Byron and Shelley's Loco-Descriptive Lyrics
The Immortal Swiss Alps and the Mortal Italian Hills

Mariko Kimura

Introduction

My talk examines the influence of mountain landscapes on Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, with particular attention to their use of loco-descriptive lyricism. Focusing on the intertextual relationship between Byron's Arquà stanzas in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1818) and Shelley's *Lines Written among the Euganean Hills* (1819), I argue that their Euganean Hills poems are deeply rooted in the immediate *locus* of their composition. To further develop this argument, I also consider their other mountain poems, such as Byron's Alpine sequence in *Childe Harold* (1816) and Shelley's *Mont Blanc* (1817). This analysis highlights that, while the sublime Alps transported the poets to an imaginative realm offering little corporeal consolation, the beautiful Euganean Hills reconciled them with their own reality, eventually enriching and enlivening it. Drawing on major aesthetic theories of the Romantic period, my presentation explores how their interactions with nature helped them reshape and refashion themselves during exile.

Byron, Shelley, and Their Loco-Descriptiveness

Byron was enchanted by Arquà in the Euganean Hills, visiting it several times during his sojourn in Italy and ultimately describing it in Canto IV of *Childe Harold*. What drew him to the site was its historical and literary significance: Arquà is the place where Francesco Petrarca "died" and "dwelt" (*CHP*, IV, 31, 32). Although Shelley probably never made a pilgrimage to Arquà, he also resided in the Euganean Hills, where—just a year after the completion of *Childe Harold* IV—he composed *Lines Written among the Euganean Hills*. While Shelley was famously critical of Byron's recently published Italian canto (Cian 158), he not only adopted the theme of the Euganean Hills from his friend, but also elaborated on it in his own poem— most notably by employing a similar mode of writing: the loco-descriptive style.

While Byron's *Childe Harold* is critically recognized as "realistic" (McGann 33), Shelley's *Lines* has traditionally been interpreted as ontological. However, this conventional reading of Shelley's work warrants reconsideration. A closer examination of the work's three distinctive motifs—the persistent imagery of moisture, pervasive mineralogical references, and blurred visions of Venice and Pauda—reveals that Shelley's ostensibly visionary poem is as deeply rooted in worldly, earthly and material *loci* as Byron's. This perspective aligns with Wasserman's unorthodox argument that *Lines* presents "a wholly world-oriented view in order to ask what it [the poem] reveals about life, rather than about divinity and immortality" (Wasserman 198). My talk thus begins by attempting to demystify or *de-immortalize* some of the key illusory elements in Shelley's nature lyric.

The Alps and the Immortal Sublime

To further emphasize the "mortality[...]felt" (*CHP*, IV, 32) in Byron's and Shelley's mountain poems, I turn to the other *mountains* they represented: Byron's Alpine sequence in *Childe Harold* III and Shelley's *Mont Blanc*. Although *mountain* and *hill* may seem interchangeable on a semantic level, the poets' experiences and representations differ markedly between the Italian hills and the Alpine mountains.

In *Childe Harold* III, Byron represents the Alps from a certain "distance" (Byron, *The Major Works*, 142). This notion of *distance* is crucial to the aesthetic judgment of the sublime. According to the aesthetic theories of

Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke, human beings—preoccupied with their own "self-preservation"—can relish sublimity only when distanced from the object that evokes the feeling (Burke 35-37; Kant 91, 92). Shelley, in *Mont Blanc*, likewise highlights the physical *inaccessibility* of the Alpine mountains, portraying them as an immortal realm accessible only through the human mind or imagination—a gesture echoed in Byron's work as well. Despite this exhilarating mental flight, however, the Alps afforded them little physical solace. As Byron notably puts it, the sublime Alps never "lightened the weight upon my heart" (Byron, *The Works*, III, 268-269)

The Euganean Hills and Mortal Beauty

In stark contrast to the anti-human Alpine precipice, the Euganean Hills are imbued with mortal vitality, physically embracing the poets: Byron, Shelley, and, most significantly, Petrarch. Reflecting on the life of the Italian poet, Byron comes to accept his own frail "mortality" (*CHP*, IV, 32), rather than yearning for immortal power. Invited by Byron's poetic counsel, Shelley, too, wanders into the hills, where he confronts human mortality through the recent loss of his own infant daughter, Clara. By immersing himself in the mortal temporality of the evanescent *now*, Shelley gradually recreates himself, ultimately arriving at "a windless bower" (*Lines,* 344) or "healing paradise" (*Lines*, 355), suffused with "mild brotherhood" (*Lines,* 369) and humane "love" (*Lines,* 342)—a locus reminiscent of his material residence in the Euganean Hills. This concept of *love*, for Burke and Kant, is what defines beauty (Burke 83; Kant 98). The beautiful Euganean Hills enabled the two poets' "furtherance of life," opening up a new stage in their outcast period in Italy (Kant 75).

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