friend Francis Hodgson: "I heard of a death the other day that shocked me more than any of the preceding, of one whom I once loved more than I ever loved a living thing, & one whom I believe loved me to the last, yet I had not a tear left for an event which five years ago would have bowed me to the dust; still it sits heavy on my heart & calls back what I wish to forget, in many a feverish dream." Presumably Byron had made a confidant of Hodgson and expected him to pick up the reference to 1806 when his feelings for Edleston were most intense. This semiconfession seems also meant to assure him that he hoped to avoid such involvements henceforth.

One of the fascinations of Byron's letters is the way in which he subtly shifts his tone—or premises—in addressing different correspondents. On the next day Byron wrote to R. C. Dallas of his grief for someone "very dear to me in happier times" but gives no hint as to the sex of the person or of anything undesirable about the affair. Clearly, he did not feel secure enough to take the pious clergyman into his confidence. More revealing is the apologetic note of his announcement of Edleston's death to Hobhouse. He was reluctant to reveal the news, as if he feared that Hobhouse would interpret his grief as a form of backsliding: "At present I am rather low, & dont know how to tell you the reason—you remember E. at Cambridge—he is dead—last May—his Sister sent me the account lately—now though I should never have seen him again, (& it is very proper that I should not) I have been more affected than I should care to own elsewhere." 

Two days after receiving Ann Edleston's letter, Byron wrote "To Thyrrha," the first of what was to become a series of elegies to his dead friend. Then, on October 14, he sent Dallas a new stanza to be placed near the opening of Canto II of Childe Harold:

27. October 13, 1811, BLJ, 2:114.
There, thou!—whose love and life together fled,
Have left me here to love and live in vain:—
Twined with my heart, and can I deem thee dead,
When busy Memory flashes o'er my brain?
Well—I will dream that we may meet again,
And woo the vision to my vacant breast;
If aught of young Remembrance then remain,
Be as it may Futurity's behest;
For me 'twere bliss enough to know thy spirit blest.  

But on this occasion, apparently regretting his earlier candor, Byron added a false statement to throw Dallas off the track: "I think it proper to state to you, that this stanza alludes to an event which has taken place since my arrival here, and not to the death of any male friend."  

How deep Byron's turmoil was at the time and how chary he felt about giving direct and candid expression to his feelings can be deduced from another literary effort, his "Epistle to a Friend, in Answer to Some Lines Exhorting the Author to be Cheerful, and to 'Banish Care.'" This poem was enclosed in a letter to Hodgson written the same day Byron wrote "To Thyrza." The first sixteen lines of this curious effort express his grief that "all I loved is changed or gone" and are clearly inspired in part by Edlestone's death; the next twenty speak of an earlier frustration, his disappointment at losing Mary Chaworth to John Musters; the strange conclusion envisions a time when Britain will be engulfed in revolutionary chaos and Byron will play a bloody part, "rank'd in some recording page / With the worst anarchs of the Age."  

Here Byron looks forward glancingly to the desperado mood of The Corsair and Lara.

On October 31, Byron sent Dallas more stanzas on Edlestone for inclusion in Childe Harold, along with a cryptic note designed to discourage further inquiry or speculation:

28. *BLJ*, 2:116. This became stanza 9 of Canto II.
“They refer to the death of one to whose name you are a stranger, and, consequently, cannot be interested. I mean them to complete the present volume. They relate to the same person I have mentioned in canto 2d, and at the conclusion of the poem.” In sending these lines for insertion as stanzas 95 and 96 Byron forgot he had earlier stated that his beloved had died after his return to England and now depicted “her” (for he intended the reader to assume he was speaking of a woman) as failing to live “to welcome here thy wanderer home.” All this must have made his earlier disavowal look gratuitous and self-contradictory. The new lines ran:

Thou too art gone, thou lov’d and lovely one!
Whom youth and youth’s affections bound to me;
Who did for me what none beside have done,
Nor shrank from one albeit unworthy thee.
What is my being? thou hast ceas’d to be!
Nor staid to welcome here thy wanderer home,
Who mourns o’er hours which we no more shall see—
Would they had never been, or were to come!
Would he had ne’er return’d to find fresh cause to roam!

Oh! ever loving, lovely, and belov’d!
How selfish Sorrow ponders on the past,
And clings to thoughts now better far remov’d!
But Time shall tear thy shadow from me last.
All thou couldst have of mine, stern Death! thou hast;
The parent, friend, and now the more than friend:
Ne’er yet for one thine arrows flew so fast,
And grief with grief continuing still to blend,
Hath snatch’d the little joy that life had yet to lend.32

To the modern ear these lines sound vapid and conventional, but they exactly suited popular taste during the Regency period.

Byron was now to write—in October 1811 and over the

31. BLJ, 2:127.
32. CPW, 2:75.
next five months—a series of seven elegies for the dead boy.33 “To Thyrza,” the first, longest, and most elaborate of these memorials, was the most specific about the intimate side of the love affair:

Ere call’d but for a time away,
Affection’s mingling tears were ours . . .
Ours too the glance none saw beside;
The smile none else might understand;
The whisper’d thought of hearts allied,
The pressure of the thrilling hand.34

Byron’s readers, of course, understood him to be writing about a woman since he used a feminine title and feminine pronouns throughout the poem.

 Barely ten days after he had written “To Thyrza,” Byron apologized a second time for his feelings for Edlestone. From Cambridge, where he was reveling with the irrepressible Scrope Davies at King’s College, Byron confessed to Hobhouse: “The event I mentioned in my last has had an effect on me, I am ashamed to think of, but there is no arguing on these points. I could have better spared a better being.” This reference to Falstaff seems puzzling since all the Thyrza poems idealize Edlestone. Perhaps this is simply Byron’s way of agreeing with Hobhouse that some cloud of public obloquy hung over his lover and of assuring him that he realized the wisdom of not identifying

33. These include “To Thyrza,” “Away, away, ye notes of woe!” (written shortly before December 8, 1811), and “One struggle more, and I am free” (written, McGann conjectures, in December 1811 or January 1812), all published at the end of the first edition of Childe Harold; and “And thou are dead, as young and fair” (February 1812), “If sometimes in the haunts of men” (March 14, 1812), and “On a Cornelian Heart Which Was Broken” (March 16, 1812), which were added to the second edition. McGann adds a newly discovered Latin elegy (first published in 1974) mourning Edlestone. The manuscript of this poem has Edlestone’s name written three times at the top. It begins “Te, tu, care puert!” (“Thee, beloved boy”). McGann prints the text and a translation (CPW, 1:354, 499). This is the only poem in the series that uses the masculine gender.

34. CPW, 1:347.
himself with him. He goes on to confess: "Wherever I turn, particularly in this place, the idea goes with me. I say all this at the risk of incurring your contempt, but you cannot despise me more than I do myself." How much of this guilt was real, one wonders, and how much assumed to placate a man who looked at all sentimental involvements with high disdain? Byron himself was still sentimental enough to write to Elizabeth Pigot's mother a week later asking for the return of Edleston's cornelian, which Byron had entrusted to Elizabeth when he found she was sympathetic to his love.

Another letter to Hobhouse a few days later strikes a different note, this time unmistakably paranoid. He describes a convivial after-dinner party with Hodgson and their common friend, the garrulous James Wedderburn Webster:

He [Webster] made one cursed speech which put me into a fever, about ἄνα παιδί [a boy] & made Hodgson nearly sink into the earth, who unluckily recollected our telling him the "two hundred a year" proffer pro ἑαυτῷ [for a "hyacinth"].

—He then to mend matters entered into a long defence of his brother in law [George Annesley, Lord Valentia], without any occasion as nobody had mentioned his name, persisted in spite of all endeavours to make him change ye. subject, & concluded by saying that Ld. Courtney was "called Cousin by the King of Prussia!!" Now all this is verbatim conversation by Bold Webster. You will think me Banksizing but it is a fact Per Dio!36

The context of this letter remains, like so much else touching on Byron's involvement with homosexuality, somewhat mysterious. Webster was a crony of Byron's with a reputation as a womanizer and a fool, whose wife Byron was later to flirt with. But what cause had Hodgson, in particular, to be embarrassed by a reference to a boy? Apparently

35. October 22, 1811, BLJ, 2:1117.
36. November 2, 1811, BLJ, 2:1224.
Hobhouse and Byron had told him about some boy who was for sale. Could this have been a price that Lusieri set on Nicolo, similar to what Madame Macri had asked for Theresa? Or had the offer been made in England? We have no clue. But Webster's indiscretion must have made Byron nervous about his own candid letters from Athens. "Pray," he asks Hobhouse, "what are become of all my Greek epistles?" He ended with another reference to his recent visit to Cambridge, which, he confessed "made me 'l'emanoholy' for many reasons, & some d---d bad ones." 37

Byron's anxieties about his continuing interest in boys could only have been exacerbated by fuller knowledge of the recent Courtenay scandal, of which Matthews had earlier apprised him. William Courtenay had never lived down the notoriety of his affair with Beckford, despite his being only sixteen at the time of the famous scandal. This and his marked effeminacy made him a dubious figure in British society, accepted in some circles, shunned in others. Late in 1810, however, he was driven into exile. A contemporary diarist, Joseph Farington, gives a detailed picture of the machinations that brought about his flight:

Mr. Morton of Exeter, an excellent magistrate, was alone the person who by His determined conduct brought the proceedings against Lord Courtney [sic] to a point which obliged Him to secure His safety by leaving the Kingdom. Mr. Morton had solicited other magistrates to concur with Him in His exertion for this purpose but they on one pretence or another declined it. He took the Depositions against His Lordship, one of them was to a fact,—the other to an attempt,—Lord Courtney had affected to disregard any proceedings against Him, saying that should He be accused before the Lords they most of them He said were like Himself [and] would not decide against Him. Thus shameless was He in His mind; but when He was informed that the Officers of Justice were ordered to pursue Him, He lost all resolution,—wept like a child, and was willingly taken on board a vessel, the first that could be found, an American Ship, and passed there under a feigned name.

37. Ibid.; "l'emanoholy" is not given in the Oxford English Dictionary. It appears to be a coinage from "l'eman," a lover.
After he had been on board sometime he asked whether he might not be called by his own name, but was told it would be dangerous on acct. of the sailors whose prejudice against [him] might have bad effects."

When Byron later contemplated, in bitterness of heart, the necessity of his own self-exile, he must have thought of Courtenay's flight as an unhappy precedent, though he himself faced only ostracism and not a trial by the House of Lords. Courtenay, on reflection, must have recalled that that body, after all, had voted to behead Lord Castlereagh. No doubt this jury system, instituted at first to obviate class bias, worked to reinforce the harsh English system of ostracism. No thoughtful lord relished the prospect of trying a fellow peer on a criminal charge, where he would be forced to choose between acquittal (which might lead to popular criticism) and voting to hang a friend or acquaintance. Far better to force the man to leave the country.

Unlike other minorities, who inevitably formed social groups, homosexuals in Byron's age were too intimidated to risk associating freely and openly with each other. In this respect their position was like that of blacks or Jews who have "passed" as members of the dominant culture. Hobhouse was acutely anxious that Byron should not associate with any man who was suspect. He warned him that Webster's brother-in-law was indeed a man to avoid. Byron, however, thought his anxiety excessive: "I see nothing very 'cativo'" in Lord Valeria, he wrote, "as every body speaks to him, one can't very well avoid it." When Hobhouse was intolerant toward other homosexuals (an all too common minority failing), Byron was not above adopting a supercilious tone to deflate him: "Sir W. [William Ingilby] with whom you are so wrothfully displeased, is going to Edinbug—bough. I tell you, he is not what you take him for, but is going to be married, reformed, and all that." Byron then twitted Hobhouse about an indiscretion of

his own: “I give you joy of your dinner with the Bishop of Ferns. Was not ‘Atherton’ a Bishop? What says the Dean? —What a proper Scoundrel that same Serving man must have been. I thought better of the Irish.” As we have noted, John Atherton, Bishop of Waterford, had been hanged in Dublin in 1640 after being convicted of sodomy with his tithe collector. The ecclesiastic whom Hobhouse was to meet was, as chance would have it, another Irish bishop, Percy Jocelyn, of Ferns and Leighlin. In 1810, when his brother’s coachman had threatened to accuse him of a solicitation to sodomy, Jocelyn had the man arrested. False accusations of sodomy, or the “attempt,” were punished severely in Great Britain, and the man was subsequently whipped through the streets and imprisoned. Twelve years later, Jocelyn, who had since been transferred to the see of Clogher, was to figure in another homosexual episode of unprecedented notoriety. The cautious Hobhouse had not chosen well.

Byron’s temperament was nothing if not kaleidoscopic. While he wrote cynical banter to Hobhouse, he was quite capable of confessing sentimental feelings to other correspondents, and even of engaging in flirtations with younger men. The day after he had expressed concern about his letters from Greece, he had rallied Hobhouse for an unwontedly sentimental moment of his own. Hobhouse had recommended John Claridge, a common schoolfriend, to Byron on the basis of Claridge’s “attachment” to him, prompting Byron to reply:

Claridge my dearest friend (for he cost me much more than fifteen shillings) is indeed dull, as to his “attachment,” will attachment keep one awake? or say pleasant things? or even soar beyond an excusable Oxonian pun? and at our time of life, to talk of “attachment!” when one has left School, aye and College too. Sredeath one would think you were like Euripides who admired the Autumn of Agatha. 36

The love of Euripides for his fellow dramatist Agathon had been proverbial in ancient Greece where love between men had meant ordinarily the love of an adult male for a beardless adolescent. 41

While Byron was teasing one correspondent, he was at the same time showing an emotional side to another. To the more sympathetic Hodgson he sent a new Thyrza lyric inspired by hearing a song he associated with Edleston:

Away, away, ye notes of woe!
Be silent thou once soothing strain,
Or I must flee from hence, for, oh!
I dare not trust those sounds again.
To me they speak of brighter days:
But hush the chords, for now, alas!
I must not think, I may not gaze
On what I am, on what I was.

The voice that made those sounds more sweet
Is hush'd, and all their charms are fled;
And now their softest notes repeat
A dirge, an anthem o'er the dead!
Yes, Thyrza! yes, they breathe of thee,
Beloved dust! since dust thou art;
And all that once was harmony
Is worse than discord to my heart! 42

Did Hodgson guess who Thyrza was? Byron dropped a hint by telling him in the same letter that “the organ at Cambridge is a sad remembrancer.” Then, in a sentence that would have made Hobhouse smile and perhaps raised some alarm if he could have read it, he confessed: “Master William Harness and I have recommenced a most fiery correspondence; I like him as Euripides liked Agatho, or Darby admired Joan, as much for the past as the present.” 43 William Harness, the object of Byron’s new—or rather, resuscitated—attention was the lame Harrow boy whom he

43. CPW, 1:349–50.
44. December 8, 1811, BLJ, 2:140.
had befriended when Harness was eleven and Byron fourteen. Since Byron's letters to him are the only surviving examples of what may be called his sentimental correspondence with schoolboy friends, it may be interesting to compare them with his usual man-of-the-world epistolatory style.

The first set of letters, written in 1808, before Byron had gone to Greece, and two months after Byron had left Cambridge, begin formally. Obviously, Byron is sounding Harness out to see if any of his old feelings have survived. He must have responded encouragingly since Byron in his next letter expresses his regret that time and a dissipated life have led him to neglect "an Intimacy, which Affection urged me to continue." In what reads like a muted love letter, he tells Harness that his first poems were addressed to him, though Harness never saw them. Then before he sailed for Greece, Byron asked for a miniature to take abroad since "I am collecting the pictures of my most intimate Schoolfellows." Later, as we have seen, Lady Caroline Lamb was to connect these miniatures with boys she claimed Byron had admitted having sexual relations with, though it seems unlikely that the sedate Harness was one of them.

Byron's use of the word "fiery" to describe the correspondence when it was resumed after his return in 1811 seems oddly self-conscious. More often than not the letters are marked by a touching tone of solicitude. Sometimes they are bantering and only lightly colored by feeling: "And now don't give way to your imaginations & the balancing of 'words' & 'looks' (to use your own expression). I can't say much for either of mine, but if ever they seem cold to you believe them at variance with my heart, which is as much yours as it was in the fourth form." Occasion-

44. February 16, 1808, BLJ, 1:156. Byron had first written on February 11.
45. March 6, 1808, BLJ, 1:197.
46. December 6, 1811, BLJ, 2:137.
ally he calls Harness “Child” or “mio Carissimo” or addresses him as “Dearest William.” Then in mid-December he makes a confession, which must have puzzled the boy. Apologizing for some harshness in an earlier letter Byron told Harness:

The latter part of my life has been a perpetual struggle against affections which embittered the earlier portion, & though I flatter myself I have in great measure conquered them, yet there are moments (and this was one) when I am as foolish as formerly.—I have never said so much before, nor had I said this now if I did not suspect myself of having been rather savage in my letter, & wish to inform you of the cause."

What were the “affections which embittered the earlier portion” of Byron’s life? Were these the same bitter influences he told his mother were the results of “insular narrowness”? Perhaps, but it is just as likely he had in mind his rejection by Mary Chaworth, which, as we have seen, still rankled.

How easily homo- and heterosexual feelings could co-exist in Byron is demonstrated by his new liaison with a young Welsh servant named Susan Vaughan. She figures frequently in Byron’s letters to Hobhouse during these months, no doubt as a reassurance to that strict mentor. But though Byron seems to have been genuinely involved emotionally with Susan Vaughan, he broke with her after a few weeks on discovering she was no more capable of monogamy than he was. Her infidelity shook his self-esteem and threw him into a self-pitying mood. “I do not blame her,” he told Hodgson, “but my own vanity in fancying such a thing as I could ever be beloved.” 47 It was his unwavering certainty that Edelstone had indeed loved him that had given that relation such importance in his eyes. By the middle of February he was writing Hodgson in a misogynist vein: he begs him “never to mention a woman again in any letter to me, or even allude to the existence of

the sex... In the spring of 1813 I shall leave England for ever.... I believe the only human being, that ever loved me in truth and entirely, was of, or belonging to, Cambridge, and, in that, no change can now take place." Obvously, the effect of the Vaughan affair was to throw him back once more on his memories of Edleston. In this same month he wrote what is probably the best of the Thyrza lyrics, "And thou art dead, as young and fair":

The love where Death has set his seal,
Nor age can chill, nor rival steal,
Nor falsehood disavow:
And, what were worse, thou canst not see
Or wrong, or change, or fault in me.
The better days of life were ours;
The worse can but be mine:
The sun that cheers, the storm that lowers,
Shall never more be thine.
The silence of that dreamless sleep
I envy now too much to weep;
Nor need I to repine
That all those charms have pass'd away:
I might have watch'd through long decay.
The flower in ripen'd bloom unmatch'd
Must fall the earliest prey,
Though by no hand untimely snatch'd,
The leaves must drop away:
And yet it were a greater grief
To watch it withering, leaf by leaf,
Than see it pluck'd to-day;
Since earthly eye but ill can bear
To trace the change to soul from fair.
I know not if I could have borne
To see thy beauties fade;
The night that follow'd such a morn
Had worn a deeper shade:
Thy day without a cloud hath past,
And thou wert lovely to the last;

49. February 16, 1812, BL, 2:163–64.
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Extinguish'd, not dEcay'd;
As stars that shoot along the sky
Shine brightest as they fall from high."

The pederast's love is often evanescent, like the particular kind of youthful beauty that inspires it. But this hard condition, which would have doomed the lover, inspired the poet. In these lines the facile emotionalism of the other elegies is reined in, and Byron's verse achieves precision and an almost Caroline sweetness. A month later he completed the two final elegies—"If sometimes in the haunts of men" and "On a Cornelian Heart Which Was Broken," the last in reference to Edleston's emblematic gift.

Taken as a whole, the half-dozen Thyrza lyrics contain more sentimentality than the twentieth century relishes, though they made a powerful appeal to Byron's contemporaries. Occasionally they rise to the level of accomplished verse. The cadences of the second stanza of "Away, Away, Ye Notes of Woe" sank deep into the sensibility of the adolescent Tennyson, who read them about a decade after they appeared: they are echoed unmistakably in In Memoriam. But all too often the poems hover on the edge of that funeral bathos Mark Twain made fun of in Huckleberry Finn. What interests us most today is not the quality of the verse but rather what the nineteenth century would have been most uneasy about, namely, the relation they celebrate. For the question inevitably arises: why did Byron not address his lines to Edleston openly, as poems inspired by the death of a male friend? After all, the most famous elegies in English have all been written by men about men: "Lycidas," "Adonais," "Thyrsis," In Memoriam. What prevented Byron from writing about John Edleston as Milton had written about Edward King, and as Shelley and Arnold and Tennyson were to write about Keats and Arthur Clough and Arthur Henry Hallam? Byron's letters,

50. CPW, 3: 5-6.
so candid on so many subjects, throw no light on his decision to pretend he was mourning a woman.

Several considerations come to mind. The classical English elegiac tradition, though distinguished on its literary side, had been markedly impersonal, as Samuel Johnson complained of Milton. Most often poets wrote of men who were not close to them, or if they were close, showed marked reserve in their expression of feeling. For the homosexual poet, the form has always posed difficulties. Thomas Gray’s most famous elegy is wholly generalized; the sonnet on Richard West, whom Gray indeed felt deeply about, may suffer from the stiltedness Wordsworth thought damned it just because Gray felt he had to conventionalize his feelings. Christopher Isherwood has explored the problem of mourning a male lover in his novel *A Single Man*; he reveals how awkwardly our society accommodates itself to such bereavements by the restraints it imposes. Above all, Byron’s deepest need on this occasion was to give vent to his emotions freely and fully.

Edleston’s clouded reputation would in itself have made it difficult for Byron to address him directly in any dedication. He could of course have indicated he was writing about a man without identifying him. But no doubt he felt it would be easier to be evasive about a woman. Delicacy has traditionally sanctioned reticence about a poet’s inamoratas: mysterious Lesbias, Stellas, Lucy, and Marguerites have abounded in literary history.

The most cogent comparison is, of course, with Tennyson, who also used the elegiac form to memorialize a deeply felt Cambridge friendship. Unlike Milton, Shelley, and Arnold, he writes personally and exposes a devastating grief. But, though the poem quickly became the quintessential testament of the Victorian age, Tennyson was at first blamed for overstepping the limits of propriety. An anonymous review in the *Times*, now presumed to be by Manley Hopkins, father of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, scolded him for striking what the critic chose to
call a note of "amatory tenderness." Hopkins stressed the un-Englishness of such sentiments, which he deplored as "unpleasantly familiar" in classical and Oriental poetry.

Tennyson, of course, had been acutely aware of the controversy over Shakespeare's sonnets. This dispute had first erupted in 1780 when George Steevens, in editing the poems, decried the notorious Sonnet 20, in which Shakespeare calls his beautiful young friend "the master-mistress of my passion." "It is impossible," Steevens had complained, "to read this fulsome panegyric, addressed to a male object, without an equal mixture of disgust and indignation." 51 Edmond Malone, in reply, argued that expressions of friendship were warmer in Elizabethan times. But Steevens's opening shot began a battle that has continued warmly, not just through Byron's age, but down to ours. The situation was made especially difficult for Tennyson since Henry Hallam, the father of his dead friend and a distinguished literary historian in his own right, had expressed the wish, in his history of Renaissance literature, that "Shakespeare had never written" his sonnets and had deplored their vogue "among young men of poetical tempers." 52 But Tennyson, deferential to the elder Hallam's prejudices in other matters, threw down the gauntlet when he deliberately invoked the suspect poems in section 61 of his elegy:

I loved thee, Spirit, and love, nor can
The soul of Shakspeare love thee more.

The result of this emotional openness was that Tennyson received "shameful letters of abuse." 53 He was compared

by the Times reviewer with Shakespeare, whose “mysterious sonnets present the startling peculiarity of transferring every epithet of womanly endearment to a masculine friend,—his master-mistress, as he calls him by a compound epithet, harsh as it is disagreeable.”

Hopkins (if he was the critic) devoted several paragraphs of his review of In Memoriam to driving home this point:

We should never expect to hear a young lawyer calling a member of the same inn his “rose” [Hallam was studying for the bar at the time of his death], except in the Middle Temple of Isphahan, with Hafiz for a laureate. . . . Many of these poems seem to be contrived . . . “a double debt to pay,” and might be addressed with perfect propriety, and every assurance of a favourable reception, to [a] young lady[?], with melting blue eyes and a passion for novels. . . . The taste is displeased when every expression of fondness is sighed out, and the only figure within our view is Amaryllis of the Chancery Bar.

“Amatory tenderness” for another male was, of course, exactly the emotion Byron wished to express. He was quite clear in his mind that what he experienced with John Edleston was love and not mere friendship. Writing of his Cambridge experiences thirteen years later in his Ravenna journal, he distinguished the two most intense relationships of his college days quite pointedly as, first, “romantic” friendship (i.e., with Edward Noel Long) and, second, a “violent, though pure, love and passion.” For Byron this was one of the inescapable facts of his youth, but he could not share it with the British public. Tennyson celebrated Hallam’s intellectual and literary interests and dramatized his religious struggles. In Memoriam reveals nothing physical in their relation, no clandestine kisses or hand-holdings. But what Byron remembered was Edleston’s beauty, his delicacy and tenderness, and the emotional experience we call being “in love.” Byron might have written about him as

Tennyson wrote of Hallam if he had been willing to repre-
sent *eros* as *philia*. But rather than misrepresent or disguise
his feelings, he chose to disguise their object, to falsify
Edleston's gender rather than to falsify the emotion.

What had the experience meant to him that he felt com-
pelled in 1811 and 1812 to write of it at such length? We
catch some sense of this in the fluctuations of his feelings
in the Vaughan affair and the distrust of women it revived.
His mother had had his welfare much at heart and was
sozely tried when he seemed to be repeating his father's
ruinous extravagances. But she was also an insensitive and
hot-tempered woman who had berated him as a "lame
brat." Later, Mary Chaworth had dismissed him from con-
sideration as "that lame boy." It was surely no coincidence
that Byron wrote the "Epistle to a Friend" with its bitter
recollections of Mary Chaworth on the same day that he
wrote "To Thyrza," for the loss of Edleston reopened the
old wound. The unique significance of Edleston's love
was the reassurance it gave him. The anxiety that caused
Edleston to burst into tears when he feared Byron would
reject his gift had revealed to the seventeen-year-old that
someone did indeed love him disinterestedly. When he
held the stricken boy in his arms and broke down himself,
he felt whole at last: Euryalus had rescued Nisus.

Naturally enough, the mystery in which Byron wrapped
the Thyrza poems piqued the curiosity of his friends and
contemporary commentators. The first readers of *Childe
Harold*, who found the first three Thyrza poems at the end
of the volume, naturally assumed that they referred to
some real person whom Byron had loved and lost through
death. Interest in the subject ran high during his lifetime
and, indeed, throughout his century. With Byron's own
death there had inevitably been some hope of revelations.
Thomas Moore was acutely aware of this fact. As in all the
episodes in Byron's career where a homosexual element is
involved, it is instructive to look at his *Life*. He had come to
know Byron just when the latter was writing the Thyrza
poems, and the vulgarly curious hoped that this intimacy would enable him to lift the veil or at least furnish some cogent hints. During the writing of the biography Moore must have been queried on the point ad nauseam. But his elaborate paragraph on the poems is a tour de force designed not to clarify the mystery but to deny there was one. With magisterial suavity he labored to convert Thyrza into a myth. After quoting the lines to Mary Chaworth from the “Epistle” to Hodgson, Moore remarked:

It was about the time when he was thus bitterly feeling, and expressing, the blight which his heart had suffered from a real object of affection, that his poems on the death of an imaginary one, “Thyrza,” were written;—nor is it any wonder, when we consider the peculiar circumstances under which those beautiful effusions flowed from his fancy, that of all his strains of pathos, they should be the most touching and most pure. They were, indeed, the essence, the abstract spirit, as it were, of many griefs;—a confluence of sad thoughts from many sources of sorrow, refined and warmed in their passage through his fancy, and forming thus one deep reservoir of mournful feeling. In retracing the happy hours he had known with the friends now lost, all the ardent tenderness of his youth came back upon him. His school-sports with the favourites of his boyhood, Wingfield and Tattersall,—his summer days with Long, and those evenings of music and romance which he had dreamed away in the society of his adopted brother, Eddleston [sic].—all these recollections of the young and dead now came to mingle themselves in his mind with the image of her, who, though living, was, for him, as much lost as they, and diffused that general feeling of sadness and forlornness through his soul, which found a vent in these poems. No friendship, however warm, could have inspired sorrow so passionate; as no love, however pure, could have kept passion so chastened. It was the blending of the two affections, in his memory and his imagination, that thus gave birth to an ideal object combining the best features of both, and drew from him these saddest and tenderest of love-poems, in which we find all the depth and intensity of real feeling touched over with such a light as no reality ever wore.”

55. Ljl, i:302–03.
It is amusing to imagine what Byron, in a ribald mood, might have said about this torrent of eloquence. Was Moore being uncommonly ingenious or uncommonly disingenuous? Did he believe what he wrote, or was he simply trying to throw readers off the track? Moore argues that the poems are too passionate to be addressed to a male and too chaste to be addressed to a woman. The parallel between Moore and those critics of Shakespeare who have interpreted the sonnets as mere literary exercises is striking and demonstrates how difficult it has been for Anglo-Saxons (or Celts) to accept the idea that a love at once passionate and ideal can exist between men. Moore sees a relation between the Thyrza poems and the unhappy Chaworth affair, but he uses the latter to obfuscate the issue. In fact, obfuscation seems to have been Moore's real aim. One can sympathize with his dilemma. He could not be candid without incriminating his friend and raising a furor among Byron's friends and defenders. On the other hand, he could not be silent on an issue where there was so much pointed interest. Moore moved freely in English high society and was subject to constant interrogation about Byron's amours. He needed to say something on the matter, whether or not people believed him was a secondary concern. There is evidence that perceptive readers didn't. He had quoted Byron's October 11 letter to Dallas about a new "death," and commentators immediately seized the point that this suggested that Thyrza was a real person. One commentator quoted Dallas's already published letter of condolence, in which the latter clearly indicated that he understood the Thyrza stanzas to refer to a real loss.\footnote{Dallas had replied to Byron's letter of October 11 ("I have again been shocked by a death and have lost one very dear to me in happier times") on October 17, "How truly do I wish that the being to whom that verse now belongs had lived and lived you!" (R. C. Dallas, Correspondence of Lord Byron with a Friend [Paris: Gallignani, 1829], 2:150–51).}

With the publication of \textit{Childe Harold}, Byron, as he put it, awoke to find himself famous. It was, however, not just
as an adventurous traveler, pessimistic philosopher, or jaded roué that he impinged on the popular imagination. It was also as Thyrza’s lover. The Edinburgh Review, where Henry Brougham had earlier attacked Hours of Idleness, singled out the Thyrza lyrics for special praise. Calling them “a kind of elegies in honour of the same lady whose loss is deplored in the concluding stanzas of the Pilgrimage,” the reviewer found in them “great beauty and feeling.”\(^{57}\) The evangelical British Review called them “replete with tenderness and grace.”\(^{58}\) Even the Satirist, previously Byron’s unrelenting foe, melted and selected the lines “Ours too the glance none saw beside” as the most exquisite in the volume.\(^{59}\)

In 1812, Byron’s reflections on religion scandalized many, and his philhellenism was still controversial. Only as a tender lover who had lost the woman he cherished did he make a nearly universal appeal. One critic, who took exception to his attack on female venality in the opening stanzas (“Mammon wins his way where Seraphs might despair”), issued an oddly prescient warning: “Fie, my Lord! the lyre of Orpheus was divinely strung; your own boasts equal harmony, but, oh! remember, and beware that Poet’s fate!”\(^{60}\) (Orpheus was killed by the Bacchantes when he forsook women and turned to the love of boys after he had lost Eurydice for a second time.) But for most female readers “To Thyrza” canceled the misogyny of the poem’s opening and revealed a man who needed only another Thyrza to redeem him.

Byron had originally planned to place near the opening

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of Childe Harold the lines on Beckford dramatizing how soci-

cial wrath threatened the exposed pederast:

Gainst Nature's voice seduced to deed accurst.

Instead, he published at the end of the volume the love
poems to John Edleston. We may imagine the irony with
which he read the praise heaped on them as the most symp-
pathetic revelation of his art. The paradox reveals how
deep the need was in his personality to assert his iden-
tity as a bisexual—he included also "To Florence" and
other poems inspired by his fleeting passion for Constance
Spencer Smith. It was entirely characteristic of Byron to
wear his heart on his sleeve: he was the most confessional
of poets. But the gesture also reveals his desperado side,
his fatal determination to risk everything, in this case by
making himself vulnerable to one of England's most deeply
held aversions. His dishonest honesty proved in fact to be
more daring than he intended. At the time he did not
mean to linger in England, nor did he anticipate that he
would become at once the center of national, European,
even worldwide attention. But this notoriety made his posi-
tion, in effect, more dangerous once he had published his
semiconfession. The stage was set for misunderstanding
and disaster: it appeared in the guise of a romantic young
aristocrat, one of whose whims was to pursue Byron in the
costume of her pageboy attendants.
Fame and Exile

With the publication of *Childe Harold*, Byron, until then known only as the author of a minor satire, became the center of what his contemporaries called the "Byronomania." No poet before or since has ever caught the imagination of so many readers in so many lands. No doubt his aristocratic status and his romantic looks helped his success, as well as his exotic subjects—Spain, Albania, and Greece. What is surprising is that the admixture of rakish cynicism and self-dramatizing guilt does not seem to have weakened the effect. But a taste for hero-villains was part of the literary fashion of the day, and in this respect, too, Byron was a storybook hero come alive. Then, finally, the Thyrza lyrics humanized him.

How potently the Thyrza myth worked can be seen in the case of Lady Falkland. This young widow, whom Byron had helped financially before he left for Greece but did not know personally, wrote from Derby: "Surely I cannot be mistaken! Byron, my adored Byron, come to me... Tell me, my Byron, if those mournful, tender effusions of your heart to that Thyrza... were not intended for myself?" Not surprisingly, Byron declined to answer her letters. But others of her class were more of a temptation to a young man whose intimate experiences with women in England had previously been confined to servants and prostitutes. The chief of these, drawn to him by his new fame, was Lady Caroline Lamb, who was to be,