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Elegiac Romance

'Tis to create, and creating live
A being more intense, that we endow
With form our fancy, gaining as we give
The life we image, even as I do now.
What am I? Nothing: but not so art thou,
Soul of my thought! with whom I traverse earth,
Invisible but gazing, as I glow
Mix'd with thy spirit, blended with thy birth,
And feeling still with thee in my crush'd feelings' dearth.

Childe Harold's Pilgrimage
Canto III, Stanza 6

SEVERAL NOVELS written during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in England, Europe and America form an identifiable group to which no term has yet to my knowledge been applied and which has not yet to my knowledge been adequately described. Some important members of the group I have in mind are these: *Moby Dick*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness*, Ford's *The Good Soldier*, Alain-Fournier's *The Wanderer*, Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, and Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*. The structural and thematic characteristics these works have in common lead me to coin the term "Elegiac Romance" to designate them. Works of Elegiac Romance are romances because a heroic figure in each is embarked on some kind of quest. They are elegiac because the narrator in each tells us the story after the heroic figure is dead. The theme these works share is the need to overcome the effect of loss which results from that death.

Narratively, each story in this group is a pseudo-biography of the questing hero. Ishmael is the pseudo-author of a pseudo-biography of Ahab, Nick Carraway is the pseudo-author of a pseudo-biography of Jay Gatsby, Marlow of Kurtz and Jim, Zeitbloom of Leverkühn, and so on. The figure the narrator designates as his hero seems at first, therefore, to be the center of the story's interest. Generally speaking, this narrator's hero is a character isolated from society by his obsessive quest. He is an active personality—in some cases hyper-

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active. Sometimes he is an artist, as he is in *Pale Fire*, *Doctor Faustus*, Salinger's *Seymour: An Introduction*, and Fitzgerald's unfinished *The Last Tycoon*. Yet even when he is an artist, the narrator's hero seldom speaks for himself. We learn everything we know about him through the narrator. If the narrator's hero speaks at all, what we hear is edited, selected, and arranged by the narrator, and in most cases the narrator is extremely self-conscious about what he is telling us, as well as how and why he is telling it. This self-consciousness so pervades these works that some critics have argued that the "central character" in some of them, *Moby Dick* for instance, is really the narrator, not the ostensible hero—Ishmael, not Ahab. In fact, all the works in this group are subject to this interpretation. They may all be read not as pseudo-biography, but as pseudo-autobiography. If we shift our attention in this way, our understanding of the stories changes radically. One central characteristic remains the same, since both the narrator and his hero are isolated, solitary figures. But even here our interpretation is bound to be affected, because the cause of isolation in each case is different. The narrator's hero is isolated from his natural society by his obsessive quest. The narrator is isolated from his natural society by an odd state of mind which seems to be a result of the nature of his relationship with his hero.

These two central characters typical of Elegiac Romance participate in a central action which is also typical. The narrative structure of Elegiac Romance is an imaginative reconstruction of the one-way relationship which once developed between the two central figures. At one time the narrator identified himself with the fate and career of his hero. His hero, on the other hand, remained aloof. However friendly the narrator and his hero may have been according to the narrator's account, it is clear that they were never on terms of real mutual intimacy. More important, although the narrator committed himself to the fate and career of his hero, his hero never in any way reciprocated. The narrator's commitment, however, was complete. At some point, then, his hero acted in such a way as to cause the narrator to identify with him, with the result that the narrator's self-possession collapsed. His self-possession to begin with was not very great. He began with an extraordinary propensity to turn himself inside out at a moment's notice, with a feeling such as Ishmael's "certain wild vagueness of painfulness concerning" Ahab.[1] But the narrative structure of Elegiac Romance requires that by the time the narrator has finished telling us the story of the experience he underwent, there should be signs that his self-possession has been reestablished and, indeed, strengthened. This can occur only when the narrator knows that the one-way bond between himself and his hero is finally broken. Thus these stories end not with the hero's death, but with the narrator's sense that he has regained himself.

Elegiac Romance is related thematically, then, as well as in form and function, to Pastoral Elegy, in which the speaker mourns his dead friend by describing their relationship, thereby reorienting himself so that in the end he is able to move on "to fresh Woods, and Pastures new." But Pastoral Elegy is always fundamentally serene, even when as often happens the poem ex-

[1] Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, ed. Alfred Kazin (Boston, 1956), p. 81.

presses anger, because the elegist and his subject were true friends. Elegiac Romance, on the other hand, is told to us by a person who seems at one time to have fallen into an emotional trap. He devoted himself totally to another person, his hero. In a sense he gave himself, or gave an aspect of himself, to his hero. Then his hero died, taking, as it were, the narrator's self with him. But since the narrator's hero never literally took anything from the narrator, the crucial event in the experience was entirely imaginary. What occurred within the narrator's mind was what we might call malfeasance of the imagination. Imagination took over as a governing faculty when it should not have, or in a way it should not have. One way to rectify this situation would seem to be to make the imagination act correctly, to cause it to govern when it should and as it should. The way the narrator must set things right, therefore, is to undergo another, similar imaginative experience. This is what he does in telling the story. He sets out consciously to lay a trap for himself like the one in which he had at one time unconsciously let himself be caught, and from which he does not yet, as he begins to tell his story, feel free. His freedom can come only with understanding. The narrator understands and thus recovers himself by imaginatively recovering the past—by "writing" his "autobiography."

Thus Elegiac Romance may be defined superficially as pseudo-autobiography concealed in pseudo-biography. As such it may be contrasted with other types of literature written in the autobiographical mode. One of these is real autobiography disguised as fiction, such as *Sons and Lovers* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.* Works like these are obviously not elegiac, and generally they are narrated in third person. But some examples of Elegiac Romance do border on this type of disguised autobiography. Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* is one of them. Yet by the narrator's own admission it is the one-way relationship between himself and his hero, Swann, which in large measure controls the theme of this novel, not the glimpses it may offer into its author's life. Some first person narratives of a more gloomy sort are classifiable as pseudo-autobiographical in another sense. These include for example *Wuthering Heights* and Stoker's *Dracula.* But such works fall outside the category of Elegiac Romance, because however romantic the heroes of these works may be, they are alive (or in the case of Dracula, dead but not yet out of the way) at the time the tales are told. This means that even though loss is an important theme in the story, as it certainly is in *Wuthering Heights,* it is not structurally important, because it is not the narrator who experiences the loss and who must therefore overcome its effects.

Finally, still another type of story in the autobiographical mode differs from Elegiac Romance because although all the events described in the story have occurred in the past, and the story is told to us by an entirely fictional narrator, the story lacks the important second figure, the narrator's hero. Some of the short stories of Sherwood Anderson are of this type. They tend to be about the narrator exclusively, and they tend to tell us "what happened that made me what I am today." Longer narratives of the sort, like *Tristram Shandy,* are more complex and involve more characters. And they are certainly concerned with the effect of circumstances and events

of the past upon the narrator's present character and life. Also, other personages (such as My Uncle Toby) may be part of the environment which has helped make the narrator the person he is. But the difference between these stories and Elegiac Romance is that the narrator makes no commitment to the fate of one of these characters, and no single loss or death impells him to tell his story. Some examples of Elegiac Romance may indeed describe in elaborate detail the circumstances which affected the narrator's development, as do both *Pale Fire* and *All the King's Men,* as well as, of course, *Moby Dick.* But these circumstances are subordinate to the story's center of interest, the one-way relationship between the narrator and his hero.

This brief effort at discrimination certainly has not exhausted the possible types of pseudo-autobiography. Neither has it dealt satisfactorily with the highly complex and subtle works to which I refer. Nevertheless, it has served to emphasize the importance in Elegiac Romance of the central relationship. This relationship is the spine which articulates all the diverse elements of Elegiac Romance: theme, character, and event. It is also the occasion of the narrator's autobiographical expression. In order to understand pseudo-autobiography of this type, and thus perhaps to understand better any true autobiography which takes a similar form, we must understand the nature and outcome of this often seemingly harmless but in truth fundamentally corrupt relationship. The relationship takes the form of a bad bargain. In establishing it, the narrator committed himself with unwarranted faith to his hero. His hero accepted the commitment indifferently, or with a show of friendship or paternalistic concern. Eventually the fraud is exposed, as it is in *Moby Dick* with the nailing of the gold doubloon, and in Ford's novel when the love affair between Ashburnham and Dowell's wife is uncovered. Typically, the narrator indicates how profound his commitment was by showing that even after the fraud was exposed, his devotion to his hero did not wane. In *Heart of Darkness,* Marlow's disgust mounts, yet he continues to be drawn to Kurtz—continues to be taken in by the fraud—even as layer after layer of corruption comes to light. If blame were to be placed, one would have to recognize that something is wrong with both the narrator and his hero in almost every instance. But the narrator himself is not, now, interested in placing blame. He is interested only in saving himself. Thus Elegiac Romance is a form of pseudo-autobiography in which the subject exposes his peculiar emotional state or moral condition, because only by exposing it can he rectify it.

This autobiographical activity suggests that Elegiac Romance is concerned thematically with the force of the past in the present. In fact, Elegiac Romance goes further, to face a situation in which the past holds the present in a vise-like grip. This grip of the past on the present is expressed through the central action of the stories, which is the formation and dissolution of the one-way relationship between the narrator, who speaks in the present, and the narrator's hero, who represents an aspect of the narrator's past. But the complexity of major works of Elegiac Romance makes the meaning of this central conflict sometimes difficult to see. It is more readily seen in simpler versions of the type. One of these, which may indeed be the earliest example in prose, is a "fragment of a

novel" by Byron.[2] Although the story is crude and not very appealing in itself, its simplicity lays bare the inner workings of Elegiac Romance. It brings the narrator's final act of commitment into close juxtaposition with the death of his hero. In fact, in this story, the relationship is culminated in a death-bed oath. This juxtaposition helps us see that Elegiac Romance as a narrative structure is a dynamic metaphor which expresses the peculiarly modern emotional predicament in which the will of the present is imprisoned by the persisting will of the past. It expresses also both the cause of that imprisonment and the means of escaping it. This view of Elegiac Romance is the one I will attempt to explain in the discussion of Byron's story which follows.

Byron made his experiment in prose fiction during the summer of 1816, the period of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto III, and *Manfred*. In it, the narrator tells us that as a young man he journeyed into the Levant with an older man he admired, Augustus Darvell. Darvell, a familiar Byronic type, was a mysterious being who seemed to be "prey to some cureless disorder." Not long after they began their journey, Darvel sickened and died. Before he died, however, he made his young companion swear to keep his death a secret. At this point the fragment breaks off, ending with the narrator's description of his state of mind at the moment: "Between astonishment and grief, I was tearless." Two emotions seem to have canceled each other out. The youth is left entirely without feeling. Once he had been an idle young man on a pleasure trip; now he has been crushed in spirit by the grim destiny thrust upon him. His experience establishes in him an unhappy equilibrium of diminished feeling which is recognizable as a kind of Byronic norm. This equilibrium, coming as it does at the end of the fragment, has the odd effect of making the story seem less fragmentary than we would expect. However much it may flaunt the necessities of the well-made story, Byron seems to have said in it all he intended to say. It gives the distinct impression of being in some way resolved.

One reason for this sense of resolution seems to be that only superficial gothic details are left to be worked out, whereas the youth's emotional state in response to his companion's death seems conclusive. Another, related reason is that despite appearances, the youth, not Darvell, is the real center of interest in the story. Our attention is drawn at first to Augustus Darvell, the only one of the two characters given a name. The narrative seems to concern Darvell's fascinating and mysterious character, his commands, his occult knowledge, his life and death. That the youth should have been dismayed by his experience with such a person would be unremarkable in itself. But he is more than dismayed. He seems to have been deeply changed by his experience. This change in the youth draws our attention away from Darvell. What also helps us shift our attention is the fact that this unnamed young man has become the character who now, speaking in the "present," tells us about what happened to him in his youth. The point of view of the story is therefore itself an important fact. It both contributes to the story's sense of

[2] *The Works of Lord Byron, Letters and Journals*, III (London, 1922), 446-453. The stanzas from *Childe Harold* are quoted from the Edward E. Bostetter edition (New York, Rinehart, 1951).

resolution and governs the story's theme, because in the very act of narration the speaker breaks the grip of the past. As a youth he swore "an oath of great solemnity" to "conceal [Darvell's] death from every human being." In telling us the tale, he breaks his oath.

How important this act of dishonorable tale telling may be is revealed by a convenient literary coincidence. Because Byron's fragment was written as a part of a contest among friends (the contest which also produced Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*), we have for comparison a story of common origin and similar intent. "The Vampyre," by John William Polidori, Byron's physician, is similar in many ways to Byron's fragment.[3] Polidori admitted his dependence on Byron's idea.

In this story, a young man named Aubrey is drawn to an illustrious-seeming but cold and scheming older man named Ruthven. They begin a journey together, and after a series of adventures, including an assault on the younger man by a vampire, Aubrey and Ruthven are attacked by robbers in Greece. Ruthven is shot, and before he dies he extracts from Aubrey an oath to keep his death and his "crimes" a secret "for a year and a day." Returning to England, Aubrey finds Ruthven alive and engaged to Aubrey's sister. Aubrey withdraws from society, struggling with his conscience. Should he betray his honor (that is, his word) and save his sister, or betray his sister and save his honor?. He decides more or less by default. Without his intervention, the couple marry, and Ruthven (who is of course the vampire) ravishes and kills the girl just before the time limit on the oath elapses. "When the midnight hour had struck," Polidori tells us, Aubrey "related composedly what the reader has perused—he died immediately after."

Thus, like Byron's story, Polidori's is pseudo-autobiographical in a sense, even though the reader gets the story secondhand. But what is for Polidori a tale of conflict between honor and the powers of darkness, a "ghost story" with exotic and gothic trappings, is for Byron a study in revolt against the grip of the past. We may be reminded of Joseph Conrad, who spoke of making *Heart of Darkness* into "something quite on another plane than an anecdote of a man who went mad in the Centre of Africa." Byron likewise makes a trivial goblin tale "into one suggestive view of a whole phase of life."[4] He expands the significance of the tale in three main ways. First, he develops the character of the narrator. In telling us his story, the narrator insists that we see him at the time the events occur as conspicuously youthful, in contrast to his companion. Whereas Darvell "had been deeply initiated into what is called the world," the narrator admits, "I was yet in my novitiate." He had therefore cultivated Darvell assiduously until he succeeded in establishing what seemed to him to be a mutually friendly relationship. Their trip together, then, had begun as "a mere party of pleasure." The naiveté suggested by this phrase in contrast with the outcome of the story is in accord with the youth's other characteristics: his lack of firm-

[3] *The Vampyre, A Tale* (London, 1819). See also *The Diary of Dr. John William Polidori*, ed. William Michael Rossetti (London, 1911), pp. 23-24.

[4] Quoted in *Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness: Backgrounds and Criticisms*, ed. Leonard F. Dean (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1960), p. 124, from *Joseph Conrad: Letters to William Blackwood and David Meldrum*, ed. William Blackburn (Durham, N. C., 1958).

ness and resilience, his lack of self-reliance, his defensiveness and literal-mindedness. The narrator reveals flaws in his own youthful character which he might normally be expected to conceal, because part of his purpose in telling the story is to demonstrate the change his character has underone. The change is typical of changes undergone by narrators of Elegiac Romance. The difference between the raw youth who adamantly refuses to be cautious in judging Darvell and the narrator's present state of thoughtful self-awareness and objectivity reminds us of the difference between an out-of-work sailor driven to settle for any job he can get and the Buddha-like Marlow narrating *Heart of Darkness*, between a green midwesterner fresh from college and the Nick Carraway who, after the death of Gatsby, finds himself "brooding on the old, unknown world,"[5] and between the child, Seurel, in *The Wanderer*, and the Seurel who after the departure of Meaulnes reflects that "someone has extinguished the lamp around which, at night, we were a happy family."[6]

The second way Byron develops his tale to give it significance is to shift the grounds of the conflict. This he accomplishes through the wording of the oath. Polidori's youth can both fulfill his oath and tell his story without destroying his honor. The time limit on the oath, "a year and a day," is a loophole which Polidori takes advantage of, at the expense of Aubrey's sister. That Aubrey agonizes over the choice is a nod to form; still, it may suggest also that Polidori was not entirely insensitive to the insufficiency of a simple, traditional code of honor in such a circumstance. That Aubrey does finally sacrifice his sister to his word, on the other hand, suggests even more strongly Polidori's blind reaction toward dependence on that traditional code. But Byron's story contains no loophole. His youth is subject to an oath without limitation. He will break his word if he tells anyone his story under any condition. That he tells his story to us, then, means either that he is admitting implicitly to being, according to the traditional code, a dishonorable man, or that Byron is governing his character's actions according to another, more complex, non-traditional concept of honor.

The implications of this shift in the grounds of the conflict are most readily seen in the question of "identity" which arises in both Byron's version of the story and Polidori's. In each case, identity is related to the problem of whether to keep one's "word of honor" or to break it. Thus identity for Polidori is determined on what are basically chivalric grounds. One's word of honor alone defines one's self-image. What threatens the self in Polidori are the malicious "powers of darkness" represented by vampirism (with its sexual implications not very far beneath the surface). These powers are traditional enemies of the chivalric world, and honor is their nemesis. If one breaks one's word of honor, one submits to the powers of darkness and destroys oneself utterly. In Byron, the opposite is true. If Byron's youth keeps his word, he loses his identity to the will of Darvell—to the will of the past. Indeed, if he did not break his word, he would have no identity at all; because of the limitless nature of the

[5] F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York, 1953), p. 182.

[6] Henri Alain-Fournier, *The Wanderer*, trans. Françoise Delisle (Garden City, N. Y., 1953), p. 28.

oath, he would not exist because his story would never be told. Byron's narrator regains himself by breaking his word of honor—that is, by defying the grip of the past. To regain the self is to reestablish the coherence of the integrated self which had been shattered by the grip of the past, and which left the self tearless with astonishment and grief. Thus the powers of darkness in Byron are not an evil force, but an experience in which the inner self is corrupted. The archaic force of honor is powerless against such an enemy. Only another experience can save or regenerate emotional coherence, an experience which is capable of producing radical change in character of the sort the narrator of Elegiac Romance undergoes by virtue of telling his story. The self in this state is accurately described by Byron elsewhere as

> ...a broken mirror, which the glass
> In every fragment multiplies; and makes
> A thousand images of one that was,
> The same, and still the more, the more it breaks;
> And thus the heart will do which not forsakes,
> Living in shatter'd guise; and still, and cold,
> And bloodless, with its sleepless sorrow aches,
> Yet withers on till all without is old,
> Showing no visible sign, for such things are untold.
>
> (*Childe Harold* III, St. 33)

Yet the solution of the problem also is implicit in this stanza. Like Marlow's lie in *Heart of Darkness*, the narrator's betrayal of his oath in Byron's story—an act of forsaking the past—is the only act which can rectify his experience and anneal the self. It does so by reestablishing a condition of truth in the self on new, non-traditional grounds. Thus by shifting the grounds of the central conflict in the story, Byron transforms a conflict of honor into a conflict of feeling, based on what appear to be peculiarly Byronic assumptions about the nature of one aspect of human experience and one stage of human growth.

If thematically, then, Byron's story concerns this stage of growth, the third way he expands his story's significance is by shifting the emphasis toward the experience of the all-too-human character, the vulnerable, maturing youth, and away from the bigger-than-life heroic character, Darvell. This change signals a new stage in the history of romance narrative. Traditional romance concentrated on the careers of heroic figures such as Gawain or Parsival, who wandered across the face of the land in search of adventure. The experience of the knight's squire got little if any attention in these stories. In the work of Cervantes, who made the first radical change in the romance tradition, attention is certainly still focused on the heroic figure, Don Quixote. Nevertheless, the common-sense presence of Sancho Panza is essential to the story's success and to its theme. We can look at the narrative structure of Polidori's tale as hardly more than an extraordinarily lightweight, gothicized parody of the form of *Don Quixote*. Ruthven is its hero, who is in this case not dotty but truly ignoble. Aubrey is his plain-minded companion who must suffer the knocks and blows dealt out by fate to anyone who insists on attaching himself to such a personage. Thus Aubrey's conflict is also a parody. He is the devoted servant torn between loyalty to those he loves, and loyalty to his "knight" in whose service he has bound himself. Aubrey

chooses to sacrifice his sister, then, mainly because it is his part to do so. That Aubrey's decision makes the end of Polidori's tale ridiculous suggests not only that the honor of the chivalric norm had become inadequate for solving thematic problems romance narrative had begun to encounter at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but also that the very narrative structure of romance as far as it had yet evolved had also become bankrupt. Thus it begins to appear that Byron is at least partly responsible for reinstating romance, for making it a viable modern narrative form, by shifting the thematic emphasis from the "knight" to the "squire." Byron shifts the emphasis decisively in his fragment by giving the romance tale a point of view, the point of view of the "squire." That is, in Byron's story, and in Elegiac Romance in general, it is not just as if we were being asked to take more interest in Sancho Panza than in his master. Quite beyond this, it is also as if Sancho Panza himself were telling us the tale. This new step away from the norm of traditional romance works a change in the character of romance which would seem to be as radical as the one Cervantes wrought. For if Sancho Panza is going to tell the tale, he can tell it anytime, even after his master's death. So by making the "squire" the narrator of romance, Byron opened the way for romance to become elegiac. And in Elegiac Romance, although the fate of the narrator's hero will of course remain important, the story is likely to be dominated by the effect of the hero's life and death, especially the latter, upon the narrator.

The effect of the hero's death on the narrator is especially severe in Elegiac Romance because of the peculiar nature of the relationship between the two characters. In Byron's story, the blind force of the young man's eagerness to become Darvell's companion seems to suggest that something more complex than youthful innocence is at work. Like other narrators of Elegiac Romance —Ishmael, Marlow, Dowell, Nick, Jack Burden—Byron's narrator seems to have suffered in his youth from a passionate, we might almost say obsessive desire to identify sympathetically with the figure who has now become the hero of his tale. This deep need reaches its crisis in the limitless oath. The intensity of the need which the oath represents is emphasized by the fact that the youth's loss is not unprepared for. In Byron's tale, the youth's trust in Darvell began to weaken when he first discovered that his companionship was being exploited for Darvell's own obscure ends. Like Marlow, who had heard quite enough of Kurtz's vaunted "talk" before Kurtz finally died, Byron's youth had already, we might say, lost his trust in guides before he lost his trusted guide at the end of the story. Yet cowed by the overwhelming force of Darvell's will, the youth acted in spite of his growing knowledge and distrust, committing himself to his guide absolutely by swearing an oath to keep forever a secret about death. The oath represents in an especially clear way, therefore, the obsessive nature of the relationship between "squire" and "knight" in this romance. It suggests that, emotionally speaking, the older man holds all the cards right from the start. As he dies, he perpetuates this imbalance by crippling the youth's will still further. He binds the youth to the will of the dead, or, speaking more generally, to the will of the past. The youth, for his part too easily intimidated, capitulates.

The key to understanding these stories of Elegiac Romance appears to lie, therefore, in understanding the need of the younger man to identify himself with the older. The intimidating nature of the oath which binds him suggests that the obverse of this obsession is fear, or, if one prefers, anxiety, which is the emotional content of the grip of the past. Such then, one would have to suppose, is the content of Ishmael's identification with Ahab, Marlow's identification with Kurtz, Nick's with Gatsby, Zeitbloom's with Leverkühn, and so on. To be precise, it is evidently not always the narrator's fear of his hero which produces this effect. The apparent cause of anxiety differs in each story, and often the real cause is obscure.[7] But one thing is always clear. In every case once the youth is captured by the grip of the past, his hero abandons him. He is left alone, in a state Byron's narrator calls tearless with astonishment and grief. Something like this state of what we might call metaphysical abandonment is fundamen-

[7] This anxiety may be associated with the incestuous triangle which seems to lie hidden in most of these works. It is not hidden at all in Polidori's story. Byron's young man was also originally to have had a "sister" for the old man to seduce, but even though the story is unfinished, it looks as if the motif would have been suppressed. The triangle clearly exists in *All the King's Men* and *The Good Soldier*. It could be argued that it exists in a heavily disguised form in *Moby Dick*. This aspect of Elegiac Romance helps account for the fact that the central relationship in almost every instance is between male characters, and it may help to explain the obsessive nature of that relationship. Again Polidori is too overt: Ruthven as vampire attacks Aubrey in a low sod hut, and then turns up again as the seemingly benign companion to "nurse" him back to health.

Looking at Elegiac Romance from this point of view would lead us, I think, to define the basic story as imaginary compensation for subservience in the Oedipal triangle, and to see the narrator's identification with his hero (a father-surrogate) and the hero's subsequent death as a wish-fulfilling assumption of the hero's power and position. The act of telling the story would then become another retributive act against the hero, as well as a confessional act necessary to manage the resulting guilt. Calling it "confessional" understates the case, however, since the imaginative reconstruction of past experience entails a confrontation with the past which evidently functions to dissolve the associated anxiety. It is in understanding this aspect of story-telling in Elegiac Romance that Stanzas 5 and 6 of *Childe Harold* III are particularly helpful.

The only example of Elegiac Romance I know in which one of the two central figures (the narrator) is female is Fitzgerald's unfinished *The Last Tycoon*. Finished, this novel therefore would have offered an interesting variation on the triangle latent in Elegiac Romance. Fitzgerald's notes to the work tell us that Cecilia, the narrator, who "has been hopelessly in love with [Stahr, the hero] for a long time" "focuses our attention on the two principal characters—Milton Stahr and Thalia, the girl he loves." (Penguin edition, ed. Edmund Wilson, pp. 166-67.)

In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, both the narrator and the narrator's hero are female. This book is of course real autobiography, but it is formally so artificial that in narrative structure it borders on Elegiac Romance. Curiously enough, the narrator's hero (Gertrude) "dies" in the role of hero by turning out in the end to have been the narrator all along. Or perhaps we should say it is the ostensible narrator (Alice) who "dies," since we find out that as a real character in the story she never matters much. In this interpretation, the "knight" tells his (her) own story as if from the point of view of the "squire," which would mean that the book is not related to Elegiac Romance after all. In either case, however, the book is undeniably Cervantean. The perplexity it offers is matched by Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, in which the narrator may in fact be his brother (Knight), a writer, whose life story the narrator is investigating (or perhaps inventing) and "writing."

These examples reinforce the view that at base Elegiac Romance is really pseudo-autobiographical, not pseudo-biographical, and they clarify the basic principle of the type, that the narrator's hero, as the narrator presents him to us, is a projection of an aspect of the narrator's own personality.

tal to Elegiac Romance, appearing often as despair or aimlessness in the character of the narrator as he begins telling us his story. It is precisely the state of mind which telling the story may overcome. So just as the youth's loss was not entirely unprepared for, neither is it entirely without compensation. One final comparison of Byron's story with Polidori's suggests why telling the story can offer this compensation and overcome the state of diminished feeling the youth finds himself in after his companion's death. Polidori's youth remains to the end held in the grip of the past. The situation Byron sets up is more realistic. He recognizes that no one has the power to place conditions on the secrets of life and death. Thus the unlimited oath ironically provides the necessary compensation for loss. Because in Byron's story the youth must break his oath to tell his story, he may break the grip of the past by defying it. Furthermore, to break this oath means to relive the past imaginatively by telling the story—to employ the imagination freely and creatively, rather than be a slave to its improper governance. This free act of the imagination turns out, therefore, to be an act of rebellion. In telling the secret he has promised never to tell, the narrator breaks through the barrier of an arcane tradition in which the coherence of the self—one's identity—is defined and maintained by a mere tenuous and untenable ideal, "honor." The compensation for loss, then, is that the act which frees the narrator from the grip of the past and from its emotional content, anxiety, does so by establishing and affirming his trust in himself, the only "guide" he can possibly have, the only "knight" he can possibly serve, once the past is dead.

The act which reestablishes the narrator's integrity is the act of destroying the validity of old truth by creating a new truth. This is the central action of Elegiac Romance, in its simplest and most rudimentary form. It is the basis on which the authors of later versions of the type—Melville, Conrad, Proust, Ford, Fitzgerald, Warren—develop their own conception of the burden of the past and the means by which one may throw it off. Seeing these major works in light of this short, abortive attempt of Byron's, and discussing them as a group under the general heading of Elegiac Romance, has the advantage, therefore, of clearing a number of paths to future study. Other works of Byron written in 1816, for example, concern themselves with the theme of loss, and one of these, Canto III of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, appears to have, as I have argued elsewhere,[8] the basic narrative structure of Elegiac Romance. In that instance too the emphasis falls not on the ostensible hero, Harold, but on the narrator, the poet who opens and closes the poem by commenting on the act of writing he is at that moment engaged in. If Byron did influence the develpment of romance narrative in the way I have suggested, he would certainly have done so not through his unfinished "ghost story," but through the similar form of the widely known and widely read work, *Childe Harold*. Furthermore, this formal similarity of a pseudo-autobiographical work and a work generally conceded to be authentic autobiographical writing suggests the possibility of gaining new insight into the psychology of the relatively modern urge to biographize (at

[8] "The Synthetic Hero and the Narrative Structure of *Childe Harold* III," *Studies in English Literature* (Autumn, 1966), pp. 669-78.

length) and to autobiographize. One place to start such a study would seem to be Boswell's *Johnson*, certainly a work in which it is at least sometimes open to question who the real subject is intended to be—the declared subject, Johnson, or Boswell himself, the narrator.[9] The study of Elegiac Romance also suggests the possible fruitfulness of another look at authentic autobiography in light of the conventions of romance and possibly even of pastoral.

But most important, in my own view, the central action of Elegiac Romance as I have defined it here adds a dimension to our understanding of a significant number of major works of modern fiction. It suggests that these works embody a struggle to establish a means of self-definition in answer to what appear to be peculiarly modern problems of identity, in solving which traditional conceptions of honor and truth fail. This means of self-definition, a complex, nontraditional conception of "honor" and identity which is gained in defiance of the past, as suggested by Byron's fragment, seems directly analogous to the "inner truth" Marlow recognizes at the end of *Heart of Darkness* by lying.[10] It is analogous in some respects also to the idea of "breakthrough" which is debated and analyzed at such length in *Doctor Faustus*. But whatever form it may take, and however it may be obscured by the rich complexity of major works of Elegiac Romance, the resolution of the narrator's obsession always allows him in the end to escape the "closing vortex" of the past by gaining, as Ishmael does, the "vital centre" of his experience in telling his tale, so that he may burst the "black bubble at the axis of that slowly wheeling circle"[11] and with innocent mockery of death return to life, his very life-raft a coffin.

[9] F. R. Hart has suggested in conversation that Lockhart's *Scott* is another authentic biographical work which may be compared to Elegiac Romance.

[10] I have developed this line of thought in "The Lesser Nightmare: Marlow's Lie in *Heart of Darkness*," *Modern Language Quarterly*, XXV (September, 1964), 322-29.

[11] "Melville, p. 432.