

Burroughs's Re-Invention of the Byronic Hero

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Volume 18 Issue 5 (December 2016) Article 19**Franca A. Bellarsi,****"Burroughs's Re-Invention of the Byronic Hero"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss5/19>>

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Abstract: In her article "Burroughs's Re-Invention of the Byronic Hero" Franca A. Bellarsi discusses George Gordon Byron's (1788-1824) and William S. Burroughs's (1914-1997) texts as masterful examples of irreverence which earned notoriety in their own days. Yet despite the scandalous aura of lawlessness, iconoclastic cynicism, and nomadic elusiveness which surrounds both authors' work, a parallel between them has never been attempted. Bellarsi argues that more than a hundred years after Burroughs's birth, assessing his work implies understanding that his enduring appeal across languages and cultures rests in part on how his writing pushes the transformation of the Byronic myth further in a long chain of adaptations over two centuries. Applying Burroughs's nomadic reading method to his own work shows surprising continuities between him and certain strands within British Romanticism.

Franca A. BELLARSI

Burroughs's Re-Invention of the Byronic Hero

At the mere biographical level, a number of parallels -- no less intriguing for being fortuitous -- exist between Byron and Burroughs. Granted that physical substance-dependency is not what makes their lives converge. But other points of contact between their respective universes abound, since be it at home or abroad, both authors cultivated the life of recluses and established a highly guarded private sphere in which their individual laws were substituted for those of society. Neither writer could, for instance, conform to the demands of emotional relationships based on exclusivity of commitment, and both practised a transgressive sexuality for their times. Byron went abroad in search of "forbidden" sex in what Burroughs calls a "sanctuary of non-interference" (*Interzone* 59), the Venetian Republic of his times being to the former (see Wasserman) what the International Zone of Tangiers was to the latter. For both men too, a transgressive sexuality went hand in hand with avowed misogyny, the ability to engage with women on an equal intellectual footing proving the exception, and female control being deeply resented (Byron, Letter to Lady Melbourne, 4 November 1814, *Selected Prose* 209). Byron and Burroughs also adopt a libertarian distrust of blind adherence to any cause, reform, and belief system, a distrust leading to distinctive black humour and pessimism regarding man's perfectibility. For both writers, what matters is not so much embracing something as opening one's eyes to the all-pervading forms of hypocrisy on which the established political and moral orders are built. And to unshackle the individual from diverse forms of control, libertarian selfishness is definitely permitted, no matter whom or what it upsets. As circumstantial as these parallels may seem at first, their number and depth considerably exceed those existing between Byron and other writers, thereby inviting the following question: could this cartography of fortuitous biographical convergences underpin a far more significant one of literary kinship?

Bridging Burroughs's universe with the one of British Romanticism may appear like a tall order at first, since Burroughs shared none of the idealism -- in the strict philosophical sense, or in the more reformist utopian one -- that linked others within the Beat group to the Romantic transmutation of political and mental energies, with its attendant deification of the poet as visionary. Explaining the connection between Burroughs and Byron cannot be done in terms of a lifelong master/disciple worship of the kind that Allen Ginsberg cultivated for William Blake, or Gregory Corso for Percy Bysshe Shelley. But though Burroughs never intended to rewrite Byron in contemporary American idiom, his life and work nevertheless exemplify the resurgence of a literary archetype created by the latter and the darker side of Romanticism with which he remains associated. Burroughs's iconoclastic sarcasm, his explorations defying class codes and verging on self-destruction, and his open disaffiliation from the sexual and political mainstream come across as so many morphings of the libertarianism and cultural exile that typify the "Byronic Hero." Burroughs's work and person will thus here be read through this template of the partly involuntary outcast turned voluntary and reviled outlaw, of this archetypal figure who outgrew his creator and became a greater-than-life being exerting equal fascination and repulsion upon fellow humans.

It is equally important to specify which lines of enquiry will not be pursued. Although the issue of "confluence" versus "influence" will be shortly addressed, what follows is not a comparative literature paper in the standard philological sense: in keeping with Burroughs's own method of inquiry and superimposition of reading grids, this article seeks to offer a "cartography of junctions" more than an exact philological and genealogical map showing intentional borrowings and recyclings of Byronic materials in Burroughs's texts. Burroughs was a master at unexpected mergers: for him, mental and aesthetic exploration implied courting the improbable fusion, not eschewing it; experimenting with perception and text meant wilfully scrambling reading grids and having enough belief in the magic of apparently illogical surface associations to operate and yield a map with "Points of Intersection" or "Coordinate Points" (Harris n.p.). Such points defy the linear paths of space-time, whilst maintaining some kind of correspondence between two separate realities. This is why, at worst, they constitute nodes of vulnerability facilitating the entry of forces of control (Burroughs, *Nova Express* 56), while in the best-case scenario, such junctions also function as gateways to mental deconditioning (Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* 171). In this more liberating version, "Points of Intersection" are what other Beats called haiku logic, i.e. the gap between realities unexpectedly juxtaposed uncovering hidden affinity beneath surface discrepancy. It is therefore Burroughs himself who gives the scholar license to follow a non-philological road, namely the one testing what new insights and reality-shifting meanings might appear in the interstices and gaps between templates superimposed against the grain. After briefly examining the issue of "confluence" versus "influence," it is thus a "cartography of junctions" that will be developed,

with "Coordinates" yielding hidden affinity beneath surface discrepancy. The argument will show how in life and writing, Burroughs generated so many avatar manifestations of the Byronic Hero, further renewing and transforming the Byronic original in the process.

Even if one refuses to erase the differences that exist between Burroughs and Byron as products of two distinct cultures and moments in time, the possibility of their universes not just colliding, but also yielding fruitful points of contact when superimposed is foreshadowed by Burroughs's genuine awareness of Byron. When it comes to the Romantics, Burroughs's attentive reader spots, for instance, references to the following: Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (*Naked Lunch* 177-78); Coleridge's "Kubla Kahn" (*Place of Dead Roads* 52); Thomas De Quincey (*Place of Dead Roads* 51, 59); the Grand Tour (*Place of Dead Roads* 169); William Wordsworth (*Western Lands* 171). Can a hugely cultivated author who fleetingly but regularly refers to other canonical figures of English Romanticism genuinely have no knowledge at all of their equally canonical contemporary, Lord Byron? Not only does this seem unlikely, but the following references, each of a very different nature, suggest that the author of *Childe Harold* was in fact on Burroughs's mental map.

This, for instance, transpires from the letter of December 1959, which Burroughs wrote his angry mother embarrassed by the release of *Naked Lunch*: "In order to earn my reputation, I may have to start drinking my tea from a skull since this is the only vice remaining to me ... I hope I am not ludicrously miscast as the wickedest man alive, a title recently vacated by the late Aleister Crowley ... And remember the others who have held the title before ... Byron, Baudelaire" (Morgan 320). Besides the mention of Byron by name, Burroughs bringing up the satanic image of himself drinking out of a skull has strong Byronic associations too. As is well known, the English poet surrounded himself at home with skulls under whose gaze he liked to indulge in musings and libations (Letter to John Cam Hobhouse, 10 August 1811, *Selected Prose* 89). Alternatively, the source of Burroughs's causticity may find its root in the short and witty "Lines Inscribed upon a Cup Formed by a Skull" (1808), in which Byron irreverently meditates on how the remains of the dead may still be usefully enlisted: "Start not -- nor deem my spirit fled; / In me behold the only skull, / From which, unlike a living head, / Whatever flows is never dull" (stanza I, *The Penguin Book* 211).

But Burroughs's knowledge of Byron extends beyond a shared reverence for skulls expressed in an irreverent tone. As unearthed by scholar Alex Wermer-Colan, the first leaf in a folder archived in the New York Public Library and containing two cut-ups features a vertical handwritten annotation on the left margin stating "cut up English poets / Wordsworth, Byron, etc." (Burroughs, *The Travel Agency Is On Fire* 25). As a whole, the scrambled text allows the reader to recognize more easily fragmentary borrowings from Wordsworth's pastoral poem "Michael" (1800), Coleridge's apocalyptic epic "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798), and Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819) than from any of Byron's verses. Whatever may have come from these has been too tampered with for sure and easy identification:

Lad lies sleeping that green sleep and forgetting--Michale
Michael weary of that ly ng form the earth-- Our message
ebbing out to Harry j Anshclinger--Sad music of human
pants and tears--There's not a joy the world cangive--Wish
no longer any shelter--Coirage left that place when pale
citadel is fallen--Tears amid the alien corn, Michael--
... --My Michael dying--Remember and live--
Remember last green shade--Go before I sleep-- Young empth
Empty prison from sad shires-- (*The Travel Agency Is On Fire* 25; typos in the original)

This first cut-up page is followed by a second, whose origin proves more uncertain. On the one hand, the red typing ink used by Burroughs seems to indicate that this second leaf is a continuation of the first and its cut-up recycling an anthology of English poets (Wermer-Colan, 28 July 2016 n.p.). On the other hand, however, because this "second leaf is more obscure, and includes more technical sci fi language and references to the Nova mythology that [Burroughs] was working on at the time," it lacks "thematic unity with the first piece," suggesting it may actually "have been misplaced from another folder" (Wermer-Colan, 28 July 2016 n.p.). Whatever the key to the mysterious origin of the piece, out of its thirty-eight hermetic lines, the thirty-fourth reads: "Full length-- Bron Friday unshaken glance yes ofcourse" (NYPL Berg Box 16, Folder 16, Leaf 2; qtd in Wermer-Colan, 10 December 2014 n.p.; typos in the original). In an experimental text riddled with typographical oddities, could "Bron" be "Byron" misspelt? Could "full length" come from line 6 of stanza 8 and line 7 of stanza 12 in the "Dedication" to Robert Southey opening *Don Juan* (6-7; pub. 1819-1824)? Could the "unshaken glance" refer to the final line of stanza CXVI and verse 6 of stanza CXVII in *Don Juan's* Canto VIII (277)? Although these

questions cannot receive any sure answer, they are genuine possibilities, all the more so if we consider that Byron definitely appears in another of Burroughs's experimental pieces. Indeed, in the "Helen of Troy cut-up," whose thirty-five lines recycle authors as diverse as Marlowe, Shakespeare, Milton and Rimbaud (Wermer-Colan, 28 July 2016 n.p.), lines eleven and twelve contain a verbatim citation of the third line in stanza one of Byron's "The Destruction of Semnacherib" (1815; *Selected Poetry* 58): "AND THE / SHEEN OF THEIR SPEARS WAS LIKE STARS ON THE SEA" (NYPL Berg Box 35, Folder 51; qtd. in Wermer-Colan, 28 July 2016).

To turn to a different kind of allusion still, in the "Notes" to the restored text of *The Soft Machine* (2014), Oliver Harris mentions that a longer draft version of the line "Bolivar in Limestones" (37) from the "Trak Trak Trak" section (31-42) had initially read "statues of Byron and Bolivar and various generals stand about in the eternal catatonic postures advocating liberty under the lidless eyes of an iguana" (*Soft Machine* 225). Fleeting as they may be, such references certainly encourage a future, more systematic study of textual correspondences between Byronic and Burroughsian texts. In addition, as variable in nature as Burroughs's succinct evocations of Byron are, they point to more than the important fact that the author of *Naked Lunch* had read the English poet. Even more crucially, they also suggest that it is the archetype of the "Byronic Hero," Byron's lasting legacy in literature and popular culture, which will surface regularly at the "Coordinate Points" of the Byron-Burroughs map operating as a "cartography of junctions." This is perhaps unsurprising in view of the liberating role that so-called Byronism has played for people as diverse as Emily Brontë, Alfred de Vigny, Keith Richards, or Peter Doherty.

Whether we are talking about the release of darkly misanthropic creativity yielding an anti-social character like Heathcliff or the "in-yer-face" antics of a contemporary pop musician, the Byronic Hero's first function in life and art repeatedly involves two fundamentals. On the one hand, the archetype gives one licence to break with the tacit codes of social hypocrisy forcing one to repress one's true nature. On the other hand, the Byronic persona encourages the unrepentant embrace of a *non-idealistic*, self-centred libertarian ethos, one which refuses to see the libertarian impulse entirely disentangled from purely egotistical drives (Cochran, "The Bisexual Byron" lxviii) and from the need for self-preservation. Over time and across cultures, the Byronic Hero has thus proved a great *enabler* for those identifying with him in part or in whole, and it is perhaps no coincidence that Byron appears in a letter and experimental cut-ups where affirming *freedom from* something -- be it received opinion or accepted aesthetic practice -- is the central issue.

As for others before or after Burroughs, Byronism may have acted as the catalytic force that perhaps helped the author of *Naked Lunch* make even more decisive and faster leaps towards a number of already contemplated disaffiliations. After all, the real-life Byron was a married bisexual aristocrat who engaged in promiscuous homosexual sex abroad (Byron, Letter to John Cam Hobhouse, 4 October 1810, *Selected Prose* 80; Gunn, "The Formative Years" 28) and forbidden -- because homoerotic or incestuous -- relationships at home (see Cochran, "Byron's Boyfriends"; Gunn, "Fame and Society" 87). As such, he comes across as an inspirational model not only to those ready to embrace transgressive, possibly even prosecutable forms of sex, but also to those willing to betray the Establishment into which they were born. Burroughs, of course, fitted in both categories. Similarly, Byron's nomadic lifestyle continues to inspire those lured by expatriation to more exotic shores, but not tempted in equal measure to go "native." Again, someone like Burroughs would not have found it too hard to identify with the figure of Byron in exile: Byronism may entail an inner journey that coincides with the physical one, but it never means substituting the host culture as a moral standard for the reviled one left behind. But the Byronic voice does not only grant one license to engage in a jointly Promethean and self-centred struggle against the shackling of personal freedom and fate by the old feudal forces of either God or State. Byronic transgression is also deeply linked to an affirmation of autonomous human agency through the exertion of absolute lucidity, the latter in fact being the only path to human dignity in the face of death, be it death in the literal sense or understood metaphorically as a result of social control. In this respect, Burroughs's 1959 letter to his mother in which he summons up the Gothic image of himself drinking out of a skull actually refers to an emblematic trait of the Byronic voice: the uncompromising -- if at times darkly humorous -- contemplation of all existential absurdities, an unflinching striving for raw lucidity bound to resonate with Burroughs in his quest for the same. Whether in real life or as a poetic persona, Byron indeed gazed at skulls by way of serving his readers and himself a kind of "NAKED Lunch—a frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork" (*Naked Lunch* 9).

Nomadic disaffiliation from accepted morality, fierce preservation of one's autonomy, and a cold-blooded grasping of reality that strips it of all pretences and illusions, these are thus the three essential traits distinguishing the Byronic Hero as an individual. These are also the very characteristics that transferred from Byron's own flamboyant life to that of his poetic *alter egos*, from the noble youth of

Childe Harold (1812-18) embarking upon a journey of initiation through Europe, to the more Gothic and avenging lonely figures at the core of poems like *The Giaour* (1813), *The Corsair* (1814), and *Lara* (1814), or still to the more Promethean protagonist engaging with supernatural forces in verse plays like *Manfred* (1817) or *Cain* (1821):

The Byronic hero is an outlaw and an outsider who defines his own moral code, often defying oppressive institutional authority, and is able to do so because of his superhuman or supernatural powers, his self-sufficiency and independence, and his egotistical sense of his own superiority. He essentially redefines himself and creates himself, like Wordsworth's "unfathered vapour," embodying the ultimate development of the individual ... He is a loner who often displays a quick temper or a brooding angst, or both, and he lacks the ability to relate to others ... An actual awareness of Byron's texts is not required for the creation of a contemporary Byronic hero, yet it is precisely his Byronic qualities that are defining characteristics of the contemporary dark hero. (Stein 8-10)

This profile strongly resonates with one of the archetype's most striking embodiments in Byron's own verse, namely the vampire-like figure of Count Lara:

18

There was in him a vital scorn of all:
As if the worst had fall'n which could befall
He stood a stranger in this breathing world,
An erring spirit from another hurled;
A thing of dark imaginings, that shaped
By choice the perils he by chance escaped;
...
His early dreams of good outstripp'd the truth,
And troubled manhood followed baffled youth;
...
And fiery passions that had poured their wrath
In hurried desolation o'er his path,
And left the better feelings all at strife
In wild reflection o'er his stormy life;
But haughty still, and loth himself to blame,
He called on Nature's self to share the shame,
And charged all faults upon the fleshly form
She gave to clog the soul, and feast the worm;
...

19

With all that chilling mystery of mien,
And seeming gladness to remain unseen;
He had (if 'twere not nature's boon) an art
Of fixing memory on another's heart;
...
But they who saw him did not see in vain,
And once beheld would ask of him again:
...
You could not penetrate his soul, but found,
Despite your wonder, to your own he wound;
... (*Lara, Selected Poetry* 52-54)

Through *Lara*, Byron superbly conveys the paradoxical mix of dangerousness and vulnerability which characterizes his archetypal adventurer's misanthropy and deviance, which actually find their root in a wounded hypersensitivity and deep disillusionment with human nature. The emotional hurt may be well hidden under the visible armour of philosophical cynicism and moral defiance, but it nonetheless exists, resulting from a lucidity painfully acquired through an equally painful process of initiation. Moreover, the deeper this inner wound, the more marked the instinct for self-preservation, and the more perfected the talent at social disguise and manipulation: "He, who would see, must be himself unseen" (*The Corsair*, Part I, stanza 10, *Selected Poetry* 50).

The Byronic Hero's moral lawlessness and cultivated elusiveness are, besides, anchored in a fundamental, threefold distrust: a basic wariness towards "Nature" called upon "to share the shame" of existence (*Lara*, stanza 18, l. 44, *Selected Poetry* 53); a root scepticism about the alleged meaningfulness of Life; and a profound doubt as to the value of words. Indeed, even if Byron's heroes never openly declare war on the biological yoke of Nature's designs as Burroughs does, and even if its

energies cleanse the mental pollution generated by base humanity (*Childe Harold*, Canto II, stanzas 25-27, *Selected Poetry* 7), Nature also takes on the more Gnostic form of the bodily prison which always repossesses human achievement in the end. Further, whether we are talking of action, intellect, or mystical contemplation, the products of "Ambition," "Thought" and "Soul" are all doomed to failure (*Childe Harold*, Canto II, stanza 6, *Selected Poetry* 6). Human lives amount to an accumulation of suffering which the deployment of "Wisdom," "Wit" and "Passion" cannot redeem (*Childe Harold*, Canto II, stanza 6, *Selected Poetry* 6), even though, paradoxically, it is only upon such a deployment that the struggle to bend existence to one's own will rests. Last but not least, the road of initiation followed by the Byronic Hero does not lead to resolution: "But words are things" (Canto III, stanza 88, *Don Juan* 132) is a realization preventing any apocalyptic, millennial uncovering of underlying essence or verity. Byron may not have cut up his own texts, but he refused "to exalt the individual word" (Manning 218), his epic poems developing a discourse "based on absence, one that never offers the consolations of climax or comprehensiveness, never holds forth the promise of an order suddenly made manifest" (Manning 218). Often deriding the mysticism of other Romantics, the Byronic narrator thus remains wary of the cognitive maps that words provide, Byron's skepticism oddly resonating with the doubts underpinning Burroughs's far more radical experimental procedures: "How little do we know that which we are / How less that which we may be" (Canto XV, stanza 99, *Don Juan* 441).

According to Atara Stein, our times of increased technological complexity call for new Byronic heroes who affirm their apartness from the rest of humanity and with whom the audience may vicariously identify (Stein 10). If we follow this assumption, besides Burroughs himself coming across in his own unorthodox life as a re-invention of the Byronic Hero, can we also read his fictional characters as recycling the Byronic archetype's traits in part or in full? Byron's protagonists may don flamboyant exotic costumes, where William Lee just wears the shabby grey suit and hat. Yet, in their solitude and pain, in their disaffiliation from humanity's follies and belief systems in general, the parallels between the Byronic and Burroughsian libertarian loners exist. Lee blends the Corsair's talent for disguise, Count Lara's ability to leave an ineradicable imprint upon any observer's consciousness, and the Giaour's combined aura of mesmerizing power, latent energy, and permanent separateness from mankind: "Lee's face, his whole person, seemed at first glance completely anonymous. He looked like an FBI man, like anybody. But the absence of trappings, of anything remotely picturesque or baroque, distinguished and delineated Lee, so that seen twice you would not forget him ... His face had the look of a superimposed photo, reflecting a fractured spirit that could never love man or woman with complete wholeness. Yet he was driven by an intense need to make his love real, to change fact. Usually he selected someone who could not reciprocate ... Basically the loved one was always and forever an Outsider, a Bystander, and audience (*Interzone* 63-64).

Amongst Burroughs's characters, it is undoubtedly Lee, the author's fictional *alter ego*, who comes closest to a recycled, updated version of the Byronic Hero as a whole -- be it the more reclusive Lee fleeing the law and interference of the moral majority, or the more swashbuckling Inspector Lee, fighting the word virus and criminal forces of mental control. In *Queer*, Lee is shown as the Byronic loner rejected by society for his difference and beginning to develop his own transgressive code of behaviour, his resentment being proportional to the restraints applied by the outside world: "Lee did not enjoy frustration. The limitations of his desires were like the bars of a cage, like a chain and collar, something he had learned as an animal learns, through days and years of experiencing the snubs of the chain, the unyielding bars. He had never resigned himself, and his eyes looked out through the invisible bars, watchful, alert, waiting for the keeper to forget the door, for the frayed collar, the loosened bar ... suffering without despair and without consent" (*Queer* 40). In typical Byronic style, the refusal to surrender individual autonomy is deeply rooted in the emotional hurt inflicted by the desired other -- in this case, by Allerton, the non-reciprocating lover who crushes Lee's intrinsic vulnerability (*Queer* 65), and who in his own selfishness and resistance to lasting attachment (41) also comes across as a sort of minor Byronic character. At this early stage in the shaping of his fictional *alter ego*, when writing *Queer* in 1952, Burroughs innovates by making Lee embody an openly homosexual version of the Byronic Hero and his masculinity. However, the cynically and consciously cultivated daredevil deviance of the dark Byronic original carries over onto this updated rendition of him as gay: "'I don't mind people disliking me,' Lee said. 'The question is, what are they in a position to do about it? Apparently nothing, at present. They don't have the green light'" (*Queer* 52). The Byronic Hero's self-sufficiency is here only equalled by his bravado and resolve to transgress, there being nothing to cling on to or obey in the first place, not even the natural prison of the body: "Like a saint or a wanted criminal with nothing to lose, Lee had stepped beyond the claims of his nagging, cautious, aging, frightened flesh" (*Queer* 68).

A similar recklessness defines Inspector Lee, whose instincts for redress against tyranny make him appear like a modernized version of Byron's Corsair or Giaour, all three remaining connected by the

quest for liberation from physical and mental forms of enslavement and oppression. The enemies might not be the same: where Byron's protagonists fight sexual slavery, existential treachery, the destructive forces of Time, or those of feudalism and established religion, Inspector Lee defies the viral forces of mental control which, through linguistic and subliminal lines of invasion, lead to addictive and unconsciously replicating behaviour. But precisely because the targets of Burroughs's dark heroes have evolved, his work characteristically offers a new version of Byron's ever adaptable archetype, one more suited to times in which it no longer suffices to define freedom as a disentanglement from publicly accepted morality and feudal forms of government. In Burroughs, the Byronic Hero moves onto the terrain of the unconscious and physical/physiological/neurological determinism. Furthermore, the shift from Byron's proto-awareness of linguistic unreliability to Burroughs's full-fledged consciousness of verbal determinism changes the Byronic archetype from a renegade fighting highly visible forms of outer control into one combating far more insidious forces of subliminal manipulation.

Yet in the attempt to "occupy The Reality Studio and retake their universe of Fear Death and Monopoly" (*Nova Express* 7), there is more to bring Byron's and Burroughs's dark heroes together than just the sustained roaming through time and space, than the defamiliarizing aura of intriguing, shifting Oriental worlds, and than the reckless avenger's bravado in tone and deed. Also building bridges across the stylistic chasms which separate Byron's Turkish tales and harems from Burroughs's Interzone is the fact that both the reclusive Lee and the swashbuckling enforcer of the Nova Police provoke their readers by voicing distrusts very much akin to those of the original Byronic Hero. Once the layers of contemporary American idiom are seen through, both the more private and public versions of Lee perpetuate the Promethean revolt and echo the fundamental, threefold distrust -- of Nature, Fate, and language -- that had distinguished Byron's dark protagonists. When Inspector Lee asks, "Who monopolized Immortality? Who monopolized Cosmic Consciousness? Who monopolized Love Sex and Dream? Who monopolized Life Time and Fortune? Who took from you what is yours?" (*Nova Express* 5), he comes across as more than a chaser of addictive forces: both in substance and form, he embodies anew the Promethean Superman who resents having "to live under the conditions your enemies will endeavor to impose" (*Ticket That Exploded* 15) in a reality shaped by words that are "simultaneously something and nothing" (Whickman 160). He likewise loathes enslavement to the ravages of Time and its defeating effects: "'The' word of Alien Enemy imprisons 'thee' in Time" (*Nova Express* 4).

In Burroughs's second trilogy, *The Cities of the Red Night* (1981) -- with the fictional recreation of Captain Mission and his pirate commune reminiscent of *The Corsair* -- might at first appear more akin to Byron's universe. It is, however, Kim Carson, the central protagonist of *The Place of Dead Roads* (1983), who, with his Western Frontier ideals and subversive organizing of the Johnson family, comes closest to the defiant libertarianism of the lawless Byronic loner. Kim's understanding of Life as "an entanglement of lies to hide its basic mechanisms" (*Place of Dead Roads* 23), as well as his hatred of the mental enslavement imposed by Christianity (32) and the social structures of any class system (169-70) make him develop a near pathological loathing of moral "decency" (32) and blind obedience to dogmatic authority (92). As a misogynistic homosexual resenting interference and building his own libertarian outposts, Kim resembles the real Byron who, in his nomadism, strove for a highly guarded private sphere in which individual laws replaced society's. Furthermore, Kim's fascination for and defiance of death (90) echo the Byronic attempt to curb the dual yoke of Fate and Nature.

However, it is in the cut-up and fold-in experiments that Burroughs most radically renews the Byronic Hero's "chilling mystery of mien, / And seeming gladness to remain unseen" (*Lara*, stanza 19, l. 73-74, *Selected Poetry* 54), when he re-invents him as a narrative "disembodied" voice tirelessly enacting that "the secret is that there is no secret" (*Interzone* 110). This disincarnated voice forever roaming and scorning the sea of linguistic association may in fact correspond to a Conrad or Lara of our times. When it comes to Burroughs, "You could not penetrate his soul, but found, / Despite your wonder, to your own he wound" (*Lara*, stanza 19, l. 89-90, *Selected Poetry* 54) continues to resonate because as a reincarnation of the Byronic Hero, the narrator who is a permanent outlaw and "pirate" of the text, remains, like Childe Harold, condemned to "live and die unheard / With a most voiceless thought, sheathing it as a sword" (Canto III, stanza 97, *Selected Poetry* 83).

On the surface, thus, Burroughs and Byron belonged to vastly different times and literary cultures, which seem unbridgeable at first, not just due to the wide gap in historical context between Georgian England and the US of the second half of the twentieth century. Whereas Ginsberg, Corso, and others modernized the voices of past mentors like Blake, Shelley, and Keats primarily with the aim of *preserving* their heritage, Burroughs tended to recycle former models -- even admired ones -- above all in terms of deconditioning through transgression and distancing. Moreover, when it comes to Romanticism proper, one of its enduring legacies is precisely hero worship: Ginsberg embracing Blake as his *guru* and guiding presence for half a century represents a devotion fully commensurate with the Romantic

turn of mind, but it is a religious reverence that ill sits with Burroughs's more sceptical temperament and savage inclination to debunk. Yet, all these contrasts notwithstanding, the literary archetype of the Byronic Hero constitutes a major "Point of Intersection" whereby the Byronic and Burroughsian maps can be rescrumbled and meaningfully recharted. Even if Burroughs did not always have it consciously in mind to emulate Byron, with whom he was nevertheless familiar, a number of Burroughsian protagonists, from Inspector Lee to the disembodied literary voice of the cut-ups and fold-ins, can be understood as so many contemporary re-inventions of the Byronic Hero, not to speak of Burroughs's public persona and its own reincarnation of this dark archetype.

More than a hundred years after his birth, assessing Burroughs implies understanding that his enduring appeal across languages and cultures rests in part on how his writing pushes the transformation of the Byronic myth further in a long chain of adaptations over two centuries. Applying Burroughs's nomadic reading method to his own work shows surprising continuities between him and certain strands within British Romanticism. The template of the Byronic Hero not only forces us to revise the view of Burroughs as not participating in the neo-Romantic energies coursing through other Beat writings. This template equally invites us to re-assess the recycling of Romanticism in the works of Ginsberg, Kerouac, and others. In their own specific ways, were they not too living "avatars" of the Byronic Hero? Do they not also re-invent him in their writing? Keeping this literary archetype on the radar not only changes our reading of Burroughs, but might also transform our reading of the Beat sensibility as a whole.

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