

## JOHN RICHARDSON'S BYRONIC HERO IN THE LAND OF CAIN

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Wacousta's essential lineaments are those of the Byronic hero by way of the Gothic hero-villain. As such, Richardson models him on what Peter Thorslev and others identify as "the most popular phenomenon of the English Romantic Movement and the figure with the most far-reaching consequences for nineteenth-century Western literature" (Thorslev 3).<sup>1</sup> "We have not yet shaken off our nineteenth-century inhibitions about Byron," laments Northrop Frye in *Fables of Identity*. "Still so incredibly readable," "Byron's tales are, on the whole, well-told and well-shaped stories." Moreover, continues Frye, "Byron's contempt of cant and prudery, his very real hatred of cruelty, his detached view of all social icons, whether conservative or popular, are well worth having" (188, 174, 178, 184).<sup>2</sup> Richardson must have thought so too, as *Wacousta* and his other works suggest. Byron offered Canada's first native-born novelist exciting possibilities for an imaginative mapping of the New World. In particular, Richardson—unlike Cooper and Scott, authors of quite different national epics—is indebted to and inspired by Byron's treatment of the ambiguous, the paradoxical and the problematic, of a terror psychological, social and metaphysical, and especially of those, like Cain, who pass beyond the boundaries of "the normal."

"Wacousta owes as much to Byron's heroes," asserts L.R. Early, "as he does to the villains of Renaissance tragedy" (Early 26).<sup>3</sup> Boxed in by the restrictions of the garrison social code, set apart from his fellows by an exceptional sensibility, Richardson's adventurer recalls the fiery, larger-than-life Byronic hero dissatisfied with authority. It is not difficult to find in the portrayal of Wacousta echoes of the Noble Outlaw who has been wronged either by intimate personal friends, or by society in general. Such aristocratic, disillusioned and moody victims of society and des-

tiny become the morally ambiguous tenants of an untamed natural landscape in Byron and Richardson.

The manner in which Richardson adheres to and departs from this pattern can best be appreciated by reference to Byron's oriental tales and his tragedies. Like Wacousta, the ostracized Childe Harold—"The wandering outlaw of his own dark mind" (3.3)—is a man of feeling suffering from unrequited love. He, too, has thought "Too long and darkly till my brain became,/In its own eddy boiling and o'er-wrought,/ A whirling gulf of phantasy and flame" (Richardson 3.7). The same fire and whirlpool imagery dominates the depiction of Wacousta and Gerald in *The Canadian Brothers*.<sup>4</sup> Discovering De Haldimar's deception, Wacousta grows "'Wild, desperate, almost bereft of reason"; "'with a heart bounding against my bosom, as if each agonized throb were to be its last, I ran like a maniac. . . . My mind was a volcano'" (3:271; 488).<sup>5</sup>

"There is a fire/And motion of the soul," Byron's narrator tells us,

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. (3.42)

The same fever propels Richardson's restless giant with his "'heart of fire'" (3: 192; 445). It, too, "Preys upon high adventure": "'Oh, that this spirit of adventure had never grown with my growth and strengthened with my strength . . . then had I never been the wretch I am'" (3: 199; 449). In Richardson as in Byron, such aspirations and such dreadful crimes are "in full accordance with the aims of romanticism, for it strives in everything to pass beyond the ordinary and everyday, to ignore the boundaries within which lies logical, daylit consciousness" (Raillo 324). Such border-crossings take the wanderer into a strange, dark landscape.

In his youth, Morton/Wacousta enjoyed "'encountering danger in its most terrific forms,'" passing "'whole days in climbing the steep and precipitous crags which overhang the sea in the neighbourhood of Morton Castle'" (3: 198; 449). He would, thus, be a fitting companion for Byron's adventurers committed to passing beyond the ordinary and familiar. Most are mountain

climbers who derive inspiration and pleasure from the open spaces of sea and mountainside; they feel caged in by the oppressive confines of city and town, by "the herd" (3.18) and "the crushing crowd" (3.62), as much as Wacousta does by "the mass," "the plodding . . . multitude" (1: 177; 3: 206; 100; 453). "My joy was in the wilderness," states Manfred (2.2.62).

Wacousta also recalls the speaker in Byron's "When I Roved A Young Highlander" who "From mountain to mountain . . . bounded along," "rude as the rocks where my infancy grew" (6, 18). Everard finds Wacousta's "'heart is as inaccessible to pity as the rugged rocks on which his spring-life was passed'" (3: 339; 525). However, as a youth, Morton the impassioned lover of ideal beauty resembled the young Highlander for whom "One image alone on my bosom impressed . . . / And pure were my thoughts, for my soul was with you" (13-16). For both, youth and the vision of the beloved have now departed. Their desolation is voiced in "Would I Were A Careless Child" by another friendless outcast; he, also, is burdened with a "maddening soul" (31) and "a darken'd mind" (52) and cries out for "woman, lovely woman" (41). Again, the edenic moment is followed closely by disaster and disillusionment:

Once I beheld a splendid dream,  
 A visionary scene of bliss:  
 Truth!—wherefore did thy hated beam  
 Awake me to a world like this? (21-4)

Such, also, is Childe Harold's plight. Byron's stanzas on the gap between the ideal and the actual forecast the attitude toward the imagination held by Wacousta and the narrator as well as the lovers in Richardson's *The Monk Knight of St. John*. "Of its own beauty is the mind diseased;/And fevers into false creation." "Who loves, raves," for "Nor worth nor beauty dwells from out the mind's / Ideal shape of such" (4.122-3). Expatriating at length on the "repose of the fancy upon an object of its own creation" and its "power of multiplying ideal beauty," Wacousta's narrator gives vent to a similar frustration. "The misery of the imaginative man," of the romantic Don Quixote in pursuit of his ideal, consists in becoming "tenants of a world of our own creation, from which we never descend, without loathing and disgust, into the dull and matter-of-fact routine of actual existence" (1: 178-9; 100).

Such has been the tragic descent of Wacousta, Richardson's Byronic "imaginative man" *par excellence*, from his Scottish Eden to his North American hell. In "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage," "Some phantom lures," but "ideal beauty" proves elusive (4.124; 4.162). Wacousta speaks eloquently of his quest for "'ideal beauty';" "'to this phantom,'" he recalls, "'I had already yielded up all the manlier energies of my nature.'" His romantic agony carries strong Byronic overtones: "'How often, while tossed by the raging elements . . . have I madly wished to press to my bounding bosom the being of my fancy's creation . . . my aching head (aching with the intenseness of its own conceptions) bared to the angry storm . . . my every faculty . . . bent on that ideal beauty which controlled every sense! Oh, imagination, how tyrannical is thy sway—how exclusive thy power—how insatiable thy thirst!'" (3: 210; 455).

"'Woman was the idol that lay enshrined within my inmost heart,'" declares Wacousta to Clara de Haldimar. Yet "'my heart had never once throbbed for created woman'" (3: 212; 456). This is in accord with the description of Rousseau in "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage":

His love was passion's essence:  
     —as a tree  
 On fire by lightning, with  
     ethereal flame  
 Kindled he was, and blasted . . .  
 But his was not the love  
     of living dame . . .  
 But of ideal beauty . . . (3.28)

While few or none find what they love in "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage," Wacousta does, indeed, locate his spiritual treasure. Yet he does so only to lose her through fate like Byron's Manfred, another aspirant after ideal happiness and love.

In his history of himself, as Dennis Duffy notes, Wacousta "strives for a Byronic, melancholy grandeur" (Duffy 49). He engages in "'probing of wounds, that nearly five lustres have been insufficient to heal'" (3: 268; 487). Harold also conceals a "breast which fain no more would feel, / Wrung with the wounds which kill not, but ne'er heal" (3.8). Stuck in the past, Harold is plagued by "The blight of life—the demon Thought" (1.34); Wacousta's features "wore a cast of habitual thought" (1: 241; 133), for he is

always remembering the past, an obsession shared by many other characters in Canadian literature. "Alter'd . . . / In soul and aspect as in age," Harold is "Unfit . . . to herd with Man" (3.8; 3.12). "Greatly altered in appearance," "accursed among men," Wacousta is "ignominiously expelled" (3: 286; 281; 494; 488).

Childe Harold, Wacousta and Gerald in *The Canadian Brothers* and Abdallah in *The Monk Knight* illustrate Frye's statement that the tragic hero of Romanticism is usually a tragic lover, a recurrent figure in Byron. "What begins as love ends in frustration, torment, or suicide. The convention is the old convention of Courtly Love, where the mistress may kill her lover with her 'cruelty,' but the treatment of the convention emphasizes rather the lover's growing morbid awareness of what would now be called the metaphysical absurd." The dominant form of Romantic tragedy, according to Frye, is the tragedy of self-awareness. Richardson's brooding Wacousta and Gerald certainly have this sense of losing the original spontaneity of one's relationship to nature and becoming an isolated and subjective consciousness. Placed outside the structure of society, Wacousta resembles the Byronic hero who "represents the force of physical nature, amoral or ruthless, yet with a sense of power, and often of leadership, that society has impoverished itself by rejecting. Another modulation of this type is the exile or wanderer, who is usually isolated by an introverted quality of mind. . . . None of these characters are thinkers: they are brooders or visionaries, but the convention often assumes that they are thinkers, centers of a mental activity too intense for social intercourse . . ." (Frye, *Romanticism* 40-1).

In oriental tales of tragic lovers like "The Giaour" (1813), "The Corsair" (1814) and "Lara" (1814) in particular, Richardson would have encountered the Byronic Fatal Man. Unlike most Gothic hero-villains, Scott's outlaws and certainly Cooper's virginal Bumpo, Byron's heroes are all passionate lovers. They remain faithful until death. Such undying love is the "one virtue" amid "a thousand crimes" that distinguishes and renders sympathetic Conrad the Corsair, another lonesome, sardonic misanthrope (3.24.696, 303). The darkest of Byron's Noble Outlaws, "Feared—shunned—belied—ere youth had lost her force, / He hated Man too much to feel remorse" (1.11.261-2). This lack of remorse marks him as unique among Byron's Cain-like outcasts; Wacousta, that "remorseless savage" (3: 186; 442), resembles Conrad most in this respect.

Grim, cynical, disillusioned, the Corsair nevertheless is helpless before that "One softer feeling," his love for Medora, "one from whom he never ranged" (1.11.282). So, too, is Wacousta, and it would be hard to imagine a figure more unlike Cooper's celibate, woman-fearing frontier Christian, the uncouth Natty Bumppo, than the passionate, romantic Sir Reginald Morton or the ribald Wacousta.

Not an American Adam but a Canadian Cain haunts Richardson's Byronic tales of doomed lovers. And so does Eve. Clara Beverley, a young woman of uninhibited passion, instinct and spontaneity, belongs to the same family of soul-mates as the Corsair's Medora, the Giaour's Leila, Neuha of "The Island" and Don Juan's Haidée; like Melmoth's Immalee, most are isolated from the corrupting influence of civilization. In *Wacousta*, the narrator speaks of "Nature's divinity—woman" (1:177; 99). In Byron's "The Island," the narrator addresses "Nature's goddess—woman" (1.10.211, 361). "With more capacity for love than earth / Bestows on most of mortal mould," Lara suggests the pattern for Richardson's lovers from Wacousta to the Monk Knight (1.18.321, 307).

Such characters are curiously absent in Scott and especially Cooper. Not Cooper's lone white man bereft of ancestry and family and in flight from history nor Byron's outcasts, but doppelgangers and doubled figures enmeshed in generations-spanning relationships obsess Richardson. Unlike Cooper, Richardson is fascinated not by a marriage of males but by a struggle of brothers over a woman. The American frontier in the style of Cooper with its disengaged, independent individualists stands in stark contrast to the Canadian borderland articulated by Richardson: a complex matrix of interrelationship and interdependence. Given such Byronic echoes, then, we can better appreciate the tragic love affair of Wacousta and the woman he has loved to the pitch of madness. The Byronic context adds resonance to "the utter blighting of the fairest hopes of one whose only fault was that of loving, "not too wisely, but too well" (3: 268; 487). Wacousta's allusion, of course, is to Othello, another dark, tragic wanderer described by A.C. Bradley as "by far the most romantic figure among Shakespeare's heroes," "for there is no love . . . more steeped in imagination than Othello's." Entering our world "as if from wonderland," he, too, "endures the shock of a terrible disillusionment" (Bradley 152, 54, 142). Lara has also "loved too well" (1.17.312), and Manfred has loved "Too much" (2.4.122).

In selected aspects of appearance and sensibility, Wacousta bears resemblance to the Giaour, the Corsair and Lara. Although he does not possess the Giaour's pallid brow and withered frame, Wacousta has the tempestuous outcast's "ruined mind / The wrack by passion left behind" (1253-4). The Giaour's face is "mark'd with inward pain" (794); Wacousta's features are "'rendered repulsive, from the perpetual action of those fierce passions which have since assailed my soul'" (3: 221; 462). There is "a haughtiness in his air, and insolence in his manner . . . a spirit unsubdued by . . . fate" (3: 327-8; 519) that recalls Byron's defiant hero. Other characteristics proclaim his consanguinity with that death-dealing "evil angel" (912) with the mark of Cain, the Giaour: "'a seal of infamy on [his] brow,'" "a wild and scornful laugh" (3: 336, 374; 495, 524) and "the fierce smile that curled the lip of the savage" (3: 189; 444).

Byron's scowling criminal relates his personal history to a Friar, as Wacousta does to Clara. The Giaour, like Richardson's dark warrior, is obsessed with "The maid I love, the man I hate" (1018). His love is "like the lava flood / That boils in Aetna's breast of flame" (1101-2). "'What a feeble word is love,'" exclaims Wacousta, "'to express the concentration of mighty feelings that flowed like burning lava through my veins'" (3: 209; 455). Cooper's Natty Bumppo, in contrast, dismisses such love and abjures women for the less troublesome, grander pleasures of the cathedral-like forest and of Chingachgook's silent companionship. Scott's passionless middle-class male protagonists, in turn, are considered mature, rational, and fit when they repress or forego the "mighty feelings" animating Wacousta, Gerald and Abdallah.

Morton/Wacousta suggests the high-born Conrad whose "heart was form'd for softness—warp'd to wrong; / Betray'd too early, and beguiled too long" (3.23.662-3). "Lone, wild, and strange" (1.11.271), "a robber . . . with gore bedew'd" (2.7.263), this outlaw, too, is an altered being: "His soul was changed, before his deeds had driven / Him forth to war with man" (1.11.251-3). The stormy Lara's romantic dreams have likewise become nightmares. Like Wacousta, Conrad and the Giaour, he strikes his opponents as the embodiment of death, revenge, terror and demonism.

Conrad, no less than the trusting, idealistic Wacousta or Othello, is "Doom'd by his very virtues for a dupe." He, too, is the victim of "traitors who betray'd him" (1.11.256-8). Richardson's emphasis on honour and reputation is shared by Byron in his

tales although the latter is not as obsessed by these as the former. The *Giaour* suffers from a "blighted name" (1227) as do Lara and Childe Harold. Conrad's detractors are also venomous and deceptive hypocrites. Such Pope-inspired invective forecasts Richardson's use of snake and poison imagery in depicting the cold-blooded De Haldimar who, protests Wacousta, "'blighted my fair name, and cast me forth an alien'" (3: 288; 494). De Haldimar, given to self-importance, priggery, cant and tyrannizing, is just such a figure as Byron rails against in what F.R. Leavis calls "a contemptuous defiance of decorum and propriety" (Leavis 84).

Unlike Byron, however, Richardson devotes much more space to describing such characters as the Governor, both explaining and, to some extent, justifying his actions and his perspective on events. De Haldimar, the celibate founder of British North America, emerges as "moral monster" and manticore, puritanical misogynist and inflexible empire builder bent on walling out feeling, joy and sexuality, artists (Wacousta was an accomplished painter), women, and native peoples. Yet this austere establishment representative is given his due, and Richardson stresses the survival value of the Governor's adherence to prudence, "decorum and propriety." Richardson is intent on balancing the attractiveness and repulsiveness of his "border doubles," his authority figure and his disorder figure. Each is an ambiguous mixture of positive and negative traits, and the balanced appeal to our romantic sympathies and to our sober judgement is such that we are often pulled both ways simultaneously. This is a tension and a preoccupation not developed in anywhere near the same degree—if at all—in Byron, Cooper or Scott.

Such a tension also suggests Richardson's uneasiness with the concept of the hero and betrays an uncertainty and confusion undetectable in the three authors listed above. Such easily recognizable heroes and opposing villains as Byron's or Cooper's Hawkeye and Scott's Ivanhoe as well as confident, neat and coherent national trajectories are invoked and parodied (another form of doubling) in Richardson's blurred, broken, and contradictory borderland of proliferating doubles, split selves and love triangles. With respect to both De Haldimar and Wacousta, fort and forest, there is a curious intermingling of opposites, a tendency for things to run into one another, overlap and coincide. Richardson is unable to see these figures and settings except as equally matched



opposites in mutual dependency, distinguishing his work from these other writers.

*Wacousta* and *The Canadian Brothers* also convey an awareness of Byron's sombre tragedies. Works like *The Two Foscari: An Historical Tragedy*, *Werner*, and *Marino Faliero* focus on revenge, crime, the injustice of the law and family curses. In these dramas, we find what Paul West terms "an Old Testament grimness," a feeling which is certainly not alien to Canadian experience, as Frye, D.G. Jones, James Reaney and others have observed (West 51). This grimness is evident in Byron's portrayal of a defiant nature. Of all the romantics, Richardson (in stark contrast to Cooper) gravitates most clearly to Byron, finding in his wild, gloomy settings the closest analogue to his own approach to the North American wilderness. Byron's is a "skeptical vision of an alienated universe which takes no reckoning of man"; his narratives, as Thorslev stresses, are informed by "the concept of the universe as naturalistic, as morally indifferent, as alien to all our deepest hopes and ideals" (Thorslev 327). This is an apt description as well of Richardson's nightmarish Canadian borderland in *Wacousta* and its sequel. How different both are from Scott's borderline zones or Cooper's idyllic, exciting American Dream frontier.

In Byron's tragedies as in his tales, Richardson was also doubtless attracted to the recurrent motif of the fall of a noble man: an imaginative, talented individual of great powers and potential trapped by forces within himself as well as without in a chaotic and destructive world. *Wacousta*, "savage and even fiendish as he now is, was once possessed of the noblest qualities" (3: 317; 514). The suffering of Byron's outcasts, no less than of *Wacousta*, has "in it something sublime, and when joined to crime, great passion and catastrophe, it leads to what approaches tragedy. In the vicinity of terror-romanticism frequently hovers, as the fate of the Byronic hero shows, the spirit of tragedy . . ." (Raillo 327).

Of all Byron's dramas, perhaps it is *Manfred* which is most relevant to Richardson's purposes. Generally regarded as the climax of Byron's gothic creations, it is described by Robertson Davies as "a very great melodrama" about "a man who is divided from his soul." Like *Wacousta* and its sequel, it "deals with a splendid, passionate grappling with the dark side of man's nature, in a dramatic milieu where only death may be accepted as the settlement of all debts" (Davies 148-50). In true Gothic style, it begins,

like *Wacousta*, at midnight, in a castle high in the mountains. The heaven-storming dimensions of Sir Reginald Morton are those of the Faust-like Count Manfred. Each is a lonely wanderer, seemingly dominated by an evil star and living under a curse. Each conceives an intense nausea for life occasioned by the loss of a spiritual likeness or anima. Haughty and despairing, each is aloof from his materialistic society. And there was a time when Manfred, no less than the feral *Wacousta*, "did not walk the rocks / and forests like a wolf, nor turn aside / From man and their delights" (3.3.22-4). Where Byron is content with a brief simile, Richardson develops and intensifies *Wacousta's* wolf-like aspect; indeed, "border wolves" recur with alarming frequency throughout his work from this novel to his last published one, *Westbrook, the Outlaw: or, The Avenging Wolf: An American Border Tale* (1851).

Recalling and invoking Byron's achievements in poetry and in drama, Richardson constructs in his novels a dark and disturbing New World wilderness haunted by shadowy Canadian Cains, not the unfallen American Adams—figures of innocence and optimism—who inhabit Cooper's frontier Edens. Like Byron, but in his own distinctive way, Richardson explores the ambiguous and the problematical, creates paradoxical figures who wander beyond the boundaries of the ordinary and the rational, and evokes a terror which undermines comforting conceptions of a benignly ordered universe such as sustain the fiction of Scott and Cooper.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Peter Thorslev, *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962). For a discussion of other models for *Wacousta's* character, see my critical study *The Borders of Nightmare: The Fiction of John Richardson* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963). "Wherever we turn in Byron's poetry," notes Frye on page 181, "we meet the figure of Cain, the first man who never knew Paradise."

<sup>3</sup> L.R. Early, "Myth and Prejudice In Kirby, Richardson, and Parker," *Canadian Literature*, 81 (Summer 1979) : 24-36. References to Byron among other influences on Richardson are considered in studies such as Jay Macpherson, "Reading and Convention in Richardson: some notes" and "*Wacousta* and the Gothic Tradition," both found in *Recovering Canada's First Novelist: Proceedings from the John Richardson*

*Conference*, ed. Catherine Sheldrick Ross (Erin: Porcupine's Quill, 1984). These are excellent articles skillfully edited and introduced by Ross.

<sup>4</sup> The whirling vortex is also a recurrent image in *Wacousta* and *The Canadian Brothers*.

<sup>5</sup> John Richardson, *Wacousta; Or, The Prophecy: A Tale of the Canadas*, 3 vols. (London: T. Cadell, Strand; and W. Blackwood, Edinburgh, 1832). Until 1987, this was the only unedited edition. All future references are to this edition and appear in parentheses after selected quotations. For convenience, the second reference in each parenthesis is to the excellent scholarly CEECT edition: John Richardson, *Wacousta or, The Prophecy; A Tale of the Canadas*, ed. Douglas Cronk (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1987) Here the reference is to page 488.

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