

“The Vulnerable Hero: Byron and Modern Athletics”

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Any one who is familiar with Lord Byron as a physical specimen probably knows that he coped with a disability. One of Byron's feet, and perhaps the lower calf of his leg, is generally accepted by modern scholars to have been deformed. The extent to which this ailment was an obstacle to Byron's physical endeavours is often debated, but the amount of contradicting testaments concerning the details of the deformation is rarely discussed. Considering all contemporary letters, journals, and medical articles that describe Byron's foot, nearly half of them disagree on the simple fact of which foot, left or right, was malformed. One such account is Trelawny's, which claims "...both his feet were clubbed, and his legs withered to the knee," and was published many years after Byron's death (*Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron*. Trelawny, Edward John. Pg. 224). This account differs greatly from Dr. Millingen's post-mortem exam which noted "...the only blemish of his body, which might otherwise have vied with that of Apollo himself, was the congenital malformation of his left foot and leg" (*Memoirs of the Affairs of Greece*. Millingen, Julius. Pp.142-3).

Whatever the truth behind this apparent controversy about his physical impairment, Byron's own image of his foot became a fixation through childhood and into his adult life. The psychological power of this deformity is perhaps incalculable, and its effects can be seen in many aspects of Byron's person. Byron was obsessed with painting his "club-foot" in the most unflattering light possible, and this handicap seems to make his successes all the more impressive. Byron casts himself as the underdog, and seems to revel in this depiction. Whether up against British Parliament, the Turkish government, or

the Princess of Parallelograms, his future wife Annabella Milbanke, Byron is quick to assume and thrive in the role of the underdog. In this respect, Byron can be seen making a shift towards the modern sense of a hero. In today's world it is the underdog who typically becomes the hero, the unlikely winner who fights back from adversity. A modern athlete is not seen as struggling against Nature or the Fates or even God; rather, an athlete is watched as if he is battling against himself. In this sense, Byron, as the handicapped achiever, becomes a precursor for our own modern model of a determined champion. Because Byron embellished both his anatomical handicaps and his physical feats, his athletic character can be viewed as more modern in outline and outlook alike than is the typical early nineteenth century view of heroism and athletics.

The model hero in antiquity was a blend of athlete and warrior, whose prowess and courage rivalled the gods, but the modern hero is quite different. Whereas Hercules and Bellerophon are nearly beyond human, the modern hero is exalted exactly because of his humanity and handicaps. Lance Armstrong won the Tour de France six times after battling cancer. Michael Jordan won the Most Valuable Player Award in the NBA Finals while sick with the flu. Modern heroes are glorified for overcoming obstacles that are personal and human. The common thread of humanity and the victory over the vulnerable self are the trade marks of today's champions. Perhaps it is not the athletes who have changed, but the audience. The taste of that audience has shifted from revelling in the apparent immortality of the athlete to preferring a celebration of the humanity of the athlete. The modern hero is not impervious--it is his vulnerability and triumph despite it that make him memorable.

Lord Byron's life and spirit often predate ideas more modern than his time, and the athletic arena offers a perfect example. Despite his clubfoot or perhaps because of it, Byron was an avid swimmer. He crossed the Hellespont, from Sestos to Abydos, and in Venice swam back from the Lido up the Grand Canal. Byron's acquaintances often note him as an excellent horseman. Part of Byron's greatness as an athlete, and to some degree his drive for competition in all aspects of life, stems from human obstacles. Especially on the athletic level, no obstacle, even if embellished, is greater in Byron's own mind than his deformed foot. However much his clubbed foot affected him physically, which is a debate in itself, Byron's striving after athletic heroism was caused and inspired more so by vulnerability than immunity; and that is the mark of a modern sports hero.

Unlike the cases of Armstrong and Jordan, Byron's physical obstacle did not emerge later in life. He was born with his condition and struggled through childhood as well as same as adulthood. In his condensed biography *Byron: A Portrait*, Leslie Marchand claims that Byron's deformation "probably did more to shape his character than it will ever be possible to calculate" (Marchand 9). Because Byron's clubfoot began affecting him at such a young age, it proves helpful to pry into the youthful beginnings of Byron's obstacles and the subsequent personality he was left with.

The obstacle in Byron's life that is most pertinent to athletic endeavour is the physical limitation that most inhabited his own mind; and, in Byron's thoughts and reflections, his foot was a truly immediate cause for shame and vulnerability. From an early age, Byron was obsessed with his deformed foot, often writing letters to his mother as a young man about being fitted for a special shoe device and ultimately giving orders on his deathbed for no one to look at his leg after he had passed on (*Works of Lord*

*Byron: Letters and Journals, vol. I.* Prothero, Rowland E. Pg. 11 ). In one letter, dated Sunday, May 1<sup>st</sup> 1803, a young Byron addresses his mother writing “I wish you would write to Sheldrake to tell him to make haste with my shoes” (Prothero 11). Sheldrake was a specialist in London who eventually did make Byron a pair of boots, “which did away with the worst inconveniences,” however vague that observation may be (*Byron*. Mayne, Ethel Colburn. Pg. 20).

Before leaping too far forward, it is necessary to describe the medical condition of a clubbed-foot as a deformity of the foot and lower calf in which the muscles, bones, arteries, and various other systems are only partly formed, causing the foot to turn inwards and point downwards. Modern surgery can easily correct the deformity, but without proper treatment the afflicted person would permanently walk on the outside edge of the foot. Byron did receive different types of treatments for his condition as a child, the best of which appears to be the corrective shoes made by Sheldrake, but the worst of which may be contained in the practices of a man named Lavender. Byron was under Lavender’s care while he lived in Nottingham and was subject to experimental types of treatment. One method “adopted for the cure was to rub the foot with oil, then forcibly twist it round and screw it up in a wooden machine” (Mayne 19). Witnesses write that Byron also played errand boy for Lavender while under his care, and “was frequently sent across the street for Lavender’s beer” (Mayne 19).

As the recipient of such suffering and humiliating treatment, it is little wonder that as a child Byron was shy, making friends with younger classmates, instead of his contemporaries. Curiously, one of his early schoolyard friends was lame as well (Marchand 24). Byron also tended to find himself in schoolyard scuffles. Marchand

claims this “was inevitable that a lame boy with a great deal of pride should come to blows with his fellows,” but Byron never mentioned his lameness as a direct cause of the skirmishes. (Marchand 24) Despite his own obsession with it, Byron rarely draws others’ attention to his deformity at all, except in strict confidence, perhaps due to the pride and vanity which Ethel Colburn Mayne claims to be a major motivating aspect of Byron’s life. She believes that in the case of “the twisted foot- vanity possessed itself also, but this time with a morbid intensity which turned it into one of the keynotes of his life” (Mayne 5-6). Whether it was vanity, the memory of suffering at the hands of Lavender, or the beginnings of the “Weltschmerz” condition now associated with the “Byronic” character, there is little surprise that Byron came to consider the deformed foot as “his mark of Cain” (Byron. Read 8, “Lord Byron: Demons of Calvinism.” Sloan 1).

Gary Sloan discusses Byron’s religious tendencies in his essay “Lord Byron: the Demons of Calvinism,” claiming that from a mixture of the deformed foot, the insults in the schoolyard, and the early death of his father “the young Byron perversely deduced that he was irremediably damned” (Sloan 1). Sloan argues that the deformity, coupled with the other several factors, combine to make up “the demons of his childhood,” which are a constant force in Byron’s mind throughout his adulthood. Thus it can be suggested that Byron’s mental restlessness and athletic passions have similar origins in his early formative years.

Mayne, however, continues the pride motif and attempts to show that vanity has a direct link to the horrific image that Byron himself had of his foot. She ultimately questions the validity of Byron’s own assessment of his deformation. She claims that “of all things, *this*- a question of visible and tactual fact--would seem the easiest to establish”,

but yet the simple statement of which foot was deformed is debatable (Mayne 6). Mayne suggests that

in the histrionic heats of his imagination, fanned as they were by the continuous actual drama which his surpassing beauty kept ablaze--he would be satisfied, so to speak, with nothing less than the worst, the ugliest aspect. *He had a club-foot:* only the "big word" would do, and it must be in the biggest letters, and the limelight must illumine them. (Mayne 6)

It is possible that Byron exaggerated the condition of his foot. Although upper legs are much more important to a rider, the actual physical impediments of a crippled foot to Byron's stride or horsemanship were rarely mentioned among his acquaintances; but it is impossible to suggest that Byron completely fabricated his condition. Sheldrake made shoes for him, Dr. Milingen notes the foot in his post-mortem observations, and Byron's condition was common knowledge to his personal friends. Still, the amount of firsthand knowledge remains in question. Dr. Milingen documents in his post-mortem examination, "the only blemish of his body, which might otherwise have vied with that of Apollo himself, was the congenital malformation of his left foot and leg...there can be little or no doubt, he was born club-footed" (Marchand 462). Also in support of this observation is Sheldrake's illustration of Byron's deformed left foot, from which he fashioned special boots; but several witnesses, including Byron's mother and his travel companion Trelawny, note that it was the right foot rather than the left that was malformed (Prothero 12). A pair of surgical boots that Byron's publisher John Murray kept shows the right boot as slightly augmented, but the shape of the augmentation does not suggest the condition of a club-foot (Prothero 12). On the other hand, the boots made by Sheldrake suggest that both feet were practically normal (Prothero 12).

These conflicting observations do not suggest that Byron's foot was healthy, but for such a tangible fact to be so poorly documented does create a level of suspicion about

the validity of the witnesses' accounts. It is possible that some of the observations were based more on Byron's own exaggerations than from first-hand inspection.

In any case, these discrepancies do suggest a lesser level of severity in Byron's condition. If his foot had been so deformed as to highly inhibit his physical movement in a gross manner, then the question of which foot was harmed would be clearly evident to all witnesses of the time. Yet Byron was physically able to attain a good reputation for horsemanship and occasionally climb rocks and mountains, both of which are more demanding on feet than boxing or swimming. It is no doubt that Byron would be self-conscious of his condition throughout his life, but the level to which he had to strive to overcome his injury in the physical arena is perhaps not as striking as the level to which his spirit was forced to rise over self-imposed difficulties and psychological barriers.

From "Weltschmerz," to playground taunting, to Lavender's "treatment," a substantial barrier to psychological satisfaction had been constructed by the time Byron reached adulthood. Rather than folding defeated, Byron's spirit seems to have been fuelled by these obstacles; at times, the struggle against obstacles, rather than the satisfaction of final accomplishment, seems to be his ultimate goal. Herbert Read quotes a letter in which Byron writes

The great object of life is sensation- to feel that we exist, even though in pain. It is this "craving void" which drives us to gaming--to battle--to travel--to intemperance, but keenly felt pursuits of any description, whose principal attraction is the agitation inseparable from their accomplishment. (Read 15)

To understand such a complex character, one that has baffled and eluded biographers and critics for nearly two centuries, often it is Byron's own words that best encapsulate the spirit of his life. On occasion Byron succinctly describes his own mind with more clarity



than the best biographer can, pointing specifically to a common drive of his life, his attraction to “agitation.”

This craving for struggle, for endeavour, is accepted as a theme for Byron’s athletic pursuits and his travels, but it may easily be applied earlier in his life as well. A spirit feeding on “sensation” might have been fuelled by a physical deformity, especially a deformation that proved to be more of a social than physical burden. After being chided as a child, perhaps Byron exaggerated upon his damaged foot, providing himself with a rich opportunity for sometimes exaggerated self-deprecation. This type of exaggeration, although improvable, might seem very in tune with the responses that Byron would exhibit later in life in his response to literary rivals and criticism and also his dreams of military grandeur. The harsh reviews given his first published volume *Hours of Idleness* in *The Edinburgh Review* at a young age caused Byron to bristle and respond with a quick reaction that seemed duly practiced. His attitude towards contemporary poet Robert Southey, such as the barbed sexual taunt from the Dedication of *Don Juan*: “Gasping on deck, because you soar to high, Bob,/ And fall, for lack of moisture, quite a-dry, Bob!”, suggests this defensive response as well.

Although he bore the physical consequences of his clubfoot, Byron’s psychological burden was even heavier. Byron often felt this vulnerability, but it was generally a private struggle. To the public world Byron would rather display the image of himself that, returning to Dr. Milingen’s phrase, “might have vied with Apollo himself.” The public world generally witnessed the outpouring of energy and drive that these inner struggles produced. Byron’s swimming feats in Venice, challenging a Scotsman to race in the canals and swimming to Lido, his renowned horsemanship, and his Grecian

expedition, inspired by the high esteem he held for Napoleon and George Washington, all may be ascribed to the outpouring of Byron's conflicted spirit. Perhaps at times his literary feats may pour from the same vein, but the two energies seem to aim at different goals. Read claims that Byron "loved as he wrote- to escape himself," but his athletic feats seem to be a more involuntary outgrowth, as if they were escaping from Byron like steam escapes from a train's stack. Byron's inner struggle seems to have required the release of physical energy in the manner of a combustion engine.

Byron's drive and struggle ultimately come to be seen in the light that Byron himself may have actually seen it, as human vulnerability. Byron was not the untouchable god-like ideal that he seems to have been reaching for; but he kept reaching, not as much to attain the ideal, as to thrive off of the spirit of the struggle. The pure thrill of competition, whether it was against another man, himself, or his condition, was the driving force of Byron's athleticism.

Byron's heroism for succeeding in the face of a physical ailment, such as with his swimming feats, is characteristically modern, because in modern sports, the greatest heroes and the ones who win laurels when they are not supposed to, despite bruised bodies and broken bones. It is vulnerability that allows us to identify with sports heroes today. This obsession with sports heroes struggling with the physical human condition is a reason why the use of steroids is so repulsive in the athletic arena. Modern culture wants to see athlete's struggle with their own limitations, to push the brink of the possibility of human endeavour without any medicinal or immortal aid. It is this presence of vulnerability, of one man grappling against his own mind and body that draws modern

thinkers towards a fascination with the character of Lord Byron. Modern man seems to believe if he can conquer himself he can conquer anything.

So, despite the presence of contradictory evidence pertaining to the details of Byron's foot, the existence of a certain mental perception in Byron's psychological state can be established. This psychological state, exaggerating the case of an ailment, which expanded the glory of accomplishment in the physical arena places Byron's athletic outlook in the spectrum of modern athletic culture. The same character which gave the literary world the "Byron" character, may also have helped to expand the role of the "underdog" in the modern athletic consciousness.

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