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Byron and Occupied Countries: The Double Agent as Revolutionary

Let me begin by telling you what I'm not going to do with that critical cliché the Byronic hero. Following Byron's own lead, there has been no shortage of critics who see Childe Harold (and his kin in Byron's work after he invented him in 1809) as the composite successor of a long line of mythical characters, classical, Jewish and Christian. The Byronic hero's obscure past sin, his somehow marked appearance, the oppressive weight of his identity, his destructive love, his pursuit of suffering, his wilful defiance, his unfulfilled wanderings, his hell of self-consciousness, no doubt justify a genealogy which includes Cain, Oedipus, Orestes, Prometheus, Faust, Milton's Satan and the Wandering Jew, particularly as these are revaluated by eighteenth-century mythographers and other revisionists. Critics have also added some of Byron's not exactly mythical older contemporaries, ranging from Fletcher Christian to Ali Pasha, both of whom are characters in his work. Similarly, the hero's inclination to lead or sympathize with outlaws or political revolutionaries, to meditate in melancholy isolation among wild surroundings or among tombs and ruins, to pride himself on being passionately sensitive, make him the heir to the assorted gloomy egoists, ingratiating bandit chiefs, sad satiated relics of dissipation and effusive men of feeling who increasingly people the cultural landscape of the late eighteenth century. Peter Thorslev in his book *The Byronic Hero* traces most of these paths leading to Harold. But let me skip all that. The womb of my emByronic hero—if you'll excuse the term—will start off at least, as a rather linguistic one—stylistic and formal.

First, who is the hero of this imitation of a Spenserian stanza (not by Byron)?

> He was to weet a melancholy carle,
> Thin in the waist, with bushy head of hair,
> As hath the seeded thistle, when in parle
> It holds the zephyr, ere it sendeth fair

Its light balloons into the summer air;
Thereto his beard had not begun to bloom,
No brush had touch'd his chin or razor sheer;
No care had touch'd his cheek with mortal doom,
But new he was and bright as scarf from Persian loom.

And second, who is the hero of this one?

A noticeable Man, with large grey eyes,
And a pale face that seemed undoubtedly
As if a blooming face it ought to be;
Heavy his low-hung lip did oft appear,
Deprest by weight of musing Phantasy;
Profound his forehead was, though not severe;
Yet some did think he had but little business there.

My first portrait is post-Harold and by Keats. The sitter is Charles Brown, a sensitive and also coarse-grained Regency buck, with a wide acquaintance in the brothels of Soho, and the ironic pseudo-innocence of that first stanza is continued in the later ones where Brown is ostensibly separated from Byronic "wassail bowl," "lewd ribbalds" and "many a damsel hoarse" because of his "pilgrim's soul." My second portrait is pre-Harold, and is by Wordsworth. Its sitter is Coleridge, and its complex justapositions include (as you will recall) a pale face that ought to be blooming and a heavy low-hung lip depressed by fantasy and set against a forehead that manages to be both profound and not severe. To some he gives the impression of not belonging where he is.

The mixed tone and mixed substance in these depictions of Brown and Coleridge, and also of Harold at the beginning of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, need to be seen in relation to the often semi-comic eighteenth-century neo-Spenserian portrait. A series of significant quotations might begin with James Thomson's "Certes, he was a most engaging wight" from *The Castle of Indolence* in 1748, go on with James Beattie's "In sooth he was a strange and wayward wight" from that remarkably influential poem *The Minstrel* in 1771, and then reach Byron's opening portrait of Harold:

Ah me! in sooth he was a shameless wight
Sore given to revel and ungodly glee;
Few earthly things found favour in his sight
Save concubines and carnal companie,
And flaunting wassailers of high and low degree....

Yet oft-times in his maddest mirthful mood
Strange pangs would flash along Childe Harold's brow,
As if the memory of some deadly feud
Or disappointed passion lurk'd below:
But this none knew, nor haply car'd to know....

> With pleasure drugg'd he almost long'd for woe,
> And e'en for change of scene would seek the shades below.

"Change of scene" indeed! I can think of few more unlikely motives for a Spenserian descent to the underworld. But it suits this Guyon guyed, who destroys his bower of bliss *before* going on his goalless quest. Beattie, in a prose passage quoted by Byron, sees the Spenserian stanza as well adapted to both the droll and the pathetic. Keats, we may recall, wanted to end the last Spenserian stanza of *The Eve of St. Agnes*

> The beadsman stiffen'd, twixt a sigh and laugh
> Ta'en sudden from his beads by one weak little cough,

but his friends wouldn't let him. Byron too felt compelled to become less droll. Later on, during his Rhine Journey, or when he turns into Manfred, Harold is wrapped in a tone of more unadulterated gloom. But one should not forget what the Byronic hero owes to the serio-comic, mixed-idiom tradition of the neo-Spenserian portrait, especially when the wheel comes full circle and he ends up as Beppo or Lambro in the octave stanza of the equally composite tradition of Ariosto. Beppo! It's nice to occasionally have the chance to call a Byronic hero Joe.

But another tradition of portraiture is also important to Harold and his kin; this time, however, the medium is the heroic couplet. "To sneer at him who drew Achitophel" was a deadly sin for Byron. Dryden's Achitophel and Zimri, and Pope's Sporus and Unfortunate Lady are the structural models for Byron's full-dress heroic-couplet portrait (in 1814) of his hero as Lara. What seems to have fascinated Byron is the way unresolved contradictions of character could be sharpened and, on occasion, pushed to extremity, by the parallels and inversions available within and between the paired lines of the medium. The destructive body-soul dualisms of Achitophel, whose pigmy body is fretted, that is eaten away or corroded by his fiery soul, whose bounds of wit and madness are divided by thin partitions, who is obsessively compelled to "punish a body which he could not please; / Bankrupt of life, yet prodigal of ease," joins, in Byron's sensibility, with the arbitrary half-and-half, up-and-down seesaw of Pope's Sporus,

> Half froth, half venom, spits himself abroad,
> In puns, or politics, or tales, or lies,
> Or spite, or smut, or rhymes, or blasphemies.
> His wit all see-saw, between that and this,
> Now high, now low, now master up, now miss,
> And he himself one vile antithesis.

The couplet portrait of Byron's Lara begins: "In him inexplicably mix'd appeared / Much to be loved and hated, sought and feared." We learn that he is both gay and bitter, with a smile that either wanes to a sneer or is undermined by the contrast between lip and eye. And yet that hard eye is sometimes soft until its softness is, in turn, suppressed by "self-inflicted penance" or "vigilance of grief that would compel / The soul to hate for having lov'd too well." Words like "choice" and "chance," "fate" and "will," "exult" and "regret," "flesh" and "soul," confront one another across the various divides of the couplet. Here is a brief anthology of passages. Lara is

> A thing of dark imaginings, that shaped
> By choice the perils he by chance escaped,
> But 'scaped in vain, for in their memory yet
> His mind would half exult and half regret....
> His early dreams of good outstripp'd the truth,
> And troubled manhood followed baffled youth....
> He called on Nature's self to share the shame
> And charged all faults upon the fleshly form
> She gave to clog the soul, and feast the worm;
> Till he at last confounded good and ill,
> And half mistook for fate the acts of will.

Of course the mistake can only be half a mistake.

Byron becomes so fond of creating characters as vile antithises (he loved Pope's phrase) that in his 1814 Journal we even find Burns being shaped into a similar portrait. "what an antithetical mind!" he exclaims, "—tenderness, roughness, delicacy, coarseness, sentiment, sensuality—soaring and grovelling, dust and deity—all mixed up in that one compound of inspired clay!" And when Byron returns to Harold and to the Spenserian stanza, Napoleon himself, at Waterloo, appears like this:

> There sunk the greatest, nor the worst of men,
> Whose spirit antithetically mixt
> One moment of the mightiest, and again
> On little objects with like firmness fixt,
> Extreme in all things! hadst thou been betwixt,
> Thy throne had still been thine, or never been.

Exiled to unnatural inactivity on St. Helena, Napoleon's fiery soul, Achitophel-like, eats away or corrodes its inadequate bodily "medium of desire":

> Even as a flame unfed which runs to waste
> With its own flickering, or a sword laid by,
> Which eats into itself and rusts ingloriously.

Tennyson remembered that passage when Ulysses rejects *his* island exile.

But by this time the Byronic hero is almost beginning to look like an inflated parody of Everyman, who, while perched on Pope's antithetical "isthmus of a middle state" and "created half to rise and half to fall" (to quote some famous phrases from *An Essay on Man*) is also without the possibility of anything (whether God's grace or some Popian paradox of natural law) which can keep him balanced or make him whole: an Everyman with no last resort but (let us say) the assertion of Shakespeare's Parolles: "simply the thing I am shall make me live."

A stylistic and psychological genealogy is one thing, a social and political is another. Or are they? What sort of a world breeds Byronic heroes? Judging from Byron's works and from his life, the answer seems to be either occupied countries ripe for revolution or occupied countries in the wake of a counterrevolution: specifically, Greece after the French Revolution and Northern Italy after Waterloo. "The air of Greece made me a poet," said Byron to Trelawny, and what he breathed in wasn't just the atmosphere of the natural landscape or the decayed spirit of Greek antiquity. Byron thought of Harold on October 31st, 1809 in Janina, chief city of Epirus, shortly after he returned from Tepelini, where he visited Ali Pasha, the notorious (and controversial) local agent of Turkish rule; he wrote "To Inez," that remarkable lyric spoken by Harold, at Athens in January, 1810; and by far the most powerful writing in the first instalment of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* concerns the natural, cultural and political world of Northern and Central Greece under the Ottoman Empire.

What needs to be emphasized first is that for Byron being pro-Greek doesn't mean being anti-Turk. Byron hated enslavement, but he liked (within limits) the enslavers. "If it be difficult to pronounce what they are," he says of the Turks, in one of the innumerable prose Notes to the *Pilgrimage*,

> we can at least say what they are *not*; they are *not* treacherous; they are *not* cowardly; they do *not* burn heretics; they are *not* assassins, nor has an enemy advanced to *their* capital. They are faithful to their sultan until he becomes unfit to govern, and devout to their God without an inquisition. Were they driven from St. Sophia to-morrow, and the French or Russians enthroned in their stead, it would become a question, whether Europe would gain by the exchange.

Similarly, his support of the enslaved Greeks, while not exactly grudging, is aroused to a great extent by their slave status and is accompanied with few compliments to their character or their ability to free themselves. Indeed, at this moment in 1810, a kind of self-governing colonial existence is the most appropriate kind of political status that

Byron can imagine for the Greeks. The people he does despise, for their condescension, their patent self-interest, their exploitation and despoiling of artistic relics, and their inability to deliver what they promise, are the French, the Russians and the British—the supposed men of good will and the group to which he himself belongs. A note on what the Greeks owe to foreigners reaches an eloquent climax:

> At present, like the Catholics of Ireland and the Jews throughout the world, and such other cudgelled and heterodox people, they suffer all the moral and physical ills that can afflict humanity. Their life is a struggle against truth; they are vicious in their own defence. They are so unused to kindness, that when they occasionally meet with it they look upon it with suspicion, as a dog often beaten snaps at your fingers if you attempt to caress him. 'They are ungrateful, notoriously, abominably ungrateful!'—this is the general cry. Now, in the name of Nemesis! for what are they to be grateful? Where is the human being that ever conferred a benefit on Greek or Greeks. They are to be grateful to the Turks for their fetters, and the Franks for their broken promises and lying counsels: they are to be grateful to the artist who engraves their ruins, and to the antiquary who carries them away; to the traveller whose janissary flogs them, and to the scribbler whose journal abuses them! This is the amount of their obligation to foreigners.

This Greek crossroads of political loyalties and betrayals is further complicated by the subdivision of religious loyalties; Western Christians are likely to assist Eastern Christians only at the expense of Eastern Orthodoxy, and Islamic Turks are themselves confronted by a revolutionary wave of Islamic fundamentalism from the south-east at the same time as they confront Russian imperialism from the north and Napoleonic revolutionary expansionism from the west. Byron tries to sum up many of these complex divisions, as well as his conviction that the one certain loser is Greece, in a single stanza of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, which begins in Constantinople, but ends back in Athens:

> The city won for Allah from the Giaour,
> The Giaour from Othman's race again may wrest;
> And the Serai's impenetrable tower
> Receive the fiery Frank, her former guest;
> Or Wahab's rebel brood, who dared divest
> The Prophet's tomb of all its pious spoil,
> May wind their path of blood along the West;
> But n'er will freedom seek this fated soil,
> But slave succeed to slave through years of endless toil.

When, in 1813, back in England, Byron finally manages to put his antithetical hero into a narrative poem (mainly in octosyllabic couplets), he becomes an unnamed Giaour, that is, an ostensible Christian—Byron's Advertisement, though not his poem, identifies him as a

Venetian—seen as an infidel from a Moslem point of view. The historical moment is the late 1770s, while the Venetians still possess the Seven Islands, shortly after the abortive Russian invasion of the Peloponnesus, with its supposed promise of Greek liberation, and with its fearful toll of internecine slaughter, especially between Greeks and Albanians. The Giaour's personal story of love and revenge, set in this world of chaotically mixed allegiances, is told as a dislocated mosaic of perspectives, an extreme example of narrative indirection in the Gothic manner. Eyewitness reports, epic narratives, confessions, curses, funeral laments, imagistic lyrics, and elegiac meditations on the natural, cultural and social paradoxes of the Greek setting are pieced together with compulsive disregard for chronological and thematic sequence. In T. S. Eliot's essay on Byron he expresses his exhilarated response to Byron's skill as a story-teller in *The Giaour*. "Not Joseph Conrad could be more devious," he exclaims, intending a high compliment.

I draw attention to just one pattern in the poem's devious mosaic: the three momentary views of the Giaour by an unidentified fisherman—like three widely spaced snapshots punctuating the so-called narrative. In the first snapshot the Giaour is riding wildly from some inescapable horror. The fisherman witness catches the summarizing expression etched on his face as he pauses and looks back.

> 'Twas but a moment that he stood,
> Then sped as if by Death pursued;
> But in that instant o'er his soul
> Winters of Memory seemed to roll,
> And gather in that drop of time
> An age of pain, a life of crime.

The witness's political and religious perspective is clearly Turkish and Moslem, although we can't be sure whether it is inherited or just prudently acquired from the occupying government. "Young Giaour," he cries, "I know thee not, I loathe thy race . . . and deem thee one/Whom Othman's sons should slay or shun." In the second snapshot the Giaour is leading an ambush against his enemy Hassan.

> 'Tis he! 'tis he! I know him now;
> I know him by his pallid brow; . . .
> I know him by his jet-black barb;
> Though now arrayed in Arnaut garb,
> Apostate from his own file faith,
> . . . accurséd Giaour!

What now especially strikes the witness about his infidel Giaour is his apostate Albanian garb. As Byron says of the Albanians, in one of his

Notes to *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, "the Greeks hardly regard them as Christians or the Turks as Moslems; and in fact they are a mixture of both, and sometimes neither." The final snapshot is, in some respects, the strangest of all. It takes place in a monastery, and there, scowling out of his monk's garb, but also refusing to "taste the holy blood and wine" is the Giaour, ready to receive his last shock of recognition from that Moslem fellow-traveller and erstwhile fisherman, whose own presence in the monastery is never explained and who seems not to have seen the Giaour twice before, but just once. What is the name of that monk? he asks.

> 'tis many a year
> Since, dashing by the lonely shore,
> I saw him urge as fleet a steed
> As ever served a horseman's need.
> But once I saw that face—yet then
> It was so mark'd with inward pain
> I could not pass it by again;
> It breathes the same dark spirit now.

But the Byronic hero's identity will abide nobody's question, and all the answering monk can say is that, if he were Prior, the Giaour would remain "not a day . . . further."

Byron's Greece fits Byron's hero like a glove. So does Byron's post-Waterloo occupied Italy, but with an important difference. No longer does Byron find a dominant literary role for that hero. The Italian setting is there for some relative of Harold to act in, but Byron creates no poem for the purpose. In such attenuated or transformed roles as Beppo or Lambro, as Cain before his enforced wanderings, or Torquil, truant mutineer from the Bounty, now vegetating on his tropical island, the Giaour's occupation's gone. And what is properly characteristic of the Byronic hero is that, placed in a psychological and social situation whose vile antitheses make action impossible, the double agent does in fact become a man of action. When Byron wrote *Don Juan*, he provided himself with plenty of opportunities, but *that* scenario, whether in occupied Italy or anywhere else, turned out not to be one of them. So now, with no Giaour or Corsair or Lara as surrogate, the Byron who lives surrounded by the Austrian occupation is irresistably, if gradually, drawn toward a revolutionary, but somehow arbirtrary act of his own.

Before ending with that act, I choose just one instance of Byronic frustration and spasmodic gesture. It takes place in Ravenna, which, although technically part of a Papal state, was certainly a breeding-ground for anti-Austrian members of the Carbonari, the revolutionary secret society into which Byron was initiated by his mistress's father

and brother, the Gambas. They certainly thought no more of the Cardinal Legate and his troops than they did of the Austrians. But Byron had his informants in the establishment too, like Count Alborghetti, the Cardinal's second-in-command, who (to quote Leslie Marchand) "was—for money, favor or friendship (perhaps a combination of all three)—running close to treason in providing Byron with information from the Cardinal's mail . . . on the movements of the Austrians." But when the military commandant in Ravenna was shot outside Byron's door and he immediately carried him in for first aid (unsuccessful), "he almost jeopardized his standing with the Carbonari" (as Marchand also points out). The tone of Byron's letter to Tom Moore is unlikely to have been the tone of his report to the Gambas. I quote from the former:

> Down we ran, and found him lying on his back, almost, if not quite, dead, with five wounds; one in the heart, two in the stomach, one in the finger and the other in the arm. As nobody could, or would, do anything but howl and pray, and as no one would stir a finger to move him, for fear of consequences, I lost my patience . . . and had the commandant carried upstairs into my own quarter. But it was too late . . . . I had him partly stripped—made the surgeon examine him, and examined him myself. He had been shot with cut balls or slugs. I felt one of the slugs, which had gone through him, all but the skin . . . Poor fellow! he was a brave officer, but had made himself much disliked by the people. I knew him personally, and had met with him often at conversazioni and elsewhere . . . . I would not choose to let even a dog die in such a manner, without succour."

But one of the first things Byron does after the crisis is over is to unseal the package in which he was just about to send the Fifth Canto of *Don Juan* to his publisher and to insert into the middle of Juan's adventures in Constantinople—he is just about to find his way into the sultan's seraglio—a literal, blow-by-blow account of the assassination scene in which he has just played a minor role. Don Juan may never be in occupied Italy, but for this once—however irrelevantly—Juan's poem must.

The final act, however, toward which Byron is really being impelled is not in occupied Italy but in revolutionary Greece. Ten years before, in *Lara*, Byron wrote of a civil war between serfs and nobles. The nobleman Lara finds himself leading the serfs. But Byron makes it clear that, by ceasing to be an unequivocal aristocrat, Lara is not becoming a single-minded democrat. As the portrait phrases it,

> Too high for common selfishness, he could
> At times resign himself for others' good,
> But not in pity, not because he ought,
> But in some strange perversity of thought.

Perhaps Byron ought to have quoted those lines to himself as, however antithetically mixed, he nevertheless determined on the action of sailing for Greece in July, 1823.