

The Modern Dark Poem of Quest and Exile: Travel as ‘Travail’ in *Childe Harold*, *Childe Roland* and *Childe Rolandine*

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This paper examines the development of the twin concepts of *travel* and *travail* in three major English poems, in the context of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries’ renovated interest in medieval epic and quest literature. If in Byron’s 1812-18 epic travelogue, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Harold is the picaresque pilgrim who flees from home to travel around a ravaged Napoleonic Europe as an exile and a sarcastic commentator; in Robert Browning’s *Childe Roland to The Dark Tower Came* (1855), Roland is the Victorian poet himself in the guise of ‘knight quester’ traversing the vast barren expanses of failure and death until he can prove himself a ‘self-made man’. In turn, twentieth-century woman poet Stevie Smith (1902-71) transforms Byron’s and Browning’s famous male epics into an ironically eccentric reflection on the unromantic life of a suburban secretary/typist; her *Childe Rolandine* can be read as a female epic of London suburbia and a powerful tribute to the ‘anonymous’ woman worker, exiled under the yoke of modern social exploitation.

‘The development of a soul’: The Poetics and Politics of Travel/ *Travail*

Travel has often been interpreted as a metaphor, not just as a literal concept, and we may speak of our lives as a ‘journey’ from birth to death, as philosophers and religious men have done. *Travel* is indeed a metaphor of individual freedom and personal experience. But the *journey* is also the literary metaphor by which we describe the mind’s workings, our flights of fancy and imaginative adventures (Robertson 2001: 11); furthermore, for psychoanalytic critics as Cixous, the journey is our “travelling in the unconscious” (1993: 70). Works such as David Scott’s *Semiologies of Travel* show how, in today’s post-modern world, the concerns of

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Romantic writers and theorists may still be relevant to reflections on travel. Yet, the new ‘poetics of travel’ also demonstrate how often modern and post-modern texts (including those of Stevie Smith) question, revisit, subvert or reject such key notions of ‘travel literature’ as exoticism, nostalgia, exile, nomadism, and otherness. In their turn, the so-called ‘politics of travel’ tend to focus on the role of travel in the formation of individual and collective identity, and the travel-knowledge-power relations, between centre-periphery, identity-difference, mobility-passivity, the West-the East.² Even in this acception, the Westerner’s travel ‘abroad’ is always the voyage across a liminal space, which can be literal and/or metaphorical. In reality, the ‘poetics’ and ‘politics’ of travel literature cannot be totally separated as methodologies.

It is significant that the word *travel* in English has a French origin, initially ‘travail’, meaning bodily or mental labour or toil. And indeed, in the past, travel was extremely painful, tiresome and often unsafe; besides, travel always had foremostly pragmatic aims. The opposition between travel and work is, thus, a very recent notion; it was only during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that pleasurable romantic and educational travel began to impose itself.³ Paul Fussell further observes that “Before the development of tourism, travel was conceived to be like study, [...] the traveller was a student of *what he sought*” (1980: 39-40).⁴ Indeed, as Amanda Gilroy states, travel writing in the Enlightenment and Romantic periods, emerges as a hybrid discourse that traversed the disciplinary boundaries of politics, letter writing, education, ethnography, anthropology, natural history, medicine, aesthetics, and economics (2000:1-3). The experience of geographic displacement helped many Romantic-era writers, like Byron, to renegotiate the cultural verities of ‘home’. He was one of the first to understand that the disturbances of travel could and *did* destabilize the boundaries of national, racial, gender and class affiliation. Eventually, travel’s expansion would also bring about the feeling of the ‘obliteration’ of place and the consciousness of a ‘transitory’ identity, more present in later poets such as Browning.

***Childe Harold* or the ‘travails’ of Byron’s exiled tourist-pilgrim**

² This implies the overstep between two symbolic geographies, different civilizations, cultures, religions, races, or divergent ideologies and political systems.

³ However, it was not until about 1800 that the term ‘tourist’ in its present acception was first used.

⁴ The word *tour* then took on the meaning of ‘a circuitous journey’ and it became fashionable for English young men of breeding to go on a *Grand Tour* of Continental Europe as part of their education.

The Romantic, and the Victorian, emphasis on the need to reaffirm and develop the Individual on a post-revolutionary period and a newly industrialised and mechanised era led in the nineteenth century to the emergence of the long poem or epic on the ‘development of the soul’. The first major example was Byron’s *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, a long narrative poem in four cantos, written in Spenserian stanzas and published between 1812 and 1818 as a poetic travelogue of experiences.⁵ The title seems to be ironic, suggesting a religious quest, and comes from the term *childe*, a medieval title for a young man who was a candidate for knighthood. The poem describes, in reality, the travels and reflections of a world-weary young man who, disillusioned with a life of pleasure and revelry, looks for distraction in foreign lands. According to the quote from Canto I

[...]

Worse than adversity the Childe befell;
He felt the fullness of satiety:
Then *loathed he in his native land to dwell,*
Which seem'd to him more lone than Eremite's sad cell. (I.4)

[...]

Apart he stalk'd in joyless reverie,
And *from his native land resolv'd to go,*
And visit scorching climes beyond the sea;
With pleasure drugg'd, he almost long'd for woe,
And e'en for *change of scene* would seek the shades below. (I.6)

In a wider sense, the poem is an expression of the melancholy and disillusionment felt by a generation weary of the wars of the post-Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras. Byron generated some of the storyline from experience gained during his own travels through Portugal, the Mediterranean and Aegean Sea between 1809 and 1811. Throughout the poem, Byron, in character of Childe Harold, regretted his wasted early youth, hence re-evaluating his life choices and re-designing himself through going on the ‘pilgrimage’. The work provided the first example of the ‘Byronic hero’: a youth with a rather high level of intelligence and perception. This hero is well-educated and rather sophisticated in his style but

⁵ The travelogue was a travel narrative in verse. “It incorporates the characters and plot line of a novel, the descriptive power of poetry, the substance of a history lesson, the discursiveness of an essay, and the--often inadvertent--self-revelation of a memoir. It revels in the particular while occasionally illuminating the universal. It colours and shapes and fills in gaps. Because it results from displacement, it is frequently funny. [...] It humanizes the alien. More often than not it celebrates the unsung. It uncovers truths that are stranger than fiction. It gives eyewitness proof of life’s infinite possibilities.” (Thomas Swick, “Not a Tourist.” *The Wilson Quarterly*, Winter 2010). Nowadays, a travelogue is a lecture about travel, often accompanied by a film, a video, or slides.

he struggles with his integrity, being prone to mood swings. Generally, he has a disrespect for certain figures of authority, thus creating the image of an exile or an outcast. The hero also has a tendency to be arrogant and cynical, often indulging in self-destructive behaviour; this dark feature is self-recognised:

And dost thou ask, *what secret woe*
I bear, corroding joy and youth?
[...]

It is not love, it is not hate,
Nor low Ambition's honours lost,
That bids me loathe my present state,
And fly from all I prized the most:

It is that weariness which springs,
From all I meet, or hear, or see:
[...]

It is that settled, ceaseless gloom
The fabled Hebrew wanderer bore;
That will not look beyond the tomb,
But cannot hope for rest before. (I. 841-856)

According to Jerome McGann, the poet masked himself behind a literary artifice, as *Childe Harold* became a vehicle for Byron's own beliefs and ideas.⁶

Childe Harold makes his journey to escape the pain of some unnamed sin committed in his homeland (England). He seeks respite and distraction in the exotic landscapes of Europe; thus, the first two cantos are primarily focused on poetic descriptions of the sights Childe Harold sees.⁷ But, as a record of his journey through war-ravaged lands, much of the work meditates upon war, conquest, and violence in the name of one cause or another. The poem thus reflects Byron's political views, particularly his support for Greek independence from Turkey and the very close-to-home incident of the Convention of Cintra (Peninsular War). Another theme is Byron's hatred of oppression; he describes Iberian resistance to Napoleon's forces, clearly siding with the 'noble Spanish' against these agents of tyranny. Indeed, William Flesch notes that "the poem is about the meaning of freedom in all its forms

⁶ Indeed, in the preface to Canto IV, Byron finally acknowledges that there is little or no difference between author and protagonist.

⁷ Byron also includes his love for the East in his celebration of the peoples and places he encounters.

– personal, political, poetic” (2010: 66).⁸ The dozen stanzas describing Harold’s sailing through the Mediterranean in Canto II vaguely parallel Odysseus’ journey sailing through the area in epic myth.⁹

In the third canto, an older and more experienced Childe Harold journeys from Dover to Waterloo, then following the Rhine River into Switzerland. Harold is still independent, ‘proud though in desolation’, nature being his favoured companion on his travels, the world of men and war being relatively distasteful. The poet here meditates upon the nature of human genius and the desire for greatness — and on Napoleon, who drew so many others into his battles.

But quiet to quick bosoms is a hell,
And there hath been thy bane; *there is a fire*
And motion of the soul which will not dwell
In its own narrow being, but *aspire*
Beyond the fitting medium of desire;
And, but once kindled, quenchless evermore,
Preys upon high adventure, nor can tire
Of aught but rest; *a fever at the core,*
Fatal to him who bears, to all who ever bore. (III.42)

In stanzas 69-75, the poet digresses to defend the spirit of individualism, arguing that “to fly from, need not be to hate, mankind”.¹⁰ Isolation pervades the poem by accentuating the other themes: the misunderstanding of genius, freedom from despotism, and the value of Nature.¹¹ Byron saw Nature as a magnification of man’s – and particularly his own – greatness and follies. Vast glaciers, thundering avalanches, and wild storms only accentuated Byron’s own internal struggles and reminded him how dangerous and marvellous a piece of work is Man. The fourth canto continues the poet’s journey into Italy: Venice, Florence, and finally Rome. Again the narrator laments the fall of older civilizations. Even the mightiest of empires eventually falls – so military and political greatness are not necessarily the measure of permanence or virtue. And it is with this critical reflection that the poet concludes both his poem and his journey.

⁸ While not always consistent in his personal life, Byron would make this battle for independence and liberation central to his public persona through his poetry and political actions.

⁹ One theme of Canto II is Byron’s frustration at the despoiling of ancient Greek treasures.

¹⁰ By this time the English media was spreading rumours of infidelity, violence, and incest on Byron’s part, going so far as to call for his exile. And, in 1816, Byron left England never to return.

¹¹ When Byron’s journey takes him to Lake Lemman and the Alps, his poetry turns to the wonders of Nature and puts Rousseau in his natural Genevan context.

Browning's *Roland* or the poet as failed 'quester'/artist

Famous for its mysteriousness and ambiguity, Robert Browning's 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came' was written in 1855 and first published that same year in the collection titled *Men and Women*.¹² The title, which significantly also forms the last words of the poem, is taken from William Shakespeare's play *King Lear*.

Child Rowland to the dark tower came,
His word was still 'Fie, foh, and fum
I smell the blood of a British man.' (*King Lear*, Act 3, scene 4)

Elements in the poem – the name 'Roland', references to his slughorn (a pseudo-medieval instrument), general medieval setting and the title *childe* (a medieval term for an untested knight) – suggest that the protagonist is the paladin of *The Song of Roland*, the eleventh century anonymous French *chanson de geste*. Thus, Roland's quest might be a search for what Harold Bloom calls 'poetic election', for entrance into the company of knights, which here means 'poets' (the likes of Shakespeare, Milton or Shelley).¹³

The Victorian poet thus explores Roland's strange journey to a mysterious Dark Tower in six-line stanzas of iambic pentameter. Nevertheless, the hero's acted story in the poem is completely subsidiary or secondary to the creation of an impression of the hero's mental state, which is a doubtful and tormented one in relation to his success or failure, as can be seen in the following stanzas:

IV.
For, what with *my whole world-wide wandering*,
What with *my search drawn out thro' years*, my hope
Dwindled into a ghost not fit to cope
With that obstreperous joy *success* would bring,
I hardly tried now to rebuke the spring
My heart made, finding *failure* in its scope.

¹² Many later writers from Hart Crane to Stephen King (in his Dark Tower sequence of novels) have tried to solve the mystery of Browning's poem.

¹³ In *Paradise Lost* Milton apparently compares the sublime ruined archangel Satan to a dark tower.

[...]

VII.

Thus, I had *so long suffered in this quest*,
Heard failure prophesied so oft, been writ
So many times among "The Band"-- to wit,
The knights who to the Dark Tower's search addressed
Their steps---that *just to fail as they, seemed best*,
And all the doubt was now---should I be fit?

What really lies beneath the vile barrenness of Roland's landscape is the disappointment/failure of its author.¹⁴ This knight has trained all his life to approach the Dark Tower, and now in the last leg of his crusade he wants to do nothing but just finish his task. He does not care whether he succeeds or fails, lives or dies. However, Roland's acquiescence to death, his frustration over his journey, and his own disappointment in himself, all combine to weaken his imaginative powers.

On the allegorical level, the landscape the narrator depicts represents his own imagination which has fallen victim to all of these forces. Roland meets no villains, fights no demons. The horror is, indeed, stronger because of the absence of a living antagonist. The narrative moves into its final stages with a nightmarish dawning of recognition. Fighting discouragement and fear, he reaches the tower, where he sounds his horn, knowing as he does that his quest and his life have come to an end. The barren plains seem to symbolize the sterile, corrupted conditions of modern life.¹⁵ In this way, his journey speaks to the anonymity and isolation of the modern individual, anticipating Smith's own poem. That no one hears Roland's horn or appreciates his deeds suggests cultural discontinuity: an overwhelming sense of futility. The inspiration for Browning's poem is thus an empty performance, just as the quest described here *is* an empty adventure.

XXXI.

What in the midst lay but the Tower itself?
The round squat turret, blind as the fool's heart,
Built of brown stone, without a counter-part
In the whole world.

[...]

XXXIV.

¹⁴ The poem is filled with images from nightmare, but the setting is given unusual reality by much fuller descriptions of the landscape.

¹⁵ Very much like the modern city, this place strains the hero's psyche and provokes abnormal responses.

There they stood, ranged along the hill-sides, met
To view the last of me, a living frame
For one more picture! in a sheet of flame
I saw them and I knew them all. And yet
Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set,
And blew. ``Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came."

Questions are still being asked about Browning's most complex poem: Is this a debunking of the myth of the quest, for this hero does not achieve anything and it seems impossible that he will survive? Is it about the despair of being without belief in God, a nightmare of many Victorians who felt that without belief in God mankind would be lost? Browning once wrote that the poem was "about the development of a soul" as "little else is worth study". Was he suggesting that what is more important is the quest itself, the process, and not the end or result? To find the Dark Tower – one's 'soul' – is in a sense to find the meaning of the quest and, thus, the meaning of the poem.

Smith's *Rolandine* or woman as an oppressed worker/liberated artist

Poet and novelist, living as a spinster in suburban London in the context of the wars, Stevie Smith (1902–1971) wrote comic verse revealing a stunning intellectual clarity. As a Modernist, who is both entrancing and sad, Smith draws up in her *Collected Poems* a pure delight from her desolation; and this despite her many suicide attempts. After finishing school, Smith had dreams of becoming a traveller or an explorer, but ironically she ended up in a secretarial school. She got a job as private secretary to Sir Neville Pearson, a Baronet who worked as a magazine publisher. Her work apparently gave her time to write poetry; but, after working for Pearson for thirty years, Smith unexpectedly cut her wrists. One friend explained that she was 'very angry' rather than merely depressed.

Contemporary reviews of Smith point their readers to the Grimm Brothers, Edward Lear, or William Blake via Smith's interest in fantastical journeys, her Gothic view of childhood, her religious ire, or her skittish illustrations.¹⁶ The texts themselves, with their complex combinations of allusion, parody, echo, and lampoon gesture to a series of possible literary antecedents. Therefore, to understand her rereading of both Byron and Browning, one

¹⁶ I have written elsewhere on Smith's religious criticism and her use of the visual in her poems, as well as on other forms of intervention and intertextuality in her work.

has first to understand what the ‘Dark Tower’ of 1914-18 meant to her.¹⁷ She writes in the poem “A Soldier Dear to Us” that “Basil never spoke of the trenches” but she still ‘saw’ the scene of the war – ‘Because it was the same as the poem *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came* I was reading at school’, she significantly added.

In “Childe Rolandine”, Browning’s tragic protagonist is transported to the harassed world of a London publishing office with some indignation. Here ‘travel’ assumes its original meaning of ‘travail’ or labour, as the artist-heroine instead of exploring is being exploited. Smith’s poem begins on a dark day, but her desolate landscape, unlike Browning’s barren wastes, where the vegetation is all blighted, contains a ‘tree’ that bears fruit. This is only possible because the tears of Rolandine ‘water’ the tree. This one, though, is a tree of hatred similar to Blake’s “A Poison Tree”.¹⁸ She believes that her soul will “fry in hell” because of this hatred of her oppressors, her rich employers. But she concludes ironically that those that she hates *will* go to heaven as they cannot be blamed for her suffering. She initially prays to heaven to keep her thoughts unspoken, but realizing that the male God she addresses is the One who thrives on her misery, then decides to speak up, as “silence is vanity”. It is worth quoting the poem in full:

Dark was the day for *Childe Rolandine the artist*

When she went to work as a secretary-typist.

And as she worked she sang this song

Against oppression and the rule of wrong:

It is the privilege of the rich

To waste the time of the poor.

To water with tears in secret

A tree that grows in secret.

That bears fruit in secret.

That ripened falls to the ground in secret

And manures the parent tree.

Oh, the wicked tree of hatred and the secret,

The sap rising and the tears falling.

Likely also, sang the Childe, my soul will fry in hell

Because of this hatred, while in heaven my employer does well.

And why should he not, exacerbating though he be but generous.

¹⁷ When Smith was in her early teens, some soldiers wounded in the First World War were stationed nearby and would visit her mother’s house.

¹⁸ This is one of Blake’s *Songs of Experience* that deals in succession with the feelings of friendship, misunderstanding, hatred and revenge in an allegorical or symbolic manner.

Is it his fault I must work at a work that is tedious?
 Oh, heaven sweet heaven, keep my thoughts in their night den
 Do not let them by day be spoken.
 But then she sang, Ah why not? *tell all, speak, speak,*
 Silence is vanity, speak for the whole truth's sake.
 And *rising she took the bugle and put it to her lips*, crying:
 There is a Spirit feeds on our tears, I give him mine,
 Mighty human feelings are his food.
 Passion and grief and joy his flesh and blood.
 That he may live and grow fat we daily die.
 This cropping One is our immortality.
 Childe Rolandine bowed her head and in the evening
Drew the picture of the spirit from heaven.

In “Childe Rolandine” Smith denounces how many British women were depreciated in their society during the mid-twentieth century. Though Rolandine is an artist, she is obliged to work or ‘travail’ as a “secretary typist”; her song tells the story of how she is victimized by her employer who leaves her to suffer alone with a “fruit in secret” (her gift of hatred). Both the fruit and “the parent tree”, the song goes, grow up to be sources of hatred not only against the oppressor but against the entire society, which does not denounce social wrongs practiced against women.

But Childe Rolandine's progress also suggests that Smith is less despairing than Browning: In her poem she ‘feeds’ even her despair and her hate to the mighty spirit who lives on ‘our’ deaths and is ‘our’ immortality. Childe Rolandine takes off on a similar journey to Browning’s almost hopeless quest for victory against impossible odds in a desolate landscape, but she makes it ‘her own’ quest with a different ending. Smith frequently shifts Browning from the devotional to the indifferent, or here, from the purely chivalric to the fastidious quotidian. If Byron identified the spirit of Imperialism, Browning says nothing of the nature of the ‘occupant’ of the Dark Tower; but Smith “Drew his picture” and she tries to visualise the spirit that takes her grief and rage. If her rewriting of Browning is an act of ‘literary murder’, she remains as direct about her usurpation as Browning’s speaker is evasive – her suburban epic is a ‘quest’ for woman’s artistic freedom.

There is little anxiety about tradition in Smith’s work. If, like Byron, she has a tendency to cast her speakers as dejected isolates wandering from temporary shelter to temporary shelter, they just as often tramp fearlessly over a series of rival traditions. For Romana Huk, Smith’s poems engage in a ‘refracted discourse’ with the past, prompting ironic

rewrites and travesties of a male tradition, and revising fairy tale and folklore to feminist ends (2010: 43). Yet Smith's idiosyncratic engagement with myth and the epic are perhaps not as conclusive as they may seem. The language of phantoms and haunting, so often used by Smith to indicate her relationship to her literary past, is mined here with acute ambivalence. The act of rewriting myth, rather than provide feminist resistance, only makes the struggle for a coherent identity more difficult for its protagonists.

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