

## Jane Stabler, “Religious Liberty in the ‘Liberal,’ 1822-23”



Figure 1: Thomas Philipps, Portrait of Lord Byron (1824)

To think about the *Liberal* as an important event is to enter contentious territory. William Hazlitt (who was a contributor) described the journal as “obnoxious” in its day (*Complete Works* 12. 379), and in the following century, it was usually regarded as a failure or, at least, a disappointment—something that never really came together before it fell apart. In 1910, Barnette Miller described it as “a vague, up-in-the-air scheme, wholly lacking in coordination and common sense” (113). Metaphors of death and still-birth pervade the twentieth-century criticism: according to C. L. Cline “*The Liberal* died with the fourth number” (247); Leslie P. Pickering summarises the project thus: “in as meteoric a manner as it lived, so did the journal die, bearing with it to its untimely grave the ruined hopes of its progenitors, until now its name conveys but little to the minds of the many” (7-8). The seminal study by William H. Marshall declared, “the real question does not concern the causes of the failure of *The Liberal* but the reason that any of the participants thought that it could succeed” (212). In Richard Holmes’s biography of Shelley, the journal “folded quietly . . . after only four issues, the final collapse of Shelley’s original Pisan plan” (731); in Fiona MacCarthy’s biography of Byron, the *Liberal* was a “critical and financial disaster” and, after Byron’s final contribution, it simply “folded” (456). Jonathan Gross argues that it took Byron’s death in Greece to convert “his failed journal into a triumph that would forever alter how both Byron and *The Liberal* were seen”



(480). Jeffrey Cox regards it as an unsuccessful attempt to reconstruct the London Hunt circle in Pisa: “if Shelley’s plans for the *Liberal* had come to full fruition,” he argues (implying that they didn’t), “Byron would have become a complete member of the circle . . . transported to Pisa” (47); Cox points out that “after offering several extraordinary issues of collaborative effort,” the *Liberal* simply “collapsed” (223-24). One of the most damning overviews is to be found in the 2000 study of The Hazlitt-Hunt dialogue by Payson G. and Eleanor M. Gates: “The *Liberal* struggled on through four numbers without surmounting the disharmony between the principals, the apathy of the British public, or the hostility of the critics” (107). Focusing on the Pisan context of Leigh Hunt’s “Letters from Abroad,” Maria Schoina states that “*The Liberal*, of course, cannot be considered a complete, consistent project either on the basis of its political direction, or in terms of its contributions,” and she refers to the journal’s “dissolution . . . while it was still in its infancy” (154). The *Liberal* project may not have been complete, but a fuller recognition of its collaborative achievement might suggest that the project was more consistent, coherent, and successful than previous critics have allowed. This article responds to Daisy Hay’s call for a critical reappraisal of the *Liberal*: Hay is one of a small number of scholars who have found “a surprisingly coherent political philosophy” within the journal’s “unevenness,” “incoherence,” and “messy miscellaneousness” (308).[1]

Modern biographers still disagree about whether Lord Byron or Percy Bysshe Shelley should be counted as the main founder-editor. Friends of Byron and Shelley also struggled to pinpoint the origin of the journal. In 1828, when Leigh Hunt published *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries*, Thomas Love Peacock forwarded a list of marginal queries to Byron’s friend, John Cam Hobhouse: where Hunt referred to “Mr Shelley’s Letter containing a proposal from Lord B. ‘inviting me to go over and set up a work with him,’” Peacock wrote, “Did Lord B. send this invitation, or originate it? Or did Mr Shelley press it on him, and take acquiescence for desire?” (2. 218). Hobhouse could not answer, and recognized that almost all Peacock’s queries “relate to matters of opinion on which a man can decide only for himself” (2. 220). Scholars working on collaborative material have to contend with the fact that, when Shelley and Byron met in person in Ravenna in August 1821 and formed the plan for Byron to move to Pisa, we have no record of their conversation, and that even when minutes were taken and diaries kept (as in the memoirs of Medwin, Trelawny, Hunt and Blessington), there are likely to be different—or even conflicting—interpretations of any joint decisions.

Surviving correspondence indicates that both Byron and Shelley had been thinking about the launch of a new journal for several years. In 1819, P. B. Shelley proposed to Thomas Love Peacock that he should edit a journal to counter the influence of the *Quarterly*: “If a band of staunch reformers, resolute yet skilful infidels, were united in so close & constant a league as that in which interest & fanaticism have joined the members of that literary coalition!” (*Letters* 2. 81). Marshall quotes a later letter from Thomas Jefferson Hogg to Shelley in January 1822 which makes clear that Hogg was prepared to volunteer his services for a new literary enterprise led by Shelley:

I understand that you are going to commence a periodical work; of what nature is it to be? . . . If my classic pen will be of any use, I shall be happy to contribute. . . . tell me what to write about, and I will write about it, excepting only politics, which I do not understand, and I have not time to learn. (144)

Meanwhile, from late 1820, Byron had been proposing some sort of newspaper to Thomas Moore to “give the age some new lights upon policy, poesy, biography, criticism, morality, theology, and all other *ism, ality, and ology* whatsoever.” (Byron, *Letters and Journals* 7. 254). Byron followed the idea up in January 1821: “I wish you to think seriously of the Journal scheme—for I am as serious as one can be, in this world, about any thing” (*Letters and Journals* 8. 55). In June 1821, Byron tried again: “Now, if we were but together a little to combine our ‘Journal of Trevoux’ But it is useless to sigh, and yet very natural,—for I think you and I draw better together, in the social line, than any two other living authors”; in August of the same year (just before Shelley’s arrival in Ravenna), Byron had not given up hope: “Is there no chance of your return to England, and of *our* Journal? I would have published the two plays [*Sardanapalus* and *The Two Foscari*] in it—two or three scenes per number—and indeed *all* of mine in it. If you went to England, I would do so still” (8.140; 8.166); this points to the intriguing possibility that Byron was willing to publish neo-classical dramas (which adhered to unity of time) in *serial* form. Byron not only thought to publish his dramas serially but suggested serial publication should be the means of transmission of all of his and Moore’s major work: “If we were together, I should publish both my plays (periodically) in our joint journal. It should be our plan to publish all our best things in that way” (*Letters and Journals* 8.147).



To poets such as Byron and Shelley, whose work had been badly mauled by Tory British periodical reviews, there was a distinct shortage of literary journals that would give them a fair hearing, and the prospect of a print counter-offensive appealed. As Kim Wheatley suggests, “*The Liberal* can be seen as an attempt to forge a reformist counterblast to the *Quarterly* on its own ground—an upmarket, quarterly periodical” (189). In early 1821, Thomas Moore wrote to Byron that “With respect to the newspaper, it is odd enough that Lord [John Russell] and myself had been (about a week or two before I received your letter) speculating upon your assistance in a plan somewhat similar, but more literary and less regularly periodical in its appearance)” (*Unpublished Letters* 1.207).<sup>[2]</sup> While in Versailles in 1822, Horace Smith assured Cyrus Redding that “I knew nothing of the projected work at Pisa, and certainly shall not contribute a line, even were I requested, which I have never been” (Beavan 164), but since February, Smith had been “contemplating the establishment of a Sunday Paper as we do not by any means think the English satisfactorily represented by your old friend Galignani, and as we cannot accomplish a reform at home we are going to try our hands here.”<sup>[3]</sup> Smith went on to become one of the *Liberal* participants; his denial of any involvement is reminiscent of Byron’s equivocation (“Be assured that there is no such coalition as you apprehend” [*Letters and Journals* 9. 110]) when asked by Moore about the new venture with Hunt and Shelley. Moore’s anxiety was partly about writerly class and partly about the group of readers known as “customers amongst the *Orthodox*” (Nicholson, *Letters of John Murray* 3). Cyrus Redding (a staunch Foxite Whig and the son of a Baptist minister) was always open about his own “lack of orthodoxy” (*Fifty Years’ Recollections* 2. 335), but like many English readers he worried about the “tincture,” as Shelley recognized “of any peculiar theories in politics or religion” (*Letters* 2.355).

As well as idealistic political aims, there were, of course, financial motives. Byron valued the political courage of the Hunts, but he also wrote about profits, and it seems that both Byron and Shelley expected Leigh Hunt to be backed by income from the *Examiner*, not realizing at the outset that the Hunts’ earlier journal was struggling to survive financially and that Leigh Hunt had resigned his editorial stake in the *Examiner* before leaving for Italy. Leigh Hunt was clear that the *Liberal* was “Byron’s proposal” and it was the prospect of a new, principled, but also money-making enterprise that brought him to Italy at a time when his finances and his family’s bad health made residence in Italy an attractive proposition.<sup>[4]</sup>

Leigh Hunt was formally invited to Italy by Shelley after the meeting with Byron in Ravenna: “He proposes that you should come and go shares with him and me, in a periodical work, to be conducted here; in which each of the contracting parties should publish all their original compositions, and share the profits. He proposed it to Moore, but for some reason it was never brought to bear” (P. B. Shelley, *Letters* 2.344). Although Shelley is extremely self-effacing in this letter of invitation (“I am, and I desire to be, nothing,” Shelley wrote to Hunt, making himself “only a sort of link between you and him”), Nikki Hessell proposes that Shelley remained the guiding light of the journal—even after his death. Later he confided to Horace Smith: “Between ourselves I greatly fear this alliance will not succeed, for I, who could never have been regarded as more than the link of the two thunderbolts, cannot now consent to be even that, —& how long the alliance between the wren & the eagle may continue I will not prophesy” (*Letters* 2.442). Smith accordingly reported to friends in England that “Shelley is only interested as an occasional contributor . . . nor has he pledged himself to any literary participation” (Beavan 163-64). Hessell suggests, however, that “although it was Hunt and Byron who lived to see the *Liberal* into print, it was Shelley, drowned and buried in Rome, whose presence can be said to be felt most clearly in the periodical” (239). It is certainly true that Shelley’s name is the most easily identified with the contents of the journal: as well as revealing the authorship of the *Faust* translation, Leigh Hunt refers to Shelley’s drowning and its media coverage in the Preface, and breaks off in the middle of his first “Letter from Abroad” to express an acutely personal sense of loss: “we talked of a thousand things —we anticipated a thousand pleasures — — — I must plunge again into my writing, that I may try to forget it” (1.103).

One of the great achievements of the *Liberal* (remarkable in view of the dispersed nature of the contributors) was that in stylistic terms, it produced a new composite editorial persona—a daringly pan-European identity that challenged the hegemonic condemnation, lofty disapproval and rapsallion vituperation of the Tory *Courier*, *Quarterly* and *Blackwood’s*, respectively. The first two publications usually commandeered the cultural and moral high ground; *Blackwood’s* was always more effervescent, but it was also seen as coarse and scurrilous. Hunt’s Preface to the first number of the *Liberal* set out to appropriate both righteous indignation (in his discussion of the Tory reports of Shelley’s death) and a sense of communal authorship, shared jokes, and a light-hearted, bantering exchange with the English reading public.



Rapid shifts between place, language and form or genre establish a dialectical, intellectual relationship with the reader of the *Liberal*, but there are also touches of familiarity, even intimacy. Hunt's third "Letter from Abroad" began as a real letter to Vincent Novello from Genoa in March 1823, and Hunt cultivated the asides to the reader that Byron had been using in *Don Juan* to joke about the progress of his narrative in "The Florentine Lovers." To the paranoid mentality of Tory reviewers, the confidence of address that linked a British peer with a radical journalist was a potentially subversive mixture, and the idea of a "Manifesto of the Pisan Conspirators," a "Pisan Confederacy" or "unholy alliance" of talent rattled even moderate Whigs back in England.<sup>[5]</sup>

In all the scholarly efforts to identify which member of the *Liberal* "Triumvirate" (Leigh Hunt's word) really led the project, one editorial strand has been overlooked.<sup>[6]</sup> There were not just three men behind the venture: a key driving force came in the shape of John Hunt, who cut through Leigh's hesitation about going to Italy by telling him that, besides the *Examiner*, "a simultaneous endeavor should be made in Italy to secure new aid to our prospects, and new friends to the cause of liberty" (Hunt, *Autobiography* 2.231). Although Leigh Hunt and Percy Shelley have received most of the credit for assembling the team of writers, the solid presence of John Hunt in London should not be forgotten.

John Hunt was less artistically dazzling than his brother, but less sensitive, volatile and insecure also—and with a much tougher political sense. Byron's shrewd business agent, Douglas Kinnaird, respected John Hunt, telling Byron, "I continue to think highly of his integrity—& I see no reason to think you will have cause to repent having made him your Publisher."<sup>[7]</sup> When Shelley drowned in July 1822, the whole project might have foundered in the same month. John Hunt ensured that the journal appeared and all the remaining Pisan writers (including Byron) deferred to his judgment. On 10 October 1822, Leigh Hunt wrote to his brother from Genoa:

& Lord Byron, who is kind enough to say that my advantage is his great object, is still perfectly willing that the magazine should be proceeded with, provided you think it would be best. What do you think best, for really I cannot determine? At all events, make your own election, & act upon it at once. This is what his Lordship wishes, as well as myself.<sup>[8]</sup>

And Leigh Hunt assured himself as much as his brother:

we shall have more writers to assist us than I looked for. Pray ask Lamb to write. Lord Byron wishes it as well as myself, & on every account I wish it extremely.<sup>[9]</sup>

We do not know if John Hunt approached Charles Lamb, but it seems unlikely: Lamb was not in sympathy with what he called "the club at Pisa" (*Works* 7.576) on account of Byron's mannerism and Shelley's atheism. John Hunt did, however, manage to persuade Hazlitt to contribute; Charles Brown was invited to participate by Lord Byron "with some compliments" (Brown, *Letters* 105) when they met in Pisa in September 1822; Brown then corresponded with John Hunt, in advance of writing his three articles. Brown wrote in January 1823, "Every one takes it for granted I know every thing about the Liberal, when the truth is I know less than any body who desires to know anything respecting it. I wrote to John Hunt some time back, but there's no answer yet" (Forman 18). Back in London, an awful lot fell on John Hunt's shoulders: he had been prosecuted for a forthright attack on the criminal tendencies of MPs in the *Examiner* in February 1821, found guilty, and sentenced in May to be imprisoned for a year. Barely six months after his release, he was indicted for publishing Byron's *The Vision of Judgment*; it is hardly surprising, therefore, that several letters and manuscripts relating to the *Liberal* seem to have gone astray.

Byron continued to cherish hopes of engaging Thomas Moore on the journal. After his initial overtures about joint editorial responsibility, he asked Moore to send Hunt "any thing in prose or verse of yours, to start him handsomely" (*Letters and Journals* 9.183), and after the death of Shelley he tried again: "Leigh Hunt is sweating articles for his new Journal; and both he and I think it somewhat shabby in *you* not to contribute. Will you become one of the *properrioters*? 'Do, and we go snacks.' I recommend you to think twice before you respond in the negative" (9.197). As with Lamb, however, it was likely to have been Shelley's reputation that blighted this possibility as much as Moore's concern about his aristocratic friend publishing with the Hunts. Moore had already





attributed the tone of Byron's *Cain* to Shelley's influence and was extremely wary of the tendency of reviews to fulminate against "impiety" or "blasphemy" in a new publication. All his hard-earned literary acclaim, he told Murray, "is nothing if the d—d sturdy Saints of the middle class should take it into their heads not to buy me—for, you know well, how they can send one to Coventry" (*Letters* 2.504; 2.511). In December 1822, Moore wrote to John Hunt expressly to forbid the inclusion of the "hasty verses" he had sent in letters to Byron (2.508). Ironically, therefore, it was Shelley, the one person from the original Pisan circle who insisted he was not really part of the venture and who came second to bottom in the number of articles contributed (seventh out of eight in Marshall's table), who seems to have deterred most of the potential contributors and readers. This highlights the extent to which religious free thought was part of the journal's identity and what made it so toxic to the early nineteenth-century British Establishment.

Mary Shelley detected Byron's cold feet as early as Hunt's arrival: "Shelley had past most of the time a [t] Pisa—arranging the affairs of the Hunts—& skewing LB's mind to the sticking place about the journal," she recollected on 15 August 1822 (*Letters* 1.248). She was probably influenced by Shelley's last account of Byron "inclined to depart without the necessary explanations & arrangements due to such a situation as Hunt's" (*Letters* 2.444). In the months following Shelley's drowning, Mary remained pessimistic about the future of the journal: "the Liberal may die," she wrote in February 1823, and "the Liberal looks dismal" in April (*Letters* 1.317; 1.329). However, the project survived what might have been the catastrophic loss of one of its founders, and Mary Shelley reported a surge of energy and enthusiasm with the third number in May 1823: "The third number has come out, and we had a copy by post—It has little in it we expected but it is an amusing number and LB. is better pleased with it than any other" (*Letters* 1.338).

Against the odds, the dispersed team of writers pulled together to support Leigh Hunt and the journal's ideals. Four full issues means that the journal was viable. That there was no shortage of material is evident from a list of some of the material that was offered or considered as possible copy at one time or other, but not in the end included: Trelawny's eulogy on Shelley; Hazlitt's "Maxims in the manner of La Rochfoucauld"; Byron's *Werner*; *Hints from Horace*; *The Island*, and the "prose pamphlets" that remained unpublished (including *Some Observations Upon an Article in Blackwood's*; *Some Account of my Acquaintance with Madame de Staël*; *Some Account of the Life and Writings of the late George Russell of A— by Henry Ferguson* and *An Italian Carnival*); Thomas Jefferson Hogg's "Demosthenes" (presumably a translation of the orations); the commentary on Dante by Taaffe; all of Percy Shelley's unpublished writings, including works such as *The Witch of Atlas* and *A Defence of Poetry*, and his translations from Greek, German and Spanish sources—translation from several cultures being one of the journal's ideals.

The eclectic literary origins of these contributions enlarge Maria Schoina's recent very productive account of the *Liberal* as a uniquely "Anglo-Italian" or "bi-cultural" project (17). Many of the articles that made it into print were international in scope: Shelley's translation from Goethe; the French translations by Byron and Charles Brown; Hogg's Greek essays and Leigh Hunt's "Mahmoud"; Hunt's translation of the account of Ali Pasha's death and the recent Suliote campaign (written possibly with help from Byron). These items among others certainly broaden the literary and political range of the journal and connect it with the growing interest in Greece that finally removed Byron from Italy. Schoina criticizes Leigh Hunt's "Letters from Abroad" for failing to mention contemporary Italian efforts against Austrian occupation (159), but the revolutionary moment in Romagna 1820-21 ended in disappointment *before* Byron's move to Pisa. Hunt has his eye on the next southern uprising, beginning his first "Letter" by mentioning the recent presence in Pisa of Prince "Alexander Mavrocordato," the Greek nationalist, "who joined his countrymen last year in their great struggle, and to whom Mr. Shelley has dedicated his Hellas" (1.98). Horace Smith's "A Sunday's Fete at St Cloud" advocates French manners over English class-consciousness and snobbery. Hazlitt's essay "On the Scotch Character" is a warning against the narrow partisan prejudice of thinking in terms of nationalist binaries and highlights the fact that such simple-minded nationalism was one of the satirical targets of the journal: the *Liberal's* writers would exemplify more mobile and culturally pluralistic viewpoints.

Since the Reformation, the British establishment has been marked by a deeply ingrained suspicion of continental culture and religion, and in the wake of Napoleon's defeat, any European sympathy was still regarded as potentially dangerous. We can see this in the divergence of views between Horace Smith and his father. Having made enough money as a stockbroker to retire at the age of 41, Horace Smith determined to set out for Italy. In



June 1821, his father recorded in his journal:

My son Horace has been for some time desirous of visiting Florence for a couple of years. . . . His reasons for the measure are, economy, pleasure, and the acquisition of French and Italian literature. I wish he may not be disappointed in any of these views; but I cannot say that I like the scheme. (Beavan 157)

By writing “from the South,” the *Liberal* project was inviting its readers to abandon a secure Anglo-centric perspective. The ideal of the “warm South” might have been romanticized and essentialized in the course of the nineteenth century, but in the early 1820s, it was much less of a tourist cliché, posing to people such as Horace Smith’s father the challenge of alien manners, politics and religion. Leigh Hunt’s “Letters from Abroad” are addressed to English readers from a self-conscious beginner in Italian social mores (vastly different from his Italian literary expertise)—it is an exploratory perspective from the point of view of one “entering” an Italian city for the first time (1.99). Although Schoina criticizes Hunt’s London comparisons as “invariably confirm[ing] English omniscience and superiority” (154), it is also possible that Hunt set out to destabilize an Anglo-centric vision by inviting his English readers to *re-imagine* London from Pisa and Genoa: “let the reader suppose the new square at Westminster Abbey, converted into a broad grass walk” (1.105). Hunt anticipates what “an English eye” will see, only to correct its vision with a significant “but” (1.116). The defiance of British ministerial authority that is frequently evident in the journal (“Epigram on Alfieri,” “Epigrams on Lord Castlereagh,” “On the Spirit of Monarchy,” “The Dogs,” “Rhymes to the Eye,” “The Book of Beginnings,” “The Monarchs: An Ode for Congress,” “Letter-Writing,” “Arguing in a Circle”) is complemented by articles that cultivate a more open, tolerant and flexible outlook (“Shakespear’s Fools”; the passing defence of Boccaccio in the first “Letter from Abroad”; “The Giuli Tre”; “Apuleuis”; mildly erotic pastoral verse and “Mouth Verses Eyes”). The moribund, entrenched antagonism of the British periodical arena was subject to satiric re-imaginings in articles and stories that challenge and dismantle simple binary oppositions (such as the atavistic division between Guelph and Ghibellines in “The Florentine Lovers;” “his Darkness and his Brightness” in *The Vision of Judgment*; the revenge story undone in “A Tale of the Passions”; the stark division between death or salvation in *Heaven and Earth* or Mary Shelley’s unlikely sympathy with the partisan historian Giovanni Villanni).

The title of the journal appears to have been in flux for some time, and “half a dozen” possibilities were rejected before it became the *Liberal* (Medwin, *Conversations* 254). An earlier suggestion from Byron was that it should be called “Hesperides” (referring to the mythical gardens of the West rather than the South, indicating Byron’s enthusiasm for all things American). The *OED* lists the title of the journal in 1822 as one of the earliest uses of the word as a British political noun. Gross examines this etymology and highlights the importance of the revolutionary Spanish context in the Holland House discourse of “liberals.” Gross provides a lucid explanation of the changing significance of the term “liberal” and its shift from an adjective meaning gentlemanly independence to a noun signalling a sympathizer with the revolutionary political movements in Spain and Italy.<sup>[10]</sup> The political persona of a “liberal” in England is not incompatible with being an aristocrat, but there is an element of paradox in *The Spirit of the Age*, when Hazlitt describes Lord Byron as “a *liberal*” in his politics (*Complete Works* 11.70); Charles Brown is obviously taken aback to discover that “never was a poor creature in rags a greater Radical than Byron” (*Letters* 107). In 1821, Byron identifies himself as a liberal in a specifically Italian context: “I am well with the Liberals of the Country,” Byron tells Murray from Ravenna in December 1820; in January 1821, he notes in his journal that “the Liberals are arming,” adding the next day that the “opponents of the Carbonari or Liberals” had not yet attacked (*Letters and Journals* 7.250; 8.16-17). The Italian political inference of “liberal” is clear, but there is a parallel English usage of which Byron also seems aware: in Medwin’s *Conversations of Lord Byron*, recorded when they were in Pisa together in 1821, Byron discusses the response to his metaphysical drama *Cain*:

“Moore says, that more people are shocked with the blasphemy of the sentiments, than delighted with the beauty of the lines. Another person thinks the Devil’s arguments irresistible, or irrefutable.—says that the Liberals like it, but that the Ultraists are making a terrible outcry; and that the *he* and *him* not being in capitals, in full dress uniform, shocks the High-church and Court party. Some call me an Atheist, others a Manichean,—a very bad and hard-sounding name, that shocks the *Illiterati* the more because they don’t know what it means.” (*Conversations* 128-29)



This evidence might qualify Gross's view that Byron "did not know the English meaning of the word when he chose it for the title of his periodical" ("Byron and the Liberal" 471), and it alerts us to the way in which the British use of the noun "liberal" at this time often implies a commitment to religious as well as political reform. In both Italy and England, to be a "liberal" was to oppose the religious establishment; in Italy, this meant the Papacy and the Catholic clergy (at Metternich's request, Pope Pius VII excommunicated the Carbonari in September 1821); whereas in England, liberals were attempting to bring about Catholic relief.[11] To Cyrus Redding, Horace Smith was a liberal, and to be liberal in politics "at that time meant little more than that he would concede religious freedom to everybody, even the Catholics of Ireland" (*Fifty Years' Recollections* 2.157-58); the "even" tells us how heretical this position was perceived to be. But the word "liberal" has softened so much in our own time that it helps to give students a clear list of the things that were then seen to constitute liberalism, as in the following late nineteenth-century overview of the religious and political position of Horace Smith:

he disapproved of the alliance of Church with State, which he designated an "unscriptural union." . . . He advocated the total abolition of compulsory confessions of creed or faith, and the Test Acts he utterly condemned. The Reformation, he said, was not a struggle for religious freedom, but for Protestant intolerance instead of Catholic intolerance, and the struggle of modern Christians should be for emancipation from *all* intolerance. . . .

In politics he was what we should call a Liberal-Conservative; though in his day he would more likely have been dubbed a Radical—even a Revolutionist, by most of the old high and dry Tory party. He was an intense admirer of Lord Brougham, and an out-and-out Reformer. He advocated the ballot. . . . Horace believed in the elevation of the working-classes, and the abolition of the newspaper tax. He condemned the Poor Laws, and designated the Game Laws barbarous enactments. He disapproved of the privileges of either Peers or M.P.'s. He considered Public Opinion irresistible, and had firm faith in a *popular* government, which he compared to a pyramid, the firmest and most enduring of all forms. . . . His opinions on most subjects were marked by enlightenment. . . . He had no respect for ancestry, "a pedigree being," he declared, "generally the boast of those who had nothing else to vaunt"; thus he disapproved of primogeniture as being equally opposed to nature, reason, morality, and sound policy" . . . English law was to him merely hocus-pocus and chicanery. . . . War and military glory he held to be, the former an act of national madness, an irrational act confined to rational beings; and the latter, the sharing with plague, pestilence, and famine, the honour of destroying one's own species. (Beavan 299-302)

At the more radical end of the spectrum, John Hunt supplied a concise list of his political principles when he was asked by Henry Brougham to oversee a new Whig paper. Hunt stated that the paper should support "Parliamentary Reform, Catholic Emancipation, Religious Liberty (not Toleration), the Melioration of the Penal Laws—and in short, what was understood by the cause of the People." [12] There is a discernible consistency here between the positions of the retired stockbroker and the radical publisher, and of overwhelming importance to both is the principle of religious freedom. [13] Horace Smith felt sure that anything atheistical in the *Liberal* would antagonize the authorities, but he defended the principle of free thought: "I would, therefore, leave everything unshackled—what is true will stand, and what is false ought to fall, whatever the consequences. Ought we not to feel ashamed that Lucretius could publish his book in the teeth of an established religion, while martyrs are groaning in perpetual imprisonment, for expressing a *conscientious* dissent from Christianity?" [14]

The *Liberal's* sympathy with political revolution is undisputable, but tantamount to this for the early reviewers was the threat of religious toleration or unbridled religious liberty. P. B. Shelley was more notorious as an atheist than a social reformer, but because of the relationship between the Church of England and the House of Lords, the two positions were inextricably linked. The attacks on Byron and Shelley by the Poet Laureate, Robert Southey, reveal the extent to which those who questioned the political *status quo* could be condemned and caricatured as irreligious. This is why Hunt singles out the *Courier's* caricature of Shelley as "*a writer of infidel poetry*" in the Preface (xi). Previous critics have underestimated the *Liberal's* challenge to the dogmatic authority of the established church partly because of the predominantly secular outlook of historicist criticism. "None of the party," Horace Smith wrote, "will dream of heretical still less of atheistical theories in a periodical publication which would inevitably be suppressed," but the *Liberal* contributors came as close as they could to questioning the inevitability of suppression. [15]



William Wordsworth's suspicions about the journal indicate the type of threat that it posed: "It is reported here," he wrote from Rydal Mount in April 1822, "that Byron, Shelley, Moore, Leigh Hunt . . . are to lay their heads together in some Town of Italy, for the purpose of conducting a Journal to be directed against everything in religion, in morals and probably in government and literature, which our Forefathers have been accustomed to reverence" (*Letters* 124). Wordsworth's was the archetypal "high and dry" Tory position, but Moore's own anxiety shows that moderately liberal sympathizers were also alarmed. Charles Lamb was able to separate the religious views of Shelley and Byron: he expressed scorn about the "cargo of Jonases" that Shelley left behind, but when the libel fine of £100 was set in January 1824, Lamb wrote to Bernard Barton, "The Decision against Hunt for the 'Vision of Judgment' made me sick" (*Works* 7.573; 7.635). Lamb regarded Southey's presumptuous anticipation of the rewards of heaven and hell as being equally bad as, if not worse than Byron's parody, which he considered "such a tolerant good humour'd thing" (6.635). Good-humoured and mildly sceptical though it was, Byron's poem was pitched against those who stood in judgement. Those who chose to be offended claimed that the satire was blasphemous.

As Timothy Webb has pointed out, Shelley had planned a paper for the *Liberal* on the subject of *Faust* and Calderón's *El Mágico Prodigoso*: "it is more than likely that it would have been concerned with the theological schemes of the two works and especially with the way in which Goethe and Calderón attempt to explain the existence of evil." (*The Violet in the Crucible* 166). The translation of *Faust* that went into Issue 1 was, as Webb explains, a bold critical engagement with a "blasphemous and revolutionary" work, in which Shelley was not afraid to "stress those very elements which affronted his contemporaries" (173). Although Shelley's contribution was, in intellectual terms, probably the most provocative, many other pieces pose a challenge to orthodox Christianity: *The Vision of Judgment* caused an outcry; *Heaven and Earth* (which poses more of a challenge to orthodoxy) ought to have caused a bigger outcry; in the Preface to "Morgante Maggiore," Byron defends Pulci from accusations of irreligion; Leigh Hunt offers a sympathetic approach to Catholicism in the "Letters from Abroad"; "The Florentine Lovers" portrays the church as the venue for lovers' meetings; "A German Apologue" plays with the definitions of judges, orthodoxy and the moral order of things; in "Dr Chalmers and Mr Irving," Hazlitt toys with the traditional religious vision of the universe: "We alone (it would appear) cannot pretend to monopolize heaven or hell: there are other contingent candidates besides us" (4.304-5) and he draws *Blackwood's* and his Majesty's Ministers and Government into his indictment of the Scottish preacher. Across all four issues, the *Liberal* steadily championed religious free thought, while also (as in the "First Canto of the Squire's Tale of Chaucer, Modernized") keeping a wary eye on the temptations of utopianism.

On 5 December 1822, Leigh Hunt told a potential contributor, John Taaffe, that his "Commentary on Dante" would not be popular enough for the *Liberal*, and he outlined the difficulties of selling an intelligent literary work:

I must again suggest to you however, that it is not possible even for the merits of such a work, much less for all the criticism in the world, to render it popular, in the common acceptance of that word. Poets themselves, of an abstract & highly poetical character, like Dante, Spenser, & others, are not popular, of fame, & the best & fondest kind of readers. Judge what the case must be with one of their commentators. To be popular, a man must either be a writer of epics or other stories, or humourous, or fall in with some obvious fashion or party of the day. The rest is all in the retirements & sacred places of literature.[16]

Hunt also thought that Byron's *The Island* was too "conventional" implying that in April 1823, however great the challenge, he still wished to sustain the avant-garde character of the journal:

Lord Byron has never written any thing for the *Liberal*, but a poem called the *Island*, which will after all be published by my brother by itself. I believe this is partly because he perceived I thought little of a great deal of it, which is written in a very *rhymy* & conventional way;—but he says (which is true) that it is too long of it's kind, & moreover he wishes to see how the public still like him *out* of the *Liberal*.[17]

The distinctive aesthetic of the *Liberal* was its mixed style, or "*pot au feu*" of ingredients as Moore called it (*Letters* 2.514), and several contributions deploy or defend the aesthetics of mixture (see, for example, Hunt's remarks in "The Florentine Lovers" about the way the Catholic faith has "a tendency to confuse the boundaries of this world





and the next" (1. 52); or Byron's discussion of style in "Morgante Maggiore").

To some extent, the journal is also about the state of print culture: it provides a meta-commentary on the difficulties of going to press in the face of political hostility and chicanery from other publishing empires. The Preface to the first number alludes to the *Courier's* reporting of the death of Shelley; the Preface to the second volume (the third number) describes the battle with John Murray, who had kept back Byron's manuscripts from the Hunts: "Had the Preface [of *The Vision of Judgment*] also, entrusted to Mr. Murray, been sent, as it ought to have been, to the new publisher, much of the unintended part of the effect produced upon weak minds would have been explained away at once;—that effect, which the hypocritical enemies of the Liberal at once delighted to assist in producing, and most pretended to deprecate" (3.vi-vii).

Southey has been rehabilitated by recent scholarship as a gentleman of letters, the kindly supporter of Coleridge's family, and a prolific and influential poet, essayist, historian, travel-writer, biographer, translator and polemicist; but to understand the *Liberal*, we need to recover a sense of his being a cultural lynch pin through venomous slander (or steadfast opposition, depending on your perspective) of Byron, the Shelleys and the Hunts. To them, he was part of the self-interested legal and religious monopoly that obstructed reform by keeping a corrupt ministry in place. The "high and dry" Tory attacks on the *Liberal* have had a lasting effect in that the journal has been seen as a hare-brained political scheme rather than a significant cultural intervention. By the end of the nineteenth century as the word "liberal" became more mainstream, the journal could be described as "one of those books 'without which no gentleman's library is complete'" (Nicoll and Wise 325), but what the journal gained in canonical respectability, it lost in its reputation for cultural "edge." A few modern scholars have offered more positive assessments: Gross has led evaluations of its pioneering political pitch; Caroline Franklin has highlighted the Journal's "agenda of demystifying loyalist ideology" (264); Michael Scrivener summarized the success of an "entirely cosmopolitan journal" (203), and Daisy Hay has most recently re-evaluated the journal's contents, drawing particular attention to the importance of Alfieri as a figurehead because "Alfieri is everything that Southey is not" and "*The Liberal*, like the Cult of the South, is defined by what it is not" (316; 318). The journal was undisputedly short-lived, but so were two of its founders and—as we see with the lives of P. B. Shelley and Lord Byron—brevity of existence is no bar to lasting cultural influence.

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## ENDNOTES

- [1] Hay claims that “*The Liberal* proclaims the value of love and champions the gradual emergence of liberal Mediterranean nationalisms,” (317) seeing the “dual focus on Italy and opposition” (318) as the main source of coherence. Jeffrey Cox is the authority who established that the title of the journal is the *Liberal* rather than *The Liberal*.
- [2] Moore met with Lord John Russell regularly in December 1820, and his journals indicate that Byron was often a topic of discussion, along with shared reading of Byron’s memoirs that had been entrusted to Moore.
- [3] MSL S649re, Brewer-Leigh Hunt Collection, University of Iowa Lib., Iowa City.
- [4] See Roe 331-33 and Brack for the conflict surrounding Hunt’s and Byron’s different perceptions of the financial or philanthropic foundations of the journal.
- [5] So called by *The New European Magazine* I (1822): 354; *The Scots Magazine* XI (June-Dec. 1822): 572 and Thomas Moore (*Letters* 2.502). For a fuller survey of the critical reaction, See Marshall 108-34, Stabler 38-39 and Hay 308-310.
- [6] Quoted in Shelley *Letters* 2.345.
- [7] 2 November 1823: MS John Murray Archive; qtd. in Stabler 179.
- [8] Ms L H94u, Brewer-Leigh Hunt Collection, University of Iowa Lib., Iowa City.
- [9] Ms L H94u, Brewer-Leigh Hunt Collection, University of Iowa Lib., Iowa City.
- [10] Gross, “Byron and ‘the Liberal’”; see also Gross, *Byron: The Erotic Liberal*, 5-7; 154; Hay 307-20; Curran 357-71 and Ogden 114-37.
- [11] For the conflation of state and religious politics during Byron’s time in Ravenna, see his letter to Moore 14 May 1821: “my life threatened last month (they put about a paper here to excite an attempt at my assassination, on account of politics, and a notion which the priests disseminated that I was in a league against the Germans” (*Letters and Journals* 8.117); see also Byron’s postscript in a letter of 15 July 1821 about the list of people banished after the failed uprising against the Austrians: “Out of the *list* in Ravenna—there are at least *ten* not only innocent—but even opposite in principles to the liberals. It has been the work of some blundering Austrian spy—or angry priest to gratify his hatreds” (*Letters and Journals* 7.155). See also Lansdown 18-25; Reinerman 55-69.
- [12] Webb, “Hunt, John (1775–1848).”
- [13] For the English political and religious connotations of “liberal” before August 1819 (Gross’s suggested first usage in *Erotic Liberal* 155), see the *Examiner* 20 August 1815 on Bonaparte’s liberalism in establishing “liberal institutions” in Italy and stopping the Spanish Inquisition (537); John Keats to the George Keatses 14 October 1818 after a discussion of the paucity of English political life: “there are none prepared to suffer in obscurity for their Country. . . . We have no Milton, no Algernon Sidney. . . . Notwithstanding [*sic*] the part which the Liberals take in the Cause of Napoleon I cannot but think he has done more harm to the life of Liberty than anyone else could have done: not that the divine right Gentlemen have done or intend any good” (Keats, *Letters* 1.396-97). See also Arthur Henry Kenney’s pamphlet on “The dangers with which Great Britain and Ireland are now menaced by the demands of Irish Roman Catholics.” Kenney reported the perception that “liberals,” “philanthropists” and “Bible Societies” were carrying on “a regular assault against the revealed religion” (106). The “Religious Retrospect” of the *Anti-Jacobin Review* LVI (March-August 1819) carried a report of the debate between the Whig *Morning Chronicle* and the Tory *Courier*: “When we consider the language that has been used in the Commons about





“*stifling*” petitions instead of letting them see the light, and the menaces of the Party Gazette against those who shall dare to present Anti-Catholic Petitions;— we naturally ask, is this the conduct of the English Liberals; the exclusive friends of freedom; or the disciples of Maret [sic] and Robespierre?” (80).

[14] Ms L S649re, Brewer-Leigh Hunt Collection, University of Iowa Lib., Iowa City.

[15] Ms L S649re, Brewer-Leigh Hunt Collection, University of Iowa Lib., Iowa City.

[16] Ms L H94t, Brewer-Leigh Hunt Collection, University of Iowa Lib., Iowa City.

[17] MsL H94ke no. 2, Brewer-Leigh Hunt Collection, University of Iowa Lib., Iowa City.

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