

‘FORGIVE MY FOLLY’: BYRON’S DIVIDED NATIONALITY

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John Gibson Lockhart’s witty open letter to Lord Byron refers to ‘your English heart’, refusing the perceived Byronic ‘humbug’ of being anything other than an English poet.¹ Despite Byron writing of the ‘diabolically well written’ quality of the letter, his poetry goes a long way to refuting the absolute Englishness of Lockhart’s assertion. Byron’s Englishness becomes subject to Byron’s instinct for independence as he wields his travels and his experience against any certainty of national identity. For Byron, the challenge to fictionalise, to transmute, to fashion the self overshadows, to paraphrase John Keats, any ‘irritable reaching after fact’,² and his poetry vacillates between his Anglo and his Italian identities. The question of national identity has been deliberately fraught by the self-conscious poet as Byron sought to create from this hybrid identity an individual voice. Using Latin language and culture to suggest his difference from and belonging to English culture, Byron makes his modulating performance centre stage. I shall focus on Byron’s formation of a risk-taking rather than smooth poetic identity that insists on its fluid and hybrid nature as it refuses the dead-end of being either Italian or English.

Italy had early provoked in Byron a strong sense of the self and its place in the world, and *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* represents some of Byron’s most feeling verse on becoming something other than an Englishman. When looking on Italy, Byron writes in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* III, that ‘to feel’:

We are not what we have been, and to deem
We are not what we should be – and to steel
The Heart against itself; and to conceal,
With a proud caution, love, or hate, or aught –
Passion or feeling, purpose, grief or zeal –
Which is the tyrant-Spirit of our thought,
Is a stern task of Soul – No Matter – it is taught. (CHP III. 111)³

The ‘we’ barely veils the tone of personal avowal, as the rapped out syllables of ‘We are not what we have been’ achieve a sense of austere truth where feeling seems to shimmer beneath every line. As Michael O’Neill writes, the rhyme ‘agitates rather than calms; it may wish to bind together, yet it spurs on the twists and turns made by the stanza as Byron moves from what it is ‘to feel’ to the wish ‘to steel / the heart’ to the implicit recognition that to ‘conceal’ feeling is to reveal it as ‘the tyrant spirit of our thought’.⁴ This agitation forces the reader to pause over the halting words, and hear the rhymes pressing up against each other as ‘feel’ leads on to ‘steel’; we must note that this hardening takes place owing to a surfeit of feeling, not its lack. The stanza draws attention to itself as a created monument to suffering, as we are shown its effect on the poet, and then its transmutation into poetry. These ‘words, thus woven into song’ (III. 112) prove to be knitted together so tightly so as to prevent any untidy spilling out of feeling without the aesthetic steel of form. Words both express and repress the void that lies beneath the voice. This double gesture defines the Byronic ‘stern task’ to steel and conceal while writing poetry; Byron must perform the self without allowing either pain or proud caution to dominate. Suggestively, it is Italy that provokes the despair that requires this steeling and concealing performance. Alienated from himself, yet unable to assimilate Italy, the lines record the struggle of the divided self, as Italy’s history and national identity trouble the meditative poet by their vast certainty. Byron must admit that in this moment, ‘I stood and stand alone’ (III. 112).

1: From John Gibson Lockhart’s anonymous *Letter to the Right Hon. Lord Byron*. By John Bull (April/May 1821), in *Lord Byron: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Andrew Rutherford (London: Routledge, 1970), p.190.

2: John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1958): 1: 193.

3: Byron’s poetry will be quoted from *Lord Byron: The Major Works*. Ed. Jerome J. McGann, Oxford World’s Classics. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.

4: Michael O’Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1997), p.99.

The 'eternal source of Rome's imperial Hill' (III. 110) arrested Byron's mind, sending him back upon himself as he returned back upon the finite self rather than scan the scale of the eternal city. By *Beppo*, Byron had found a way to annexe a particular part of Italianness, and a mode of writing that would allow him access to the human, not the eternal beauty that propels his poem as he sought 'Love [and beauty] in full life and length, not Love ideal' (*Beppo* 13). Having left England in 1816, Byron had now some very fine 'new mythological machinery' (*Don Juan* I. 101) and formal armoury, and he sought, using the *ottava rima* form, to signal his significant difference from his contemporaries as he made the Italian form his own.⁵ Harnessing his mastery of the English language inside this Italianate form saw Byron insisting on his cultural hybridity. Byron can move between the inside and the outside of the two cultures. Yet this movement is far from seamless, and as in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, when faced with this separate, though now far more familiar culture, Byron can explore the contours of the self. Stanzas 41 to 49 show Byron engaging in a virtuosic and risk-taking performance where he trains his pen on a comparison between Italy and England. The 'conversational facility' (*DJ* XV. 20) allows Byron to run the gauntlet between comic levity and an angry excoriation of the faults and vices of the English establishment. The building crescendo of the stanzas predicated itself around the pitiless eye of the expatriate, who has become well-versed enough in another culture to correctly appraise the faults of his own. The reader watches as the more Byron considers Italy, the more passionately he feels in accord with the country. The seductive accents of the Italian language build to an erotic description of Italian female sexuality, leading reviewers to allude grudgingly to: 'some peculiar expressions... [such as its] ardour in praise of foreign beauty'.⁶ Byron let no national attribute stand superior to the Italian model, but his intent fascination in proving the same allows Byron to slip between Italian and British identities.

This is no objective travelogue; Italy, most importantly, is 'a pleasant place *to me*' [emphasis added]. Yet his enjoyment seems to spring from what Italy is not, and it is emphatically not England:

I like on Autumn Evenings to ride out
 Without being forced to bid my Groom be sure
 My Cloak is round his middle strapped about,
 Because the Skies are not the most secure;
 I know too that if stopped upon my route
 Where the Green Alleys windingly allure,
 Reeling with Grapes red Waggons choak the way –
 In England 'twould be Dung, Dust, or a Dray. (*Beppo* 42: 329-36)

The first four lines of the *ottava rima* stanza are dedicated to Byron's implicit judgement of English weather and its insecure skies. Rather than getting lost in the sensual beauty of Italy, Byron seems subtly to rap England across its metaphorical knuckles for lacking a similarly temperate climate. The second four lines offer more immersion in the beauty of the Italian countryside as Byron knows that if stopped: 'Where the Green Alleys windingly allure, / Reeling with Grapes red Waggons choak the way'. The metre and rhyme here 'windingly allure' the reader as the phrasing embodies the feeling, yet Byron cannot resist another shot at England as the repetition of the 'd' sound in 'Dung, Dust, or a Dray' clashes against the elegantly elongated 'r' sounds in the line before. Byron's Italy seems designed to show England at her worst, and move his national identity away from England. Yet the continual return to England reminds the reader of the very Englishness the poet would escape. Byron builds the effect in stanza 43, closing his stanza with a complaint against 'reeking London's smoky Cauldron' in comparison to the Italian day that rises 'Beauteous as cloudless'. This lyric paean

5: As Auden notes in his 'Letter to Lord Byron', Byron's late preferred form has become associated with his poetic achievement:

Ottava Rima would, I know, be proper,
 The proper instrument on which to pay
 My compliments, but I should come a cropper ...

See W. H. Auden, *Letter to Lord Byron, The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1977), p.172.

6: Donald H. Reiman, ed., *The Romantics Reviewed: Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers, Part B: Byron and Regency Society Poets*, vol. 3 (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1972), p.1115. Quoted in Jane Stabler, *Byron, Poetics and History*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism 52 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), p.31.

to Italianness by virtue of its unEnglishness climaxes in a celebration of the erotic charge of the language in an oblique strike against Philip Sidney's insistent promotion of the English language at the expense of the Italian hegemony of poetry:

I love the language, that soft bastard Latin,
Which melts like kisses from a female mouth,
And sounds as though it should be writ on Satin
With syllables which breathe of the sweet South,
And gentle liquids gliding all so pat in
That not a single accent seems uncouth –
Like our harsh Northern whistling grunting Guttural,
Which we're obliged to hiss, and spit, and sputter All.
(*Beppo* 44: 345-52)

As Timothy Webb writes, 'in describing the effects of the language in terms of kisses, the stanza concentrates on language as a combination of sounds rather than a system of signs or a conveyor of precise meanings.'⁷ The 'l' sounds roll off the tongue at the start of the line, and are then spiced by the sleepy 's' sound playing against the plosive and aggressive 'b' of 'bastard'. Byron heightens this shiver of sensual enjoyment by his simile of melting female kisses which crowd into the line to seduce and astonish the English reader. The 's' sounds dominate the third and fourth lines, as Byron, with firmly controlled style, renders an approximation of the breath of the sweet South in the English language. But Byron insists on the conflict between the two nations once again, using the final couplet to point up the uncouthness of the English language in its stark difference from the linguistic spell he just created. Byron rubs the readers' nose in 'our harsh Northern whistling grunting Guttural, / Which we're obliged to hiss, and spit, and sputter All'. And yet, as Byron so often does in his moments of contempt for poetry or language, his virtuosity undoes his own claim. We, like Byron (as the 'our' reminds both Byron and us), may be condemned to our animalistic grunts, but these grunts attain a beauty and grace in Byron's poetic hands. The contrast between the lush excitement of the first six lines of the stanza and the final couplet displays Byron's talent for both harmony and discord at its fullest, and signals his command of the Italian, and the English idiom enclosed within a single stanza.

The praise of the Italian female condemns the English woman by implication. The Italian woman, 'Soft as her Clime, and Sunny as her Skies', is directly related to the warm climate of Italy, while the English woman is given to understand that her nature may be accordingly weather dictated, and thus damned by comparison. The 'Eve of the land which still is Paradise!' appears to dominate the teasing Byronic imagination, but the allusion to an Eve is suggestive of Milton's Eve of *Paradise Lost*, allowing the provocative poet to annexe from England her epic heroine. As Angela Esterhammer notes, 'When Byron develops his affinities with the improvisatore in *Beppo* and *Don Juan*, sometimes for comedic purposes and sometimes as a mode of perceptive and communicative spontaneity, this "consciousness of relation"⁸ or "communicative exchange"⁹ between poet and audience evolves into an outstanding characteristic of his style.'¹⁰ Byron, though speaking of the perfection of this idealised 'Italian beauty', writes with his eye trained on the reaction of her English sisters. Byron moves, with faux tact, not to a direct comparison with English women, but rather to a more general judgement of England, as if glossing the implicit cruelty of comparison. When Philip Martin claims that '*Beppo* was innocuous, apologetic even,'¹¹ he overlooks Byron's cutting comparisons and implicit judgements.

The stanzas that home in on England are relentless in their anatomization of English culture, politics. Byron's controlled modulation of his satiric range throughout the stanzas reveals itself by the tightness of construction as the bland repetition of 'I like' play against his half-undercutting qualifying statements:

"England! with all thy faults I love thee still!"
I said at Calais, and have not forgot it;

7: Timothy Webb, "'Soft Bastard Latin": Byron and the Attractions of Italian', *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies* 10 (2009), p.75.

8: M. K. Joseph, *Byron the Poet* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1964), pp.189-90.

9: Jerome McGann, *Byron and Romanticism*, ed. James Soderholm (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), p.120.

10: Angela Esterhammer, *Romanticism and Improvisation 1750-1850* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), p.118.

11: Philip W. Martin, *Byron: A Poet Before His Public* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982) p.186.

I like to speak and lucubrate my fill,
 I like the Government (but that is not it)
 I like the freedom of the press and quill,
 I like the Habeas Corpus (when we've got it)
 I like a Parliamentary debate,
 Particularly when 'tis not too late;

I like the taxes, when they're not too many,
 I like a sea-coal fire, when not too dear,
 I like a beef-steak too, as well as any,
 Have no objection to a Pot of Beer,
 I like the weather – when it is not rainy –
 That is, I like two months of every Year;
 And so God save the Regent, Church, and King!
 Which means that I like all, and every thing. – (*Beppo* 47-8: 369-84)

The number of qualifying statements multiplies, and where there were only three in the first quoted stanza, by the second, these qualifiers make up the majority of the stanza until Byron's final couplet, saturated in irony, feigns a demureness that grates by its almost outrageous avowal of approval. Moving from a comment on beef-steak, Byron then insinuates his irreverence toward 'Regent, Church, and King', by praising them in the same vein, and to like 'all, and every thing' renders all his apparent likes, particularly of 'Regent, Church, and King', at best meaningless, and at worst, an outright undermining of Byron's espoused feeling. In comparison to the pleasure Byron takes in mimicking the 'soft bastard Latin' cadences of Italian, these stanzas are calculated to lack the same aesthetic thrill, throwing the reader back on the unglamorous listed content. Beginning with a quotation from William Cowper, a poet Byron had little time for,¹² he lists his way through his lukewarm liking of things English, yet by not comparing England to Italy, the focus insinuates that all along, Byron's focus had been on his native country. Maria Schoina argues that Byron here establishes a 'peaceful co-presence' of the two countries,¹³ writing that 'Byron counterbalances his serio-comic praise of Italy against his sharply qualified and conditional praise of England', yet these lines glisten with a dangerous potential to damn his former home. Byron seems less interested in establishing a 'peaceful co-presence' of England and Italy than in exposing the flaws of England by comparison to the virtues of the latter. The fault line of danger running through the stanzas makes them seem far more than a kind of post-modern playfulness as the tension held in the increasing number of qualifiers draws attention to their importance over and above what Byron claims to 'like'. By placing these stanzas after his exordium on all things Italian, Byron uses his acculturation as a political weapon with which to beat England over the head, as he signals his wider knowledge only to disclose the corruptions and displeasures of English life.

Our standing Army, and disbanded Seamen,
 Poor's rate, Reform, my Own, the Nation's debt,
 Our little Riots just to show we're free men,
 Our trifling Bankruptcies in the Gazette,
 Our cloudy climate, and our chilly women;
 All these I can forgive, and those forget;
 And greatly venerate our recent glories,
 And wish they were not owing to the Tories. (*Beppo* 49: 385-92)

By stanza forty-nine, Byron moves into an increasingly acute critique of English society with its 'little riots to show we are free men'. The riots are 'little', and the bankruptcies 'trifling', and by combining these complaints with 'Our cloudy climate', he throws into question the seriousness of his complaints. In this way, Byron deliberately retains a dangerous balance between an urbane distance and a muted denunciation of the state of the nation. The magnanimity of the aristocratic exile as he writes 'All these I can forgive, and those forget' reminds the reader of his distance, even as his use of 'Our' points to a shared nationality. The discomforting acceleration into increasingly serious complaints is only half-undercut by the

12:: Peter Cochran points out, that Byron wrote that Cowper was *no poet* (from Byron's letter to Annabella Milbanke (*BLJ* III. 179). See note 95 on stanza 47 of Cochran's edition of *Beppo*: (<http://petercochran.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/beppo2.pdf>)

13:: Maria Schoina, *Romantic 'Anglo-Italians': Configurations of Identity in Byron, the Shelleys, and the Pisan Circle* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p.116.

final couplet as Byron refuses to release England from his semi-teasing, semi-excoriating voice. It is this disorientating quality that Byron capitalises on as he deliberately keeps his reader guessing. The seriousness of Byron's search for independence, especially independence from the constraints of total integration into a single cultural framework works alongside his political instinct as he steers a course between Italian and English identity by his performance of nationality. Byron's strength resides in his hybridized identity, and he attends playfully and seriously to the dangers of being either within or without a culture. Byron's heart was neither 'all Meridian' as he writes in 'To the Po', or 'English', as John Gibson Lockhart would have it; his struggle for poetic independence demanded his art being aloof from the constraints of total national identity.

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