

C.B. 481351  
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ASSOCIAÇÃO PORTUGUESA  
DE  
ESTUDOS ANGLO-AMERICANOS

V ENCONTRO

*Literatura — Teoria — Educação*

*4, 5 e 6 de Maio de 1984*

UNIVERSIDADE DO MINHO

069.3:82  
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OFERTA



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**NATURE, CULTURE AND EDUCATION IN WORDSWORTH, BYRON AND  
SHELLEY**

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Lecture given at the 5th Conference of the APEAA (Associação Portuguesa de Estudos Anglo-Americanos), Braga, 5-V-84, and in revised form in the Faculty of Letters of the University of Coimbra, 28-V-84.

**I**

The aim of this paper is to discuss certain key texts of Wordsworth, Byron and Shelley in relation to the questions of Nature, Culture and Education. The various models of education, diseducation or re-education presented by the three poets will be considered, in the wider context of the concepts of Nature (the external non-human world) and Culture (human society and history). "Education" is taken to mean, not necessarily only formal education, but the formation of the human subject by environmental and cultural forces. Wordsworth will be discussed first, before a contrastive analysis of Byron and Shelley arranged by theme; this arrangement is justified by the existence of simultaneous convergences and divergences between the two "second-generation" poets. The principal texts discussed are "The Prelude" (Wordsworth), "Don Juan" (Byron) and "Laon and Cythna" (the first version of "The Revolt of Islam") (Shelley).

## WORDSWORTH

## II

Wordsworth's model in "The Prelude" (1805, published 1850), as is well known, is essentially one of education by Nature. The text explicitly rejects a utilitarian/empiricist model of the type imposed on John Stuart Mill by his father<sup>1</sup>, the child produced by such a model is seen as a "monster birth" (V-292)<sup>2</sup>, knowledgeable in "telescopes, and crucibles, and maps" (330), but indifferent to Nature and deficient in imagination. Wordsworth proposes a counter-model, to be based on "books and Nature" (447) – and implicitly, on the type of pre-capitalist social relations prevailing in the Lake District (see VIII - 144-58) – but with Nature as, in practice, the dominant educative force. This is the model expounded in "The Prelude" and in the related Book I of "The Excursion" (1814)<sup>3</sup>.

Before proceeding further, it will be useful to de-naturalise the term "Nature". As Raymond Williams has stressed, it is "perhaps the most complex word in the language"<sup>4</sup>, and is, besides, a highly dangerous term ideologically; the term signifies a series of realities – those of the external non-human world – that are objectively heterogeneous and *plural*, by means of a *singular* noun, thus tending to reduce them to a "singular and essential nature, with consistent and reconcilable laws"<sup>5</sup>. This tendency is visibly operative in Wordsworth. Nature is typically presented as, in the last analysis, totally beneficent, and thus homogeneous; it is the empty space in which all contradictions are resolved:

"Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light,  
Were all like workings of one mind" (PVI - 567-8)

Among the antagonisms thus ideologically resolved in the term Nature is that between Desire and Law. In one of the Lucy poems ("Three years she grew in

1 see Mill (1971), pp. 1-24.

2 All quotations from "The Prelude" are from the 1805 text, with one exception (see note 9).

3 For "The Excursion" (Book I), see section III below. Although "The Excursion" was not published until 1814, the account of the Wanderer's education was drafted as early as 1798, and passages from the earliest drafts eventually found their way into "The Prelude" (see MacGillivray (1972)).

4 Williams (1976), p. 184 (entry: "Nature").

5 Williams (1980), p. 70.

sun and shower" – 1800), Nature personified declares:

"Myself will to my darling be  
Both law and impulse" (7-8);

the young girl will perceive in natural objects "an overseeing power/ To kindle or restrain" (11-12). Nature is thus seen as the source of *both* "impulse" (the sexual desire that "kindles") and "law" (the cultural forces that "restrain"). In practice, in Wordsworth's work, Nature intervenes more often to impose the Law than to validate Desire; the erotic and reproductive side of Nature is played right down, to an extent that provoked Shelley, in "Peter Bell the Third" (1819), to label Wordsworth a "moral eunuch" (314), afraid to look at Nature in her nakedness.

Thus, in another Lucy poem ("Strange fits of passion have I known" – 1800), the lover is riding uphill towards Lucy's cottage, when suddenly the proud, ascending movement of his horse is checked by the "descending moon" (20). The natural object intervenes as signifier, not only of death, but of the Law which blocks and negates desire:

"O mercy!" to myself I cried,  
"If Lucy should be dead!" (27-8)

The agency of Nature here may be read as a projection of the workings, within the subject, of the authoritarian values of a repressive patriarchal culture; Nature intervenes to impose the Law of the Father. This context may also be applied to the otherwise perplexing "Anecdote for Fathers" (1798): Here, a five-year-old boy tells his father that he would rather live in a place called Kilve than in Liswyn, his present home, because "at Kilve there was no weather-cock" (55); the child's aversion to weather-cocks may be read as both displacement and symbolisation of his unconscious fear of the castrating Oedipal father.

The antagonism between Desire and Law in the child's mind, with its Oedipal origins, may be considered to determine certain key episodes in "The Prelude". Indeed, episodes which Wordsworth ideologically attributes to the educative force of Nature may be read, in Benjamin's phrase, "against the grain"<sup>6</sup>, as signifying the child's formation by *social* forces, through the internalisation of the

6 cf. Benjamin (1973), p. 259; the reference is to the materialist view of history, but the concept can equally be applied to the reading of literary texts. Cf. Eagleton (1981), p. 113.

cultural Law. In this sense, the poem may be read as illustrating Williams' recently proposed model of "text" and "subtext": "you may say, "this is what is reproduced from the ideology", but also, "this is what is incongruously happening in this text which undermines it or questions it or in certain cases entirely subverts it""<sup>7</sup>

Five episodes from Books I and XI will now be considered, in which Wordsworth presents fictionalised versions of childhood events. In these episodes, the child: 1) hunts woodcocks at night and is frightened by an imaginary pursuer (I - 309-332); 2) steals bird's eggs on the mountain and is frightened by the wind (I - 333-350); 3) goes out on the lake in a stolen boat, imagines he is being pursued by an animated cliff, and turns back (I - 372-427); 4) comes by chance on the sight of a gibbet and the name of a murderer written in the grass (XI-279-326); 5) looks out, from a hilltop, for two horses which are to take him and his brothers home for the Christmas holidays – holidays during which his father is to die (XI - 345-89).

Wordsworth presents these incidents as examples of his formation by Nature; he claims to have been "framed" by Nature (I-363), in an educative process that included both "pleasure" and "fear" (631-2). However, in episode after episode, the pleasure is effectively blocked by the fear. As Jonathan Bishop has pointed out in a Freudian-oriented study<sup>8</sup>, there is a sequence of events that repeats itself across the text: pleasurable movement is inhibited by a more powerful, external counter-force, frequently in the shape of a phantom pursuer or "grim shape"<sup>9</sup>. The episodes to be analysed tend to follow this structure, all involving prohibitions or inhibitions which, in the real social world, are imposed on the child by his *culture*. The first three episodes all involve theft; in the "woodcocks" and "stolen boat" the theft is specifically a crime against private property, since the birds and boat are another's (I - 327, 373). In the "gibbet" the child is frightened by the idea of murder, while the "wait for the horses" is followed by his father's death, for which he feels somehow responsible. The blockage of the child's desire is, then, placed in close association with the biblical (i. e. cultural) prohibitions on theft and murder.

7 Williams (1981), p. 63. The model of "text" and "subtext" is here applied primarily to Wordsworth; in the cases of Shelley and Byron, it is less necessary from a materialist viewpoint, given the relatively "unrepressed" character of the texts. Shelley and Byron, in contrast to Wordsworth, were consciously aware of the sexual significations of their rhythms, images, etc.

8 see Bishop (1972), pp. 135-7, 140.

9 "The Prelude" (1850 text), I, 381. The "grim shape" is the pursuing cliff in the "stolen boat" episode; the 1805 text has "huge cliff" (I, 409). 1850 here intensifies the punitive, intimidating role of the cliff/father.

In all the episodes, pleasure is textually signified, before being blocked: the child's "joy" (I-313), "desire" (325), "pleasure" (389), his "proud hopes" (XI-281), are typically signified by *movement*, actual or anticipated – rowing or horse-riding. This movement, however, is either cut short (the child turns back, or dismounts) – or it never happens (the horses are not seen to arrive). The inhibiting agent is perceived by the child, in the "stolen boat", as a natural object mysteriously animated; and elsewhere, as a natural object taking on an admonitory function – thus, in the "bird's-nesting", the wind warns the child with a "strange utterance" (I-348-9), while in the "wait for the horses", the expected horses are replaced by a phantasmagoric mist,

"Which on the line of each of those two roads  
Advanced in such indisputable shapes" (XI-381-2).

The narrating adult interprets the child's frightening experiences as instances of the disciplining function, the "severer interventions" (I-370) of Nature.

Nonetheless, the discipline of the Father can be seen at work behind these incidents. The text refers twice, quite specifically, to "my father's house" (I-288; XI - 366), placing the events within patriarchal culture, while the pleasurable movements, rowing and riding, can be read as symbolic expressions of the child's sexuality. The rhythmic movement of the oars – "I pushed, and struck the oars and struck again" (I-385) – would support such a reading, as would the textual comparisons of the child's movements with those of an *adult* male:

"My little boat moved on,  
Even like a man who walks with stately step" (I-387-8);

"We were a pair of horsemen; honest James  
Was with me" (XI-283-4).

The child's "proud" rowing (I-396), his "proud hopes" of horsemanship (XI-281) correspond, then, to the Oedipal desire to replace the father in his position of power. This unconscious desire may also be seen as determinant of the child's fear of the murderer's name (in a sense, *he* is the "murderer"), and of his irrational sense of guilt on his father's death.

Those external, more powerful forces which block the child's desire may be seen as symbols of the punitive, castrating Oedipal father. The wind's "utterance" is in the discourse of Authority, the mist has the "indisputable" force of paternal power. Above all, the cliff in the "stolen boat", erect and "growing still in stature"

(I-409), may be read as signifying the superior power of the castrating father. The biological father does not have to be actually present, or even alive; on his death, his place is filled at once by "God, who thus corrected my desires" (XI-368-70). What is happening in these episodes is, on this reading, a re-run of the Oedipal drama<sup>10</sup>: the child's desire is inhibited by his recognition of a more powerful rival in the Father, and his consequent internalisation of the paternal image.

Indeed, the drama of the young Wordsworth runs parallel to that of Little Hans, as exposed in Freud's celebrated case history of 1909, "Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy" – down to the horse symbolism: "For Hans, horses had always typified pleasure in movement. . . this pleasure in movement included the impulse to copulate"<sup>11</sup>. The male child finally accepts the inhibition of desire "now" in return for the hope of deferred gratification "later"<sup>12</sup>; it may be noted that in the "gibbet" episode, the spot is later revisited by the young-adult Wordsworth in a more pleasurable context, "in the blessed time of early love" (XI-318) – ie. at the point of full entry, as an adult male, into the Law of the Father. The Oedipus complex may be seen, as in Juliet Mitchell's reading of Freud, as "the internalized law of patriarchal human order"<sup>13</sup>, making the moment of the subject's entry into culture in our civilisation; but the process of socialisation which it initiates demands a severe psychological price, via the internalisation of the paternal image. On the shattering of the Oedipus complex, the image of the Father is internalised as a punitive, sadistic agency of Law within the subject's mind. Hence, in "The Prelude", the extremity of the child's fear; hence the disproportion between "crime" and "punishment". After temporarily borrowing a boat, he is terrorised for "many days" (I-418) by "huge and mighty forms" (425) haunting his dreams, while he sees his father's death as a "chastisement" (XI-370) imposed on himself by God for expecting too much pleasure from the holidays. These episodes, then, re-confirm the child's post-Oedipal insertion into culture, in the context of a cruel, authoritarian and punitive patriarchal order<sup>14</sup>.

10 cf. Bishop, p. 146.

11 Freud (1977), p. 296.

12 see *ibid.*, pp. 257-9, 288.

13 Mitchell (1975), p. 413. On her reading of Freud's work, "the individual ego makes the general human culture his own" through the Oedipus complex and its shattering (72); "the patriarchal law speaks to and through each person in his unconscious, and the reproduction of the ideology of human society is thus assured in the acquisition of the law by each individual. The unconscious that Freud analysed could thus be described as the domain of the reproduction of culture or ideology" (413).

14 Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798) may be read on similar lines, as exposing the operations of a cruel patriarchal order within the mind of the subject

Nonetheless, the ideological myth of "The Prelude" consists of the *naturalisation* of that patriarchal culture. Both "impulse" and "law" are presented as deriving from Nature; thus, the discourse of "impulse" is effectively silenced by naturalising the process of its repression and control. It is true that at other points in "The Prelude", pleasure is not so violently or painfully inhibited, as in the skating (I-452-89) or the hooting to the owls (V-389-413). However, the seeds of Wordsworth's eventual conservatism may be traced to "The Prelude". It should be remembered that book I validates not only the patriarchal law, but also private property; the view of theft is here far more orthodox than that presented in the earlier "Goody Blake and Harry Gill" (1798), where Nature intervenes in favour of a poor woman who steals firewood from enclosed land. Wordsworth's model of education in "The Prelude" is, in some respects, a model of insertion into an authoritarian Culture – and a particularly dangerous model, since that insertion takes place under the sign of Nature. It is not altogether surprising to find the later Wordsworth, in "The Excursion", Book IX (1814), writing in favour of a national education system, on the reactionary grounds that universal literacy will neutralise revolutionary tendencies among the poor and provide skilled cohorts for imperialism (293-415).

## SHELLEY & BYRON

### III

In "The Prelude", then, if the "text", in Williams' sense, affirms the myth of education by Nature, a "sub-text" (or, indeed, "counter-text") may be constructed which signifies the process of the child's socialisation into Culture. In the work of both Shelley and Byron, the existing Culture is quite openly called into

(cf. Bostetter, 1973). It may be noted that it was Wordsworth who suggested the shooting of the Albatross to Coleridge (see Wordsworth, "Notes dictated to Isabella Fenwick" (1843), in Jones and Tydeman (1973), pp. 24-5); there are clear analogies with "The Prelude", in the "crime" committed against a bird, as metonym for Nature, and in the disproportion between "crime" and "punishment" (cf. respectively, the bird's-nesting and the "stolen boat").

question, though with different emphases; the conservative Southey quite correctly identified them as the "Satanic school", who "have rebelled against the holiest ordinances of human society"<sup>15</sup>. Where Wordsworth assents in society's regulation of desire, in both Byron and Shelley sexuality is positively valued against the culture that controls and represses it. Thus Shelley declares sarcastically in the notes to "Queen Mab" (1813): "Law pretends even to govern the indisciplinable wandering of passion"<sup>16</sup>, while Byron satirises the attempts of educators to "destroy" the "natural spirit" ("Don Juan" I-50).

Both younger poets stand in a "professional" relation to Wordsworth marked by a high degree of ambivalence. The work of both contains a brief "Wordsworthian" phase, followed by satiric condemnation of the older poet's sellout ("Alastor", "Childe Harold" III; "Peter Bell the Third", "Don Juan" *passim*). *At no point*, however, in spite of undeniable influences, does either Byron or Shelley present a model of Nature that can be identified with Wordsworth's. In Shelley's case, "Alastor" (1814) is, as Harold Bloom has pointed out<sup>17</sup>, both a recognition of Wordsworth's influence, and an attempt to work through it in order to shake it off. The poem is, as Bloom stresses, "prompted by 'The Excursion'"<sup>18</sup>, in whose first book Wordsworth had recently published the only full account of his model of education-in-Nature to which Shelley had access<sup>19</sup>. There, Wordsworth's protagonist, the Wanderer, is educated, once again, by books and Nature, but primarily by Nature. In "Alastor", which is the biography of an imaginary poet, Shelley's protagonist, himself a "wanderer" (626), undergoes a comparable education. But while his sensibilities are formed by study, travel and exposure to Nature, he fails to recognise himself as social and sexual being<sup>20</sup>. His repressed sexuality finally emerges in the form of an erotic dream vision which drives him to a premature death. "Alastor" includes passages – the description of a sunset and some lines on the poet's "mystic sympathy" with Nature – which may be read as ironic re-writes of similar passages from "The Excursion"<sup>21</sup>; ironic, for "Alastor" as a whole implies that Wordsworth's model of education could easily lead to what Shelley calls "self-centred seclusion"<sup>22</sup>, to the denial of sexuality and the rejection

15 Southey (1821), in Rutherford (1970), pp. 180-1.

16 Shelley, "Even love is sold" (in "Notes on *Queen Mab*", 1812), Oxford "Works", p. 796.

17 see Bloom (1961), pp. 278-80.

18 *ibid*, p. 278.

19 Neither Shelley nor Byron had access to "The Prelude", barring the few brief extracts which Wordsworth published in their lifetime.

20 Shelley consistently defined the human subject as a "social being" (see, e.g., "On *Frankenstein*", in "Prose Works" I, pp. 417-9).

21 Compare "Alastor" 550-9 with "Excursion" I, 197-205; and *A*, 651-3 with *E I*, 153-62.

22 Shelley, "Preface" to "Alastor" (Oxford "Works", p. 14).

of all social relations. Further, Nature is in this text presented as essentially inconstant and ambivalent – natural phenomena are endlessly "mutable" (447), and landscapes contain both calm rivulets and treacherous cataracts (369-408). Nature and human society are parallel but separate domains; Nature is *not*, as in Wordsworth, the primary formative influence on the human mind. This anti-Wordsworthian position is repeated in "Mont Blanc" (1816); while natural objects can be interpreted and appropriated as symbols that validate human desire, these significations are generated by "the human mind's imaginings" (143) – they are *not* inherent in Nature.

Byron, in the Lake Geneva sequence of "Childe Harold" III (1816), having been "dose(d) . . . with Wordsworth physic" by Shelley<sup>23</sup>, temporarily and uncertainly assumes a Wordsworthian mask for a few stanzas (68-75), where Nature is seen as (perhaps) constitutive of the subject:

"Are not the mountains, waves and skies a part  
Of me and of my soul, as I of them?" (75);

but this mask is quickly blown to pieces by the subsequent vision of Nature as a destructive force, in the account of a violent storm on the lake (29-7). Here, too, Byron privileges the erotic dimension of Nature, all but repressed by Wordsworth; the tempestuous night recalls "the light/Of a dark eye in woman" (92). Shelley, it may be added, had already introduced a non-Wordsworthian sexual dimension into the natural landscapes of "Alastor", where parasite flowers erotically "twine their tendrils" round the trees (444).

23 Byron to T. Medwin (Marchand (1976), p. 241).

## IV

As has been shown, Shelley clearly dissociates himself from the Wordsworthian model of education. The same is true of Byron in "Don Juan" Canto I (1819), where there is an explicit rejection of any model that denies sexuality. The young Juan is subjected by his mother, Donna Inez, to a moralistic, censorious education, which the narrator sees as an attempt to "(tame) him down" (50), indeed as a denial of Nature in its sexual and reproductive aspect:

"But not a page of anything that's loose,  
Or hints continuation of the species,  
Was ever suffer'd, lest he should grow vicious"(I-40).

The satire is directed mainly at Byron's ex-wife, but Wordsworth seems to be the target in the lines:

"how sage, and still, and steady,  
Her young philosopher was grown already" (I-50).

There is probably an ironic reference here to the sexless child of the "Immortality Ode" (1807), the celebrated "best philosopher" (110), "trailing clouds of glory" (64). In spite of his mother's efforts, Juan gains his sexual education at the hands of Donna Julia, a married friend of his mother's. Before their relationship is consummated, he goes to the woods, with the aim of forgetting his desire – and here Byron parodies the sexless Wordsworthian view of Nature:

"He Juan (and not Wordsworth), so pursued  
His self-communion with his own high soul" (I-91).

But Nature sends Juan's thoughts back to sexual themes, and to Julia, through association of ideas; the woods suggest "wood-nymphs" (94), and the sky suggests "Donna Julia's eyes" (92).

The narrator violently rejects Donna Inez's model of education:

"I think, I know  
That sons should not be educated so" (53)

(nor daughters, presumably); but equally under attack is the Wordsworthian model, known to Byron from a "drowsy, frowzy poem call'd "The Excursion"" (III-94), and implicitly charged with falsifying Nature by repressing its erotic dimension.

## V

The conflict between Desire and Law, which Wordsworth resolves in favour of Law, thus takes place in a different ideological context in both Shelley and Byron. In both poets' work, insurgent Desire challenges the cultural Law; the revolt of Desire is validated in the name of an erotised Nature. At the same time, and in spite of a certain surface rhetoric of Nature in both poets, there is in both a tendency that points away from *any* ideology of Nature; certain elements in their texts imply, not the contestation of Culture by Nature, but the substitution of one cultural order by another – the possibility of establishing a new, and less repressive culture.

In the first four cantos of "Don Juan" (1819-21), Juan, after his sexual initiation at Julia's hands, is discovered with her by her husband, on which Julia is sent into a convent while Juan is sent abroad. Shipwrecked on a Greek island, Juan has his second affair with Haidée, daughter of Lambro, a wealthy pirate, during her father's absence. Lambro, believed dead, returns, discovers Juan and sends him to be sold into slavery. Haidée responds to her father's intervention with madness, silence and finally death.

In both episodes, Desire rebels against Law – against marriage, the family, the institutional regulation of sexuality. The text tends to validate desire, male or female, in terms of Nature. Thus the triumph of Julia's desire over her attempts to control it is compared to the outbreak of a storm:

"But passion most dissembles, yet betrays  
Even by its darkness; as the blackest sky  
Foretells the heaviest tempest, it displays  
Its workings through the vainly guarded eye" (I-73).

Equally, the Juan-Haidée relationship is consummated under the sign of Nature, on the beach at sunset:

"each clasp'd by an arm,  
Yielded to the deep twilight's purple charm" (II-184).

The text calls Haidée "Nature's bride" (II-202), thus implying that their union, while subverting the maritalist norms of their culture, is validated by Nature:

"And now 'twas done – on the lone shore were plighted  
Their hearts; the stars, their nuptial torches, . . .  
Ocean their witness, and the cave their bed" (II - 204)<sup>24</sup>.

24 cf. a similar trope in Shelley, "Rosalind and Helen" (1818), 851-4.

Nonetheless, in both cases the patriarchal law finally punishes those who transgress it. Julia falls victim of the sexual double standard, and wastes away in a convent. Haidée, deprived of Juan by her father, resorts to madness as a form of protest. In her dream, just before her father's return, she sees Juan "lifeless at her feet" (IV-34), until his face

"Faded, or alter'd into something new  
Like to her father's features" (IV-35);

the dream signifies the replacement of the rule of Desire (Juan) by the reimposed patriarchal Law (Lambro). After Juan's removal, Haidée refuses to speak to, or even look at, her father (IV-64,68) but she cannot contest his power in any practical sense.

In the universe of "Don Juan", it seems that pleasure must be paid for:

"Oh Pleasure! you're indeed a pleasant thing,  
Although one must be damn'd for you, no doubt" (I-119).

The explosion of desire is seen as biologically inevitable, but the punishment of libidinal revolt is seen as socially inevitable; on Haidée's death, the narrator declares: "A heavy price must all pay who thus err" (IV-73). The text can thus be read as a proto-Freudian document of cultural pessimism, presenting a social universe ruled by a double determinism, both biological and environmental – in which the continuation of culture requires the inexorable punishment of acts of revolt which are, themselves, unavoidable . . .<sup>25</sup>

However, other readings are possible; "Don Juan" can be read as vindicating "Nature", or sexuality, against "unnatural" social arrangements. The first two cantos were defended in these terms by Leigh Hunt, who wrote in 1819: "If to do this [referring to Julia's adultery] be immoral, we can only say that Nature is immoral . . . he [Byron] merely shows the folly of setting up forms and opinions against nature"<sup>26</sup>. For Hunt, then, Julia's and Haidée's desire is natural while arranged or mercenary marriages are unnatural. On the other hand again, it can be argued that, in some respects, the Haidée episode, at least, exhibits a tendency towards, neither the defence of the existing culture, nor the privileging of Nature – but, rather, towards the construction of an *alternative culture*. The affair is

25 cf. Freud (1961): "It is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built up upon a renunciation of instinct" (p. 97).

26 Hunt (1819), in Rutherford (1970), p. 177.

initiated partly under the sign of Culture; when Haidée and her maid Zoe tend the shipwrecked Juan in the cave, the text emphasises the breakfast which Zoe *cooks* for him. In the preceding shipwreck episode, it is stressed, "all his latter meals had been quite raw" (II-157); but now, Zoe transforms the raw into the cooked and thus helps reinsert Juan into Culture:

"But Zoe the meantime some eggs was frying,  
Since, after all, no doubt the youthful pair  
Must breakfast" (II-144).

The breakfast helps initiate the lovers' relationship; Haidée and Juan share the eggs (II-144-5) which, as the text later reminds the reader, happen to be "amatory food" (170), i.e. aphrodisiac. The love-affair will be presented, ideologically, as a return to Nature; but the breakfast signifies it as objectively *social*.

Further, after the mourning for Lambro's supposed death, Juan and Haidée celebrate with an elaborate party (III-27 ff.) Here the text signifies, in elaborate detail, a profusion of *cultural practices*; there is a dinner of "a hundred dishes" (III-62), wine, coffee, fancy dress, music, storytelling, smoking. This carnivalesque "holiday" (42) flies in the face of the profit motive which dominates Lambro's activities (14-16, 35). The food and drink are offered free to all comers (39, 69); the new regime has "turn'd the isle into a place of pleasure" (39), while Juan and Haidée have "not one hour to spare from loving" (ibid). Of course, the hedonist insurrection is far from a complete revolution. Haidée thinks neither of freeing her father's slaves (see 61),<sup>27</sup> nor of freeing herself from her bondage of illiteracy (see II-62). Libidinal revolt is not inserted into a coherent revolutionary programme. Nonetheless, the brief utopia of sex, plenty and pleasure points, however imperfectly, to the possibility of a cultural alternative; marriage, the Law of the father, the rule of profit, are replaced by a saturnalian regime in which the "illicit indulgence" of desire (III-13) is permitted, and the products of labour cease to be commodities. In this sense, the Juan-Haidée regime, with its accumulated signs of pleasure, constitutes, if in distorted form, an image of a possible universe of plenty. One may compare Benjamin's interpretation of the Arcades of nineteenth-century Paris, the glass-roofed pedestrian walkways which

27 In contrast, the protagonist of "Lara" (1814) shows his liberalism by abolishing serfdom in his domain (II-210-219).

housed shops overflowing with commodities. For Benjamin, the arcades represented both the apotheosis of commodity fetishism *and* a utopian dream of pleasure<sup>28</sup> – they formed, as Susan Buck-Morss puts it in her study of Benjamin, a “dream-image of the future”<sup>29</sup>. The “desire for pleasure”, she argues, becomes, in a phenomenon like the arcades, a “form of resistance” to authoritarian culture<sup>30</sup>; Haidée’s transformation of her island may be read in this light, brief though the anti-patriarchal utopia is.

## VI

In “Don Juan”, then, the revolt of pleasure is linked both with an insurgent Nature and with the possibility of an alternative Culture; the tension is not solved, but the question is clearly raised. A similar ambivalence in relation to the Nature-Culture question may be observed in Shelley’s work. In the earliest work, oppressive institutions are regularly attacked as being against nature; thus in “Queen Mab” (1813), kings (III-103), war (IV-109), sexual oppression (V-20-1) are all seen as “unnatural”. In the essay “A Vindication of Natural Diet” (1813)<sup>31</sup>, Shelley explicitly demands a “return to nature”<sup>32</sup>, defending vegetarianism as the rule to total social transformation. However, in the long narrative poem “Laon and Cythna” (1817)<sup>33</sup>, the relation between Nature and Culture has become more complex, and the concept of a simple “return to Nature” no longer suffices.

The poem, set in contemporary Greece and Turkey, narrates an imaginary non-violent revolution, which temporarily dethrones the Ottoman Sultan. The two leaders, Laon and Cythna, are Greeks, and brother and sister; the climax of the narrative is provided by their incestuous union. The revolution fails, crushed by the forces of oppression; the Sultan is restored by foreign arms – but the reader is assured that the future has been offered an undying example for subsequent poli-

28 Benjamin refers to the “dream in which every epoch sees in images the epoch which is to succeed it” (“Paris – the Capital of the Nineteenth Century”, in Benjamin (1973a) p. 159). The arcades are seen as such a utopian dream-image (ibid., 171).

29 Buck-Morss (1981), p. 64.

30 ibid.

31 Originally one of the “Notes on *Queen Mab*”; published separately in 1813.

32 Shelley, “A Vindication of Natural Diet”, Nonesuch edition, p. 911.

33 “Laon and Cythna” was printed in 1817, but suppressed by the publishers from fear of prosecution for blasphemy. It was published in censored form as “The Revolt of Islam”, in 1818 (see Blunden (1946), p. 166). All quotations are from the “Laon and Cythna” text, as published in the Nonesuch edition.

tical action, and a new kind of social relations: “The world has seen / A type of peace” (IX-30).

This revolution is political, social and sexual, with, as recent criticism has stressed, a strong feminist dimension<sup>34</sup>. The processes of change are frequently validated by textual reference to Nature, as when Laon reads a message of hope in the dawn (V-38), or when Cythna appeals to “Nature, and Truth, and Liberty, and Love” (IX-7). The incest, too, is seen as a return to Nature, breaking through artificial taboos; the lovers sleep on “a natural couch of leaves” (VI-28), illuminated by a meteor, and for a while stand outside culture, liberated from “fear and time” (VI-35). Yet this rhetoric of Nature is undercut elsewhere in the text: natural images are *also* applied to the old regime and the counter-revolution – e.g.: “the chains of earth like mist melted away” (V-37), or: “blood . . . fell o’er the fields like rain” (VI-6). Nature here, as in “Alastor”, is, once again, in practice ambivalent and inconstant. It may therefore be preferable to locate the objective dynamics of Shelley’s revolution in some other discourse than that of a “return to Nature”.

In fact, the text offers a *model of history* which implies the possible *transformation of culture by culture*. History is seen, not as a homogeneous continuum, but as the space of an ongoing conflict between two antagonistic traditions – that of oppression, symbolised by the Christian God, and that of democratic revolt, symbolised by Satan.

The past contains a valuable intellectual and artistic heritage, “the wondrous fame/Of the past world” (II-2), but it also contains a “dark tale” of violence and oppression (I-28); Shelley realises that, as Benjamin was to put it, “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism”<sup>35</sup>. The cultural tradition is to be viewed with ambivalence. Thus Laon, brought up in Greece, looks *back* to the classical tradition, but also *forward* to a qualitatively different future. He realises that the ruins of antiquity are monuments to “a race of mightier men”, and to “less ungentle creeds” (II-11), to a less oppressive heritage than the Islamic tradition that now enslaves Greece. But his reaction – and here Shelley’s position contrasts with Byron’s<sup>36</sup> – is not to demand a simple resurrection of the Hellenic tradition. That tradition must, indeed, be placed in significant relation with the present; but it must be appropriated in order to be superseded.

34 cf. Brown (1979), *passim*.

35 Benjamin, (1973), p. 258).

36 cf. discussion of Byron’s view of history in section VIII below.

"Such man has been, and such may yet become!  
Aye, wiser, greater, gentler, even than they  
Who on the fragments of yon shattered dome  
Have stamped the sign of power" (II-12).

For Shelley, unlike Marx, the revolution does not refuse to take its poetry from the past; but it must take it from the future too<sup>37</sup>.

In "A Defence of Poetry" (1820), Shelley stresses that the ancient Greek tradition was far from being beyond criticism: "the scheme of Athenian society was deformed by many imperfections"<sup>38</sup>, notably the "degrading restraints" placed on women<sup>39</sup>. "Laon and Cythna" implies that neither the classical tradition, nor the French revolutionary tradition, can offer a useful model for future praxis, *unless* tradition is transformed by the liberation of women. It is Cythna who persuades Laon that no revolution will succeed in the long term unless it includes women's self-emancipation:

"Can man be free if woman be a slave? . . .  
Can they whose mates are beasts. . . / dare  
To trample their oppressors?" (II-43)

The future post-revolutionary society must, then, be conceived as qualitatively different from any previous social order – a *new culture* has to be constructed.

*Education* plays a crucial role in this text, both in the analysis of the existing society and the programme for its transformation. There is no question of a "natural" model of education, as in "The Prelude"; in his "Preface" to the poem, Shelley describes the type of "education peculiarly fitted for a Poet", with reference both to Nature and to Culture (reading, travel, conversation) but clearly privileging Culture<sup>40</sup>.

The text makes it clear that people's consciousness is formed primarily by what they are taught in society – thus women are taught to see their own

37 cf. Marx, (1973), p. 149.

38 Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry", p. 1033 (in Nonesuch edition).

39 *ibid.*, p. 1042.

40 Shelley, "Preface" to "Laon and Cythna", in Nonesuch edition, pp. 144-5.

oppression as natural: "till they had learned to breathe the atmosphere of scorn" (II-35). Having learned to accept "the mortal chain/Of Custom" (Dedication-7), they perpetuate that oppression by tacitly consenting in it<sup>41</sup>. Nonetheless, a revolutionary *counterpedagogy* is possible; Cythna, indeed, as the critic Nathaniel Brown has recently put it, "raises her brother's consciousness"<sup>42</sup>. Laon, who had previously been relatively unaware of women's oppression, is "taught" by his sister:

"Nor are the strong and the severe to keep  
The empire of the world: thus Cythna taught" (II-34).

Women's "misery" was "but coldly felt" by Laon, until she "indued/My purpose with a wider sympathy" (II-36); but from that point, the feminist perspective becomes integral to the revolution – Laon declares, "This slavery must be broken" (II-37). Cythna later extends her revolutionary pedagogy to the Turkish capital.

"Thus she doth equal laws and justice teach  
To woman, outraged and polluted long" (IV-21);

her militancy is directed towards realising the utopian dream of a qualitatively new culture.

After the revolution fails, a concrete model for future social praxis is nonetheless still operative, in the lovers' relationship, where sex-role stereotypes are effectively dissolved in an androgynous practice. Shelley quite openly rejected what he called the "detestable distinctions of sex"<sup>43</sup>; in the poem, Cythna at time requires protection from Laon ("and for a space in my embrace she rested" – VI-25), yet on the other hand displays greater resistance than he does to imprisonment and madness, and at one point appears on a black horse, "waving a sword", to rescue him (VI-19). What emerges is not a simple reversal of traditional sex-roles, but their dissolution; in the incestuous love-relation, man and woman unite, on a basis of full equality, as *politically* "brother and sister"<sup>44</sup>. Here again, their relationship points towards an alternative culture.

41 cf. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

42 *ibid.*, p. 182.

43 Shelley, quoted Brown, p. 226 (no source given).

44 cf. Brown, pp. 185, 215-6.

## VII

"Laon and Cythna", then, may be read as implying that an authoritarian culture can eventually be replaced by a democratic one, by means of a revolutionary pedagogy. This concept of cultural transformation is present elsewhere in Shelley's poetry; "Queen Mab", for all its rhetoric of Nature, concludes with a utopian vision of the transformation of world society, under the banners of equality and unrepressed desire.

The same is true of "Prometheus Unbound" (1820). In both texts, the changes in human society are accompanied by changes in external Nature; thus, in both, the climate becomes universally temperate and nightshade loses its poison (*QM* VIII-58-76, 129-30; *PU* III-3, 114-123; III-4, 77-83). The transformation of Nature is offered to as parallel to, and metaphoric of, the transformation of social relations.

In "Prometheus Unbound", the Law of the Father is finally replaced by a non-authoritarian order; Jupiter, "the tyrant of the world" (III-4, 183), is deposed and replaced by the "alternative" deity Demorgon, whose "mighty law" (II-2, 43) is *not* that of the Father. Equally, in "Hellas" (1821), where Shelley considers the actual Greek War of Independence, the possibility of a totally new culture is raised. The text offers a model of history which is neither linear nor cyclical, in which traditions are resumed in order to be superseded; if Greece frees itself from Turkey, it will not be to return to the classical tradition, but to go beyond it:

"A brighter Hellas rears its mountains  
From waves serener far" (1066-7).

If world history so far has moved in cycles of culture and barbarism, revolution and counter-revolution, nonetheless traditions have been established which, if developed, can permit a breaking-out of the cyclical pattern. The text demands a qualitative rupture, the construction of a utopian order that will break the cycle: "The world is weary of the past" (1100), and the cycle must give way to a permanent democracy, to a world of "kingless continents, sinless as Eden" (1047). Shelley's work as a whole may be considered as an attempt at revolutionary pedagogy, aimed at preparing the ground for the final rupture with the oppressive inheritance of history, that point at which humanity may say with Laon, "Let the past/Be as a grave" (V-12).

## VIII

If Shelley's model of history pushes, then, towards the concept of a qualitative break, can the same be said of Byron's? To some extent, Byron in fact appears as prisoner of that repetitive, cyclical past from which Shelley demands a break. Both in "Childe Harold" (1812-18) and "Don Juan" (1819-24) there is a tendency to view history in terms of cycles: cultures appear, rise to a peak, then degenerate; a new culture takes over and the same old cycle is resumed. Thus, in *CH IV* (1818), Byron declares:

"There is the moral of all human tales;  
'Tis but the same rehearsal of the past,  
First Freedom, and then Glory — when that fails,  
Wealth, vice, corruption, — barbarism at last.  
And History, with all her volumes vast,  
Hath but *one* page" (IV-108).

On this view, human history would ultimately become absurd, governed by a blind compulsion to repeat. Empires succeed each other, but none marks any advance on its predecessor:

"Assyria, Greece, Rome, Carthage, what are they?" (*CH IV* - 182)

"The eternal surge  
Of time and tide rolls on . . . while the graves  
Of empires heave but like some passing waves" (*DJ XV*-99).

However, in the concrete pictures of past societies offered in *CH*, this cyclical nihilism is replaced by a more complex view which brings forward the element of *contradiction*. The western cultural heritage is viewed with ambivalence; Byron pays tribute to the power and the aesthetic development of Rome or Venice, but realises that their magnificence was based on violence and oppression. The "marble piles" of Venice were built on the economic lifeblood of "many a subject land" (IV-1); the "colossal fabric" of the Coliseum (IV-143) is a monument to a culture whose pleasure was rooted in sadism, where Dacian "barbarians" were "butcher'd to make a Roman holiday" (IV-141). At such moments, Byron, like Shelley, recognises that a monument to "culture", like St Mark's or the Coliseum, is also a

monument to barbarism. The past transmits a discordant message of both slavery and freedom; Renaissance Venice is seen as

“Though making many slaves, herself still free” (IV-14),

much as Shelley recognised that ancient Athens provided only a highly imperfect model for future democracy.

Nonetheless, Byron at times replaces this ambivalent view of history with appeals to a simplified, idealised “tradition”. Oppressed nations are exhorted to free themselves by returning to ancient traditions; thus in *CHI* (1812) – written during the Peninsular War – Byron appeals to the Spanish to free themselves from Napoleon in the names of Don Pelayo and the Reconquista (I-35), and in *CHII* (1812), demands that Greece “resume” the “Spirit of freedom” of ancient Hellas (II-73,74). What is in question is a simple *return* to an idealised past, seen at these points without ambivalence. Exactly the same demand is made in “The Isles of Greece”, the celebrated lyric inserted into *DJ* III (1821):

“Earth! render back from out thy breast  
A remnant of our Spartan dead!” (“The Isles of Greece”, 13).

Here too, Byron demands a *return*, to what he calls in the main text the “spirit of old Greece” (III-55) – to the tradition of Marathon (*IG* 3) and Thermopylae (*IG* 7), and of the classical “arts of war and peace” (*IG* 1). There is no question of any *development* or *supersession* of the Greek tradition; and here Byron’s view of Greece contrasts with Shelley’s, as presented in “Laon and Cythna” and “Hellas”<sup>45</sup>. Indeed, the final chorus of “Hellas” may be seen as a riposte to Byron’s “The Isles of Greece”, given Shelley’s emphasis on the future *transformation* of the Hellenic tradition, on a possible society *without* those classical “arts of war”. “O, write no more the tale of Troy!”, demands Shelley’s text (1078), affirming that utopian possibility which “The Isles of Greece” excludes.

Byron’s work does, however, at certain points confront the possibility of such a utopian rupture. If *CH* reads as a generally pessimistic overview of Napoleonic and Restoration Europe, the principle of “Freedom” is, nonetheless, seen as feeding a tradition of resistance that opposes itself to the dominant principle of tyranny:

45 cf. Section VII above.

“Yet, Freedom! yet thy banner, torn, but flying,  
Streams like the thunder-storm *against* the wind” (IV-98)<sup>46</sup>

Further, the French Revolution is seen as having permanently established a *new* type of democratic tradition; in spite of the Terror, the memory of 1789 remains as an example to the future and a guarantee that the Europe of 1815 will not last forever.

“But this will not endure, nor be endured!  
Mankind have felt their strength, and made it felt” (III-83).

At certain points in *DJ*, Byron even considers the possibility of a liberated future, when monarchy will be as obsolete as “the mammoth’s bones” (VIII-137); addressing “our children’s children”, inhabitants of a tyrant-free world, he declares:

“That hour is not for us, but ’tis for you” (VIII-136).

There are, then, moments when Byron approximates to a Shelleyan view of the future. At all events, while Byron may be accused of recurrent nihilism in his emphasis on blind cycles, and of a sporadic over-idealisation of past cultures, his view of history, taken whole, is of impressive ambivalence and complexity, and may be received as the necessary “realist” corrective to Shelley’s “utopian” view.

## IX

The future may, then see the transformation of culture; such a possibility is affirmed repeatedly by Shelley and occasionally by Byron in their historical discourse. Clearly, however, any such cultural transformation would have to start out from already existing materials. The cultural treasures of the past, although resting in part on barbarism and blood, would not be destroyed, but appropriated for humanity – transformed by insertion into a new context. A *model* for such a cultural transformation exists, it may be argued, in the *literary practice* of both

46 These lines were later quoted by Shelley as epigraph to his “Ode to Liberty” (1820).

poets – in their re-writing, or transformation, of texts, characters and themes from the literature of the past. Already-existing themes are rehandled in a new, secular and democratic context; thus to re-write becomes to subvert.

Thus in “Prometheus Unbound”, Shelley re-writes parts of Aeschylus’ “Prometheus Bound” and pre-empts its lost sequel, in a new political context. Existing authority, represented by Jupiter, is no longer seen as eternal and permanent, but as capable of replacement by a new democratic order. Where in Aeschylus’ lost sequel, Prometheus and the Olympian tyrant were reconciled, in Shelley’s version of the myth Jupiter is deposed; Shelley wrote in his “Preface”: “I was averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the Champion with the oppressor of mankind”<sup>47</sup>. The text, further, re-writes an image from Milton; Demogorgon, who in “Paradise Lost” is, as tradition presents him, a terrifying demon of the abyss<sup>48</sup>, becomes, in Shelley’s text, the agent of liberation, rising from the abyss to depose Jupiter. His very *shapelessness* (“a tremendous gloom” (I-I, 207); “a mighty darkness/. . . shapeless, neither limb,/Nor form, nor outline” (II-IV, 2-6) becomes an index of the unprecedented, undefinable *shape* of the future social order<sup>49</sup>. In “Laon and Cythna”, too, the last canto contains a re-writing of Dante in a secular context; the paradisaic landscape to which the lovers are translated after death is clearly a secular version of the Earthly Paradise from the “Purgatorio” (see *L&C* XIII-17-41)<sup>50</sup>; details in common include a labyrinthine river, and unknown fruit-trees (“fruits ne’er plucked of man” in Dante<sup>51</sup>; “trees of unknown kind” with “bright fruit” in Shelley (XIII-18).) The point is, however, that in Shelley’s text, the ideal landscape becomes the domain of Satan, as bearer of the democratic tradition; this is the Paradise of revolutionaries.

Byron, equally, re-writes legendary figures from past literature, in his poetic dramas “Manfred” (1817) and “Cain” (1821). In “Manfred”, the Faust legend undergoes a secular transformation; Manfred, the Faustian rebel who at first believes he is condemned to eternal life for the crime of incest, finally dies rejecting both the abbot who offers him salvation, and the devils who try to drag him to tell:

47 Shelley, “Preface” to “Prometheus Unbound”, Oxford “Works” p. 201.

48 see Milton, “Paradise Lost”, II, 964-5:  
“Orcus and Ades, and the dreaded name / Of Demogorgon”.

49 Brailsford (1913) points out that the name of Demogorgon “suggested none of the traditional theologies” (p. 228).

50 see Dante, “The Divine Comedy – II: Purgatory”, trans. D. L. Sayers, London: Penguin, 1955, Cantos 27 to 29.

51 Dante, op. cit., Canto 28-120.

Away! I’ll die as I have lived – alone” (III-IV, 90).

Manfred thus becomes a Faust-figure who finally goes *neither* to hell *nor* to heaven, but dies alone; the poem may be read as, like Shelley’s “Prometheus Unbound”, one moment in the gradual “death of God” in vanguardist intellectual circles across the 19th century<sup>52</sup>. “Cain”, in spite of Byron’s defensive and tongue-in-cheek claims for its orthodoxy<sup>53</sup>, is in practice a re-writing of the biblical myth from the vantage points of Cain and Lucifer. Lucifer appears as defender of intellectual freedom (II-II, 449-66) and prototype of resistance to tyranny. He and Cain are, he declares, both

“Souls who dare look the Omnipotent tyrant in  
His everlasting face, and tell him that  
His evil is not good!” (I-I, 138-40).

The murder of Abel becomes a protest – albeit blind and irrational – against the arbitrary and capricious rule of Jehovah, seen as a tyrant similar to Shelley’s Jupiter. The effect of Byron’s re-writing of the biblical myth is to undermine the Law of the Father in its religious aspect.

In “Don Juan”, that same Law of the Father is undermined in its social aspect, though an ironic re-writing of Homer. The narrator explicitly compares the return of Lambro to his island with Ulysses’ return to Ithaca:

“An honest gentleman at his return  
May not have the good fortune of Ulysses” (III-23);

but in this case, the patriarchal order has been, not maintained as in Homer, but subverted. Penelope, the faithful wife, gives way to Haidée, the rebellious daughter. There is a further ironic parallel with Homer (this time silent) in Haidée’s reception of Juan after the shipwreck. Their encounter (II-129) recalls the princess Nausicaa’s meeting with the shipwrecked Ulysses in “The Odyssey”, Book VI. But where the

52 cf. Nerval, “Le Christ aux Oliviers” (1853); Baudelaire, “Le cygne”, “Les aveugles” (1860).

53 “With regard to the language of Lucifer, it was difficult for me to make him talk like a clergyman” (Byron, “Preface” to “Cain”, in Oxford “Works”, p. 521).

Homeric encounter remains strictly within the Law of the Father (Nausicaa invites Ulysses to her father's house, but precedes him on the way to avoid gossip)<sup>54</sup>, in Byron's version, Haidée rejects the idea of "taking him [Juan] into her father's house" (II-130), and their developing relationship quickly subverts the patriarchal order. The "authority" of Homer is invoked to overturn "authority" itself.

Both Shelley and Byron, then, re-write images and themes from the Western cultural tradition – from the Bible, Homer, Aeschylus, Dante, Milton, etc. – in such a way as to subvert or invert their original significations. This re-writing of tradition suggests that the past can be appropriated for the future, in a context that transforms the "cultural" artefact.

### X

Finally, the question must be asked: why read, and why teach, these texts today? The texts discussed in this article belong, after all, to that History which is little more than the history of oppression and violence. Nonetheless, as Benjamin points out in his essay on Eduard Fuchs, the past contains, not only a catalogue of oppressions, but also a collection of "cultural treasures". Orthodox "cultural history", as Benjamin stresses, "may well increase the burden of the treasures that are piled up on humanity's back. But it does not give mankind the strength to shake them off, so as to get its hands on them"<sup>55</sup>. Materialist criticism, however, may provide the tools that will permit that appropriation of the past for humanity. In this context, it may be argued that the work of Wordsworth, Shelley and Byron contains material that can be appropriated along the lines Benjamin suggests; past culture may be transmitted in a way that "illuminate(s) the revolutionary possibility of the present"<sup>56</sup>. The texts in question raise problems of Nature, Culture and education, of Desire and Law, which are far from being resolved today. Ideologists continue to defend the patriarchal family, while a rhetoric of Nature is still exploited to defend sexist norms and role stereotypes. Hence reading these can still be useful.

I have tried to establish that Wordsworth offers a model of education which tends to "naturalise" the existing culture, and therefore requires demystification; while Byron and Shelley, though both trapped to some extent in a rhetoric of Nature, offer, respectively, a process of *diseducation* ("Don Juan") and *re-education* ("Laon and Cythna"), at the same time as much in their work implies the possibility of cultural transformation. Considered in these terms, the study of these nineteenth-century texts may be seen as of continuing scientific and pedagogic utility.

<sup>54</sup> Homer, "Odyssey", Books VI and VII.

<sup>55</sup> Benjamin, (1979), p. 361.

<sup>56</sup> Buck-Morss, p. 57.

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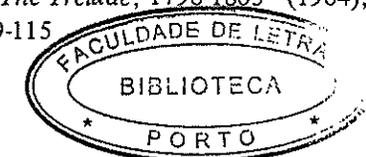
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