

Don Byron and The Moral North

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IN a letter of 1812 to Lady Melbourne Byron wrote, about a piece of scandal they were exchanging notes on, 'I never laughed at P. (by the bye, this is an initial which might puzzle posterity when our correspondence bursts forth in the 20th century)'. It puzzled the editor of *Lord Byron's Correspondence*¹ in which the letter was first printed, in 1922, and has continued to puzzle scholars since then. Lady Melbourne, mother-in-law of Caroline Lamb, whom Byron didn't marry, and aunt of Annabella Milbanke, whom he did, shared an intimate friendship with Byron, despite the problems created by her relatives. The cheerfully egocentric parenthesis in the letter quoted is characteristic of this intimacy, as it is of the cynicism of the society in which they lived, and of the pleasure Byron took in hiding behind all kinds of masks of obscurity and deliberate puzzlement.

Byron has defeated his biographers, largely because of this enigmatic quality which made everything he said a posture and at best a half-truth. Even Leslie Marchand's splendidly thorough biography offers more a chronicle than an analysis of its subject. Its author specifically denies that he has any 'interpretation' of Byron's character and actions — 'I have no thesis and have consciously avoided formulating one'.²

I begin with this because *Don Juan*, Byron's greatest poem, derives its nature in a more complex and yet precisely ascertainable way from its author's career, his mentality, his fame and his attitude to his fame, than perhaps any great poem written in English. It began as an exile's answer to the society which had exiled him.

When Byron became the focus of all eyes in 1812 with the publication of *Childe Harold* it is understandable that an intimate,

¹ *Lord Byron's Correspondence*, ed. J. Murray, 2 vols, 1922, I, 102.

² Leslie A. Marchand, *Byron: A Biography*, 3 vols, New York, 1957, I, ix.

licentious and gossip-loving community like the Regency aristocracy should subject his private life to a particularly close scrutiny. He had not been noticeably restrained, it is true, but he would probably not have appeared so exceptionally licentious if it were not that he had become Childe Harold himself, and a living legend.¹

Three things happened between his fame in 1812 and his exile in 1816 to make his reputation as a debauchee, which at first he played up to, into a hateful label and the direct cause of his departure from English society. The first was the Caroline Lamb business. Lady Caroline, wife of the second son of Lord Melbourne, was something of an experienced amorist before Byron turned up. When he did, according to Rogers, the banker-poet:

... she absolutely besieged him. He showed me the first letter he received from her; in which she assured him that if he was in any want of money, 'all her jewels were at his service'. They frequently had quarrels; and, more than once, on coming home, I have found Lady C. walking in the garden, and waiting for me, to beg that I would reconcile them . . . such was the insanity of her passion for Byron, that, sometimes, when not invited to a party where he was to be, she would wait for him in the street till it was over! One night after a great party at Devonshire House, to which Lady Caroline had not been invited, I saw her, — yes, saw her, — talking to Byron, with half of her body thrust into the carriage which he had just entered.²

We should note from this description of pursuit and capture that what struck Rogers as so pleasantly scandalous was not the love affair or the adultery but its openness. Lady Caroline's precarious mental balance made her indiscreet, not merely sinful. Byron himself of course also lacked the double moral standard. When fame helped to make his amours public he usually had to insist in his oblique way that he was as wicked as could be. But he was more led than a leader into temptation. He was, in fact, capable of considerable forbearance when put upon. The widowed

¹ A review of Moore's *Lord Byron's Life and Letters* in the *Monthly Magazine* for 1830 (p. 183) went so far as to claim that Byron was not 'A hair's breath worse than nine-tenths of the decorous young gentlemen whom we meet every day roving the fashionable streets; the only difference being that his Lordship's taste for notoriety urged him into perpetual exposure'. But this is probably not so much an accurate measurement of Byron's wickedness against that of his contemporaries as a variation on the fashion of using Byron's reputation for moralistic purposes.

² Marchand., 1, 334-5.

Lady Falkland, to whom he had given £500 some years before when she was destitute, wrote to him after reading *Cbilde Harold*: Surely I cannot be mistaken! Byron, my adored Byron, come to me. I shall feel each hour an age until you are pressed to a heart as ardent and warm as your own . . . Tell me, my Byron, if those mournful tender effusions of your heart to that Thyrsa . . . were not intended for myself?¹

She sent a lock of her hair with the letter. When she had no reply in a month she wrote again saying she knew his silence reflected the nobility of his soul. He passed the letters on to her relative.

The Caroline Lamb scandal wound to its climax in 1813. *The Satirist* published an anecdote which began with an epigram taken, appropriately, from *Rejected Addresses*:

With horn-handled knife
To kill a tender lamb as dead as mutton.

and told how Lady C. had 'took up a dessert-knife, and stabbed herself' in a fit of jealousy over Lord B. She survived, of course, but her husband carted her off to the country where the noise of her indiscretions was more muffled.²

The same liking for exhibitionistic wickedness which made Byron serve as an accessory to the Lamb scandal led him to promote the second furor of his social phase. It was evidently talked about at least in the Melbourne House circle, though in whispers, because there are four references in the Byron-Lady Melbourne correspondence to it. In one of the references Byron assures Lady Melbourne that his half-sister Augusta's baby, Medora, is '*not* an "Ape"', heavily underlined, which we are expected to take as an assurance that the child is not his — not a monster born of incest.³ Byron was certainly fond of his half-sister, whom he didn't come to know at all until 1813, at the height of his social lionhood, and he certainly enjoyed fostering the whispers that their affection went to the length of incest. Augusta herself was too dreamy or idle to bother about such rumours.

This rumour is important chiefly because of its involvement in the third and decisive scandal, the separation following

¹ *Ibid.*, I, 346-7.

² See the account in Marchand, I, 397-8.

³ *Lord Byron's Correspondence*, I, 251.

Byron's marriage in 1815. Lady Byron certainly peddled the incest charge as the crucial reason for her deciding to leave her husband. The matter has been exhaustively debated, and it is not necessary in tracing the emergence of *Don Juan* from it all to go into more than the outlining facts.

The marriage was in itself an extraordinary union of the mad, bad and dangerous to know Lord Byron with an innocent blue-stocking whom Byron himself described after their first meeting as too perfect for his taste. His curiosity was piqued by her, and she no doubt like hundreds of other women then and after held the hope of reforming him. Lady Melbourne encouraged the alliance partly, one presumes, to guarantee the separation of Byron and her daughter-in-law, and her influence was in the end decisive. For a year after the marriage they survived, not always unhappily, though Byron did continue his exhibitionistic antics, usually in the form of furious rages or sulks. In the new year of 1816, just a year after they were married, Annabella went home to stay for a few days with her parents. She wrote affectionately to Byron on the journey, on 15 January, and again in a letter dated 16 January:

Dearest Duck,

We got here quite well last night and were ushered into the kitchen instead of drawing-room by a mistake that might have been agreeable enough to hungry people . . . Of this and other incidents Dad wants to write you a jocose account and both he and Mam long to have the family party completed . . . Such . . . and such a *sitting-room* or *sulking-room* all to yourself. If I were not always looking about for B. I should be a great deal better already for country air. *Miss* [their daughter] finds her provisions increased and fattens thereon. It is a good thing she can't understand all the flattery bestowed upon her — 'Little Angel' and I know not what . . . Love to the good goose [half-sister Augusta] and everybody's love to you both from hence.

Ever thy most loving
Pippin . . . Pip . . . Ip.¹

This wifely note was not entirely ingenuous, however, for she had written only the night before to Augusta with advice on what she should say to Byron about his mental health — his melancholy — about which there had already been a lot of discussion. Then

¹ Quoted by Marchand, II, 563-4.

on 17 January she quite abruptly reversed her whole attitude, asked that Byron should be prevented from following her into the country, and on the 20th her mother went to London to institute separation proceedings. They never saw each other again, since Byron left the country once the formalities were settled, and never returned.

The abruptness of Annabella's about-turn makes it doubtful that either the story of Byron's incest with Augusta or his mental cruelty to Annabella, which became the orthodox complaint, is sufficient to explain the break. Obviously Annabella's parents worked hard for it, but their persuasions would hardly have been the complete cause of her bitterness against her husband and her long campaign to justify the break. Wilson Knight's hypothesis, that Byron persuaded Annabella into sexual practices the sinfulness of which she did not know until her mother enlightened her, is one possible explanation of the violence and suddenness of her switch.

What is important for *Don Juan* in this sordid and unhappy story is Byron's reaction. As one might expect he was deeply hurt. Not only the sudden switch in Annabella from affection (as in the letter quoted) to active hostility, but the reasons given — Byron was ready enough to admit his sexual wickedness to Lady Melbourne, but to acknowledge being cruel to Annabella, still less insane, when they had actually parted on terms of what seemed to be real affection, cut him to the quick. So far as Caroline Lamb and the scandal of 1813 was concerned he had seen himself, rightly enough, as more sinned against than sinning, and his other amours were no more than many of his contemporaries indulged in with neither offence nor scandal. So it was with a strong feeling of injustice, a very substantial grievance against the Milbankes and the society which aligned itself with them in painting him scarlet, that he shook its mud off his feet and went to be a *cavaliere-servente* in Venice.

In the early days of the divorce business he wrote to Annabella:

Were you then *never* happy with me? did you never at any time or times express yourself so? have no marks of affection, of the warmest and most reciprocal attachment, passed between us? or did in fact hardly a day go down without some such on one side and generally on both? . . . had I not — had we not — the days before and on the day when

we parted, every reason to believe that we loved each other — that we were to meet again? . . . You are much changed within these twenty days, or you would never have thus poisoned your own better feelings — and trampled upon mine.¹

There is a genuinely hurt self-righteousness about this which shows through the rhetoric of reproof. Later, in 1820, he summarized his attitude in a letter to *Blackwood's Magazine*: 'I was accused of every monstrous vice by public rumour and private rancour . . . I felt that, if what was whispered, and muttered, and murmured, was true, I was unfit for England; if false, England was unfit for me.'²

Once out of England, he attacked Annabella in stanzas 135-45 of the fourth and last canto of *Childe Harold*. But *Childe Harold* was now the wrong vehicle; his attack was a defence, a satire without the ready endorsement from society which a satire needs for success. Another vehicle had to be found for his bitterness and sense of injustice. He started *Don Juan* during his Venetian exile in April 1818, when a series of minor incidents combined to renew his vindictive mood against all things English. In July he wrote of a project to compose a set of ironical memoirs³ (some of these he did write: they were burned by John Murray after his death). His social debacle was very much in his mind in the months up to September when he completed the first canto of *Don Juan*. That canto of course contains the satirical portrait of Annabella as Donna Inez, the perfect woman:

To others' share let 'female errors fall',
For she had not even one — the worst of all.

(Stanza 16)

But the idea of ironical memoirs shaped Byron's construction of the poem in a more fundamental way than by simply providing another opportunity for a satirical portrait of the author's ex-wife. The poem, brilliantly funny and acute as it is, appears a much lesser creation if the steps from Byron's recent past into its construction are not taken into account.

One can see the genesis of *Don Juan* as taking five steps. They begin with the choice of a hero. As the opening says, 'I want a hero . . .'. In his social heyday Byron had been all too easily

¹ Quoted by Marchand, II, 575.

² Quoted by Marchand, II, 602, n. 4.

³ *Ibid.*, II, 743-4.

identified with his other great hero Childe Harold, an identification which Byron with characteristic dualism both fostered and resented, as a one-sided picture of a many-sided man. The second step was the choice of Don Juan, in legend the archetype of seducers, and especially of those seducers who come to a bad end. At bottom this choice was a burlesque of the oversimplifying process by which Byron became first the romantic Harold, then the hell-doomed Don Juan. The choice of hero fitted Byron's image of England's image of him, and the choice of the same stanza-form for *Don Juan* as for *Childe Harold* underlined the irony. Byron's attitude is summarized in the ambiguity of the last couplet of the first stanza:

We all have seen him in the pantomime
Sent to the Devil somewhat ere his time.

The pantomime was either Mozart's opera — or any other version of the story — or the English separation *furor*; and 'somewhat ere his time' can mean either before the term of his natural life, before he was due to die, or that he (Byron) was sent to the Devil by the English with summary justice before the laws of nature ordained it. So he chooses as his hero 'my friend Don Juan' (stanza 5).

The third step is understandably to give this caricature of his own public image a parentage identifiable as Byron himself and his wife Annabella, since their marriage led to the creation of the image. This he explicitly states (stanza 7):

My way is to begin with the beginning;
The regularity of my design
Forbids all wandering as the worst of sinning,
And therefore I shall open with a line
(Although it cost me half an hour in spinning),
Narrating somewhat of Don Juan's father,
And also of his mother, if you'd rather.

He then moves straight into the easily recognizable portrait of Annabella, even down to a cruelly precise rendering of a pedantic joke which is too odd not to have been authentic:

But this I heard her say, and can't be wrong,
And all may think which way their judgments lean 'em,
'Tis strange — the Hebrew noun which means "I am",
The English always use to govern d -- n'.

The Hebrew for 'God' is 'I am'; the English say 'God damn', which can therefore be translated 'I am damned'. It sounds all too like Annabella. Stanzas 26-32 of the poem go on to give Byron's version of their marriage and separation, at the end of which he tells us that Juan's father died leaving him to be shaped by Donna Inez/Annabella. That, then, is the parentage, the heredity, of Byron's hero: Don Juan, a personality born of Byron's marriage and nurtured by Annabella after Byron's disappearance from the scene.

The fourth step in the building of the poem was to give the narrator of the story a persona different from either Don Juan himself or from Byron in his English and Venetian versions, the Childe Harold or Don Juan persona. So the narrator speaks frequently in the first person, and goes so far as to say of his hero 'I knew his father well' (stanza 51). Furthermore, he several times denies that he, the narrator, has ever been married. In stanza 22, before the account of Donna Inez's marriage, he says, 'I'm a plain man, and in a simple station', and in the next stanza modifies the account by saying that his curiosity follows from his 'Not having, of my own, domestic cares'. Anyone reading that in England would be expected to know what form Byron's Italian cares took, and domestic was not their word either. Here again Byron is exploiting his pseudo-innocent narrator's persona in the full knowledge that his readers would have the public image of the author in the front of their minds. For that reason he claims barefacedly in stanza 53 that he, the author, never married. If one is reading about Don Juan as the child of the marriage of Byron and Annabella it is a supremely audacious irony:

For my part I say nothing — nothing — but
This I will say — my reasons are my own —
 That if I had an only son to put
 To school (as God be praised that I have none),
 'T is not with Donna Inez I would shut
 Him up to learn his catechism alone,
 No — no — I'd send him out betimes to college,
 For there it was I picked up my own knowledge.

For there one learns — 't is not for me to boast,
 Though I acquired — but I pass over *that*,
 As well as all the Greek I since have lost: —
 I say that there's the place — but '*Verbum sat*'

I think I picked up too, as well as most,
 Knowledge of matters — but no matter *what* —
 I never married — but, I think, I know
 That sons should not be educated so.

The narrator is no Don Juan, not in any way to be identified with the bad Lord Byron of English legend, and yet of course absolutely to be identified at the same time.

The fifth step was an elaboration of the ambiguous opening of the poem, about Juan being sent to the Devil by popular acclaim before his time. This Juan, child of the profligate as he is, becomes an innocent, a child of virtue and the good intentions of Donna Inez. Byron reverses the conventional characterization of Juan and says in effect 'my public image is what your [Annabella's] "magnanimity" (stanza 29) has made me'. It is a commonplace that the seducer of 1,003 women (according to Leporello's catalogue aria) becomes in Byron the victim of three seductions and just a complaisant accomplice in the other two. Juan is an innocent in his first amour with Julia and in all the later escapades, unconcerned with sin, a victim of circumstance. Donna Inez nurtured him with all care:

The languages, especially the dead,
 The sciences, and most of all the abstruse,
 The arts, at least all such as could be said
 To be the most remote from common use,
 In all these he was much and deeply read:
 But not a page of anything that's loose,
 Or hints continuation of the species,
 Was ever suffered, lest he should grow vicious.

Juan's error is not vice but ignorance, and much of what Byron is saying in this first canto is evident in this fact — Juan is a child of his environment, banished from Seville for a natural and spontaneous piece of behaviour which offended the moral canons of Donna Inez and conventional (and knowing) society. The offence was created by the morality, not by the innocent offender.

This was the key to Byron's construction of the initial canto of the poem. He fired it off to England in furious haste, and refused to modify it in anything except the incidental elaborations of the dedicatory stanzas. The real point of the poem at the outset was to question the conventional Don Juan label they had tied around his neck, to question the conventional morality which had banished him.

Happy the nations of the moral North!
 Where all is virtue, and the winter season
 Sends sin, without a rag on, shivering forth
 ('T was snow that brought St. Anthony to reason);
 Where juries cast up what a wife is worth,
 By laying whate'er sum, in mulct, they please on
 The lover, who must pay a handsome price,
 Because it is a marketable vice.

In a letter about the first canto he said, 'I maintain that it is the most moral of poems; but if people won't discover the moral, that is their fault, not mine'.¹ He felt it was a canto designed to test the understanding of the reader, a trial run of his own view of the situation, as the penultimate stanza says:

... for the present, gentle reader! and
 Still gentler purchaser! the Bard — that's I —
 Must, with permission, shake you by the hand,
 And so — 'Your humble servant, and Goodbye!'
 We meet again, if we should understand
 Each other; and if not, I shall not try
 Your patience further than by this short sample —
 'T were well if others followed my example.

The canto was his way of showing how misconceived he felt the marriage scandal and his reputation in exile were. The ironic realignment of the Don Juan story was meant to suggest his own moral approach to what he identified in the poem as the same generating circumstances. He gave the canto an epigraph from Horace — 'domestica facta' — which we might understandably translate as the cares of domestic life, though he himself, facing both ways as ever, insisted that it meant simply 'common life'.²

Perhaps the ultimate irony of this intimately biographical poem is that Byron's inversion of the conventional characterization of Juan in the poem left the actual erotic events of his life intact. In this as in so many of Byron's pronouncements there is a furtively exhibitionistic ambiguity, a duality which says that he really is the wicked Lord Byron however charmingly or mockingly he may contrive to upset your conventional interpretations. Not bad, not mad, but certainly difficult to know.

¹ *Ibid.*, II, 766.

² *Ibid.*, II, 765.