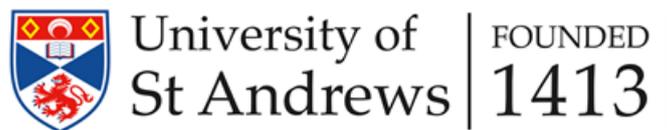


Exile

Jane Stabler

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EXILE

Byron rehearsed going into exile in 1809 when he was 21 years old. Before setting sail for Lisbon, he wrote, 'I leave England without regret, I shall return to it with out pleasure. -- I am like Adam, the first convict sentenced to transportation, but I have no Eve, and have eaten no apple, but what was sour as a crab, and thus ends my first Chapter'.¹ Byron's sardonic perception of himself as a biblical exile foreshadowed the allusive character of his second longer-term exile at the age of 28 when his carefully staged exit required an audience (some of the same friends and servants), expensive props (a replica of Napoleon's carriage), and a literary precursor. On his last evening in England, Byron visited the burial place of the satirist, Charles Churchill, and lay down on his grave. It was a performance of immense weariness with life and solidarity with an embittered outcast.

In 1816, Byron was the most famous (and infamous) writer of the day, but he continued restlessly to try out different roles. Visiting the site of Waterloo, he invoked non-Wellingtonian military heroism. John Polidori who was then accompanying Byron recorded that they went 'cantering over the field ... my companion singing a Turkish song'.² Lyrical descriptions of Greece and Albania

¹ *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A Marchand, 13 vols. (London: John Murray, 1973-94; hereafter *BLJ*), i 211.

² William Michael Rossetti, *The Diary of Dr. John William Polidori 1816* ([1911] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 65.

in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* Canto II had created a new kind of romance; as Byron re-entered battle-scarred Europe after the defeat of Napoleon, he turned again to the persona of the Childe and the alliterative pulse of his Spenserian stanzas. For the first part of summer 1816 in Switzerland, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* Canto III provided a vehicle for Byron's projection of his subjectivity onto external forms. Releasing his inner Albanian was something that Byron performed at least once more in front of an audience as Mary Shelley remembered from a joint rowing-boat excursion:

The waves were high and inspiriting, – we were all animated by our contest with the elements. 'I will sing you an Albanian song,' cried Lord Byron; 'now, be sentimental and give me all your attention.' It was a strange, wild howl that he gave forth; but such as, he declared, was an exact imitation of the savage Albanian mode, – laughing, the while, at our disappointment, who had expected a wild Eastern melody.³

Byron's time with the Shelleys in 1816 involved intense conversation, shared reading and writing. Byron's temporary home, Villa Diodati, invoked their sublime literary predecessor, John Milton, who had visited the Diodati family on his Italian tour; voyages around Lake Geneva paid homage to scenes from Rousseau's *Julie* and Edward Gibbon's writing of *The Decline and*

³ Lord Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron with his Letters and Journals, and his Life*, ed. Thomas Moore, 17 vols. (London: John Murray, 1832-33), iii 270-71.

Fall of the Roman Empire; they perused Voltaire, aware that he, too, had lived in exile nearby, and Byron briefly re-joined the salon of Madame de Staël, who made what was probably the last serious attempt to reconcile him with Lady Byron. P. B. Shelley's translation of *Prometheus* initiated a long-running debate about what was right about Greece and wrong with the English stage; the young writers devoured what fragments they could of Goethe's *Faust*, gothic tales (which initiated the ghost-story pact), more Wordsworth than Byron wanted, and the long-awaited 'Christabel' by Coleridge. The serendipitous mixture of books and heady excitement of 'Glacier ... Storm ... thunder – lightning – hail – all in perfection – and beautiful' contributed to the hybrid nature of that summer's creations.⁴ Everything that they wrote pushed formal experimentation to the limit. *Frankenstein* provided a commentary on the heedless brinksmanship of it all. To external viewers, Byron seemed on the edge of insanity or suicide, but through works like *The Prisoner of Chillon* and *Manfred*, he wrote himself back into existence.

The summer of 1816 established a pattern for the first half of Byron's exile: a new place, a short stay in a hotel, determined avoidance of other English travellers, rental of an enormous house; transient sexual relationships (in Switzerland he ended the affair Claire Clairmont had initiated in London, leaving her pregnant); pilgrimages to the homes and graves of famous figures; new writing energised by the locality, and repeated backward glances to England, informed by Byron's sense of mythic injustice. His woundedness comes through

⁴ *BLJ* v 101.

in the prose piece he wrote in 1820 against a *Blackwood's* article that referred to his exile as 'selfish and polluted'; Byron pointed out that those who are exiled by political faction or debt have some hope of redress and return, but

he who is outlawed by general opinion ... whether he be innocent or guilty must undergo all the bitterness of Exile without hope – without pride – without alleviation. ---

This case was mine ... In other countries – in Switzerland – in the shadow of the Alps – and by the blue depth of the Lakes I was pursued and breathed upon by the same blight. --- I crossed the Mountains – but it was the same – so I went little farther, and settled myself by the waves of the Adriatic.⁵

Arriving in Venice in November 1816, Byron embarked on a series of promiscuous sexual liaisons, accompanied by concentrated study of Armenian at the monastery because 'my mind wanted something craggy to beak upon'.⁶ He started to restock the library he had been forced to sell off when he left England and attended operas, plays and Venetian *conversazione*. Something of Venice's spirit as a republic 'which survived the vicissitudes of thirteen hundred years, and might still have existed', accorded with Byron's own sense of survival against

⁵ Lord Byron, *The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Andrew Nicholson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 90; 94-95.

⁶ *BLJ* v 130.

the odds.⁷ He visited Venetian tombs and monuments; leased a palazzo on the Grand Canal and asked for his grave to be 'the foreigners' burying-ground at the Lido... I am sure my Bones would not rest in an English grave'.⁸ He began his memoirs. Canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* tracked the passage of human history through the dream-like decay of Venice and the ruins of Rome (which he visited in April-May 1817). In *Mazeppa* Byron re-discovered his interest in story telling, blending the old piratical adventures of the Turkish Tales with an unexpectedly humorous narrative closure. The chance arrival of new publications from London brought the playful *Whistlecraft* to Byron's attention, and in September 1817, he tried out comic *ottava rima* in *Beppo*.

Ottava rima enabled a creative recasting of Byron's role as brooding outsider. His allegiance to England had often seemed questionable to early reviewers who felt that *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* I and II had not endorsed British values as wholeheartedly as travel writing by an Englishman ought. *Beppo* inclined to the continental way of doing things, but was seen as a *jeu d'esprit*; Byron's next work in *ottava rima*, however, attacked English expectations in a more sustained way. Byron's sense of grievance against the self-righteous Lake School been rekindled in 1818 by the report that Southey had stirred up rumours about a 'league of Incest' at Villa Diodati. Focusing all his resentment about the separation scandal on Southey, Byron cast him as 'a dirty, lying rascal; and [I] will prove it in ink'.⁹

⁷ *Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, p. 91.

⁸ *BLJ* vi 149.

⁹ *BLJ* vi 83.

Byron's robust Johnsonian adherence to empirical evidence always helped him to stand against what he saw as the characteristic hypocrisy of English life: 'cant' or the utterance of things one doesn't really believe in order to pretend a virtue one doesn't really possess. Cant had forced Byron out of London society in 1816, and he now recognised it as an English version of the political hostility that had demonised freethinking writers across the ages - figures such as Rousseau, Voltaire, Hume, Dante, Galileo, Tasso, and Boccaccio.

Don Juan was open about Byron's new intellectual centre of gravity in Italy. When he moved from Venice to Ravenna in pursuit of a new lover, the Contessa Teresa Guiccioli, the poem's digressions detailed his daily route past the tomb of Dante, the site of the Battle of Ravenna, and his horse rides in Boccaccio's pineta. The narrative of *Don Juan* was interspersed with commentary on current affairs in England (culled from newspapers and reviews) and the smouldering Italian political unrest that led to an assassination outside his door in 1820. Byron had learnt of the nascent *Risorgimento* movement when he passed through Milan in 1816, but four years later, established in the upper storey of Palazzo Guiccioli in Ravenna, living 'in the heart of their houses' and becoming 'a portion of their hopes, and fears, and passions', Byron was captivated by the Italian struggle to shake off Austrian occupation.¹⁰ In the company of Teresa's brother, Pietro Gamba, he joined the local brotherhood of freedom fighters, stored their weapons, and sent lively accounts of his new cause to English correspondents.

¹⁰ *BLJ* vii 170.

The anticipated Italian uprising of 1820-21 came to nothing, but Byron's opposition to tyrannical political authority did not diminish and was fuelled by increasing annoyance with John Murray's reluctance to publish more *Don Juan*. Byron's European, cosmopolitan outlook sharpened his admiration for classical craftsmanship rather than Keatsian or Wordsworthian insular imaginings. He honed a translation of Pulci's *Morgante Maggiore* in February 1820, thought about resurrecting his old *Hints from Horace*, and participated vigorously in a prose pamphlet battle about the merits of Alexander Pope (which involved having another go at Wordsworth and Southey). He ventriloquized the voice of Dante in exile and turned to the idea of writing classical drama in the summer of 1820. Canto V of *Don Juan* was the work of autumn 1820, but questions about political activism were uppermost in the winter of 1821, explored in *Sardanapalus*, followed by *The Two Foscari* and then *Cain*. In the summer of 1821, the Gamba family faced expulsion from Romagna for supporting the insurgents. Byron determined to go into exile with them and contemplated a move back to Switzerland. A visit by Percy Shelley in August 1821, however, re-kindled the possibility of shared literary activism and persuaded Byron to move to Pisa. Shelley wanted to start a new journal with the journalist Leigh Hunt that would counter reactionary forces with liberal energy 'from the south'. Byron agreed to join them, but delayed his departure and wrote another whole poem against 'Rogue Southey' - *The Vision of Judgement* - before leaving Ravenna at the end of October 1821.¹¹

¹¹ *BLJ* viii 240.

The winter of 1821-22 in Pisa brought back English forms of sociability that Byron had not enjoyed since 1816. There were dinner parties, boating projects, and participation in a closet theatre production of *Othello*. Regular meetings between the Shelleys and the Greek independence leaders involved Byron at the fringes of this new liberation movement. Edward Williams and Percy Shelley were both labouring over stage plays; having finished *Heaven and Earth* with apparent ease, Byron drafted *Werner* within a month then began another prose response to Southey. Shelley noticed that the 'canker of aristocracy' in Byron was still present.¹² Shelley had been an unwilling party to Byron's separation of his daughter, Allegra, from her mother, Claire Clairmont; in April 1822, Allegra died in the convent where Byron had placed her. Claire's misery placed a severe strain on relations between Shelley and Byron. At the same time, Byron was warned by friends in England not to link himself with either the disreputable Hunts or Shelley. Teresa had asked him to discontinue *Don Juan*, but in 1822 Byron picked up Canto VI, this time determined not to make any concessions to female delicacy.

Hunt reached Italy at the beginning of July 1822. The journey had been a massive upheaval for his family and it proved to be one for Byron as well. Apart from the few days he had spent with Ada in his London home and the odd weeks that Allegra had been allowed to roam around his Venetian palazzo with the rest of the menagerie, Byron (an only child) had lived most of his adult life in childfree

¹² P. B. Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), ii 345.

houses. His rented Palazzo Lanfranchi on the Arno was seen as 'large & magnificent' by the Shelleys and 'spacious' by Byron himself, but it turned out to be not quite big enough for the Hunt children whose boisterousness came as something of a shock to a man who had only petted infant daughters for very limited periods of time.¹³ Percy Shelley might have been able to avert the inevitable falling out, but a week after Hunt arrived as Byron's house guest, Shelley drowned and Byron suddenly found himself responsible for Shelley's family as well as Hunt's, and for seeing through Shelley's political vision.

Byron escaped from the hideous details of Shelley's funeral firstly by getting very drunk and then by writing furiously. He worked on *Don Juan* Cantos VI, VII and VIII 'To occupy [his] mind', and suddenly in August 1822 resolved that Canto IX would 'throw away the scabbard' and attack the English ruling class directly.¹⁴ Byron felt that Shelley (like himself) had been maligned even beyond the grave by the Tory press. The Preface to Cantos VI, VII and VIII struck back against Establishment propaganda and the siege cantos and anti-Wellington stanzas that follow contain some of Byron's most excoriating satire. John Murray was horrified by the confrontational nature of the new cantos and said he could not publish them. Byron instructed Murray to place all his unpublished works in the hands of John Hunt, Leigh Hunt's brother, the publisher of the radical *Examiner* newspaper. The changed publishing affiliation had a significant impact on Byron's reputation; *Don Juan* passed completely beyond the pale of

¹³ Jones (ed.), *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ii 331; *BLJ* viii 246.

¹⁴ *BLJ* ix 187; 191.

respectability and several periodicals declined to review further instalments. Byron did not flinch from his new war in words. Cantos X-XVI were written with astonishing speed alongside *The Age of Bronze* and *The Island* in Genoa from where Byron also weighed up whether to join the liberation movements of South America or Greece. Shelley's memory and the urging of other friends in London sent him to Greece.¹⁵

Leigh Hunt recalled Byron's invitation to look at the Homeric helmets that were purchased as accessories for the Greek expedition:

“Have you seen my three helmets?” he inquired one day, with an air between hesitation and hurry. Upon being answered in the negative, he said he would show them me, and began to enter a room for that purpose; but stopped short, and put it off to another time.¹⁶

Hunt's account captures the conflicted nature of Byron's Greek venture – half eager and half reluctant, embracing a new heroic role and wryly aware of the clichéd territory, always sensitive to audience reaction. Despite his specially fitted-out schooner and the helmets, Byron's mission to Greece was one of the least ostentatious parts he ever played. His party set sail, after several false starts,

¹⁵ Roderick Beaton, *Byron's War: Romantic Rebellion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 139.

¹⁶ Ernest J. Lovell, *His Very Self and Voice: Collected Conversations of Lord Byron* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), p. 330.

on 16 July 1823. They landed on Cephalonia in August when Byron realised the messiness of the situation: 'Great divisions and difficulties exist – and several foreigners have come away in disgust as usual -- it is at present my intention to remain *here* or *there* as long as I see a prospect of advantage to the cause – but I must not conceal from you ... that the Greeks appear in more danger from their own divisions than from the attacks of the Enemy', he advised Hobhouse in September 1823.¹⁷ Back in 1810 when he had visited Troy, Byron reclined on the tomb of Achilles; the older poet's heroic model was no warrior idol, but a female reformer: 'Whoever goes into Greece at present should do it as Mrs. Fry went into Newgate – not in the expectation of meeting with any especial indication of existing probity – but in the hope that time and better treatment will reclaim the present burglarious and larcenous tendencies'.¹⁸ From his arrival in Missolonghi in January 1824 to his final illness, Byron took on role of patient administrator, attending to finances, supplies, the management of his infuriatingly ill-disciplined bigade of Souliot soldiers and humane treatment of prisoners. He had little time to write poetry but he kept up his campaign against the rhetorical distortions of party ideology: 'I shall continue to pursue my former plan of stating to the [Greek] Committee [in London] things as they *really* are – I am an enemy to Cant of all kinds – but it will be seen in time – who are or are not the firmest friends of the Greek cause ... the Lempriere dictionary quotation Gentlemen – or those who neither dissemble their faults nor their virtues'.¹⁹

¹⁷ *BLJ* xi 23-4.

¹⁸ *BLJ* viii 22; xi 32.

¹⁹ *BLJ* xi 147.

Worn out by the vexations of Greek politics, Byron died from fever rather than in battle on 19 April 1824. Pietro Gamba noticed that in his delirious state, Byron thought that he was leading a military charge and tried to instil courage in his men; he spoke sometimes in English and sometimes in Italian: 'Poor Greece!' and 'why did I not go home before I came here?'²⁰ In his hours of fading consciousness, Byron believed that he had given his life to a lost cause but Gamba saw his death as a sort of homecoming: 'He died in a strange land, and amongst strangers; but more loved, more sincerely wept, he could never have been, wherever he had breathed his last'.²¹

Further Reading

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Teresa Guiccioli, *Lord Byron's Life in Italy*, transl. Michael Rees; ed. Peter Cochran (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005)

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Omar F. Miranda, 'The Celebrity of Exilic Romance: Francisco de Miranda and Lord Byron', *European Romantic Review* 27. 2 (2016): 207-231

²⁰ Count Peter Gamba, *A Narrative of Lord Byron's Last Journey to Greece* (London: John Murray, 1825), pp. 264-5.

²¹ Gamba, *Byron's Last Journey*, p. 267.

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