

Byronic Book Reviews

Atara Stein

The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction and Television

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My thanks to Ines Tiger Adelsberger for drawing my attention to this book.

Recently a well-known Byronperson gave (and then, I'm told, gave again), a lecture on Byron's Impact on Popular Culture, in which she adduced Captain Jack Sparrow, the Johnny Depp character in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, as a descendant of the Byronic Hero. I had been dragged to the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie, and had found it the worst film I'd seen since the first *Harry Potter* movie, which had been the worst film I'd seen since *Ghostbusters II*, which had been the worst film I'd seen since *Superman IV*. Suffice to say that I'd seen no trace of Byron in any of them.

That I find no trace of Byron in any of the movies dissected in Atara Stein's book doesn't make it not worth reading, because of the intelligent ways in which she discusses what she does discuss.

But there are two big drawbacks to her argument: her selective examples of The Byronic Hero, and the way in which she ignores other, well-documented pedigrees for the movies she chooses.

In concentrating, Byronwise, just on Conrad, Manfred, and Lucifer in *Cain*, she cuts the ground from beneath her feet, paints herself into a corner, and saws off the branch on which she's sitting. You can't ignore the Giaour just because, unlike the rest, he's achieved his end in action. He's had his revenge on Hassan, but finds that his revenge leads to further, though ambiguously-defined, torment. You can't ignore Selim in *The Bride of Abydos* just because, though a rebel in aspiration (*perhaps* fantasy-aspiration), he achieves absolutely nothing at all (unlike Conrad and Manfred, Stein's other chosen Heroes, who at least get off First Base). You can't ignore Alp in *The Siege of Corinth* just because he's not a rebel, but a regular (albeit alienated) military leader fighting an open battle. You can't ignore Lara just because there are so many things about him and his activities that no-one understands at all. Had Stein widened her source-poems to include all the Byronic Heroes, her use of them, as the originals of several dark heroes of the twentieth-century screen, would have been even harder than it is.

It goes without saying that Don Juan is nowhere in sight.

I yield to no-one on earth in my admiration of Clint Eastwood's own westerns (not the Sergio Leone ones): but the huge subtexts of virtually all of them are not Byron (for goodness' sake), but *High Noon* and its antithesis, *Rio Bravo*. The heroes of these (Gary Cooper and John Wayne) are, like the heroes of *High Plains Drifter*, *Pale Rider*, and *Unforgiven*, depicted in an ambiguous relation to the communities they inhabit. That this is less so in the case of *Rio Bravo* is because that movie is a conservative answer to *High Noon*. Will Kane in *High Noon* (Cooper) is anxious to serve his community, but finds his community too cowardly to help him serve it. John T. Chance in *Rio Bravo* (Wayne) finds enough assistants in his community to help him defeat the bad guys, even if those assistants are an old-timer, a greenhorn, and the town drunk.

Eastwood's heroes deconstruct and then reconstruct Will Kane's dilemma in *High Noon*. Every schoolboy remembers the long pull-up-and-out crane-shot in that film, showing the hero's final realisation that, with Frank Miller's train arriving any minute ("He made a vow when in state prison, / Said it'd be my life or his'n"), there's no-one around prepared to help him: not even his deputy (whom he's left unconscious in the stable) or his wife (who's about to get on the train which brings Miller, and leave just as Miller arrives). This total alienation, which Kane discovers agonisingly, Eastwood's heroes bring into town ready-baked. They *know* they're alienated beyond extrication (in the case of *High Plains Drifter*, the hero may even be a ghost), and they don't give a shit: indeed, their alienation is the root of their inexorable strength. They are indeed "Byronic" in that they have no bond with their communities: but you could say the same of Hamlet, or, in different ways, of Lear, Macbeth, or Coriolanus. That John T. Chance in *Rio Bravo* isn't alienated is one reason – along with several other very serious errors of judgement – why that film is such rubbish: though Eastwood may pay homage to it in *Drifter* by making one of his only friends, not the town drunk, but the town midget.

The real connection between *Drifter* and the Byronic Hero is that its protagonist isn't buried properly (for I go along with the ghost theory). Like "Kaled – Lara – Ezzelin [*who are*] are gone, / Alike without their monumental stone!", like Astarte, like Marino Faliero, like Lambro and Haidee, he's not been buried properly. Only in the very last sequence, when the town midget puts up a marker where he'd previously been buried "hugger-mugger", does he get a name, and achieve closure: but Stein doesn't mention that.

In *Rider* the protagonist can't be other than a ghost, to judge from his skill at de- and re-materializing, and from the number of exit-wound scars visible in his back when he removes his shirt. This is completely unByronic – protagonists such as Alp or Manfred may encounter ghosts, but never are ghosts themselves.

Stein is very good on the way, in *Unforgiven*, Eastwood further deconstructs and reconstructs his previous deconstructions and reconstructions. It's a pity she wrote her book before Eastwood made *Gran Torino*, which further reconstructs the by-now-familiar scenario by dumping it right down in the middle of present-day Michigan (and, with its septuagenarian hero, is even less Byronic than its predecessors).

That both *Drifter* and *Rider* also owe not a little to *Shane* further demonstrates the flimsiness of Atara Stein's "Byronic" thesis. *Rider's* indebtedness to *Shane* is the most obvious. *Shane*, *High Noon* and *Rio Bravo* are in every film-maker's muscular memory in a way I don't believe *Manfred* and *The Corsair* to be.

I'm afraid I'm not in a position to discuss the *Crow* movies, or even *Star Trek*, to which Stein dedicates two chapters: but *Terminator II* is in my Top Ten All Time Favourites. However, though I can see Stein's point, that Schwarzenegger is, like Lara, "a stranger in this breathing world, / An erring spirit from another hurl'd" (p.62: except that he doesn't err), and her further point, that the Terminator has of necessity to identify more and more with the humans he protects (thus inverting the progress of, for instance, Manfred, or Alp), I don't believe James Cameron needed Byron in the back of his mind in order to think up such a development. When, in the finale, Schwarzenegger, his time (or its time) expired, drowns himself (or itself) in a vat of molten metal, he (or it) might say with Manfred (or gargle metallically with him), "'Tis not so difficult to die" – but needless to say, he / it doesn't.

Atara Stein sums up the compromised, fantasy quality of the original Byronic Hero (and some of his popular descendants) thus:

If, however, despite his superhuman abilities, he ultimately reaffirms his humanity or (in the case of cyborgs, androids, and the like) becomes increasingly humanlike, he leaves the audience content with their own condition and the ability to identify with the hero. Their own powerlessness and inability successfully to defy oppressive authority are, paradoxically enough, affirmed as desirable states. The readers or viewers cannot be like him, and they are flattered that he wishes to be like them. In other words, while the audience, powerless in the face of institutional authority, cheers the hero's defiance of this authority and glories in the vicarious experience of this defiance, they are not impelled by the text to go out and defy authority themselves. By rehumanizing the hero and taking away or depreciating his powers, the hero's creators send a firm message to the audience: Don't quit your day job. The extent of the audience's own subversive desire to rebel against social institutions must be contained within the parameters of the text itself finishing the book or leaving the movie theater, they must remain satisfied that authority has been successfully defied by the hero on the one hand, and that there is no need or them to defy authority on the other. The satisfying sense of closure provided by the hero's rehumanization (a process that frequently involves the hero's death) leaves his audience ultimately complacent. Instead of being dissatisfied at their own inability to match the hero's feats and questioning the institutions that oppress them, they depart the text satisfied with the status quo and the hero's validation of basic human values. Such texts, in effect, allow the audience the illusion of empowerment and subversion while simultaneously forestalling any real-life enactment of those states. The writers and filmmakers have drawn up an implicit contract with their audience: We will give you a certain type of experience and a certain type of hero; you will be satisfied with that experience and not seek to imitate it (p.3).

I've never wanted to shoot up any western townships, or to fight Robert Patrick: but I'd say that both Clint Eastwood and James Cameron had taken the Byronic scenario (without realising that that was what it was), and moved it well beyond this wet-dream stage.



Stein has a chapter on Byronic Heroines: but instead of writing about the passive Leila or Medora, or even about the active Gulnare or Neuha, she writes about Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights* and Eustacia Vye in *The Return of the Native* – characters conceived not by Byron, but by authors who thought (or may have thought), they knew what a Byronic Heroine *should* be like. I’ll be blasphemous at this point, and say that Catherine and Eustacia inhabit an area of reality (Eustacia especially), in which Byron never treads, even in his ottava rima works. When Stein then adduces Ripley from the *Alien* movies and Sarah Connor from the *Terminator* movies as Catherine’s and Eustacia’s twentieth-century descendants, we see her game: it’s called Cheating. Both Catherine and Eustacia exist – however uncomfortably – in relation to men, just as Byron’s do ...



Catherine (and Man)



Eustacia (and Man)

... but there are no men in Ripley’s emotional life, her surrogate child in *Aliens* is the girl, “Newt”, and in *Alien Resurrection*, it is itself a very large baby alien. The most important male in Sarah Connor’s life is her son. A mother’s love for her son forms only the smallest part of Byron’s canvas: that of Ada in *Cain*, where her son is only a cradled infant. Catherine and Eustacia are, as Stein says, violent and rebellious: what she omits to say is that they resemble, in this, few if any heroines in Byron. Gulnare in *The Corsair* is briefly violent, but the supposedly criminal Conrad, whose life her violence saves, is farcically horrified by the fact. In *The Island*, Neuha saves the life of Torquil; but she isn’t violent, only energetic; and rebels against no-one.

The sci-fi situations in which Sarah Connor and Ripley find themselves, and the forces they have to contend with, are hyper-monstrous in comparison with any faced by Catherine, Eustacia, Gulnare, or Neuha. To call their struggles against machines and monsters “*Byronic* self-assertion and aspiration”, as Stein does, (p.189) is just silly. Byron is two centuries in arrears of them all.

*Medora**Zuleika**Ripley**Connor*

It struck me, reading Atara Stein's book, that another film she unfortunately missed out, writing when she did, was *Despicable Me*, one of the great hits of 2010. Its protagonist, Gru, is obviously derived from Conrad in *The Corsair*, dedicated as he is to a Byronic goal (to steal and shrink the moon), followed as he is by a posse of loyal, banana-shaped minions (just like Selim), and in denial, as he is, of any link to the human race (a trait he shares with Childe Harold, Alp, and the rest).



The heartening tale of the way he bonds with three little orphan girls, who restore in him a sense of his own humanity ("The world is full of orphans" – *Don Juan XVII 1*), is clearly intended as a comment on Byron's inability to relate to his own children, and a pointer to the way the Byronic Hero *would* have developed, had his creator stayed in Ravenna and played shove-ha'penny with Allegra, instead of sending her to the convent and listening instead to the fraudulent blandishments of the London Greek Committee.

Matthew J.A.Green and Piya Pal-Lapinski (eds.)

Byron and the Politics of Freedom and Terror

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Postmodernism is innate to consumer-society civilisation itself, with its fragmentation of values and order, and it reaches expression in the transformation of works of art into products: having lost any sense or foothold in reality (including the “death” of God, the “death” of history and progress) the modern civilisation that emerges is simulacra. Jean Baudrillard vividly describes the mechanism of this transformation in his article *Simulacra and Simulation* [10]. Essentially, modern civilization is a bifurcated ‘play space’ that consists of a) an objectively real consumer society that has broken with the genuine values of traditional civilizations and b) an objectively real consumer society void of purpose but having a simulacrum reality with a semblance of meaning that has nothing to do with genuine reality. The latter is a purely imaginary reality that is nevertheless called upon to restore faith in a supposedly still existent higher purpose for a consumer civilization. – E.N.Shevyakova, *English and French Literary Postmodernism: Some Characteristics of National Variants*, in *Language, Culture and Society in Russian / English Studies* (London 2010), p.165.

The book before me illustrates this thesis perfectly. Most of its essays are simulacra, “with a semblance of meaning that has nothing to do with genuine reality”: and it sells at £50.

When jumping on to a bandwagon, it helps to know what a bandwagon looks like. If you don’t, you risk jumping on to a bendy-bus, or into the basket of a hot-air balloon, instead.

The book seems, from its introduction, to know that in our twenty-first century the simple opposition of open, peaceful, freedom-loving West and secretive, violent, fanatical East won’t really do:

... the “terrorist’s” ghostly status, his or her ability to inhabit a spectral space or virtual network, is directly invoked to justify incursions into the rights and freedoms of those privileged enough to lay claim to them. (p.3)

Thus the Patriot Act (for example) is invoked, though without being named. Discretion is the better part of valour.

It’s when the book looks at Byron, and assumes that Byron has Something Relevant to contribute to our Current Debates (for that, I take it, is the point), that it misses the bandwagon completely and falls flat on its face. It seems that the temptation to “metahistoricize” Byron’s politics remains overwhelming, even in 2011. He *must* have been a revolutionary / liberal / radical Whig:

Marino Faliero and *The Two Foscari* register the imprint of Byron’s politics abroad and at home, or his external and internal warfare—that is, his “activ[e] plotting with the Carbonari,” a revolutionary Italian secret society, and his reinvigorated disgust with Parliamentary Old Corruption in England as a result of the killing of unarmed demonstrators at Manchester (dubbed the Peterloo Massacre in ironic homage to the self-congratulatory spectacle of Waterloo), the execution and transportation of the Cato Street conspirators, and the evisceration of the already tenuous public authority of the Prince Regent by the Queen Caroline affair (p.50).

Note the assumption that the reader won’t know who the Carbonari were, or why Peterloo was so nicknamed. And why we need square brackets around the “e” of “active” is a mystery.

Byron’s experiences with the Carbonari were banal in the extreme. When the Austrians advanced, his two closest Carbonari cronies – Teresa Guiccioli’s father and brother – left on a hunting expedition and made sure they couldn’t be contacted. His “reinvigorated disgust” at the Peterloo Massacre is shown when he refuses to contribute to a fund for its victims. On October 7th 1819 Douglas Kinnaird asks him, in a modest P.S.:

Do let me subscribe your mite to the Manchester Sufferers –¹

But Byron answers, on October 26th:

My dear Douglas –

... As to Subscribing to Manchester – if I do that – I will write a letter to Burdett – for publication – to accompany <to> the Subscription – which shall be more radical than <the> anything yet rooted – but I feel lazy. – I have thought of this for some time – but alas! the air of this cursed Italy enervates – and dis<en>franchises the thoughts of a man after nearly four years of respiration – to say nothing of emission. – –²

After the empty threat, he lets his letter peter out, and turns aside Kinnaird’s request into a dirty joke about “emission”. Later, in a letter to Hobhouse of April 22nd 1820, he makes his reactionary feelings plainer still:

I think I have neither been an illiberal man nor an unsteady man upon politics – but {I think also that} if the Manchester Yeomanry had cut down Hunt only – they would have done their duty – – as it was – – they committed murder <for> {both in} what they did – and what they did not do, – in butchering the weak instead of {piercing} the wicked, in assailing the seduced instead of the seducer – in punishing the poor starving populace, instead of that pampered and dined blackguard who is only less contemptible than his predecessor Orator Henley because he is more mischievous. – – – –

What I say thus – I say as publicly as you please – if to praise such fellows be the price of popularity – I spit upon it, as I would in their faces – – – –³

There is no evidence that the Peterloo victims were starving; but it fits in with Byron’s concept of Henry Hunt as Jack Cade or Wat Tyler.

He was taken in by the “Cato Street Conspiracy”, a vote-catching publicity stunt created by a planted newspaper article and a government *agent provocateur* (see below): “And if they had killed poor Harrowby – in whose house I have been five hundred times – at dinners and parties – his wife is one of “the Exquisites” and t’other fellows – what end would it have answered?”⁴

The idea that Cato Street was a government plot could have led to much more truly speculative parallels with our day, but the book doesn’t want to rock the boat that much (after all, it’s only a simulacrum). There is a section on Cato Street in another essay, on p.129, which reads it as if only the “Conspirators” were involved. If the writers can only write about Cato Street as if the 1820 Tory government’s version of it is the accurate one, they really aren’t qualified to write their book. Having no truck with David Ray Griffin does not mean that you have to believe Liverpool and Castlereagh as well (or maybe it does).



“Could someone please explain what’s going on?”

To see what’s going on, click here: <http://www.911truth.org/>

As for Queen Caroline, I’m sorry to say that Byron’s attitude to her has, owing a metahistoricising instinct on the part of all editors until now, been hidden away ever since he expressed it:

2: Byron to Kinnaird, October 26th 1819; B.L.Add.Mss 42093 ff.118-19, BLJ VI 231-3

3: Byron to Hobhouse, NLS Ms.43440; BLJ VII 80-2.

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

Oh – you [Murray] must know that I sent H.’s letter without asking him – so – say nothing about that – I thought it might serve the Quim [BLJ has “Queen”] in her cause – and you in her behalf & sent it – trusting to your discretion – pray – do not compromise him – nor any body else.⁵

... he [Hobhouse] is a little wroth that I would not come over to the Quim’s [BLJ has “Queen’s”, and so does the Ashley transcription] trial – lazy – quotha! – it is so true that he should be ashamed of asserting it.⁶

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

That injured Queen, by Chroniclers so coarse,
Has been accused (I doubt not by Conspiracy)
Of an improper friendship for her Horse *
(Love like Religion sometimes runs to heresy);
This monstrous tale had probably its source
(For such exaggerations here and there I see)
In printing “*Courser*” by mistake for “*Courier*”;
I wish the Case could come before a Jury here. –

* See Pliny.⁷



**“Oh gracious Queen, we thee implore
To go away and sin no more ...”**

The idea that Byron’s politics were what we would call (being *very* charitable) “Centre-Right”, might upset the book’s focus – but does it have a focus anyway?

⁵: Byron to Hobhouse, November 9th 1820: text from NLS Ms.43440; censored at BLJ VII 222.

⁶: Byron to Murray November 9th 1820: text from B.L.Ashley 5161; censored at LJ V 113-18, and BLJ VII 224.

⁷: *Of an improper friendship for her Horse*: the reference is to Pliny, *Natural History*, VIII 64 (Loeb III 108, 155-6): *equum adamatum a Samiramide usque in coitum Iuba auctor est* (Juba is responsible for the statement that Semiramis felt such strong passion for her horse that she copulated with it). Semiramis was in legend Queen of Babylon (her husband was Ninus, as in “Wilt thou at Ninny’s tomb meet me straightway?” – *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V i 201). B. could have chosen many aspects of her career – her murder of her husband (for which see *Sardanapalus* II i 374-5) her lust for her son (ibid, IV i 158) her murder by that same son, her conquest of most of Asia, her mighty public works, her intelligence, or her beauty: his choice of one rumour (unreported elsewhere) says much about his intention. Juba II was the historical King of Numidia; a cultured monarch often quoted by Pliny, he was son-in-law to Antony and Cleopatra, and died in 23 A.D. *Sardanapalus* refers at I ii 180-1 to *my ancestor Semiramis*, / *A sort of semi-glorious human monster*; see also his quasi-incestuous nightmare at IV i 102-65. Voltaire’s tragedy *Semiramis* has a strongly Oedipal content. Semiramis is to be paired with Pasiphae (*Don Juan* II St.155 and n) as a type of female concupiscence: a theme of this canto, and of *Don Juan*, *passim*. In ancient times, both women joined Astarte (whose name B. uses in *Manfred*) and became fertility goddesses.

It starts with an alarming essay on *The Giaour*, in which a variety of strategies are employed, as follows:

1) Quote as many authorities, critical, philosophical, or theoretical, as you can, to show you've read them. Thus we get Marilyn Butler (p.15), Edward Said (ibid), Judith Butler (p.18), someone called "Butler" who could be either of the foregoing Butlers but whose Christian name isn't vouchsafed us (pp.30 and 31), Emma McEvoy (p.16), Alain Badiou (p.23 et seq), and Slavoj Žižek (p.24 et seq).

2) Next, quote the authorities' surnames without giving their Christian names at all: this coyness will make the reader feel inferior, since they will assume the named one to be incredibly famous even though they've never heard of him / her. Thus we get someone called "Meyer" (p.20), and someone called "Nancy" (p.22). On the last page (p.32) comes, predictably, "McGann" – whom I admit everyone will know (or will they any more?). The Christian names are only given in the index, which is discourteous.

3) A further rhetorical refinement involves quoting such authorities in groups of three, as if to triple the intimidation:

Žižek here maps Badiou onto Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" ... (p.25)

Žižek cites Kierkegaard—with a nod towards St. Paul ... (ibid)

Žižek explains this, via Kierkegaard and Lacan ... (p.26)



Slavoj, Slavoj, and Slavoj!

4) Don't be afraid of long (or even short) sentences, of which the ends lose sight of the beginnings, and which ignore such antiquated, bourgeois qualities as "style" and "euphony". Such sentences try to exert authority by alienation – like George Bush, but with harder words:

The anchor that binds both freedom and wickedness to relationship is the body, which persists even after death has collapsed the singularity's interiority (p.28).

For Badiou, similarly, love is a condition of philosophy precisely as "the procedure that makes truth out of the disjunction of sexuated positions" (p.26).

In his role as foreigner, he [*the Giaour*] is best understood not as the champion of freedom but as himself an expression understood as a singularity marked by "the absolute intensity that through and through *ex-tends* the play of differences" (p.21).

5) Don't be afraid of contradicting your own thesis, without acknowledgement, but ignore any potentially embarrassing details which might cause the thesis to seem without foundation in the first place. After all, Edward Said does this all the time. Thus it's said on p.19 that Leila's suffering "operates metonymically for the Greek loss of spirit", whereas on p.23 we read that "the figurative link between Leila and Greece has ceased to be salient". This is diluted still further when on p.26 we read "his [*the Giaour's*] violence *feels* like a revolutionary act despite the breakdown of the conceit linking Leila to Greece and despite the complete absence of a political motivation on his part". This progressive loss of confidence may be the result of being secretly aware of where Leila comes from:

So moved on earth Circassia's daughter –
The loveliest bird of Franguestan! (*The Giaour*, 505-6)

Circassia, in the Caucasus, is a long way from Greece.

The essay concentrates in part on Byron's poetic use of The Body: but misses out the poem's most striking bodily image:

“On cliff he hath been known to stand,
And rave as to some bloody hand
Fresh severed from its parent limb,
Invisible to all but him,
Which beckons onward to his grave,
And lures to leap into the wave.” (*The Giaour*, 826-31)

Whose severed hand it is which the half-crazed Giaour is hallucinating, neither the narrator nor we ever know: as Leila's watery death involves no amputations or bloodshed, we have to assume it's that of Hassan (if the narrator's conjecture is true). The identification (to put it uncontroversially) thus shown between the Giaour and Hassan, would show the poem to be, not about a confrontation between terrified East and terrorist West, but a recognition of their shared humanity. Byron's concern is (to quote Michael Franklin), “blurring the Eurocentric binarism of self and other,” to see, as did Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, “English self in Asian otherness,” and to employ, what this essay never mentions, “a comic reflexivity and relativity” reflecting ironically on both East *and* West.⁸ However, if one took that way of analysis, the essay wouldn't fit the theme of the book (or would it?)

As usual with essays on *The Giaour*, the difficulties with logic when studying the protagonist's actions are ignored. Why does he need to go into a monastery, when he so obviously despises religion? Why, if he's killed the man who killed his woman, does he feel so terminally miserable? Such a killing would make one feel grim, but revenge normally brings about a sick kind of closure – one doesn't retire into a hole and die. Perhaps Said, Žižek, both the Butlers, Badiou, Kierkegaard, and the rest, proved unhelpful here.

The next essay, by Andrew Stauffer, is written in normal English, and is free from the insecure urge to quote as many theoreticians as possible. It's about Charles Calvert's production of *Sardanapalus*, at Booth's Theater, Manhattan, in 1876 – “the longest-running performance [*should be “production”*] of any of Byron's dramas ever”, at 113 nights (p.34). Its vast designs were based on recent archaeological discoveries: its text was cut to ribbons, with, we infer, all references to the king's bisexuality removed.

An attempt at contemporary relevance is made:

There are levels of coincident irony in the convergence of techno-spectacle, imperialism, and the looting of relics represented by this production, plotted along an axis connecting New York City and the place we now call Iraq (p.34).

The question, “Which imperialism are you talking about? Assyrian? Surely not *American cultural imperialism*? There's no such thing!” is side-stepped here: the idea could be developed. As every schoolboy knows, the Ottomans (whom Byron admired so much), divided “Iraq” or “Mesopotamia” into three regions: north (Kurds), middle (Sunni) and south (Shi-ite). We can see, from the perspective of 2012, what a sensible idea this was. It was the antiquarian-obsessed Brits who, in the 1920s, saw these three provinces, remembered their history lessons, thought, “Ah! Mesopotamia! Ur of the Chaldees!” and tried to unite the three provinces into a single state (which they never had been, even in antiquity).

The bloody results of the Brits' ignorant decision – trying to foist a historically fake idea of unity on a place that never was a unit – are still with us.

The Byronic point is this: what was his doomed second expedition into Greece, but prelude to an attempt to foist a historically fake idea of unity on a place that never was a unit, except in the eyes of antiquarians unable to interpret the antiquarian evidence under their noses? The greatest work of ancient Greek history, Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*, disproves at once the idea that Greece ever possessed the unity which the Franks (“Trust not for Freedom to the Franks”) thrust upon her, with young King Otto from Bavaria, in 1833, and which President Bush (who'd never heard of the Sunni / Shia divide) attempted to create in Iraq, with his usual lack of success, in our own day.

8: See Michael Franklin, *The Building of Empire and the Building of Babel: Sir William Jones, Byron, and their Productions of the Orient*, in Martin Procházka, (ed.) *Byron: East and West*, Charles University, Prague, 2000, pp.63-78.

Our hearts sink when the next essay, a “geopolitical” one on Byron’s Venetian tragedies, refers to Friedrich Ratzel, Rudolf Kjellén, Gearóid Ó Tuathail, Achille Mbembe, Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agambe (in whose “wake” we’re told that Mbembe writes), and Daniel Arasse, all in its first three pages. The presence of the more familiar name of Claus von Clausewitz is presumably included as a reassurance, in case we feel too intimidated.

In ancient days, before the Soviet Union collapsed, no literary essay, book, or PhD thesis, would be accepted in the communist East if it did not have some such opener as “As Lenin writes ...” or “We read in Engels that ...” or, “As that great critic Joseph Stalin reminds us ...”. If you didn’t quote a major Marxist authority, you wouldn’t get past the censor or the viva-panel, and you’d have no career. The pressure to quote authorities has not *hitherto* held sway in the bourgeois-capitalist West: but on the evidence of *Byron and the Politics of Freedom and Terror*, it’s beginning to creep in. Under communism people were (justifiably) frightened – but what are they frightened of now? Why do we sense that they have to intimidate us with fake learning?

The reason for the attempt at intimidation becomes clear when we find, on p.50, the list of misreadings of Byron’s political attitudes (to Cato Street, and so on) quoted above. The theoreticians are listed, Edward Said-wise,⁹ as a smokescreen to disguise the fact that the writer doesn’t know what he’s talking about.



“Actually I was only kidding ... sorry ...”

Once, the writer looks at an object and describes its opposite:

The Doge [*Foscari*] embodies the stoic impassiveness represented by a painting that became iconic for French Revolutionary self-sacrifice to the state-form, J.-L. David’s neo-republican *The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of his Sons* (1789), in which Lucius Junius Brutus apathetically looks away while his sons are marched off to be killed on his order for betraying Rome (p.54).

Now you don’t even have to know the painting, only read its title, to see that Brutus’s sons, so far from being marched off, are already dead. And here’s the picture, and a detail, showing the father’s “apathy”:

9: For example: “As a humanist whose field is literature, I am old enough to have been trained forty years ago in the field of comparative literature, whose leading ideas go back to Germany in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Before that I must mention the supremely creative contribution of Giambattista Vico, the Neopolitan [*sic*] philosopher and philologist whose ideas anticipate those of German thinkers such as Herder and Wolf, later to be followed by Goethe, Humboldt, Dilthey, Nietzsche, Gadamer, and finally the great 20th Century Romance philologists Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer, and Ernst Robert Curtius.” (<http://www.counterpunch.org/said08052003.html>).

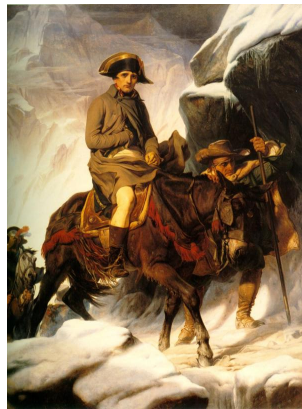


A simulacrum must bear *some* resemblance to reality (or must it?)

This worrying indifference to observable fact, and weddedness to strange fantasy, is found elsewhere in the essay:

Both Napoleon and Byron were partial, in other words, to figurations of sodomy from the active or dominant position favored by the Greco-Roman masculinist tradition, an analogy that cannot be pursued here (p.60).

“Why then mention it?” is the obvious question, the irrelevant thesis is so tantalising. And “Where were the editors looking when they allowed these passages through?” another.



“Les anglais ... Je pète dans leur direction générale ...”

The essay sometimes qualifies its optimistic analysis of Byron’s radicalism (quoted above): “Byron’s relationship to a ‘general will’ was impaired by a revulsion for the people ...” (p.57); “Byron’s patrician sympathies do not emerge undegraded. They too are but words ...” (p.62). But the two perspectives stay irreconcilable.

And you would never know that *Marino Faliero* is and was interpreted as a reaction to the “Cato Street Conspiracy”, in which the Duke of Wellington was convinced that Byron’s friend J.C.Hobhouse was implicated! Here again, a most interesting way of fitting at least one of the two tragedies to the book’s supposed theme has been ignored.

The next essay, by Jane Stabler, is the best in the book: it quotes no theoreticians (except Aristotle, who I guess is O.K.), writes in normal, lucid English, and its examination of Byron’s experience of all kinds of terror during his life in Italy is informed by the kind of virtuosity in selecting quotations which

only comes from long immersion in the subject. A degree of on-the-spot research may be inferred from its observations about the churches and paintings to be seen in modern Venice.

It makes no attempt to draw connections between Freedom and Terror in Byron's day and the same factors in our own, and thus does not fit the book's advertised theme: but when you think about it, it would strain imagination to draw parallels between Marino Faliero and Iacopo Foscari on the one hand, and Silvio Berlusconi on the other. My own suspicion is that in writing dignified tragedies about Italian politics, Byron ignores the possibility that – as would be the case with Berlusconi – a more appropriate genre would be a Carry On movie, or a Whitehall farce, or a TV series by Armando Iannuci.

The essay ends on a truly alarming note:

A growing suspicion that the poetic genius and the wanton despot had something in common in his "want of all community of feeling" may have been one of the factors that impelled Byron to abandon the amused detachment of narrating *Don Juan XVII* and to embroil himself for the last time in one of Freedom's battles (p.83).

Leaving aside the question of Byron's community of feeling, I'd rephrase the last bit as "to attempt to embroil himself for the last time as what *he hoped, against all his commonsense, might be* one of Freedom's battles": but it's true that at least one enthusiast claims that Byron, in going to Greece in 1823, envisaged his role there as Napoleonic.¹⁰ If he did, his dream turned at once to dull nightmare.

With the next essay, we are back in the land of the theoreticians. If you feel insecure about your argument, quote gurus – preferably gurus of whom your students / readers haven't heard – and quote them in groups, there being safety in numbers. Thus, here, Derrida inhabits the same sentence as Sara Guyer (p.86); Slavoj Žižek (again) is quoted half an inch away from Lacan (p.87); "Abraham and Torok" are found on p.88; Georges Bataille and one "Blanchot" share a paragraph on p.89; and on p.100 Žižek, Melanie Klein, plus "Abraham and Torok", are all found within three lines.

It really is a kind of nervous tic. On p.90, Paul Cantor shares a sentence with Camus,¹¹ and further down the same page Habermas shares one with Ernst Bloch and Friedrich Schelling. Nothing in the argument is illuminated by this ritual kow-towing to obscure authority: all it proves is that the writer has read lots of books that we haven't, and don't feel any need to.

We have, too, more examples of the long, self-collapsing sentence:

For Edelman the heteronormative family configured around the child "shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought" in terms of "reproductive futurism" (p.86).

You really have to re-learn English to understand stuff like this.

Our further suspicion – that the book may have been *conceived editorially* as a thematic unit, but was not *written* as one – is further reinforced when we find half this essay to be about Mary Shelley, and the way, in her later novels, the paternal and quasi-paternal figures of William Godwin and Byron are confused and conflated. Interesting to those few who've read Mary Shelley's novels beyond *Frankenstein*, it throws no light on either Byron himself, or on *The Politics of Freedom and Terror*.

The essay's second half, a wordy analysis of *Cain* (which bears no relation to the first half), might, with some rewriting, have illuminated *The Politics of Freedom and Terror* (as shown in the play in the inscrutable intentions of the Divine Will): but the rewriting hasn't been done, and our sense that the book's title is just a case of unscrupulous packaging is, over halfway through, becoming more and more confident (and, if we paid fifty pounds for it, more and more cross-making).

Manfred is a most un-Promethean figure: rather he's conceived as an anti-Promethean figure. Prometheus feels benignly towards mankind: Manfred feels contempt for mankind, thinking himself of

10: See John Clubbe, *By the Emperor Possessed: Byron and Napoleon in Italy and Greece (1816-1824)*, in Raizis, M. Byron (ed). *Byron and the Mediterranean World, Proceedings of the Twentieth International Byron Conference in the University of Athens* 20-21 September 1995, Athens 1995, especially pp.112-13.

11: There's no index entry for Camus. He's on pp.90 and 155-6.

a different order – that is, feeling himself (arrogantly and incorrectly) to *be* what Prometheus really *is*. Prometheus steals fire from heaven, and gives it to mankind at no small cost to himself; Manfred has discovered the secret of the universe (a dualistic concept cobbled together by Byron from the notes to Thomas Taylor’s translation of Pausanias), but he doesn’t give it to mankind – he does nothing with it at all. He doesn’t tell it to anyone (except the Witch of the Alps); he doesn’t write a book about it; he dies with it still a secret. The self-punishments he put himself through in order to discover it are wasted, and may (this is left vague) have occasioned the death of Astarte, she whom he loved most.

So far from being a Promethean Hero, Manfred seems like a man affected very badly with the Death-Wish.

The writer of the next chapter is vaguely aware of the conundrum these issues create:

What is the nature of the freedom Manfred seeks? And who or what forces constitute the antagonist(s) in his Promethean struggles? (p.102)

... what is the “deeper” truth Manfred is seeking? Why does he declare that [s]orrow is knowledge ... and suffer so intensely? If his knowledge and powers are *not* based on normative values or reason, what are the implications, especially the political implications, of his truth-seeking? (p.104)

See the insistence that the play *must have* a political implication (“Byron *must have been* a radical / revolutionary”): this writer has the book’s title in mind, and tries hard to stick to its line. But the fact that Manfred lives in a political vacuum is embarrassing: he seems Swiss, but the play doesn’t relate to Swiss politics – is it not rather set, as Byron told Murray *Lara* was, on “the Moon”? (As with the previous essay, on the Venetian tragedies, the idea that we are dealing here with a theatre-piece is never mentioned).

Leaning as is by now customary on Great Minds (Lacan, Foucault, Thorslev, Charles Taylor, Trilling, McGann, Peter Manning, Caroline Franklin, Althusser, Philip Cox ... in fact they thin out as the piece progresses), the writer at last implies, and with characteristic style, the unsayable: that the last thing Byron was, was politically-engaged:

... critics of the political delimitation of this “modern” self (or Romantic subjectivism) point to its bourgeois ideology, which makes it complicit with hegemonic power, and to its transcendentalism, which amounts to a retreat from social and political engagement into solitary introspection (ahistorical escapism). (p.105)

This, we’re told, is “troubling” (p.105). But there’s a way out! The whole thing’s a metaphor!

Manfred’s struggle for freedom, from himself and from unnameable sources of oppression, correlates with the modern subject’s political struggle in the evolving modern European state ... (p.107)

But the metaphor doesn’t work. Manfred experiences no exterior sources of oppression at all. He has no social superiors; he refuses to kneel to Arimanes; he defies both the Abbot and the Spirit who comes for him in the last scene – if anything, *he* oppresses *them*. As Southey wrote, Byron “met the Devil on the Jungfrau – and bullied him”.¹² The only being of whom Manfred is in awe is Astarte. His play cannot be made political. He may fight against paternal authority figures (perhaps in part by being “transgressive” with Astarte), as the essayist writes; but they all retreat before him, and none of them are political authorities anyway.

The piece terminates with a reassertion that Byron *was* politically-engaged after all:

Byron’s unflinching search for freedom from these [“clankless chains”] precedes his plunge into more pronounced political struggles in the years that followed Manfred’s publication (pp.116-17).

But his anticlimactic “plunge” into Italian politics led nowhere; and when he “plunged” into “Greek politics”, he did so fully aware that western-style “politics” didn’t exist in Greece – he went into Greece with a death-wish fully comparable to that displayed by Manfred himself. Both “plunges” were compensations for the fact that he thought, if he took part in English politics, that he would endanger his holdings in the government funds; and so he let his friends get political there.

12: *Some Observations upon an Article in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, August 1819; CMP 90.

I'd like to forward an opposite, and blasphemous thesis: that *Manfred* is not a thesis about freedom or terror: it's a play designed for Edmund Kean to act in at Drury Lane, written by Byron to a commission from Douglas Kinnaird, with a view to getting Byron's revenge on the England who – he asserted – had expelled him. Byron mentions none of this; but he rarely wrote with one-hundred-percent frankness, and sometimes wrote with no frankness at all.



On July 9th 1816, Kinnaird (still on the Drury Lane Committee), wrote to Byron:

There is one other subject I implore you to satisfy me upon – when shall I receive a Tragedy from you – Never was there a moment when you could try it on the stage with such a certainty of the author being unknown – you will of course have read & heard how pertinaciously one half of the public believe you to be the conceal'd author of *Bertram* – I have ever treated the question mysteriously with a view to the power it w^d afford you of producing a play with the certainty of your name being conceal'd – No one but myself need know the secret ...¹³

On July 20th, Byron responded:

Tragedy – I have none, – an act – a first act of one¹⁴ – I had nearly finished some time before my departure from England – when events occurred which furnished me with so many real passions for time to come – that I had no attention for fictitious ones: – – The scenes I had scrawled are thrown with other papers & sketches into one of my trunks now in England – but into which I know not – nor care not – except that I should have been glad to have done anything you wished in my power, – but I have no power nor will to recommence – & surely – Maturin is your man – not I ...¹⁵

On February 3rd of the following year (Kinnaird having been forced to resign from Drury Lane), Byron wrote to him, with changed tone and much rephrasing:

I suppose & fear that your <row> {row} plagued you sufficiently – but what could be expected from the <scenes?> {Green=room?} – sooner or later you will have your revenge – & so shall I (in other matters) you on the stage <or off> & I <both on &> off & by Nemesis! – you shall build a new Drury – which shall pay one per Cent to the Subscribers – & I will write you a <play> {tragedy} which shall reduce your pounds to shillings – besides for my own particular injuries – (while this {play} is representing with much applause) <with> ordaining a proscription to which that of Sylla shall be a <comedy> comic Opera – & that of Collot d'Herbois at Lyons – a symphony. –¹⁶

Sulla's proscriptions in 82-1 BC involved the deaths of up to 9,000 Romans. Collot d'Herbois had 2,000 people executed in Lyons in 1793. Byron wants, with his proposed tragedy, to decimate the population of London.

By this time, he has, unknown to all, written most of *Manfred*. The manuscripts of *Manfred* are unusual in not being dated: but if I am correct in saying that Taylor's Pausanias is a vital subtext to the

13: Kinnaird to Byron, July 9th 1816: text from NLS Ms.43455.

14: The first act of *Werner*, written late in 1815.

15: Byron to Kinnaird, July 20th 1816: text from Ms. NLS TD 3079 f.1; BLJ V 82-3.

16: Byron to Kinnaird, February 3rd 1817: text from B.L.Add.Mss.42093 ff.21-2; BLJ V 167-8.

play's demonology,¹⁷ we can date its commencement roughly, for Byron asks Hobhouse to bring that book as early as May 1st 1816.¹⁸

On February 5th 1817 Byron wrote to Murray:

I forgot to mention to you – that a kind of poem in dialogue (in blank verse) or drama – from which “the Incantation” is an extract – begun last summer in Switzerland – is finished – it is in three acts – but of a very wild – metaphysical – and inexplicable kind. – Almost all the persons – but two or three – are Spirits of the earth & air – or the waters – the scene is in the Alps – the hero a kind of magician who is tormented by a species of remorse – <when> the cause of which is left half unexplained, – he wanders about invoking these spirits – which appear to him – & are of no use – he at last goes to the very abode of the Evil principle in propria persona – to evocate a ghost – which appears – & gives him an ambiguous & disagreeable answer – & in the 3^d. act he <dies> is found by his attendants dying in a tower – where he studied his art. – You may perceive by this outline that I have no great opinion of this piece of phantasy – but I <figure on> have at least rendered it quite impossible for the stage – for which <I have> my intercourse with D. Lane had given me the greatest contempt. –

I have not even copied it off – & feel too lazy at present to attempt the {whole – but} when I have I will send it you – & you may either throw it into the fire or not; – I would send you the rough copy as it is – but it would be illegible – & perhaps not less so when copied fair. – The “Incantation” was the conclusion – (a kind of Chorus) of the 1st. scene .. – – – Nobody has seen it. – – I send you an extract. – from out act 2^d. –¹⁹

Notice that he makes no connection between the new work and Kinnaird's request for a tragedy, made the previous year (Murray and Kinnaird were not on good terms). But he's lying: he has *not* made it “quite impossible for the stage”: on the contrary, as Bernhard Reitz pointed out a long time ago,²⁰ *Manfred*, with its spectacular Alpine scenes and infernal settings (“Arimanes on a ball of fire”, and so on), would have been no problem at all for the theatre which had put on Sheridan's *Pizarro*, with its settings in the Andes. *Manfred* is a real attempt at professional playwriting (unlike the Venetian tragedies: though see below). At about an hour and a half in length, it gives plenty of evening-time for a farce beforehand and a ballet after; and its leading role is created for Edmund Kean, who specialised in angst-ridden parts, and whose distaste for rivals caused him to sack any good actors – or even mediocre actors – who he felt might upstage him. Thus the minor parts in *Manfred* act only as feeds for the protagonist's soliloquies and speeches. Kean disliked Maturin's *Bertram* because (a) the female lead was bigger than his own, and (b) because the actress who played it was – as many actresses were – taller than him. Of proletarian origin, Kean was a welcome guest at the dinner-tables of the great.

If therefore we object to the play because of its “bourgeois ideology, which makes it complicit with hegemonic power”, we have to blame Edmund Kean, to whose personality it's perfectly tailored.



¹⁷: See *Manfred and Thomas Taylor*, BJ 2001, pp.62-71; rptd. at Cochran (ed.) *Byron's Religions* (CSP 2011), pp.262-73.

¹⁸: BLJ V 74.

¹⁹: Byron to Murray, February 15th 1817: text from NLS Ms.43489; first sheet only BLJ V 169-70.

²⁰: Bernhard Reitz, *Byron's Praise of Sheridan*, in Bridzun, Petra and Pointner, Frank Erik (eds.): *Byron as Reader*, Essen 1999.

On March 25th Byron pretended to come clean, and wrote to Kinnaird himself:

I have no tragedy nor tragedies – but a sort of metaphysical drama which I sent to Murray the other day – which is the very Antipodes of the stage and is meant to be so – it is all in the Alps & the other world – and as mad as Bedlam – I do not know that it is even fit for publication – the persons are all magicians – ghosts – & the evil principle – with a mixed mythology of my own – which you may suppose is somewhat of the strangest. – – –²¹

And only six days later, he added,

As to tragedy, I may try one day – but never for the stage – don't you {see} I have no luck there? – my two addresses were not liked – & my Committee=ship did but get me into scrapes – no – no – I shall not tempt the Fates that way – besides I should risk more than I could gain – I have no right to encroach on other men's ground – even <I> if I could maintain my own. – – –

You tell me {that} Maturin's second tragedy²² has failed – is not this an additional warning to everybody as well as to me? – however – if the whim seized me I should not consider that nor anything else – but the fact is that success on the stage is not to me an object of ambition – & I am not sure that it would please me to triumph – although it would doubtless vex me to fail. – – For these reasons I never will put it to the test.²³ – Unless I could beat them all – it would be nothing – & who could do that? nor I nor any man – the Drama is complete already – there can be nothing like what has been. –²⁴

This self-defeating attitude, in the plain face of the evidence, represents a fishing for reassurance on Byron's part. He wants Kinnaird to praise the piece, to see at once what an excellent vehicle it would make for Kean, and to persuade Drury Lane to mount it. Unfortunately for the timing, Kinnaird was no longer in charge of Drury Lane, and Kean hated him anyway. On November 3rd 1817, Monk Lewis told Byron,

... they say, that the rapture of Drury Lane from Kean to the Scene-Shifters inclusive, when D. Kinnaird's expulsion was announced, was something quite ludicrous.²⁵

Kinnaird never mentions *Manfred* in any surviving letter (though many of his letters are missing); and Byron's other close friend, Hobhouse (who was with Byron for most of the play's composition), mentions it in no document known to me. I imagine the incest-theme scared them.

There have been no professional productions (as opposed to rehearsed readings) of a full text of *Manfred* in England, ever. In Germany, yes: and fragments of it are sometimes heard in the concert-hall, as fillings-in for Schumann's incidental music. Jerome J. McGann's outline of his own proposed production of it, with lots of noisy scaffolding, and Astarte as Crucified Cheesecake, is still recollected with awe.

The next essay, on *Marino Faliero*, spends three pages, before examining that text, on a meditation about René Girard and Eric Gans, which climaxes thus:

All esthetic experience has the same structure, but melodrama is “popular” art, in that its emphasis is on the appropriative, or “sparagmatic” phase of the oscillation, while tragedy holds us longer on the contemplation of the sign itself, rather than its desirable referent (p.121).

This writer has swallowed the official 1820 version of Cato Street, hook, line, and sinker, and *implies* a shocking modern parallel:

Several modern commentators condescendingly point out almost as an inconsistency his [Byron's] repugnance at the Cato Street conspiracy in the year of the play's composition. Is it?

21: Byron to Kinnaird, from Venice, March 25th 1817: text from Ms. NLS TD 3079 f.3; BLJ V 194-5.

22: *Manuel*.

23: Compare “Were I capable of writing a play which could be deemed stageworthy, success would give me no pleasure, and failure great pain. It is for this reason that even during the time of being one of the committee of one of the theatres, I never made the attempt, and never will” – *Marino Faliero*, Preface.

24: Byron to Kinnaird, March 31st 1817: text from B.L.Add.Mss.42093 ff.34-5; BLJ V 195-7.

25: Matthew Gregory Lewis to Byron, November 3rd 1817; text from NLS Acc.12604 / 4247G.

(On analogy, would a modern proponent of global human development and equity be inconsistent in his or her horror at the idea of a high-jacked aircraft hitting the White House and killing the American president and his cabinet? Would such delicacy be sneered at in terms of the race or nationality the proponent shared with the prospective victims? – p.129).

This implies Byron to have been the early nineteenth-century equivalent of “modern proponent of global human development and equity”. I’m not sure that he was.

To re-rehearse what really happened in January 1820: a group of radicals, led by one Arthur Thistlewood (he claimed the acquaintance of J.C.Hobhouse), banded together in a stable-loft in Cato Street, off the Edgware Road (it’s still there, with a blue plaque, next to a condo. named “Sidmouth House” after the then Home Secretary). Their aim was to invade Lord Harrowby’s house, where they believed he would be holding a dinner-party, assassinate the entire cabinet, then break open the Bank of England and distribute all its gold to the poor. But they had been infiltrated by a government spy called George Edwards, and lured to Harrowby’s place by an article planted in *The New Times* (the government’s official newspaper). There was no dinner-party planned. On the night intended, the Bow Street Runners were waiting, and after a scuffle in which one Runner was killed, the “Conspirators” were arrested, tried, and sentenced in various ways, including death for Thistlewood and three others. The government plot succeeded. England was overcome with a Climate of Terror, and the Tories won the election.



**“It’s the law of England.
Nothing to do with me!”**

If the book told you these things, it might also mention a *possible* contemporary parallel with greater confidence (or would it?).

Hobhouse was by now not in Newgate (where he had been at the time the “Conspiracy” happened), but in Parliament, as M.P. for Westminster. In his diary, he describes the execution:

Monday May 1st 1820: Rode up to London. Thistlewood,²⁶ Ings,²⁷ Brunt,²⁸ Davidson,²⁹ and Tidd³⁰ executed this morning at the Old Bailey. Their heads were cut off by a man in a mask.³¹ The people hissed violently during the operation – soldiers were in readiness everywhere. The men died like heroes – Ings perhaps was too obstreperous in singing *Death or Liberty*, and

26: An ex-militiaman (like Hobhouse) Thistlewood had been acquitted of sedition on 15 Nov 1816 in connection with the meeting at Spa Fields, which “Orator” Hunt had addressed.

27: James Ings (????-1820) a failed butcher and seller of political pamphlets.

28: John Thomas Brunt (????-1820) occupation(s) unknown.

29: William Davidson (????-1820) was black, and according to some stories son of the Attorney-General for Jamaica.

30: Richard Tidd (????-1820) shoemaker and radical.

31: The headsman was probably Tom Parker, an expert resurrection-man and mortician; though several respectable surgeons were assaulted, and in one case almost castrated, on suspicion of having performed the decapitations.

Thistlewood said, “Be quiet Ings, we can die without all this noise”. They admitted they intended to kill the ministers, but without malice,³² and as the only resource.

It is certain that Edwards, a government spy,³³ was the chief instigator of the whole scheme. The people cried out for him during the execution. The government will gain nothing by this execution.

I went down to the House, and sat some time. The Attorney-General³⁴ did not come down, and if he had I think I should have been afraid to speak.³⁵

Came home. Dined with Cuthbert,³⁶ Burdett, Lord Thanet,³⁷ and Bainbridge³⁸ there. Three of the company had been in jail – Lord Thanet, Burdett, and I.³⁹

I walked about a long time with Burdett talking over the fate and conduct of these men who died this morning.



This illustrates The Politics of Freedom and Terror better than anything in the book before me, which, in twice taking the 1820 government line on Cato Street without reservation, destroys its own pretensions to expertise completely.

Hobhouse’s diary also illustrates the title-theme better than *Marino Faliero*, whose author (strangely uninformed by Hobhouse about Edwards – at least in any surviving letter), took the government line as well – see his reaction, quoted above. Some contemporary reviewers made the connection with Cato Street:

32: Ings had fantasised (as had B.: see *H.V.S.V.* 124 and 126) about having Castlereagh’s head off.

33: George Edwards (????-????) had been employed by Sidmouth (and by Hobhouse’s cousin Henry, who worked at the Home Office) as *agent-provocateur*; he gave no evidence at the trial; and was last heard of trying unsuccessfully to keep a false identity in Jersey.

34: The Attorney-General was Robert Gifford (later Baron Gifford: 1779-1826).

35: Last sentence not in *RLL* (II 127). H.’s implication is that the executions had scared him into silence.

36: Cuthbert unidentified.

37: Sackville Tufton, 9th Earl of Thanet (1767-1825) had spent a year in jail in 1799 and been fined £1,000 for allegedly abetting the escape from Maidstone Courthouse of Arthur O’Connor, the Irish patriot.

38: Bainbridge unidentified.

39: Burdett’s first incarceration had been in 1810: he was imprisoned again in 1821.

... his Lordship has drawn from real life, as well as from the storehouse of recorded poetry. If Thistlewood and Ings could have delivered themselves in blank verse, they would have spoken much the same words (for they did utter the same sentiments) as the Doge, and his accomplice Israel Bertuccio. This is as it should be, and if Lord Byron consulted his own bosom, instead of the newspapers, it proves his deep knowledge of the worst parts of human nature.⁴⁰

Hobhouse's maiden speech (on May 9th 1820, a week after the executions), was against the use of government spies as *agents provocateurs*.

It's commonplace to write about Byron's plays, ignoring the fact that they're plays, and making heavy prose commentaries on them, as if they're political tracts (as the essay here does). Their thin-to-nonexistent stage history is never mentioned. The fact that they *may* not work in the theatre is never held against them.⁴¹ One's suspicion, that there are so few dramatic moments in *Marino Faliero* as to render it unwatchable, is neither here nor there. Byron, as we know, was furious when Robert Elliston succeeded in putting the play on at Drury Lane; but it's worth reading what Kinnaird told Byron about the production – which he saw three times (Hobhouse only saw it once):

My dear Byron

I went last night to see the Doge on the Stage – M^r Cooper &c did not, as you imagine, realise your conception – I fairly confess, I believe myself to have formed a wrong opinion of its' fitness for the stage – It was very affective – The audience felt it so – I could not have believed an English audience so sensible to the beauties of this admirable production – I shall go again tomorrow ...⁴²

My dear Byron,

I went to see your Tragedy again last night – It is admirable – I retract {my former opinion} – , – It acts to perfection – The public have always more merit than they have credit for – a scatter'd audience – thin – & meagre – Their attention so arrested throughout the whole time, that a noseblowing was considered an indecent interruption – Kean would have been, & will be still greater than he yet has shown himself when he personates the Doge – the Doge is not on the whole ill-acted – nor are the other parts – The Angiolina of M^{rs} West is certainly damnable – But all the Conspiracy Scenes are so well written that the actors are not put to it to help them out – I would not have believ'd an English audience of the present day had the discernment I witnessd in them last night – The applause was only at times – but one hand drew down the whole at once – The most intense silence & attention was the striking tribute to the author's merits – The interest rose without interruption till the last – The Curtain falls as the Doge kneels to lay his head on the Block – The play had no aid from scenery, or Decoration, or dresses – But the public does not come to see it – But they will do one of these days – No one sees it without becoming a proselyte – But all seem to have follow'd the {unanimous} Dictum of the Press that it was not fitted for the Stage – whence arises this unanimity? I believe in stratagems & plots⁴³ – The literary {or writing} world, all of which envies & would kill you, has an interest in preventing you from trying the stage – You have tried it under every possible disadvantage against your consent, & your Genius has beaten your Judgement – There is nothing on the Stage but Shakespeare that can compare with it, for uniform & extraordinary appropriateness of the Sentiments to each particular character & circumstance – The language for tr[Ms. *tear*: "*ue*"] simplicity grace & force is unrivall'd – (I would cut out "false dice"⁴⁴ by the Bye) – It will live as long as language – Will it not be ranked as your best? I think so – It requires to be almost learned by heart to feel it's merits – The character of the Doge is more fully & perfectly developed than any character except one or two drawn by Shakespeare – But what is most striking after all is the naturalness of all <tht> the action on the stage – There is a continuity of the story that is never once broken – & it is never tiresome – It is quite wonderful – However delightful the closet, I say its' merits are only half understood till it is acted – Excuse this scrawl – Elliston is abused in a canting tone by all the press – {I say on the contrary} <,> he had a right to act it – & you had no right to ask him to desist from his trade – –⁴⁵

40: *The British Critic*, May 1821 (*The Romantics Reviewed* I p.305).

41: Jonson's *Sejanus* was thought unstageable until the recent RSC production revealed its theatrical excellence.

42: Kinnaird to Byron, May 1st 1821; text from NLS Ms.43455.

43: Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, V i 84.

44: *Marino Faliero* IV ii 291.

45: Kinnaird to Byron, May 4th 1821; text from NLS Ms.43455.

Byron should have been pleased – to keep even a thin Drury Lane house quiet and well-behaved was a feat almost without precedent. His plan to reform the English stage might seem, in a small, embryonic way, to be working. But he would not be convinced. He wrote to Murray on June 29th 1821: “I am quite ignorant how far ‘the Doge’ did or did not succeed – y^l. first letters seemed to say yes – your last say nothing. – My own immediate friends are naturally partial ...”⁴⁶ It looks as if he does not want to know what a good practical playwright he is. Kinnaird’s “... its’ merits are only half understood till it is acted” contradicts what Byron says about writing for the closet. The statement about Kean shows Kinnaird’s intuition that Byron is still writing for Kean, as he was with Manfred: but as with Manfred, Kean never played Marino Faliero.

Beethoven’s *Fidelio* is one of the most famous iconic celebrations of a hero being rescued from tyranny. But a striking thing about its performance-history is this: it was still more popular after 1815 than it had been before. Before 1815 it was assumed that Florestan had been imprisoned as a liberal; after 1815 it was assumed that he had been imprisoned as a monarchist. Before 1815 his enemy, Pizarro, was assumed to be a “legitimist”; after, a Jacobin. There’s more sense in the latter, for Don Fernando, whose arrival sets the seal on his liberation, is a messenger from the King; but it’s true that we never know exactly why Florestan was imprisoned in the first place.

Likewise the father of Bonnivard, Byron’s Prisoner of Chillon,

... perished at the stake
For tenets he would not forsake;
And for the same, his lineal race
In darkness found a dwelling-place ... (ll.13-16)

But what those tenets were is a subject about which the poem is mute. A cynic might say that Beethoven, his librettists, and Byron, were only writing for as wide a market as possible. In fact Byron confesses that when he wrote the poem he knew nothing about Bonnivard (who was not imprisoned with his brothers, and whose father did not die at the stake).

The next essay in the book, about Byron and Switzerland, is by Simon Bainbridge, and is another welcome example of lucidity, free from the insecure urge to quote theoreticians. Its unquestionable thesis is that in Switzerland in 1816, Byron wrote his most famous works about politics and freedom – using, for example, the 1476 Swiss victory at Morat “as an antithesis to Waterloo” in *Childe Harold III* (p.139).

But Bainbridge is honest enough to point out that Byron’s concept of “freedom” is a bit vague (he quotes Malcolm Kelsall to this effect – p.142). For the creepy fact is that, even nowadays, anyone in favour of “Freedom”, from whatever political angle, finds it easy to claim Byron (or rather, the simulacrum “Byron”), as one of their own. I do not believe that Michael Foot’s politics had much in common with those of Elma Dangerfield: but a more closely-knit pair of “Byronists” it was impossible to imagine. The present essay gives us, all quoting “Eternal Spirit of the Chainless Mind”, Giuseppe Mazzini, the American abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, and ... er ... Margaret Thatcher. One event of which I’d like to see the video-record is Thatcher opening the Lord Byron School in Gyumri, Armenia. I wonder what she said as she cut the ribbon?

46: Byron to Murray, June 29th 1821; text from B.L.Ashley 2700; BLJ VIII 144-5.



Don't worry, it's only a simulacrum.

Was Byron anxious to make Italy free from the Austrians, or Greece free from the Turks? Or was he just anxious to make himself and his money free from the "Aristocracy of Blackguards" which was all he considered democracy to be?⁴⁷ The answer only makes things harder – "Both":

It is not that I adulate the people –
 Without me there are Demagogues enough,
 And infidels to pull down every Steeple,
 And set up in their stead some proper stuff;
 Whether they may sow Scepticism to reap Hell,
 As is the Christian dogma rather rough,
 I do not know – I wish men to be free
 As much from Mobs as Kings – from you as me.⁴⁸

It was not the current political Swiss environment – Simon Bainbridge here concedes – but the ideal image of it as a pastoral paradise, seen in Manfred's Alpine meditations, which appealed to Byron. This despite the fact that he could not "lose my wretched identity" in it (p.151): he could not be what he wanted to be – "free" not from tyrants, but from himself. Whether he succeeded in freeing himself from himself, and losing his identity, when he plunged into Greece in 1823 / 4, is a matter for doubt. He certainly succeeded in losing his life there. For him, "Freedom" was defined exclusively in negative terms – as Freedom from something, not as Freedom to do something. It was a negator, not an enabler. What people were to do with their freedom didn't interest him. How was Italy to be ruled, and by whom? What sort of constitution should an independent Greece have? If Byron thought about such questions, then logically he should think about how England should be governed, and, despite the book's assertion that "Byron's influence by neo-Harringtonianism is well known" (p.51), the further he got away from England, the less urgent that issue became.

The next two essays are also free from ritual bows to gurus, and are written in non-academic (that is, good) English.

The first (which is very well-informed) is by Stephen Minta, looks at Byron's involvement with Greece, and tries to construct a thesis alternative to that of Malcolm Kelsall and Doris Langley Moore, for whom the decision to cross from Cephalonia to Missolonghi (at least) was a serious error of judgement on Byron's part. Minta concedes that "Byron's commitment to freedom can appear always

⁴⁷: *My Dictionary*: entry for Augustus.

⁴⁸: DJ IX st.25.

equally diffuse, and always potentially problematic” (p.155), and that his way of expressing his intentions towards Greece are “slippery” (p.156). When he got to Greece, “What he encountered was a nation in the process of constructing itself, not a nation achieved” (p.164): this is a very polite way of saying that the Greek leaders hated each other and were trying to kill one another. “Clearly it is possible to construct a narrative of Byron’s return to Greece that stresses the quixotic, the chance, the misinformed” (p.165) is also charitable – Byron’s journey to Greece was his way of ending his life – which didn’t end in the glorious way he hoped for.

The next piece, by Jonathan D. Gross, seems at first three unconnected essays. One is on Orphic dismemberment (with apt references to Horace, Judges, the multiple voyages home of Lord Guilford’s body, and the gruesome adventures of Byron’s own cadaver). The next is an intriguing examination of the Blackness of the Stranger in *The Deformed Transformed*. The last is on the much-discussed-but-so-far-unresolved question, “What is the role of Byron in J.M.Coetzee’s *Disgrace*?” The novel’s protagonist, an old-fashioned English lecturer forced to face the irrelevance of literature in the “Post-Christian, posthistorical, postliterate” culture of modern South Africa,⁴⁹ dreams of creating an opera featuring Byron as tenor, Alessandro Guiccioli as bass, Teresa as soprano and Margarita Cogni as contralto. It’s clear that he’ll never write it. Via a strained digression about Monk Lewis’s *The Wood Demon*, the piece concludes that “For art to renew itself, it must return to silence” (p.181). But its problem, and that of Coetzee, is that we’re never confident that the protagonist is an artist at all.

The final essay takes as its starting-point Baudrillard’s *The Spirit of Terrorism*, an essay which I haven’t read, but which seems from this account to swallow the official line on 9/11 rather as writers in the book swallow the 1820 official line on Cato Street (though see the final quotation, below, as an example of how the official line is articulated). Baudrillard (quoted by the writer of my epigraph) seems thus himself to be a purveyor of simulacra. The writer has arrived at Byron (via Girard and Derrida) by their third page, and at once we can tell that, as often in the book, Byron’s texts are being viewed from a distance:

In *The Giaour* and *Manfred*, major acts of signification take place “over” the dead bodies of Leila and Astarte (p.185).

... “over” – as opposed to “under”? Why the inverted commas? When in either work do we see the heroine’s dead body? Is “over” in inverted commas as way of signalling that they aren’t, in fact, seen at all? Is the writer really drawing attention to the fact that nonsense is being written, even in the act of writing it? With these po-mo people, you really can’t tell. As with Chaucer’s Pardoner (or Edward Said, or Baudrillard), self-advertising fraudulence seems a necessary part of their routine. To quote someone else:

“Fare Thee Well!” tells HIStory, then – let us call it Byron’s story, pretending that even his-story is unitary and unconflicted. But in venturing Thatstory the work also calls out HERstory – let us call it Lady Byron’s story; on a similarly heuristic pretense. Because neither of Thesestories are simple or commensurable (and least of all pretty or sentimental), in thosestories the work develops Theirstory as well. Theirstory, however, never belonged entirely to HIM or HER; from the outset it comprised numerous otherstories which wove themselves into the fantastic network of Thesestories. As the locus of Thistory, “Fare Thee Well!” makes possible a number of other stories, which we would probably not be entirely wrong to call ourstory. All Thesestories began among the first transmitters of the poem, and they continue to work their ways down to and beyond ourselves.⁵⁰

The essay under current discussion continues:

The material violence of history is not accessed in Byron as in Sade through bodies being ripped open (p.185).

But it *is* so “accessed” (if you insist on such a damp word):

49: J.M.Coetzee, *Disgrace* (Vintage 2000), p.32.

50: Jerome McGann, ed. James Soderholm, *Byron and Romanticism*, (Cambridge University Press 2002), p.229.

And he saw the lean dogs beneath the wall
 Hold o'er the dead their carnival,
 Gorging and growling o'er carcass and limb;
 They were too busy to bark at him!
 From a Tartar's skull they had stripped the flesh,
 As ye peel the fig when its fruit is fresh;
 And their white tusks crunched o'er the whiter skull,
 As it slipped through their jaws, when their edge grew dull,
 As they lazily mumbled the bones of the dead,
 When they scarce could rise from the spot where they fed;
(*The Siege of Corinth*, ll.409-18)

A dying Moslem, who had felt the foot
 Of a foe o'er him, snatched at it, and bit
 The very tendon, which is most acute
 (That which some ancient Muse, or modern Wit,
 Named after thee, Achilles!) and quite through't
 He made the teeth meet, nor relinquished it
 Even with his life – for (but they lie) 'tis said
 To the live leg still clung the severed head. (*Don Juan* VIII st.84)

The essay would have us believe that “*Werner* was the closest Byron came to exploring the spirit of terrorism” (p.188), and that it’s to be associated with the Byron’s membership of the Carbonari ...

... A secret revolutionary society with elaborate initiatory rituals and a belief in effecting violent, catastrophic change in politics and government, the Carbonari or “charcoal burners” emphasized the liberation of Italy from Austria (p.188).

To call it “emphasis” rather than “demand” or “aim” or “goal” may indicate an unease at knowing just how empty the rhetoric of the Carbonari was. In addition to their belief in violence and catastrophe, they “emphasised” the need to rid Italy of drunkenness, gambling, and adultery – with what success, we in 2012 can see, and could have seen then. The Carbonari are the ancestors of the P2, the killers of Paolo Pasolini, and the engineers of the Banco Ambrosiano scandal. When Garibaldi arrived, he would have nothing to do with them. They were (unlike the P2) incapable of inflicting terror, and were happiest singing songs deep in the forests.

As with *Manfred* and *Marino Faliero* (see above), the question “is *Werner* any good?” is here irrelevant. Ellen Terry thought it “the dullest play that ever was”, when Irving was preparing its last recorded performance (in 1887).⁵¹ But as long as a text provides material for essays, who cares about its quality? “Everything exists, nothing has value”, as Mrs Moore realizes in the Marabar Caves.

The essay puts Ulric and his black bands at the centre of its attention, despite the fact that Ulric takes up very little stage time in comparison with his father, and is never dramatized in conjunction with his followers (whose reality we may doubt, as we may Selim’s followers in *The Bride of Abydos*). It’s like putting Laertes at the centre of your analysis of *Hamlet*: except that we see Laertes’ followers on stage.

The essay employs a modern analysis of the Thirty Years War which was not available to Byron, and uses terms in which he never thought:

More than any other work by Byron, *Werner* recognizes that by removing death from the system of equivalencies a politics of terror *can* interrupt capitalism’s production and control of the idea of “the human” as well as the “inhuman” (p.191).

It shows its ignorance of the details of the text by, for example, saying that *Werner* steals “a gold coin” from Strahlenhem (p.192): what he steals is a rouleau, that is, several coins wrapped in a paper tube. And it shows its Baudrillard-inspired relevance to the book’s supposed theme, The Politics of Freedom and Terror, in passages like this:

If then, reading Byron’s *Werner* through Baudrillard reveals the former’s postmodernism, especially with respect to revolutionary terror, can we say that the spectral presence of an earlier, possibly more Romantic Byron, the Byron of *The Giaour* and *Manfred*, haunts Baudrillard’s *The*

51: Margaret Howell, *Byron Tonight*, p.148; modified on p.167 to “the dullest play to read as ever was”.

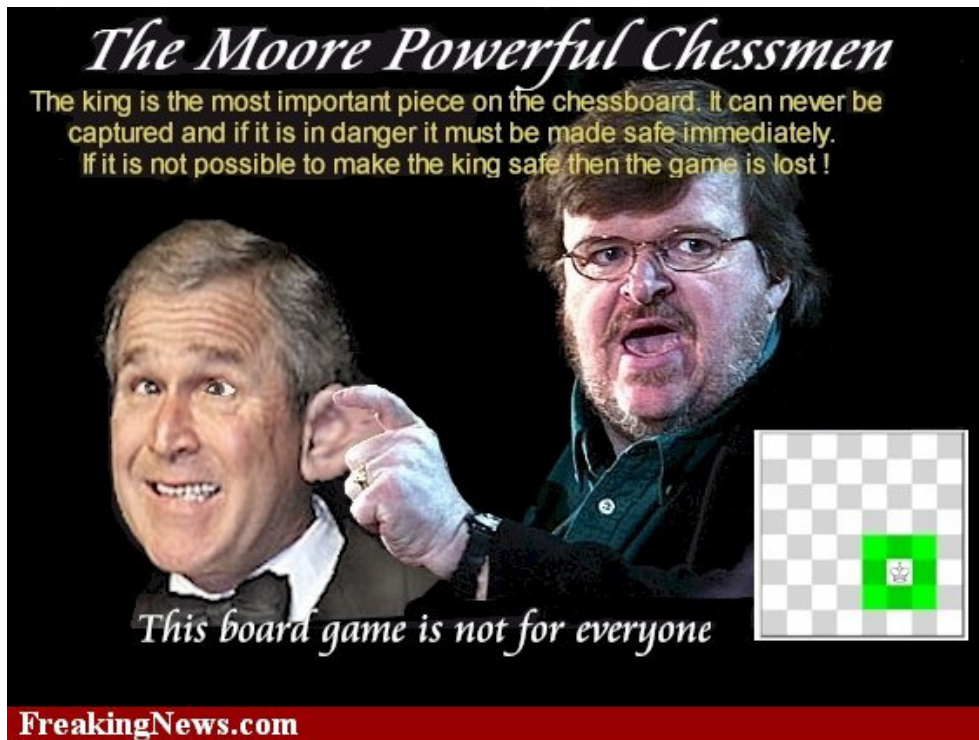
Spirit of Terrorism? This text is filled with a yearning for the seductiveness of death, and particularly an aesthetic and erotic fetishization of self-destruction. The terrorists' suicide converts death from mere extinction (which is its signified [*sic* – *P.C.*] within global capitalism) into "a symbolic stake and gift" which becomes an "absolute weapon." The Twin Towers also "commit suicide" by collapsing in response to the terrorists' death; (like lovers mirroring each other) both the towers and the terrorists enter the aesthetics of the sublime specifically through an act driven by an internal logic of self-destruction, in which death cannot be "exchanged" for either redemption or ideology: "by the grace of terrorism," the Twin Towers have become the "world's most beautiful building" (p.194).

How about that for a simulacrum? Tell it to Michael Moore. See how he reacts when you then tell him he'll have to pay fifty pounds to read it in context.

The post-modernist assertion that the past cannot be known has as corollary that, since the roots of the present lie in the past, the present can't be known either. It's an excellent academic excuse for not bothering to study anything, but to weave meaningless verbal patterns signifying nothing. The thesis is perfectly exemplified by this book. Who benefits for such an obvious dereliction of duty is clear – the villains who run the world in the present.



“Look, Dave! A simulacrum!”
“Gosh! You could have fooled me! I could have sworn it was real!”



“Explain, please. Is all this some kind of joke?”