

Byron's legacy, and Byron's inheritance

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Byron's principal bequest to Europe was the Byronic hero, that dead-end character who can achieve nothing, because he's not convinced that he's really a member of the human race:

He knew himself detested, but he knew
The hearts that loathed him, crouched and dreaded too.
Lone, wild, and strange, he stood alike exempt
From all affection and from all contempt ...¹

Fatally attractive in his gloom, alienation, "Weltschmerz und Skeptizismus",² he leads at once to the heroes of Pushkin's *Eastern Tales*, later to Pushkin's satirically-rendered Evgeny Onegin, to the Superfluous Man of nineteenth-century Russian fiction, and to other variants. He leads to Lermontov's Pechorin, to Musset's Rolla, and later still to Huysmans' *Des Esseintes* – another comic version of him.

The comic versions owe little or nothing to Byron's own well-attested capacity for self-mockery, of which I shall speak later. The "Byronic" original is not funny, and the "Byronic" myth allows no room for the real Byron's sense of humour.

This "Byronic" Hero is seen at his most extreme in such figures as Baudelaire's Prince, of whom the poet laments that he is:

Riche, mais impuissant, jeune et pourtant très-vieux,
Qui, de ses précepteurs méprisant les courbettes,
S'ennuie avec ses chiens comme avec d'autres bêtes.
Rien ne peut l'égayer, ni gibier, ni faucon,
Ni son peuple mourant en face du balcon.

["... rich, but powerless, young, yet very old, who, despising the kow-tows of his advisers, is bored by his dogs, as by other beasts. Nothing can cheer him, neither sport, nor falcon, nor his subjects dying before his balcony".]

The Byronic Hero exists either to be shunned by his fellows, or to be loved hopelessly by a good woman, or to be shot. The lesser literature of the nineteenth-century is strewn with brigands, pirates, alienated intellectuals, disillusioned politicians, and suicidal poets, all deriving from the early heroes of Byron – just as the literary history of the century is strewn with the corpses of writers – Pushkin, Lermontov, Espronceda, Musset – who died early, under the impression that they were imitating him.

First- and second-generation Byronism was a misanthropic, nihilistic cul-de-sac. The Russians were completely taken in by it, and loved it. Dostoevsky took it very seriously, and wrote of it:

BLJ: *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols, John Murray, 1973-94. **CMP:** *Lord Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Andrew Nicholson, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991. **LJM:** *The Letters of John Murray to Lord Byron*, ed. Andrew Nicholson, Liverpool University Press, 2007.

1: *The Corsair*, 269-72.

2: Max Simhart, *Lord Byrons Einfluss auf die italienischen Literatur*, Leipzig 1909, p.29.

First of all, one shouldn't use the word 'Byronist' as an insult. Byronism, though a momentary phenomenon, was a great, sacred and necessary one in the life of European mankind and, perhaps, in that of the entire human race. Byronism appeared at a moment of dreadful anguish and disillusionment among men. After the ecstatic transports at the new ideals proclaimed at the end of the previous century in France, then the most progressive nation of European mankind, the outcome was very different from what had been expected; this so deceived the faith of man, that there has never perhaps been a sadder moment in the history of Western Europe. The new idols – raised for one moment only – fell not only as a result of political causes, but because of their innate bankruptcy – which was clearly perceived by the wise hearts and progressive minds. The new *outcome* was not yet in sight; the new valve was not yet opened, and everybody was suffocating under the weight of a former world, which drew itself down over mankind in a most dreadful manner. The old idols lay shattered.

At this very moment a great and mighty genius, a passionate poet, appeared. In his melodies there sounded all the anguish mankind felt in those days, its gloomy disillusionment in its mission, and in the ideals which had deceived it. It was a novel, hitherto unheard-of muse, of vengeance and sorrow, cursing and despair. The spirit of Byronism swept mankind as a whole, and everything responded to it. It was precisely as if a valve had been opened: amidst the universal and dull groans – mostly inarticulate – this was a mighty outcry, in which all the cries of mankind combined in one chord. How could it not have been felt in Russia, and particularly by so great, ingenious and pioneering a mind as that of Pushkin? – So in those days, no strong mind in Russia, no magnanimous heart, could have avoided Byronism. And not only because of distant compassion for Europe and European mankind, but because precisely at that time in Russia, too, there arose a great many unsolved and tormenting questions, a great many old disillusionments
 ...³

The “new *outcome*” (“новый *исход*”) to which the slavophile Dostoevsky would have us believe Byronism blinded Europe temporarily, is, he tells us a few lines later, “преклонение перед правдой народа русского” – “the worship of the truth of the Russian people”. Now, we have to admit with the hindsight of 2007 that, much as we love the Russian people, the “truth” they embodied or embody has not been of much benefit to anyone, least of all to them: perhaps if Dostoevsky had foreseen the story of Russia in the twentieth century he would have seen Byronism in a still more favourable light.

Variants of the Byronic hero appear in the nineteenth-century English novel, often as a seducer: George Staunton in *The Heart of Midlothian*, Steerforth in *David Copperfield*. Not until the twentieth century did the four great English-language modernists, Eliot, Yeats, Pound, and, especially, Joyce, find (in their very different idioms), more to derive from Byron than just sex and alienation.

Byron would have been intrigued by this final outcome (imagine him reading the Cantos for the first time), but very amused and / or frustrated indeed by the interim development. For the Byronic Hero and the tales from which he derived – “my Harrys and Larrys, Pilgrims and Pirates”, as he described them⁴ – constituted a

3: Dostoevsky, Journal for November 1877, HAYK Dostoevsky, XXVI, pp.113-14: tr. Boris Brasol as Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Journals, The Diary of a Writer*, Cassell 1949, p.939 (adapted).

4: BLJ IV 252-3.

dead-end in his own work: a dead end which, however, received maximum publicity, thanks to its novelty (for, though largely literary in inspiration, it was imagined to be autobiographical), and thanks to the speed with which, via post-Waterloo French prose translations, it was disseminated throughout Europe. But the poems upon which it was based were written carelessly, at high speed. Byron became ashamed of having pandered to what he saw, even as he wrote, as the debased taste of a public with no literary standards:

They [*modern poets*] have raised a Mosque by the side of a Grecian temple of the purest Architecture [*the legacy of Pope*] – and more barbarous than the Barbarians from whose practise I have borrowed the figure – they are not contented with their own grotesque edifice – unless they destroy the prior and beautiful fabric which preceded and shames them & their forever and ever. – – I shall be told that amongst these – I *have* been – (or it may be still *am*) conspicuous; – true – and I am ashamed of it; – I *have* been among the builders of this Babel attended by a confusion of tongues – but never amongst the envious destroyers of the classic temple of our Predecessor. I have loved and honoured the fame and name of that illustrious and unrivalled man – far more than my own paltry renown.⁵

When Byron found his real forte as a writer – in 1817, with *Beppo* – the earlier “Byron” had taken too strong a hold on the imagination of the world to be shaken off. Byron’s own inability to relinquish the idiom completely, as, for example, in the figure of Fletcher Christian in *The Island*, a poem written for a readership to whose low appetite Byron was pandering, did not help.

We could discuss endlessly who was to blame for “Byronism” and “the Byronic hero”: ultimately, however, it was Byron himself.

When we look at what Byron inherited via his haphazard but capacious reading from the European tradition, we find that the ingredients which make “Byronism” and “the Byronic Hero” make up only a small fragment of it. Two of his favourite writers were the eighteenth-century rationalists Voltaire and Pierre Bayle, without whose voluminous complete works he felt almost unable to travel.⁶ In them he would have found much material for the scepticism which marks his poems and plays about religion (not a subject about which the Byronic Hero, irreligious though he may appear, thinks *rationally* at all). The following thought from Bayle’s Dictionary, about God the Father, goes straight into *Cain*:

This is to compare the Deity to a Father who should suffer his Children to break their legs on purpose to show his City his great Art in setting their Broken Bones; or to a King who should suffer Seditions and Factions to encrease thro’ all his Kingdom, that he might purchase the Glory of quelling them. The Conduct of this Father and Monarch is so contrary to the clear and distinct ideas, according to which we judge of Goodness and Wisdom, and in general of the whole Duty of a

5: *Letter to John Murray Esquire*; CMP 148-9.

6: See BLJ VIII 238.

Father and a King, that our Reason cannot conceive how God can make use of the same.⁷

Eighteenth-century scepticism was only one thread of Byron's reading. While writing the Turkish Tales, from which "Byronism" sprang, he made a thorough study of the Italian epic verse tradition. Between 1813 and 1816⁸ he bought two complete copies of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*,⁹ three copies of Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*,¹⁰ plus at least two copies of Dante's *Divine Comedy*,¹¹ and assisted himself by learning Italian systematically.¹² He also bought Black's *Life of Tasso*,¹³ a thirteen-volume Machiavelli,¹⁴ and Goldoni's Memoirs.¹⁵ To get it all in perspective he bought an 1813 edition of Sismondi's *de la Littérature du Midi*.¹⁶ Much of this research and reading gets into *Don Juan*. Thus, simultaneously with sowing the seeds of "Byronism" via *The Corsair*, *Lara*, and so on, he was preparing himself for "Byronism's" antidote. The Siege Cantos of *Don Juan* – in which a Christian army besieges and sacks an Islamic town – have as models similar sieges and sacks in the *Morgante Maggiore*, the *Orlando Furioso*, and the *Gerusalemme Liberata*. When Ariosto recounts the aftermath of a successful siege, in which a Christian army captures the Islamic city of Bizerta in North Africa, he lets slip, in his honesty, some details at which Byron would have nodded grimly:

con quel furor l'impetuosa gente,
là dove avea in più parti il muro rotto,
entrò col ferro e con la face ardente
a distruggere il popul mal condotto.
Omicidio, rapina e man violente
nel sangue e ne l'aver, trasse di botto
la ricca e trionfal città a ruina,
che fu di tutta l'Africa regina.¹⁷

[Such was the violence of the impetuous host as it surged through the gaps in the walls into the city to destroy the ill-captained Saracens with fire and sword. Murder, robbery and violence done to life and property hastened the downfall of the rich, triumphant city which had once been queen of all Africa.]

When Byron has a siege in *Don Juan*, he chooses, from the many that had occurred in the years since he'd been born, a horrible but not very famous one from the Turkish Wars of Catherine the Great. Surely he did so because it was one of the few modern examples of a Christian army besieging a Moslem town, as in Ariosto:

7: Bayle's Dictionary, 1710 English translation, IV 2488: chapter on Paulicians, nE: compare *Cain*, II ii 289-305.

8: Byron's library sale catalogues will be found at CMP 231-54 and LJM 506-16; see also <http://www.internationalbyronsociety.org/images/stories/pdf_files/sale_catalogues.pdf>.

9: 1816 catalogue, 28 and 29.

10: 1816, 310, 311: one an 1813 set.

11: 1816, 93, 310, 311.

12: See 1816, 19 and 53.

13: 1816, 147.

14: 1816, 239.

15: 1816, 240.

16: 1816, 292.

17: Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso* 40, st.32

But let me put an end unto my theme –
 There was an end of Ismail – hapless town!
 Far flashed her burning towers o'er Danube's stream,
 And redly ran his blushing waters down;
 The horrid War-whoop and the shriller Scream
 Rose still; but fainter were the thunders grown;
 Of forty thousand who had manned her wall,
 Some hundreds breathed – the rest were silent all!¹⁸

These and other important themes in Byron's work form no part of nineteenth-century "Byronism". What Byron expressed in his best poetry is the opposite of what his immediate readership, and the readership of the nineteenth century, claimed it had discovered. This readership perceived *Don Juan* as a regrettable aberration.

To examine further what Byron valued most in his reading, I want to examine, not his poems and plays, nor his library sales catalogues, but the commonest quotations and references in his letters. Here, in his private communications, we surely find which books meant most to him, even though in his literary output we may not find many traces of them. The question I wish to ask is, with which characters from fiction did he most empathise? Where did he find the figures which reminded him most of himself?

I find three books being referred to over and over again by Byron in his letters: they are Shakespeare's *Henry IV* part I, Sheridan's *The Critic*, and the novel *Gil Blas*, by Alain René le Sage.

At *Don Juan* I, 125, Byron writes,

Sweet is a legacy, and passing sweet
 The unexpected death of some old Lady
 Or Gentleman of seventy years complete,
 Who've made "us youth" wait too – too long already
 For a estate, or cash, or country-seat ...

It's a reference to his mother-in-law, Lady Noel, from whose death he expects to benefit (she was still alive when *Don Juan* I was published). The two-word phrase "us youth" is Byron's favourite Shakespearean quotation; it occurs more often in his letters than any other,¹⁹ and is part of Falstaff's cry (*They hate us youth!*) as he ambushes the travellers on Gad's Hill, at *Henry IV* i II ii 85. The irony is (i) against Falstaff, who is no youth, and (ii) against Byron, who is no youth either: losing his youth was a fate which he did not anticipate with pleasure, and, like Falstaff, he joked about it to cover his gloom:

Falstaff: You that are old consider not the capacities of us that are young; you do measure the heat of our livers with the bitterness of your galls: and we that

18: Byron, *Don Juan* VIII, st.123.

19: See BLJ III 15, 160, 161, 250, IV 115, VI 60, 200, and VII 231.

are in the vaward of our youth, I must confess, are wags too.

Lord Chief-Justice: Do you set down your name in the scroll of youth, that are written down old with all the characters of age? Have you not a moist eye? a dry hand? A yellow cheek? a white beard? a decreasing leg? An increasing belly? is not your voice broken? Your wind short? your chin double? your wit single? And every part about you blasted with antiquity? And will you yet call yourself young? Fie, fie, fie, Sir John!

Falstaff: My lord, I was born about three of the clock in the afternoon, with a white head and something a round belly. For my voice, I have lost it with halloing and singing of anthems.²⁰

A doomed, Byronic version of Falstaff can be sensed subtextually beneath much of *Don Juan*. Byron often identifies with the heroic, tragic figures of Macbeth and Coriolanus; but it's the comic, overweight, almost-over-the-hill Sir John Falstaff who, from the Shakespearean gallery, means most to him in terms of his private self-image.

Falstaff is of course famous for being fraudulent through and through (it's because he's so openly mendacious and fake that we love him so much). A more neurotically fraudulent character is the fifth-rate playwright Sir Fretful Plagiary in Act I of *The Critic*, by Byron's drunken friend Sheridan. Where Falstaff revels openly in his mendacity, Sir Fretful pretends all the time to be sincere. He demands honest criticism of his plays, but when he gets it he can't accept it, and ascribes it to bad motives:

Sir Fretful: I say nothing – I take away from no man's merit – am hurt at no man's good fortune – I say nothing. – But this I will say – through all my knowledge of life, I have observed – that there is not a passion so strongly rooted in the human heart as envy!²¹

His two-facedness invites ridicule, which he receives in abundance – and from those who claim to be his friends. By the end of the scene, he has been goaded into a kind of self-realisation:

Dangle: A severe rogue! ha! ha! ha! But you are quite right, Sir Fretful, never to read such nonsense.

Sir Fretful: To be sure – for if there is anything to one's praise, it is a foolish vanity to be gratified at it; and, if it is abuse – why one is always sure to hear of it from one damned good-natured friend or other!

... let me tell you, if you continue to believe this, you must mean to insult me, gentlemen – and, then, your disrespect will affect me no more than the newspaper criticisms – and I shall treat it with exactly the same calm indifference and philosophic contempt – and so your servant. (*Exit.*)²²

This sad character seems to have got under Byron's skin like few others. He is always quoting him in letters. On May 5th 1810 he writes: "My friend H. is naturally anxious on the head of his rhymes ... but he has not yet acquired the 'calm

20: Shakespeare, *Henry IV II* 166-78.

21: Sheridan, *The Critic*, I i.

22: Ibid.

indifference' (as Sir Fretful has it), of us old Authors".²³ On June 12th 1813, he writes about a book called "Strictures on Lord Byron": "I may enjoy it like Sir Fretful or the Archbishop of Granada".²⁴ On August 22nd 1813, he quotes Sir Fretful again: "Mr Jeffrey (or his deputy) 'has done the handsome thing by me,' and I say nothing. But this I will say ..."²⁵ On September 18th 1815 he writes, "one thing you may be sure of – if there is any thing bad you will always as Sheridan says 'find some damned good natured friend or other to tell it you'".²⁶ Faced with criticism, it pleases him to take Sir Fretful as his model of deportment.

"The Archbishop of Granada", whom Byron associates with Sir Fretful, is from le Sage's picaresque novel *Gil Blas* (1715-35). One episode from this book made such an impact on Byron that he returns to it nine times in his correspondence.²⁷ In the seventh book, Gil Blas becomes secretary to the Archbishop of Granada, who is struck by his fine taste in letters. The Archbishop is old, and commands that, when his sermons begin to lose their quality, Gil, whose frankness he values, should tell him so at once. The time comes when, after an apoplexy, it's clear that his touch has gone, and Gil tells him so: but the Archbishop's reaction is not a humble one:

"I were unfit to live in a Christian land!" interrupted he, with stammering impatience; "I were unfit to live in a Christian land if I liked you the less for such a Christian virtue as sincerity. A man who does not love sincerity sets his face against the distinguishing mark between a friend and a flatterer. I should have given you infinite credit for speaking what you thought, if you had thought anything that deserved to be spoken. I have been finely taken in by your outside shew of cleverness, without any solid foundation of sober judgment!"

Though completely unhorsed, and at the enemy's mercy, I wanted to make terms of decent capitulation, and to go unmolested into winter quarters: but let those who think to appease an exasperated author, and especially an author whose ear has been long attuned to the music of his own praises, take warning by my fate. "Let us talk no more on the subject, my very young friend," said he. "You are as yet scarcely in the rudiments of good taste, and utterly incompetent to distinguish between gold and tinsel. You are yet to learn that I never in all my life composed a finer homily than that unfortunate one which had not the honour of your approbation. The immortal part of me, by the blessing of heaven on me and my congregation, is less weighed down by human infirmity than when the flesh was stronger. We all grow wiser as we grow older, and I shall in future select the people about me with more caution; nor submit the castigation of my works but to a much abler critic than yourself. Get about your business!" pursued he, giving me an angry shove by the shoulders out of his closet; "go and tell my treasurer to pay you a hundred ducats, and take my priestly blessing in addition to that sum. God speed you, good Master Gil Blas! I heartily pray that you may do well in the world! There is nothing to stand in your way, but the want of a little better taste."²⁸

23: BLJ I 241: see also IV 50 and 51.

24: BLJ III 61.

25: BLJ II 94: see also V 198, and *Beppo*, 96, 5.

26: BLJ IV 313: see also IV 78, VI 107, X 141.

27: See BLJ I, 111 (to William Bankes); II, 63 (to William Miller); III, 61, V, 211, VI, 61, VII, 168, and VIII, 88 (all to Murray); VI, 212 (to Hobhouse); and XI, 25 (to Moore).

28: *Gil Blas*, VII, 4; translation by Tobias Smollett.

On each occasion in his letters, Byron takes on the role either of the Archbishop, or of Sir Fretful: that is, of one who needs criticism, asks for it, but is unable to take it when it comes.

Sir John Falstaff, Sir Fretful Plagiary, and the Archbishop of Granada. These characters do not at first seem at all like Conrad, Lara, or Childe Harold – still less like Evgeny Onegin, or Pechorin, A Hero of Our Time. But are they really so unlike? I believe not. They all have one dreadful problem in common: all exist beyond the pale of human discourse, and have to be rejected. Falstaff, the consummate liar, believes in a fantasy-future in which he will become the most powerful man in the country: his disillusion kills him. Sir Fretful leaves the stage in humiliation at the end of Act I, and has no further part in the pageant. Obviously the Archbishop remains in his pulpit; but we can see he has no future there – perhaps another apoplexy will carry him off in mid-sermon. That Byron should – in the spontaneity of his private letters – identify himself with such men, shows a sense of humour, a humility, an acknowledgement of his common fallibility and humanity, which is absent from the supposed self-depictions in his “Byronic” verse.

It has a worrying undercurrent, however, in line with the self-deprecation we find here:

But I am but a nameless sort of person
 (A broken Dandy lately on my travels)
 And take for Rhyme, to hook my rambling verse on,
 The first that Walker’s Lexicon unravels,
 And when I can’t find that, I put a worse on,
 Not caring as I ought for Critics’ cavils;
 I’ve half a mind to tumble down to prose,
 But Verse is more in fashion – so here goes!²⁹

Once he left England, though fame pursued him, a “rambling”, “tumbling”, “nameless” “broken Dandy” was what, in effect, he became. He was as alienated from his social context as Falstaff, Sir Fretful, and the Archbishop were in their idioms – or as Lara, Harold, or the Giaour were in theirs. The only difference was that – unlike the paranoid Sir Fretful or the hypersensitive Archbishop – he really did care “[n]ought for Critics’ cavils”. Had he done so, *Don Juan* would have stopped at the second canto; and *Don Juan* drove an even greater wedge between himself and his old friends in England.

Only in his death, here in Missolonghi, did he attain – perhaps – a measure of oneness with the world.

29: *Beppo*, st.52.