George Gordon Lord Byron (1788-1824)

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George Gordon Byron was born in London on 22 January 1788. Both of his maternal ancestors, the Gordons of Gight, and his paternal dynasty, the Byrons of Lancashire and Nottinghamshire, embodied an old aristocratic heritage in decline. Byron lived with his mother in Aberdeen on a meagre income until the age of ten when, after his father's death, he inherited the title of Baronet and the derelict ancestral mansion of Newstead Abbey. Byron's mother had to rent rooms near the castle of Nottingham, and later a house, Burgage Manor in Southwell, before being able to move into Newstead in 1809. This solemn place, together with his gothic readings and Calvinist imprint, would later influence the poet's life and works. More than twenty years later, he would recall in Don Juan:

The mansion's self was vast and venerable,
With more of the monastic than has been
Elsewhere preserved: the cloisters still were stable,
The cells too and refectory, I ween:
An exquisite small chapel had been able,
Still unimpair'd, to decorate the scene;
The rest had been reform'd, replac'd, or sunk,
And spoke more of the baron than the monk. (XIII, 66)

Byron's juvenile poetic productions were influenced by his provincial surrounding, and were presented as the efforts of a dilettante. His first collection of poems, Fugitive Pieces (1806), later re-published as Poems on Various Occasions (1807), contained occasional verses, mainly inspired by the poet's everyday experiences, social life and sexual liaisons in London and Southwell. Because he made explicit references to the people he knew, the two collections had a controversial reception, especially in the rural and conservative environment of Newstead. As Byron observed, 'I am surrounded here by parsons and Methodists', and his emerging career as a provocative poet was not easily compatible with the parochial surroundings (L&J, I, 115).

Hours of Idleness, Byron's next collection of poems published in 1807, clearly reveals a newly acquired awareness of the contemporary literary market, in England and abroad. Hours of Idleness, as the title itself suggests, is reminiscent of the Della Cruscans' poetry, which had a fundamental influence on Byron's poetic career. This collection, in particular, tries to recreate the same languid and indolent atmosphere of The Florence Miscellany, the first collection of occasional poems that the Della Cruscans composed in Florence in 1785 'to while away an afternoon' (1785, 6). Although in later years, Byron would agree with the Quarterly Review editor William Gifford, who considered the Della Cruscans' poetry too effeminate and too exotic to appeal to English readers, his whole production is forged by the Mediterranean languorous atmosphere, the improvisatory style, the satirical-erotic vein and the politically liberal intent of the Della Cruscans.

Hours of Idleness marks the start of Byron's career as a professional poet. The collection went through a second edition in 1808, and it provided Byron with considerable success. However, the publication of Hours of Idleness had also fuelled the first unpleasant reviews by Henry Brougham (Edinburgh Review, January 1808) and Hewson Clarke (The Satirist, October 1807). Brougham's negative review in one of the most prestigious literary periodicals
of the time particularly infuriated Byron, and incited the polemical tone of his next work, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1808). This satirical poem, which clearly aligns Byron with the 'good' English poets against the 'cruel' reviewers (almost all Scottish), reveals Byron's confidence as a poet and his facility for writing verses. By attacking one of the most authoritative literary journals of the period – *The Edinburgh Review* – Byron started to emerge as a non-conformist poet, alienated by the literary establishment, and an advocate of freedom of expression. In spite of the initial difficulty at publishing it, – it was published anonymously by James Cawthorn – *English Bards* went through five editions, the last of which came out in 1811.

Byron embarked on the traditional aristocratic Grand Tour in 1809, when he left England for southern Europe and Asia Minor (France and Italy were excluded due to the Napoleonic Wars). This travelling period radically changed Byron's perception of himself as a poet and of his writing career. The poet's transformation is clearly visible in *Childe Harold I and II*, the composition of which coincided with his travelling experience. In *Childe Harold*, Byron's innovative approach to travel is transposed into poetry. Byron's re-visionary approach to the Grand Tour favoured an emotional and transgressive encounter with place, rather than the traditionally scholarly and erudite approach. The Grand Tour would provide inspiration for the Orientalist writer, shaping a new personal and unique perception of places and cultures. Since his early travels, and later in his Italian stay, Byron's journeying abroad initiated a process of geographical, cultural and political displacement, which involved a process of annihilation and recreation of his own identity as man and poet. From *Childe Harold* on, Byron's works centre on images of displacement, as well as concepts of translation, and spatial and cultural overlappings. In *Childe Harold* in particular, Byron tries to shape a new poetics of space, where familiarity and otherness intermingle and contaminate each other. This contamination takes place on different levels: cultural, stylistic, and linguistic. In this way, Childe Harold, as alter-ego of his creator, appears as a multifarious, fluctuant and impermeable character, who adapts to different circumstances and, most importantly, to different geographical and cultural locales.

This blending of literary modes and cultural influences is also visible in Byron's Orientalistic works. His Oriental Tales, which include *The Giaour* (1813), *The Bride of Abydos* (1813), *The Corsair* (1814) and *Lara* (1814), as Cheeke has recently observed, are bound together by a strong formulaic homogeneity, so that the codes of Eastern ‘other’ overlap and intersect with those of British aristocratic mores, refracted through and influenced by both literary conventions and British imperial politics (2003, 57). At the same time, *Childe Harold* and the ‘Oriental Tales’ perfected that ‘improvisatory’ style which Byron had first attempted in *Hours of Idleness*. ‘I feel [that ‘our’ art] comes over me in a kind of rage every now and […] if I don’t write to empty my mind, I go mad. [...] I feel it as a torture, which I must get rid of, but never a pleasure’ (*L&J*, VIII, 55). Similarly, commenting on the composition of *Don Juan*, Byron insisted on the poem as improvisatory: ‘I have no plan – I had no plan – but I have or had materials’ (*L&J*, VI, 207). Byron’s emphasis on the improvisatory style of his best poetry clearly alludes to a Mediterranean poetics of passion and spontaneity which was becoming popular at the beginning of the nineteenth-century.

Byron's frequentation of Stael's salon at Coppet in Switzerland, together with his definite move to Italy in 1816, strengthened this Mediterranean poetics, and anchored it to a wider European intellectual debate. This is perceivable not only in *Childe Harold IV*, but also in his dramatic productions. *Manfred* (1816), *Cain* (1821) and *Heaven and Earth* (1823) clearly take inspiration from the German tradition of Goethe and Schleghel, whom Byron had met at Coppet, where he was captivated and actively engaged in the debate on the formulation of a modern Romantic drama in opposition to ancient tragedy. The creation of a new classical tragedy, which could reconcile the modern Christian drama of a northern literary tradition (from Shakespeare to Goethe) and the southern tradition of the ancient Greek and Roman tragedies, became a major concern in Byron's dramatic productions. In *Marino Faliero* (1820), *The Two Foscari* (1821), and *Sadanapalus* (1821), in fact, Byron attempts to bring together the southern historical tragedy, particularly Italian and Greek, with the modern combination of pathos and religion, typical of a northern Germanic tradition.
Italy gave Byron a new poetic identity, that of the self-exiled poet, rejected and misunderstood in his own country, who finds success and inspiration in another country, culturally and politically different. Byron's facility in self-negating his own national identity and his ability to transform his English origins into an expression of otherness reveal an intrinsic incompatibility between the poet's needs for freedom and the limitations imposed by his own national belonging. This condition of 'otherness' implies an inherent lack in the understanding of one's own culture, and the consequent need for looking away in search of fulfilment and completeness. This attitude challenged the Romantic perception of national boundaries, and started an important process of re-discussion of national belongings. Influenced by Stael's philosophical re-consideration of national boundaries in De l'Allemagne (1810), Byron felt the need to partially reject the national identity of his birth, in order to acquire 'une patrie de la pensée', more congenial to his character and his profession. During his residence in Italy, in fact, Byron's process of translation, transculturalization and transplantation, which had started with the Grand Tour, reached its completion. This process led to a condition of hybridity in terms of cultural and literary identity. Beppo (1818) and Childe Harold IV (1818) exemplify this condition.

From a stylistic perspective, Beppo represents Byron's effort to transpose into English the Italian burlesque ottava rima tradition of the fifteenth-century poets Luigi Pulci and Francesco Berni. The result is the creation of a hybrid style which adapts the malleability of Italian rhyme scheme to the rigidity of the English language. At the same time, the poem shows Byron's cultural absorption of Venetian liberal manners, including the unorthodox practice of the cavalier servente, a role that he would be willing to play in his relationship with Teresa Guiccioli.

Childe Harold IV takes Byron's process of amalgamation even a step further. By ventriloquising and re-elaborating the history of Italian literature (from Dante and Petrarch to Foscolo and Alfieri), Byron clearly communicates his deep knowledge of the Italian cultural heritage. But, most importantly, he displays his understanding of the Italian political and historical situation, and clearly aligns himself and his poetry with the Risorgimento:

ITA"lia! Oh Italia! Thou who hast
The fatal gift of beauty, which became
A funeral dower of present woes and past,
Oh thy sweet brow is sorrow plough'd by shame,
And annals graved in characters of flame.
Oh, God! That thou wert in thy nakedness
Less lovely or more powerful, and couldst claim
Thy right, and awe the robbers back, who press
To shed thy blood, and drink the tears of thy distress; (XLII)

By connecting Filicaja's seventeenth-century sonnet with the contemporary political enslavement of Italy, Byron re-inscribes his poetry in a timeless and universal call for freedom. His frustrated political idealism could finally be turned into political action against imperialism. In Melchiori's words, the Risorgimento was probably the revolution 'Byron had been waiting hourly to play a major role in', as a political activist and a revolutionary inspirer (1981, 112). Italy's right to be a free and united nation is discussed throughout Canto IV in the form of a celebration of the country's ancient and prestigious past, and in the hope for a better and nobler future. Though politically enslaved and divided, Italy still appears in the imagination of an enthusiastic Byron as a land full of energy, ready to wake up after a long sleep:

Yet, Freedom! Yet thy banner, torn, but flying,
Streams like the thunder-storm against the wind;
Thy trumpet voice, though broken now and dying,
The loudest still the tempest leaves behind;
Thy tree hath lost its blossoms, and the rind,
Chopp’d by the axe, looks rough and little worth,
But the sap lasts, and still the seed we find
Sown deep, even in the bosom of the North;
So shall a better spring less bitter fruit bring forth. (XCVIII)

On the whole, Byron’s support of the Italian revolutionary movements was not simply limited to an ideological and poetic encouragement. After he started his relationship with Teresa Guiccioli, whose family, the Gambas, had been exiled from Romagna for being the major organiser of the 1821 insurrections, Byron became actively involved with the Carbonari. Thus he comments in his diary on February 18, 1821:

Today, I have had no communication with my Carbonari cronies; but in the meantime, my lower apartments are full of their bayonets, fusils, cartridges, and what not. I suppose that they consider me as a depot, to be sacrificed, in case of accidents. It is no great matter, supposing that Italy could be liberated, who or what is sacrificed. It is a grand object – the very poetry of politics. Only think – a free Italy!. (L&J, IV, 230)

The hope of Italy’s re-birth is also the motif of The Prophecy of Dante (1819), where Byron re-asserts his firm belief in the temporariness of the Italian enslavement, and in the possibility of a renaissance of its ancient glory and democracy. By amplifying Dante’s, and his own, condition of exile, Byron acquires a strong patriotic tone, aligning himself with Dante and with all the victims of political injustice:

Oh! My beauteous land! So long laid low,
So long the grave of thy own children’s hopes,
When there is but required a single blow
To break the chain […]
What is there wanting then to set thee free,
And show thy beauty in its fullest light?
To make the Alps impassable; and we,
Her sons, may do this with
one deed- Unite! (II, 136-145)

Both Childe Harold IV and The Prophecy of Dante were written partly to stir English indignation and military and political action in defence of Italy. Byron’s disappointment at the unsuccessful outcome of the Carbonari’s plotting echoes Dante’s poetic interpretation: ‘The plan has missed- […] thus the world goes; and thus the Italians are always lost for lack of union among themselves’. He even proclaims himself to be ready to accomplish freedom by any means: ‘whatever I can do by money, means, or person, I will venture freely for their freedom’ (L&J, V, 178). Their freedom became our freedom in his letters of 1821, when the process of identification between the English poet supporting independence and the Carbonar was completed.

In 1818, after the publication of Childe Harold IV, Murray asked Byron to write another burlesque poem like Beppo: ‘Give me a poem – a good Venetian tale describing manners formerly from the story itself, now from your own observations’ (Smiles, I, 372). Later in the same year, Murray urged Byron to produce ‘another lively tale like Beppo’, which the publisher suggested, could be in prose – ‘or will you not give me some prose in three volumes?’ (Smiles, I, 396). Murray had seen Byron’s potential for sexual comedy not only in Beppo, but also in the letters he wrote throughout his stay in Italy, which he had sent to Murray for publication. In January 1818 Byron was already working at a novel with the main character named Don Julian. It was relatively easy for him to combine Murray’s requests, and to turn the prose novel into a novel in rhyme- Don Juan- written again in the Italian burlesque ottava rima. Don Juan, like Childe Harold, is clearly presented as another alter-ego of the poet himself, filtering Byron’s life experience and opinions through a satirical eye. Don Juan is introduced as a modern hero, one that would replace the idealism of ancient heroism, with a new, ironic, version of it:
I want a hero—an uncommon want.
When every year and month sends forth a new one,
Till after cloying the gazettes with cant,
The age discovers he is not the true one;
Of such as these I should not care to vaunt,
I’ll therefore take our ancient friend Don Juan;
We all have seen him in pantomime
Sent to the devil, somewhat ere his time. (I, 1)

Unsurprisingly, Byron’s incarnation of modern heroism is a Mediterranean hero, a Spaniard whose mission is to scandalize and mock nineteenth-century English society. The dichotomy between a liberating south and a morally strict north is introduced in the First Canto as fundamental for the understanding of Byron’s satirical strategy. When it comes to experience in the arts of love, this moral difference becomes striking, and surely a source of uneasiness for English readers. The young Don Juan falls easily in love with Donna Julia, a beautiful woman of Oriental origins—‘The darkness of her oriental eye/Accorded with her Moorish origin’—who was given in marriage at an early age to a rich old man (I, 56). According to the customs of the South, this does not prevent her from falling in love with Don Juan, and from having an affair with him. Byron’s satirical approach frames his perception of Spain and England:

’Tis a sad thing, I cannot choose but say,
And all the fault of that indecent sun
Who cannot leave alone our helpless clay
But will keep baking, broiling, burning on,
That howsoever people fast and pray
The flesh is frail, and so the soul undone:
What men call gallantry, and gods adultery,
Is much more common where the climate’s sultry. (I, 63)

The chivalric and sentimental southern interpretation of love is clearly opposed to the cold and prudish northern attitude, which measures love in economic terms:

Happy the nations of the moral north!
Where all is virtue, and the winter season
Sends sin, without a rag on, shivering forth
(‘Twas snow that brought St. Anthony to reason);
Where juries cast up what a wife is worth
By laying whate’er sum, in mulct, they please on
The lover, who must pay a handsome price
Because it is a marketable vice. (I, 64)

Later, after the publication of the First Canto, Murray tried to justify the directness of Byron’s satire by saying that his exile prevented him from fully understanding the bourgeois values of the English upper- and middle-classes. As a matter of fact, Byron’s satire in Don Juan was consciously directed to criticise the increasingly moralistic and domestic values of the emerging Victorian society. His condition as an expatriate put him in a better position to criticise English society freely and straightforwardly.

Murray agreed to publish the first canto of Don Juan only anonymously, and without the name of the publisher. He also urged Byron to write a moral ending to the story; in particular, he suggested to send Juan to hell, and to
exploit the comic potential of the hero’s eternal damnation. Byron, however, showed no intention to end the story. He concluded the first canto expressing the clear intention to carry on the project:

But for the present, gentle reader! And
Still gentler purchaser! The bard – that’s I –
Must, with permission, shake you by the hand,
[...] We meet again, if we should understand
Each other [...] (I, 221)

He clearly enjoyed writing Don Juan and adding new cantos paralleling his own personal and political experiences. Only his death, in 1824, would mark the end of the poem, leaving it without a definitive conclusion, let alone a moral ending.

Byron’s last works were mostly published in the four issues of The Liberal: Verse and Prose from the South, a periodical he created with Percy Shelley and Leigh Hunt, in 1822. Originally, the periodical was meant to be about Italian literature and to circulate in England. However, after the death of Shelley, the real motivator of the project, in July 1822, The Liberal became an editorial space to publish Byron’s works outside English jurisdiction, and with little or no compromise on economic profits and editorial policy. As Franklin observes, in the original idea, The Liberal represented a cosmopolitan alternative to the nationalistic canon of the Edinburgh and Quarterly Reviews (2000, 164). Like the Della Crusca’s Florence Miscellany, The Liberal was an Anglo-Italian project which tried to overcome the national barriers traditionally associated with writing and publishing. As the title suggests, the periodical aimed to popularise a southern Mediterranean poetics in Britain. More generally, by including works by English writers (mainly Byron, Shelley and Hunt) and other European writers (mainly Italian) the periodical was meant to bridge the distances between a northern literary tradition and a southern one. Had it survived longer, this multinational project may have served as a foundation for the development of a more cosmopolitan view of literature.

The first issue came out in 1822, with a preface by Hunt, which presents The Liberal as a provocative as well as radical periodical. After having criticised the English establishment, including the Church, as being hypocritical and falsely moralistic, Hunt proclaims that ‘[the editors] are willing to accept the title of enemies to religion, morals, and legitimacy, and hope to do our duty with all becoming profaneness accordingly’ (p.6). At the same time, Hunt presents the periodical as a free publishing space serving the ultimate cause of universal literature. He abjures any political or ideological etiquette, including the classicism versus Romanticism debate, then so popular in Europe. He claims that liberalism in literature is neither the monopoly of French scepticism, nor of German sentimentalism,, that one can admire Voltaire as well as Goethe and Schiller, Boccaccio and Ariosto as well as Dante and Milton. The editors of The Liberal, he writes, will pay tribute ‘Wherever [...] we see the mind of man exhibiting powers of its own, and at the same time helping to carry on the best interests of human nature’ (p. 7).

The first issue contained Byron’s ‘Vision of Judgment’, some of Shelley’s translations of Goethe’s Faust, Hunt’s ‘Letters from Abroad: a Description of Pisa’, and an Italian tale based on Marco Lastri’s L’Osservatore Fiorentino (a former contributor to The Florence Miscellany) and the poem ‘Rhyme and Reason’. The second issue came out in 1823 and included Byron’s Heaven and Earth, and other contributions from William Hazlitt and Mary Shelley. In the same year, Byron wrote two poems specifically for further issues of The Liberal: ‘The Age of Bronze’, a satire on the Congress of the Allied Powers, held at Verona in 1822, written ‘in [his] early English Bards style’, and ‘The Island’, a verse tale inspired by the love story between a mutineer from The Bounty and a princess of a South Sea island. Both poems never appeared in The Liberal; on the contrary, Byron decided to publish them separately in June 1823. The third issue of The Liberal came out in 1823, and contained Byron’s ‘The Blues’ and other contributions from the Shelleys and Leigh Hunt. The fourth and final issue appeared the same year, featuring as Byron’s contribution only a translation of the first canto of Pulci’s Morgante Maggiore. Byron then communicated
his intention to withdraw from the project, feeling utterly responsible for the lack of success of the periodical: 'I am at this moment the most unpopular man in England [...] it appears that the two pieces of my contribution have precipitated that failure more than any other'. After that, *The Liberal* lost its popularity both in England and Italy (*L&J*, X, 123).

Byron left for Greece on 24 July 1823 to support the Greek war of independence. Before departing, Byron had made arrangements with Hunt for the publication of the remaining cantos of *Don Juan*. He died of fever on 19 April 1824 at Missolunghi. Byron had always foreseen his death in heroic terms: 'Yes! A grassy bed in Greece, and a grey stone to mark the spot, would please me more than a marble tomb in Westminster Abbey' (Lovell, 367). He was right about Greece, but wrong on the geographical position of his burying place. His body, in fact, was returned to England and lies among his ancestors in the vault of St. Mary Magdalene Church in Hucknall, Nottinghamshire. His heroic death as a martyr to freedom, together with the publication of the last cantos of *Don Juan*, restored Byron and his works to everlasting popularity.

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