

Byron’s Virtual Mapping of an Oriental Myth

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I

When Hilaal asks his nephew Askar, in Nuruddin Farah’s modern novel, *Maps*, “Do you find truth in the maps you draw?” Askar responds: “My maps invent nothing. They copy a given reality, they map out the roads a dreamer has walked, they identify a notional truth” (216). Such are Byron’s mappings of the notional truths of the Eastern world¹ he dreamed of and experienced. Byron’s maps, though, are *texts* scanning reality in an enchanting *verse* tracing Oriental sites and life. His maps locate reality to dislocate it, as they carry both the mapper and the reader beyond and above the common sites and times onto a virtual world in which reality becomes a myth; and myth, reality. One can compare Byron’s *verse*-maps to modern computer games, with Byron as the main player, who is in full control of the virtual realities he creates or recreates employing the power of his keen intellect and thriving imagination, and with his readers are spectators dazzled by the ability of the player to transport them onto multiple levels of exotic and aesthetic virtual experiences, thus satisfying his and his spectators’ urges for transcendence. Better, his map politics can be compared to that of a modern movie writer-director whose main purpose is to stimulate the emphatic and exotic sensibility of the viewers. Reading Byron becomes like watching a modern movie, much like *The Matrix*, which, according to Laura Barlett and Thomas Byers, “places posthuman subjects at the center of its action and flirts with a theoretical postmodernism only to reject the posthumanist configuration of subjectivity in favor of resurrecting a neo-Romantic version of the liberal-humanist subject” (30).² Byron’s *verse*-maps flirt with Romanticism in favor of a new type of Romanticism, a neo-Romanticism, a blend of cognitive reality and fantastic fancy, he could approach with a Byronic urge for liberal-humanism.

Several critics confirm that the modern fascination of willingly and consciously mapping a world through a fantastic *text* is a neo-Romantic path. Randy Schroeder discusses the Romantic features of Gibson’s *Neuromancer, Mona Lisa Overdrive*, and *Count Zero* and draws the correspondences between Romantic aesthetics and Gibson’s modern science fiction: “The problem with the word ‘romantic’ is, of course, its plurality of usages”; Gibson's fiction engages “the loose collection of popular conceptions and misconceptions that fall under the heading “romantic”—the nostalgic, of “solitary hero, the exotic weapon, and the transcendent will-to-power,” the “commitment to subjectivity,” and the “use of nature as metaphor” (156).

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¹ East/Orient in this work refers to Greece and Turkey of the nineteenth century.

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explores the nature of the affinity of modern science fiction and claims: “Romanticism and postmodernism are the two ends of an arch celebrating human individualism which has spanned two centuries” (55); Paul Jahshan contends that cyberspace fills “the contemporary mythical void [suffered by Postmodernists and Structuralists] by re-creating an already-there virtual reality through the magical/mythical medium of writing [but] with the city as model” (27). Lord Byron’s virtual maps are meant to fill the “mythical void” of his readers by “creating an already-there virtual reality [the reality of the East]” through the power of metaphoric texts. On Sunday, December 5, Byron writes in his Journal of 1813:

The *Bride of Abydos* was published on Thursday the second of December; but how it is liked or disliked, I know not. Whether it succeeds or not is no fault of the public, against whom I can have no complaint. But I am much more indebted to the tale than I can ever be to the most partial reader; as it wrung my thoughts from reality to imagination—from selfish regrets to vivid recollections—and recalled me to a country replete with the *brightest and darkest*, but always most *lively* colours of my memory.”

Byron’s ultimate purpose is to fill his before his readers’ dream-spaces with images dislocating reality in a metaphorical virtualization carrying the essence of sublime mythology. Other Romantics create myth by referring to real Oriental historic sites and times. William Blake in “Jerusalem” fuses the rivers of the East with the Thames River to create his religious myth; Wordsworth in Book IV of *The Prelude* dives into the mysterious sources of knowledge in a myth-like dream of an Arab Bedouin in the Arabian Desert; Coleridge constructs his theory of imagination in a dream poem “Kublia Kan,” which carries him and his readers into a mysterious Oriental world; Shelley places the dreamer poet of *Allaster: The Spirit of Solitude* in an antique Oriental land, where he searches for his mythological mistress; and Keats in his “Ode on a Grecian Urn” exposes his theory of the eternity of “Beauty” and “Truth”. Those poets, nonetheless, employ fantastic dream-like visions of Oriental sites and people they never visited and met. Byron, on the other hand, maps his myths engaging his on-the-spot notions of real spaces, times, and people with his imagination. In a letter to his brother George, September 1819, John Keats writes: “You speak of Lord Byron and me—There is this great difference between us. He describes what he sees—I describe what I imagine—Mine is the hardest task” (Qtd. Barton, 3). The truth in Keats’s view places Byron outside conventional Romanticism. Byron, who disliked Keats for his “abuse of Pope” and for his poetic

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3 All quotations from Byron’s letters and journals are taken from Marchand’s 12 edited volumes.
principles, was quite aware of his eccentric position. He distrusted mere imagination devoid of the absurdity of reality, as he distrusted mere reality devoid of imagination, all the reason why the literary theories of the lake-district poets did not appeal to him. As a manipulator of poetic aesthetics, he wrote poetry that suited his extreme purposes, disregarding mainstream poetic canon.

His narrative epics, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan* and his Oriental tales strike a balance between imagination, intellectualism, and objective existentialism. His trilateral wisdom rejects fixed and explicit current poetic forms, all the reason why his poetry is fragmented and reflects the complexities of the human mind. As thus, the conception of Byron’s objective-artistic politics starts with an understanding of his trilateral poetic politics, which is based on a perfect balance of his sharp intellect, with his powerful imagination and his cognitive sensibility to reality. In his *Journal* of January 1821, he writes: “Tis false—we do care about ‘the authenticity of the tale of Troy.’ I have stood upon that plain daily, for more than a month, in 1810; … I still venerated the grand original as the truth of history (in the material facts) and of place” (*L & J*, VIII, 21–22). Peter Graham contends that Byron in Greece is “keenly alive to the wonders of a place incomparably rich in sites sacred to myth and history”; and Bernard Beatty asserts that in the East Byron is a spirit pilgrim who “hanker[s] after an intersection of the temporal and the eternal” (143 and 4 respectively). Oriental sites and sights and especially those of Greece in Byron’s verse then reflect real and mythical elements and reveal prospects of the hidden realities of the human mind. This locates Byron’s Oriental verse-maps at the crux of what is currently called “neo-Romanticism.”

But why did Byron choose to map the Eastern sites and peoples?

To most early nineteenth-century British people, the East, the world of the *Arabian Nights*, of antiquity, of bright colors, and of rich but obscure culture, was the origin of mythological characters and spaces hosting mysteries of antique times. Edward Said describes this space as the “theater” of the Orient:

In the depths of this Oriental stage stands a prodigious cultural repertoire whose individual items evoke a fabulously rich world: the Sphinx, Cleopatra, Eden, Troy, Sodom and Gomorrah, Astarte, Isis and Osiris, Sheba, Babylon, the Genii, the Magi, Nineveh, Prester John, Mahomet, and dozens more; settings, in some cases names only, half-imagined, half-known; monsters, devils, heroes; terrors, pleasures, desires. The European imagination was nourished extensively from this repertoire: between the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century such major authors as Ariosto, Milton, Marlowe, Tasso, Shakespeare, Cervantes, and the authors of the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Poema del Cid* drew on the Orient’s riches for their productions, in ways that sharpened the outlines of imagery, ideas, and figures populating it. In addition, a great deal of what was considered learned Orientalist scholarship
in Europe pressed ideological myths into service, even as knowledge seemed genuinely to be advancing. (63)

In his poetic texts, Byron skillfully maps his Orient on a stage constructed by highly metaphorical *verse-texts* but not to press “ideological myths into service,” as Said claims, but, as mentioned above, to fill his and his audiences’ dream-spaces with an aesthetics of his on-the-spot experiences in the East, aesthetics blending fertile imagination with live memories to elevate his and his readers’ gazes onto multiple levels approaching the rapture of sublime myths. But before discussing this further, a clarification of the relation of maps to texts and of myth to History is fitting.

A *text* is like a map that prints parts of or the whole of one domain in a cognitive virtualization of reality. Both transform sensate experience into insensate thought thus generating new spaces and times, new virtual realities. Both turn physical experiences into mental and emotional conceptions of virtual isomorphic mythical forms. To Derrida, *text* virtualization coexists with the “meta-physics of presence”—

a pure presence, present enough to be living, to be felt in pleasure *[jouissance]* but pure enough to have remained unblemished by the work of difference, inarticulate enough for self-delight *[jouissance de soi]* not to be corrupted by interval, discontinuity, alterity. … It is indeed this accord, this resemblance of the divine and the human that inspires … dreams, in the *Reveries*, of that experience of a time reduced to presence, “where the present lasts forever, without marking its duration in any way, and without any trace of succession” (249).

Like maps, *texts* render presence eternal; they turn realities into virtual spaces and times peopled by virtual figures. In this sense, Byron’s verse-maps of the countries and peoples he visited and met in the East after his first Oriental tour render absence presence in *texts* that last forever to offer pleasure and “self-delight *[jouissance de soi]* not to be corrupted by interval, discontinuity, alterity” whereby absence is elevated onto myth virtualization. Moses Finley considers “timelessness” the main characteristic of myth because it is without a connection to a before or after as its heroes never die (285). To George Poulet, timelessness is the essence of Romanticism, which “is first of all a rediscovery of the mysteries of the world, a more vivid sentiment of the wonders of nature, a more acute consciousness of the enigmas of the self” (25). And Karin R. Andriolo clarifies: “Western tradition tends to view myth and history as concepts that complement each other; they are distinct representations of the course and significance of past events” (262). Andriolo’s view
complies with Byron’s endeavor to relate myth to history, thus rendering his experiences in the East timeless or mythological.

II

Byron’s verse-maps of the Orient cross the traditional borders into a world embodying the crux of myth. Take for instance the following introductory verses from The Giaour:

Fair clime! where every season smiles
Benignant o'er those blessed isles,
Which seen from far Colonna's height,
Make glad the heart that hails the sight,
And lend to loneliness delight.
There mildly dimpling-Ocean's cheek
Reflects the tints of many a peak
Caught by the laughing tides that lave
These Edens of the eastern wave;
And if at times a transient breeze
Break the blue chrystal of the seas,
Or sweep one blossom from the trees,
How welcome is each gentle air,
That wakes and wafts the odours there!
For there-the Rose o'er crag or vale,
Sultana of the Nightingale
(ll. 7–22)⁵

Or the opening lines of the Bride of Abydos:

Know ye the land of the cedar and vine,
Where the flowers ever blossom, the beams ever shine;
Where the light wings of Zephyr, oppressed with perfume,
Wax faint o'er the gardens of Gul in her bloom;
Where the citron and olive are fairest of fruit,
And the voice of the nightingale never is mute;
Where the tints of the earth, and the hues of the sky,
In colour though varied, in beauty may vie,

⁵ This and all subsequent quotations from Byron’s poetry are from Jerome McGann’s editions.
And the purple of Ocean is deepest in dye;
Where the virgins are soft as the roses they twine,
And all, save the spirit of man, is divine—
'Tis the clime of the East—'tis the land of the Sun—
(Canto I, ll. 5–16)

The real geo-climate map of the East is clearly elevated onto the level of a dream-like myth in an Eden-like setting. Here, Byron is careful to distinguish the warmth and beauty of this Eden-like climate from the grey and cold climate of England; and by doing this, he transforms his text into a virtual map, a living myth relived in a text; and at the same time, he offers his readers dream fulfillments discharging their stressful times. In his dedication of The Corsair to Thomas Moore, Byron writes, “none can do those scenes [the scenes of the East] such justice” (III, 224). Elevating actual Oriental sites onto the level of mythology is then an attempt on Byron’s side not only to give those scenes justice but also to immortalizing them. And to give myth justice and a sense of reality, Byron swims from Sestos to Abydos to authenticate the myth of Hero and Leander. And in Childe Harold Pilgrimage, he traces the “dwelling-place” of the ancient throne of Zeus:

Here let me sit upon this massy stone,
The marble column's yet unshaken base;
Here, son of Saturn! was thy fav'rite throne:
Mightiest of many such! Hence let me trace
The latent grandeur of thy dwelling-place.
(Canto II, Stz. 10, ll. 82–86)

Byron’s recreations to the dynamics of ancient mythology are not unlike his reactions to the dynamics of real sites, whereby imaginary and spiritual elements become concrete and corporal, and the opposite is also true. Thus all elements of myth and fact retain a dynamic verse-map that makes them eternal, thus mythological, exotic, and sublime. The reviewer of the Edinburgh Review comments on The Bride of Abydos and praises Byron as

the only modern poet who has set before our eyes visible pictures of the present aspect of scenes so famous in story; and instead of feeding us with the unsubstantial food of historical associations, has spread around us the blue waters and dazzling skies—the ruined temples and dusky olives—the desolate cities, and turbaned population, of modern Attica. (Romantics Reviewed, II, 851)
If anything, the reviewer acknowledges Byron’s virtualization of the Oriental reality and places him on a different aesthetic platform than his contemporary poets.

Lord Byron's mappings of the geo-climate scenes of the East rival his mappings of the mythological nature of its peoples; after all, the easterners centered their lives on mythologies ever since ancient times.

There is no doubt that most, if not all, of his Oriental characters in the Eastern tales are replicas of real people he had met during his first Oriental tour. In *The Giaour*, Leila is an embodiment of a real Eastern beauty Byron saved from being drowned in the Hellespont. In his map-tale, Leila is sacked and drowns, but she becomes no more and no less than a mythological figure surviving forever in the Eastern myth of the Rose and the Nightingale and in Byron’s thrilling text:

For there-the Rose o'er crag or vale,  
Sultana of the Nightingale  
   The maid for whom his melody—  
   His thousand songs are heard on high,  
   Blooms blushing to her lover's tale;  
   His queen, the garden queen, his Rose,  
   Unbent by winds, unchill'd by snows,  
   Far from the winters of the west  
   By every breeze and season blest,  
   Returns the sweets by nature given  
   In softest incense back to heaven;  
(II. 21–31)

Pointing to Byron’s descriptions of Leila confirms her god-like beauty and immortal figure. Leila is a rose “Unbent by winds, unchill’d by snows,” and “By every breeze and season blest.” After her death, she becomes a divine incense flavoring “heaven.” Byron does not stop here, for he is careful to contrast her with the roses of the West, which whither and die in “the winters of the west.” In *The Bride of Abydos*, Zuleika, like Leila, becomes a mythological figure after she dies mourning her lover. She overcomes death by living forever as a rose:

Ev’n in that deadly grove—  
   A single rose is shedding there

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6 This Persian myth is explained in Naji Oueijan’s *A Compendium of Eastern Elements in Byron’s Oriental Tales*. (New York: Peter Lang, 1999): 89–90.
It's lonely lustre, meek and pale,
It looks as planted by Despair—
So white—so faint—the slightest gale
Might whirl the leaves on high;
And yet, though storms and blight assail,
And hands more rude than wintry sky
May wring it from the stem—in vain—
To-morrow sees it bloom again!
(Canto II, ll. 1153–1162)

“In vain—/Tomorrow sees it bloom again,” gives Zuleika mythical eternality. In a letter to John Murray, Byron writes that “Zuleika is the Persian poetical name of Potipher’s wife on whom & Joseph there is a long poem in Persian” (L. & J., III, 164). 7 Byron was aware that this Biblical story became for the Oriental people a mythology traditionally celebrated in Oriental literature. Byron immortalizes his Oriental heroines, who according to Bernard Blackstone, represent the “allegorical mistresses or youths of Sufi poetry, symbolizing noesis, mystical realization” (327). 8 But Byron also renders his Eastern male heroes mythological characters surviving in texts mapping the binary realities of the human mind. 9 Eastern heroes, such as Giaour, Selim, Giaffir, Seyd, and especially Lambro, are iconographic Byronic heroes surviving in Western and Eastern literary traditions. I refer here to Lambro as I believe he is a typical Eastern mythological figure: he is powerful and friendly, brutal and forgiving, vengeful and loving, mysterious and contented. Byron exalts Lambro to the level of Zeus, father of Aphrodite, and Haidée, to the level of Aphrodite. Lambro lives less on “dry land than Ocean,” and his heroic rays “Flash’d o’er his soul,”

Such as lit onward to the Golden Fleece
His predecessors in the Colchian days;
Tis true he had no ardent love for peace—
Alas! his country show’d no path to praise:
Hate to the world and war with every nation

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7 The long poem Byron refers to here is by the Persian poet Jami, who also alludes to the rose-nightingale myth to immortalize the love between Joseph and Zuleika; this poem is discussed in detail by Naji Oueijan in Lord Byron’s Oriental World. (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2011): 89–95.
8 The Byronic hero, Western and Oriental, is a mythological character immortalized in texts mapping the virtual realities of Byron’s personal experiences. Like Don Juan, Childe Harold, and Manfred, his Oriental Byronic heroes such as Giaour, Selim, Giaffir, and Seyd have become iconographic characters surviving in Western and Eastern literary tradition.
9 This is not to indicate here that Byron’s Western Byronic heroes are not mythological; Don Juan, Childe Harold, and Manfred are typical characters that invaded the Western and Eastern literary tradition. But for the purposes of this work, I limit my discussion to Eastern male heroes.
He waged, in vengeance of her degradation.

*(Don Juan, Canto 3, Stzs. 26 and 55)*

Like Zeus, Lambro is a god-like hero who controls his paradise-like abode. His daughter, Haidée, who is a fairy with a “beau ideal” “Drawn from the stars, and filter'd through the skies” (Canto 2, Staz. 212), is his only passion. Still his commands, though they lead to her death, are obeyed. Besides, his home on a Greek island is a paradise-like dwelling where young fairies dance and sing:

And further on a group of Grecian girls,
The first and tallest her white kerchief waving,
Were strung together like a row of pearls,
Link'd hand in hand, and dancing; each too having
Down her white neck long floating auburn curls
(The least of which would set ten poets raving);
Their leader sang—and bounded to her song,
With choral step and voice, the virgin throng.

And here, assembled cross-legg'd round their trays,
Small social parties just begun to dine;
Pilaus and meats of all sorts met the gaze,
And flasks of Samian and of Chian wine,
And sherbet cooling in the porous vase;
Above them their dessert grew on its vine,
The orange and pomegranate nodding o'er
Dropp'd in their laps, scarce pluck'd, their mellow store.

Their classical profiles, and glittering dresses,
Their large black eyes, and soft seraphic cheeks,
Crimson as cleft pomegranates, their long tresses,
The gesture which enchants, the eye that speaks,
The innocence which happy childhood blesses,
Made quite a picture of these little Greeks;
*(Don Juan, Canto 3, Stzs. 30–33)*

This site compares to the dwelling places Aphrodite and Adonis, whose love compares to that of Juan and Haidée. Like an ancient Greek goddess: “Haidée was Nature's bride, and knew not
Haidée was Passion's child, born where the sun/Shower triple light, and scorches even the kiss/Of his gazelle-eyed daughters” (Canto 2, Stz. 202). There is no doubt in my mind that when Byron described his “beau ideal”, he had Aphrodite in the back of his mind. Besides, Haidée’s dream is a Promethean:

She dream'd of being alone on the sea-shore,  
Chain'd to a rock; she knew not how, but stir  
She could not from the spot, and the loud roar  
Grew, and each wave rose roughly, threatening her;  
And o'er her upper lip they seem'd to pour,  
Until she sobb'd for breath, and soon they were  
Foaming o'er her lone head, so fierce and high  
Each broke to drown her, yet she could not die.  
(Don Juan, Canto 4, Stz. 31)

The association of this dream with the Promethean myth cannot be doubted. The foam of the sea could not drown her because she is like Aphrodite, born from the foam of the sea. Besides, like Aphrodite moans the death of her lover Adonis, Haidée moans losing her lover, Juan, and dies of sorrow. But in her death, she becomes a mythological figure as “… many a Greek maid in a loving song/Sighs o'er her name; and many an islander/With of the her sire's story makes the night less long” (Canto 4, Stz. 73). So she lives forever in the tales of the Greeks and in Byron’s virtual mapping of Greece.

Byron’s mappings of Eastern characters in his tales, in a modern sense, reload the memories of the East that he wanted to keep alive forever. Marius Byron Raizis notes that the “Grecian travel and location visited act as a trigger mechanism that sets in motion the artistic creativity of Byron”; Raizis believes that “Byron’s physical travels in Greece normally entailed mental travels” (131–132). Gilles Fauconnier has shown that we articulate our thoughts about the world by mapping across partial, dynamic, and temporary “mental spaces”; these mental spaces allow us to project our thoughts and ourselves from the present, real space in which we are grounded, into past and future spaces, into hypothetical and counterfactual situations, into “wish” spaces, and so on. (12) Byron’s mapping of his experiences in the East do not only translate his sincere eagerness for discovering various airs of otherness, but also for authenticating his willingness to consciously recreate his living experiences in a myth carrying the life-force of the human mind. Byron’s aesthetic politics coincides
with the politics of an objective mapper who adds colors and texts projecting real experience onto himself first and then onto the readers of his maps.

Such is Byron’s hybrid Romanticism, which is flustered with a sharp sensibility for reality and fancy. As a realist, Byron observes the East as a notional reality he lived and loved; and as a Romantic, he maps the East in texts carrying the core of timeless mythology. Byron confesses that the East is his “Temple of Poetry”; “With those countries, and events connected with them, all my really poetical feelings begin and end” (L & J, V, 45.) Byron’s Romanticism is then a neo-Romanticism, and this renders him a pioneer modernist and postmodernist. Long before the modernists and postmodernists sought an innovative realistic and imaginative path towards a mythology to fill their vacant spaces and times, he did. Byron’s Neo-Romantic politics still liberates his readers from inveterate confines and fills their vacant spaces and times.

Works Cited


