

# Byron's Temperament



# Byron's Temperament:

## *Essays in Body and Mind*

Edited by

Bernard Beatty and Jonathon Shears

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Byron's Temperament: Essays in Body and Mind  
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Edited by Bernard Beatty and Jonathon Shears

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- BLJ* Leslie A. Marchand (ed.), *Byron's Letters and Journals*, 12 vols  
(London: John Murray, 1973-82)
- CHP* *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*
- CPW* Jerome J. McGann (ed.), *Lord Byron: the Complete Poetical  
Works*, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-93)
- DJ* *Don Juan*





# INTRODUCTION

BERNARD BEATTY AND JONATHON SHEARS

## I

This volume is in the *Psycho-Literary Perspectives in Multi-modal Contexts* series set up by ‘Research in Literature, Psychology and Medical Humanities’ at The University of Liverpool. The focus and aim of the group is ‘to bring together and produce dialogue between scholars working in the humanities, psychology, the social sciences, the biosciences, and medicine, and also scholars from differing cultural backgrounds which nurture somewhat different understandings of mental phenomena.’

Byron is a particularly suitable exemplum here since we know a considerable amount about his life, and the balance of his personality has been the subject of more or less continuous speculation and enquiry both during his life and in the two centuries following it. A further, equally compelling, reason is that Byron was peculiarly self-conscious of, and attentive to, the often contradictory ebbs and flows of his physical and mental being and was, continually, fascinated by the connections and disconnections between the two. As he wrote to Leigh Hunt in 1815, his poetic temperament was generated by ‘an uneasy mind in an uneasy body’.<sup>1</sup> Byron’s fascination with the interrelationship of mind and body has always been known, so why should another foray be made into this territory?

There are two obvious reasons. The first is the massively thorough editing of his poetry and letters in the last century coupled with a whole series of biographies, some with scrupulously assembled new details of his life, and others with striking claims to explain the mystery of his personality by some master theory of a more or less psychological, but sometimes physiological, kind. We are now the other side of this and can take stock of it. The other reason is the swing to materialist kinds of explanation within literary studies and outside it, and the investment of considerable intellectual energy, both theoretical and empirical, in cognitive neuroscience. Such explanations of Byron have recently been

advanced by various authorities. What can they tell us and how far can we rely upon their cogency?

Byron would be fascinated by all this since he often settles for materialist explanations of mental/psychic behaviour himself. Thus, when the sixteen-years-old Don Juan suddenly takes an interest in Nature, his self, and the marvellous, Byron as narrator comments: ‘If you think ’twas philosophy that did this, / I can’t help thinking puberty assisted (I, 93). And yet, he was never an out-and-out materialist for, more deeply, he was always some kind of Dualist in that he thought that a double explanation, often specifically self-contradictory, of the same phenomena gave more insight than a single one. So, Charles Churchill, whom Byron admired, published his poem *The Ghost* in 1763, in which he made it clear that any belief in spectral agents was a sign of idiocy. But when Byron wrote his two elaborate ghost episodes in the last cantos of *Don Juan*, prefaced by a lengthy discussion as to whether ghosts are real, he uses some details from Churchill’s poem, deliberately calls attention to the devices that he is copying from Gothic fictions, and yet includes other references that suggest that the first ghostly appearance may be a real one. He does not intend to clarify this but rather he leaves ‘the thing a problem, like all things’ (*DJ*, XVII, 97). Hence ‘insight’ is perhaps not quite the right word to use, since Byron was always more concerned with registering, bumping up against, re-presenting intractable gaps and impossible co-presences than in explaining them.

It is this which perhaps authorises what otherwise might seem puzzling: this is the fact that all the essays in this inter-disciplinary study – which by no means all deal directly or mainly with literary texts – are by literary scholars. That earlier presiding formulation – ‘from differing cultural backgrounds which nurture somewhat different understandings of mental phenomena’ – kicks in here very directly. Whereas in Byron’s time, scientific, medical, literary and philosophical material was available (most obviously in the major reviews of the time) within the same volume, which was read by the same people, this has, long since, not been the case. For the most part, scientists do not read literary journals, nor literary scholars read scientific ones. It is presumed that they are, both in object of attention and method of procedure, disparate, even incompatible. More largely, the notion of ‘Truth’, which could, in principle, be reached by various roads, has been displaced by rival kinds of certainty, high probability, or by a disbelief in the utility or possibility of either. Though older discriminations between the objectively and subjectively held are *passé* (not least, for example, for quantum physicists) and this applies also to over-confident discriminations between the presented and the

represented, yet, in practice, few outside literary disciplines think that literary scholars can be said to 'know' anything beyond interpretative theories and strategies of various kinds which are incapable of confirmation. It is usually taken for granted that such theories and strategies will only reverberate within their own circle.

Yet, it might be possible to acknowledge that literary scholars, too, in their way, like Byron himself, register and bump up against re-presented intractable gaps, impossible co-presences, palpable forms of understanding and signifying forms which, however one might want to formulate it, belong to 'reality' and are revelatory of it. Such is the endeavour in this collection of essays.

It is helped, of course, by the obvious fact that literature, compared to music for instance, is an impure discipline. Music, needless to say, emerges from distinct social, political and historical contexts, derives from song and dance which are inherently social, and, especially in Byron's nineteenth century, exhibits considerable cross-over with literature. The invention of 'piano recitals' based on poetry recitals and the giant example of Liszt (a great fan of Byron) are enough to demonstrate this. Yet musicians, not unreasonably, claim a certain abstract purity, even a universally accessible one, in musical forms which could never be the case with literature which is dependent upon and delights in the materialised specificity of distinct languages. Correspondingly, it has never been possible to sever literature or its criticism from history, politics, changing sensibilities and ideas, religion, and philosophy. Certainly this has never been the case with Byron. His readers and critics, drawn to his incomparable management of words, forms and differentiated voices, nevertheless find themselves talking about all manner of things as Byron does himself.

Similarly, it is more than usually impossible to separate Byron the man from Byron the poet though the two are not identical. If we wish to understand Byron's temperament, we will need to be as much concerned with his poetry as with his life, not least to avoid precipitately settling on a psychological or even medical 'diagnosis'. Literary scholars have an advantage here over those from other disciplines and, indeed, many biographers, who assume too readily that 'Byron' is primarily Byron the man and that, at most, the man will illumine the writings, even the poems, far more than the writings and poems will illumine the man. This is particularly evident in the limitations of the last three biographies of the poet by Phyllis Grosskurth, Benita Eisler and Fiona MacCarthy.<sup>2</sup> It is a severe limitation of their trustworthiness.

The present volume differs from these but it continues, albeit in a more academic manner and in changed circumstance, the enquiries into the great puzzle of Byron's personality entwined with his writings that originated in his lifetime. It is not only that there was much less of a divide between the Arts and Sciences at that time but also that the 'humours' explanation of temperament (where 'temperament' is nothing other than the proper balance of different humours) was not overthrown until well into the century. Hence, everyone accepted that there was a blurred territory between the psychological and physiological. This was the background to the many attempts to pick over the details of Byron's life and verse, especially following his sudden death in 1824, to provide a pathology of his temperament. Indeed it became something of a national pastime. For many, Byron was constitutionally melancholy – presenting the same poetic temperament which had scarred the likes of Pope and Cowper<sup>3</sup> – for others he was characteristically carefree and whimsical. His much-remarked charm, athletic vigour (particularly regarding swimming and horse-riding) and 'light and agreeable' nature, remarked upon by Thomas Medwin, sit uncomfortably at odds with reports of aloofness, outbursts of temper, recalcitrance and his own frequent references to poor health.<sup>4</sup> For Thomas Moore, who knew Byron better than most, he had a desultory nature, alternating high moods with low. Was Byron happy or sad? Was he ill or in good health? In earnest or insincere? And how did this affect his writing? Certain views were perpetuated: his famous pale complexion was as much the embodiment of his gloom as Childe Harold or Manfred;<sup>5</sup> he had become so well known for a splenetic nature that in 1849 a Spanish doctor – Lopes de Mendonça – could dismiss a patient suffering from spleen for parodying 'Byron's temperament';<sup>6</sup> John Galt sourced Byron's hyperbolic moods to the mountainous scenery of his childhood in Aberdeenshire.<sup>7</sup> Even so, suspicions abounded and 'many imagined that Byron's melancholy was purely fictitious'.<sup>8</sup>

The amateur and professional aetiology – somatic and psychological – of Byron's temperament began early, but it has never really gone away in either studies of his life or poetry. Although recent investigations into Byron's turbulent moods have highlighted certain personality traits and dispositions – perhaps most spectacularly manic-depression, anorexia and even madness – scholars still struggle, often with apparently new claims for confidence, to provide an account sufficiently holistic to allow us to read Byron's temperamental nature.<sup>9</sup>

Explanations of behaviour based on the theory of humours, is where it all began. But the dismantling of this theory – initially through a discourse of nervous disorders in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries developed

by Cullen and Brown<sup>10</sup> – led to the separated development of modern medical theories and treatment for physical illnesses on the one hand and, on the other, to the rise of Freudian and other psychological theorising which, in effect, elevated the explanatory force of psychological history over somatic fact in treating mental disorders. Confidence in the latter has declined, so we are left with increasingly confident and professional materialist diagnoses of apparently mental or psychological phenomena which seem to bear no relation to the residual ('amateurish') vocabulary used by literary critics when they discuss sensibility, behaviour, and thought. In this volume, leading international scholars aim to redress this balance by tackling a topic which, more than most, demands understanding and examining the relationship between body and mind in ways that take account of recent theories but, like their nineteenth-century predecessors, they are, and seek to be, rooted in a literary culture which does not separate itself off from other intellectual modalities. For instance, behavioural psychology sometimes shares a methodological direction with literary studies, emphasising pattern and recurrence, which this book will in part exploit.

The present volume, therefore, is the first attempt to draw together, in eight original essays, some of the dominant strains in our critical thinking about Byron's behaviour and the way it affected his writing and reputation. Using discourses and paradigms drawn from a variety of disciplines, including literary studies, history of medicine, behaviourism and cultural studies this volume looks to explore and synthesise the development of what we might call Byron's 'behavioural strategies'<sup>11</sup> and their impact on his poetic manner which is so often felt to be inadequately represented by the catch-all term Romanticism. In so doing, the book aims to develop recent studies of emotions, such as those by Keith Oatley and Faflak and Sha,<sup>12</sup> to be more inclusive of behavioural strategies and to distinguish longer-term shifts in mood that might be said to constitute temperament, and to pitch literary modes of exploration and understanding into a larger public arena than is now usually expected. Studies of the precise relationship of his body and mind have often placed Byron within some of our modern psychological and medical frameworks without acknowledging that these 'diagnoses' are bound up with the complex business of reading and responding to literature. The contributors to this book have chosen the topic of temperament as one which uniquely allows concurrent discussion of body and mind within the context of Byron's writing as well as his life.

## II

This book is firstly literary, though readers will find that the approaches taken by individual contributors abut onto medical history, psychological analysis and biography. It establishes that the pathologising that became a national pastime following Byron's death, and the narratives that this speculation produced, continue to inform – albeit factored through more sophisticated and technical language belonging to modern medicine, psychoanalysis, and cognitive science – contemporary readings of Byron's temperament. But increasingly, we contend, these approaches seem to cast doubt on the authority of any discourse, such as the literary, which does not wholeheartedly accept their primacy. This volume therefore both relies upon recent scientific or quasi-scientific theory and yet insists upon the relevance of literary procedures which are not dependent upon it and can, in certain cases, cast doubts upon some of its claims.

Chapter 1 looks squarely at some of the recent diagnoses of Byron. In particular, Bernard Beatty disputes recent assertions by Kay Jamison – that Byron is a prime example of the artistic temperament that is prone to and often dependent upon psychological polarities – and Alan Richardson – that recent advances in cognitive neuroscience show that Romantic discourses of 'spirit' and 'mind' actually depend upon brain function – through close analysis of Byron's poetry and letters.

Chapter 2 examines and disputes the received notion that there is a 'light' and 'dark' Byron, a Byron of good humour and one of melancholy temperament, a distortion prompted by Byron's turn to comic verse in 1817. Gavin Hopps presents an alternative reading in his analysis of *Don Juan*, whereby Byron's 'levity' is viewed as more serious than the customary definitions of shallowness or frivolity. Instead, Hopps presents a nuanced account of Byron's alertness to the performative nature of ease and grace within his self-conscious aristocratic context.

Chapter 3 extends and develops the discussion of Byron's positive moods in asking whether, as is often perceived to be the case, the excesses of the body necessitate consequences on the mind and spirit? Christine Kenyon Jones overturns the frequent discussions of the infirm body to look at the representation of agile, festive and carnivalesque bodies at scenes of social engagement such as balls, feasts and parties. She examines, amongst other things, the representation of good humour at the carnival in *Beppo*, Lady Richmond's Ball in *Childe Harold* III and Haidee's feast in *Don Juan* and questions the possibility of sustaining a carefree mood on such joyous occasions.

Chapter 4 explores in detail the problematic issue of Byron's supposed madness, including his own attitudes to his mental health and the way these affected his portrayal of female mental illness – including hysteria – in *Don Juan*. Shona M. Allan acknowledges the then still pervasive theory of the humours, but her methodology is instructive, too, in terms of present endeavours, not least in this volume, to bring together and 'read' off different kinds of insight, kinds of explanation, assumptions, and vocabulary. In Chapter 5, Peter Cochran takes the same topic of madness, arguing that evidence from correspondence of the period indicates that Byron suffered a nervous breakdown during the first year of his marriage to Annabella Milbanke. Cochran places the discussion within Byron's own fears of madness, to present the arguments for and against seeing Byron as 'mad' or 'bad'. These involve the now legendary ambivalence of Annabella, Lady Milbanke and their domestic circle, who damned Byron through their silence.<sup>13</sup>

In Chapter 6, Jonathon Shears poses the question: when we ask whether Byron was a hypochondriac is that the same as asking whether he ever imagined himself to be ill? His analysis of the history of hypochondria – often considered to be a male version of female hysteria – through close analysis of periods of acute melancholy in Byron's life in 1814 and 1821 suggests the two are very different. The chapter demonstrates that Byron's alleged hypochondria was actually a result of the ease with which he slipped between discussing his body and mind. For Byron, discussing the body – whether in comic or melancholy vein – is frequently an indirect way of indicating an unsettled mental, emotional or spiritual state. Just as Cochran diagnoses a temporary breakdown rather than a permanent mental disorder, so Shears questions whether Byron's hypochondria was as clear-cut a physical phenomenon as has been suggested.

Is spontaneity a part, or the antithesis, of temperament? Chapter 7 poses the intriguing question was Byron really spontaneous and, if so, how do we go about measuring this? Shobhana Bhattacharji provides answers by closely reading a number of Byron's letters in which we see his own testimony that '[o]ur minds are perpetually wrought on by the temperament of our bodies' borne out. She presents an analysis of Byron's grieving process in 1811 and the way that Byron became temperamentally attuned to continually trying out new experiences while never quite departing from old. Again, like Cochran, she does not take certain facts and base a total understanding of Byron upon them – as Jamison and others have previously done – rather she reads closely a particular period of Byron's life as a singular, enlightening episode. The word 'reads' here

is instructive and typical of the procedures of many (Hopps for instance) in this book.

The final chapter sees the volume take a scientific turn through a reading of Byron's poetry of the commingled matter of body and spirit in *The Deformed Transformed, Cain and Heaven and Earth*. Hermione de Almeida presents Byron in the light of his knowledge of pre-Darwinian evolutionary science such as that of Herschel and Cuvier and French anatomists like Buffon. She finds in Byron's metaphysical and religious drama a continual probing of the 'fixed lines' commonly accepted to exist between species in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. Byron's discourses of body and mind reveal a developed interest in, and understanding of, the problematic questions that science was raising about the inviolability of the spirit in matter.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Letter of 4-6 [?] November 1815, in *BLJ*, 4, p. 332.

<sup>2</sup> See: Grosskurth, *Byron: The Flawed Angel* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997); Benita Eisler, *Byron: Child of Passion, Fool of Fame* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1999); Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend* (London: John Murray, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Richard Madden, *The Infirmities of Genius*, 2 vols (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea, and Blanchard, 1833).

<sup>4</sup> Medwin, *Conversations of Lord Byron*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Colburn & Bentley, 1824), p. 483.

<sup>5</sup> Jane Porter, for example, noted of Byron '[t]he pale complexion [...] a sort of moonlight paleness' (cited in G. Wilson Knight, *Lord Byron: Christian Virtues* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952], p. 278).

<sup>6</sup> See Maria Leonor Machado de Sousa, "'Tempting Demon": The Portuguese Byron', in Richard A. Cardwell (ed.), *The Reception of Byron in Europe*, 2 vols (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 1, p. 173 (pp. 164-87).

<sup>7</sup> Galt, *The Life of Lord Byron* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1835), pp. 38-39.

<sup>8</sup> *Waldie's Select Circulating Library* (Philadelphia: Adam Waldie, 1833), 2, p. 486.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example: Kay Redfield Jamison, *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993); Leslie Heywood, *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996); Gary Elliott, *Eating Disorders in Males* (n.p.: Seminar Paper, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> See James Robert Allard, *Romanticism, Medicine and the Poet's Body* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 27-32.

<sup>11</sup> Marcel Zentner and Rebecca L. Shiner, *Handbook of Temperament* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2012), p. 4.



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<sup>12</sup> See: Keith Oatley, *Emotions: A Brief History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Joel Faflak and Richard C. Sha, *Romanticism and the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Sadly Peter Cochran passed away in 2015. The chapter published here has been worked up to its current form from the first draft that Peter sent to the editors. It develops his work on the subject of Byron's madness in 'The Draught Fermenting on the Chimney-Piece', *The Byron Journal* (2004), pp. 125-30.

## CHAPTER ONE

# ‘HE WAS A MAN OF STRANGE TEMPERAMENT’: READING BYRON’S MIND AND MATTER

BERNARD BEATTY

Byron was a poet not a philosopher. He distrusted philosophical arguments and systems of thought. But, even more than most, the evidence of his poetry, letters and journals, and indeed of his life itself, is that he found existence in general and his own existence in particular constantly puzzling and, if he could not make sense of it, yet constantly strove to.

The logical basis of all traditional philosophising is the principle of non-contradiction. But Byron is always acutely aware of contradictions in his own thinking and experience and writes directly out of these. He is explicit about this in *Don Juan*:

But if a writer should be quite consistent  
How could he possibly show things existent?

If people contradict themselves, can I  
Help contradicting them, and every body,  
Even my veracious self? – But that’s a lie;  
I never did so, never will – how should I?  
He who doubts all things, nothing can deny;  
Truth’s fountains may be clear – her streams are muddy,  
And cut through such canals of contradiction,  
That she must often navigate o’er fiction. (XV, 87-88)

Here Byron is mainly concerned with incompatible ideas and opinions which ‘fiction’ may combine or ‘navigate’ a way through but philosophical argument cannot. Yet Byron has, to recycle Jane Stabler’s

wonderful phrase, a broader ‘hospitality to contradiction’ than this.<sup>1</sup> A necessarily lengthy quotation from Isaac D’Israeli, who knew Byron and was admired by him, will give helpful context for this and establish the tenor of this essay.

A stroke of personal ridicule is levelled at Dryden, when Bayes informs us of his preparations for a course of study by a course of medicine! “When I have a grand design,” says he, “I ever take physic and let blood; for when you would have pure swiftness of thought, and fiery flights of fancy, you must have a care of the pensive part; in fine, you must purge the belly!” Such was really the practice of the poet, as Le Motte, who was a physician, informs us, and in his medical character did not perceive that ridicule in the subject which the wits and most readers unquestionably have enjoyed. The wits here were as cruel against truth as against Dryden; for we must still consider this practice, to use their own words, as “an excellent recipe for writing.” Among other philosophers, one of the most famous disputants of antiquity, Carneades, was accustomed to take copious doses of white hellebore, a great aperient, as a preparation to refute the dogmas of the stoics. “The thing that gives me the highest spirits (it seems absurd, but true) is a dose of salts; but one can’t take them like champagne,” said Lord Byron. Dryden’s practice was neither whimsical nor peculiar to the poet; he was of a full habit, and, no doubt, had often found by experience the beneficial effects without being aware of the cause, which is nothing less than the reciprocal influence of mind and body.

This simple fact is, indeed, connected with one of the most important inquiries in the history of man – the laws which regulate the invisible union of the soul with the body: in a word, the inscrutable mystery of our being! – a secret, but an undoubted intercourse, which probably must ever elude our perceptions.

Whether we consider the vulgar distinction of mind and body as an union, or as a modified existence, no philosopher denies that a reciprocal action takes place between our moral and physical condition.<sup>2</sup>

D’Israeli’s phrase ‘the inscrutable mystery of our being’ is a more elaborate version of Byron’s simple response to an assassinated Italian officer whom he has brought into his house:

But it was all a mystery. Here we are,  
 And there we go: – but *where?* five bits of lead,  
 Or three, or two, or one, send very far!  
 And is this blood, then, form’d but to be shed?  
 Can every element our elements mar?  
 And air – earth – water – fire live – and we dead?  
 We, whose minds comprehend all things? (*DJ*, V, 39)

The conjunction of lead and mind appals him here. Bits of lead can close down the mind which comprehends lead and ‘all things’. This is both plain fact and incomprehensible mystery, for if the mind exists in a different plane of existence from uncomprehending lead, does it cease altogether or exist in some other way (‘but where’)? Elsewhere, Byron is equally puzzled by what seems to be the opposite state of affairs, for in this example a small bit of matter does not end the mind’s life but extends and forms part of it:

But words are things, and a small drop of ink,  
 Falling like dew upon a thought, produces  
 That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think. (*DJ*, III, 88)

The obvious meaning – that it is odd that something small and material can be the means of making millions think – is complicated in a characteristically Byronic way by likening the inactive sterile ink to the active fruitful dew which appears as much to produce a thought as be the means of expressing it. Creativity here seems to belong to matter as well as mind, for the poet in the act of thinking finds his thought already thought or, as it were, already inked out. We would have to talk, to adapt D’Israeli’s phrase, of the ‘reciprocal influence of mind and matter’.

## I

Creativity is much the concern of Kay Jamison’s study, *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament* (1993).<sup>3</sup> She is inevitably, too, much concerned with the intermingling of physical and psychical events. The book begins and ends with quotations from Byron and though she instances many examples of artists who, she claims, were clearly manic-depressive (her preferred term, and mine, rather than ‘bi-polar disorder’) yet Byron is the only one to whom she devotes a whole chapter of forty-one pages. She does so, I suspect, because she finds Byron particularly interesting and because, whereas she does not have to make a case for some kinds of mental disorder in, for example, Van Gogh or Schumann, she clearly thinks that this is necessary with Byron. His wife thought, or wanted to think (as we shall see) that he was mad, but none of the medical authorities whom she consulted to establish this agreed with her.<sup>4</sup> He was, they thought, clearly odd but not mad, indeed manifestly sane.

Jamison sent draft copies of her work to two of the world’s most distinguished Byronists – Leslie Marchand and Jerome McGann – who approved and endorsed it. The book has been widely read and is very

influential. But is it right? And does it explain the mystery of Byron's 'strange temperament'?

I will briefly set out her argument. To do so, I will have to distinguish, which Jamison explicitly does not, between two styles of argument in the book. Essentially they belong to the old division between the Quadrivium and the Trivium, or between the Faculty of Arts and that of Science. One is based on words and the other on numbers. Thus some of her chapters, especially the one on Byron himself, are based on quotations of various kinds which are presented as cumulative evidence rather than in any sequence and are interspersed by supporting statements such as 'the diagnosis of manic-depressive illness in Lord Byron is given further support by other aspects' or more strongly '[m]anic-depressive illness is the only medical diagnosis that could reasonably account for [...]' and so on.<sup>5</sup> But many chapters, especially the earlier ones, seem evenly divided between quotations of many kinds and statistical information or lists often presented in tables or charts.

On the one hand, it is a pleasure to encounter someone trained in formal medical disciplines and scientific methods who is widely read and takes Byron's words seriously and *in extenso*. On the other, the statistical information sits awkwardly with other looser enquiries and sometimes seems present in order to give some suggestion of impeccably objective authority to argument which is more rhetorically based and, significantly, does not much take into account opposed readings of the evidence presented, or alternative evidence, preferring instead loose formulas such as 'research suggests' or 'research has shown'.

To give an example of this, Jamison insists that Byron's manic-depressive illness (sometimes asserted as strong possibility but more usually taken as fact) got much worse as he aged – which is commonly the case. She finds little difficulty in locating quotations from Byron himself, mainly in prose rather than poetry, and from those who knew him, which could certainly be used to support this. On the other hand, there is no gesture towards any supporting statistics which would balance the number and character of these observations with those of a similar character made earlier in his life. Nevertheless anyone reading the book, unless drenched in Byron's writings first-hand, would tend to think the case proven. But what if we looked at a different kind of evidence?

In January 1816, Lady Byron convinced herself that her husband was mad and, rather strangely, went through his belongings to find proof of it – discovering a small bottle of laudanum and a copy of *Justine*.<sup>6</sup> She showed these to Dr Baillie and asked him to confirm her diagnosis. But he did not do so. Neither did John Hanson whom she also approached

with a list of her findings. Her own doctor, Le Mann, examined Byron and declared that he had ‘discovered nothing like settled lunacy’. She said that this was why she left Byron. She would have stayed with him otherwise: ‘if he is insane I will do everything possible to alleviate his disease’ [*sic*].<sup>7</sup> Annabella Milbanke, however differently motivated, has this at least in common with Kay Jamison: she wished him to be proved insane.

There can be no doubt that Byron was extremely tense and moody throughout the time of his marriage. Manic depression is one explanation, but there are others. Byron often played roles – he had an intensely dramatic sense, but was also extremely shy, so that role-play was a helpful way out of his difficulties. On the other hand, Byron disliked playing a role dictated wholly by others or by circumstance. He avoided funerals, including that of his mother, he liked visiting tombs, but not those of anyone dear to him, he was extremely awkward when formally introduced into the House of Lords and when presented to the Sultan. He excelled as a lover, but found the roles of suitor, betrothed, married, and newly married husband extremely difficult. Hence, whatever the difficulties between his wife and himself personally, caused largely by their extremely discrepant, but equally strong, personalities (these clearly existed but then there is also evidence of real affection between them), Byron found considerable problems in continually playing the role assigned to him. Years later, he found a similar difficulty when he took on the publicly accepted role of *cavalier servente* to Teresa Guiccioli, but he just about managed it then. Earlier he could not.

To this problem, essentially one of character and upbringing, must be added Byron’s dreadful financial situation in 1815-16 which had made him consider calling off his marriage. Byron was used to being in debt but, now that he was married, especially, his debtors closed in, he eventually had to sell his books,<sup>8</sup> and he feared quite properly that bailiffs would invade his house and seize his property. He was intensely embarrassed by this and there was no obvious way out. His wife was pregnant, and then with a small child. He was drinking probably more heavily at this time of his life than any other. Would not this set of facts explain his moods and sometimes extreme behaviour? After all, those called to certify his insanity did not do so.

The word ‘moods’, for instance, which is very frequently used by Byron and naturally plural in reference (no mood can last that long after all) may be contrasted with temperament. The most recent work to do so – David Watson’s *Mood and Temperament* (2000) – treats moods as necessarily short-term affairs whereas temperament refers to the habitual

balance and character of an individual.<sup>9</sup> It will therefore always be a delicate and often difficult matter to know whether the evidence of moods of particular kinds is equivalent to temperament as such. Manic-depressive diagnosis tends to conflate the two but, in Byron’s case, this is exactly the point at issue.

We should consider, too, the unsettling effect of being set up secretly to be examined for insanity by your wife. Byron fictionally revisited all this two years later:

For Inez call’d some druggists and physicians,  
And tried to prove her loving lord was *mad*,  
But as he had some lucid intermissions,  
She next decided he was only *bad* (*DJ*, I, 27).

The tone here is noticeably controlled, relaxed even. Byron finds no difficulty in a comic repetition of the humiliating event. But in the intervening two years (1816-18), and it seems more than probable that it is not a coincidence, Byron, for the first time, writes a number of poems in which mad people and madness – or something close to it – play a prominent part. I am thinking of *The Dream*, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* Canto III, *Manfred*, *The Prisoner of Chillon*, *The Lament of Tasso* and *Mazepa* (finished in 1818 but begun in April 1817). He is not interested in the condition of the permanently insane in these texts, but by the movement in and out of insanity, or something close to it: the mind reacting to great physical and emotional strain. This, in itself of course, could be seen as buttressing Jamison’s case, for manic depression is inherently oscillating. What is striking is that Byron foregrounds extreme mental disturbance only for this two to three year period during most of which he was often in extreme states of mind partly, at any rate, occasioned by the suddenness of his exile, the change in his circumstances, and the notoriety which now belonged to him.

Of course, it is true that disturbed mental states often intermittently characterise the heroes of the earlier tales and the later classical tragedies, but they are not their principal interest. Byron is primarily interested there in narrative events or enclosed situations in relation to the exaltation of the human will. Whereas, in the 1816-18 period, he is interested in whether or not the creative imagination is linked with powers of will or surrendering those powers. Madness is Janus-faced. Will is in one way supreme (the madman does what he wills) but in another it is non-existent (the madman is not responsible for his actions). Hence fictionalised madness is an ideal testing-ground of these opposed possibilities. *Manfred* and *Beppo* are test cases here. *Beppo*, hitherto led

by will, submits to Laura, and Manfred, suicidal, prizing difficulty, refusing obedience, in the end yields gracefully to a death ('not so difficult' [3, 4, 151]) that he does not induce. Byron is a poet who makes things independent of himself but it is clear that the moods, thoughts, and feelings of his protagonists in the 1816-18 poems are, in different ways and to different extents, shaped and dramatically situated projections of his own moods, thoughts, feelings and understanding-in-process at the time.

Quite a lot of this material is used as evidence in Jamison's book, and naturally so. But what concerns me, and she does not consider this question, is that this preoccupation with kinds of insanity or quasi-insanity can be dated to this specific period and that it comes to a clear end. We can date this end more or less exactly. In Canto IV of *Don Juan*, Byron gives his acutely observed but final version of a mad scene in the death of Haidee, and he then comments:

I don't much like describing people mad,  
For fear of seeming rather touch'd myself (IV, 74).

We can take him at his word, for he does not describe mad people after this. What is impressive here is Byron's ability to present Haidee's mental disturbance accurately and sympathetically but then bound out and away (essential if the poem is to continue) in this aggressively disarming couplet. Byron, I agree with Jamison, did often express the fear that he might be or would become 'rather touch'd', but the oscillation in the poem is between exactly balanced empathy and editorial detachment, not between moods. After this, though Byron often deals with extreme emotional conditions, as all great writers do, he seems uninterested in the movement in and out of madness. This does not, of itself, mean that he himself was less prone to this condition than before but it is a useful straw in the wind. It suggests that the agitations in Byron from 1815 to 1818 are susceptible of non-medical explanations, hence, when the circumstances changed, he changed with them.

Jamison gathers plenty of evidence for Byron's sometimes odd behaviour in the period from 1818 but, once again, ignores competing explanations and opposed evidence. There is plenty of evidence after all for Byron's intermittently worsening physical, rather than psychical, health in this period, especially after catching sun-stroke on his mile-long swim to his yacht in August 1822 so as to avoid witnessing Shelley's cremation.<sup>10</sup> Might this not have something to do with it?

In any case, I do not read this period of his life as Jamison does. Byron has, from 1819-23 with Teresa Guiccioli, the most stable love



relationship that he ever had, he becomes for the first time in his life an accepted part of a family (the Gambas), and he is fully accepted into the higher echelons of Ravenna society. He writes his best poetry in this period, which is remarkable for its sane poise and architectonics. *Don Juan*, by far his longest poem, alters as it proceeds but its fundamental aesthetic and underpinning is maintained effortlessly. The poem deals with laughter and with horror as well as the mundane, but does so from a steady, unoscillating, and poised centre. How does this fit with the claim that Byron's manic/depressive condition was manifestly worsening at this time?<sup>11</sup> *Don Juan* could, after all, have been used by Charles Lamb in his essay in *Last Essays*, 'On the Sanity of True Genius', where he rebuts what he takes, interestingly, to be the growing orthodoxy of his time, that genius entails mental disorder.<sup>12</sup>

Now this is evidence, too, surely? I do not want to use it to overthrow Jamison's hypothesis (for that is what it is). Byron may well have been manic-depressive in the technical sense. I do not know.<sup>13</sup> But there is plenty of evidence that tells against this and, far more strongly, I would oppose any single over-riding explanation of Byron's being and indeed temperament. For manic depression is not the only candidate. Fiona MacCarthy, grotesquely in my view, 'explained' Byron's being and writings as based more or less entirely upon his partly suppressed homosexuality and thus he was 'false to his own heart'.<sup>14</sup> I do not want to argue this point at length here, but would note that Louis Crompton in his *Byron and Greek Love* (1985), from whom MacCarthy clearly derived much material, says that 'Byron's heterosexual instinct was inherently strong'.<sup>15</sup> Others explain his make-up as wholly formed by childhood sexual abuse.<sup>16</sup> Yet others still have been equally confident that Byron's personality is anorexic,<sup>17</sup> or explained by *bulimia nervosa*.<sup>18</sup> There is no law forbidding such speculations and Byron himself delighted in pointing out connections between food and thought for

who  
 Would pique himself on intellects, whose use  
 Depends so much upon the gastric juice? (*DJ*, V, 32)

Nevertheless, one must object to the confidence displayed in these competing accounts, natural perhaps to those who wear white coats, which dispose of their object of attention in a most unByronic way. After all, if I had an inherited tendency to obesity (which Byron had from his mother), a lame leg which made walking painful and difficult, and considerable vanity about my appearance which had become, post 1812, almost a public property, together with phenomenal natural vitality

extended frequently in physical sports and erotic encounters,<sup>19</sup> then I too might oscillate between over-eating and under-eating if I detected any increase in my weight. But I would keep quiet about it, like most in this condition, whereas Byron didn't. Similarly, it was not uncommon for homosexuals, repressed or otherwise, to marry in order to disguise their proclivities but Byron's considerable and vigorous investment in heterosexual love-making over long periods of time would surely indicate matching heterosexual appetites unless one was prosecuting counsel for the contrary opinion.

Who is to choose between these explanations? How does one ascertain the primacy of what is normal, abnormal, psychic, physical, innate, inherited, or circumstantial in Byron's personality or determine the precise nature of their possible combinations? D'Israeli's opinion is still pertinent: 'This simple fact [i.e. the reciprocal influence of mind and body] is, indeed, connected with one of the most important inquiries in the history of man – the laws which regulate the invisible union of the soul with the body: in a word, the inscrutable mystery of our being! – secret, but an undoubted intercourse, which probably must ever elude our perceptions.' It is certainly the case that advances in psychology and neuro-physics seem to be real enough, if often over-egged, but the 'undoubted intercourse' still preserves its secrets. To be fair, Jamison often says something like this but the effect of her book and others like it, is to suggest that a mystery has been solved and the phenomenon of Byron no longer puzzles us for we have seen through it.

## II

To establish that Byron is manic-depressive is only part of Jamison's concern. Her larger argument is that creativity is characteristically, if not inevitably, bound up with peculiar mental states especially manic-depression. Her larger concern is whether increasingly successful medical counter-actions to manic depression risk destroying a creativity which we should value. If Byron had taken lithium regularly would the world lack *Manfred*? This argument is very similar to that made by the psychologist Anthony Storr, whom Jamison mentions twice. Storr has a chapter on 'Creativity and the Manic-Depressive Temperament' in his *The Dynamics of Creation* (1975).<sup>20</sup> Jamison's own argument is, again, mainly cumulative rather than analytical or sequentially sustained, though much more focused than Storr's, who does not mention Byron but stresses psychological rather than physiological explanation. She gives example after example of major artists who gave signs of mental disturbance and

puts these into categories thus giving a sense of empirical objectivity. The effect, on me at least, is both to convince and yet not wholly convince, for many of the examples seem very different from each other: some of them are founded on large-scale evidence, and some on lesser acts of reporting.

I don’t wish to engage with this argument directly but the relationship between creativity and mental disturbance and Byron is a proper subject both for literary scholars and those in scientific disciplines. In that sense this volume is a bridgehead of a kind.

The first thing to say is already adumbrated in my earlier enquiry. It is clearly the case that Byron’s poems of 1816-18, which tend to concentrate on disturbed mental states, are linked to his portraits of madness. Byron’s Tasso, madman and poet, is an obvious example. So Byron himself links the two. But even here we would have to make some diverging distinctions. Byron’s Mazeppa, for instance, is tied naked to the back of a wild horse and seems almost to pass into the state of consciousness of the horse before entering a strange state of lapsed consciousness in which sparks cross his brain:

An icy sickness curdling o’er  
My heart, and sparks that cross’d my brain – (792-94)

This is not far from Tasso’s worried sense of his own madness in perceiving ‘unwonted lights’:

Yet do I feel at times my mind’s decline  
But with a sense of its decay: – I see  
Unwonted lights along my prison shine (189-91).

But Mazeppa is not a poet. He is presented as a practical person without special gifts. It is true that there is something excessive in his earlier, and still discernible, vitality and that Byron often links extreme vitality to something destructive for ‘There is a very life in our despair, / Vitality of poison’ (*CHP*, III, 298-99), but poets are makers, creators of substantial forms, and Mazeppa makes nothing. Similarly there is no creativity in Byron’s Prisoner in Chillon castle who is reduced to experiencing the nothingness of

vacancy absorbing space  
And fixedness – without a place (243-44)

and who, unlike Mazeppa, has all vitality drained out of him until, upon

his release from prison:

It was at length the same to me,  
Fettered or fetterless to be (372-73).

This absolute stability in reduced consciousness is the opposite of Mazeppa's vitality and Tasso's creativity. It is manifestly the antithesis of the oscillations of manic depression.

What I find interesting in all these examples is the different orders of vitality that Byron carefully distinguishes in these characters who enter, intermittently or, in the case of the Prisoner, perhaps permanently, into disturbingly altered mental states. This, in turn, raises the question of how Byron understands the relationship between poetic creativity and vitality for this will, or could, link to Jamison's particular interest in the link between the manic polarity in manic depressive illness and the artistic temperament.

That Byron felt and explored the connection between writing and vitality scarcely needs to be demonstrated. Writing to Thomas Moore on 2 January 1821, Byron says:

I feel exactly as you do about our "art," but it comes over me in a kind of rage every now and then, like \*\*\*\*, and then if I don't write to empty my mind, I go mad. As to that regular, uninterpreted [*sic, but should be 'uninterrupted'*] love of writing, which you describe in your friend, I do not understand it.<sup>21</sup>

The context of Moore's letter makes it clear that Byron is comparing the ungovernable impulse to write with that to make love. Byron here could be read in Jamison's way – writing is a form of alleviating incipient madness and, perhaps even in a way, some expression of it or, since the letter implies an accurately observing 'I' which is not the same as the impulsive 'I' which acts, it could imply a model of consciousness which is radically undisturbed and accustomed to the movements which it notes. And here, again, it is necessary to be fair to Jamison, who often emphasises Byron's ability to control his fluctuations of mood or counteract them. It would be helpful to know if this is commonly the case in acknowledged sufferers from manic depression. My impression and experience is that it is not. Medical advice on the NHS website, for instance, suggests that situations of stress and excitement should be avoided by manic depressives as triggers of mood change but does not suggest that this amounts to any real control over the condition. Jamison quotes Robert Lowell who was 'humiliated' at the hurtful consequences

of his mania and also by the fact that ‘control and self-knowledge come so slowly, if at all.’<sup>22</sup> But then Byron was peculiarly self-conscious in general and, in particular, astonishingly articulate about the contradictions in his being, moods, and thoughts. This enables him, in *Don Juan*, to set up a structure based on the rival claims of his spontaneous, unselfconscious hero and the ultra-conscious narrator. These polarities (like that in the account of the madness of Haidee) are not of mood but between empathy and detached, often ironic, observation. These are antitheses in themselves but their inter-action is expertly calculated from a single controlling source.

There is a different kind of split in Byron’s most famous assertion of the connection between creativity and vitality. The celebrated stanza 6 from *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* Canto III is often quoted and examined on its own, but it will be helpful here to set out what follows it as well.

’Tis to create, and in creating live  
 A being more intense, that we endow  
 With form our fancy, gaining as we give  
 The life we image, even as I do now.  
 What am I? Nothing; but not so art thou,  
 Soul of my thought! with whom I traverse earth,  
 Invisible but gazing, as I glow  
 Mix’d with thy spirit, blended with thy birth,  
 And feeling still with thee in my crush’d feeling’s dearth.

Yet must I think wildly: – I *have* thought  
 Too long and darkly, till my brain became,  
 In its own eddy boiling and o’erwrought,  
 A whirling gulf of phantasy and flame:  
 And thus, untaught in youth my heart to tame,  
 My springs of life were poison’d. ’Tis too late!  
 Yet am I chang’d; though still enough the same  
 In strength to bear what time can not abate,  
 And feed on bitter fruits without accusing Fate.

Something too much of this: – but now ’tis past,  
 And the spell closes with its silent seal.  
 Long absent HAROLD re-appears at last (III, 6-8).

Byron’s thought is a curiously re-situated version of Christ’s injunction ‘For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it’ (Matthew 16:25, AV). There is nothing in Byron’s line, of course, of ‘for my sake’, but the paradox of ‘gaining as we give’ is the same as losing life in order to find it. The ‘Nothing’ which

is recognised as the 'I' is gifted to the 'Soul of my Thought' which gains new life ('blended with thy birth') through the transaction. Creativity is evacuation and generation.

Byron often has the rather unnerving habit of connecting things which we think of as in separate categories, but his thinking here, in substance, if not in manner, is the same as comparing his impulse to write with his impulse to make love. Byron's hostile comments on Keats's poetry suggest that he despised masturbation ('f-gg-g his imagination', 'the onanism of Poetry'),<sup>23</sup> since sexuality, intrinsically out-going, here turns back upon itself. Byron thought that Keats's poetry was like this. In John Jones's terminology, it is founded on 'end-stopped feel'.<sup>24</sup> Byron's sexuality, on the contrary, was always based on encounter. Here, too, we gain what we give.

This is a kind of literary or poetic thinking about creativity and odd mental states which is quite different from Jamison's two kinds of procedure (statistical and cumulatively evidential). She never argues as closely as this or as oddly as this or as interestingly as this. This is no criticism, it would not be appropriate for her to do so, but it raises all kinds of problems not simply about the relationship between mind and body but also between the modes of enquiry into or articulation of these things. Can they talk to one another?

This is less the case in the lines which follow this stanza where Byron (I still prefer, and could defend, this usage to 'the poet' or 'the persona') seems to draw back from his own insight which is now characterised as 'wildly' thinking. Whereas stanza 6 celebrates the conferral of extra vitality in the poet's yielding of his habitual self to a creative attentiveness, this is now said to result from a distortion of his being when young so that 'My springs of life were poison'd.' In a further twist, these springs of life (not the sort of things that can be tamed surely?) should have been tamed by him or he should have been taught to tame them. Now, in this stanza, it is as though he is, late or too late, making amends for this in his present act of taming the magnificent outburst in stanza 6.

This counterpointing rhythm is common in Byron. It could be seen as an awareness of his openness to surges of an extra vitality which alarm him and which he wishes to control and, in this way, be consonant with Jamison's thesis that Byron tries to contain and counteract his manic depression, but there is vitality of a kind, too, in stanza 7. We would have to distinguish, as I tried to with Byron's Tasso, Mazeppa, and his Prisoner, between different kinds of vitality and modes of being rather than different kinds of mood. For Byron always, there is vitality in both