

# Byron and the Sea-Green Isle



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By

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In loving memory of

Caroline Ward

1981 – 2018

*altissima quaeque flumina minimo sono labi*



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A throwaway remark made by Jonathon Shears, the editor of *The Byron Journal* (in Vol.38 No.2, 2010) that *The Island* was “a poem that deserves a book” started a train of thought that led finally to the production of this volume, and thus my thanks are due to him for fixing my gaze on such a worthwhile and pleasurable project. Whether or not this is the book he (and perhaps others) imagined is of course quite another matter.

I should also like to express my gratitude to Alice Farley, whose fine original painting of a scene from *The Island* is reproduced on the front cover.

Finally, I should like to put on record my indebtedness to those many scholars, friends and literati whose shared passion for Byron’s poetry has created a truly international “Byronosphere” within which to work and exchange ideas. Their encouragement, support and often helpful remarks via the instant response afforded by social media and email have all fed into the shaping of this book.

# INTRODUCTION

I would I were a careless child,  
Still dwelling in my Highland cave...  
*Hours of Idleness*

## 1.

It is tempting to write that *The Island* is something of a Cinderella poem in Byron's *oeuvre*, but if such a claim is advanced it is only fair to observe that the past few decades have seen some important individual studies of particular aspects of the poem, variously privileging its social, cultural, historical and political aspects, in the main springing from literary theory and informed by epistemological perspectives; this book engages with them where relevant, but this is not its primary function. No study has unpacked the whole work as a poem *qua* poem, considered first and foremost as poetry, and the focus of this book is exactly on that, so the poetry is the yardstick against which any theory is laid, rather than the other way around. To give a simple example, in making the text the fulcrum of this study we can come to understand why Shakespeare is more important to it than the sociological writings of Diderot—though these too will find their place.

A full-length study of *The Island* has fair claim to be the longest overdue debt to Byron and this book attempts to clear it, but it would be as well from the outset to be specific about what makes this poem important and deserving of such treatment. It will perhaps be most helpful to begin by drawing attention to four critical elements which justify devoting a whole book to a single long poem and in the process sketch a little of what lies ahead; though on a personal note I should first confess that the book I imagined I was going to write at the beginning was not quite the book that emerged at the end. I discovered that *The Island* proved to be a richer, more complex and often more magical poem than I had realized, and that sense of discovery is something I would like to share with the reader.

Why a whole book, then? The first argument centres on the language and thought embedded in the poem's structure: its competing energies are starker in *The Island* than in any other poem of Byron's, not excepting *Don Juan*—the reader is asked to take this on trust for the moment—and

have never been fully examined in poetic terms. Byron weaves symbols into the tapestry of the poem in three distinct ways, through metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche, supporting them with a wide range of “chime words” which, like the striking of a bell whose pitch cannot precisely be determined, are not symbols in themselves but yet resonate in an unfocussed and suggestive way within the text. This poetic weave, together with a slanting of some phrases and words momentarily pointing in more than one direction, provides an ideal vehicle for the polyphonic nature of Byron’s expression and thought, pointing to parallels, oppositions and connections which contribute to a distinctive music. In this regard—and in this poem in particular—Wallace Stevens’s injunction that “one should have eyes all the way round one’s head and read in all directions at once” finds its very embodiment.<sup>1</sup>

Second, Byron’s personal investment in the poem. This works rather differently from the way it does in other major poems such as *Childe Harold* or *Don Juan*; in a poem where dualities abound, history is reworked and reconfigured in a flight of the imagination that constantly presents us with competing “realities”. Something of the personal in Byron, his continuing desire for love, his need for freedom within a socialised context, his brooding poetic persona all leak into *The Island* through the creation of two antithetical characters, one historical whose history he alters, the other fictional, who shares certain physical characteristics and qualities with his creator. Why Byron breaks off from *Don Juan* at this period of his life and in this particular way to write *The Island* when he already has to hand a greater canvas to paint upon leads us to ask, what did he think he was doing, and why did he do it like this?

Third—and very much linked to this personal element—Christian, the leader of the mutineers, the final incarnation of the Byronic hero who has appeared across the whole trajectory of Byron’s work, makes his final bow in *The Island*; he will not just die, as all Byronic heroes do, but here he will at last be annihilated. We are bound to ask why this is and further, how does even such a diffuse thinker as Byron manage to place him successfully in a poem which already boasts three other different heroic types, one of them female? The reader who suspects that this embarrassment of riches illustrates a drawing together of many strands previously woven into other poems is surely right, but such an argument deserves to be unpacked in detail, not just to see what we are left with when we reach the end of the poem, but to look at what Byron takes from this for the major poetry he is yet to write—the final cantos of *Don Juan*.

Fourth and last—though perhaps distinct from the three points above—*The Island* deserves a full-length study because it has never been discussed

in relation to Byron's original holograph, which records the immediacy of his thought and spontaneous reworkings; until now, no transcription of the original manuscript has ever been published, meaning that everything ever written about *The Island* has been in reference to the scholarly editions of E H Coleridge and R E Prothero, Jerome McGann and Peter Cochran, who each subject the poem to (admittedly much-needed) emendation and amendment. To work from the first raw draft, to follow the individual cast of Byron's immediate thought as revealed in his evocative use of the dash in place of formal punctuation brings us as close as we shall ever get to watching him as he thinks. His multi-faceted dashes act like an x-ray record of pauses, leaps, connections and disruptions, as opposed to the precise formality of traditional punctuation which allots primacy to expression and is generally employed to ease the reader's path through the poem.

These then in summary are the arguments for devoting a whole book to *The Island*: the subtlety of its language allied to the contrapuntal nature of its thought; the unexplored depth of Byron's psychological investment in the poem; the analysis of what it means to be a hero in both paradise and hell; and the presentation of the poem in a mode that freezes the immediacy of its composition. Taken all together, they are compelling.

## 2.

Something further needs to be said about the holograph at this point. A full description of the editorial principles adopted in its reproduction for this book will be found in the Appendix, but as the basis for all quotations from *The Island* in this study are taken from it, readers unfamiliar with Byron's idiosyncratic use of the dash in his poetry need an explanation of what lies ahead. Because of this employment of the holograph as the default text, it should be noted here that Byron's individual capitalization and spelling have been fully retained, including his customary use of "it's" for the possessive "its"—something entirely familiar to readers conversant with eighteenth century literature and a norm still in the early nineteenth century, but considered today a grammatical solecism.

Byron's use of the dash is highly expressive, at first glance doing duty for the conventional comma, semi-colon, colon or full stop; but from his pen it is also a subtle deployment akin to phrasing in music, demanding an interpretive instinct from the reader which, according to one's disposition, can either be liberating and insightful or an impediment to the flow of the eye. Byron habitually (though not invariably) employs the dash to separate phrases where convention uses commas, thus marking the caesura(e) and

encouraging more choice for the reader as to how long or significant any pause should be. As a rough rule of thumb, a dash within the line habitually indicates a place where we would place a comma, or much less frequently, a semi-colon; but when placed at the end of a line, punctuation becomes the reader's oyster, requiring a flexible yoking of eye and ear. (Of all great poets, none benefits more than Byron from being read aloud to find a natural pathway through his expression.) Byron writes as he thinks, and his dashes are the signifiers of that thought; in appreciable measure they allow us to hear him thinking. This is why Andrew Lansdown's statement that Byron "uses dashes and commas freely, but for no apparent reason, other than possibly for natural pause between phrases, or sometimes for emphasis", rather misses the mark;<sup>2</sup> there *is* reason in that it lies in the expression of his thought. No one I suppose has put it better or more persuasively than Andrew Nicholson; though writing about Byron's prose, the spirit of what he says applies almost as well to his poetry:

Many of his dashes are in fact hieroglyphs of verbal signification, gestures of meaning, nuancing his expression in ways that elude ordinary punctuation. To adapt Puff in Sheridan's *The Critic*, there is the dash impatient, the dash ironical, the dash comical, the dash furioso: there is the dash-and-be-damned-to punctuation, the dash expletive, the dash imperative...In a vital way his dashes reflect a passionate desire to gather the scattered impression and to communicate its immediacy; the race to get down what is fleeting.

To give one illustration of this: Byron's rare (in this poem) use of the double dash, which occurs only at three moments, each of them highly significant. At I.51, there is an apostrophe to the sleeping Bligh, heralding the moment of mutiny; IV.90 records Torquil's act of courage and blind faith when he vanishes below the waves in front of the eyes of the pursuing navy; and IV.106 registers the change below the water as Neuha and Torquil pass from one world to another. All these moments have a double dash, but it would be a mistake to think of them as no more than extra marks upon the paper. The first is a mark of urgency, the second signals quietude in the face of death, and the third indicates transcendence and change.

### 3.

The full reading offered here of *The Island* as something more than just the object of special theory or extended contextualization is reflected in

the elements of the individual twelve chapters—though its first two are prefatory, providing biographical and historical contextualization before the poem proper is examined. A brief overview of the chapters will help to make this clear.

Chapter I, *Annus horribilis*, contextualizes the year preceding the composition of *The Island*, examining the biographical and poetic elements which supplied the influential background and foreground to the poem's composition. The short chapter which follows, *An Historical Engagement*, serves to provide an historical contextualization of the poem by looking at what occurred before, during and after the mutiny on the *Bounty*, comparing the results with Byron's treatment of the known historical facts to see how far he skewed them for particular creative ends. The next two chapters concern themselves with Byron's particular use of language in the poem: Chapter III, *The Poet Speaks*, looks below the narrative waterline to see how Byron achieves the effects he wants, distinguishing between narrative *per se* and the para-narrative of discourse, digression, address, musings, dialogue, song, notes and commentary. Chapter IV, *Byron's Slanted Language*, further distinguishes between symbolic language—which requires a clearly apprehended referent—and language that is merely *slanted*, which arises from the employment of words or phrases that are ambiguous or elusive, pointing the reader to other potential meanings without its being necessarily obvious what those meaning may be. This enquiry develops over two chapters and also includes a discussion of *chime words* and the rhetorical device of hendiadys, the first of several Shakespearean resonances to be heard in *The Island*.

The four chapters which follow are devoted to an examination of the major symbols in the poem. Chapter V, *The Purpling Ocean*, traces the consonance of the sea in relation to the shifts and moods in the narrative, as well as its role as occasional commentator and actor in the drama; echoes of Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley and Landor are highlighted, and Byron's stunning imagery is unpacked. Chapter VI, *The Gentle Island*, is an extended consideration of two determining questions: what sort of an island is Toobonai, and how do we recognise it as a discrete space in its own terms, separate from the many writings which fed into its creation? The range of those writings and their varied influences are weighed, drawn from feeder poetry by Tasso, Spenser, Shakespeare, Pope, Shelley, Mary Russell Mitford and Byron himself, together with the prose writings of de Bougainville, Diderot and Rousseau. Chapter VII, *A Subterranean World*, discusses the ontological ambiguity of the special physical space of a cave that makes possible the profound and the mysterious; this is

considered in relation to an episode of Byron's early life. The final chapter in this section, *White Sails, Dusky Seas*, is devoted to Byron's symbolic use of particular colours in the poem. Shakespeare's use of green serves as a paradigm, and Byron's deployment of it is contrasted with how it functions in poems which bore an influence upon *The Island*. Attention then is focused on the base colours of black and white and how Byron invests them with deep significance.

The succeeding four chapters are devoted to individual studies of the significance and actions of the native girl Neuha and her young mutineer lover Torquil, the mutineers' leader Christian and the comic but deadly figure of the sailor Ben Bunting. The focus of Chapter IX, *A Rainbow in a Storm* is Neuha, the pivotal and most original figure in the poem, whose "masculine" activity is contrasted with Torquil's "feminine" passivity. The argument is then developed that it is Neuha's presence—rooted in nature—that directs the poem, but that her actions are rooted in thought. She is contrasted here with Haidee in *Don Juan*, who is quite as demonstrably amorous as Neuha but whose independence requires the absence of a paternal gaze. Chapter X, *The Pilgrim of The Deep*, considers the potentiality of Torquil, viewing him as emblematic of certain aspects of Byron's character and self-imaging. Certain distinctive differences are outlined, before broadening out into a consideration of how the momentum of the poem, with its multiple perspectives, voices and registers, comes to rest on a boyish figure destined for a comic marriage unprecedented in Byron's work. This leads to an exploration of Torquil's relationship with Neuha as an inverted image of the tragic love between Zuleika and Selim in *The Bride of Abydos*, moving from there to consider Neuha's active ascendancy over Torquil in relation to expected gender norms of behaviour. Chapter XI, *An Extinct Volcano*, is an examination of Christian, Byron's final brooding tormented hero figure and the ghosts that cluster around him: Satan in *Paradise Lost*, the Giaour, Conrad, Lara and Alp. How far or not Christian fulfils the criteria for a figure of Satanic empathy is weighed, set against Byron's delicately moving and suggestive language employed over Christian's suicide. Christian's pseudo-familial relationships with both Torquil and Bligh are then looked at, not just in a poetic context but in an historical mirror of the real relationship obtaining between Fletcher Christian and William Bligh, set against a backdrop of the emotional undercurrents that were in play between them. The final discussion of an individual is about the seaman Ben Bunting in Chapter XII, *A Seaman in a Savage Masquerade*, whose twilight eruption out of the forest creates a profound disjunction of tone at the end of Neuha and Torquil's first love duet. Ben is discussed in relation to that strand of



linguistic thought in Byron that was imbued with Shakespearean expression, viewing him in the context of two oppositional forces, both of which Shakespeare habitually engages with in his work. A final *Envoi* briefly summarizes what makes *The Island* such an exciting poem, arguing that much of it is represented in Byron's seeing an imagined skein of realizable possibilities woven out of a conflict of dualities existing in and of themselves and requiring no explanation. The old preoccupations of his creative thought are here worked out differently, with both tragic and comic endings to the poem as the brooding Byronic hero is finally destroyed forever, encompassing a happy-ever-after ending in which both Eros and *eros* have triumphed.

#### 4.

Although this is the first full-length study of this rich and complex poem, I would not have been able to shape it as I have were it not for some immensely valuable shorter studies undertaken by more able scholars than myself. Their range will be clear from the engagement with their arguments within the text, the Bibliography and references within the notes, but it is only fair to say that I have been immeasurably helped in particular by the work of three fine scholars: Bernard Beatty,<sup>4</sup> P D Fleck,<sup>5</sup> and James C Mckusick,<sup>6</sup> even when I have found myself drawing differing conclusions from theirs. My main sources from the abundance of material about the historical events of the mutiny on the *Bounty* have been two contrasting but highly regarded books by Caroline Alexander<sup>7</sup> and Greg Denig.<sup>8</sup>

Because of the way the disparate topics and elements of the poem are discussed, the reader will find that many quotes are repeated in different contexts—some key ones quite often—but with markedly different emphases. It is to be hoped that such repetition will be seen for what it is intended to be, as evidence for the seemingly inexhaustible nature of Byron's contrapuntal thought, as well as a unifying factor for the weave of arguments with which this book engages. I should add that a degree of basic familiarity with *The Island* is assumed in what follows, so that the reader unfamiliar with it will find engaging with what lies ahead easier if the whole poem is read first—preferably as presented here in the Appendix.

Lastly—and on a personal note—I should declare an open bias: a general fondness for this unusual poem developed into something deeper as I worked on it, and I discovered things that surprised me and took me in directions where I had not expected to go. As I view the poem now at the

end of an intriguing journey, *The Island* seems to me to be an expression of certain universal wishes which the reader is invited to share with the poet, one who briefly magicked the Highland cave of the epigraph above to the other ends of the earth, so that we can see him as a poet-Prospero who does not drown his book but just breaks his staff instead. Byron's Book of Wonders continues—*Don Juan*—but that recognizable staff he has leaned on for so long, the brooding guilt-tormented hero, is in the figure of Christian finally dashed to pieces on rocks, never to be resurrected again. In that sense at least, it is a poem of unburdening and farewell. But it is also a poem with a Janus face, looking not just backward over an often sublimated past but forward to a distinctive reckoning with the numinous in *Don Juan*. My hope is that the experienced reader (scholar or not) as well as the casual one will find pleasure in following where I have gone, that this study might open up unexpected avenues of thought about a poem which has divided opinion since it first appeared—opinion usually based upon partial considerations of the whole. *The Island* seems to me now to be something of a personal work, more so perhaps than Byron himself realized; it is possessed of a touching vulnerability that he would have disdained had he realized quite how much of his own psyche is invested in it. Perhaps in the end he did, for he was cool and vaguely dismissive in the few references he makes to it in his letters. This, it need hardly be added, is no guarantee of either the poem's worth or quality. But there is nothing cool about the passion innate in it; for this is a polyphonic toccata rich in symbols, themes and characterization, and answers the plaint of the seventeenth century poet Henry Vaughan in his poem *Man* more decidedly than anywhere else in Byron's poetry:

Man has still either toys, or Care,  
 He hath no root, nor to one place is ty'd,  
 But ever restless and Irregular  
 About this earth doth run and ride,  
 He knows he hath a home, but scarce knows where,  
                   He says it is so far  
 That he hath quite forgot how to go there.

Byron has remembered; and in *The Island* he shows us.

# CHAPTER I

## *ANNUS HORRIBILIS*

### **1. Shocks and wounds to come**

As a first step to understanding what Byron did in *The Island*, it will be helpful to look in some detail at the painful year that preceded its composition, a year which also saw the writing of *The Age of Bronze* and Cantos VI–XII of *Don Juan*. Buffeted by contrary fortune during these months, the states of mind revealed in both Byron's letters and through his actions provide useful indicators. The intention here is not to mine every nook and cranny for a full biographical and psychological contextualization—an undertaking that would require a depth and length unbalancing to the whole—but only to present a background context for the writing of the poem and bring events into view from Byron's perspective. The concern then is not to sort every bit of wheat from the chaff and be overly prescriptive about what did or did not serve as a possible well spring for the poem, but rather to lay out such events in broad brushstrokes and suggest possibilities and connections which might form a useful backdrop.

In any such undertaking we are helped immeasurably by having access to the rich mine of Byron's letters and journals, enabling us to look up what his preoccupations were on any one particular day—an access easily taken for granted. A moment's reflection however, imagining that could we read Shakespeare's letters to his friends while writing *The Tempest*, or look into Dante's private journal as he finishes *The Inferno* reminds us of our privileged perspective in Byron's case. The insights that we glean from the poet's expressed attitudes, states of mind and record of quotidian events is not unique, but it is precious, because judiciously approached, it has the capacity to illumine multiple aspects of his creative expression and thought—and not just in his prose writings. It is obvious, for instance, that Byron uses a range of dramatic voices in *Child Harold's Pilgrimage*, but we are inclined to accept that when he writes, "And if my voice break forth",<sup>1</sup> it is indeed, in some real sense, "his" voice that we hear.

The year that led up to Byron's picking up his pen on 11 January 1823—in the small hours, one assumes—and inscribing the double title

*The Island. Or Christian and his comrades*<sup>2</sup> produced an array of emotional shocks and wounds to Byron's psyche quite unlike any other in his life. 1816 may have seen his catastrophic fall from grace, but this was a single volcanic event evolving out of a distressed marriage and visited upon a still relatively young and healthy man, stimulating him to one of the greatest creative periods of his life. 1822, by contrast, was a year of attrition, producing month by month a wearying series of seismic shocks that took their toll in poor health, bouts of melancholy and a sense of frustration with life which only a continuous restless creativity could alleviate. Indeed, as the miseries of this *annus horribilis* piled Pelion upon Ossa, Byron's productivity turned like a weathercock: from January 1822 to February 1823 (when he finished *The Island*), he also completed *Werner*, wrote *The Deformed Transformed*, a full seven cantos of *Don Juan* and *The Age of Bronze* as well as *The Island*, starting Canto XIII of *Don Juan* two days after finishing it, yielding an approximate overall total for the period of 5,673 lines.<sup>3</sup> Given the troublesome nature of these thirteen months it is as well for us that Byron's habit was to write at night rather than during the day. That some of what he experienced did seep transmuted into his poetry is undeniable; it may of course be mere coincidence that in January 1822, depressed by the state of his physical deterioration he believed had been recorded by a bust made of him, Byron started *The Deformed Transformed* the same month; but if so, it is an interesting synchronicity. In June when he enjoyed a brief reunion with his boyhood friend and love, the Earl of Clare, he was cast into melancholy over their parting for weeks afterwards whenever he recalled him, according to Teresa; there may be a resonance of this in Canto VII of *Don Juan* where the unexplained presence of two women whom Don Juan and John Johnson bring with them into the Russian camp receives somewhat unnecessary attention when their parting is described, "...with tears and sighs and some slight kisses",<sup>4</sup> lines which were written within the same time frame of the aftermath of Clare's visit. Indeed, Cantos VI–XII abound with such resonances: Canto VIII of *Don Juan*, the death and slaughter canto, was written under the shadow of Shelley's drowning and terrible cremation.<sup>5</sup> A *fortiori*, Byron's continuing anxiety over money is definitely reflected in the opening stanzas of Canto XII of *Don Juan*. This is far from the end of it; when we come to *The Island* we confront Byron's most extended and fanciful elaboration of what might be called a necessary project of his psyche. Byron had a deep personal investment in both *Don Juan* and *The Island* and it is one of the major tasks of this book to show what this is and how it played out.

## 2. A framing year

January 1822 began by touching Byron on a spot where he was vulnerable: his sense of the deterioration of his once celebrated physical appearance. The third of January saw Shelley's friend, Edward Williams, call on Byron to find him sitting for a bust by the sculptor Bartolini. It seems that Byron had more of an inkling of what was to come, because he wrote in a letter to Murray a couple of months later of the exercise, "Of my own I can hardly speak, [Bartolini was sculpting Teresa's head as well] except it is thought very like what I now am—which is different from what I was, of course, since you saw me."<sup>6</sup> It proved to be a bad omen for things physical in a year that also saw his weight continuing to balloon and diminish, as it was wont to do; when the finished bust was eventually delivered in September he was greatly dismayed by how old it made him look, "*pare un vecchio Jesuita quasi rimbambito*" (like an old Jesuit almost in his dotage).<sup>7</sup> This was the month he started his only creative engagement with his own deformity, the drama *The Deformed Transformed*, and the synchronicity of timing with the Bartolini bust's arrival suggests that it focused Byron's attention on how others saw him. In *The Deformed Transformed*, the hunchbacked Arnold is tempted by the Stranger with an opportunity to swap bodies; that the drama remained unfinished, abandoned the following month, suggests (amongst other things) that Byron saw the idea as something of a dead end. The perceptive Lady Blessington, though doubtless elaborating according to her custom, observed the troubling connection between *The Deformed Transformed* and Byron's self-image and perhaps captured something of the real truth of it. According to her, Byron said this:

My poor mother was generally in a rage every day, and used to render me sometimes almost frantic; particularly when in her passion, she reproached me with my personal deformity, I have left her presence to rush into solitude where, unseen, I could vent the rage and mortification I endured, and curse the deformity that I now began to consider as a signal mark of the injustice of Providence. Those were bitter moments: even now, the impression of them is vivid in my mind, and they cankered a heart that I believe was naturally affectionate, and destroyed a temper always disposed to be violent. It was my feelings of this period that suggested the idea of "*The Deformed Transformed*".<sup>8</sup>

Though extraordinarily interesting as an incomplete dramatic experiment and one quite unlike his other plays, *The Deformed Transformed* proved to be a cul-de-sac. Byron was to find a lighter, more metaphysical solution to the problem of escaping from himself a year later in quite a different sort

of fantasy; but much was to intervene in the succeeding months before he was ready to write it. Leslie Marchand draws the conclusion that at this time Byron had come to feel that he no longer required an “all-consuming passion” and was contenting himself with the calmer state into which his relationship with Teresa had settled;<sup>9</sup> this was the corollary of no longer feeling young, perhaps exacerbated by something he gleaned from Bartolini’s preliminary work and certainly by the approach of his thirty-fourth birthday, bringing him within a year of the half-way point of the traditional three score years and ten. It is around this time that he began work in secret on Canto VI of *Don Juan* without telling Teresa, and although he makes no mention of it to Douglas Kinnaird, his most intimate and frequent correspondent at this time, it may lie at the back of this remark he made to him three days later on 23 January, after finishing *Werner*:

I shall not the less contrive to publish till I have run my vein dry. – – If it is not profitable – be it so – I shall do so for nothing (till it becomes actually a loss) and this because it is an occupation of mind – like play – or any other stimulus.

We can discount the parenthetical aside, perhaps: Byron was not just writing to a friend, but to his banker. He wrote compulsively, life-long, from earliest youth until death and there is no reason to think that, had he lived and sold nothing else, his vein would have ever run dry; a man’s compulsion, like water, is adept at finding avenues, particularly if that man is a creative genius.

If the worries of January were intrinsic, February brought two of an extrinsic nature. By far the most worrying and anger-making—with his customary circumspection, Marchand describes it as a quarrel “which absorbed more of his emotional intensities”<sup>10</sup>—and resulted in Byron’s issuing a challenge to a duel which, happily for all concerned, was never delivered. Byron and the poet laureate Robert Southey had for years crossed swords in print, but when in his preface to *A Vision of Judgement* Southey attacked certain English writers and poets under the label the “Satanic School” it was clear to all who his real target was, despite his not mentioning Byron by name. Certainly, Byron took it as a direct personal attack. He hit back in the fifth Appendix to *The Two Foscari*, lambasting the poet laureate, which in turn prompted Southey to retaliate in an open letter published in *The Courier* on 5 January, this time daring to name Byron personally in his denunciation of the Satanic School, talking of “blasphemous and lascivious books”, “slaves of sensuality”, “impiety”, “lewdness”, “profanation and pollution”. Byron’s challenge resulted from

this, but Kinnaird, charged with its delivery—and prompted by Hobhouse—discreetly let the matter drop. The whole *contretemps* lingered on in Byron's mind however, at the back of which must have been the haunting fear that the picture painted of him by the Poet Laureate might adversely affect the chances of his ever seeing or having contact with Ada again, his legitimate child. Hard on the heels of this came the news that Murray was in danger of being prosecuted for publishing the putatively blasphemous *Cain*; though caring little for such a proximate attack, Byron likely saw the timing as unfortunate, given Southey's recent public denunciation. It did however give a covering excuse for dropping Murray as his publisher and throwing in his lot with John Hunt, which he was now determined to do.

The following month gave him only a little respite: on the twenty-fourth Byron and his coterie of friends were embroiled in the Pisan Affair, which was still dragging on a month later when he found himself called for public examination in court. This ridiculous affray—a road rage incident on horseback involving a collision of puffed-up male egos and outraged pride—resulted in the wounding of Shelley, Hay and, more seriously, an Italian sergeant major called Masi who was thought likely to die for many days (though he did not); it also resulted in the imprisonment of various servants, including Byron's ever-loyal erstwhile gondolier Tita, for carrying firearms. The whole nonsense eventually cost Byron a fine, reported to be three thousand scudi.<sup>11</sup> Teresa meanwhile had been prevailed upon in March to lift her ban on the continuation of *Don Juan*, presumably through gentle incremental persuasion; at the time Byron was writing Canto VI *sub rosa* and nothing else, but with permission granted he finished it on the third of April. He did not complete Cantos VI–VIII rapidly, as Peter Cochran states,<sup>12</sup> but in fact wrote nothing for about two months—a long hiatus for so compulsive a writer—resuming work in June and writing Canto VII complete, following it in July with Canto VIII. This gap is difficult to explain and seems to have been occasioned by no particular great event or preoccupation; but waiting in the wings were two deaths that were to cast a further shadow over this troubling year, the first of them being that of his natural daughter Allegra in April.

The difference in the way Byron discussed Allegra's death with first Teresa and later the Countess of Blessington reveals not just that instinctive adjustment of his thought to the nature and disposition of his interlocutor, adapting in a way familiar to us from his correspondence, but his marked ability to entertain diverse and even conflicting strands of thought and feeling, a familiar hallmark of his great poetry. It was to be particularly so in *The Island*. To Teresa he showed resignation, saying,

“she [Allegra] is more fortunate than we are...besides, her position in this world would scarcely have allowed her to be happy. It is God’s will—let us mention it no more”; to which Teresa adds, “...from that day he would never pronounce her name.”<sup>13</sup> He did though discuss Allegra again with the Countess of Blessington, who records his saying, “While she lived, her existence never seemed necessary to my happiness; but no sooner did I lose her, than it appeared to me as if I could not live without her.”<sup>14</sup> The egocentric nature of this view seems to have struck neither of them. Perhaps Shelley gauged the real depth of Byron’s feelings, whatever mixture composed them: in a letter he wrote on behalf of Claire, Allegra’s mother, requesting a portrait and a lock of the child’s hair, he observes in passing, “I will not describe her [Claire’s] grief to you; you have already suffered too much...”<sup>15</sup>

May found Byron at last removing his household to the Villa Dupuy near Leghorn, something of a precursor to the restlessness which was to characterize the remaining months of the year; in *The Island* he will come to refer to the “irksome restlessness of Rest”, a phrase which perhaps held resonance for him.<sup>16</sup> From now on until his death Byron seems to belong nowhere in particular, at least as far as a sense of home can be said to be implicit in the word “belong”. One might argue that his whole life can be seen as a series of sojourns, in one way or another; he had the capacity to be a citizen and a stranger simultaneously, wherever he found himself, always looking back to the safety of an unalterable past to locate an elusive happiness associated with the idea of home—an idea which turns out to be a nexus of opposites, as Bernard Beatty has convincingly shown. As Beatty puts it, “if home is anywhere for Byron, it is where words are, where words are made”,<sup>17</sup> and at this time he was not deploying any in poetry; a further month was to elapse before he embarked on Canto VII of *Don Juan*. When he did so in June, work poured from him without interruption: by the time he had finished *The Island* just over eight months later, he had written six complete cantos of *Don Juan*, *The Age of Bronze* and *The Island* itself during a period of sustained worry, agitation and misery.

It was in June that the visit from his boyhood friend Lord Clare ended by plunging the poet into further melancholy. Clare embodied the very essence of what he retained in fond memory of his youth—friendship complemented with a sense of belonging, a suggestive hint of which was to emerge later in *The Island* between Torquil and Christian—so that he was to write of him, “I never heard the word ‘Clare’ without a beating of the heart even now & I write with the feelings of 1803 – 4 – 5 ad infinitum”,<sup>18</sup> and indeed Teresa noted that whenever Clare’s name came



up for weeks afterwards Byron was reduced to melancholy.<sup>19</sup> Nor was this the only thing he had to oppress his thoughts that month. The Gambas, Teresa's family, were under sentence of exile from Tuscany for political activities, which would obviously have affected him had they had to remove themselves; this threw him back upon those old thoughts which had first surfaced in 1819 of leaving Europe altogether and removing to South America. He was also growing fat again, his dietary regime having fallen by the wayside—comfort eating, perhaps?—at least according to Leigh Hunt, who arrived with his unsympathetic brood at the end of the month, all of them more or less dependent upon the poet's support; Byron was to describe the Hunt children as “dirtier and more mischievous than Yahoos”.<sup>20</sup> Clearly there was to be no recreation of the 1812 summer idyll at Eywood that he had enjoyed with both Lady Oxford and her children, whose complicated dynamic of innocent emotional dalliance, concupiscent seduction and light love affair was to leave a discernible mark on *The Island*.<sup>21</sup>

Then, on the eighth of July, came the greatest blow of the year: another death, Shelley's drowning in the waters of Spezia. Byron was stunned by the loss, his feelings likely enough fed by remorse and regret over what had sometimes been an irritable and fractious interaction during Shelley's last visit to him in Pisa. On the day of Shelley's death—which he did not hear about until a couple of days afterwards—the Gambas had to leave Tuscany, adding confusion to this most difficult month; Byron had just moved and was unwilling to move again, added to which the concerns of Hunt and his family, together with his potential yoking to *The Liberal* (about which he felt increasing unease) all contributed to his insecurity. Even if we wish to keep life and art separate, it is not difficult to be struck by the synchronicity of his writing Canto VIII, the death and slaughter canto of *Don Juan*, throughout this month, which was to see the horrible cremations of Shelley and Williams on the seashore.

Financial worries returned in August through a combination of his bi-annual income failing to arrive from Britain, together with legal disputes over the Noel estates;<sup>22</sup> Byron later makes some play in *The Island* of the desirability of a world without money, a “Goldless Age where Gold disturbs no dreams”.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile the Gambas moved to Genoa, though Byron was unwilling to follow them; their absence exacerbated his growing restlessness and reignited his desire to leave Italy for good. Thoughts of South America still beckoned, but now there was an option nearer home: the emerging war for independence in Greece claimed his attention. This arena was to become doubly attractive in his eyes, for it linked together his persisting desire to be a Man of Action with a lifelong

reverence for the land and culture of the “Scian and the Teian Muse”.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps also there was mixed into this a remorseful awareness of the shade of Shelley, the erstwhile revolutionary whose reverence for and knowledge of classical culture had been superior to his own. In the event, he vacillated; he was not to meet his fate at Missolonghi for another twenty months.

September, according to Thomas Medwin, saw the poet grown “indolent” and starving himself to “unnatural thinness”, as well as over-indulging in alcohol (wine and Hollands); unsurprisingly he was suffering from poor digestion too.<sup>25</sup> A five-day visit in the middle of the month from his erstwhile travelling companion and long term friend John Cam Hobhouse revived his spirits somewhat—they had not seen one another for four years—and while he was there the young Greek revolutionary Karvellas, whom Byron had met three times before, called on them, again putting before him the prospect of involvement with the Greek struggle for independence from the Turks. How far the suggestion of the figure of a young and active man in revolt against authority became poetically reworked in *The Island* through Torquil’s seeking a different kind of freedom is of course impossible to speculate upon; but the possibility—however slight—tantalizes. Nothing came of this meeting, though it is clear that Karvellas’ visit and what they had been discussing had been noted by the authorities; when Byron finally made up his mind to follow the Gambas to Genoa a spy called Torelli recorded in his diary that the poet’s intention was not to settle there but to go on to Athens and “make himself adored by the Greeks...”.<sup>26</sup> Clearly such talk as had been had circulated. Instead Byron made his way to Genoa in his Napoleonic coach, followed by the Hunt *ménage*. His gloom had returned with Hobhouse’s departure, made worse by the delivery of Bartolini’s bust which, as we have seen, he thought made him look depressingly ancient; perhaps this was what spurred him to pitting himself against the younger, stronger and fitter Trelawny in bouts of swimming, resulting in making himself ill for four days through unaccustomed over-exertion. Later in *The Island* another stronger and fitter young man will notably escape capture and death through swimming where his pursuers cannot follow.

October brought a further cutting of ties when Byron offered the now six completed cantos of *Don Juan* he had on hand to Leigh Hunt’s brother John for publication rather than to Murray, though he did still continue to correspond with his old publisher; this move away—a kind of slow soft mutiny in itself, perhaps?—from one who was well established to an outsider who was anything but, certainly increased his financial worries, finding a reflection in the opening stanzas of Canto XII of *Don Juan*,

begun in November. His wavering about the future—to stay in Italy with Teresa, to relocate to South America, to go to Greece and join the struggle for independence there—found further expression in letters to his sister Augusta, whom he now invited to join him either somewhere in Italy or in Nice. That this was no idle consideration is shown by his reiterating the request on the twenty-second of December.

That month saw a visit from Wedderburn Webster, who further undermined the poet's flaky self-image by making references to his weight; the result, predictably enough, was another thinning regime. Clearly his weight had ballooned again since Medwin's visit in September and he was unwell off and on through November and December, complaining about his health in a letter to Kinnaid written two days after he had completed *The Age of Bronze*,<sup>27</sup> which he had begun some five days before he had finished Canto XII of *Don Juan*. It is possible that this bout of illness could have been fuelled psychosomatically, owing to a further upset at the end of December, which increased the distance between him and Murray: Byron had wanted Allegra's body to be privately buried in Harrow church—a place of significance to him—and a plaque placed upon the wall, but for reasons that are unclear, he gave the task of superintending the affair to Murray rather than Kinnaid. He did not know (or claimed not to have known) that Lady Byron attended that church often and when rumours appeared in the papers of this potential embarrassment he blamed Murray for it.<sup>28</sup> It must further have increased his sense of helplessness about ever being able to communicate with his daughter Ada.

This *annus horribilis* was not quite over yet: it held a Parthian shot. On the twenty-eighth of December Allegra's mother, Claire Clairmont, re-emerged. She had lost her position in Vienna and Lady Mountcashell, a friend of the Shelleys who had previously meddled in Byron's affairs, wrote to him on Claire's behalf requesting some kind of financial support for her. The communication was disagreeable to Byron, recalling an episode of his life he preferred to forget; in consequence it served to rekindle his resentment against Claire and his feelings of guilt and remorse, not only over Allegra, but also his spoiled final interaction with Shelley. It was as if this depressing miserable year was holding him like a terrier does a rat and would not let him drop.

### 3. Creating an “infant world”

Turning to the letters Byron wrote during the genesis and composition of *The Island*, it takes but a glance to see that the most persistent and

detailed correspondence was with Douglas Kinnaird, his friend, banker and literary go-between, and that the overriding subject was the preservation and increase of money. Byron acknowledged his own increasing concern with financial matters in a paragraph of deep significance, characteristically written in a light throw-away vein which, deliberately or not, fails to disguise its seriousness. Many things of import come together here:

You will perhaps wonder at this recent & furious fit of retrenchment – but – it is not so unnatural – I am not naturally ostentatious – although once careless and expensive because careless – – and my most extravagant passions have pretty well subsided – as it is time that they should on the very verge of thirty-five. – – I always looked to about thirty as the barrier of any real or fierce delight in the passions – and determined to work them out in the younger ore and better veins of the Mine – and I flatter myself (perhaps) that I have pretty well done so – and now the cross is coming – and I loves lucre – for one must love something. At least if I have not quite worked out the others – it is not for want of labouring hard to do so – but perhaps I deceive myself. At any rate I have a passion the more – and thus a feeling. However it is not for myself – but I should like (God willing) to leave something to my relatives more than a mere name; and besides that to be able to do good to others to a greater extent.<sup>29</sup>

Timing, as ever with Byron, is critical here; he is a week into the composition of *The Island* at this point, just starting its extraordinary Canto II (as far as one can judge) and is receiving visits every other day from Dr James Alexander who recorded that his patient was ill, depressed and in a generally unsettled state of mind. Amongst his other ailments, he had been suffering from chilblains and complaining of the cold, the irony of which probably did not escape him, considering the poem's geographical setting.<sup>30</sup> Of interest is his reported remark about his lameness to Alexander, "that foot has been the bane of my life"; Byron rarely discussed his club foot with acquaintances, and this uncharacteristic comment reinforces the impression that he was brooding.<sup>31</sup> As he writes this letter to Kinnaird, he is four days away from his birthday, an unwelcome event that unpalatably rammed home the crossing of the threshold to middle-age. Money worries—the burden of this letter—had increased owing to the collapse of the negotiations to sell his Rochdale property, combined with the vanishing of his earnings from his poetry. The letter's tail however reveals that his thoughts are not entirely self-interested; the final few words can even bear the interpretation that in wishing to do good to "others" he might be referring to the Greeks, if he chose to join them.

Financial concerns however are not what are most interesting about this extract: it is the absolute need to *feel* something—anything—that Byron communicates so directly (“At any rate I have a passion the more – and thus a feeling”) which is not entirely satisfied by thoughts of wealth and the cessations of financial worry. Such may be the safe pragmatic choice of one prematurely ageing man viewing his rapidly diminishing horizons, but it is not, we want to cry, the Byron we know and love. *That* Byron is about to emerge as he writes Canto II of *The Island*, finding a temporary refuge from the quotidian oppressiveness of reality in the creation of a young man who can do everything he cannot: escape from the constraints of society, convention or the need for money; revel in the unconscious freedoms of youth and live close to nature; and above all, lose himself in a deep and abiding love. Even so, Torquil (functioning for him as a kind of avatar here) will still have to pay some kind of a price for his rebellion, regardless of how far he was involved or not, for he remains a mutineer. He will be hunted, shot at and wounded, see all the friends and compatriots of his own country be captured or killed, and though his life be charmed on the island of Toobonai, know that he can never return home to England, friends and family should he ever want to. If this seems a relatively small sacrifice we can point to Byron’s deliberate avoidance of any mention of Torquil in the first canto, which leaves us in the dark as to what part he played in the actual mutiny, so that we have the option to think that he may have been nothing more than a hesitant or unwilling bystander—as indeed some men were on the historical *Bounty*. But mutineer he was, and indisputably a fighting one towards the end. This is not however the end of Torquil’s story, for he is destined to undergo a profound change and, in the life to come, the guilt he bears will be lifted.

Considering the background to the composition of *The Island* it is unsurprising that by the end of this *annus horribilis* Byron was toying with many versions of altering aspects of his life, and thus perhaps of himself. These included moving to South America—cutting his ties with Murray—proposing meetings with his sister Augusta on the continent to some undefined end—involving himself in the Greek struggle for independence—the possibility of making some kind of emotional investment in Catholicism; but aside from his death in Greece, nothing of this came to pass, so that he even continued to correspond with Murray after Hunt had become his publisher. The creation of Torquil seems to reflect that desire for change, though it is worth observing that Byron and his creation mutate in opposite directions: Byron’s movement is a centrifugal one, freeing himself from a relationship to move away and

realize his long-held ambition of becoming a Man of Action, whereas Torquil's is centripetal, in that he will cease to engage with the active masculine world of fighting and become absorbed instead in submission to love.

With this said, we can return to the text. Jane Stabler makes a very interesting point about the speed of Byron's composition being responsible for the verbal overlaps between *Don Juan*, *The Age of Bronze* and *The Island*, showing that these works are "digressive offshoots" from one another, quoting such examples as the word "ark" and the phrase "yet infant world".<sup>32</sup> Stabler points here to an important truth about Byron's late work, but it is a partial one, because it ignores a persuasive picture of the working out of Byron's creative psyche through the accommodation of emotions; furthermore, it is a picture that becomes obscured if we work in chronological order, as Stabler does.<sup>33</sup> By working backwards chronologically rather than forwards in Byron's "digressive poetics"<sup>34</sup> something broader than an increasingly ironic engagement with politics emerges as the ghost in the machine—significant element though this certainly is—something which combines a retreat and an escape, yet slips between the interstices of language. To uncover what this is we need to go forward a little to around the middle of March when at XV.43 in *Don Juan* Byron began his hesitant introduction of the most enigmatic character of his creation, Aurora Raby.

I have described elsewhere the protracted genesis of the liminal Aurora, how Byron is entranced by her, unable to get a fix on who or what she might be and discussed what distinguishes her from every other character appearing in *Don Juan*; here all that needs to be abstracted from those arguments is a single qualitative distinction, that Aurora is the only character in the whole poem whose concern is with being rather than doing.<sup>35</sup> She is the endpoint of an arc that we shall see began with *The Island* in the peculiar space of a hidden cave, a womb-like enclosure where the lovers Neuha and Torquil pass from the state of being active—Neuha's planned rescue, the lovers' flight and their joint dive into the sea—to simply *being*, while the world continues its frantic business somewhere else. For them the condition is temporary; they pass from this state back into an altered cleansed world which receives them gratefully, in contrast to Aurora, who carries her "cave" within her and who in a quite numinous sense personifies that space. This suggests a contrasted pair of readings: that either Byron was interested enough in the tentative suggestion of the numinous in *The Island* to expand and personify it in his masterpiece, or the opposite, that in some way what happens in *The Island* was unsatisfying to his creative unconscious—*pace* its fairy-tale ending—