

Byron and the Best of Poets

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By

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To Caroline

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INTRODUCTION

The mind, that ocean where each kind
Does straight its own resemblance find;
Yet it creates, transcending these,
Far other worlds, and other seas;
Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in a green shade.
The Garden, Andrew Marvell

1.

Byron called Pope “the best of poets” and much else besides; indeed this is far from the most generous praise he was to lavish upon him. (1) The initial genesis of this book arose from a desire to understand what impelled (and it is impelled, rather than merely prompted) the seminal poet of the early nineteenth century to speak in this way about the greatest poet of the eighteenth. From there more complex questions emerged: how far and in what way did Byron’s adoration of Pope leave traces upon his own poetry in conscious and unconscious echoes, in parallels of thought and expression, in the unexpected unlooked-for congruence? Differences in diction, style and respective positioning in separate centuries set up natural assumptions in the reader; to place a poem of Pope’s side by side with one of Byron’s is to expect something different from a pairing of poems by Keats and Shelley say, or Hart Crane and Wallace Stevens. Unconscious assumptions are brought to the table when comparing poets of like kind, but we become alert to them when looking across the centuries. Synaptic pathways between ostensibly different poetry stand out more readily when these are set aside; they emerge to fascinate and tantalise, often following crooked routes which suggest that in Byron’s case his absorption of the “little Queen Anne’s man” (2) was profoundly lodged in his creative unconscious.

For myself, as I began to read differently and without prejudice, I experienced many surprises. It is one task of this book to share those with the reader. To lay Pope’s *Windsor-Forest* side by side with Byron’s *The Island*, for example, is to discover poetic, psychological and biographical links that demonstrate not just mere influence but a congruence of thought

at the deepest level. (3) As I read work after work with both poets in tandem, digging beneath the differences of style, thought and diction, much that was intriguing came to the surface. It was something of a surprise to find so many real people and fictional ones entwined: Augusta Leigh and Don Juan's Julia with Abelard's Eloisa; the Sultan's Queen Gulbeyaz with Pope's Atossa; the Duke of Wellington with Joseph Addison; Pope's "Sporus" (Lord John Hervey) with both Viscount Castlereagh and Annabella's nurse-companion Mrs Clermont; and Cloe (who "wants a heart") informing Don Juan's mother Donna Inez. Nor was the list confined to people. The cave of Spleen in *The Rape of the Lock* finds more than an echo in the Sultan's harem in *Don Juan*, and there is a profound resonance of Windsor Forest to be heard on the island of Toobonai. Even *Aristomenes*, Byron's last attempt at an heroic creation, emerges from the banks of the Thames. There they all were upon examination, some closer to the surface than others, but what emerged at the end was a picture of Pope reaching the deepest recesses of Byron's poetic thought, providing a touchstone for anything from a lowly image to the valuing of poetry as a moral force. The central task of this study is an attempt to identify, unpick and explain the most significant strands of Pope's pervasive influence, teasing them out to see where they lead.

To the best of my knowledge this is the first book length account of that influence and although many articles, papers and books on related areas have fed into it, the most substantial study to date has been a fifty-two page section in G Wilson Knight's 1954 study of Pope, *Laureate of Peace*. Wilson Knight was a pioneering scholar whose keen textual eye married to an awareness of the numinous was brought to bear on studies of Shakespeare, Pope and Byron with the greatest effect, but inevitably there were many areas where he was unable to venture within the confines of what was in effect just a long chapter. These I have attempted to address here.

Primarily this book speaks to academics and scholars, who require strong meat; but the general knowledgeable lover of poetry needs consideration too and deserves to be introduced to new thinking in a way that is not overly formidable. There are other considerations too, engendered by the particular nature of this study: Byronists cannot be assumed to have as deep a knowledge of Pope's work as they do of Byron's – though doubtless many do – and although Byron's colours form the baseline of the book, Pope provides the mast to which they are nailed. The Popeian has a right to expect equal consideration to be given to both poets. A further problem was the glossing of unfamiliar names, words and references from both centuries, particularly from the more rarefied

eighteenth: unnecessary perhaps for the academic Popeian, but others might be floored by such oddities as “sooterkins”, “pipkin” or “bohea” or be surprised to learn that “saints” are tarts, or that “nice” has a number of meanings, none of them corresponding exactly to modern usage. Accordingly, I have added a glossary at the back to facilitate understanding, where required.

Homer is a hidden presence behind some of the discussions. The man the ancients called with a telling simplicity “*the poet*” was a huge early influence on Byron, being familiar with Pope’s translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* since his youth; they imprinted his thought with an heroic vision (or rather, a vision of the Heroic) which never quite left him. The long shadow of the Greek stretched right to the end of his life and is found below the surface of much of Byron’s poetry. For example, Byron’s last planned narrative poem – which I discuss in some detail in the *Epilogue: Mighty Pan is Dead* – has an epic theme which places an historical Greek hero at its centre; it exists only as an abandoned scrap and bears a deeper Popeian imprint than an Homeric one, but in a primary sense it could not have existed without Homer. Byron however made no Homeric translations which could be compared with Pope’s and although Greek poets fired his imagination and vision more, in the end Roman poets left a more visible stamp upon his verse. The same can be said for Pope (*pace* his *Iliad* and *Odyssey*), except that I think the stamp went deeper in his case owing to his prolonged engagement with Horace. More than one chapter alone could have been written about subsidiary classical influences such as Juvenal, Martial, Ovid and the corpus of Greek lyric and drama, but this would have made the book imbalanced, so I have limited my discussion to Horace in the one chapter devoted entirely to classical influences, as he was the most direct influence on them both.

Pope’s view of the moral dimension of poetry had a profound and lasting effect on Byron, who made it the springboard of his defence of the eighteenth century poet when he came under attack from his contemporaries. That same sense of a moral voice speaks through the sardonic, sarcastic, conversational, satirical and even lyrical Byron, the echoes of which are the major business of this book. Given that both poets were natural satirists – Byron starting early, Pope late – inevitably satire forms a nexus around which most discussion is based, dissolving into sub-groups such as character portraits of individuals, attacks on immorality, the expression of political anger and social commentary; but non-satirical topics feature too in wide-ranging intertextual discussion, including the lyrical expression of love, prosody, the depiction of myth and history, the element of comic burlesque and the resonance of earlier writers. No mode

of critique, discourse or theoretical analysis has been barred from discussion where it is judged to be a useful tool in explication – contemporary gender studies, for example, has much still to say about both poets – but fundamental to this project has been the determination to resist privileging any particular viewpoint that entails seeing the poetry through a single lens. The poetry is the thing; and however compelling a theory or dedicated a lens, if it does not illumine it has the potential to obscure.

2.

My intention throughout the book has been to keep both Byron and Pope in the same focus through a series of interconnected topics rather than rigid genre types and from there to follow the thinking wherever it leads, without employing pre-conceived arguments into which the poets must be fitted. The book's structure may be outlined simply. Its first two chapters consist of an introductory consideration of what Byron actually said about Pope and why he said it, followed by a scrutiny of their shared techniques of composition; the core of the book is then contained in the six chapters which follow, with discussion and intertexts of specific poems grouped around the topic of the chapter. Although designed to be read in sequence, it *could* theoretically be read according to topic preference by a reader willing to overlook lacunae resulting from discussion elsewhere.

Chapter I, *The Greek Temple*, presents an overview of Byron's intense feeling for Pope, examining the roots of it in order to lay the ground for future chapters where I show how it plays out in the poetry. The frustrating (and very public) Bowles / Pope Controversy is considered, to which Byron, in language of sometimes religious fervour contributed an increasingly urgent attempt to argue for the supremacy of Pope above all other poets. I look at his adoration in some detail, relating it closely to his belief that poetry's deepest value lies in its moral thrust, with Pope as its greatest practitioner. A process of sifting distinctions shows Pope's concern with morality *per se* contrasted with Byron's focus on the particularity of sin, commenting on his perception of humanity's bias towards historical cycles of destruction and man-made suffering. I lay the groundwork for the next chapter through introducing the techniques of composition which Byron inherited from Pope; I compare the poetic music which flows from them with the different concerns of his peers who sought to create a music in verse through other means. The seminal importance of Homer is cited and the psychological identification of one physically disabled poet with another and its attendant affinities discussed, making the point that Byron's love of Pope had roots other than poetical –

a point which I argue in more detail in Chapter VII. Here I present one of the core themes of the book, that Byron was a deep thinker whose movement of thought – were it to be expressed in musical terms – was contrapuntal in nature.

Chapter II, *Dressing the Thought*, the second of the two introductory chapters, presents Byron and Pope as haters both, using their portraits of the Duke of Wellington and Lord John Hervey (both of whom are discussed in greater detail in Chapter VI) as a basis for unpacking the compositional techniques that both poets employ to achieve their effects. The focus is on antithesis and hyper-antithesis, enjambment (particularly Byron's more varied use of it), three types of caesura with the subtle divisions they throw up, Byron's more complex employment of multiple voices for the narrator(s) and a certain tone dubbed "earnest inconsequentiality" which both poets employ. Two passages – Pitholeon and Raucocanti's babbling – are then discussed in the light of these techniques to identify a difference in approach.

Chapter III, *Epistles That Grow Warm*, examines Pope the "Romantic" in relation to Byron's "glow", combining biographical detail of the poets with intertextual analysis. *Eloisa to Abelard* serves as the source poem alongside Byron's *To Augusta*, *Epistle to Augusta* and the six stanzas of Julia's letter in *Don Juan*. I discuss the emerging differences against the many parallels and echoes which abound, adumbrating themes which are developed in later chapters. In *To Augusta* the marked imprint of Pope's language is identified, as well as how closely Byron takes some of his thinking from *Eloisa*, then, in order to bring the poem into greater relief, I review four ways in which the *Epistle to Augusta* differs from it. I place some emphasis on Byron's locating himself at the centre of the poem while at the same time managing to suggest he is at a remove from it, arguing that this connects both to the duplicity of his technique and to the contrapuntal nature of his thought. I also consider the significance of this poem as Byron's first experiment in *ottava rima*. Lastly, in the six stanzas of Julia's letter in *Don Juan*, I offer an argument for a cinematic quality which both poets bring to bear on the poems, weighing the differing nature of the women's passion, their states of being, the quality of their tears and the employment of an operatic range of expression. I contend that both women's actions have moral and pragmatic consequences that both poets see as significant and that they view their subjects through an empathetic lens deployed to powerful effect. Pope's entry into his own poem at the very end leads to contextualisation of the presence and absence of the narrator in each text.

Chapter IV, *Places of Transformation*. The collocation here entirely centres on *The Rape of the Lock* and *Don Juan*. It seeks to identify and analyse congruence of language, themes and symbols within the poems. Beginning by asking what type of satire these poems embody, I identify their linking features, including the odysseys both Don Juan and Belinda undergo, the partings they suffer and the poets' different approaches to the application of bathos and burlesque. The first of two main discussions centres on the cave *per se*, considered as both a universal psychological symbol and a reification of antithesis as a place of both safety and danger. I then examine their metaphorical and psychological significance in the poems, before going on to analyse the nature of explosive female anger in both texts and the particular significance of The Cave of Spleen in *The Rape*. I compare this to the Sultan's harem, arguing that in the context of *Don Juan* it acts as an analogue for a cave, wherein the metamorphosis of inanimate and animate objects is brought into single focus. I posit that Don Juan's journey to the harem is akin to a *katabasis*, a journey to the underworld, unravelling points of congruence in language and imagery, in the objects their spaces contain, and in details such as the two sets of twin guards attached to each. Both caves on this reading are presented as places of transformation embodying an inversion of reality. The second of the two main discussions examines and contrasts the world of coquettes and prudes at Hampton Court and Norman Abbey. The central focus is on how women can careen from one state to the other within the texts, particularly concentrating on Adeline as she assumes characteristics of Clarissa in *The Rape*, all the while demonstrating a mobility in her self-deceiving pursuit of Don Juan. Outside of all this stands the radiant serene figure of Aurora Raby, who affects Adeline's behaviour and Byron's ability to continue the poem.

Chapter V, *Tulips in Satire*, widens the exploration of the satirical portrait, selectively begun in the previous chapter, though here devoted only to Pope and Byron's treatment of women. Together with the poems concerned I discuss how each poet only ever attacked one woman apiece out of motives of personal animus, contrasting this with the way both show great empathy with particular individuals. The "masculine" and the "feminine" are weighed here in relation to satirical expression and the display of empathy. Distinctions emerge which are useful in identifying congruence and difference between the two poets; how Pope can write both dispassionately and pitilessly at the same time, whereas Byron needs to be animated by anger or dislike before he grows pitiless; how Pope's women are concerned with being rather than doing; and Byron's drawing on a wider spectrum of female types. In the extended discussion which

follows, three particular female groups are scrutinised, underlining the point that both poets hunted not just individuals from the pack, but the pack itself. The first group, “Blue Wits”, concentrates on Lady Mary Montagu and an assortment of Pope’s minor portraits, together with Byron’s extended sniping at his estranged wife in the portrait of Donna Inez. I then make a major digression to take account of a curious turn towards the end of *Don Juan* when a tinge of “blue” leads to the profoundest collocation in the poem mirrored in the gathering of antithetical forces about Norman Abbey. I review these encroaching forces in relation to the Dionysian and Apollonian aspects of Shakespeare, above all to the serene and numinous Aurora Raby. The second group, “Frolic Jades”, shows both Byron and Pope playing with *double entendres* as they write of lascivious women and their potential dangers, looking at Philomedé, Laura and focussing upon the Duchess of Fitz-Fulke. On the reading presented here she is unique in *Don Juan* as the only character who embodies both Eros and Thanatos. The final group, “Vulgar Tempests”, compares the congruence and parallels between Atossa and Gulbeyaz, two passionate and emotionally violent women, one devoid of psychological integrity, the other who has “self-will even in her small feet.”

Chapter VI, *Sacred to Ridicule His Whole Life Long*, complements the previous chapter by addressing the male in satirical portraiture. Its three sections are linked by the concept of the psychological *doppelgänger*, here analysed in some detail. I pose the question, “what would a *doppelgänger* for Byron and Pope look like?” and in the subsequent discussion a simple binary opposition of good and evil is rejected in favour of a more nuanced projection of multiple aspects of a fractured Self. Cibber, Addison and Lord John Hervey are presented as representing such aspects of Pope’s personality, while Southey, the Duke of Wellington and Castlereagh represent the same for Byron. The slow war of words and its descent into invective, libel and accusations of slander exchanged between Pope and Cibber on the one hand and Byron and Southey on the other is charted; my concern here is to make qualitative distinctions between the degrees of viciousness of attack in order to distinguish between angry antipathy and fully fledged loathing. I present the *doppelgänger* as a projection of fears of the unconscious, in part realised by Cibber and Southey; in the two discussions which follow other dark aspects of the psyche supplied by Joseph Addison, Lord John Hervey, the Duke of Wellington and Viscount Castlereagh emerge. Byron’s feelings about the Duke of Wellington are considered politically, militarily and personally, and the satirical attacks on him in *Don Juan* are analysed, but they are not seen to rise to the manic

and illogical level of detestation he expresses for Castlereagh, which exceeded even Pope's loathing of Hervey. I make an attempt to redress the balance in Castlereagh's case, offering some counter-arguments to Byron's and suggest at the end that the feelings of both poets became exacerbated as they consider each of their targets to be corruptors of language, rendering them doubly open to censure.

Chapter VII, *The Groves of Eden* is an exploration of a number of shared themes resonating through the lives and poetry of Byron and Pope: psychological alienation, internal and outward exile, the taint of physical and social deformity (in this context Pope's Catholicism and Byron's bisexuality), the distinctive natures of Eden and paradise and, in Byron's case, the desire for something akin to secular redemption. In the analysis that follows the main source poem for *The Island* is *Windsor-Forest*. I argue here that the concerns of Byron's poem are fundamentally paradisiacal in nature whereas Pope's are Edenic. The poems appear to offer us a vision of Windsor Forest and the island of Toobonai as uncorrupted places where man lives in harmony with himself and nature, but on close reading a more complex situation obtains. Edenic Windsor Forest assumes for Pope (as does *Windsor-Forest* for the reader) certain paradisiacal qualities, whilst Byron, temporarily eschewing a paradise tainted by the incursion of Europeans, creates in unusually religious language a paradise within paradise. It is in effect a suspended place where Torquil and Neuha can withdraw from the world and allow love to confer a kind of redemption upon the youthful mutineer. At the heart of the argument lies the recognition of an increasingly cornered Byron who desires something similar for himself and that this is the unconscious impulse that led him to write the poem. In tandem with this I see Torquil functioning as Byron's avatar, an idealised description of himself, who, placed in any land would emerge from it a bold and brave ruler of men, a man of action of the type whom Byron longed to be. Both poems contain climactic hunt scenes and are concerned with the construction of a personal myth, Pope moving from the classical to the creation of an historical one – the epicentre of which is a Stuart monarchy embracing peace, trade and prosperity – and Byron pursuing a private resonant myth of his own making. With Torquil's "redemption" the lovers are in effect made anew, thus allowing Byron to have it both ways, an Eden *and* a paradise on Toobonai. He has momentarily recreated an Edenic garden lodged in a cave ontologically mimicking the almost unsayable, the space that lies between God's paradise and Man's earth.

Chapter VIII, *Horace and the Prosaic Muse*, examines Byron and Pope's relationship with Horace, their classical "guide, philosopher and

friend". I begin with an overview of the historical forces which shaped Horace's life at a seminal moment in western European history and try to tease out antithetical elements inhering in Horace's biography, beliefs and poetry which found resonance in Byron and Pope's work. The contention here is that Horace's *sermones* (conversation pieces), embodied in his *Satires* and *Epistles*, are the major influences. In the intertexts analysed the didactic epistle *ars poetica* (The Art of Poetry) serves as the master text for Byron as do *Epistles* from Book II for Pope. After identifying five techniques both poets use to reconfigure the Horatian originals, I sift the factors contributing to the increasing difference in the poets' response to Horace, showing that Pope felt more constrained than Byron to maintain an Horatian mask of urbanity and, paradoxically as a result, grew angrier and more disillusioned with the world he was satirising. Horace, the emperor's friend, member of an elite circle at the epicentre of power, became no longer fit for the satiric purpose of an increasingly alienated outsider. I contrast this with Byron's response, which was to drop the Horatian mask as and when it suited him and argue that this demonstrates a critical difference between Romantic and Augustan sensibilities. The *Epistles* and *Satires* make up only half of Horace the poet, so I conclude with a review of the effect of his lyrical voice, which had much less influence on the poets' work. Pope imitated two short lyrics and Byron one, with another that he "had in mind" as a catalyst for *The Prophecy of Dante*. Byron's reaction to this stimulus eloquently illustrates how his thought expands, initially from a slight inspiration to spiral outwards into narrative, moral censure, the use of different dramatic vocal registers, elegiac apostrophe and something of an Horatian odal tone. The chapter concludes with an examination of the conversational style of Horace's *sermones* as it is reflected in *Don Juan*, taking in the multiple allusions to Horace embedded in the text, from the opening epigraph through to its final stanzas. I conclude that the two poets seemed to move in opposite directions in their dealings with their Roman model.

Epilogue: "*Mighty Pan is dead*". A short coda in two parts closes the book with remarks first on *Aristomenes*, the tantalising eleven line fragment Byron wrote in Greece some months before he died. Just as Pope before him, Byron ended his creative life in isolation: Aurora Raby had ensconced *Don Juan* and poetically all he left from his time there are desultory scraps, apart from "*On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year.*" *Aristomenes* is such a scrap, but one of especial interest, for here (and for the last time) Byron returns to the couplet, though not in any way that Pope would have recognised. Despite its proto-modernity, deep Popeian echoes are present, for the poem is heavily salted with elements

from *Windsor-Forest*, the final congruence to which this book draws attention. In the second and final part I am concerned to review and weigh those definitive differences between Pope's thought and Byron's which have emerged in this study, viewing them both in process and expression in quasi-musical terms.

3.

The story of Byron's engagement with Pope begins in the most obvious way: through the clearest imitation. The savaging of *Hours of Idleness*, Byron's first publicly printed work in *The Edinburgh Review* in 1808 by Henry Brougham (the earlier *Fugitive Pieces*, a collection of mildly erotic dainties had been privately printed) had deeply disturbed its young author to the extent that his mother put pen to paper to record her own alarm at his reaction of being cast into self-doubting despondency. (4) As Mary O'Connell has pointed out in her finely drawn study of Byron's relationship with John Murray, he seems not to have registered that the overall response from the majority of reviewers was quite positive. (5) His considered reaction after his tears had dried was a productively angry one: he expanded a satire he had begun a few months before called *British Bards* – the intention of which had been to castigate modern English poets in a Dunciadic manner – into *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* so as to include Francis Jeffrey, the critic he erroneously believed to have been responsible for the devastating review of *Hours of Idleness*. If Pope had been his "guide, philosopher and friend" when he had started *British Bards* he became doubly so as *English Bards* grew out of it. The ghost in this particular machine is eminently palpable.

Had Byron's poetic career taken a different turn and he had not employed satire or the heroic couplet as vehicles for expression in his later poetry, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* would be little more than an engaging curiosity today. It has its excellencies and it is occasionally quite amusing, but the overall effect is of a racing pen rather than a considered one – and what it is racing over is a bewildering array of names both forgotten and forgettable which largely hold no interest for us now, blunting its impact. The first observation of Byron in a sustained satirical attack reveals the difference between how each poet targets his victims: Byron takes a blunderbuss off the wall and blazes away, peppering everyone in sight, hitting some, missing others, whereas Pope is more deadly. His is the eye of a sniper. There is also an absence of tension in *English Bards* that is present in Pope at all levels; in *The Dunciad* (from which the example below is taken) this derives from the employment of

two antithetical voices, Pope's authorial one and the goddess Dullness. Byron has no room for any other but his own. The natural concerns of a young man – glory and fame, even though he eschews them – are contrasted with those of maturity, here conceived as religion and morality:

Religion blushing veils her sacred fires,
 And unawares Morality expires.
 Nor public flame, nor private, dares to shine;
 Nor human spark is left, nor glimpse divine!
The Dunciad (IV. 649–52)

When fame's loud trump hath blown its noblest blast
 Though long the sound, the echo sleeps at last;
 And glory, like the Phoenix midst her fires,
 Exhales her odours, blazes, and expires.
English Bards and Scotch Reviewers (957–60)

Byron has a good ear and sometimes individual lines can seem momentarily interchangeable with his master's. Here is the goddess Dullness watching and approving the stuff of literary creation crawling out of a pit of chaos into “life” – i.e. publication:

She sees a mob of metaphors advance,
 Pleased with the madness of the mazy dance:
 How tragedy and Comedy embrace;
 How Farce an Epic get a jumbled race...
 (I. 67–70)

Byron looks on at a similar scene:

Each spurs his Pegasus apace,
 And Rhyme and Blank maintain an equal race;
 Sonnets on sonnets crowd, and ode on ode;
 And Tales of Terror jostle on the road...
 (145–48)

That it would be possible to construct an hypothetical chimerical quatrain out of these eight lines by yoking the first couplet of each poem together to construct an artificial one demonstrates nothing about Pope, but quite a lot about how closely Byron modelled himself upon the older poet, viz:

She sees a mob of metaphors advance,
 Pleased with the madness of the mazy dance:

Each spurs his Pegasus apace,
And Rhyme and Blank maintain an equal race...

There is no need to discuss the poem further; my argument here is only that Pope's influence is palpable right from the start of Byron's career and appears in its most blatant form in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. How that influence diversified and embedded itself in the arena of Byron's creative thought and what came of it poetically is the chief story told by this book. But it is by no means the only one. It is a search for shadows, parallels, resonance, convergence and congruence between two great poets, only one of whom was familiar with the work of the other; what it uncovers is a spectrum of influence which imbued itself in many ways and in many different works.

It is also the story of certain modes of thought which set Byron apart from his peers. Byron's deep thought was essentially contrapuntal, so that he was able to carry in his mind differing strands at the same time: independent, complementary and sometimes conflicting, he gives voice to them poetically in a way which fascinates, but which at times can startle and even confuse. Byron was a deep thinker, though this has not always been recognised, (6) as sustained analysis of his poetry shows; here I would contrast him with Pope, who was an intense one. Pope's tone and registers weave contrapuntally, but the essential vocal line carrying his thought does not. To continue the musical metaphor, Pope's thought moves harmonically as opposed to contrapuntally and this is what distinguishes it in essence from Byron's. I take the view in this book that Goethe's glib dictum, "*sobald er reflectirt ist er ein Kind*" (the moment he reflects he is a child) has been a canker in considerations of Byron's poetry and to refute this with example and argument forms one of the main themes as intertextual comparison unfolds. Other themes will emerge too: the importance of Byron's distinct and subtly Augustan prosody – eschewed by his fellows romantics, for whom the music of verse was found in other ways – and the conviction derived from his engagement with Pope that poetry's vitality and worth are lodged in its moral force.

To put it in holistic terms, this book sets out to answer three questions not often asked of Byron: what lay behind his adoration of a great poet who had become markedly unfashionable in his own day? How deeply did that feeling imprint itself on his work? What was the range and extent of that imprint? If it has been written with more passion than is often usual for an academic study of this kind, I hope at least that it will be seen as a disinterested even-handed sort, fair to both poets, devoid of any edge privileging one as "greater" than the other; even if that were so, such thinking would hole the book below the water-line. In truth – to

paraphrase the wonderful Ben Jonson a little – “I do honour the very fleas
of their dogs.”

A NOTE ON THE TEXTS

The question of textual editions for Byron was resolved with a Gordian knife: few great poets present such an *embarras de choix* as he, whose refusal to engage with punctuation from the outset has allowed two centuries of publishers and editors to impose their own, often with wildly varying results. I therefore chose to print what Byron actually wrote, the substance of which is faithfully reproduced by Peter Cochran on his superb website. Cochran applies only silent minor amendments and allows the reader the most direct access to Byron, second only to the original manuscripts themselves – though it should be noted that he did not have access to the originals in every instance, *The Island* being an example. Where Cochran in some texts reproduces Byron’s deletions and amendments where they occur, I have not followed suit for clarity’s sake, but otherwise I have endeavoured to reproduce what Byron wrote and the way he wrote it. This will be most noticeable in two areas: 1) spelling – “desart” for “desert” etc. – and punctuation, where he uses the ubiquitous dash, either singly or in multiples *in lieu* of conventional punctuation; 2) in his capitalisation of significant nouns which, though copious, is not as ubiquitous or distracting as is found in early eighteenth century poetry. (It is worth noting that Pope in his later works reduced his heavy capitalisation somewhat.) It might seem to some perverse to reproduce Byron’s texts with much of his original capitalisation restored, but I have done this to complement Byron’s invariable and highly characteristic use of the dash, the better to put before the reader more or less what he actually wrote. Byron’s dashes allow us to see how he breathes as he writes, how the accretion of thought expands in a fluid suggestive manner more akin to music than the precise compartmentalisation imposed by formal punctuation on prose; even, I suggest, that the look of the lines brings his voice to our ear. Part of that look is his emphatic capitalisation – so the capitals have stayed.

With Pope the issue is very different, for no two poets could have been more unlike in their attitudes to punctuation and the presentation of their work. Pope was assiduously methodical in his approach to every detail, however small, so that we know what he wrote and what he wanted – though with one caveat noted below. Unfortunately that is far from the end of it, for there are particular problems in the presentation of eighteenth

century literature for twenty-first century readers, causing me to take as opposite an approach to the reproduction of Pope's texts as I can afford to, given that they are standardised in a way that Byron's are not. Anyone who doubts this has but to compare the three main editions of *Don Juan* by Steffan, Steffan and Pratt with Jerome McGann's and Peter Cochran's to see that Pope was farther down the road of standardisation within a generation of his death than Byron is today.

Following the example of Leo Damrosch in his clarifying edition of *The Rape of the Lock and Other Major Writings* (Penguin 2011), I have eliminated the ubiquitous capitalisation of nouns that can make engaging with the poetry of the eighteenth century less of a pleasure than it should be, particularly for the non-specialist, though I have retained them where they underscore a noun of significance. In Byron's case capitalisation often adds something to his voice; in Pope's texts a smothering with conventional eighteenth century capitalisation does not allow us to hear his voice any the clearer, but rather distracts the eye. For non-specialists there are quite enough unfamiliar terms, references and names as it is – all of which I have addressed in the Glossary. Most quaint or archaic spellings have been modernised, though I have retained “chuse” for “choose” because Byron tended to favour it. I am aware that my reproduction of Pope's texts here may well raise eyebrows. I own to different standards here – authenticity in the reproduction of Byron, plain readability for Pope – but comfort myself that Byron is still too little presented as he actually thought and wrote, whereas Pope's texts reached a generally uniform standard from the beginning, though it *is* worth noting that Pope's executor and literary editor William Warburton, regularly altered his punctuation in line with his own taste. The base texts for Pope's poetry used here are the last quartos of 1743 together with Warburton's edition of 1751, as edited by Herbert Davis for the 1966 Oxford edition; for the letters, Howard Erskine-Hill's 2000 edition of *Selected Letters*, also for Oxford.

I have however differentiated between Pope's prose and his poetry; in his prose Pope tends to overuse commas by today's standards, so much so that their natural flow can seem impeded to our eyes so in the interest of clarity I have not hesitated to remove them where I have judged them to be unhelpful or unnecessary. The poetry is a different case: though the same heavy use of commas obtains, these play a part in a rhythmic balancing that is integral to the structure as a whole, so I have not adjusted these unless completely and obviously redundant. No one I hope will object to the conversion of colons to semi-colons as they are properly used today, Pope's tendency being to prefer the colon; and redundant apostrophes –

“fix’d” for “fixed” etc. – have been silently replaced with the requisite “e”, except where inappropriate.

ABBREVIATIONS

CMP for Andrew Nicholson's edition of *Lord Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991)

L.&J. for Leslie Marchand's edition of Byron's letters and journals.

LCL. For the Loeb Classical Library edition published by the Harvard University Press.

PC. For Peter Cochran's online edition and commentary on Byron's works.

Where a book is referred to more than once, subsequent references are given in abbreviated form, thus: Mack, *Life*, for Mack, Maynard, *Alexander Pope – A Life* (Yale University Press, 1985).

CHAPTER I

THE GREEK TEMPLE

As to Pope, I have always regarded him as the greatest name in our poetry. Depend on it, the rest are barbarians. He is a Greek Temple, with a Gothic cathedral on one hand, and a Turkish Mosque and all sorts of fantastic pagodas and conventicles about him.

—Byron, letter to Moore, May 3rd 1821

1. A God and bastard pelicans

In a life more crowded with irony than most, it is easy to overlook that Byron sometimes entered the right race but backed the wrong horse. His public life, for example, was book-ended by such choices. At its start he made two speeches as a new member of the House of Lords, the first opposing Tory legislation to make factory frame-breaking a capital offence and the second proposing Catholic emancipation, but both appeals fell on stony ground; while at the end of it he went off to fight for Greek Independence, dying there miserably, sans hope, sans love, sans everything. His earlier determined alliance with the inept Italian Carbonari proved to be so much effort wasted when the uprising to throw off the Austrian yoke melted away, in contrast to his previous failure to offer any support to his radical Whig friend Hobhouse who had received an achievable nomination for parliament in 1818. Byron in fact turned his back on him, making excuses to their mutual friend Scrope Davies; (1) subsequently Hobhouse was to be highly instrumental in pushing through the Great Reform Act in 1832, one of the building blocks of modern democracy.

The private Byron famously fared no better. In all his affairs of the heart, he was congenitally, psychologically and emotionally unable to form a deep relationship with anyone that did not contain some essence of the forbidden, whether it was with adolescent boys, pre-pubescent girls or women who were either engaged or married; the irony is that (*pace* his cavalier servente status in Italy with Teresa) the only completely socially acceptable relationship he ever embarked on – his marriage – proved to be

the most destructive of his life. In this he truly backed the wrong mare, with a vengeance. As to the literary Byron, a tolerable irony here seems to verge into a capricious perversity: Shakespeare is "...the worst of models, though the most extraordinary of writers"; (2) Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats are dismissed and derided over and over again – although Byron did greatly admire *Christabel* and the *Ancient Mariner* – while the now virtually forgotten quartet of Crabbe, Rogers, Gifford and Campbell are consistently rated as better poets than any of them. Shelley he is cool over, rarely expressing anything in the way of real or sustained admiration for his friend's work, and only in one contemporary instance – his contempt for Southey – does he seem at last to have backed the right horse in the right race, as we might judge it today.

That is far from the end of it. His successive judgements on his own work have struck many as also perverse, with the addition of being erratic: he dismissed his early work and the *Tales* for their "false stilted trashy style", (3) claiming that "... their exaggerated nonsense...has corrupted the public taste", (4) but revised the opinion somewhat in 1817, declaring to his friend Thomas Moore that he was "very sorry that I called some of my own things *Tales*, because I think that they are something better." (5) *A fortiori*, he then wrote in 1821 to Murray, "... the fact is (as I perceive) – that I wrote a great deal better in 1811 – than I have done since." (6) Although he is almost certainly referring to the first draft of *Hints from Horace* which dated from that year – a poem which he *did* consistently hold in the highest regard, along with the later translation of the first canto of Pulci's *Morgante Maggiore* (7) – his judgement here does seem puzzling, considering that at the time of writing he had *Beppo* and five cantos of *Don Juan* under his belt. As to his changing opinions as to what was his best work, previously he had said of *Childe Harold* (particularly Cantos III and IV) that "...I look upon...as my best." (8) That opinion was then superseded in 1820 when he declared to both Hobhouse and Murray that *The Prophecy of Dante* was "...the best thing I ever wrote." (9)

Of course all this comes with a significant caveat: Byron tailored his opinions both to the nature and tastes of the recipient or to the effect he wanted to create in that recipient's mind. For example, in his letter to Moore above where his attitude appears to soften towards his earlier *Tales* he may have been mindful that his friend had just published a similar one of his own, *Lallah Rookh*, and wanted to lay the ground for a more generous critical approach. (10) Although he never praised his own *Don Juan* in extravagant terms, his dogged persistence with its composition over the last five years of his life in the face of opposition from friends, publisher and sections of the reading public tells a tale of its own, that he