

Byron and the Athlete's Ethos
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I had my own pretensions to the laurel when considering the prospect of this conference on "Byron and the Olympic Spirit." The title of my projected grand essay, 'Byron and the Athlete's Ethos,' struck me as inspired, and I quickly conceived many lofty ideas revolving around that subject. I was ecstatic. The topic fit the theme of the conference, and I was excited by the prospect of exploring Byron's work under this premise. I envisioned a paper replete with examples of Byron at his most muscular – both in poetry and biography – urging readers on to feats of athletic glory in verse sweating with physicality and brute force. It would be a great paper, or so I thought – but it didn't work. Oh, Byron describes the athletic prowess of his protagonists, to be sure, but he would continue by emphasizing the limitations of such physical matters. Or the poet might laud an athletic accomplishment as the pinnacle of glory, but then quickly dismiss these notions as mere philistine hogwash. In "Written after swimming from Sestos to Abydos," for example, Byron defies classification, refusing to take a particular stance on athleticism. He wrote this lyric after crossing the Hellespont in imitation of Leander, and the poem initially seems to champion the concept of glory through athletics of mythic proportion. But the tone changes at the end: "Sad mortals, thus the Gods still plague you! / He lost his labour, I my jest: / For he was drown'd, and I've the ague" (*CPW*, 1: 282) Byron's humorous irony deliberately alters his stance on glory, producing both an ambivalent tone in his poem and an enormous dilemma for my essay.

At first I blamed Byron's chameleon talents and slippery persona for ruining my envisioned paper. But after visiting Olympia, still awash with the specter of those ancient games,

I realized what was wrong with my topic – not Byron, but rather my own notions of the athlete’s ethos. The ideal athlete is not just a physical specimen, because there are other equally important elements in sport; consequently, the strongest man does not always win the fight, nor does the fastest runner always finish first. In order to achieve true athletic *arête*, which will provide the best chance of victory, one must possess a combination of virtues, strengthening the body and mind. This is the athlete’s ethos: willpower and fist power; thinking speed and foot speed; physical stamina and mental endurance. Excellence in these two seemingly antithetical arenas leads to *arête*. The concept brings to mind the oft-used catch-phrase “poetry in motion,” which seems awfully Byronic given his blend of the physical and poetical.

In many respects Byron embodies the athlete’s ethos in his life and literary feats. As he himself wrote, “’Tis sweet to win, no matter how, one’s laurels / By blood or ink” (*CPW*, 5: 48). If one returns to “Written after swimming from Sestos to Abydos” with this new frame of mind, the poem, even if skeptical of glory, adds a sense of accomplishment to the swim and separates Byron from other less literate athletes. Meanwhile, the actual swim provided a subject *for* poetry – there is a discernible symbiotic link. So let us examine Byron’s poetics through the lens of the athlete’s ethics in order to avoid over-simplifying the work of a complex, and instinctively competitive poet. For the purpose of jazzing up this exercise, I will assign different aspects of Byron and his work to five categories of ancient Olympic sporting events--boxing, wrestling, running, equestrian, and pentathlon--while ignoring the final classical sport, *pankration*, as it is merely a combination of boxing and wrestling. I will focus mainly on Byron’s positive athletic attributes, but there are certainly many reasons why he would have failed to win the honor of an olive wreath.

Why don't we begin in the 'fisty ring' with boxing, a sport Byron himself loved? There is something pugilistic about Byron the poet, insofar as he clearly practices the art of retaliation; or in baser terms, when he was hit, he hit back harder. After all, "sometimes we must box without the muffle" (*CPW*, 5: 117). Byron demonstrates this attitude early on in his career. After the *Edinburgh Review* skewered his *Hours of Idleness*, Byron lashed back, and not in the most cautious manner, with *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. Although he later regretted some of the attacks he made, the poem displays remarkable wit and originality and shows Byron to be quite capable of good verse when his 'blood is up.' He refined his retaliatory technique later on and, like a good boxer, always used an opponent's attack to his advantage. Such literary sparring seemed to rouse his competitive instincts. In a letter to John Murray in 1819 he writes:

You will see me defend myself gaily – that is – if I happen to be in Spirits – and by Spirits I don't mean your meaning of the word – but the spirit of a bulldog when pinched – or a bull when pinned – it is then that they make the best sport – and as my sensations under an attack are probably a happy compound of the united energies of those amiable animals – you may perhaps see ... 'rare sport.'

(*BLJ*, 6: 192)

And the result of his sport? If only we could ask Lady Byron about certain aspects of Donna Inez, or question Southey as to which 'Vision of Judgment' is superior. After belligerently attacking the so-called 'Satanic School,' Southey, if at all sporting, must have at least admitted a touché.

Boxing is not merely an individual sport but also a society of fellow pugilists who respect and honor each other. Likewise with poetry. Byron considered himself a member of an elite group of writers, contemporary or otherwise, and defended the reputation of these esteemed

compatriots as well as his own. When Keats attacked Pope, whom Byron greatly admired, in the poem "Sleep and Poesy," Byron retorted, calling Keats "the Tadpole of the Lakes" in an article in *Blackwood's Magazine (Portrait, 323)*. In correspondence he was just as withering, describing Keats' ideas as "not poetry, nor anything else but a Bedlam vision produced by raw pork and opium" (*BLJ, 7: 225*). Such criticism was probably spurred less by a dramatic dislike of Keats' poetry than a fervent desire to defend his fellow writer, Pope. Perhaps it is this same ethos, the idea of a literary society founded on athletic ideals, that fuels future attacks on the 'tight little island'; Byron (admittedly the prima donna of this 'team'), in addition to holding British society and politics in disdain, might have considered the country's conduct during his fall from grace to be altogether unsporting and hypocritical. Byron, after all, obeyed the athlete's code himself: when Keats died Byron asked Murray to "omit all that is said about Keats in any manuscript" (*BLJ, 8: 163*). Like his corsair Conrad's refusal to murder the sleeping Seyd, Byron will not kick a poet when he is down. Similarly, he did not publish the dedication of the first canto of *Don Juan*, which contains a scathing treatment of Southey, because the poem was to be anonymous. He claimed, "I won't attack the dog in the dark. Such things are for scoundrels and renegades like himself." True sportsmanship outweighs simple vengeance.

Wrestling is a sport similar to boxing in context, pitting two opponents against one another in a rather primal scenario, but I will explore the less openly aggressive aspects of the exercise. The true wrestler, one sure of defeating his opponent, needs not merely the strength of Ajax but also the strategy of Odysseus. Byron's literary cunning takes shape in his cultivation of the Byronic figure, feigned or real, and its mixture of haughty detachment and vulnerability, gentlemanly refinement and worldly wisdom. Such a romantic pose was lucrative: his popularity grew as the public became more and more intrigued. It was also a protection: although his

persona attracted a large number of critics, Byron could disdain their attacks with an aloof lord's air, even claiming that poetry is not his vocation. And the façade was practical, giving the passionate, changeable, sensitive man a public guise – his wrestler's oil to let him slip away from those who wished to exploit, attack, or define him.

Likewise, whenever Byron engages in a bout of literary grappling, he strategically avoids any potential hypocritical pitfalls. *The Vision of Judgment*, for example, is successful because he does not pronounce supposed certainties and morals like Southey's poem. Rather than taking up the opposite side, the narrator chooses a subtle and carefully constructed neutral ground, from which he acknowledges the best, though trivial, characteristics of his rivals, before lambasting their most egregious attributes. Thus George III, a good farmer and faithful husband but bad king, is described as "although no tyrant, one / Who shielded tyrants" (*CPW*, 6:314). The narrator consequently tiptoes around the trap of seeming either audacious or vitriolic. At the end of the poem, Byron refuses to exact celestial judgment but lets his opponents damn themselves – in this case Southey offends heaven with his hypocritical, jingoistic, and altogether bad, poetry. The best example of this poetical maneuvering, however, is Byron's famous appropriation of Southey's four lines at the end of Canto 1 in *Don Juan*, and his withering dismissal, "For God's sake, reader! take them not for mine" (*CPW*, 5: 80).

Byron demonstrates his strategic know-how in other manners as well. In later satirical poems like *Beppo* and *Don Juan*, he presents a narrator who can moralize on others precisely because he is happily amoral himself. The perfect vehicle for Byron's worldly wisdom and cosmopolitan nature, this mode of narrator manages to critique without any undercurrents of prudery or duplicity. He allies himself with the reading public by employing a healthy dose of self-deprecation, and all criticism of England is implicit, though obviously apparent:

I like the taxes, when they're not too many;
I like a seacoal fire, when not too dear;
I like a beef-steak, too, as well as any;
Have no objection to a pot of beer;
I like the weather, when it is not rainy,
That is, I like two months of every year.
And so God save the Regent, Church, and King!
Which means that I like all and every thing.

(CPW, 4:144)

A definite pin for the poet-wrestler, who, one can imagine, with deft maneuvering and slippery skin, managed to disable his opponent without ever stepping into harm's way.

But enough of gladiator games. Let us move on to fields where athletic pursuits are more individualized and personal, in which the athlete often finds his greatest opponent to be himself. Running, a sport to which club-footed Byron was naturally averse, tests one's resilience and willpower. The poet was often tempted to quit writing. Nevertheless, Byron displays incredible endurance throughout his poetical career, or marathon, despite his recurrent claim to be giving up the race. The literary lord remarkably succeeded in attaining and maintaining his fame from *Childe Harold* to *Don Juan*, throughout a turbulent life in letters and loves. Although he never quite surpassed his early popularity when *The Corsair* sold 10,000 copies the first day of publication, Byron's work was widely read by contemporaries, if widely criticized. Posterity has judged him favorably as well, and our continued study of his poetry is a testament to his consistency and quality.

Regarding stamina in individual poems, Byron predominantly wrote long creative works – a long-distance runner. His masterpiece, *Don Juan*, is the longest poem of its kind in the English language. But he was as much the master of the sprint as of the marathon. Erupting with “lava of the imagination,” Byron could produce lyrical effusions that rival any in all of English literature. “She Walks in Beauty,” a gem of merely eighteen lines, was written only the day after he saw Lady Wilmot in her mourning dress at a party. An even better example of Byron’s creative speed is his claim to have written “The Giaour” and “The Bride of Abydos” each in a week, and “Lara” was supposedly composed “while undressing after coming home from balls and masquerades” (*BLJ*, 9: 168). Nevertheless, it must be said that Byron would probably not have won the laurel wreath in this particular category because of his notorious dislike for revision, never running farther than he felt necessary. As he said, “I hate tasks” (*BLJ*, 6: 105).

It might seem appropriate to discuss Byron’s use of metrical feet in the context of this running conceit, but meter and feet serve as a perfect segue into the next sporting event, equestrian games. A horseman must have mastery over his mount just as a poet must master his technique and form. The rider would be bucked off otherwise, and the poet would write a terrible poem. Indeed, writing poetry is frequently described as mounting Pegasus, a metaphor Byron often employs to portray an artist’s creative faculties. In *Don Juan*, for example, he likens writing a poem to riding that mythical steed in a race: “For oftentimes when Pegasus seems winning / The race, he sprains a wing and down we tend” (*CPW*, 5:203). Notice even here the allusion to competition in the literary realm. Byron’s own steed was certainly well-shod, for he demonstrates a remarkable ability to write – and write well – in many different forms, from the Spenserian stanzas of *Childe Harold* to the heroic couplets in *The Age of Bronze*, and back again from the blank verse of *Manfred* to the *ottava rima* in *Beppo* and *Don Juan*.

Although he shows skill in all gaits of meter, *ottava rima* is clearly his canter – the most comfortable and natural form that accommodated his changeable moods, themes, and expansive thought. The poet showed no signs of stopping his masterpiece, lending some credence to his hyperbolic vision of a century’s worth of cantos, “If that my Pegasus should not be foundered, / I think to canter gently through a hundred” (*CPW* 5: 511). Byron found the mount and gait suited him, a form fit for wit, philosophy, romance, tragedy, or mere adventure. And like his creator, the young Don was described as a horseman himself: “Juan, like a true-born Andalusian, / Could back a horse, as despots ride a Russian” (*CPW*, 5: 531). In contrast, Byron would have sneered at the breeding of Wordsworth’s muse when *his* Pegasus stretched its legs. To carry on the conceit, he probably would have likened the Lake Poet’s blank verse to a mule, or some other bastardized form of equestrian exercise. Whether or not those claims are legitimate, Byron had good reason to chuckle at Southey’s limping hexameter. In “The Vision of Judgment” he attacks the poet laureate’s writing style with all sorts of insulting horse imagery, deriding Southey’s “spavin’d dactyls, spurred into recitative ... of all his foundered verses under way” (*CPW*, 6: 340). Poor Southey’s cavalry was no match for Byron’s.

The final ancient Olympic sport suited to my purposes is the pentathlon, composed of discus, javelin, jumping, running, and wrestling. This particular event embodies the spirit of Byron more than any other, because it requires and rewards versatility. Byron is the consummate pentathlete: like a true Renaissance man, he possessed myriad talents and interests, never to be tied down by one thing. Able to adapt to many vocations, Byron was a poet, peer, traveler, and a freedom fighter. In the realm of love-making, he served many roles as well: philanderer, adulterer, husband, *cavalier servente*, seducing and seduced. Likewise, he was a man of changeable moods – melancholy and misanthropic at times, but also kind, clever, and friendly.

These different aspects of Byron's life resulted in a variety of poetic styles and tones: a satirist; a teller of tales; a dramatist; a lyricist, even a lively correspondent. The variable nature of Byron's poetry is particularly evident in an environment like this conference, where so many different and thought-provoking papers have stemmed from merely considering one man's poetry under the specific theme of the Olympic spirit.

But it is the epic form that aligns itself specifically with the pentathlon, with its combination of versatility, endurance, and overall excellence. *Don Juan*, Byron's "epical pretensions to the laurel" (*CPW*, 1: 76), indeed achieved its goal, ensuring Byron's entry into the poetic athlete's pantheon. But it is a different sort of epic than those of his predecessors, and from the outset Byron consciously separates his poem from those of classical counterparts. *Don Juan* does not start *in media res*, nor does the protagonist at all resemble the traditional epic hero; rather, we are introduced to a naïve youth whose actions and decisions bear to some degree less importance than those of other characters in the work. Lofty deeds and supernatural forces give way to base human desires and dealings. One could even argue the narrative to be subordinate to the narrator, who delights the reader with his brilliant and witty digressions. Yet there is no denying *Don Juan* is epic, and its singular style aptly suited to a modern audience for whom the definitions of heroism, morality, and justice have become somewhat blurred. Byron employs all of his various talents in order to create a work that could rightly claim to possess a greater versatility of skill and style than most epics: low, conversational diction blends with soaring verse; romantic idealism (Juan's relationship with Haidée, for example) complements cynical realism (the lustful Catherine's court); rustic, pastoral settings shift to urban, sophisticated realms; poetical rhetoric is employed often to denounce political rhetoric. In *Don Juan*, Byron marries all of his athletic skills, his boxing retaliation, wrestling savvy, running endurance and

speed, and skilled metrical horsemanship, into a champion performance and a fitting farewell to the poetic field.

Although I may have imposed this idea of poetic athletics on Byron, this form of play or sport has proven a fascinating exercise that illuminates Byron's competitive spirit. And he was competitive poetically, determined to show the Lake Poets and others mistaken in assuming "that poesy has wreaths for [them] alone" (*CPW*, 5: 4). He had political rivals as well, the repressive Tory Castlereagh in particular, whom he wished to shame publicly. And finally, once Byron was good and done with England in 1816, he acquired a large measure of antagonism toward his mother country and was ever keen to put the nation's deficiencies on display. There is more to be flushed out by applying this sort of analogical thinking in other sporting events, such as the poet's preferred sport, swimming. But Byron did not write poetry to merely fight personal battles. An athlete's code of ethics govern Byron's writing career, during which, yes, he strove to beat rivals, but also challenged his own sense of excellence and established his place among the literary elite.

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