

Coastal Connections

While reading through Lord Byron's *Don Juan* and *The Giaour*, my attention was caught by his interestingly descriptive and rather lengthy writing about the Greek coast. In each of the two poems, Byron spends several pages and stanzas delving into great detail concerning the natural beauty and sublimity of the Greek coast. Furthermore, Byron created a definitive link between the Greek coast and the powerful concepts of life, death, and rebirth. With such a high level of specificity, I could not help but to assume that Byron included these descriptions for a particularly important reason. While these concepts greatly contribute to the meaning and depth of his poetry, Byron must have had a profound life experience which allowed him to relate his coastal connections so vividly and powerfully. After further investigation into Byron's life, I began to discover the ways in which his various experiences influenced his writings. Byron's most notable triumph, outside of his endless list of literary achievements, was that in spite of his physical setbacks he victoriously swam across the Hellespont Channel from Sestos to Abydos. There is no doubt that the level of personal accomplishment Lord Byron experienced in swimming the Hellespont left a lasting impression upon his works, especially *Don Juan* and *The Giaour*.

Throughout his life, Lord Byron suffered from a debilitating lameness of his right leg and foot. The nature of Byron's deformity has been largely misunderstood as many people believe he suffered from a clubbed foot. His condition has been more recently classified as a congenital dysplasia; which is described as a birth defect in which one leg and foot never fully develops, but instead remains drastically smaller than the other (Browne). In order to help correct his deformity as well as to disguise it, Byron wore a padded walking boot as a child (Poetry Foundation). His deformity caused him to experience ridicule and embarrassment not only from the other children, but from his own mother at times. In one of his letters he wrote that his mother called him a "lame brat" (Galt). At a young age, Byron fell madly in love with Mary Chaworth, a neighbor girl to whom he wrote many sappy love poems.

Unfortunately for Byron, she didn't hold the same feelings towards him; and to make the ridicule worse, she called him "that little lame boy" (Pregolato). Needless to say, these humiliating experiences led him to develop a life-long sensitivity towards his lameness and deformity. Mary Shelley commented on the effects this had upon his personality when she wrote, "No action of Lord Byron's life – scarce a line he has written – but was influenced by his personal defect" (Keats-Shelley House).

Regardless of his physical setbacks, Byron managed to attain a high level athleticism through his involvement in various sports. Some of his athletic activities included fencing, boxing, horseback riding, pistol shooting, and swimming. Byron insisted on regular and vigorous exercise, and swimming was the one exercise that didn't affect his performance (Noden). The particular passion he developed for swimming was attributed to the fact that he could move about freely in the water and not be slowed down in any way by his lameness. It seems that Byron's swimming prowess surpassed the capabilities of many of his peers. In fact, Byron stated that he loved to swim because it raised his spirits; and therefore, on many occasions he passed away his time by swimming (Life of Byron, pgs. 259, 473).

During his travels around Europe, Lord Byron eventually arrived at the celebrated Hellespont. The Hellespont, now known as the Dardanelles Strait, is a one to four mile wide channel of water that ultimately connects the Mediterranean Sea to the Black Sea (World Atlas). Its depths can reach down to beyond two hundred feet in some locations (Whitman). The Hellespont also creates the separating line between the continents of Europe and Asia. On the southern shore of the Hellespont, a traveler can find the archeological site which holds the possible ruins to the Ancient city of Troy (World Atlas). Due to the geographical makeup of the Hellespont, complex and powerful currents flow constantly, all year long. This induces treacherous conditions for swimmers and small boats. Byron noted this when he wrote, "The rapidity of the current is such that no boat can row directly across" (Written after Swimming; footnote, pg. 19). Actually, the Hellespont is considered to provide some of the most dangerous nautical conditions in the world for mariners and navigators (Poseidon Shipping). Regardless of the dangers, the

Hellespont yearly attracts scores of swimmers looking to test and prove their swimming fortitude by swimming across the channel. Several online blogs describe harrowing experiences of almost drowning, being helplessly sucked under, massive waves constantly crashing down, or needing rescue from sheer exhaustion. Despite extensive training and preparation, many swimmers do not complete their journey across the Hellespont (Hero).

The Hellespont also holds a profound historical and literary background as well. Herodotus recorded how the Persian Emperor Xerxes built a bridge using triremes in order for his army to cross the Hellespont during the second Persian invasion of the Greco-Persian wars. It was reported to take Xerxes seven days to accomplish the crossing (Zaretsky). Paris' kidnapping of Helen, the wife of the powerful Spartan King Menelaus, initiated the Trojan War, which lasted for roughly ten years (Stanford). Helen was portrayed by the Greeks as a strikingly beautiful woman whose face is said to have launched a thousand Greek ships across the Hellespont (Stanford). Later in History, Alexander's crossing of the Hellespont became the launching point for his extensive military campaign through which he conquered most of the known world. In Greek mythology Jason sailed on his ship named Argos across the Hellespont in his search for the mythical Golden Fleece (Fitzwilliam Museum).

In spite of all the historical significance surrounding the Hellespont, Lord Byron found his inspiration for attempting to swim the channel from yet another story—a story of love. Greek Mythology contains the legend of two lovers named Leander and Hero. These lovers were isolated from each other because Leander was a resident of Abydos, a town on the southern coast of the Hellespont; meanwhile Hero was confined to the temple of Aphrodite at Sestos, a town located on the northern, European coast (Swimming the Hellespont). Since Hero served as a high priestess, she was sworn into living a celibate life. Nevertheless, love seems to always find a way to bring two hearts together, even if this love arrives in the form of swimming the Hellespont. The two lovers met in secret because they were afraid of getting in trouble for defiling religious codes. Leander would brave swimming back and

forth across the dangerous Hellespont every night so that he could be with the woman he loved. To help guide Leander along his arduous swim, Hero would light an oil lantern and hang it from the temple's tower. The light from Hero's lantern could apparently be seen from the opposite shore, and therefore Leander always safely found his way. Their secret meetings went on for months. Unfortunately, one night Leander encountered a severe winter storm while swimming and drowned in the middle of the Hellespont. Upon discovering that her lover had perished, Hero threw herself, in a fit of passion, off the tower and plunged into the rapid waters below (Musaeus Grammaticus).

The tragic tale of Leander and Hero motivated Lord Byron to attempt the swim for himself. Strong evidence for this conclusion comes from a poem Byron crafted shortly after his epic swim titled "Written after Swimming from Sestos to Abydos." The first stanza beautifully tells, "If, in the month of dark December, / Leander, who was nightly wont / (what maid will not the tale remember?) / to cross thy stream, broad Hellespont" (Written after Swimming, pg. 19). Byron spends the rest of his poem contrasting himself with Leander. One example of Byron's contrasts reveals that while Leander swam for love and failed, he swam for glory and jest, and therefore succeeded. Byron also states that he accomplished no small feat in his successful swim. Since Byron was very interested in the dynamics of love and romance, it is no wonder that he found this particular story to be the most highly compelling reason for such a risky endeavor.

During his tour around Europe, Byron managed to catch a ride aboard *Salsette*, a frigate that was commanded by a Captain Bathurst. When the frigate passed through the Hellespont, Byron decided to give swimming the Hellespont a try, but this first attempt ended as a complete failure. It was in the middle of April, and the snow melting off the mountains caused the waters to be unbearably cold. Also Byron was completely worn out from the long journey he had earlier in the day. Even with this failed attempt, Lord Byron remained hopeful in his abilities to fulfill his objective of swimming across the channel (Written after Swimming; footnote, pg. 19).

On the third of May in 1810, three weeks after his first try, Lord Byron successfully swam across the Hellespont (pg. 20). Quite opposite from Leander's journey, Byron swam from the Greek Sestos to the Turkish Abydos. He was accompanied by Lieutenant Ekenhead, one of the officers of the frigate, who also decided to try his swimming abilities against the formidable Hellespont. The swim, as Byron recounted, only took him an hour and ten minutes. Even in May the icy cold waters proved to be the harshest element with which he had to contend. Byron also added that in spite of the powerful currents he was not very fatigued upon reaching the opposing shore, and therefore felt as if he completed his swim with "little difficulty" (pg. 20). The strong currents, however, threw him roughly three miles off course from his expected target destination.

Afterwards, Byron frequently wrote about his noble achievement for many years to follow. He directly refers to this feat in his *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan*; as well as in many letters, journals, and various other correspondences. Upon reaching the shore of Abydos, it seems as if Byron experienced a sort of rebirth, or baptism, into a whole new perspective of himself. The former childhood humiliation didn't have nearly the same impact upon his life although it was still present. In his correspondence to Francis Hodgson, Byron states, "I plume myself on this achievement more than I could possibly do on any kind of glory, political, poetical, or rhetorical" (Written after Swimming; footnote, pg. 20). Despite his lameness, Byron had accomplished a seemingly impossible physical task, of which very few others during his time were able to boast.

Since the Hellespont contains such a rich mixture of Greek history combined with many literary and poetical aspects found in works like *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and even the tale of Hero and Leander, Byron immersed himself in a tide of inspiration of which he so beautifully captured in his own poetic works. By successfully swimming the Hellespont, Byron not only overcame his own distraught past, he also became directly linked to the legends of yore and to some of the best works of classical epic poetry. After this moment of glory, Byron actively engaged in a poetical career that eventually culminated in his

epic *Don Juan*. Byron's journey towards preeminence in Romantic literature launched when he woke up famous with his sensational hit *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, and then gained momentum through great works such as *The Giaour*, *Manfred*, *Beppo*, and eventually reached its greatest height with his compilation of *Don Juan*. While Byron was a great poet nonetheless, his magnitude of accomplishment might never have been fully achieved if he had not experienced something truly inspirational—like swimming the Hellespont.

Now that I have given a fairly comprehensive account of the historical, literary, and dangerous nature of the Hellespont (Dardanelles) Strait, as well as Lord Byron's intimate ties to it, I feel that one important question still remains. I must now change my focus towards demonstrating how all of these factors tie into and directly affect Lord Byron's writing of *Don Juan* and *The Giaour*.

Canto two of *Don Juan* renders a peculiar theme of rebirth and new life through details describing the relationship between Haidèe and Juan. Byron portrays Haidèe with motherly characteristics, while Don Juan assumes the role of a newborn child. Through the sequence of events in which Haidèe rescues the nearly lifeless Juan on the beach and then proceeds to nurse him back to health in a coastal cave, Byron creates a strong allusion to the process of a mother birthing and raising a child.

Juan is described as practically being dead when he first washes up on the beach after having survived the shipwreck. His deathly state is further revealed when Haidèe first discovers him and "Recalled his answering spirits back from death... / each pulse to animation, till beneath / its gentle touch and trembling care, a sigh" (*Don Juan* 2. 113, pg. 451). This describes the moment in which Juan is reborn into a whole new world. The following stanza further signifies the process of giving birth through the exposition, "Then she wrung / his dewy curls, long drenched by every storm, / and watched with eagerness each throb that drew / a sigh from his heaved bosom—and hers too" (*Don Juan* 2. 114, pg. 451). Childbirth can clearly be described as a turbulent storm, and when a baby is first born it is

drenched wet from the birthing. Yet after the baby is out of the womb, both the mother and child can breathe a big “sigh” of relief.

After Haidèe’s beachside discovery, she sets up a “nursery” in a nearby coastal cave with the help of her maid, or more appropriately nurse, Zoe. Haidèe then carefully nurtures Juan until he fully recovers his strength. Byron uses this long and slow nurturing process to further solidify the mother and baby allusion. This allusion is frequently related through Haidèe’s maternal interactions with Juan while he is sleeping. In one of Haidèe’s visits to check on Juan, she notices that “like an infant Juan sweetly slept” (Don Juan 2. 143, pg. 457) and like a mother “she stopped and stood as if in awe” (2. 143 pg. 457). Another instance depicts Haidèe “bent o’er him, and he lay beneath / hushed as the babe upon its mother’s breast, / drooped as the willow... / lulled like the depth of ocean when at rest” (2. 148, pg. 458).

Eventually infants must grow into toddlers. Once Juan is fully recovered, Haidèe begins teaching him how to speak Greek. Juan’s learning the Greek language is beautifully related to a mother teaching her child how to speak. At first Juan cannot understand anything Haidèe was saying, but he still enjoys listening to Haidèe’s voice: “Now Juan could not understand a word... / but he had an ear, / and her voice was the warble of a bird, / so soft, so sweet, so delicately clear / that finer, simpler music ne’er was heard” (2. 151, pg. 459). Even though babies cannot understand much of what their mothers are saying, they still react to her voice. A mother’s voice is oftentimes the only thing that can soothe an upset child. As Juan grows up he learns how to speak Greek rather fluently; and then, like every teenager, his attention turns to more romantic interests. His mother becomes the focus of his attraction. It is oftentimes said that men will eventually marry women who remind them of their mother in some way.

This whole process of Juan washing up on the shore and Haidèe nursing him back to health takes place in a Greek coastal environment. As soon as Haidèe rescues Juan, she immediately moves him

to the sea-side cave. Not once during this time does the story's setting deviate from the coast. It isn't until the next canto, after Juan is recuperated and in love with Haidèe that they progress from beyond the shoreline. This device creates a firm link between Juan, Haidèe, and the Greek coast. In fact, right after the mother and infant allusion, Byron, i.e. narrator, dramatically states, "The coast—I think it was the coast that I was just describing—yes, it was the coast—" (2.181, pg. 466). The rhetoric of this statement shows that it is an important element in a greater theme—the theme of rebirth tied to Juan, and ultimately to Byron himself.

The mother and infant allusion is important because the sublime qualities of the coast are not only able to foster an environment conducive to intimate romance; but these qualities are able to bring a man back from the dead and immerse him into a whole new life and new perspective. When Lord Byron emerged on the Abydos shore of the Hellespont, he was a changed man. He had experienced rebirth into a life of which he was no longer so severely affected by his lameness. He could move on from those humiliating moments and focus on the more important things that lay ahead of him in life. Even though he was reborn, he still held a tie to his old self much in the same way a reincarnated person is said to maintain certain ties with their previous life.

This connection makes sense when Juan's former love affair with Julia is taken into account. Towards the end of canto two, Byron brings up an important question when he states, "But Juan, had he quite forgotten Julia? / and should he have forgotten her so soon? / I can't but say it seems to me most truly a / perplexing question" (2.208, pg. 472). Yet in canto four, Don Juan avoids having relations with the Queen Gulbeyaz because his heart still belongs to his lost Haidèe. The reason why Juan so easily moved away from and forgot Julia is because she was a part of his past life. Since Juan was reborn into a new life, the things he held important in his former life, although they were still a part of him, didn't matter anymore. When Juan arrived in Gulbeyaz's court, he still had a strong attachment to Haidèe because she was the first love of his new life. In this light, Julia seems to correspond to Byron's

humiliating lameness, while Haidèe represents the rebirth he experienced upon reaching the Abydos shore. For the most part, Byron found the strength to look past his deformity, but he could never overcome the fact that he had accomplished the impossible by swimming the Hellespont.

Interestingly enough, Lord Byron creates another allusion to the Greek coast and Hellespont, through a link he establishes between Haidèe and Helen of Troy. It is known that Helen “crossed” the Hellespont several times through her marriage, kidnapping, and return. At one point, Haidèe has a restless night in which she dreams, “of a thousand wrecks, o’er which she stumbled, / and handsome corpses strewed upon the shore” (2.138, pg. 456). This suggestive reference to the “face that launched a thousand ships” reveals an unsettling reality that maternal love isn’t the only trait of women. There also exists an inevitable fatality even in the pure, unselfish love Haidèe feels for Juan (P. Graham).

Haidèe’s dream of the fatality in women’s love is brought to life in the opening stanzas of *The Giaour*. Byron accomplishes this by constructing a clever allegory which describes characteristics pertaining to the Greek Coast, and its relationship with the pirates and fishermen it harbors, in a way that embodies the inevitable outcome between Leila, Hassan, and the Giaour.

Leila is represented by the personification of feminine attributes upon the Greek coast through the descriptions, “There mildly dimpling—oceans cheek,” “laughing tides,” and “each gentle air, / that wakes and wafts the odors there” (*The Giaour*; lines 12-20, pg. 136). Dimpling cheeks and constant laughter, or giggling, are primarily feminine characteristics, while the pleasant smell of wafting odors can be understood as a woman’s perfume. This allegorical link between the Greek coast and Leila especially becomes apparent when Byron states, “Sultana of the Nightingale, the maid for whom this melody” is told (*The Giaour*; lines 22-23, pg. 124). In this case, since the sultana is a part of an eastern lord’s harem, she can still be considered a maid under the definition of female servants fulfilling the role of one of many wives. This also makes sense when it is found that Leila is described as a female servant who escapes Hassan’s harem to secretly meet the Giaour.

Unfortunately, along with all the pleasant feminine characteristics held by the Greek coast, there is also a fatality working beneath the surface. Byron highlights this natural duality inherent in the coast when he writes, “Strange—that where Nature loved to trace... / 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” (lines 46-61, pg. 125). Although the Greek coast is beautiful and possesses seemingly innocent qualities, the underlying fatality creates a haven “that holds the pirate for a guest; / whose bark in the sheltering cove below / lurks for the passing peaceful prow” (lines 37-39, pg. 124). The lustful and passionate qualities of the coast ultimately rouse the pirate to destructive ends. Byron also mentions the dangers of the wild and lustful side of women in *Don Juan* when he writes, “A real husband always is suspicious, / and when the spouse and friend are gone off wholly, / he wonders at their vice, and not his folly” (*Don Juan*; 1.99 pg. 408). This shows how Byron believes that a good husband should be weary of allowing his wife to be in the company of other men, regardless of his friendship with the men. Women are beautiful and to be loved, but not completely trusted.

Meanwhile the unsuspecting fisherman is portrayed as happily singing aloud and strumming his guitar as he is sailing along the shore. This device creates a sense of peaceful unity, or marriage, between the fisherman and the Greek coast. It becomes apparent that the fisherman represents Hassan with the juxtaposition of the lines, “His thousand songs are heard on high” (*The Giaour*; line 24, pg.124) and “till the gay mariner’s guitar... / and turn to groans his roundelay” (lines 40-45 pgs. 124-125). The first line is referring to the husband boastfully singing about “his queen, his rose” (line 26 pg. 124); whereas the second quote shows the fisherman enjoying his coastal environment with pleasant music and singing. The “grotto meant for rest” (line 36, pg. 124) implies the marital bedroom of Hassan and Leila; but the *Giaour*, like the pirate, has also taken up a hidden residence there. Once the fisherman recognizes the pirate’s presence, he becomes “enamour’d of distress, / should mar [Nature i.e. the Greek coast] into wilderness” (lines 50-51, pg. 125), before succumbing to his own death brought about

by the pirate. Similarly, after Hassan discovers the Giaour's infidelity with Leila, he binds her in a sack and tosses her to her watery grave. Soon after Leila's murder, the Giaour vows a bloody revenge and then quickly slays Hassan in battle.

The fatality existing within the nature of Leila's love not only brings about her and Hassan's death, it also prevented her from attaining the true love she desired to share with the Giaour. Directly following the allegory of the Greek coast, Byron deeply laments over the appearance of a beautiful corpse. While the corpse appears to be the remains of the slain fisherman, it is also described metaphorically as the Greek coast when Byron writes, "Such is the aspect of this shore— / 'tis Greece—but living Greece no more" (lines 90-91). This statement serves to create an important link between Hassan and the spirit of Leila. At first this link seems to reflect the lingering impact of Leila and Hassan's deaths upon the Giaour since he spends much of the second-half of the poem in mournful confession to a monk. Yet, when this link is viewed through the perspective of Haidèe's somber dream of a thousand nameless corpses lying upon the shore, it serves to reveal a greater thematic truth found in most of Byron's poetry. Ultimately the desire to obtain a lasting true love becomes the fatality of all those seeking it.

Lasting true love for Lord Byron, as well as his Byronic hero, was an unattainable concept. As a child, Byron endured the disastrous effects of his parents' failed marriage; and then he eventually suffered misery when he married Anne Isabella Milbanke. In order to escape the doomed nature of love he witnessed in marriage, Byron found happiness in the *cavalier servente* sort of lifestyle in which he could enjoy passionate romance as the lover. It seems as if Byron also viewed the Hellespont as a real and tangible representation of the gulf created by the desire for an enduring true love. This really makes sense when Byron's poem "Written after Swimming from Sestos to Abydos" is taken into account. Byron demonstrates that while Leander drowned swimming the Hellespont for *true* love, his success was possible because he swam in "jest" as a lover. Although literary characters like Haidèe, Hassan, Leila,

Julia, and even Hero and Leander inevitably become a part of the thousand corpses washing upon the shore in Haidèe's fatalistic dream, the Byronic hero continues to live on. Essentially Lord Byron and his Byronic hero conquer true love by not pursuing it, even though their experiences leave a lasting impact upon them.

While my coastal connections provide another compelling perspective into the poetic tales of *Don Juan* and *The Giaour*, there is no way to truly know if Lord Byron consciously intended for all these literary links to exist. The important concept is that the close relationship of birth, death, and rebirth give a clear revelation of the ways in which Byron's achievement of swimming the Hellespont has no doubt heavily impacted his writing. Such life-changing accomplishments must certainly serve to flavor our season a writer's works. I find it fascinating to observe how Lord Byron's great athletic accomplishment has forever been immortalized in the great literature he produced throughout the rest of his life.

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