Horse-riding has always been a very familiar and favourite sport for Byron during his whole life and it also prominently features in his verse. There have been various riding instances and episodes in Child Harold, The Giaour and Don Juan. The riding episode in the opening section of Shelley’s Julian and Maddalo, however, boldly reflecting biographical aspects (a section that I have elaborated upon before, but in different ways) is, arguably, quite distinct for very specific reasons: Firstly, for the amazing imaginative force augmented by the boldly physical features it portrays projected with a remarkable revolutionary impetus; and Secondly, and more importantly, for reflecting deeper and fundamental issues that divided the two poets. Here are the opening lines of the poem appropriately abbreviated: “I rode one evening with Count Maddalo / Upon the bank of land which breaks the flow / Of Adria towards Venice.”

And further on:

This ride was my delight – I love all waste
And solitary places; where we taste
The pleasure of believing what we see
Is boundless, as we wish our souls to be:
And such was this wide Ocean, and this shore
More barren than its billows; and yet more
Than all, with a remembered friend I love
To ride as then I rode; – for the winds drove
The living spray along the sunny air
Into our faces; the blue heavens were bare
Stripped to their depths by the awakening North;
And from the waves sound like delight broke forth
Harmonizing with solitude, and sent
Into our hearts aerial merriment...

While riding impetuously alongside – and at times into – the breaking waves, sea-froth, ‘the living spray’ of the poem, is driven by the winds into the faces of the two young and eager riders: those winds whose sweeping revolutionary potential becomes so obvious in Shelley’s *Ode to the West Wind*, written approximately during the same period. But the difference is that here, their bodies, apart from being beaten by the elements, feel their heartbeat forcefully mingling with that of their galloping stallions, through the body-to-body contact of man and beast. Soon, however, this both psychological and physical, freeing and liberating, iconic representation of the impetus of high Romanticism starts getting obscured by disagreement and distrust, ending in a bitter dispute: so much so, that it generates the suspicion that this, nearly uncontrollable, force may turn into a destructive one, turning the two literary personas, and indeed what they represent, against each other. For a moment, the liberating wind, even the sun, seem to be sinking.

The sun was sinking and the wind also.
Our talk grew somewhat serious [...] Concerning God, freewill and destiny [...] We descanted, and I (for ever still Is it not wise to make the best of ill?) Argued against despondency, but pride Made my companion take the darker side.
The sense that he was greater than his kind
Had struck, methinks, his eagle spirit blind
By gazing on its own exceeding light.

The symbolism starts getting clearer at this point. Julian, whose name reminds, of course, the last non-Christian emperor of Byzantium, known as Julian the apostate (conversely, deserter, infidel or pagan), calls his fellow rider a spirit blinded by his detested egotism and self-importance; Count Maddalo, on the other hand, whose name and title is identical to the traitor courtier who betrayed the deranged poet’s, Turquato Tasso’s secrets in Shelley’s unfinished Drama, calls Julian a ‘perilous infidel’. But, quite predictably, there is a third level of reference, that of the real persons Shelley and Byron, their dispute here expressed in verse by Shelley’s hand. But, eventually, no matter how much the younger poet may have tried to project his own views in the poem, the text is transparent as regards their deeper embedded differences. They both shared liberal ideas about the emancipation of humankind, but they considered that crucial issue from different perspectives: Shelley’s enthusiasm and optimism about the improvement potential of humankind, not at all superficial and thoughtless as I had the chance to explain in a recent publication, boldly contrasted to Byron’s darker perspective, the one known as that of the Byronic hero: sarcastic and cynical, with strong, towering feelings, but only due to his belief in an accursed fate, nuanced by gloom and despair.

Crossing the bridge from poetry to politics, I do not think I would ‘present an owl to Athens’ or ‘coal to Manchester’ for that matter, if I said that it is often mentality and chance events that judge the outcome of major issues rather than just bravery, profundity of thought or square logical analysis. Shelley was drowned and, as it is
now superbly proven by our distinguished colleague, Roderick Beaton, this event triggered Byron’s actual involvement in the Greek cause, even his ‘idiosyncratic altruism’, according to Stephen Minta. I do not believe that had it been otherwise, namely if Byron had died first, Shelley would succeed more than Byron. Although nobody, I suppose, would support Byron’s views in principle, one needs, perhaps, along with bravery and patriotism, some cynicism in him, perhaps a drop of Mad Jack in his blood even, to dare try such major ventures like the liberation of a whole nation.

I was thinking about the poet’s dispute with Stanhope regarding censoring the Chronicle, the Messolonghi Newspaper, an idea that Byron, very conscious of the specific conditions prevailing in Greece in those days, cynically supported. According to Stanhope, as presented in Byron’s War, the poet became furious when his views were opposed time and again by Stanhope himself. ‘His Lordship started into a passion. He contended that Law, justice and equity had nothing to do with politics’. He finally exclaimed: ‘without my money, where would your Greek newspaper be?’

The poet’s exclamations, although cynical, are not nuanced, at long last, by ‘wilful nihilism’; neither do they sound like what Malcolm Kelsall has called, rightly I believe, ‘hot air ballooning’ referring to the Byron’s old Humanitarian rhetoric at the House of Lords. Political Byron in Messolonghi is altogether transformed. Pietro Gamba records the following words by Byron, which, ironically, sound so very Shelleyan: ‘I am not come here in search of adventures, but to assist in the regeneration of a nation’.

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