

Byron, Sport and the Classics

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Byron's sporting endeavours have yielded some interesting episodes in biographies of the poet. The activities most frequently referred to include Byron's boxing lessons under 'Gentleman' John Jackson from 1808, the swim following the cremation of Williams at Viareggio in 1822, and, most of all, the crossing of the Hellespont in 1810. However, biographers tend to treat these feats anecdotally, citing sports as no more than incidental hobbies of Byron. Neither Leslie Marchand, Benita Eisler, nor Fiona MacCarthy's biographies of Byron relate these physical exertions to the man's works¹. As a result, we are frequently presented with studies that separate the man from the poet, leaving Byron enigmatic and fragmented.

Recent decades have produced studies of Byron that examine him as a man in unprecedented detail, and a more complex figure has emerged than was previously known to scholars. There is a new emphasis on the corporeal Byron, which is exemplified by studies of his portraits and his diet. For example, Byron's changing appearance in portraits has been examined by Christine Kenyon Jones in an essay which suggests that the nineteenth-century's enthusiasm for reproducing Byron's portraits, often inaccurately, has led to an assumption of familiarity with the poet's features.² In turn, this supposition of knowledge has caused a neglect in the study Byron's actual appearance in the original paintings; we take the

¹ The biographies in question are Leslie Marchand's *Byron: A Biography*, 3 vols (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), Benita Eisler's *Byron: Child of Passion, Fool of Fame* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1999), and Fiona MacCarthy's *Byron: Life and Legend* (London: John Murray, 2002).

² Christine Kenyon Jones, 'Fantasy and Transfiguration: Byron and his Portraits', in *Byromania: Portraits of the Artist in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Culture*, ed. By Frances Wilson (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1999) pp.109-36.

details for granted. This is comparable to the treatment of Byron's sporting interests, which are quite often referred to, but rarely explored; and still less frequently interpreted as a significant part of his personality.

Byron's eating habits have recently generated even more interest than the portraits. Wilma Paterson and Jeremy Hugh Baron propound that modern medicine would consider Byron to be bulimic, or anorexic, yielding scientific studies which chart Byron's fluctuating weight and various diets in detail³. With this new emphasis on Byron's physique, it is logical that his exercising habits should be analysed as closely as his diet continues to be. Diet and sport are obviously connected, as exertion contributed to Byron's weight as his diet did. As the sensuous Romantic poet's attitude to food interests his readers, so too should his exercising habits: it is fascinating that Byron should be unsatisfied by the conventional walking tours and mountain hiking of his time. While contemporaries such as Wordsworth and Coleridge seldom engaged in any exercise other than hiking, Byron was drawn towards more challenging activities such as swimming, boxing, riding, and fencing. And Byron's sporting activities are of interest to us because they are alluded to in his poetry and written of in his journals, and in each of these he suggests that there is more than physical enjoyment in question. Byron reveals strong psychological issues when he writes of exercise, and his sporting interests are often connected to his reading habits- including his study of the Classics. Byron's 'Childish Recollections' establishes his interest in sport from a young age, as release from the constraint of the classroom :

³ Studies of Byron's diet include Wilma Paterson's *Lord Byron's Relish: The Regency Cookery Book* (Glasgow: Dog and Bone, 1990) and Peter W. Graham's "The Order and Disorder of Eating in Lord Byron's *Don Juan*" in *Disorderly Eaters: Texts in Self-Empowerment*, ed. by Lillian R. Furst and Peter W. Graham (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992) pp. 113-23.

Yet when confinement's lingering hour was done,
 Our sports, our studies, and our souls were one:
 Together we impell'd the flying ball,
 Together waited in our tutor's hall;
 Together join'd in cricket's manly toil,
 Or shared the produce of the river's spoil;
 Or, plunging from the green, declining shore,
 Our pliant limbs the buoyant waters bore;
 In every element, unchanged, the same,
 All, all that brothers should be, but the name.

(‘Childish Recollections’ 255-64)

Recalling Gray’s ‘Elegy on a Distant Prospect of Eton College’, Byron’s lines reveal a typical schoolboy’s interest in team sports. This is interesting because later in life Byron would dedicate himself to non-team activities such as swimming and boxing. There is a parallel evident between Byron’s development as a sportsman and poet: his interest in team sports yielded to a preference for more isolated activities, and his travails with books moved from the society of work in the classroom to reading and composing poetry alone. Byron’s early association of sport with study should also be noted: as we shall see, he maintained a mental connection between exercise and literature throughout his life, the balance of his hobbies suggesting that unity of being was an important concept to the man.

Approximately half of a pupil’s studies at Harrow- Byron’s school- were devoted to ancient Greek and Latin literature. Dr Glennie, treating young Byron’s deformed foot, found

that the boy ‘was far beyond the usual standard of his age’.⁴ This was before Byron enrolled at Harrow, where he found himself struggling to keep up. But in spite of the shortcomings of his own Greek hexameters, Byron had great enthusiasm for his early studies. Of all his reading matter, Byron informed Murray in October 1817 that Aeschylus’ ‘*Prometheus...* has always been so much in my head, that I can easily conceive its influence over all or any thing that I have written.’⁵ In addition to stealing Hephaestus’ fire, Prometheus is guilty of a lesser-known crime: he steals knowledge of Athena’s arts. Plato offers one account of this myth in *Protagoras*. In this context, Athena’s knowledge is of exercises promoting fitness and combative expertise. In Plato’s view, exercise alone is insufficient. Body and soul are indivisible, and the balanced individual requires not only a programme of exercise, but a study of poetry. Knowledge of poetry, to Plato, improves the soul to ensure that it will care for the body (*Republic* 410c). Byron’s unfinished drama *Heaven and Earth* reveals his familiarity with the concept of the body and soul’s insoluble union. His reading would also have led him to Plato’s promotion of sensible eating, in which Socrates cites Homer’s Argives as the paradigm of a healthy diet: waiting on the banks of the Hellespont, the warriors abstain from desserts, wine, and fish.⁶ We are not to deduce that, when eating or paddling in the ocean, Byron was acting under orders from Greek philosophers or tragedians, but the connections between his various interests may yield a deeper understanding of the man.

The Hellespont is the setting for Byron’s most celebrated sporting feat. On crossing the river, he wrote to Francis Hodgson that ‘I plume myself on this achievement more than I

⁴ Thomas Moore, ‘Notices of the Life of Lord Byron’, in *The Works of Lord Byron: With His Letters and Journals, and His Life*, (London: John Murray, 1835) in *English History* <http://englishhistory.net/byron/moorebyron.html> [accessed 5 July 2004]

⁵ Lord Byron, *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (London: John Murray, 1973-82), V, 268.

⁶ *Iliad* XIX.

could possibly do on any kind of glory, political, poetical, and rhetorical.’⁷ Byron’s pride is remarkable because he had in fact already undertaken ‘a longer, rougher swim’ of the Tagus in July 1809.⁸ Of this earlier feat, Byron’s only documentation is in a letter to Francis Hodgson in which he lists some events of his tour to date: ‘I swims in the Tagus all across at once, and I rides on an ass or a mule, and swears Portuguese, and have got a diarrhoea and bites from the mosquitoes.’⁹ While the babyish language emphasises the achievement with the tautology of ‘all across at once’, suggesting that Byron does wish for Hodgson’s admiration, the humorous phrasing and the swim’s inclusion in a list with mules and insect bites does not suggest that Byron was awestruck by the significance of his crossing the Tagus. He presents the swim ironically as so mundane an occurrence as the utterance of an obscene word. This irony is suggestive of a false modesty, and that Byron actually did recognise the worth of his achievement, but he did not consider the Tagus episode worthy of commemoration in verse. The occasion of swimming the Hellespont remains superior in Byron’s opinion because of the location’s literary associations: he was rereading Homer as he visited what he believed was the site of Troy, and was also familiar with Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander*, in which Leander undertakes the same swim across the Hellespont.

Bernard Blackstone sees Byron’s swim as ‘a work of historical salvage, a revisitation through living action of a portion of the past into the present, an act of piety, a triumph over time.’¹⁰ If Byron displays ‘piety’, it is to ancient literature, ‘whose triumph over time’ is its enduring quality in contrast to the contemporaries whom Byron detests: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott, and others attacked in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. Byron’s swim,

⁷ Lord Byron, *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, I, 240.

⁸ Benita Eisler, *Byron: Child of Passion, Fool of Fame* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1999) p. 258.

⁹ Lord Byron, *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, I, 215.

¹⁰ Bernard Blackstone, *Byron: A Survey* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1975) p. 57.

therefore, is not one of ‘historical salvage’, but of *mythological* salvage, and his writings indicate his awareness of this. In an analysis of an 1821 journal entry, in which Byron mulls over a list of authors to whom he has been compared (including Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides), Peter Graham deems the poet ‘reluctant to admit how fascinated he is by the making of his own myth.’¹¹ In swimming the Hellespont Byron resurrects a mythical past, and seeks to mythologise himself. His method of accomplishing this is not ‘reluctant’, perhaps, but tactful: rather than explicitly gloating over his feat, Byron juxtaposes himself with his famous predecessor, Leander, leaving the reader to equate the two.

The media of Byron’s self-mythologisation are poetry and prose. Benita Eisler surveys his correspondence: ‘Months after the event, he mentioned the achievement in every letter- sometimes twice to the same recipient.’¹² These letters included one to Henry Drury with whom Byron had made no contact for over a year. His letter is dated 3 May, the very day of his great feat. Six days later he chose to commemorate the event, and composed his stanzas ‘Written After Swimming from Sestos to Abydos’. This light piece reveals Byron’s real goal in pursuing fame, as he recalls Leander, asking, ‘What maid will not the tale remember?’

Having described the tempestuous conditions that threaten Leander, Byron’s poem concedes that his own swim has been undertaken in the more favourable weather of May. Hence, only a ‘gentle stretch’ has been necessary for the poet to emulate his Classical model. In literary terms, it also implies that the gods favour Byron’s attempt, and not Leander’s. The latter defies Neptune and drowns, while Byron humorously acknowledges the piety expected

¹¹ Peter Graham, “His Grand Show: Byron and the Art of Mythmaking”, in *Byromania: Portraits of the Artist in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Culture*, ed. by Frances Wilson (New York: St. Martin’s Press Inc., 1999) pp. 24-42.

¹² Eisler, *Byron: Child of Passion, Fool of Fame* p. 259.

of him with a reference to Venus. However, Byron's smugness is repaid with a bout of the ague. Wondering if he even swims the same body of water that claimed his predecessor- if Leander swam at all- Byron displays an ironic, gentlemanly modesty towards his model and rival, which is humorous because it is inappropriate: Leander cannot answer Byron, and the competition exists only in the poet's mind. Realising how tenuous the connection between his experience and that of a legendary figure is, Byron wonders whether or not he has 'done a feat to-day'. The Hellespont has not challenged Byron sufficiently, so he must find a new means of mythologizing himself. In the poem's commentary, he decides to present himself as a man of unprecedented shrewdness instead of a remarkable swimmer: 'the only thing that surprised me was that, as doubts had been ascertained of the truth of Leander's story, no traveller had endeavoured to ascertain its practicality.'

The turning point of the poem is Byron's acknowledgement that Leander's tale is a 'doubtful story'. His feat is not so marvellous as once it seemed, and to swim 'for Glory' is therefore, in Byron's view, as futile as to do so 'for love', which costs Leander his life. However, while the poem's commentary suggests that Byron be remembered as a man of uncommon practicality, his letter to Henry Drury insists on his strength and bravery: 'the current renders it hazardous, so much so, that I doubt whether Leander's conjugal powers must not have been exhausted in his passage to paradise.'¹³ This implies greater exertion than a 'gentle stretch'. Giving varied accounts across different media- with different emphases- would increase the chance of Byron's myth surviving: after all, different tales of Prometheus and Leander existed in folklore for centuries before Aeschylus' and Ovid's respective treatments. More significantly, the inconsistent reports indicate Byron's developing senses of audience and self-presentation. He may realise that the vanity of the letter to Henry Drury, boasting of the 'hazardous' current and the exhaustion that results in overcoming it, would be

¹³ Lord Byron, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, I, 237.

unsuitable in a poem whose reader might be familiar with accounts of more accomplished swimmers such as Byron refers to in the commentary: to his Hellespont poem. He mentions a Jew and a Neapolitan who swam the same distance, and the crew of the *Salsette*- including the poet John Clare's uncle- some of whom swam further still. Byron realises that it is best not to praise himself for anything other than 'practicality', and so governs his vanity with a tongue-in-cheek humour when comparing himself to Leander. He presents himself with a false modesty comparable to that in the baby talk with which he describes the crossing of the Tagus.

As a further note on Byron's unprecedented practicality, those considering the emulation of his feat might be interested in the following: www.swimtrek.com offers the opportunity to 'Swim from Asia to Europe in the footsteps of Leander & Byron', although the website does not elaborate on the feasibility or practicality of 'swimming' in anybody's footsteps. Despite this cynicism, however, it is apparent that Byron's quest for 'Glory' has resulted in the survival of his myth and name outside the media of poetry and letters, and in the unlikely realm of the package holiday.

Yet Byron's swim across the Hellespont should not be dismissed as merely an egotistical quest for 'Glory', in spite of the facetious tone of his lines 'Written After Swimming from Sestos to Abydos'. The subject of personal triumph has broader implications concerning questions of identity and self-acceptance. Byron seeks a kind of 'Glory' to pursue instead of the paths to fame that seem unlikely: the 'political, poetical, or rhetorical'. In 1809, Byron was snubbed by a relation, Lord Carlisle, who could have introduced him in the House of Lords, but declined to do so. Instead, Byron underwent a tedious process of proving his genealogy. In March of that year Byron took his seat in the House of Lords, but felt humiliated at the manner in which he was introduced, and felt gloomy about the political career he had wished for. He was also uncertain of his future prospects as a poet: his *Hours*

of *Idleness*, published in 1807, had been savaged, especially, to Byron's intense disappointment, by the *Edinburgh Review* (in February 1808). This had been followed by the positive sales figures for *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809), but this did not imply lasting success.

Byron needed self-definition, and was unable to satisfy this need through intellectual pursuits. Physical condition, of which he was acutely self-conscious, also contributed to the formation of Byron's sense of his own identity. On entering Cambridge in 1806, Byron weighed 14stone 6lb; arguably obese for man whose height was 5ft 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. In July 1811, the month of his return from the Grand Tour, Byron's weight was 9 stone 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ lb. This weight loss was partly due to exercise and heat, but also to Byron's abstemious diet of vegetables, and avoidance of alcohol. However, Byron could do little to conceal his lameness. The only activity in which this was not a hindrance was swimming:

The waters offered freedom to a body more fettered than others and liberated his mind from the deadweight of frequent depression: "I delight in it [the sea]", he told a friend, "and come out with a buoyancy of spirits I never feel on any other occasion."¹⁴

In the *Remedia Amoris*, Ovid introduces Leander's tale to a discussion of exclusion, as the youth struggles to overcome elements that forbid his love (II.249-50). Lameness excluded Byron from many physical activities such as dancing. Thomas Moore writes of Byron's attempts to overcome this inability from a young age:

¹⁴ Benita Eisler, *Byron: Child of Passion, Fool of Fame* p. 259.

No sooner was the boy released for play, than he showed as much ambition to excel in all exercises as the most robust youth of the school; — "an ambition," adds Dr. Glennie... "which I have remarked to prevail in general in young persons labouring under similar defects of nature."¹⁵

In his triumphant swim of May 1810, Byron gains self-acceptance. To facilitate this need, his lines 'Written After Swimming from Sestos to Abydos' exclude Lieutenant Ekenhead, with whom Byron raced to cross the Hellespont, and who beat the poet by some five minutes. In *Don Juan*, whose composition was at a time when Byron's reputation as one of the country's most important poets was secure, Ekenhead is welcomed back into an account of the famous swim. Of Don Juan we are told that

A better swimmer you could scarce see ever,
 He could, perhaps, have pass'd the Hellespont,
 As once (a feat on which ourselves we prided)
 Leander, Mr. Ekenhead, and I did.

(*Don Juan* II.105)

The lines from *Don Juan* display the same amusingly inflated egotism as one finds in the poem from 3 May, 1810, but reverses Byron's trick from the earlier piece: in the lines 'Written After Swimming from Sestos to Abydos', Byron implies his worthiness as a mythical figure by associating himself with Leander, and alluding to Ovid and Marlowe. However, Don Juan's status as an accomplished swimmer is confirmed by the inclusion of

¹⁵ Thomas Moore, 'Notices of the Life of Lord Byron'.

his name in a line with Byron's and Ekenhead's. This is ironic because Don Juan was already a famous figure in Spanish folklore.

The connection of Don Juan to Byron affects our view of each. It hints at a greater resemblance than mere ability; otherwise the comparison would be unnecessary, as Byron has already demonstrated that Juan is a fine swimmer. Byron associates Juan with himself, and one is reminded of the Don Juan of folklore being renowned for amorous adventures, which hints at Byron's scandals with Lady Caroline Lamb and Annabella Milbanke; this much evoked by the connection of swimming.

Byron's writings from May 1810 also evoke speculation regarding his relationships to women, as a need for his mother's acceptance becomes apparent. His poem initially suggests that his swim is to win the approval and admiration of young women in general, as he asks 'What maid will not the tale remember?' This line is echoed in a letter Byron had wrote to his mother nine days after the composition of his poem, on 18 May 1810, in which he depicts himself 'in imitation of Monsieur Leander whose story you no doubt know too well for me to add any thing on the subject'.¹⁶ According to Thomas Moore, to whom the incident was supposedly related by Peter Browne, the Marquess of Sligo, in July 1810, Byron still blamed his mother for his deformity, and claimed that she mocked him for it. Revealing his lame foot, he is said to have declared that

"It is to her false delicacy at my birth I owe that deformity; and yet, as long as I can remember, she has never ceased to taunt and reproach me with it. Even a few days before we parted, for the last time, on my leaving England, she, in

¹⁶ Lord Byron, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, I, 242.

one of her fits of passion, uttered an imprecation upon me, praying that I might prove as ill-formed in mind as I am in body!"¹⁷

This comment, passing from Byron, to Sligo, to Moore, is suspect, but the letter to Catherine Gordon and the poem suggest that Byron did retain complex feelings for his mother: she has hurt him, he desires to wound her emotionally, but also seeks to impress her. Byron's claim that his mother will know the story of Leander 'too well' has an obvious air of sarcasm, and he delights in contriving 'to add any thing on the subject': the tone of his letter implies that proof of his sporting expertise would come as a great surprise to Catherine Gordon. Byron's poem, initially seeming light in tone, is misleading in claiming that he swims simply for 'glory', as thoughts of his troubled relationship with his mother are evident.

Another of Byron's swims took place on a more solemn occasion than in May 1810, but his feelings on this later exertion are unclear. The event was the cremation of Williams on 13 August, 1822, and the ceremony for Shelley was to follow two days later. Trelawney provides an account which is questionable because of his problematic acquaintance with Byron, and the lapse of thirty-four years between the events and their documentation: 'The Greek oration was omitted, for we had lost our Hellenic bard', he tells us, commenting that Byron swam to the Bolivar and back without considering the effort's purpose.¹⁸ Byron apparently retched, which, if true, may have been partly due to his unfitness and not distress alone. Leigh Hunt, recalling his first inspection of the poet in 1822, writes that 'I hardly knew him, he had grown so fat'¹⁹ (although Hunt, like Trelawney, was not on the best of

¹⁷ Thomas Moore, *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron, with Notices of his Life*, 2 vols, (Paris: Gagliami, 1829) I, 183.

¹⁸ Wright, David ed., *Records of Shelley, Byron, and the Author*, by Trelawney, Edward John (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1973)

¹⁹ Hunt, Leigh, *Lord Byron and Some of his Contemporaries*, 2nd ed., 2 vols, (London, 1828)

terms with Byron). Byron's creativity had been interfered with: since July 1821, he had not added to *Don Juan*, at the request of his mistress, Teresa Guccioli. There is an interesting contrast between the overweight Byron of 1822 and the fit, dieting Byron of 1810, who was immersed in composing whatever poetry he pleased. It suggests unity of being; that Byron was productive as a poet at times when he was in good physical condition. Byron seems to have resumed his old form following Shelley's death and his own swim, for he began to compose cantos VI, VII, and VIII in haste soon after. Byron had earlier used sporting activity as an outlet for grief following the death of his mother in 1811:

Calling for Robert Rushton to bring his boxing gloves for their daily session, he sparred without speaking, jabbing and pummelling with a violence he had never shown before, the page recalled. Then, abruptly, his master threw down the gloves and left the room.²⁰

Similar emotion may have been behind Byron's swim to the Bolivar on the occasion of Williams's cremation. There is also, perhaps, a symbolism which Trelawney overlooks: Trelawney alludes to Grecian themes by reference to the 'Hellenic orator', and pouring libations for the deceased is in keeping with sacrifices. In this context, Byron's swim might be seen as a sort of funeral game to honour the dead.

Swimming was not included either in the Olympics or in funeral games, as it was not seen as a competitive sport. Instead it was seen as a preparatory act. Byron also viewed exercise as a necessary prelude to different activity, but it could be poetical instead of physical. A journal entry describes Byron's mentality while composing *English Bards and*

²⁰ Eisler, *Byron: Child of Passion, Fool of Fame* pp. 293-4.

Scotch Reviewers as a response to the harsh treatment of *Hours of Idleness* by its critics. He explicitly links his creation to boxing:

I remembered only the maxim of my boxing-master, which, in my youth, was found useful in all general riots- 'Whoever is not for you is against you- *mill* away right and left', and so I did.²¹

Byron the boxer cuts a fascinating figure: questions are raised regarding the extent to which his agility was impaired by his limp, and the blend of sensitive artist and hardened fighter seems a precursor to Hemingway, quite unlike any of Byron's contemporary poets:

I used to be a hard hitter, and my arms are very long for my height (5 feet 81/2 inches). At any rate, exercise is good, and this the severest of all, fencing and the broad-sword never fatigued me half so much.²²

This bodes well for energetic satire, and Byron certainly employs the language of contest. The Preface opens with confrontational language, as Byron promises to counter-attack those who have volleyed 'paper bullets' at him. These enemies come 'with or without arms' to deride his work. He opines that there is a need for some 'Hercules'-himself- to 'crush the Hydra' that is the *Edinburgh Review*, but will content himself with injuring it. Byron accuses Francis Jeffrey, the most damning reviewer of *Hours of Idleness*, of lying for 'a sharper hit' (l. 71). By contrast, Byron claims that he himself is a methodical opponent, who knows 'when to spare, or where to strike' (91). Between flurries aimed at

²¹ Lord Byron, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, II, 330.

²² *Ibid.* II, 402.

Scott, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lewis and others, Byron returns for bouts with Jeffrey. On several instances, having moved his attention elsewhere, he begins a new verse paragraph to make a fresh, measured attack on Jeffrey, often opening a new barrage of biting comments with sarcasm: ‘Health to immortal Jeffrey’ he declares, subsequently rounding on this foe again with ‘Then prosper Jeffrey!’ (438, 528).

Byron claims that *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* takes its cues from boxing, but becomes a more serious contest because Jeffrey’s lying has, in Byron’s view, negated the rules. Plato suggests that common meals and gymnastic exercises have been invented by your legislators for the purpose of war (*Laws*). Not all boxers join armies, but Byron’s military interests are not incongruous with his highly competitive and confrontational attitude to sporting contests- and poetry. A journal entry from April 1814 further evinces the mental connections between Byron’s boxing, writing, military fascination and diet:

To-day I have boxed one hour—written an ode to Napoleon Buonaparte—copied it—eaten six biscuits—drunk four bottles of soda water—redde away the rest of my time.²³

This ‘day in the life’ demonstrates Byron’s creative fitness operating in tandem with his health. The ‘Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte’ also relates to his favourite Classical themes by allusion to Sylla and Prometheus.

Sporadically, Byron continued to exercise, and often did so to ready himself for serious engagements, including his involvement in the movement for Greek liberation. In the new year of 1824, Byron’s boat to Messolonghi took refuge in a secluded cove near

²³ Lord Byron, *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, III, 257.

Dragomestre. Despite the risk of Turkish ships passing and discovering the revolutionaries, Byron insisted on keeping his spirits high and maintaining good hygiene through exercise:

I thought the shortest way to kill the fleas- was to strip and take a swim...
contrary to the remonstrance of crew—passengers—and physician... and I
have been the better for it ever since.²⁴

Swimming was a part of Byron's self-imposed regime of exercise as he prepared to play a part in The Greek revolution- or so he hoped. In military matters as much as in poetic or in his sporting routine, Byron valued discipline, as indicated in the verses entitled, 'On This Day I Complete my Thirty-Sixth Year', in which Byron expresses his desire to behold signs of military organisation, 'The sword, the banner, and the field/ Glory and Greece around me see!' Unlike the lines 'Written After Swimming from Sestos to Abydos', the word 'glory' no longer applies to individual sporting or poetic success. 'Glory' has become a term of community and discipline, and Byron has made the transition that Sophocles did, from poet to general. Aeschylus too fought at Marathon in the fifth century BC. Byron's favourite tragedian was a believer in the Prometheus myth's message to the peasantry, that humanity could improve itself both on an individual and a social level. However, Aeschylus wrote his *Prometheus Bound* after the defeat of the Persians. Byron's revolution was still but a dream when he died, but one for which he was willing to give up his life: 'Up to the field, and give/ Away thy breath!' This is the same courage which led him to undertake a dangerous swim across the Hellespont that no real person was known to have completed. The martial significance of riding and shooting, two of Byron's other hobbies, should also be noted. Byron had conditioned himself to the point of resembling the leaders he admired, but through

²⁴ Lord Byron, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, XI, 91.

practical means in addition to self-mythologising: eating moderately, exercising, and following the example of his heroes, literary and military: Napoleon, Alexander the Great, Aeschylus .

Byron's death was not a 'romantic' one in any sense; he did not die a heroic general, as he wished to, nor did he commit suicide, impoverished, as Chatterton was thought to have done. He lay feverish, drained of his blood by leeches, with none of the imagined heroism of war. Even this, however, was an engagement with reality, akin to battling the currents of the Hellespont or sparring with John Jackson. In sport Byron became a man of action, which challenged the concept of the self-absorbed poet, depicted in an exaggerated manner in *Childe Harold* carrying his melancholy thoughts around Europe. Byron had completed the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in the weeks before swimming the Hellespont. Sport allowed Byron to unite his public self- the racing swimmer, and boxer, and fencer- with the private, the poet. Sport enabled him to combine poetry with 'real life' as he perceived it, the best example being *Don Juan*, whose controversial content of adultery and deception and sexually-charged women was defended by its author as realism.

The more deeply psychological issues which are hinted at in Byron's writings on swimming and boxing are complex ones. His problematic relationship with his mother is connected to sport by his letter to her after swimming the Hellespont, and his ferocious sparring with Robert Rushton following her death. To gauge these acts with precision may require a psychologist's interpretation of sporting activity. The swim following Shelley's death hints at a possible mystical aspect to Byron's sporting activity, as if this atheist were in some way anticipating the 'muscular Christianity' of the Victorians. A preference for more strenuous exertion than walking tour cannot necessarily be interpreted as a comment on, or challenge to, the Lake poets. Walking for extended periods may simply have been impossible due to Byron's deformed foot. If nothing else, however, it can be concluded that the

importance of Byron's sporting interests is evident in his life and writings, and that a deeper understanding of these activities may yield a more detailed picture of the man.

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