

# Byron's European Impact



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By

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Cambridge  
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Publishing



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This book first published 2015

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-7541-4

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-7541-7

*“Among those whose importance is greater than it seemed, Byron deserves a high place. On the Continent, such a view would not appear surprising, but in the English-speaking world it may be thought strange. It was on the Continent that Byron was influential, and it is not in England that his spiritual progeny is to be sought. To most of us, his verse seems often poor and his sentiment often tawdry, but abroad his way of feeling and his outlook on life were transmitted and developed and transmuted until they became so wide-spread as to be factors in great events”*

—Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*.<sup>1</sup>

*Qui est-ce qui lit Byron, maintenant? Même en Angleterre!*

—Gustave Flaubert.<sup>2</sup>

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1: Routledge, 2010, p.675.

2: Letter to Amélie Bosquet, August 9th 1864; text from << <http://flaubert.univ-rouen.fr/correspondance/conard/outils/1864.htm>>>.



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No-one could write such a book as this unassisted. I should like to thank the following for the generous help they have given me: Shona Allan, Anne Barton, Geoffrey and Dianora Bond, Victoria Brice, Richard Cardwell, Michel Charlot, John Clubbe, Sarah Côté Delisle, Maureen Crisp, Peter and Sabina Davison, Nina Diakonova, Gregory Dowling, Denis Feignier, Olivier Feignier, Ann Fleming, Michael Gassenmeier, George Gömöri, Peter Graham, Jens Gurr, Peter and Gloria Heap, David Holton, Giovanni Iamartino, Simon Jarvis, Christine Kenyon Jones, Svetlana Korolyova, Marcin Leszczyński, Mirosława Modrzewska, Nick Nesbitt, Davy Pernet, Frank Erik Pointner, Gabriele Poole, Martin Procházka, Catherine O'Neil, T.J.Reed, Michael Rees (Brother Teilo), Gill Robinson, Julia Rosenthal, Maria Schoina, Elinor Shaffer, Joanne Sherriff, William St. Clair, Jane Stabler, Barbora Steurová, Nina Tchernyshova, Thérèse Tessier, Valeria Vallucci, Christine Vigouroux, Kathryn Williams, Fran Waterhouse, Clive Wilmer, Frances Wilson and Tatyana Wolff.

## ABBREVIATIONS

- Abba: Giuseppe Cesare Abba, *Da Quarto al Voltorno / Noterelle d'uno dei Mille*, ed. Nicola Zanichelli, Bologna ("dodicesima edizione") 1918
- BJ: Byron Journal
- Barton: Anne Barton, *Byron: Don Juan*, Cambridge 1992
- Binyon: T.J. Binyon, *Pushkin: A Biography*, HarperCollins 2002
- Blaicher: Günther Blaicher, *Die Rezeption Byrons in der deutsche Kritik (1820-1914)* Königshausen & Neumann 2001
- BLJ: *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron* ed Marchand, John Murray, 1973-1994
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- Brasol: Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Journals*, tr Boris Brasol as *The Diary of a Writer*, Cassell 1949: I have rephrased at points
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## PREFACE: RECEPTION THEORY

It was once my privilege to sit through an hour-long paper by a famous German Theoretician of Reception. Because the conference organiser had spent such a long time chatting to him at the beginning of the morning, and still more during the coffee-break, his paper (which was the one before mine, at the end of the morning), began forty-five minutes late, so that as he read on and on I could see that I should have half an hour – or less – in which to deliver my own hour-long paper.

Despite the tension this situation created in me, I managed to follow his argument: but found it surprisingly banal. It might be summarised thus: A: a writer writes in a certain way; B: he reads another writer; C: as a result of this reading, the next time he writes, he writes in either in a slightly different way, or in a radically different way, depending on how deeply taken he has been by his reading of the other writer.

I was struck not only by the simplicity of this sequence of ideas, but by the skill with which the Famous German Theoretician of Reception spun it out to many, many times the length it appeared to me to need.

As a result of this experience, I have had no truck with Reception Theory since, and anyone looking for a theoretical underpinning for this book will look in vain. This is only in part because I believe that a lot of Byron's European Reception is caused by partial reading, misreading, or even (especially) by no reading at all.

– P.C.



## INTRODUCTION

To get the following arguments into perspective, here is a brief summary of Byron's poetic career, which divides, roughly, into five areas:

- 1: the nostalgic conservative, author of two Augustan satires (*English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* and *Hints from Horace*) on the one hand, and several classical plays (*Marino Faliero*, *The Two Foscari*, and *Sardanpalus*) on the other.
- 2: *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and the Eastern or Turkish Tales (so called, even though two are set in the western Mediterranean).
- 3: The three ottava rima satires, *Beppo*, *Don Juan* and *The Vision of Judgement*. These poems often satirise the readership of those in 2, and indeed make it very difficult to take those in 2 seriously.
- 4: His "cosmic" dramas, *Manfred*, *Cain*, and *Heaven and Earth*.
- 5: Two late poems, *The Island* and *The Age of Bronze*, intended, at first via *The Liberal*, for a new, downmarket readership.

The greater part of Byron's nineteenth-century European readership ignored 1, 3, and 5 completely, and derived their inspiration from a partial and impressionistic reading of 2, with occasional glances at 4. This reading becomes more and more partial and impressionistic until we sense that no Byron has actually *been* read, and, mixed with the influences of other artists – Berlioz, Delacroix – European "Byronism" leaves Byron's poetry far, far behind, and disappears down cul-de-sacs either of decadence, depravity, and diabolism on the one hand, or flag-waving, revolutionary libertarianism on the other. These shrunken, inverted, and blackened – these completely false and inaccurate – caricatures of Byron infect much early twentieth-century criticism, including that of Bertrand Russell, normally regarded with awe by the Byron community for having placed their poet – and their poet alone – in his *History*, in the company of such as Plato, Spinoza, and Kant. Russell's reading of Byron, ignoring as it does Byron's great comic poems, gets no further than the usual romantic stereotype, the Alienated Aristocrat and Fighter for Freedom: "Byron is not gentle, but violent like a thunderstorm".<sup>1</sup> As with so many others, *reading* Byron becomes onerous, if not irrelevant. "Byronism" is a mirage,

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1: Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, p.680.

which is so much more important than Byron that Byron himself becomes an embarrassing nuisance:

On the subject of Byron, the reading of whose poems had so much excited him in his youth, Flaubert wrote:

‘Il ne croyait à rien, si ce n’est à tous les vices, à un Dieu vivant, existant pour le plaisir de faire le mal.’ [‘He believed in nothing if not in all the vices, in a living God, existing for the pleasure of doing evil’.]

The teaching of Sade fitted in with that of Byron, for Flaubert also—‘volupté du crime’, ‘joies de la corruption’, ‘le sublime d’en bas’. [‘The ecstasy of crime, the joys of corruption, the sublime of the depths’].<sup>2</sup>

But Byron “taught” nothing – to think of him as a teacher or propagandist is to turn him upside-down and inside-out. Mario Praz, author of the above, doesn’t, in the case of Byron, know what he’s talking about.

Byron was too varied and versatile a writer for most of those who claimed to be his acolytes to comprehend.

He was, in addition, deemed, in the face of all the evidence, to have been active among the Carbonari revolutionists in Italy (he wanted to be, but they ran away when the Austrians attacked) and above all that he had “died fighting for Greek liberty” (he wanted to, but saw no action, and was bled to death by his doctors, a despairing victim of the indifference and cupidity with which he was surrounded). But Europe craved either a bogeyman or a mythical hero, and in the face of such appetites, evidence is impotent.

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“Byronism” is more than literary, more than political, more even than literary / political. Andrew Elfenbein writes:

... Byron is not just an author, but an unprecedented cultural phenomenon. His work affects not only the novel, poetry, and drama, but fashion, social manners, erotic experience, and gender roles.<sup>3</sup>

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**2:** Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* (Oxford 1970), p.164. I’ve been told that the relative neglect of Byron in Italy (until recently) was because Praz had held him in such low regard.

**3:** Elfenbein p.8.

One could add, “porcelain figurines, pub-signs, portraits, paintings, engravings, tourist-guides, statuettes, miniatures, songs, and operas”. “Byronism” was a commodity independent of Byron’s work. It’s impossible to cover all these fields in one book.

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I have concentrated on the way six cultures read – or failed to read – Byron. When writers from countries other than France, the German-speaking areas, Russia, Poland or Italy describe how their compatriots read him, the result seems either a mite desperate, or, as in the case of Norway and Ibsen, they fail to see what went on, not knowing their Byron well enough. So Switzerland, the Low Countries (Holland was typical in that it shunned him with middle-class abhorrence), Scandinavia apart from Ibsen, Portugal, South-East Europe (in Greece he’s hardly a literary figure at all),<sup>4</sup> and the Caucasus, are not covered in this book. In Spain, only Espronceda stands out.

How Byron was – or was not – read, may be seen in the following account from Hungary:

[*Byron*] created only one man and one woman. The man should he be called Harold, Conrad, Lara, Manfred or Cain: he is proud, sullen, cynical, lustful. The woman, Zuleika as much as Julia, Haidee, Gulnare or Medora, is gentle, kind, she wants to love and be loved and is frightening in her passion. That man is Byron himself and the woman the one his pride desires.<sup>5</sup>

Even as a generalisation, it won’t do. Byron hasn’t been read at all. None of the heroes listed are “lustful” (Harold was before his poem starts, but became satiated). Zuleika, Gulnare and Medora exist in a roseate dimension which Byron abandons when creating Haidee and, especially, Julia. Thus Byron the poet, unexamined, is swept under the carpet. Finding the truth about him is too effortful.

Different fantasy Byrons cling around different cultures, independent of any study, or even reading, that’s been done. Each country and each culture creates its own Byron (in a way that they don’t create their own

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4: Litsa Trayianmoudi makes no reference, in the Greek chapter of Cardwell III vol.2, to Emmanouil Roidis’ Byronically comic novel *Pope Joan* (1866): see Foteini Lika, *Byron and the Latin encounter in nineteenth-century Greek fiction*, in Cochran (ed.) *Byron and Latin Culture*, CSP 2013, pp.403-24.

5: Quoted Rákai at Cardwell III vol. 2, p.331.

Wordsworth). In Russia at the start of the nineteenth century he was, thanks to Pushkin and Lermontov, seen as a major example of the Superfluous Man: Dostoevsky saw him as the Dark Night of the European Soul: and by the end of the century he had become, thanks to the translations of Ivan Bunin, a kind of prophet. In France he was seen as a pro-Bonapartist Englishman, and thus as either an angel or a demon, to be either adored, saved, or rewritten. In Spain he was read as a tortured obscurantist and blasphemer. In Czechoslovakia he was seen as German.<sup>6</sup> By the authorities in Italy he was seen as a menace, to be persecuted from state to state: by the liberals, as a major writer of their persuasion. The fantasy is seen at its most extreme in Greece and Turkey, where no amount of printed evidence can yet shake the belief, in Greece that he loved the Greeks and died fighting for them, or in Turkey that he hated Turks and was their enemy. The paradoxical truth – that he despised the Greeks and admired the Turks very much – can't be articulated even in 2015.

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Byron and Walter Scott have a unique place in English literary history in that their continental impact was immediate. As soon as the end of the Napoleonic wars permitted, their works were exported, translated into French as rapidly as possible, and circulated, from the Atlantic to the Urals and beyond. Shakespeare by contrast took two centuries to make his cultural presence felt.

In Byron's case, complications set in at once, for the French translations, being in prose, did not quite convey the original. For them, see below, chapter on France.

It is from *Childe Harold* and its affiliates, the so-called Turkish or Eastern Tales, that most of nineteenth-century European "Byronism" stems: and this produces a second, more important complication. For *Childe Harold* was, in its original form and with its original content, a private poem in a private satirical idiom, describing Byron's experiences in the Mediterranean for an intimate Cambridge circle headed by C.S. Matthews. But Matthews died, and the poem Byron wanted to publish, *Hints from Horace*, was not liked, so Byron, deprived his ideal super-addressee, agreed to *Childe Harold's* publication in a censored form: and it is from *Childe Harold* and its gloomy followers that most of European "Byronism" – the main subject of this book – derives its inspiration.

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6: See Martin Procházka at Cardwell III vol. 2, pp.285-6.

Byron became ashamed of the success of his misanthropic, “romantic” narratives. His ottava rima works on the one hand, and his classical tragedies on the other, would be, he hoped, the means of educating the public out of the false taste to which his “Byronic” works had pandered:

They [*contemporary poets*] have raised a mosque by the side of a Grecian temple of the purest architecture, and more barbarous than the barbarians from whose practice I have borrowed the figure; they are not contented with their own grotesque edifice, unless they destroy the prior and purely beautiful fabric which preceded and which shames them and theirs forever and ever. I shall be told that amongst these I *have* been (or it may be still *am*), conspicuous – true; and I am ashamed of it; I *have* been amongst the builders of this Babel attended by a confusion of tongues; but never amongst the envious destroyers of the classic temple of our predecessor.<sup>7</sup>

But by then it was too late. The tone of *Don Juan*, being facetiously comic, was much harder to translate (even modern non-English readers, who understand its content well enough, have difficulty assessing the fine-tuned layers of its irony and jokes): and in the nineteenth century “l'École du rire” (as Lamartine named it, with a frown) was held in no high regard. A Great Poet had to be deep, and serious, and it was manifestly impossible to be serious and amusing both at once: “We are never scorched and drenched while standing on the same spot”.

Byron's self-critical *volte face* was ignored (in so far as it was even known about). The works of which he was ashamed held sway: though see chapters below on Goethe and Pushkin for the two most notable exceptions. Pushkin will always be the Hero of Byron Reception, for the way in which, in *Evgeny Onegin*, he takes Byron's own reversal on board, and makes us see a Haroldian figure through the lens of a Juanesque style. Pushkin's was a great critical, as well as creative, faculty.

It was inevitable that the influential Swiss *Bibliothèque Britannique* should turn its hand to Byron. The poet had, it is reported, met its editor, Marc-Auguste Pictet, on May 28th 1816, at a soirée attended also by Pellegrino Rossi and Victor de Bonstetten.<sup>8</sup> The *Bibliothèque* did him justice in 1817, after it had (post-Vienna), changed its name to *Bibliothèque Universelle*: extracts from *Childe Harold* and the Turkish Tales decorate its pages throughout that and the following year. Byron preferred these to the later, more widely-circulated Parisian ones by

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7: Letter to John Murray Esquire.

8: Jean Rilliet and Jean Cassaigneau, *Marc-Auguste Pictet ou le rendez-vous de l'Europe universelle 1751-1825*, Editions Sklatine, Geneva, 1995, p.495.

Amedée Pichot; on May 12th 1821, he writes to Francis Hodgson, “The Paris translation is also very inferior to the Geneva one, which is very fair, though in prose also”.<sup>9</sup> Remembering Anne Elliot’s scepticism about *The Giaour* in Chapter 11 of *Persuasion*, I had hoped to illustrate the translation with some anti-religious passages from the Giaour’s confession; but find that its translation of *The Giaour* ends at line 688, before the Giaour has begun his final rant. Byron’s alleged religious scepticism had to be neutered for European consumption. Here instead is the description of the poem’s heroine, Leila:

Her eye’s dark charm ’twere vain to tell,  
 But gaze on that of the Gazelle,  
 It will assist thy fancy well;  
 As large, as languishingly dark,  
 But Soul beamed forth in every spark  
 That darted from beneath the lid,  
 Bright as the jewel of Giamschid.  
 Yea, *Soul*, and should our Prophet say  
 That form was nought but breathing clay,  
 By Allah! I would answer nay;  
 Though on Al-Sirat’s arch I stood,  
 Which totters o’er the fiery flood,  
 With Paradise within my view,  
 And all his Houris beckoning through.  
 Oh! Who young Leila’s glance could read  
 And keep that portion of his creed,  
 Which saith that woman is but dust,  
 A soulless toy for tyrant’s lust?<sup>10</sup>

The *Bibliothèque universelle* renders this:

On essayeroit en vain de rendre le charme sérieux de son regard. Voyez les yeux de la gazelle: il vous aideront à l’imaginer. Ils sont aussi grands, aussi noirs, aussi languissans; mais l’ame de Leila se montre dans ce feu qui rayonne au travers de ses cils, et qui brille comme le joyau de *Giamschid*. J’ai dit son ame, ah! oui sans doute! Et quand le Prophète lui-même apparoîtroit pour me dire qu’elle est une argile vivante; dût mon salut en dépendre; fussé-je suspendu sur le pont tremblant d’Al-scrat [*sic*], au-dessus du gouffre de feu; invité, pressé par toutes les houris du paradis ensemble, je répondrais, non! par Alla! – Quel est celui qui a pû lire dans les yeux de Leila, et qui répétera comme article de foi: «cette femme n’est

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9: BLJ VIII 114.

10: Byron, *The Giaour*, ll.473-90.

que poudre: ce n'est qu'une forme sans ame, destinée aux plaisirs d'un tyran.»<sup>11</sup>

The effect of putting a highly individual tone, a highly rhythmic verse-form, into neutral French prose is strange; but this translator is much more conscientious than those who had mangled the novels of Jane Austen, in previous rushed and amateur translations for the *Bibliothèque*. The rhetoric is sustained, and every obscure Islamic reference is conveyed – somehow. *The Giaour* had been finished four years before this version came out: I imagine the greater care over detail is a consequence of there having been more time – either that, or Byron's reputation, being infinitely greater in 1817 than that of the anonymous Jane Austen, seemed to demand a more professional translator.

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Byron's own sensational image precluded an accurate assessment of his poetry, a problem not diminished by the fact that the standard biographical works, such as Medwin, Galt, and Moore, were translated into French almost as soon as they appeared in English. He was deemed an aristocrat who had rebelled against his own society, and been expelled by it. He was deemed a great lover. He was deemed (in the teeth of the evidence) a champion of the common man, and of democracy. He was deemed to have been a freedom-fighter in Italy in aspiration, and a freedom-fighter in Greece in reality.

Only the Italian part of this list approximated the truth.

Words and phrases often associated with Byron and “Byronism” were such as *Zerrissenheit*, *Weltschmerz*, *Skeptizismus* and *Maladie du Siècle*: “Disunity” (or “Ripped-apartness”), “World-sadness”, “Scepticism”, and “Illness of the Century”. This was of course on the continent, not in England. In pure, Anglican / Methodistical England, intent as she was on Empire and moneymaking, Byron and “Byronism” were associated with sin, mockery, and a lack of patriotism. Here is one characteristic reaction:

Byron ... is doomed to be exiled from the libraries of all virtuous men. It is a blessing to the world that what is putrid must soon pass away. The carcase hung up in chains will be gazed at for a short time in horror; but

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11: *Bibliothèque universelle* 1817 (Vol.6), p.403.

men will soon turn their eyes away, and remove even the gallows on which it is hung.<sup>12</sup>

Post-Napoleonic mainland Europe, however, saw the misanthropy and despair, the alienation and bitterness of characters like Manfred, and voices like that of Childe Harold, as representing a new mood, a mood of revolutionary despair, a defiance in the face of political power and religious cant, which was new, and specific to their own time. The fact that Byron had expressed his own sense of life's worthlessness, not as a modish innovation, but in the most traditional perspective possible, cut no ice with them:

Oh Love! O Glory! What are ye! who fly  
 Around us ever, rarely to alight?  
 There's not a Meteor in the polar Sky  
 Of such transcendent or more fleeting flight;  
 Chill and chained to cold earth, we lift on high  
 Our eyes, in search of either lovely light;  
 A thousand and a thousand colours they  
 Assume, then leave us on our freezing way.

And such as they are, such my present tale is –  
 A non-descript and ever-varying rhyme –  
 A versified Aurora Borealis  
 Which flashes o'er a waste and icy clime;  
 When we know what all are we must bewail us,  
 But ne'ertheless, I hope it is no crime  
 To laugh at *all* things – for, I wish to know,  
*What, after all, are all things – but a Show?*

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,

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**12:** Rev. John Todd, first Professor of English at University College London, wrote in his 1830 book *The Students' Guide*. Quoted in Chambers (1925: 19). Todd, writing as "Oxonienensis", had in 1822 published a pamphlet against Byron's *Cain*: "*A Remonstrance Addressed to Mr. John Murray, Respecting a Recent Publication.*"



By Fénelon, 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. –

Socrates said our only knowledge was  
 “To know that nothing could be known,” a pleasant  
 Science enough – which levels to an Ass  
 Each Man of Wisdom, future, past or present;  
 Newton (that Proverb of the Mind) Alas!  
 Declared, with all his grand discoveries recent,  
 That *He* himself felt only “like a Youth –  
 “Picking up shells by the great Ocean, Truth!”

Ecclesiastes said that all is Vanity –  
 Most modern Preachers say the same, or show it  
 By their examples of true Christianity;  
 In short, all know, or very soon may know it;  
 And in this Scene of all-confessed Inanity,  
 By Saint, by Sage, by Preacher, and by Poet,  
 Must I restrain me, through the fear of Strife,  
 From holding up the Nothingness of Life? – (*Don Juan*  
 VII, sts.1-6)

However, this was in *Don Juan*, the tone of which was harder to gauge and translate than that of *Childe Harold*, but which *seemed* to be comic. To the lost miserable Polish exiles in Paris (for example), or the doomed Decembrists in Russia, or the Spanish liberals exiled in England, or the Italian patriots exiled in France, England, or Switzerland, the dominant mood was not comic. Byron must be, like his own Harold, a tragic exile: his grief at the fact must be their grief. Here, “Harold” addresses Nemesis:

From mighty wrongs to petty perfidy  
 Have I not seen what human things could do?  
 From the loud roar of foaming Calumny  
 To the small whisper of th'as paltry few,  
 And subtler venom of the reptile Crew,  
 The Janus Glance of whose significant eye,  
 Learning to lie with Silence, would *seem* true,  
 And without utterance, save the Shrug or sigh,  
 Deal round to happy fools its speechless Obloquy.

But I have lived, and have not lived in vain:  
 My Mind may lose its force, my Blood its fire,  
 And my Frame perish even in conquering pain;  
 But there is that within me which shall tire  
 Torture and Time, and breathe when I expire;  
 Something unearthly, which they deem not of,  
 Like the remembered tone of a mute Lyre,  
 Shall on their softened Spirits sink, and move  
 In hearts all rocky now the late remorse of Love.

The seal is set. – Now welcome, thou dread Power!  
 Nameless, yet thus omnipotent, which here  
 Walk'st in the shadow of the midnight hour  
 With a deep awe, yet all distinct from fear;  
 Thy haunts are ever where the dead walls rear  
 Their ivy mantles, and the solemn scene  
 Derives from thee a sense so deep and clear  
 That we become a part of what has been,  
 And grow unto the spot – all-seeing but unseen.<sup>13</sup>

The interpretation which has the tone of *Childe Harold* to be self-indulgent histrionics, and that of *Don Juan* to be relaxed, civilized, and witty, could have no currency. The writer who could tell you

But I am but a nameless sort of person  
 (A broken Dandy lately on my travels) ...<sup>14</sup>

Was not one to increase your sense of *Weltschmerz* or of *Skeptizismus*. You could derive little anti-imperialist happiness from studying Juan's adventures – he goes to bed with Catherine the Great! – but surely those of Conrad the Corsair, of Selim in *The Bride of Abydos*, or of Lara, had an obvious political meaning, and their defiant, courageous failures to survive only increased their value, in an age where tyranny was all-powerful?

The idea that Byron / Harold, unlike the Polish exiles in Paris, and quite unlike the Decembrists in Siberia – unlike Ovid or Euripides! – could return home any time he wanted, would be read as a cruel travesty. It would spoil the myth, and the myth, like our own myths, was all-powerful. The idea that he preached an universal and eternal message – a *non-political* message – of hopelessness, in which “Vanity” and “Inanity” rhymed *respectfully* with “Christianity”, was not to be entertained. Christianity, as interpreted by the Tsar, the Emperor of Austria, or the

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13: CHP IV sts.136-8.

14: *Beppo*, st.52, 1-2.

King of Prussia, was the enemy of all one held dear, not the friend of those philosophers who reminded one that *all* strife was futile, *all* defiance useless, *all* aspiration without point.

The power of this myth was strong in the nineteenth century, continues to this day, and was and is useful as a means of avoiding the study of Byron himself – which is admittedly a difficult task. The double layer of misreading is clear in the case of Kierkegaard, of whom we hear, from the pen of a twenty-first century scholar,

Kierkegaard turned, as did his contemporaries, to the spirit and temper of the modern literature of the day, the romanticism of Hugo and his school in France, of Hoffmann and Heine in Germany and of Byronism in England. Except for the Germans, Kierkegaard was not too well acquainted with these writers, for his ignorance of French and English literature is profound. Yet Kierkegaard was imbued with the passions and sentiments of demonic romanticism. He felt so attracted to this dangerous world that, in the years of his studies in Don Juan, Faust and Ahasverus, it almost threatened to dissolve his personality.

It is easy to trace in Kierkegaard's fictive writings the predominant moods of Byronism. Here is both the English *spleen*, the German *Zerrissenheit* and the French *maladie du siècle*, three labels covering the whole range of passionate feeling, of loneliness and contempt as well as of irony and bitter sarcasm. Depression and despair are virtues which conceal a bleeding heart that suffers from the contact with a low, materialistic world. The Kierkegaardian hero of these years, whether nameless or called Johannes the Seducer, is filled with pessimism, nihilism and some degree of sentimentality. He has the mark of Cain on his forehead and demonstrates as many interesting poses as the heroes of Byron. Like the English poet, Kierkegaard scorned society and believed in individualism, but he lacked the positive aspects of the Byronic gospel, the cult of Nature and Liberty, of Woman and Love. Kierkegaard accepted only the attitudes and costumes of Byronism. The great skeptic in Kierkegaard never went so far as to doubt God, his father, the Danish monarchy, or conservative ideals. Behind the Byronic fancy dress, there is always the loyal subject of Frederik VI or Christian VIII.<sup>15</sup>

Byron would have laughed at “demonic romanticism” (whatever that may have been), never doubted either God or his father, and fathered no “cult” of either Nature, or Woman, or Love, much as he liked to discuss

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15: Henning Fenger, *Kierkegaard: A Literary Approach*, in Jon Stewart (ed.), *Kierkegaard and His Contemporaries* (Walter de Gruyter, Berlin / New York 2003), p.312.

these things. It is the modern writer who accepts “only the attitudes and costumes of Byronism”.

What, we wonder with trepidation, of Kierkegaard himself? As the above quotation shows, the figure of Don Juan was important to his thought, parallel to those of Faust and the Wandering Jew. There were several German translations of Byron’s *Don Juan* in his lifetime:<sup>16</sup> but all he makes of them can be seen here:

Desire awakens in Don Juan because he sees one of the girls happy in her relation to the one she loves, and he begins by being jealous. This is a point of interest that would not occupy us at all in the opera, precisely because Don Giovanni is not a reflective individual. Once Don Juan is interpreted as a self-aware individual, we can achieve an ideality corresponding to the musical one by transferring the matter to the psychological domain. Then one attains the ideality of intensity. For that reason Byron’s *Don Juan* must be considered a failure, because it expands itself epically. The immediate Don Juan has to seduce 1,003, the self-aware one has only to seduce one, and what occupies us is how he does it.<sup>17</sup>

Byron’s Don Juan will not fit this pattern of thought at all, not because his poem is conceived “epically” (which in fact it isn’t, really), not just because he is neither “immediate” nor “self-aware”, but because, unlike Don Giovanni, he is not a seducer at all, but a passive innocent cornered by wicked women. Kierkegaard may have realised this, but, equally, may not: we can’t tell. His reaction to the masterwork of the poet by whom he thought he was influenced is to create a false *Don Juan*, and then sweep it under the carpet. The passage gives us no confidence that Kierkegaard has read *Don Juan* at all.<sup>18</sup>

This problem – of wilful ignorance – recurs, especially in English critics. Here is Thomas Carlyle:

Surely, all these stormful agonies, this volcanic heroism, superhuman contempt and moody desperation, with so much scowling, and teeth-gnashing, and other sulphurous humour, is more like the brawling of a

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**16:** They were by Wilhelm Reinhold, Zwickau 1821 *et seq*; by G. N. Bärmann, Frankfurt 1830-1; Cantos I-IV by A. von Marées, Essen 1839; by Otto Gildemeister, 2 vols Bremen 1845; and by Adolf Böttger, Leipzig 1849, 1858.

**17:** Kierkegaard, *Either/Or A Fragment of Life*, tr. Alastair Hannay, Penguin 1992, pp.112-13.

**18:** See Troy Wellington Smith, *P.L.Møller: Kierkegaard’s Byronic Adversary* (BJ Vol.42 No1 2014, pp.35-48). From this it’s indeed possible to deduce that Kierkegaard’s knowledge of Byron was nil.

player in some paltry tragedy, which is to last three hours, than the bearing of a man in the business of life, which is to last three score and ten years. Perhaps *Don Juan*, especially the latter parts of it, is the only thing approaching to a *sincere* work, he ever wrote ...<sup>19</sup>

A distant – and probably rapid – reading of *Childe Harold*, and *Childe Harold IV* alone, has been rolled up into a black ball and substituted for a considered reaction. Carlyle needs a bogeyman for his polemic, and duly creates one. Had he bothered to re-read *Don Juan*, he might have omitted the unwilling “perhaps”. Here is John Stuart Mill:

In the worst period of my depression, I had read through the whole of Byron (then new to me), to try whether a poet, whose peculiar department was supposed to be that of the intenser feelings, could rouse any feeling in me. As might be expected, I got no good from this reading, but the reverse. The poet's state of mind was too like my own. His was the lament of a man who had worn out all pleasures, and who seemed to think that life, to all who possess the good things of it, must necessarily be the vapid, uninteresting thing which I found it. His Harold and Manfred had the same burthen on them which I had; and I was not in a frame of mind to derive any comfort from the vehement sensual passion of his Giaours, or the sullenness of his Laras. But while Byron was exactly what did not suit my condition, Wordsworth was exactly what did.<sup>20</sup>

Again, the last thing he would have done was to pick up *Don Juan*. He needed, he thought, philosophical calm, not laughter. Laughter is collusive, trivial, and not serious. Mill, it seems, didn't want to know about its role in *fighting* depression. Here is Matthew Arnold:

What a spendthrift, one is tempted to cry, is Nature! With what prodigality, in the march of generations, she employs human power, content to gather almost always little result from it, sometimes none! Look at Byron, that Byron whom the present generation of Englishmen are forgetting; Byron, the greatest natural force, the greatest elementary power, I cannot but think, which has appeared in our literature since Shakespeare. And what became of this wonderful production of nature? He shattered himself, he inevitably shattered himself to pieces against the huge, black, cloud-topped, interminable precipice of British Philistinism. But Byron, it may be said, was eminent only by his genius, only by his inborn force and fire; he had not the intellectual equipment of a supreme modern poet;

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**19:** Quoted Elfenbein p.96.

**20:** Mill, *Autobiography: A CRISIS IN MY MENTAL HISTORY. ONE STAGE ONWARD*.

except for his genius he was an ordinary nineteenth-century English gentleman, with little culture and with no ideas.<sup>21</sup>

That Byron might have been a “supreme modern” *comic* “poet” isn’t an idea Arnold can entertain. Our suspicion is confirmed when we find that, in his edition of Byron, the only ottava rima section he includes is Sathan’s “prosecution” speech from *The Vision of Judgement* – printed with no context. So much for “the greatest natural force, the greatest elementary power ... which has appeared in our literature since Shakespeare”. Readers must be discouraged from reading the works in which his elementary power is most clearly displayed.

They wrote, we must remind ourselves, for a society which never put male and female authors next to one another on the same shelf.

How different was John Ruskin, here describing his childhood reading in *Praeterita* (1885-9):

By that time my father had himself put me through the two first books of Livy, and I knew, therefore, what close-set language was; but I saw then that Livy, as afterwards that Horace and Tacitus, were studiously, often laboriously, and sometimes obscurely, concentrated: while Byron wrote, as easily as a hawk flies, and as clearly as a lake reflects, the exact truth in the precisely narrowest terms; nor only the exact truth, but the most central and useful one. Of course I could no more measure Byron’s greater powers at that time than I could Turner’s; but I saw that both were right in all things that knew right from wrong in; and that they must thenceforth be my masters, each in his own domain. The modern reader, not to say also, modern scholar, is usually so ignorant of the essential qualities of Byron, that I cannot go farther in the story of my own novitiate under him without illustrating, by rapid example, the things which I saw to be unrivalled in his work. For this purpose I take his common prose, rather than his verse, since his modes of rhythm involve other questions than those with which I am now concerned. Read, for chance – first, the sentence on Sheridan, in his letter to Thomas Moore, from Venice, June 1st (or dawn of June 2nd!), 1818. ‘The Whigs abuse him; however, he never left them, and such blunderers deserve neither credit nor compassion. As for his creditors — remember Sheridan never had a shilling, and was thrown, with great powers and passions, into the thick of the world, and placed upon the pinnacle of success, with no other external means to support him in his elevation.’<sup>22</sup>

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**21:** Arnold, *Essays in Criticism*.

**22:** Ruskin, *Praeterita*, 2, I, 6.