

EASTERN TALES

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The French poet Charles Baudelaire published *Les Fleurs du mal* ('The Flowers of Evil') in 1857. Within a month of publication, the French government had initiated action against poet and publisher, on the grounds of offences against public morality. One of the poems in the collection is 'Don Juan aux enfers' ('Don Juan in Hell'). It's an interesting poem, first written in 1846, when it had the significant title 'The Unrepentant'. It shows us Don Juan as he crosses the River Acheron into Hades. Everything around him is noise and movement. The legions of women he has betrayed bellow around him, each one an invitation, at this final moment, to a recognition of a life spent in the horror of self-indulgence. But Don Juan is, uniquely motionless, 'le calme héros', the 'calm hero', who simply watches the ever lengthening wake of the boat as it carries him into oblivion.

The challenge of the Baudelaire poem is obvious. On the surface, at least, the Don Juan myth requires closure in the form of a recognition, on the part of Don Juan, of the fact that he has done wrong, and, for the audience, the satisfaction that doing wrong has consequences, if not in this world, then at least in the next. The underlying assumption is that an audience cannot simply watch the unfolding of a life where the protagonist shows so little awareness of the social and emotional impact of what he does: there needs to be comment, self-awareness, resolution. In Tirso de Molina's play, which first introduces the character of Don Juan to the European stage, the protagonist says at the end: 'Let me send for someone who can confess and absolve me'. In Baudelaire's version, there is no self-recognition, simply an account, a description, unmediated. The audience of the poem is left to get on with it, to make of it what they will.

For those of you who know Byron's *The Giaour*, this will sound already quite familiar. What I want to do here is to look at the early reception of the poem, at the reviews which came out immediately in the wake of publication in 1813. My aim is to show how genuinely problematic the poem appeared to the overwhelming majority of the early reviewers; to attempt to understand why

this was so; and, in the course of examining the contemporary evidence, to see how the unmediated story becomes the focus of anxiety, a challenge at once broadly cultural and highly specific.

The plot of the *Giaour* I'm sure you all know. Leila is a beautiful slave in the harem of the Turkish Muslim Hassan. Hassan is referred to as an 'emir' at line 357, a title of honour given to the descendants of the prophet Muhammad. Leila is seduced by a young Venetian, who is the Giaour of the title. The term goes back to a Persian word, borrowed into Turkish with the pronunciation [djiaour], and first attested in French in 1542, in English in 1589. It strictly indicates someone who is non-Muslim, especially a Christian, but it easily drifts into a term of reproach or scorn (or worse). In Turkish, the word *gâvurluk* means the 'quality of being a non-Muslim', but also 'Christian fanaticism' or 'cruelty'. Byron first uses the word in *CHP* 2.729. In his poetry, he rhymes it with 'tower', 'lower', 'power', 'bower' and 'hour', so there is no doubt how he pronounced it. In Greek, the word is *gkiaouris*. At the time of the ethnic cleansing that followed the close of the Greco-Turkish War of 1919 to 1922, 500,000 Muslims who were living in Greece at the time were expelled to Turkey: these refugees were frequently referred to by the inhabitants of Turkey as *giaours*, because they spoke Greek. Incidentally, Orthodox Christians expelled from Turkey were often referred to in Athens as *viaourtovaftismenous*, or 'those baptized in yoghurt'.

To return to Byron. Hassan has Leila drowned at sea for her sexual infidelity. The Giaour then takes his revenge, kills Hassan, and then, overcome with a wild mix of emotions, seeks out a monastery in which to end his days.

The early reviewers of the *Giaour*, almost without exception, recognised that it was an important poem, that it had moments of great beauty and power. Occasionally, a reviewer draws attention to what can be carelessness in Byron's writing style. So *The British Review* in October 1813 points to lines 667/670 of the *Giaour* which describe the death of Hassan:

His breast with wounds unnumber'd riven,

His back to earth, his face to heaven,

Fall'n Hassan lies—his unclos'd eye

Yet lowering on his enemy...

And, indeed, it is true that, having said his back is to the earth, the writer 'need scarcely have informed us' that his face was towards heaven. It quite naturally follows. More importantly, the same reviewer notes the use and abuse of the adjectives 'black' and 'dark' throughout the poem. Hassan is black; so is the Giaour's horse, and so is his beard; then we have Leila's eyes, the cypress trees, not to mention the dark in soul and the dark in spirit. Byron certainly takes some easy short-cuts here. But, by and large, the overwhelming majority of the reviewers stress the power of the verse. Francis Jeffrey, in the *Edinburgh Review*, begins, quite simply: 'This, we think, is very beautiful'. However, almost none of the early reviewers approve of the poem, and the reasons for this remain interesting to us.

There are two main complaints. Firstly, about the form of the poem. Though Byron, in his preface (or advertisement), immediately notes that the poem is composed of 'disjointed fragments', and though in the penultimate line we are told of '[t]his broken tale' (which the *OED* glosses as meaning 'incomplete' or 'fragmentary'), almost none of the reviewers is happy with the way the poem is constructed. Only Jeffrey, in the *Edinburgh Review*, makes out a case: he says the contemporary reading public is impatient 'of the long stories that used to delight our ancestors'; therefore, he concludes, 'the taste for fragments, we suspect, has become very general; and the greater part of polite readers would now no more think of sitting down to a whole epic than to a whole ox...', adding what must surely be true: 'that after we once know what it contains, no long poem is ever read but in fragments'.

Mostly, however, the reviewers are troubled by the 'disjointed fragments' of which the *Giaour* is composed. Partly this is because it makes the poem difficult of access, and here, I think, we can be sympathetic. *The British Review* says that it is hard, in reading Byron generally, 'to conjecture...what it can all be about'. The reviewer goes on: 'We had just this sort of difficulty with the Childe Harold; his name, character, and office occasioned us considerable perplexity, and our impatience to advance to the interior was checked by a sort of sphynx which embarrassed us at the entrance'. Real fragments are not a problem, the reviewer goes on: where time has erased the greater part of a text, we understandably value what remains. But, he says, where a writer deliberately

‘and with premeditation’ launches a fragmentary work upon the public, where a writer acts to ‘pre-arrange confusion’, that is unacceptable. ‘For our parts’, says *The British Review*, ‘we should as soon think of contracting with a builder to construct us a house in a finished state of dilapidation, as to accept at the hand of an author a heap of fragments as a poem’. And, with a wonderful sense of the uncompromising: ‘We shall continue to require a beginning, middle, and end...Both nature and art in all their designs and arrangements abhor mutilation, and delight in the correspondence and union of parts...’

Again, we can sympathise. The fantasy or nostalgia for wholeness remains an urgent part of artistic endeavour well into the twentieth century, until the despairing possibility of attaining it finally crumbles in the hands of the modernists:

These fragments I have shored against my ruins

T.S. Eliot, in the final moments of *The Waste Land*. The writer in *The British Review* for October 1813 says that a work of art constructed of fragments ‘will generally require repeated perusals, some labour of collation, and some stretch of imagination, before it can act upon the mind (if it ever can) with the impression of a whole’. We are reminded here of Arnold’s famous remark about Byron: ‘his poetic work could not have first grown and matured in his own mind, and then come forth as an organic whole; Byron had not enough of the artist in him for this, not enough of self-command’. As we shall see, Byron’s flirtation with the disjointed, broken text of *The Giaour* is, precisely, that: a flirtation; an experiment, a look at what such a text might be like, what it might offer in terms of thinking about ways of telling a story.

Yet from the moment of its publication, through to more recent criticism, there has been a tendency to disregard what Byron himself said of the poem and its fragmentary nature, and to try to turn it towards a greater degree of wholeness. So, for example, Robert Gleckner, in *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise* (1967): in the course of a very discerning account of *The Giaour*,

Gleckner finally shies away from confronting the implications of its fundamentally fragmentary nature, and takes refuge in a belief that we can talk of 'our sense of the whole'. The whole is, in his analysis, the sum total of all the points of view expressed in the poem, and the ability of the poet to enable us to see these simultaneously. Which is, I think, a long way from the truth, as I shall hope to show.

A more recent attempt to discipline this unruly text is Marilyn Butler's 'The Orientalism of Byron's *Giaour*' (1988). Written at the moment when Romantic orientalism was emerging as a rewarding direction for study, this essay, like Gleckner's, is full of insights, but its view, finally, of the *Giaour* is one of order and balance. The author talks of the 'two halves of the poem', of how Byron 'symmetrically' ends one part with an anticipation of the end of the second part, of how the narrative method 'balances the Western and Eastern points of view', deconstructing Western Christian solidarity. Once again, I hope to show that this is, somehow, missing the point about the kind of narrative that we find in the *Giaour*.

If the early reviewers found the form problematic, understandably felt adrift in the disjointed processes of the tale, they all had a further objection: this one returns us to the world of Baudelaire's Don Juan, with which I began, and has to do with the very nature of the narrative presentation and the characterisation of the tale. Here is the writer in *The British Review* again: 'The character of his *Giaour* is of a cast which we cannot approve...The *Giaour* is evidently one of those persons whom modern poetry and the German drama have...so frequently introduced to us—a being, whose tumultuous passions, mixed with a sort of blustering humanity and turbid sentiment, assume the right of trampling upon the rights of others, of breaking the bands of society, and of treating honest men and their wives...as creatures of a lower world...'

This seems strangely petulant, in line with the writer's statement that, while the *Giaour* had seduced a woman of a Turkish emir, 'it would have been the

same to him had it been an honest citizen's wife'. But behind such rather banal statements is an anxiety which is widely shared by the reviewers. It is, in conventional terms, Byron's apparent lack of a moral compass, of course. *The Antijacobin Review* puts the mix of frustration and anxiety clearly: 'Why did not Lord Byron point the moral of this tale?' But the sense that we have witnessed something in the *Giaour*, or experienced something, and that we are adrift in our attempts to understand what it is: this raises questions that are more than simple reflexes in response to social convention, the fear for the inviolability of honest citizens' wives. Underlying it is fear at the loss of limits. Hamlet, in his famous speech in Act 3, reflects on the way in which we inevitably draw back when faced with the limits of what we cannot know or imaginatively access:

The undiscovered country, from whose bourn

No traveller returns, puzzles the will... (where 'bourn' means 'frontier').

By the time of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*, the prospect of crossing what may (or may not) be the final frontier into death is precisely what draws us irresistibly towards it; the final lines of that collection are an invitation to defy the timidity of our imaginative conventions, as Baudelaire relativises all moral imperatives:

Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe?

Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du *nouveau!*

Plunge into the depths of the abyss, what does it matter if it's Hell or Heaven?
Into the depths of the Unknown in order to find the *new!*

The Giaour crosses, or appears to cross, a series of obvious frontiers: the one that guards inter-racial love and sex, most importantly; but also the lines that

separate two religious systems; two cultures; two languages. The problem for the early reviewers is summed up by the writer in the *Antijacobin* whom I have already quoted: 'Why did not Lord Byron point the moral of this tale?' A little earlier, the same reviewer had written: 'We may express our concern...and also to regret, that he failed to point the moral, which the tale, even in its present imperfect state, obviously presented'. This goes to the heart of the matter. The moral *is* obvious, it's there for the taking: once you cross these boundaries of race and culture and sex, bad things are bound to happen. The reviewer is dismayed, not because of the lack of a moral, but because Byron refuses to underline it with his authority. As Brian Nellist (1988) puts it: 'Blame for what happens becomes secondary to the sheer fact of suffering'. Morality has been eclipsed by the fascination with experience. The problem is that, as readers, we are simply left to confront our own darkness in the face of a horror we can both imagine and yet not imagine. What *might* it be like to be the Giaour? To face the fact that the woman you love has been put into a sack and drowned? To know the extraordinary price of sexual guilt? Who could live with that knowledge? The poem draws us towards a total paradox:

For infinite as boundless space
 The thought that Conscience must embrace,
 Which in itself can comprehend
 Woe without name—or hope—or end.— (273-276)

Hamlet pulls back from the potential revelations of conscience or consciousness. But here there is only a sense of human beings' limitless capacity for despair, an eternity of suffering in a moment of reflection, or simply a moment of awareness. This evocation of despair troubled the early reviewers, almost without exception. The writer in *The Eclectic Review*, for example, says that, in the *Giaour*, 'the poetry, like the glare of lightning on a dark night, just serves to shew, and to exaggerate, the darkness around'. From the perspective of a Christian culture, it is easy to understand the reviewer who writes: 'the moral tendency of this fragment...we are convinced, is

exceedingly pernicious'. Or another, who writes: 'The Character of his Giaour is of a cast which we cannot approve...' These early reviewers saw danger here, saw the attractiveness of horror, felt instinctively the un-Christian nature of a situation where suffering surpasses the mind's capacity to provide a moral commentary on it. The *Antijacobin* picks up on something in the *Giaour* that we might not ordinarily notice now. Very early on in the poem, at line 70, the poet talks about the immediate aftermath of death and refers to

The first dark day of nothingness...

The reviewer in the *Antijacobin* cannot bring himself to believe what he reads. It sounds to him, he says, like an echo of the godless voice of revolutionary France. '[S]urely', he says, 'a christian nobleman could have no such meaning'. But the *Giaour* prompts such a meaning, by refusing to provide the assurances of a controlling, ethically grounded consciousness. And though we might pass by the line without thinking, the *OED*, attentive as ever, sees the importance of Byron's use of a word that here suggests no joyous afterlife following death, nor even the possibility of hell, but precisely what he says: nothingness. Under 'nothingness', 1.c., the *OED* records a sense of 'absence or cessation of consciousness or life', and gives the *Giaour* as the first recorded use of the word in this sense in English.

We have, then, the two major objections which the early reviewers bring against the *Giaour*: the formal one, which is a dislike of its fragmentary nature; and the cultural or psychological one, which is a deep anxiety about the lack of a moral framework. And, of course, these objections are related: they both suggest an underlying suspicion of a *lack* of connectedness in the poem, a lack of wholeness. Such suspicions about the dangers of the disconnected work of art, and the fears which lie behind this disconnectedness, are still being parodied as late as Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* of 1941: 'What we need is a centre. Something to bring us all together...The very latest notion, so I'm

told is, nothing's solid...I must say I like to feel sure if I go to the theatre that I've grasped the meaning...' and so on.

The narrative of the *Giaour* is carried by a number of figures: the poet, a Muslim fisherman, Hassan, the Giaour, a Monk. Almost none of the early reviewers pick up on this. The reviewer in *The Quarterly* is almost alone in realising the importance of the Muslim fisherman as the dominant narrator. We now understand clearly the significance of these alternating voices, but because Byron never makes the transitions from one voice to another obvious, it is easy to become confused. That, presumably, is a part of the intended effect, refusing us, once again, the assurance of a dependable point of view. The voices fade in and out. Any sympathy we might begin to feel with the character of the Giaour is implicitly challenged by what others think of him. To the fisherman, he is an accursed member of an alien religion, someone who has come to Greece and done irreparable harm. Here is the fisherman reflecting on the desolation of Hassan's once gorgeous palace:

The steed is vanished from the stall,
 No serf is seen in Hassan's hall;
 The lonely Spider's thin grey pall
 Waves slowly widening o'er the wall;
 The Bat builds in his Haram bower;
 And in the fortress of his power
 The Owl usurps the beacon-tower... (288-294)

The spider and the owl have taken possession; and where once fountains played, wild dogs howl, famished, desperately seeking water. Byron here presses a nostalgia for a settled world, one which passion has destroyed for ever. The apparent racial, cultural, and religious oppositions of the tale fade in the face of the material fact; the poet says of the now ruined fountain:

'Twas sweet of yore to see it play
 And chase the sultriness of day—
 As springing high the silver dew
 In whirls fantastically flew,
 And flung luxurious coolness round
 The air, and verdure o'er the ground.-- (299-304)

'Fantastically' here means 'oddly', 'strangely'. Byron captures the extraordinary magic of the fountain, the paradox of the cooling spray of water in a heat-locked, dry country.

The Christian Observer, in its review of the *Giaour*, said: '[w]e conceive that few poets ever put their readers in more complete possession of a country they have never seen, than his Lordship of the coasts, country, and population of Greece'. It's good to be reminded of this aspect of the *Giaour*: in the 21st century, around two million British nationals visit Greece every year. In Byron's time, it was still a foreign country for almost everyone in Britain.

Byron's search for authenticity in his presentation of an exotic Greece is clear. He subsidises it with a range of terms drawn from Turkish, Greek, and Arabic. Some of these words had been in the English language since the 18th century, like 'afrit', from Arabic, a powerful demon in Muslim mythology; or 'calpac', 'a felt cap', from Turkish. Some had been in English longer still; like 'Bairam', the name of two Muslim festivals, from Persian via Turkish; 'caloyer', a Greek monk, a word which came into English from late Greek via Italian and French; or 'chiaus', from Persian via Turkish, meaning a Turkish messenger; or, indeed, 'giaour', which, as we have seen, reached English in 1589.

Some of these exotic words, though, Byron introduces into English himself, apparently for the first time: 'ataghan' (a long Turkish dagger), the expression

'bi'smillah' (in the name of Allah), 'tophaiké' (a Turkish musket). With the word 'serai', which appears in the *Giaour*, in the *Bride of Abydos*, and in the *Corsair*, Byron makes a mistake: 'serai' comes from Turkish, via Persian, and means a building for the accommodation of travellers, or a Turkish palace, not least that of the Sultan at Constantinople. In the *Giaour*, as the *OED* points out, Byron uses the word by mistake for 'seraglio' (a harem).

These words are all part of the exotic patina of the *Giaour*, and Byron is fond of using them at the rhyme, so that they stand out in their exoticism:

Though too remote for sound to wake
In echoes of the far tophaiké... (224-5)

Or:

Swift as the hurled on high jerreed,
Springs to the touch his startled steed... (251-2)

The 'jerreed' is a word from Arabic, denoting a wooden javelin used by Persian, Turkish, and Arabian horsemen. The total number of Turkish words that passed into the English language generally in the period 1760 to 1850 is not large, but the peak period of borrowing is 1810 to 1820, the period of Byron's Eastern Tales.

Far more important than this exotic linguistic legacy, however, is the passionate account of Greece with which the *Giaour* opens. This, along with the lines about Greece in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, takes us to the heart of Byron's relationship with the country. Greece is, first of all, an earthly paradise:

Fair clime! where every season smiles

Benignant o'er those blessed isles... (7-8)

This is the Greece of outstanding natural beauty; Byron registers the touch of the air, the smells of the countryside, the softness of the seasons. But the picture of the beauty of Greece is never allowed to stand unchallenged. As soon as the poet mentions the presence of human beings in this wonderful landscape, the picture turns dark:

Strange—that where all is peace beside

There passion riots in her pride,

And lust and rapine wildly reign,

To darken o'er the fair domain. (58-61)

This then leads into the famous extended simile, in which Byron compares Greece to a recently dead body. The beauty of the body is retained for a few hours before decay sets in; and so he thinks of Greece:

Such is the aspect of this shore—

'Tis Greece—but living Greece no more!

So coldly sweet, so deadly fair... (90-2)

Byron was troubled by what he found in Greece. Greece was a place with a missing soul. A place, like Leila in the *Giaour*, beautiful, but enslaved. Lost in the dull ordinariness of centuries of occupation, but where life occasionally blazes into the fire of passions that have nowhere to go. Passion is a sign of the existence of immense energy, a refusal of everyday dullness. But passion

always threatens to turn inwards. The violence that men like Hassan and the Giaour bring to the world (and to themselves) is a function of their courage, pride, loyalty, and love—all human assets, all, here, the agents of futile destruction.

Which brings me to a kind of conclusion. How should we read the *Giaour*? If our aim should be to resist attempts to turn it into what Byron says it is not, if, that is, we should set ourselves against any desire to find wholeness in the poem, what can we do with it? Once again, we can turn to the early reviewers. I want to look at one further aspect of the early reception of the *Giaour*, to see how we might re-interpret positively what the reviewers universally experienced negatively. The area I'm interested in here concerns the notes to the poem. No-one liked them in 1813, to judge from the reviewers. The British Review says that the notes are 'beyond measure trifling and injudicious', either telling us things everyone already knows, or sometimes calling 'our attention from the midst of tumult and slaughter to some ridiculous story'. Further: 'the attempts at humour in these notes are very far below the standard of his lordship's undoubted taste and spirit'. While *The Monthly Review* says: 'It were to be wished that the noble author had omitted all the notes...except those which are absolutely necessary to render the text intelligible; since they are of a style of sprightliness which ill accords with the narrative'.

The complaint is, again, about lack of fit. The *Giaour* is dark, so what is the purpose of these light-hearted notes? The notes have a variety of functions, but an important one is to draw attention to the *Giaour* as story. The lack of fit, that is, makes us doubly conscious of a narrative which is in some sense 'out there', not here. The aim is to create the illusion of something which is theoretically independent, but which cannot be recovered except in fragmentary terms. The author of the notes, in that sense, is not the author of the poem, because the poem, like some monument of exotic sculpture, has been rescued and brought back into a culture where it lacks any supporting context; it is a Turkish tale 'Englished', but not domesticated for the English

market. As Sophie Thomas has suggested: ‘Fragments simultaneously raise and disavow the possibility of totality and wholeness’.

This is true at the level of form, but it also has a relevance at the psychological level. The *Giaour* depends for much of its power on the way it conveys a sense of what can never be fully recovered, only intimated. When the Muslim fisherman watches the Giaour’s horse flash by, he is aware that the moment is charged with significance (‘But in that instant, o’er his soul/Winters of Memory seemed to roll’, 261-2); however, he can only ask ‘What felt *he* [i.e. the Giaour] then...?’ Across the gaps of religion, language, geography, social class, and time, there can be no re-ordering of the whole.

In the sense of ‘one whose business it is to recite legendary or romantic stories’, the noun ‘story-teller’ comes into English only in the late eighteenth century: the *OED*’s first recorded use is in 1777, and it is in the context of the story-tellers of the East; the second recorded usage is in 1813, in the *Giaour* (note to line 1334), and the context is, again, the East. Byron says of the story we are reading:

‘I heard it by accident recited by one of the coffee-house story-tellers who abound in the Levant, and sing or recite their narratives...I regret that my memory has retained so few fragments of the original’.

Whatever the truth of this, the *Giaour* remains, in all its incompleteness of form and psychological insight, a memorial of the Grand Tour—whether real or imagined. Self-consciously lacking in context, it draws on a late eighteenth-century fashion for the fragmentary, but, as the early reviews testify, it baffled as well as fascinated, and remained, in many ways, unassimilable.