

Byron's Romantic Politics

Byron's Romantic Politics:
The Problem of Metahistory

By

Peter Cochran

**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Abbreviations	ix
Introduction	1
Byron the Myth, and His Assistant Mythmakers	
Chapter One.....	7
Byron's Politics – Did he have any?	
Chapter Two	35
The Politics of Borrowing: The Cost of <i>Childe Harold's Pilgrimage</i>	
Chapter Three	53
The Politics of Nottinghamshire	
Chapter Four	83
The Politics of Publishing: The Murray / Byron Comedy	
Chapter Five	117
The Politics of Editing	
Chapter Six	155
The Politics of Early U.S. Imperialism: Byron Boards the U.S.S. Constitution	
Chapter Seven.....	173
The Politics of Italy [<i>Book Review</i>]	
Chapter Eight.....	191
The Politics of Mendacity and Manipulation	
Chapter Nine.....	209
The Sale of Parga and <i>The Isles of Greece</i>	

Chapter Ten	221
Why Did Byron Envy Thomas Hope's <i>Anastasius</i> ?	
Chapter Eleven	263
Byron, Greece, and Guilt	
Chapter Twelve	293
Byron's Turkish Friends	
Chapter Thirteen	311
Walking into it with his Eyes Open: Byron and the Greek War of Independence	
Conclusion.....	351
Appendix	355
Frank Abney Hastings' Letter to Byron	
Bibliography	375
Index	385

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– P.C.

ABBREVIATIONS

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

In the notes: **B.:** Byron; **H.:** Hobhouse; **K.:** Kinnaird; **Mu.:** Murray; **SBD:** Scrope Davies.

BB: *Byron's Bulldog, The Letters of John Cam Hobhouse to Lord Byron*, ed. Peter W. Graham, Ohio 1984.

BJ: *Byron Journal*.

Blessington: *Lady Blessington's Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell jr., Princeton 1969.

BLJ: *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols, John Murray, 1973-94.

Clogg I: Clogg, Richard (ed.) *The Struggle for Greek Independence*, Macmillan 1973.

Clogg II: Richard Clogg, *A Short History of Modern Greece*, C.U.P. 1979.

Coleridge: *The Works of Lord Byron: A New, Revised and Enlarged Edition with illustrations. Poetry*, ed. E.H. Coleridge, seven vols, John Murray, 1898-1904.

CHP: Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

CMP: *Lord Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Andrew Nicholson, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991.

CPW: *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann and Barry Weller, 7 vols Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980-93.

DJ: Byron, *Don Juan*.

Finlay: Finlay, George. *A History of Greece* (Oxford 1877), Vol. VI.

Gamba: Gamba, Pietro. *A Narrative of Lord Byron's Last Journey to Greece*, (John Murray, 1825).

Gell: Gell, William. *Narrative of a Journey in the Morea* (Longmans, 1823).

Green / Lapinski: Green, Matthew J.A., and Piya Pal-Lapinski (eds.) *Byron and the Politics of Freedom and Terror*, Palgrave 2011.

HaE: Byron, *Heaven and Earth*.

HVSV: *His Very Self and Voice: Collected Conversations of Lord Byron* edited with an introduction and notes by Ernest J. Lovell, New York: MacMillan, 1954.

- Kennedy: Kennedy, James. *Conversations on Religion, with Lord Byron and others, held in Cephalonia, a short time previous to his Lordship's Death*, 1830.
- LBAR: Langley Moore, Doris. *Lord Byron Accounts Rendered*, John Murray, 1974.
- LBLI: Guiccioli, Teresa. *Lord Byron's Life in Italy*, trans. Rees, ed. Cochran, AUP Delaware, 2005.
- LJM: *The Letters of John Murray to Lord Byron*, ed. Andrew Nicholson, Liverpool University Press, 2007.
- LLB: Langley Moore, Doris. *The Late Lord Byron*, John Murray, 1961.
- Marchand: Marchand, Leslie A., *Byron: A Biography*, 3 vols Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1957.
- Medwin: Medwin, Thomas. *Journal of the Conversations of Lord Byron at Pisa*, 1824.
- Millingen: Millingen, Julius. *Memoirs of the Affairs of Greece* (London, 1831).
- Minta: Minta, Stephen. *On a Voiceless Shore* (Henry Holt, 1998).
- NABSR: *Newstead Byron Society Review*.
- Nicolson: Nicolson, Harold. *Byron: the Last Journey* (Constable, 1924).
- NLS: National Library of Scotland.
- Parry: Parry, William. *The Last Days of Lord Byron* (Knight and Lacey, 1825).
- RL: Dorchester, Lady (ed.) *Recollections of a Long Life*, 6 vols (John Murray, 1909-11).
- RR: *The Romantics Reviewed*, ed. Donald H. Reiman, Garland, 1972.
- SAHC: Fischer, Doucet Devin and Reiman, Donald, eds., *Shelley and his Circle*, Harvard 1961-2002.
- Stanhope: Stanhope, Leicester. *Greece in 1823 and 1824* (Sherwood and Jones, 1824).
- St.Clair: St.Clair, William. *That Greece Might Still Be Free* (Oxford, 1971).
- Trelawny: Trelawny, E.J. *Records of Byron, Shelley and the Author*, ed. Wright (Penguin, 1975).
- TVOJ: Byron, *The Vision of Judgement*.

If a prose quotation is left-justified only, it is taken from the original manuscript; if left- and right-justified, from a printed source. Codes are as follows:

<Authorial deletion>: <xxxxx>; Irrecoverable authorial deletion:
 {Interlineated word or phrase};
 E[ditoria]l A[dditio]n; [] Illegible

INTRODUCTION

“If, as could be argued, he was what might be defined as the next Promethean man in Western history after Christ, he had reason to be embarrassed; and the more so since the culture of his time possessed no thought-structure in which his significance could be placed.”

—*G. Wilson Knight*.¹

His name is in the haunted shade,
His name is on the air;
We walk the forest's twilight glade,
And only he is there.
The ivy wandering o'er the wall,
The fountain falling musical,
Proclaim him everywhere,
The heart is full of him, and flings
Itself on all surrounding things. — *L.E.L.*²

“Return with me to those thrilling days of yesteryear!” So did the narrator introduce *The Lone Ranger* radio program, a passion of mine twenty-five years before I had ever thought to read anything by Lord Byron: The Lone Ranger – that is to say, another (mid-twentieth century) revenant of The Giaour, The Corsair, Mazeppa. Beyond Bronte, Baudelaire, Berlioz, Kierkegaard, Melville, Nietzsche, etc., the Byronic generations do go on.

—*Jerome J. McGann*.³

Howe relates how, crossing the Gulph of Salamis in a sailing boat, he pulled out a volume of Byron. The wind blowing open the leaves, disclosed his portrait. The skipper caught a glimpse, recognized, and begged to look at it. The book was handed to him. He gazed for a moment or two at the portrait, and reverently kissed it, murmuring “ἦτον Μεγάλος καὶ Καλός” [“*He was great and good*”] Then he passed it to his men: each of those rude sailors did the same, uttering the same words with solemn fervour. —*Z.D. Ferriman*.⁴

1: *Lord Byron Christian Virtues* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), p.281.

2: *The Portrait of Lord Byron, at Newstead Abbey / Inscribed to his Sister, Mrs George Leigh from Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap-Book*, 1840, p.11.

3: *Romantic Scholarship and Culture 1960-2001, A Byronic View*, at Marios Byron Raizis (ed.), *Byron and Greece*, Athens 2003, p.4.

4: *Lord Byron* (1920), p.263.

INTRODUCTION

BYRON THE MYTH, AND HIS ASSISTANT MYTHMAKERS

People need myths, but don't always choose their mythological figures well. For example, evidence that the radio speeches of King George VI were pre-recorded, and his stammering edited out prior to transmission,¹ has not (as of July 2011) prevented Mr Colin Firth from becoming a national treasure.

No-one chooses to create a myth. It emerges unbidden:

The death took subtler and more lasting shapes in Chandrapore. A legend sprang up that an Englishman had killed his mother for trying to save an Indian's life – and there was just enough truth in this to cause annoyance to the authorities. Sometimes it was a cow that had been killed – or a crocodile with the tusks of a boar had crawled out of the Ganges. Nonsense of this type is more difficult to combat than a solid lie. It hides in rubbish heaps and moves when no one is looking. At one period two distinct tombs containing Esmiss Esmoor's remains were reported: one by the tannery, the other up near the goods station. Mr McBryde visited them both and saw signs of the beginning of a cult – earthenware saucers and so on. Being an experienced official, he did nothing to irritate it, and after a week or so, the rash died down. "There's propaganda behind all this," he said, forgetting that a hundred years ago, when Europeans still made their home in the countryside and appealed to its imagination, they occasionally became local demons after death – not a whole god, perhaps, but a part of one, adding an epithet or gesture to what already existed, just as the gods contribute to the great gods, and they to the philosophic Brahm. – E.M.Forster, *A Passage to India*, Chapter 28.

Byron is a "local demon" here, and "not a whole god, perhaps, but a part of one" there – in Nottinghamshire he's the former; in Greece, the latter. There is more evidence about his life than there is about most historical figures, but evidence never gets in the way of myth-making. In *Fiery Dust*, Jerome McGann writes:

1: www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article/1351257/The-Kings-Speech-BBC-engineer-ordered-Churchill-remove-King-George-Vis-stutters.html (consulted April 29th 2011).

McGann continues:

This MS fragment was written sometime before 1812, probably in 1809. It contains a strange prophecy, and one entirely worthy of the man who longed so passionately to be in fact what he dreamed he was. Byron's statue now stands in the Garden of Heroes in Missolonghi, a sign that his prophetic hope had not been in vain. Further, he has the fame he sought—more of it, probably, than any other English poet except Shakespeare. Byron gained his notoriety by the force of his projected personality, and it is an irony he would have appreciated that that very specific personality has now largely become dispersed into a variety of modern myths. Nor does a serious, even scholarly, attempt to remain true to the facts protect us from mythmaking, for Byron will not let us rest content with mere facts but forces us on to seek meanings behind them and patterns within them. He forces us to mythmake, and Keats did not know what an important truth he pointed to when he sneered at Byron for “cutting a figure.” Byron refused the distinction between his life and his art, and the result has been, as G. Wilson Knight has always said, that he became a work of art, that the distinction could not be easily, or even usefully, drawn.³

I disagree, and am not sure what “metahistory” is: it sounds suspiciously like the version of history of which Mr David Cameron showed himself master last year (2010), when he said that in 1940 Britain and America stood alone, shoulder to shoulder, against Hitler, or when on a recent radio programme someone said that Byron gave two speeches in the House of Lords, and was married in 1814. Having studied Byron for twenty-five years (often in very “dry historical records”), I find that “a mythological transformation” *never* takes place, and an historical one comes into sharper and sharper focus. I think the distinction between Byron's life and his art *can* be drawn, both “easily” and “usefully”, and that his own inability to distinguish the two can be analysed with profit. The perils of failing to do so are obvious from McGann's example here, where evidence is set aside for mythologisation, even in the act of describing the evidence. McGann's “... dashed across the page in his bold script” hardly does justice to the furtive way in which the word “Byron” is hidden in the text, and in any case ignores the fact that, in four of its five appearances, it is erased. What Byron's erasures show to be a hesitancy (an 80% hesitancy), McGann makes a 100% confident aspiration. The critic's urge to mythologise Byron is greater than Byron's. Byron is not responsible for his own myth as articulated here – his followers can be left alone to create it. It may be true that “It hides in rubbish heaps and moves

3: Ibid, pp.27-8.

when no one is looking”: but a certain amount of human agency is always helpful as well.

In McGann’s analysis, the following (written in 1811) must be a cynical front, covering a “romantic” wish, the futility of which Byron is too intelligent not to see, and therefore too embarrassed to articulate:

To talk, as the Greeks themselves do, of their rising again to their pristine superiority, would be ridiculous: as the rest of the world must resume its barbarism, after reasserting the sovereignty of Greece: but there seems to be no very great obstacle, except in the apathy of the Franks, to their becoming an useful dependency, or even a free state, with a proper guarantee;—under correction, however, be it spoken, for many and well-informed men doubt the practicability even of this.⁴

The idea that Byron thinks himself able to lead the Greeks out of this conundrum would argue, not his ability to hope prophetically, but his mental and political derangement. But he harboured no such hopes – hence his four erasures in the Beinecke manuscript.

Jane Stabler has recently written,

Faliero’s disappearance from the portraits of the doges moves Byron because his identity has been annulled in addition to the taking of his life, and the place retains the terror of that act of obliteration.⁵

As I hope to show, much writing about Byron constitutes an attempt to annul his identity and replace it with another one, more marketable. But – as was not the case with Marino Faliero – the terrifying acts of obliteration are easily reversed.

4: B., note to CHP II.

5: “*Awake to Terror: The Impact of Italy on Byron’s Depiction of Freedom’s Battles*”, at Green / Lapinski, p.77.

CHAPTER ONE

“The day will come,” wrote the Italian patriot Mazzini, “when Democracy will remember all that it owes to Byron”.

— *quoted by Stephen Coote*.¹

As for democracy, it is the worst of the whole; for what is (in fact) democracy? An Aristocracy of Blackguards.

—*Byron*.²

... critics of the political delimitation of this “modern” self (romantic subjectivism) point to its bourgeois ideology, which makes it complicit with hegemonic power, and to its transcendentalism, which amounts to a retreat from social and political engagement into solitary introspection (ahistorical escapism).

—*Young-ok An*.³

Thursday May 16th 1822: At the House of Commons. Warne’s motion respecting Wynne’s embassy to Switzerland came on, and we were beat completely. I overheard Lethbridge say to Curtis the night before, “I shall vote with them tonight – I think it does good to yield a point or two to the people now and then” – as if the people were the great enemy: but the country gentlemen, generally, voted against us. This seems the last great battle for the year, and the opposition are now as low as ever: 141 to 247. Warne made a milk-and-water speech, according to his custom.

—*J.C.Hobhouse*.⁴

The reality is that the British government regularly views democracy abroad as a threat – which matches how it increasingly sees the public in Britain. These policies are being decided in an elitist and increasingly undemocratic decision-making process in Britain, which in its foreign policy is, I argue, akin to a totalitarian state.

—*Mark Curtis*.⁵

1: *Byron*, (Bodley Head 1988), p.144.

2: *My Dictionary*: entry for Augustus.

3: *Manfred’s New Promethean Agon*, at Green / Lapinski, p.105,

4: Hobhouse’s diary, entry for May 16th 1822 (B.L.Add.Mss. 56544).

5: Mark Curtis, *Web of Deceit: Britain’s Real Role in the World* (Vintage 2003), p.207.

CHAPTER ONE

BYRON'S POLITICS: DID HE HAVE ANY?

Byron's major creative achievement lies in his three ottava rima satires, *Beppo*, *The Vision of Judgement*, and *Don Juan* – three poems which are, on balance, “comical”. But he wrote a lot more in addition to them, in verse and prose, and from aspects of this huge body of extra material – not from the three ottava rima poems – emerges the regrettable phenomenon called “Byronism”. “Byronism”, the phantom which accompanied Byron throughout his life from 1812 onwards and continues to this day, has nothing to do with his greatest works – is in fact laughed at and contradicted by them – and is in effect a conspiracy to prevent his real genius from being recognised, and to prevent the three poems from being read and understood for the unique contributions which they represent. The fact that they're very funny counts against them, for the hypnotic monster “Byronism” poses as something deadly serious; and comedy is much harder to analyse than solemnity. Analysis is itself comical, for it implies inadequacy on the part of both analyst and reader: if you don't understand comedy at once, “by intuition”,¹ then analysis won't help. Everyone knows that the best way of killing a joke is to analyse and explain it.²

Rather than read the comic poems, and encourage others to read them, people invent supposedly fascinating alternative Byrons, and write about *them*. It's a displacement, a way of averting one's gaze: rather than read the great comic Byron (for comedy gets less palatable the more farcical life becomes), we examine the Romantic Byron, the Orientalist Byron, the Bisexual Byron, Byron the Eclectic Religionist, Byron the Creator and Marketer of his Own Image, Byron the Philosopher of Language, and – most fatuous of all – Byron the First Rock Star, or Media Celebrity. We

1: TVOJ 101, 5.

2: See David Ellis, *Byron's Sense of Humour, Romanticism* 17.1 2011, pp.106-115.

have to bring him down to the level of our own culture, in which watching paint dry is our definition of a really good night out.

Above all, we create the Byron the Political Revolutionary. Since his bathetic end in Missolonghi, 1824, he has been hailed as an icon of political rebellion, almost from China to Peru. The history of Czech nationalism, we're told, cannot be understood without reference to the role played in it by his work. His poetry, we're told, encouraged the Poles to rebel. He was quoted (we're told, erroneously – it was Lord Acton who was quoted), in Tiananmin Square. Garibaldi and Mazzini were enthusiastic in their evaluation of the political example he set Italy. In Greece he is a vital icon in the preservation of that nation's self-image.

All these alternative Byrons are myths. Their Byron exists in the same dimension as Ned Ludd, or Robin Hood. Given the enormous (and still increasing) amount of documentation in existence about the historical Byron, the academic propagation of these myths represents a massive *trahison des clercs*. That Byron often thought of himself as a mythical figure, and was himself responsible for his own imagined retreat into meta-history, doesn't mean that we should concur.

Byron achieved his initial fame as a poet (before writing the ottava rima satires) with a largely female readership, in whose critical capacity he had no confidence, and he was startled and ashamed at his own success. *Beppo* and *Don Juan* are both satirical at the expense of these factors. He tried a parliamentary career with three speeches in 1812 and 1813, but soon found that he lacked the patience and staying-power for such a thing. He was more suited by temperament to the literary career which, however, he despised, having earned it (as he judged), with contemptible ease.

But his more "serious" commercial poetry is still treated with the same academic respect as his comical work – seen at the time by his publisher, Murray, as uncommercial.

As with literature, so with politics. He lived, thought and felt "antithetically". This is a polite way of saying that he was a mass of inconsistencies, which is a polite way of saying that he was two-faced and couldn't think straight. He was by nature incapable of arriving at a conclusion, or of making up his mind. He really was a walking example of Keats' "Negative Capability". When his personal circumstances forced him to leave England in 1816, he expressed the utmost dislike for his native country. But although he became acclimatised quickly on the continent (especially in Italy), he continued to express the greatest concern for the literary and political life of the England which, as he asserted, he hated for the way it had expelled him. He never stopped commenting on its political affairs. But his public voice was poetic, and ironical:

“England! with all thy faults I love thee still!”

I said at Calais, and have not forgot it;

I like to speak and lucubrate my fill,

I like the Government (but that is not it)

I like the freedom of the press and quill,

I like the Habeas Corpus (when we've got it)

I like a Parliamentary debate,

Particularly when 'tis not too late;

I like the taxes, when they're not too many,

I like a sea-coal fire, when not too dear,

I like a beef-steak too, as well as any,

Have no objection to a Pot of Beer,

I like the weather – when it is not rainy –

That is, I like two months of every Year;

And so God save the Regent, Church, and King!

Which means that I like all, and every thing. –

Our standing Army, and disbanded Seamen,

Poor's rate, Reform, my Own, the Nation's debt,

Our little Riots just to show we're free men,

Our trifling Bankruptcies in the Gazette,

Our cloudy climate, and our chilly women;

All these I can forgive, and those forget;

And greatly venerate our recent glories,

And wish they were not owing to the Tories.³

The stanzas show how well he's keeping in touch with England, from Venice, in October 1817, when he wrote *Beppo*. There was no “freedom of the press and quill” after the Gagging Acts of March, and Habeas Corpus was suspended – “we” hadn't “got it”. Parliamentary debates *did* go on too late more often than not; taxes *were* too many, and sea-coal too dear. It often rained, then as now, riots and bankruptcies proliferated ... and so on. Byron's “likes” are so obviously dislikes that we can only smile, seduced by his inventiveness and his light tone. He's describing a massively dysfunctional society, in which oppression, starvation, and violence are rife. However, such facetiousness is not the tone of an observer who is politically committed, and wants things to change: rather it's of one who has, in observing, given up. In writing a poem about it he has translated it from the world of fact – where action is needed – to the world of comic

3: *Beppo*, sts.47-9.

art, where the only apt reaction is laughter. All his grim details are, to use Malcolm Kelsall's phrase, "bustled into triviality".⁴

It seems that the temptation to (as Jerome McGann might say) metahistoricize Byron's politics remains overwhelming, even in 2011. He *must* have been a revolutionary / liberal / radical Whig:

Marino Faliero and *The Two Foscari* register the imprint of Byron's politics abroad and at home, or his external and internal warfare—that is, his "activ[e] plotting with the Carbonari," a revolutionary Italian secret society, and his reinvigorated disgust with Parliamentary Old Corruption in England as a result of the killing of unarmed demonstrators at Manchester (dubbed the Peterloo Massacre in ironic homage to the self-congratulatory spectacle of Waterloo), the execution and transportation of the Cato Street conspirators, and the evisceration of the already tenuous public authority of the Prince Regent by the Queen Caroline affair.⁵

For Byron's banal experiences with the Carbonari, see Chapter Seven below. His "reinvigorated disgust" at the Peterloo Massacre is shown when he refuses to contribute to a fund for its victims (see below, this chapter). He was taken in by Cato Street, a vote-catching publicity stunt created by a planted newspaper article and a government *agent provocateur*: "And if they had killed poor Harrowby – in whose house I have been five hundred times – at dinners and parties – his wife is one of "the Exquisites" and t'other fellows – what end would it have answered?"⁶ As for Queen Caroline, I'm sorry to say that his attitude to her has, owing a metahistoricising instinct on the part of all editors until now, been hidden away ever since he expressed it:

Oh – you [*Murray*] must know that I sent H.'s letter without asking him – so – say nothing about that – I thought it might serve the Quim [**BLJ** has "**Queen**"] in her cause – and you in her behalf & sent it – trusting to your discretion – pray – do not compromise him – nor any body else.⁷

4: Malcolm Kelsall, *Byron's Politics* (Harvester Press 1987), p.152.

5: Joshua D. Gonsalves, *Byron's Venetian Masque of the French Revolution*, at Green / Lapinski, p.50.

6: B. to Hobhouse, March 29th 1820: text from NLS Ms.43440; BLJ VII 62.

7: B. to Hobhouse, November 9th 1820: text from NLS Ms.43440; censored at BLJ VII 222.

... he [*Hobhouse*] is a little wroth that I would not come over to the Quim's [BLJ has "Queen's", and so does the Ashley transcription] trial – lazy – quotha! – it is so true that he should be ashamed of asserting it.⁸

These regrettable lapses into ungentlemanliness are further developed in *Don Juan* V, stanza 61.

Misogynist sneers apart: what the relationship of poetry to politics is or should be, I shall look at in my conclusion. Meanwhile, I propose to look at three political themes with which Byron should have been preoccupied during his writing career (had he been a serious political thinker), his attitude (or attitudes) to which we can try and evaluate: 1) Napoleon; 2) the reinstatement, after Napoleon's defeat, of the continental despotisms he had overthrown; and 3) the British parliamentary voting system.

Byron's attitude to Napoleon was coloured by two facts: firstly, that he perceived the Frenchman, not as a normal politician, but as a kind of living legend, inhabiting a world not of contemporary history but of metahistory or contemporary myth, in the same dimension as Prometheus (or, as we've seen, as England in 1817); and secondly, that having created this idol, he identified with it. In February 1814 he recorded in his diary,

Napoleon!—this week will decide his fate. All seems against him; but I believe and hope he will win—at least, beat back the Invaders. What right have we to prescribe sovereigns to France? Oh for a Republic! "Brutus, thou sleepest." Hobhouse abounds in continental anecdotes of this extraordinary man; all in favour of his intellect and courage, but against his *bonhomme*. No wonder;—how should he, who knows mankind well, do other than despise and abhor them?⁹

... from which we can see that Byron despises and abhors them too. His Napoleon is a projection of himself. Hobhouse's letters from the Hundred Days – none of which Byron ever acknowledged – abound, not just in "continental anecdotes" about Napoleon's "intellect and courage",

8: B. to Murray, November 9th 1820: text from B.L.Ashley 5161; censored at LJ V 113-18, and BLJ VII 224.

9: London Journal, February 18th 1814; text from Moore's Life; BLJ III 243-4.

but about his political compromises, or about such details as his nose-picking, and the fact that his paunch causes his shirt to ride up over his breeches. For Byron, these mundanities have to be airbrushed out of the picture. A few weeks after the above diary entry, he writes to Moore:

Napoleon—but the papers will have told you all. I quite think with you upon the subject, and for my *real* thoughts this time last year, I would refer you to the last pages of the Journal I gave you. I can forgive the rogue for utterly falsifying every line of mine Ode—which I take to be the last and uttermost stretch of human magnanimity ... Making every allowance for talent and most consummate daring, there is, after all, a good deal in luck or destiny. He might have been stopped by our frigates—or wrecked in the Gulf of Lyons, which is particularly tempestuous—or—a thousand things. But he is certainly Fortune's favourite, and

Once fairly set out on his party of pleasure,
Taking towns at his liking and crowns at his leisure,
From Elba to Lyons and Paris he goes,
Making *balls* for the ladies, and *bows* to his foes.

... Nothing ever so disappointed me as his abdication, and nothing could have reconciled me to him but some such revival as his recent exploit; though no one could anticipate such a complete and brilliant renovation.¹⁰

His Prometheus had got down from his rock – his Macbeth had survived the Fifth Act to fight on. The “renovation” was short lived, and ended at Waterloo, three months after Byron wrote this letter. But long before that he had let the cat out of the bag, with

What strange tidings from that Anakim of anarchy—Buonaparte! Ever since I defended my bust of him at Harrow against the rascally time-servers, when the war broke out in 1803, he has been a “Heros de Roman” of mine—on the continent; I don't want him here.¹¹

The world of art is where Byron's Napoleon belongs – to bring him into the dull, oppressive world of English politics would spoil the effect, and prick the dream-bubble.

When it came to Napoleon's vanquishers, however, Byron's attitude showed no signs at all of being “metahistorical” – rather the reverse. The cant of the age would have had the world believe that Waterloo had been a

10: B. to Moore, March 27th 1815: text from Moore's Life; BLJ IV 285.

11: London Journal, November 17th 1813; BLJ III 210.

triumph for humanity, a victory for the forces of right, and a sign of God's grace, enabling the forces of Legitimacy to reassert themselves – a "Great Moral Lesson" for the powers of Jacobinism, radicalism and revolution, a return to the God-given status quo. Three of the victorious Allied powers attempted to cast themselves in a "metahistorical" role unassisted, by calling themselves The Holy Alliance, a canting gesture so gross that, in England, not even Liverpool and Castlereagh could bring themselves to echo it, much as they concurred with its anti-Bonapartist premise.

Byron was not alone in disagreeing: the suicide of Samuel Whitbread was attributed in part to his despair at Waterloo, and Hazlitt went without washing or shaving for months after. But Byron expressed his disgust more memorably than most:

Oh, Wellington! (or "Villainton" – for Fame
 Sounds the heroic syllables both ways;
 France could not even conquer your great name,
 But punned it down to this facetious phrase –
 Beating or beaten she will laugh the same)
 You have obtained great pensions and much praise;
 Glory like yours should any dare gainsay,
 Humanity would rise, and thunder "Nay!" *

* Note — Query, Ney? — Printer's Devil.

I don't think that you used Kinnaird quite well
 In Marinet's affair – in fact 'twas shabby,
 And like some other things won't do to tell
 Upon your tomb in Westminster's old abbey.
 Upon the rest 'tis not worth while to dwell,
 Such tales being for the tea hours of some tabby;
 But though your years as *man* tend fast to zero,
 In fact your Grace is still but a *young Hero*.

Though Britain owes (and pays you too) so much,
 Yet Europe doubtless owes you greatly more;
 You have repaired Legitimacy's Crutch –
 A prop not quite so certain as before;
 The Spanish – and the French, as well as Dutch,
 Have seen and felt how strongly you *restore* –
 And Waterloo has made the World your debtor,
 (I wish your bards would sing it rather better.)

You are "the Best of Cut-throats" – do not start –
 The phrase is Shakespeare's, and not missapplied;
 War's a brain-spattering, windpipe-slitting Art,

Unless her Cause by Right be sanctified;
 If you have acted *once* a generous part,
 The World, not the World's Masters, will decide;
 And I shall be delighted to learn Who,
 Save you and yours, have gained by Waterloo?¹²

It's a bold piece of urbanity, a nobleman addressing a fellow nobleman in such a way as to imply that he is (as we would put it) a war-criminal. A certain smart at the fact that Wellington had bedded both Caroline Lamb and Frances Wedderburn Webster doubtless fuels Byron's "*young Hero*" gibe; but it doesn't lessen the righteous, liberal aspect of his anger. John Murray could never have published these stanzas.

Byron's domestic politics were at odds with his cosmopolitan ones. Few if any of his contemporaries judged him to be a radical in terms of English politics. The radical Hazlitt wrote of him that "... the liberal poet defends freedom for all and courts revolution, while the aristocrat shelters behind his title and fears the rabble". The Tory Scott wrote to Moore that "On politics, he [Byron] used sometimes to express a high strain of what is now called Liberalism; but it appeared to me that the pleasure it afforded him as a vehicle of displaying his wit and satire against individuals in office was at the bottom of this habit of thinking, rather than any real conviction of the political principles on which he talked".¹³ In his obituary for Byron, Scott further commented that

... notwithstanding his having employed epigrams, and all the petty war of wit, when such would have been much better abstained from, he would have been found, had a collision taken place between the aristocratic parties in the state, exerting all his energies in defence of that to which he naturally belonged.¹⁴

Richard Cronin has noted that

Byron had found in Italy and Greece the only arenas in which he could comfortably address himself to political realities because abroad, in preindustrial, neo-feudal societies, he could assume his preferred

12: DJ IX sts.1-4.

13: Quoted. P.G.Trueblood (ed.) *Byron's Political and Cultural Influence on Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Macmillan 1981), p.26.

14: Reprinted in *The Mirror of Literature*, June 25th 1824, p.378.

political role as champion of the people without compromising his aristocratic status.¹⁵

Byron was a revolutionary abroad, but a mainstream Whig, that is, a conservative, in England. In England, for reasons I shall examine, he disliked revolution: on the continent he felt freer to indulge his liberalism:

But never mind – “God save the king!” – and kings!
 For if he don't, I doubt if Men will longer –
 I think I hear a little bird who sings
 The People by and bye will be the stronger;
 The veriest Jade will wince whose harness wrings
 So much into the raw as quite to wrong her
 Beyond the rules of posting, – and the Mob
 At last fall sick of imitating Job;

 At first it grumbles, then it swears, and then,
 Like David, flings smooth pebbles 'gainst a Giant;
 At last it takes to weapons such as Men
 Snatch when Despair makes human hearts less pliant;
 Then comes “the Tug of War” – 'twill come again,
 I rather doubt, and I would fain say “fie on't,”
 If I had not perceived that Revolution
 Alone can save the Earth from Hell's pollution.¹⁶

In Italy (where these lines were written) he was all in favour of a revolution which would expel the foreign imperialist oppressor, the Holy Ally, Austria, and replace it with representative government (though *how* representative he didn't say). Early in October 1820 he wrote to the men who styled themselves Neapolitan Insurrectionists:

An Englishman, a friend to liberty, having understood that the Neapolitans permit even foreigners to contribute to the good cause, wish that they would do him the humour of accepting a thousand louis, which he takes the liberty of offering. Having already, not long since, been eyewitness to the despotism of the Barbarians in the States occupied by them in Italy, he sees, with the enthusiasm natural to a cultivated man, the glorious determination of the Neapolitans to assert their well-won independence. As a member of the English House of Lords, he would be a traitor to the principles which placed the reigning family of England on the throne, if he

15: Richard Cronin, *Romantic Victorians: English Literature, 1824-1840* (Palgrave, 2002), p.18.

16: DJ VIII sts 50-1.

were not grateful for the noble lesson so lately given both to people and to kings.¹⁷

In Italy, he claims to have inherited the ideals of 1688. But when it came to the reform of the English parliament, and the freeing of England from feudal oppression – to the continuation, in short, of the work of 1688 – he sang a softer and less stirring tune. In *The Vision of Judgement*, Southey has tried without success to hymn the Establishment of which he claims to be Bard:

Saint Peter – who has hitherto been known
 For an impetuous Saint – upraised his keys
 And at the fifth line knocked the poet down –
 Who fell like Phaeton – but more at ease –
 Into his lake – for there he did not drown,
 A different web being by the Destinies
 Woven for the Laureate's final wreath – whene'er
 Reform shall happen, either here or there. –¹⁸

When, where or how “Reform shall happen” – and thus when, where or how Robert Southey's “final wreath” shall be woven, is not something which Byron is prepared either to be specific about, and certainly not something he's prepared to work towards. He'll just sit back and observe events. In fact, when “reform” happened in 1832, Robert Southey's position wasn't affected one bit. He may in his insane way have blamed the cholera outbreak on the legislation, but he was Poet Laureate – with all the public indifference that post normally receives – before, during, and ten years after the passing of the Great Bill. Had there been a revolution in 1832, he might have been “torn for his bad verses”: when Byron writes “reform,” he means “revolution”, being unable (“romantically”) to distinguish the two words.

In Italy, Byron anticipated revolution, and looked forward to taking part – but was disappointed, a fact which he lamented with a characteristic joke: “It seems that, just at this moment (as Lydia Languish says) “there will be no elopement after all.”¹⁹

17: B. to the Neapolitan Insurrectionists, Oct. 1st-4th 1820: translation from LJ V 595-6; BLJ VII 187-8.

18: TVOJ, 104, 8.

19: Ravenna Journal, January 8th, 1821, Monday; B. quotes Sheridan, *The Rivals*, IV ii.

The reason why “there will be no elopement” is clear from his Ravenna Journal entry for January 24th 1821:

... the Germans are on the Po, the Barbarians at the gate, and their masters in council at Leybach (or whatever the eructation of the sound may syllable into a human pronunciation), and lo! they dance and sing, and make merry, “for tomorrow they may die.”

... The principal persons in the events which may occur in a few days are gone out on a *shooting party*. If it were like a “*highland hunting*,” a pretext of the chase for a grand re-union of counsellors and chiefs, it would be all very well. But it is nothing more or less than a real snivelling, popping, small-shot, water-hen waste of powder, ammunition, and shot, for their own special amusement: – a rare set of fellows for “a man to risk his neck with,” as “Marishal Wells” says in the *Black Dwarf*.²⁰

If they gather, – “whilk is to be doubted,” – they will not muster a thousand men. The reason of this is, that the populace are not interested, – only the higher and middle orders. I wish that the peasantry *were*; they are a fine savage race of two-legged leopards.

“The principal persons in the events which may occur in a few days” were Byron’s supposed Carbonari friends, Ruggiero and Pietro Gamba. Faced with a call to action, they went off out of earshot. Their revolutionary intentions were revealed as posture: the Austrians had called their bluff.

As in Italy, so in the rest of Europe. In his recent book *Byron and the Rhetoric of Italian Nationalism* (for a full review of which, see below), Arnold Anthony Schmidt presents Byron’s political influence in Europe in the customary positive way:

During nineteenth-century uprisings by the Czechs, French, Germans, Hungarians, Poles, Russians (and, of course, Italians), Byron’s words and image as a nationalist hero appeared over and over again. The Russian poet Kondraty Fyodorovich Ryleev, when executed by the Czar for his part in the 1825 Decembrist uprising, died holding a copy of Byron’s poetry. Byron also influenced the Polish nationalist and romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz, called “*il Byron polacco*” (“the Polish Byron”), who in 1822 wrote “It is only Byron that I read, and I thrown away any book written in another spirit, because I detest lies” (Bone 259). Mickiewicz, who translated *The Giaour*, died from cholera while trying to organize a Polish Legion to combat Russian oppression, a death which mirrors Byron’s in Missolonghi organizing Greeks to fight the Turks. Another admirer, the French poet-politician Alphonse de Lamartine, served in France’s government following the revolutionary events of 1848, wrote an homage

20: See Scott, *The Black Dwarf* (1816), chapter XIII.

to Byron entitled *Le Dernier Chant du Pelerinage d'Harold*, and became the lover of Byron's Venetian mistress Teresa Guiccioli (p.5).²¹

He has chosen three very sad examples. Ryleev did indeed participate in the Decembrists' failed uprising (though I believe he was hanged with a Byron in his pocket, not in his hand – that would have made the hangman's job even harder than it was – the rope broke). But the Decembrists were confused in motivation, half-hearted in planning, and let down by the defection of two of their leaders. In its non-stop bathos their attempted coup was indeed a Byronic event: but out of *Beppo*, not out of *The Corsair* (though the events in *The Corsair* are bathetic enough, in *The Corsair's* idiom). Mickiewicz's attempt to start (not a Polish, but a Jewish Legion) to fight the Russians, was a waste of time (not unlike Byron's attempt at organising the Greeks in Missolonghi): and what he actually wrote was,

I read only Byron, and cast aside books if written in a different spirit, since I don't like lies; if there's a description of happiness, family life, this rouses my indignation as much as the sight of married couples and children; this is my only aversion.

... which is hardly a revolutionary sentiment. As for Lamartine, it's true that he inscribed his name beneath that of Byron when he visited Tasso's cell in Ferrara, that he followed in Byron's tracks in Greece and Turkey, and that he tried to turn Childe Harold's face back to religion, in his "completion" of Byron's work. In *Le Dernier Chant de Childe Harold*, Harold leaves Italy for Greece, where he rests not at Missolonghi but in a monastery, claiming to seek God. In a dream he is faced with the choice between a vessel containing the fruit of the Tree of Life, and one containing a serpentine Satan. He chooses the latter, and dies. It's that silly. In making his fifth canto of *Childe Harold* into a narrative, Lamartine shows that he hasn't read the first four. The Neapolitan General Pepe challenged him to a duel over the poem, in which he describes Italy as a land of the dead.

He deplored *Don Juan* as an example of "l'école du rire".

Nevertheless, in the late 1820s, after Byron's death in Greece, he expressed the desire to "Assister à cette résurrection d'un empire sur la terre des souvenirs, et y participer moi-même, comme Lord Byron ..." His

21: Arnold Anthony Schmidt, *Byron and the Rhetoric of Italian Nationalism* (Palgrave 2010), p.5; parenthetical references omitted.