Byron’s Poetry
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PREFACE

Most of the papers in this book were given at a conference on Byron’s Poetry organised by the Newstead Byron Society at Nottingham Trent University on April 30th 2011.

I should like to thank Ken Purslow, Carl Thompson, and everyone else who assisted in making the day a success.

— P.C.
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Marina S. Ragachewskaya is Associate Professor at the Department of World Literature at Minsk State Linguistics University. She has over eighty articles published in different journals, also internationally, on the works of D.H. Lawrence, modernism, literature and psychoanalysis, text interpretation, and contemporary British writers. The most important of her published articles in English are: “Conflict Between Cognitive Science and Fiction Narrative in David Lodge’s Thinks…” (2007); “The Sense of Becoming and Initiation in D.H. Lawrence’s Short Novel The Man Who Died” (2007); “Couples and Doubles in Women in Love” (2008); “The Political and the Psychological in Kangaroo” (2009); “Fictional Memory and the Narrating Mind in J. Coe’s Novel The House of Sleep” (2009); “Poetry of Self in Search of the Other” (2010); “Fiction in Search of Theory: I. McEwan’s Enduring Love” (2011). Now she is working on her post-doctoral thesis. Her academic interests include: literature and psychoanalysis; modernism; text interpretation; and the contemporary British novel.

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Adam White recently completed his PhD studies at the University of Manchester. His thesis – “The Fancy painting Eye”: the Aesthetic in John Clare’s Poetry – focuses on Clare’s engagement with eighteenth-century poetry and the work of his Romantic contemporaries. Adam presented a paper on Burns, Byron and Clare at the ‘Burns and Byron in Scottish, British and European Romanticism’ conference at the University of Manchester in late 2010. He is currently writing an essay on Clare and Byron.

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To economize on space in the notes, the following abbreviations are used for the books referred to. See the Bibliography for further information.

BJ: The Byron Journal
When a citation from BLJ is headed “Text from”, followed by a manuscript reference, it means that the text is not from BLJ but from the original manuscript.
Codes are as follows: <Byron’s erasures>; {Byron’s interlineated corrections and second thoughts}; [editorial additions].

BoA: Byron, The Bride of Abydos


CHP: Byron, Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage


DJ: Byron, Don Juan

HandE: Byron, Heaven and Earth
Abbreviations


NLS: National Library of Scotland


SoC: Byron, The Siege of Corinth

TVOJ: Byron, The Vision of Judgement
INTRODUCTION

PETER COCHRAN

Most of this book is the result of a conference held on April 30th 2011. In the course of the day I was assured that to discuss poetry as if poetry was interesting in itself was by no means as cutting-edge as I had imagined, and that such approaches as eco-criticism, post-colonialism, queer theory, historicism, new historicism, feminism, post-feminism, cultural materialism, and so on (those which involve discussing poetry as if it’s prose, or as if it’s a study ancillary to some other, more important discipline), were all passé. In the more advanced English faculties (I was further assured), the very act of writing about poetry had been abandoned – no no, the latest approach involved learning poetry off by heart, arriving at the seminar, and comparing recitations. As we had, prior to the conference, got together and read one of Byron’s longer poems, I took heart from all these messages.

Byron may be a cultural phenomenon in terms of politics, religion, sexuality, philhellenism, social iconography, and so on: but he wouldn’t be any of these things if he weren’t a poet in the first place. That (as I think) his thoughts about politics and religion are very ordinary indeed, that his philhellenism can only be deduced by ignoring virtually everything he said and wrote about the Greeks, that he found his status as a cultural icon either shameful or laughable depending on his mood, that he was in any case not The First Media Celebrity – that was Queen Elizabeth I – and that the very last thing he was, was a philosopher, doesn’t stop writers, in our a-historical, post-literate age, from deflecting attention away from his poetry, and leading their befuddled students up all these different blind alleys.

To such a weird academic culture of denial and displacement, I hope this book may serve as a modest corrective.
Byron the protean poet

The first problem with writing about “Byron’s Poetry” is – which Byron? He offers a wider variety of personae than most poets. Does one examine Byron the Heir of Augustanism:

Launched into life, extinct his early fire,
He apes the selfish prudence of his sire;
Maries for money, chooses friends for rank,
Buys land, and shrewdly trusts not to the Bank!
Sits in the Senate, gets a son and heir,
Sends him to Harrow, for himself was there;
Mute, when he votes, unless when called to cheer,
His son’s so sharp – he’ll see the dog a Peer!

(_HINTS FROM HORACE, 243-50)

Does one examine Byron the Romantic Orientalist:

With sabre shivered to the hilt,
Yet dripping with the blood he spilt;
Yet strained within the severed hand
Which quivers round that faithless brand;
His turban far behind him rolled,
And cleft in twain its firmest fold;
His flowing robe by falchion torn,
And crimson as those clouds of morn
That, streaked with dusky red, portend
The day shall have a stormy end;
A stain on every bush that bore
A fragment of his palampore;
His breast with wounds unnumbered riven,
His back to earth, his face to Heaven,
Fallen Hassan lies … (THE GIAOUR, 655-68)

Does one look at Byron the Self-Dramatising Misanthrope:

Our life is a false Nature – ’tis not in
The harmony of things – this hard decree,
This uneradicable taint of Sin,
This boundless Upas, this all-blasting tree,
Whose root is Earth – whose leaves and branches be
The skies which rain their plagues on men like dew –
Disease, death, bondage – all the woes we see,
And worse, the woes we see not – which throb through
The immedicable Soul, with heart-aches ever new.
(CHP IV St.126)

Or does one favour his inversion, Byron the Facetious Self-Parodist:

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!
(Beppo, St.52)

Just when we think his variety has been exhausted, we find Byron the Sincere Lyricist:

She walks in Beauty, like the Night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that’s best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes;
Thus mellowed to the tender light
Which Heaven to gaudy day denies …
(from Hebrew Melodies)

And when we think it’s all over, we get Byron the Post-Modernist:

Ah! – what should follow slips from my reflection;
Whatever follows ne’ertheless may be
As à propos of hope or retrospection
As though the lurking thought had followed free;
All present Life is but an Interjection –
An “Oh!” or “Ah!” of Joy or Misery –
Or a “Ha! Ha!” – or “Bah!” – a Yawn – or “Pooh!” –
Of which perhaps the latter is most true.
(Don Juan XV st.1)

Or Byron, the Articulator of the People’s Voice:

He from the world had cut off a great man,
Who in his time had made heroic bustle;
Who in a row like Tom could lead the van,
Booze in the ken, or at the Spellken hustle?
Who queer a flat? who (spite of Bow Street’s ban)
On the high toby-spice so flash the muzzle?
Who on a lark with black eyed Sal (his Blowing)  
So prime, so swell, so nutty, and so knowing? –  
*(Don Juan XI st.19)*

It looks as if we can find, in Byron, any kind of poet we want. Wordsworth was never as abundant as this. As Bernard Beatty has it below, “Byron is, after all, a master of the adjusted idiom”.

Whatever my colleagues at the conference said, it seems that, in 2011, *evaluation* remains taboo. One must not express critical judgement – after all, someone else might argue with one, and win! Instead, a kind of hot-air approach is favoured, with greater emphasis on one’s own capacity to string words out than on one’s ability to discuss poetry. For example, a recent author, quoting *The Giaour*, lines 94-7 (“Hers is the loveliness in death, / That parts not quite with parting breath; / But beauty with that fearful bloom / That hue which haunts it to the tomb …”), writes about them thus:

Byron’s note draws deliberate attention to these lines, announcing the intention to evoke the “painful remembrance of that singular beauty which pervades … the features of the dead, a few hours, and but for a few hours after ‘the spirit is not there’” (416n). The beauty of this evocation not only affects us far more deeply than the paradisial representations of harmony and ease that have come before, but in so doing the text allows for a momentary overcoming of the terror associated with the dead corpse and allows us to glimpse a world beyond that of mere life. This brief flicker from the mythic to the divine allows for an understanding of community as concerned with singularities rather than individual or collective subjectivities and can concentrate attention on real existing networks of relation above and beyond the governance of subjects.

The idea of a “dead corpse” is intriguing, giving us, as it does, a brief glimpse of some other kind of corpse. As reading Byron demands a constant degree of critical distancing, this kind of unalloyed enthusiasm does seem a cop-out, especially when it climaxes, as here, in an ascent into meaning-loss – “Pinnacled dim in the intense inane”.

It was not always thus: in ancient days (still remembered), one was allowed to keep a distance, and even allowed to find some aspects of Byron unsatisfactory – and say so:

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1: Green / Lapinski, p.29.
In the later Tales, he returns to Scott’s octosyllabics, and about half-way through *The Siege of Corinth* these are varied by his hearing of *Christabel*. But he does not manage the variations in stress and length with Coleridge’s delicacy; the tetrameters though freer and looser, tend to fall back into regular patterns of either iambics or anapaests. Similarly the imitation of Coleridge’s calculated simplicity of diction tends to be trite rather than ballad-like.2

No doubt there are flaws in this passage (*The Giaour* l.1099-1120)—those scorching veins and writhing lips are unfortunate touches which verge on the ludicrous, and the whole speech has a stagey ring—but the lines are alive, not dead on the page like most of Harold’s outbursts, and the hero’s passion, pride, remorse and isolation are brought before us as we read; while the same is true, though to a lesser extent, in all the other tales.

Yet having acknowledged this one must insist on the limitations of Byron’s achievement here. The intensity in his portrayal of these heroes is the intensity not of tragic poetry, but of adolescent day-dreams ….3

In 1982 Philip W. Martin published *Byron A Poet Before his Public*, a similarly critical work to the two just quoted, which drew (and from *The Great*), reviews of such vitriol that it evidently touched a raw nerve. William St. Clair wrote,

> The whole book is written in such a condescending and reproachful style that our sympathies quickly shift to the despised readers of Byron’s day, who ‘if not ignorant were incapable of recognising literary distinctions’. Better to enjoy Byron with them, we conclude, than discriminate with Dr. Martin.4

John Clubbe was still less polite:

> How this parody of scholarly methodology, at once shoddy and pretentious, managed to get by a doctoral committee, much less by readers for a university press, must remain a minor mystery.5

Now it’s true that Martin writes some strong things:

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The sincere student of Byron must accept that a large proportion of his time will be spent examining poetry written without serious intent.\(^6\)

He writes of …

… Byron’s dilemma: the dilemma of a poet who does not wish to know too much about himself, but nevertheless intends to present himself as the subject of his poem.\(^7\)

One can’t go along with a book which analyses *The Prisoner of Chillon* exclusively in terms of its influences (Shelley, Wordsworth, Ambrose Philips, Sterne, Dante, Fuseli …),\(^8\) and which ignores the massive empathy which Byron felt with his (imagined) Prisoner, when being shown over the Chillon dungeons themselves. But Martin’s main thesis – that much of Byron’s oeuvre consists of a series of performances, acted before an audience he rightly despised – is a strong one:

Finally we are left with the impression that the Childe has been used as a device by which Byron can watch himself perform. Sometimes his antics make him laugh, occasionally he finds them irresistibly attractive, but most of the time he is unsure what to think of this image with which he is experimenting; his response is thus a mixture of attraction and repulsion.\(^9\)

He implies “perform” to be a bad thing, ignoring how badly Shakespeare would fare, faced with the same charge. Shakespeare, it will be objected, wrote plays, and would be a very poor playwright indeed if he did not write for “performance”: Byron’s actual plays – so a hesitant consensus would probably say, if such a thing could be mustered – are not his most glittering achievements, but Byron was – so all agreed who saw him perform on the amateur stage – an excellent actor. “Form”, writes Michael O’Neill below, “is play; it is the principle of Byronic life”. So it’s helpful, Byron being a paradoxical, antithetical sort of being, if we look for drama in his supposedly non-dramatic works:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{It is not that I may not have incurred} \\
\text{For my Ancestral faults or mine the wound} \\
\text{I bleed withal, and, had it been conferred} \\
\text{With a just weapon, it had flowed unbound;}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^7\): Ibid., p.82.  
\(^8\): Ibid., Chapter 3.  
\(^9\): Ibid., p.21.
But now my blood shall not sink in the ground;
To thee I do devote it – thou shalt take
The vengeance, which shall yet be sought and found,
Which if I have not taken for the sake –
But let that pass – I sleep, but thou shalt yet awake.

And if my voice break forth, 'tis not that now
I shrink from what is suffered: let him speak
Who hath beheld decline upon my brow,
Or seen my Mind’s convulsion leave it weak;
But in this page a record will I seek.
Not in the air shall these my words disperse,
Though I be ashes; a far hour shall wreak
The deep prophetic fulness of this Verse,
And pile on human heads the Mountain of my Curse!

That Curse shall be Forgiveness … (CHP IV sts.133-5)

This outrageous self-regard cannot be sincere. Or can it? (Our reaction
may be qualified when we find that the idea of forgiveness-as-curse is
stolen from Coleridge’s Remorse).10 Byron is Acting the Role of Himself –
as it might be played by Edmund Kean, or John Philip Kemble – in the
manner of Coriolanus. Later, he re-wrote The Role – in the manner of
Falstaff:

They accuse me – Me – the present writer of
The present poem – of – I know not what –
A tendency to underrate and scoff
At human Powers and Virtue and all that –
And this they say in language rather rough;
Good God! I wonder what they would be at!
I say no more than has been said in Dante’s
Verse; and by Solomon and by Cervantes,

By Swift, by Machiavel, by Rochefoucault,
By Fénélon, and Luther, and by Plato,
And Tillotson, and Wesley, and Rousseau,
Who knew this life was not worth a Potato;
'Tis not their fault nor mine if this be so –
For my part I pretend not to be Cato –
Nor even Diogenes; we live and die –
But which is best – you know no more than I. –

(DJ VII sts.3-4)

10: Ordonio: My Brother! I will kneel to you, my Brother! / (kneeling.) / Forgive me, Alvar! —— Curse me with forgiveness! (Remorse, V i).
Here, the Role of Himself is more relaxed, more self-deflating, and thus much more confident and authoritative. Philip W. Martin appears at first to deny this:

To suggest that *Don Juan* ‘shows us life as viewed by a brilliant exponent of worldly commonsense’ [the idea is J.D.Jump’s] is extremely misleading: what may have been mistakenly recognized as ‘commonsense’ is in fact a flaunting of a deliberately facetious and essentially non-serious way of coming to terms with the world.11

If we are to restrict our claims for *Don Juan* to its burlesque, its impropriety, or its shock value, then it is hard to see how it can be represented other than as a piece of glorious tomfoolery.12

“… glorious tomfoolery” is the Deputy Head, remembering his own wild days in the Sixth Form. As with most critics, Martin is embarrassed by the fact that Byron is at his best when writing comically – and with Wordsworth, Matthew Arnold, Dr. Leavis, L.C.Knights and W.W.Robson as his lodestars, how could it be otherwise? Finally, however (though without conceding for an instant the value of comedy), he concedes that *Don Juan* and the other two ottava rima works show Byron at his strongest:

*Don Juan* shows him using the knowledge that his varied poetic ventures had brought him to: the knowledge that as a surrogate context for the projection of emotions and sensations which he wished to claim for his own, his writing was inadequate. This realization carries with it the full recognition of his poetry as a performance, the dramatization of events and feelings that, whatever their roots in the real world, are defined ultimately by the actor’s mode, the presentation of himself before his public. The ‘thorough-going actor’ or actor-poet of *Don Juan* registers his recognition of this fact by using his poetry as a structure through which the world is transformed, rather than as a means of reconstituting its episodes and feelings.13

What’s the difference between “transformation” and “reconstitution”? If even such an unsmiling critic as Philip W. Martin admires *Don Juan*, does this imply a general preference for *Don Juan* and its associated works over *Childe Harold* and its associated works? As I’ve said, in 2012, one

12: Ibid., p.191.
expresses an evaluation at one’s peril: but such a position would not be novel. In 1966, W.H. Auden wrote:

If I had to introduce Byron to a student who knew nothing of his work, I would tell him: “Before you attempt to read any of the poetry, read all of the prose, his letters and journals. Once you have read these, you will be able, when you come to the poems, to recognize immediately which are authentic and which are bogus. You will find, I think, that only three are of major importance: Beppo, The Vision of Judgment, and Don Juan, all of them written, incidentally, in the same meter.”

It does not matter where one opens the prose; from the earliest years till the end, the tone of voice rings true and utterly unlike anybody else’s.

This place [Cambridge] is wretched enough – a villainous chaos of din and drunkenness, nothing but hazard and burgundy, hunting, mathematics, and Newmarket, riot and racing. Yet it is a paradise compared with the eternal dulness of Southwell. Oh! the misery of doing nothing but make love, enemies, and verses. (1807)

Dined [in Ravenna] versus six o’ the clock. Forgot that there was a plum-pudding (I have added, lately, eating to my “family of vices” and had dined before I knew it. Drank half a bottle of some sort of spirits – probably spirits of wine; for what they call brandy, rum, etc, etc, here is nothing but spirits of wine, colored accordingly. Did not eat two apples, which were placed by way of dessert. Fed the two cats, the hawk, and the tame (but not tamed) crow. Read Mitford’s History of Greece – Xenophon’s Retreat of the Ten Thousand. Up to this present moment writing, 6 minutes before 8 o’clock – French hours, not Italian.


Clock strikes – going out to make love. Somewhat perilous but not disagreeable. Memorandum – a new screen put up today. It is rather antique but will do with a little repair. (1821)

In the poems and plays, on the other hand – even the later ones – at any moment the voice may go off-key. It is instructive, and sad, to compare the journal of 1816, which he kept for Augusta while traveling through the Alps, with the alpine scenes in Manfred, written the following year – in which he also wrote his first major poem, Beppo. The scenes are based
upon the Journal – sometimes whole phrases are repeated word for word – but while the Journal is vital and exciting, the play is dead and a big bore.14

It’s an evaluation so large as to approach caricature: one would not describe *The Prisoner of Chillon* as “dead and a big bore”. But what is caricature, but the truth deprived of its peripherals and reduced to its essence?

In 1811, Byron became the poet he became, by accident. Before his first trip to Greece he’d become fairly famous with *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, and on his return he hoped to develop his standing as a late Augustan satirist with *Hints from Horace*. But the latter found no favour, and, prompted by R.C.Dallas, he confessed to having another work, in Spenserian stanzas, in, as it might be, his bottom drawer. This was *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* I and II, a poem (here I echo Tom Mole)15 intended for a small and highly select private audience headed by his admired gay Cambridge friend, C.S.Matthews. Matthews’ presence as its super-dedicatee accounts for the camp archaisms, and the homoerotic details which every editor preceding me has conspired either to expunge completely, or to banish to footnotes which they’re confident no-one will read.

Thus censored, *Childe Harold* was published, and Byron found himself famous before a public which (as Philip Martin argues) had no sense or discrimination – a bit like today’s public. For this he proceeded to write *The Giaour*, and its fellows. In 1822, he wrote to Shelley (confident that Shelley would concur), about the poor reception lately afforded his classical tragedies, which he had conceived as an educational corrective:

> You see what it is to throw pearls to Swine – – as long as I wrote the exaggerated nonsense which has corrupted the public taste – they applauded to the very echo – and now that I have really composed within these three or four years some things which should “not willingly be let die”16 – the whole herd snort and grumble and return to wallow in their mire. – However it is fit that I should pay the penalty of spoiling them – as no man has contributed more than me in my earlier compositions to

produce that exaggerated & false taste – it is a fit retribution that anything [like a?] classical production should be received as these plays have been treated. ––17

Byron never says so, but it’s helpful to read Beppo, Don Juan, and The Vision of Judgement as another kind of educational corrective to the taste his “romantic” work had created. In the case of The Vision, with its anti-Southey bias, this status is obvious. But Don Juan contains numerous amusing remarks aimed at poets of the day; and Beppo contains this, directed, too, at the readership by whose adulation Byron was now sickened:

Oh! that I had the art of easy writing
What should be easy reading! could I scale
Parnassus, where the Muses sit inditing
Those pretty poems never known to fail!
How quickly would I print (the world delighting)
A Grecian, Syrian, or Assyrian tale,
And sell you, mixed with Western Sentimentalism,
Some samples of the finest Orientalism.

“How quickly would I print …” is facetious. He’s printed and sold a number of them, and dominates the field, a fact by which he’s now disgusted.

This periodical shift in Byron’s styles might imply a degree of self-critical uncertainty, and bring to the fore the question, “How good was Byron as a literary critic?” and, following on, “How good was he as a self-critic?”

The answer is bewildering, and perhaps sad, in the context of his letter to Shelley. Here are stanzas 15 and 16 of Beppo, which had been in the poem’s first draft, written on October 9th-10th 1817:

I said that like a picture by Giorgione
Venetian women were, and so they are,
Particularly seen from a balcony
(For Beauty’s sometimes best set off afar)
And there just like a heroine of Goldoni
They peep from out the blind, or o’er the bar;
And truth to say they’re mostly very pretty,
And rather like to show it, more’s the Pity!

For Glances beget Ogles, Ogles Sighs,
Sighs Wishes, Wishes Words, and Words a Letter,

17: B. to Shelley, May 20th 1822: this text from LJ VI 66; BLJ IX 161.
Which flies on wings of light-heeled Mercuries,
Who do such things because they know no better,
And then God knows! what Mischief may arise,
When Love links two young people in one fetter:
Vile Assignations, and adulterous beds,
Elopements, broken vows, and hearts, and heads. –

And here, from Childe Harold IV, are the last two stanzas to be written:

Oh! that the desart were my dwelling-place,
With one fair Spirit for my Minister,
That I might all forget the human race,
And, hating no one, love but only her!
Ye Elements! – in whose ennobling stir
I feel myself exalted – Can ye not
Accord me such a Being? Do I err
In deeming such inhabit many a spot?
Though with them to converse can rarely be our lot.

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,
There is society, where none intrudes,
By the deep Sea, and Music in its roar;
I love not Man the less, but Nature more,
From these our interviews, in which I steal
From all I may be, or have been before,
To mingle with the Universe, and feel
What I can ne’er express – yet cannot all conceal.

(CHP IV sts.177-8)

These last were sent to Murray – so Byron tells Hobhouse¹⁸ – by March 3rd 1818; by which time, Beppo was already published! The incompatibility between the two styles (and subjects) is such that an innocent reader wouldn’t believe they were from the same pen, and an experienced reader would suspect one or the other of being phoney: given the power of satire over romantic rhetoric, it would be Childe Harold which would lose in such an exercise. This brings us back to Philip W. Martin’s thesis about Byron before his public: he’s styling Childe Harold for an audience he knows, whereas in Beppo he’s writing spontaneously, for himself, as an amusing new exercise in emulation of Frere’s Whistlecraft. That he should still feel free, after writing the witty Beppo, to go on in his empty Childe Harold vein, argues not so much a failure of

literary judgement, as a determined eye on the market – another way of reinforcing the argument of Philip W. Martin. Byron charged Murray 2,500 guineas for *Childe Harold* IV (the largest sum he ever demanded and got), and threw *Beppo* in for nothing, as a sweetener.

There are more striking examples of his flexibility, adaptability (or “mobility”). Here, complete, is the nineteenth section of Canto II of *The Island*, describing Ben Bunting:

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But here the herald of the self-same mouth
Came breathing o’er the aromatic South,
Not like a “bed of violets” on the gale,
But such as wafts its cloud o’er grog or ale,
Borne from a short frail pipe, which yet had blown
Its gentle odours over either zone,
And, puffed where’er Winds rise or Waters roll,
Had wafted smoke from Portsmouth to the Pole,
Opposed its vapour as the lightning dashed,
And reeked, ’midst mountain-billows, unabashed,
To Æolus a constant sacrifice,
Through every change of all the varying skies.
And what was he who bore it? – I may err,
But deem him sailor or philosopher.
Sublime Tobacco! which from East to West
Cheers the Tar’s labour or the Turkman’s rest;
Which on the Moslem’s ottoman divides
His hours, and rivals opium and his brides;
Magnificent in Stamboul, but less grand,
Though not less loved, in Wapping or the Strand;
Divine in hookas, glorious in a pipe,
When tipped with amber, mellow, rich, and ripe;
Like other charmers, wooing the caress,
More dazzlingly when daring in full dress;
Yet thy true lovers more admire by far
Thy naked beauties – Give me a cigar!
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*(The Island, II section 19)*

This was written in January 1823. But by the end of February 1823, Byron had also written

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For my part, I am but a mere Spectator,
And gaze where’er the palace or the hovel is,
Much in the mode of Goethe’s Mephistophilis; –

But neither love nor hate in much excess,
Though ’twas not once so; if I sneer sometimes,
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It is because I cannot well do less,
And now and then it also suits my rhymes;
I should be very willing to express
Men’s wrongs, and rather check than punish Crimes,
Had not Cervantes, in that too true tale
Of Quixote, shown how all such efforts fail. –

Of all tales ’tis the saddest, and more sad
Because it makes us smile; his hero’s right,
And still pursues the right; to curb the bad
His only object, and ’gainst all odds to fight
His guerdon; ’tis his Virtue makes him mad!
But his adventures form a sorry sight –
A sorrier still is the great moral taught
By that real Epic unto all who’ve thought.

Redressing injury, revenging wrong,
To aid the damsel and destroy the Caitiff,
Opposing singly the united Strong,
From foreign yoke to free the helpless native –
Alas! must noblest views, like an old Song,
Be for mere Fancy’s sport a theme creative? –
A jest, a riddle Fame through thin and thick sought?
And Socrates himself but Wisdom’s Quixote?

(Theodore Bunting, 1832, 18:11-10)

The false and patronising jocularity of the Bunting passage could not make a greater contrast with the philosophical sadness of the Quixote passage. In Don Juan, Byron is, as in Beppo, writing primarily for his own enjoyment (confident, by now, that such a thing is marketable): but whereas in Childe Harold IV he’s writing for a John Murray readership with whom he’s familiar, in The Island he’s writing for a more down-market readership – the one he imagines to be loyal to his new publisher, John Hunt – with whose taste he imagines himself to be familiar, but (we hope through gritted teeth), isn’t.

We thus arrive at two incompatible alternative conclusions: either that Byron really was a genuine, but immensely protean talent, writing with a number of different styles, all “sincere”, or that he was just a genius professional, writing for a selection of well-defined markets. His posture was, throughout, to show contempt for “professionals” like Sotheby, Wordsworth, or Southey – so, did he really protest too much?
No-one, in Byron’s day, “studied English Literature”. Readers were guided by their own instinct. This was, more often than not, herd-instinct: but a gentleman was expected to have innate literary taste, without training. His grounding in Latin and Greek would give him all the standards and sophistication he needed for any modern works that happened his way.

The poem which sold best in Byron’s lifetime was Robert Bloomfield’s *The Farmer’s Boy*.19 Byron’s friend John Cam Hobhouse spent Tuesday April 8th 1823 with his other friend (and role-model), Sir Francis Burdett, a feudalistic plutocrat masquerading as a radical. He wrote in his diary:

> Burdett and I rode nearly thirty miles to meet the Pytchley hounds on Rockingham Forest – we did not find them for two hours, and when we did find them, had no sport. We put up the afterwards at the George Inn, Kettering, dined, and slept comfortably. I read a little book of Lindley Murray’s, containing accounts of men who had either lived or died piously. I do not think these sort of books are ever written well enough for their subject, which requires skill and address.

> Burdett read *The Farmer’s Boy* for the first time – thought versification smooth.”

Just as Hobhouse deflects the need to think about Murray’s book on pious lives by impugning its style, so Burdett, disturbed by the idea that lower-class country people such as Bloomfield have a viewpoint, deflects the need to think about Bloomfield’s poem (which is, by implication, more radical than he is) by praising its style – and that with the most general of comments. Books, for both, are to be criticised and appreciated, not taken to heart. Gentlemen of property and leisure don’t need books to teach them about life. Their patrician role is to apportion praise and reservations.

Byron didn’t approach the evaluation of poetry from this class perspective (though he did make jokes about working-class writers, and may have marketed some of his poetry from a class perspective – see above). But he seems not to have been a systematic critic in any other way either. His judgements lurched about, and could swerve suddenly. This is his famous reaction to Moore’s *Lallah Rookh*, from a letter to Murray of September 15th 1817:

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20: B.L. Add. Mss. 56547 f.46r.
With regard to poetry in general I am convinced the more I think of it—that he <and I> and all of us—Scott—Southey—{Wordsworth}—Moore—Campbell—I—are all in the wrong—one as much as another—that we are upon a wrong revolutionary {poetical} system—or systems—not worth a damn in itself—and from which none but Rogers and Crabbe are free—and that the present & next generations will finally be of this opinion.—I am the more confirmed in this—by having lately gone over some of our Classics—particularly Pope—whom I tried in this way—I took Moore’s poems & my own & some others—and went over them side by side with Pope’s—and I was really astonished (I ought not to have been {so}) and mortified—at the ineffable distance in point of sense—harmony—effect—and even Imagination {Passion}—&—Invention—between the little Queen Anne’s Man—and us of the lower Empire—depend upon it is all Horace then, and Claudian now among us—and if I had to begin again—I would model myself accordingly—Crabbe’s the man—but he has got a coarse and impracticable subject—and Rogers the Grandfather of living Poetry—is retired upon half-pay,(I don’t mean as a Banker)—<and bating> {since} pretty Miss Jaqueline with her nose aquiline,{and} has done enough—unless he were to do as he did formerly.—

The argument is sincere, but there is no disciplined reading behind it.

In March 1821, he writes again to his publisher, apropos of his defence of Pope in the Letter to John Murray Esq.:

Whether I have made out the case for Pope I know not—but I am very sure that I have been zealous in the attempt.

If it comes to the proofs—–we shall beat the Blackguards—I will show more imagery in twenty lines of Pope than in any equal length of quotation in English poesy—and that in <a> places where they least expect it,—<I mean> {for instance —} in his lines on Sporus—now—do just read them over—–the subject is of no consequence—(whether it be Satire or Epic) we are talking of poetry and imagery—from Nature and Art—

Now—mark—the images separately & arithmetically.——
1 The thing of Silk—
2 Curd of Ass’s Milk
3 The Butterfly—
4 The Wheel—
5 Bug with gilded wings.—
6 Painted Child of dirt.—
7 Whose <The> Buzz, <the witty &c.>

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21: B. to John Murray, September 15th 1817; text from NLS Ms.43489; BLJ V 264-6.
22: All B.’s quotations are from Pope, Epistle to Arbuthnot, ll.309-33.