> Both experienced the pain of exile. Both were key figures in the history of European Romanticism, and at the centre of the European fashion for the literary pilgrimage.

Both enjoyed enormous fame with early works: the first two Cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* made Byron famous overnight in 1812; *Atala ou les Amours de deux Sauvages dans le Désert*, first published in 1801, was twelve times reprinted by 1805. It was translated into Spanish, Italian, German, Russian, English (*Atala*, or the Love and Constancy of two Savages in the Desert), and modern Greek, led to a mass of imitations, parodies, ballets, popular engravings, operas, and vaudevilles,<sup>15</sup> and, in France, to the fashionable choice of *Atala* as a girl's name. Finally, though Chateaubriand is known only for his prose and Byron for his poetry (if one excepts the correspondence), Chateaubriand was instinctively responsive to the poetic: the poet is always, he says, 'l'homme par excellence', adding that 'whole volumes of descriptive prose are not worth fifty beautiful lines by Homer, Virgil, or Racine.'<sup>16</sup>

The dissimilarities between the two writers, however, are also very great. Whether it is true that, as one of Chateaubriand's critics has written, 'Chateaubriand lived the life that Byron dreamed of living',<sup>17</sup> their experiences of the world were radically different. For much of the time, Chateaubriand's life was scarcely detachable from the history of France. It was a life grounded in an excess of history, from the French Revolution until the 1830s. He knew a range of worlds: military, political, diplomatic, artistic. He negotiated with Metternich and Alexander I, and, on passing through Prague in 1833, it was only natural that he should have been received by the exiled Charles X of France. It was a life genuinely large, besides which the apparent largeness of Byron's life often appears as simple *trompe-l'oeil* and self-projection.

Chateaubriand arrived in Paris at the end of June 1789 and witnessed most of the early events of the Revolution, including the storming of the Bastille; he left for America in April 1791. Somewhere on his travels, he picked up an old newspaper, lying on the floor, and learned of the flight of Louis XVI;<sup>18</sup> returning to France, early in 1792, he left in August to join one of the royalist émigré armies. Wounded at the siege of Thionville, he then made for the island of Jersey, where he arrived almost at the point of death. In May 1793 he went to London, where he began a period of exile in deep poverty. His brother and sister-in-law were guillotined in 1794, his mother imprisoned, the family chateau confiscated and pillaged. All this, by the time he was twenty-six years old.

Byron, by contrast, was only twenty-two years old when he self-consciously went looking for experience in a truncated version of the Grand Tour, the experience which he wrote up in the first two Cantos of the *Childe*. Nothing much had yet happened to him in life, though by 1811, when he was revising the *Childe*, he had come to know the weight of deep personal loss, through the deaths of his mother and a number of close friends. Before that, he had done the usual boyish things, played cricket, spent a lot of money that he didn't have, and been initiated into various kinds of sexual activity that we cannot pursue with any clarity. When Chateaubriand's *René* finally sits down to tell his story to an Indian chief and a white missionary, he seeks to communicate 'not the adventures of his life, because he had experienced none, but the secret feelings of his soul.'<sup>19</sup> Byron's *Childe*, too, is someone who appears to lack a past, yet bears a secret burden, and it is not surprising that Chateaubriand sought to claim a share of paternity in his creation.

### *Atala*

The story of the half-Indian woman *Atala* is told by Chactas, the same North-American Indian chief who appears in *René*. In *Atala* the roles are reversed: now it is René who listens and Chactas who speaks. Chactas has had a varied life that has taken him to France, where he has been both a galley-slave and a visitor to Louis XIV. By the time he tells his story, he is blind and seventy-three years old. René, for his part, had gone to Louisiana in 1725, 'poussé par des passions et des malheurs'.<sup>20</sup> He went up the Mississippi, and was adopted into Chactas's tribe. A prologue and an epilogue frame the narrative, and the voice there is clearly that of Chateaubriand.

**14:** Chateaubriand published an 'Appel en faveur de la cause sacrée des Grecs' (Paris, 1825), in which he argued that the Greeks could not legally be considered rebels against the Turkish state. The same text was published as *Note sur la Grèce* in 1825 (with an extensive foreword); a further edition followed in 1826.

**15:** See the 'Index des Oeuvres' in *MOT*, 2, 1148-50.

**16:** Chateaubriand, *Oeuvres romanesques et voyages*, vol. 1, edited by M. Regard (Paris, 1969), 18 (note to the Preface of *Atala*). Hereafter *ORV*. He called *Atala* 'une sorte de poème' (*ibid*).

**17:** V. Troubetzkoy, 'Chateaubriand et Byron, ou Le Père refusé', *Revue de Littérature Comparée*, 253, no. 2 (April-June 1990), 327-36 (335).

**18:** The royal family left Paris on June 20th 1791; the news reached New York on August 22nd.

**19:** *René*, in *ORV*, 118: 'non les aventures de sa vie, puisqu'il n'en avait point éprouvé, mais les sentiments secrets de son âme'. *René* first appeared in 1802, in *GC*. It was not published separately, like *Atala*.

**20:** *ORV*, 36: 'driven by passions and misfortunes'.

Chactas says that at the age of seventeen he fought alongside his father against another Indian tribe. His father was killed. He himself was taken to Saint-Augustin, a port on the Atlantic coast of Florida, where he was looked after by a generous Spaniard named Lopez. After some time, Chactas rejects the civilised white world and returns to the forest, where he is almost immediately captured by Indians who propose to burn him alive. The chief's daughter, Atala, falls in love with him, enables him to escape, and they wander off together into the forest. The narrative soon becomes pointedly concerned with the sexual act: will Atala lose her virginity in the forest, or not? Chactas finds Atala impossible to read. She seems both passionate and hauntingly, mysteriously, withdrawn. She tells her companion that she is the daughter of a white father (who turns out, of course, to be Lopez) and an Indian mother who had become a Christian.

The couple are about to have sex in a storm, when lightning strikes a tree near them and they run off. They meet an old priest and he offers to teach Chactas the fundamentals of Christianity, so they can get married. However, there is a profound problem, which emerges when Chactas and the priest come back from a church service in the forest to find Atala ill. On her mother's death-bed, Atala had promised to remain a virgin forever. Should she fail to keep this vow, she says, it would be to consign her mother's soul to eternal torment. Since she sees the loss of her virginity as something now impossible to resist, having fallen in love with Chactas, she has taken poison. This has the makings of a kind of tragedy, but the narrative oddly interposes here the priest's reflection that he could easily have written to the Bishop of Quebec, who had the power to release Atala from her vow. Only, of course, it is too late. She dies elegantly: as the editor of the *Pléiade* edition puts it, like Socrates, rather than Emma Bovary (ORV, 1180). In the epilogue, we discover that, subsequently, both René and Chactas were to die in a French massacre of the Natchez tribe, and that the priest, Father Aubry, was to be burnt to death by a group of Indians.

It is clearly, from a modern perspective, an implausible enough narrative. Indeed, even at the time of first publication there were doubts about various aspects of *Atala*, most obviously the characterisation and the setting. Chactas is a strange mix of European and Indian influences. He sometimes talks as if he is in a seventeenth-century salon.<sup>21</sup> Chateaubriand, recognising the problem, argues that the mix is deliberate and entirely to the writer's advantage, since Chactas is a character who lives perpetually 'between society and nature' (ORV, 20). As to the setting, Eugène Ney, in an article in March 1833, noted simply that the description of the Mississippi 'is the work of someone who has never seen it.'<sup>22</sup> Chateaubriand himself refers to the critics who derided the reference to 'bears drunk on grapes' in the prologue to *Atala*.<sup>23</sup>

In fact, Chateaubriand had never seen the landscapes he describes (Florida, Louisiana, and what he calls 'Les magnifiques déserts du Kentucky'),<sup>24</sup> though he had certainly seen Indian tribes elsewhere in America.<sup>25</sup> His accounts of place in *Atala* are more the result of reading than experience. What is interesting, however, is the passionate attempt Chateaubriand makes to convince his readers of the authenticity of the descriptions: 'the natural world of America is painted [in *Atala*] with the most scrupulous exactitude' (ORV, 30). He even goes so far as to observe that the two English translations of *Atala* had reached America: if the descriptions, he says, had been unfaithful, how could they have convinced people who could say at any moment 'those are not our rivers, our mountains, our forests?' (ORV, 30-1).

Authenticity, or the illusion of it, was crucial to the genre of the literary pilgrimage. If readers were to be entranced by excursions into the exotic, they still craved at least some sense of a reality. '*Atala*', Chateaubriand says, 'was written in the wilderness, and in the huts of Savages' (ORV, 18). Byron, similarly, begins his preface to Cantos I and II of the *Childe* with the words: 'The following poem was written, for the most part, amidst the scenes which it attempts to describe'.<sup>26</sup> He refers a few lines later to 'the correctness of the descriptions'. Audiences appear to have enjoyed this reassurance, though the immense success of *Atala* (where, as we have seen, there is a profound gap between illusion and reality) and the equally immense success of the *Childe* (where, so far as we can tell, Byron remains largely faithful to what he saw), suggest that the issue of authenticity was resolved at the level of style and authorial conviction.

*Atala* and the *Childe* satisfied a pre-existing appetite: for Indian stories, on the one hand, and for stories of the East, on the other. *Atala* is much more directed politically, however. It takes the reader back to the time

**21:** For example, during the storm in the forest, Atala lets a tear fall onto his breast: 'Orage du coeur, m'écriai-je, est-ce une goutte de votre pluie?' (ORV, 61). 'Storm of the heart, I cried out, is this a drop of your rain?'

**22:** Quoted in ORV, 1164. As so often with Chateaubriand, there is a political context. Marshal Ney, Eugène's father, was one of the most dazzling commanders in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. In 1815, Ney was tried for treason in the Chamber of Peers and Chateaubriand voted for his execution.

**23:** ORV, 30 (Preface); 35 (Prologue).

**24:** ORV, 37. Chateaubriand writes: 'so many things meet the eye, that I would try in vain to describe them to those who have not travelled through 'ces champs primitifs de la nature' (ORV, 35).

**25:** The most recent biography suggests that, sometime after mid-September 1791, he may have gone as far south as the confluence of the Ohio and Kentucky Rivers (in the modern state of Kentucky); or even as far as Knoxville (Tennessee). But it is impossible to be sure (Berchet, 186ff.).

**26:** CPW II no. 174, 3.

when French travellers and missionaries went down the Mississippi in the late seventeenth century. In the first paragraph of the prologue, Chateaubriand reminds readers that France once possessed a vast empire in North America, stretching from Canada to Florida. The great panoply of excess that characterises the first three pages of the prologue, a vision of the natural world almost untouched by human presence, with its profusion of snakes, blue herons, crocodiles, wild buffalo, and the rest, is not simply there for exotic entertainment. Napoleon had eyes on the reconquest of Canada, and the reading public was sympathetic to these colonial intentions. So, too, the edifying nature of the tale fitted in well with the religious climate that led to the 1801 Concordat between Napoleon and the Pope, an attempt to repair some of the damage done to Church-State relations during the French Revolution.

By contrast, the first two Cantos of *Childe Harold* appear to have no agenda beyond the moment of composition. The narrative is loose, episodic, open-ended; it is not uniform in tone or narrative pace. It simply goes on. It is, above all, much less driven than Chateaubriand's text. Whereas everything in *Atala* is directed to an end, to the extent that the narrative seems contrived and implausible, there is no detail in the *Childe* that strikes us in this way. On the surface, *Atala* reveals a world of infinite connections, where in spite of the apparently anarchic world of the jungle in which it is set, there are no formal loose ends. Everything works together to produce an inevitable conclusion and, though the story is one of gloom and horror, it is satisfyingly contained artistically. In *Childe Harold* I and II, there is no such connectedness, no point towards which the narrative is directed. Harold is the spectator of events and places to which he is not fundamentally linked. He looks at the present state of Portugal, Spain, or Greece, and he responds to the immediate stimulus, but the narrative overall reflects the arbitrary nature of a journey that was, because of the political state of Europe at the time, arbitrary in itself.

As Jerome McGann suggests, the theme of the first two Cantos of the *Childe* is 'Consciousness awaking to her woes';<sup>27</sup> this deeply personal attitude is reflected in the inability of the narrator to make sense of much of what he sees: 'In Spain ... the poet's sympathies and antipathies are moved in so many different directions that he is finally unable to adopt a coherent attitude toward the sequence of events that unfolds there ... The situation seems a hopeless tangle of blood, crime, and vengeance, and the poetry is an image of the narrator's growing sense of bafflement and helplessness in the face of it' (McGann, 53). At the end of Canto II, the sense of exile is passionately evoked, but it has no resonance beyond the personal:

What is the worst of woes that wait on age?  
What stamps the wrinkle deeper on the brow?  
To view each lov'd one blotted from life's page,  
And be alone on earth, as I am now. (CHP II 918-21)

*Atala*, too, ends with a sense of exile, but it offers the reader a very different context. The narrator of the epilogue describes a journey towards the Niagara Falls. He says that on the way he comes across an Indian woman,<sup>28</sup> holding her dead son in her lap. The young woman's husband explains that they are exiles in search of a homeland, having lost their lands to white settlers. They are travelling with a small group of old men and carrying the bones of their ancestors wrapped in the skins of wild beasts. Chateaubriand concludes *Atala* with two sentences for which, as he says, he was ridiculed<sup>29</sup> by some early readers:

Indiens infortunés que j'ai vus errer dans les déserts du Nouveau-Monde, avec les cendres de vos aïeux, vous qui m'aviez donné l'hospitalité malgré votre misère, je ne pourrais vous la rendre aujourd'hui, car j'erre, ainsi que vous, à la merci des hommes; et moins heureux dans mon exile, je n'ai point emporté les os de mes pères.<sup>30</sup>

Ill-fated Indians, whom I have seen wandering in the wildernesses of the New World, with the ashes of your ancestors; you who had given me hospitality, in spite of your poverty: I could not return it to you today, for I wander, like you, at the mercy of men; and, less happy in my exile, I have not carried with me the bones of my fathers.

The connection may be vulnerable to ridicule, but, beyond the self-pity, for which Chateaubriand is noted, it is an attempt, like Baudelaire's in *Le Cygne*, to universalise the experience, and the tragedy, of exile. The savagery of colonialism was something against which Chateaubriand wrote powerfully in *Les Natchez*. As for the self-pity, it is, perhaps, redeemed by Chateaubriand's own personal situation and a detail which confirms

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<sup>27</sup>: J.J. McGann, *Fiery Dust: Byron's Poetic Development* (Chicago and London, 1968), 58; and CPW II 43 [*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, I, line 941. Hereafter CHP].

<sup>28</sup>: She turns out to be the daughter of René, and so the fictional meeting point between the narrative of Chactas and the world of the author.

<sup>29</sup>: *ORV*, 23 (Avis sur la troisième édition (1801).

<sup>30</sup>: *ORV*, 99.

its depth and extent: exiled from France, and living in the small Suffolk village of Beccles, he used to eat alone in the local inn; and it was there, one evening in May 1794, that he heard an Englishman reading from the newspaper a list of the latest victims of the guillotine, among which was his brother (Berchet, 240).<sup>31</sup>

I look next, briefly, at the twin aspects of alienation and reassurance in these two texts. Clearly, both work for their readers by offering a sense of what is different, exotic. They assume that travel, or, at least, some kinds of travel, can promote an interesting conflict of values, a challenging of the known by the unknown. This creates anxiety and a sense of displacement in the reader. Both texts also, however, recognise that readers can only bear so much alienation. So each writer grounds the unfamiliar in familiar form. Chateaubriand makes very self-conscious use of past literary models for his exotic saga of sex in the New World: 'I have given this ... work', he writes, 'the most ancient of forms; it is divided into prologue, narrative, and epilogue'.<sup>32</sup> He likens himself to a rhapsodist (the word means literally 'one who sews a poem together'), the natural descendant of the Greek rhapsodists who performed the work of Homer. Byron, in the *Childe*, similarly clothes his experimental narrative in what he calls 'the old structure of versification' (CHP I 4), the Spenserian stanza.

Both texts, then, invite the reader into the unknown against a background of formal properties that reassure. In this confrontation with the unknown, there are, however, significant differences between the two texts. Chateaubriand's *Atala* is concerned, from the outset, to promote a dialogue with the reader which is clearly announced in the opening page of the *récit*. There, Chactas, the Indian, is beginning his tale to René the European. Chactas has seen the very best and the very worst of Europe. He has been barbarously treated and humiliated, but he has watched the tragedies of Racine and heard the funeral orations of Bossuet. René has made the journey in the other direction; from France to the world of the Indian. So *Atala* naturally poses the fundamental question:

'I see in you', Chactas says to René, 'the civilised man who has become a savage; you see in me the savage, whom the Great Spirit ... has chosen to civilise ... we must have had a completely different view of things. Which, of you or me, has gained the most, or lost the most, by this change of position?' (ORV, 38).

The question is topical, and challenging, at the cultural and historical levels. Chactas formally expresses the 'correct' view late on in the work: 'I felt', he says, 'the superiority of that stable and busy life [of civilisation and religious devotion] over the wandering and idle life of the Savage'. In an earlier version, this was expressed even more strongly: '... that stable, moral, and busy life over the wandering, useless, and idle life ...' (ORV, 72-3; 1179 [for the variant reading]). However, *Atala*, for all its formal connectedness, often undermines any expression of cultural confidence. Below the surface of the tale, nothing is resolved.

Europe is a place from which to escape, but there is no refuge in the New World. Chateaubriand says that he is not, 'like M. Rousseau, enthusiastic about Savages ... I do not believe that pure nature is the most beautiful thing on earth' (ORV, 19). Indian society can be as savage as any other; and while we have the marvellous paean to the landscapes of the New World, in the opening pages of the prologue, those same landscapes can easily turn to nightmare.<sup>33</sup> The Christian religion is sympathetically portrayed through the character of Father Aubry, but *Atala*'s fate reflects the worst kind of religious fanaticism; and the fact that her vow could so easily have been sorted out, if only she had been less secretive, takes away much of the potentially heroic nature of her sacrifice. Left to their own devices, outside the interfering complexities of the civilised, the reader knows that *Atala* and Chactas could have been happy.

There is a moment in the tale of an articulated wholeness,<sup>34</sup> where the Indians are shown to be developing an ideal contract with the land, as they cut down the forest and introduce the plough. But the moment is not allowed to survive very long. Chactas, René, and Father Aubry all die anonymous deaths, the first two massacred by the French, the third by the Indians. There appears to be little to choose between them.

The greatest anxiety in *Atala* is the sense that there is nowhere to hide, no stability or reassurance to be had. In one of the great tragic reflections of the story, we hear the voice of a suffering Europe, beside which much else pales. The priest is endeavouring to console *Atala* for her early (and pointless) death. At least, he says, now you are spared from ever having to hear 'ce long cri de douleur, qui s'élève de cette vieille terre' (ORV, 81), 'the long cry of pain that rises from that old land.' The expression suggests the terror that contemporary Europe has embraced, but the real horror lies in the fact that *Atala* allows no escape from it, except in death.

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**31:** Following the coup of fructidor (September 1797), the French nobility were deprived of citizenship rights and reduced to the status of aliens.

**32:** ORV, 18. He says that *Atala* is like the *Philoctetes* of Sophocles in having only three characters (ORV, 20).

**33:** 'at each moment we were about to be engulfed in swamps. Insects without number, enormous bats blinded us; rattlesnakes ... wolves, bears, wolverines ...' etc. (ORV, 61).

**34:** In the Mission village, presided over by Father Aubry, 'there reigned the most touching blend of the social life and the life of nature' (ORV, 71).

Byron, too, in the first cantos of *Childe Harold*, awakens anxiety in the reader. The epigraph from *Le Cosmopolite* suggests, it is true, a comfortable rationale for the journey, a plausible and acceptable account of why anyone might want to travel: the Universe is like a book and you've only read the first page if you've never left your native land. But this is undermined by the revelation that the Childe is on the run. He is not simply a conventional youth who, having lived too well, eventually succumbs to 'the fulness of satiety' (CHP I 34); his past history of sexual indulgence ('concubines and carnal companie', CHP I 17) does not offer adequate motivation. Nor is the idea that the Childe is running from an unhappy love-affair entirely convincing either ([he] 'Had sigh'd to many though he lov'd but one, /And that lov'd one, alas! could ne'er be his.' CHP I 39-40). We never do learn about the Childe's past, and that, of course, is the point. The imagination, invited to fill a gap, is left face to face with its own dark imaginings, a state which is always potentially troubling; or else the imagination senses its failure to understand, is forced to accept that it cannot measure the depths of another's fantasies or misfortunes. That, too, is always potentially troubling.

Something terrible has happened to the principal actor in the drama, but it is so terrible that we cannot be allowed near it. The reader is tempted with the assertion that 'he through Sin's long labyrinth had run' (CHP I 37), but all remains vague. The narrator plays with the reader's curiosity: 'I've known the worst', he says (CHP I 868), and then asks, rhetorically, 'What is that worst?', before immediately replying 'Nay do not ask— / In pity from the search forbear'. We are invited to look into the darkness and warned against it at the same time, for fear of what it might reveal about ourselves:

Smile on—nor venture to unmask  
Man's heart, and view the Hell that's there. (CHP I 871-2)

It's hard to imagine—though there lies the unspoken challenge—that the hell can be other than sexual. In some cancelled lines from Canto II, Byron points to what it might be, something unfathomable to the majority of contemporary readers:

For boyish minions of unhallowed love  
The shameless torch of wild desire is lit  
(CHP II, replacing lines 545-6 in the published version)

This was a fantasy stimulated by a visit to Ali Pasha in October 1809, and it is probably significant that Byron began the *Childe* just a week after he left Ali. Shelley, in a letter of December 1818 to Thomas Love Peacock, gives a clear sense of how even a relatively unconventional observer at the time might struggle with the sexually aberrant: Byron, he says, 'associates with wretches ... who do not scruple to avow practices which are not only not named but I believe seldom even conceived in England.'<sup>35</sup>

The sexuality of *Atala* is also teasing and disconcerting, but it is much more open. The central question that inevitably preoccupies the reader is: 'will the young lovers have sex, or not?' The reader hopes that they will, so the tension can be broken, and that they won't, so that the tension can be sustained. But the darker aspects of sex are there, too. There are obvious interracial anxieties. Lesbian fantasies (the two virgin dancers at the *Fête des morts*, touching nipples and mouths (ORV, 51)). And then the outspoken defence of incest, in a fantasy of the first men and women of the earth, a time of 'those ineffable unions, when the sister was the wife of the brother, when love and fraternal friendship were joined in the same heart, and when the purity of the one increased the pleasures of the other.' (ORV, 82). A fantasy which Byron may well have shared, but which he could never have sought to defend in public.

The first two Cantos of the *Childe* share with *Atala* a sense of the inescapability of terror. McGann points out that, though in Byron's later poetry there is a frequent search for ways out, or ways forward, the poetry in general 'is ... built upon a vision of the world's horror and absurdity' (McGann, ix). As the Childe approaches Lisbon, the poet reflects on all that 'heaven hath done for this delicious land!' (CHP I 208). When he enters the city, however, and sees what the inhabitants have made of heaven's gifts, he can only wonder: 'Why, Nature, waste thy wonders on such men?' (CHP I 235). This sets a pattern for what is to follow. But, of course, the problem does not lie simply in the fallibility of one's fellow human beings. Escape is impossible, because consciousness will not leave us alone:

What Exile from himself can flee?  
To Zones, though more and more remote,  
Still, still pursues—where-e'er I be,  
The blight of life—the demon, Thought. (CHP I 857-60)

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**35:** *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, edited by F.L. Jones, 2 vols (Oxford, 1964), 2, 58. Letter 488 to Thomas Love Peacock, 17 or 18 December 1818.

This brings me to a final reflection, concerned with the moral and emotional issues surrounding what came to be called *le mal du siècle*.

It has long been accepted that Chateaubriand's role was central in defining the particular forms of sensibility that are associated with the *mal du siècle*. The expression suggests melancholy and world-weariness, a state of mind that is aimless and unsatisfied, but the underlying sense of mal here is 'moral suffering'. René expresses the condition in its simplest form, describing himself as 'a young man without strength and without virtue, who finds in himself his own torment' (*René*, in ORV, 119). The generic relationship with the Childe is obvious. I want here only to comment briefly on two aspects of what is a very large topic.

Firstly, Chateaubriand's attempts to explore the genesis of the condition remain interesting. In the *Essai sur les révolutions*, he says that all idea of progress in human affairs is illusory; that societies simply experience an endless process of reduplication, beginning always in freedom and ending in tyranny and corruption (ESR, x). Echoing Ecclesiastes 1:9, he writes: 'What have I sought to prove in the *Essay*? that there is nothing new under the sun' (ESR, 15). That disabused sense clearly underlies much of the spirit of the *mal du siècle*. Humanity, by these criteria, has nowhere to go.

At other times, however, Chateaubriand offers a different account: 'It is in the spirit of Christianity', he writes, 'that we should, above all, seek the reason for this vagueness of feeling that is widespread among modern men' (GC, variant reading, 1777). Christianity, he argues, offers us a twin picture of the sorrows of the earth and celestial joys, leaving the human heart endlessly uncertain of itself (GC, 715). At other times, still, the *mal du siècle* is the responsibility of Rousseau: 'he has made a whole crowd of young people believe that it is fine to throw oneself ... into the vagueness of life' (Preface to *René*, in ORV, 114). One of the most interesting passages on the subject in the *Génie du christianisme* is the opening paragraph of a chapter significantly titled 'On the vagueness of the passions'. Chateaubriand writes:

It remains for us to speak of a state of the soul which, it seems, has not yet been properly examined; it is that state which precedes the development of the passions, when our faculties—young, active, fully-formed, but self-contained—have exerted themselves only on themselves, without aim or object (GC, 714).

Chateaubriand understands that, whatever the source of the malaise, it is one that afflicts the undeveloped consciousness, a state that throws us back on resources we turn out to lack, and which we experience as moral anguish. In such circumstances, the secret burden, whether of Atala or René or the Childe, at least appears to offer, in however dysfunctional a form, something defining for consciousness to rest on, an identity to clothe the appalling vagueness of feeling.

Secondly, as we examine Chateaubriand's analysis of the *mal du siècle*, it becomes clear why he felt Byron's lack of recognition so sharply. Chateaubriand writes: 'It is surprising that modern writers have not yet thought of painting this singular condition of the soul' (Preface to *René*, ORV, 112). He believed he had defined that condition and that Byron had followed in his footsteps. When he writes about the modernity of this state of mind, he certainly opens up perspectives that Byron will make his own:

The Ancients scarcely knew this secret anxiety ... they were not inclined to the exaggerations, the hopes, the fears without object, the mobility<sup>36</sup> of ideas and feelings, the perpetual instability, which is nothing but a constant source of disgust (Preface to *René*, ORV, 112).

Chateaubriand noted that the monasteries had once provided a disciplined environment for reverie and contemplation. With their demise, however, we should expect to see, 'as has happened in England', a rise in solitariness at the heart of social life, the emergence of observers 'who, unable either to renounce the vices of the century, or to love this century, will take their hatred of man as a proof of their genius ... and will plunge ever deeper into a proud misanthropy which will lead them to madness or to death' (Preface to *René*, ORV, 114).

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**36:** See Byron's famous note on 'mobilité' in *Don Juan*, CPW V 769 (note to Canto XVI, line 820).