Arnold Anthony Schmidt
BYRON AND THE RHECTORIC OF ITALIAN NATIONALISM
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Lucy Riall
GARIBALDI: INVENTION OF A HERO
Yale 2008
xiv + 482pp.

Arnold Anthony Schmidt’s is a “romantic” book. Positive interpretations are favoured for most details: warts in the portrait are air-brushed out. There is a lot of padding (albeit well-researched padding) for the price.

Byron’s influence on Italian nationalism is indeed rhetorical – a question of cheering the nation up so that it can ignore its failings. The case is even more severe in Greece, where Byron statues are erected and relocated, and Byron conferences hosted with pride, in inverse proportion to the amount of Byron that is actually read. After all, if the Greeks read Byron, they’d find such things as

The Greeks will never be independent, they will never be sovereigns as heretofore, and God forbid they ever should! … To talk, as the Greeks themselves do, of their rising again to their pristine superiority, would be ridiculous; as the rest of the world must resume its barbarism, after re-asserting the sovereignty of Greece.¹

Or …

He did not know – (Alas! how men will lie)
That a report (especially the Greeks)
Avouched his death …²

Or …

Whoever goes into Greece at present should do it as Mrs Fry went into Newgate – not in the expectation of meeting with any especial indication of existing probity – but in the hope that time and better treatment will reclaim the present burglarious and larcenous tendencies which have followed this General Gaol delivery. – When the limbs of the Greeks are a little less stiff from the shackles of four centuries – they will not march so much “as if they had gyves on their legs”. – – At present the Chains are broken indeed; but the links are still clanking – and the Saturnalia is still too recent to have converted the Slave into a sober Citizen. – The worst of them is that (to use a coarse but the only expression that will not fall short of the truth) they are such d——d liars; – there never was such an incapacity for veracity shown since Eve lied in Paradise. – One of them found fault the other day with the English language – because it had so few shades of a Negative – whereas a Greek can so modify a No – to a yes – and vice versa – <that> by the slippery qualities of his language – that prevarication may be carried to any extent and still leave a loop=hole through which perjury may slip without being perceived. – – – This was the Gentleman’s own talk – and is only to be doubted because in the words of the Syllogism – “Now Epimenides was a Cretan”. But they may be mended by and bye. – ³

¹: Note to Childe Harold II.
²: DJ III 38, 1-3.
³: Cephalonia Journal.
The Italian nationalist reading of Byron may be gauged from some entries in the diary of Cesare Abba, one of Garibaldi’s Thousand. He has several references showing what a familiar iconographic stock Byron’s poems provided, as long as one just concentrated on their rugged, anti-imperialist message. The “Byronic Hero” must be shorn of his weirdness, and his self-destructive impulses, and reinvented as a fighter. Abba sees a young sailor throwing tow overboard as a signal:

Io guardava le sue mani ben fatte, il suo petto ampio, il suo collo robusto e bello, cinto di un fazzoletto di seta ricadente giù per le spalle; e pensava ai mari d’oriente e al Corsaro di Byron. – [“As I took note of his well-shaped hands, his broad chest, his fine sturdy neck in its silk scarf falling back over his shoulders, I thought of the seas of the Orient and of Byron’s Corsair.”]  

Conrad is in this version not a short, unsuccessfu pirate but a noble, well-made political insurgent. Elsewhere, someone is telling stories on the road at night, but his audience fall asleep:

Quando se ne avvide, Carini si tirò il mantello sul capo e sorridendo disse: <<Come Mazeppa, nell’ultimo verso del poema di Byron>>. – [“When he noticed this, Carini pulled his cloak over his head and said, smiling, ’Just like Mazeppa in the last verse of Byron’s poem.’”]

Mazeppa isn’t here a follower of some crazed Swedish king, but a proto-Redshirt. Later:

Trovammo un cavallo disteso morto sul margine del sentiero, e si disse che era di Bixio: il quale irato, perché ci nitrì poteva scoprirci al nemico, gli aveva scaricata nel canio la sua pistola. Byron, sempre Byron! Lara l’avrebbe fatto anche lui. – [“We found a horse lying dead by the side of the path and they said it was Bixio’s, who had been enraged because its neighing could have revealed our presence to the enemy and had blown its brains out with his own pistol. Byron, always Byron! Lara would have done the same.”]

The inscrutable Lara, too, is recast as a rebel against imperialism. When Abba is on board the Piemonte in Genoa harbour, about to start with Garibaldi on the expedition which will unite Italy, he records:

A piè della collina d’Albaro alzai gli occhi, per vedere ancora una volta la Villa, dove Byron stette gli ultimi giorni, prima di partire per la Grecia: e il grido di Aroldo a Roma mi risonò nelle viscere. Se vivesse, sarebbe là sul Piemonte, a fianco di Garibaldi inspiratore. – [“At the foot of the hill of Albaro, I looked to see the villa again where Byron passed his last days before leaving for Greece, and Childe Harold’s invocation to Rome came to my mind. If he were alive today he would be on board the Piemonte to inspire Garibaldi.”]

There’s no such thing as “il grido di Aroldo a Roma”; indeed, once he’s sung his Farewell in Canto I, Childe Harold never gives utterance. But so what? None of these readings of Byron involve any reading. Byron is not an author, but an icon. His works were presented from “a Risorgimento perspective”, as Schmidt writes (p.62: quoting Edoardo Zuccato): that is, a perspective from which he could not be clearly seen.

There are more sensible Italian voices. Of the “Byronic heroes”, Mazzini writes (in a passage not quoted by Schmidt):

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5: Abba, 72: Vincent, 48.  
7: Abba, 14: Vincent, 8.
Gifted with a liberty they know not how to use; with a power and energy they know not how to apply; with a life whose purpose and aim they comprehend not; – they drag through their useless and convulsed existence. Byron destroys them one after the other, as if he were the executioner of a sentence decreed in heaven. They fall unwept, like a withered leaf into the stream of time ... The emptiness of the life and death of solitary individuality, has never been so powerfully and efficaciously summed up as in the pages of Byron.\footnote{Byron and Goethe, in Life and Writings of Joseph Mazzini, 1870, VI 73.}

It’s an original thesis, anticipating some modern thoughts about the “Byronic Hero” as a revolutionary in attitude only, destructive in effect, without real political focus, and casts implicit and ironical doubt on the wisdom of preferring, as so many Italian political poets did, Childe Harold and the Turkish Tales to the ottava rima work – ignoring, in short, the work in which Byron owes most to Italy.

Schmidt presents Byron’s political influence in Europe in the customary positive way:

During nineteenth-century uprisings by the Czechs, French, Germans, Hungarians, Poles, Russians (and, of course, Italians), Byron’s words and image as a nationalist hero appeared over and over again. The Russian poet Kondraty Fyodorovich Ryleev, when executed by the Czar for his part in the 1825 Decembrist uprising, died holding a copy of Byron’s poetry (Felluga 74). Byron also influenced the Polish nationalist and romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz, called “il Byron polacco” (“the Polish Byron”) (Pedrocco 4), who in 1822 wrote “It is only Byron that I read, and I throw away any book written in another spirit, because I detest lies” (Bone 259). Mickiewicz, who translated The Giaour, died from cholera while trying to organize a Polish Legion to combat Russian oppression, a death which mirrors Byron’s in Missolonghi organizing Greeks to fight the Turks (Bone 261). Another admiring, the French poet-politician Alphonse de Lamartine, served in France’s government following the revolutionary events of 1848, wrote an homage to Byron entitled Le Dernier Chant du Pelerinage d’Harold, and became the lover of Byron’s Venetian mistress Teresa Guiccioli (Fortescue 151-195, 33) (p.5).

He has chosen three very sad examples. Ryleev did indeed participate in the Decembrists’ failed uprising (though I believe he was hanged with a Byron in his pocket, not in his hand – that would have made the hangman’s job even harder than it was – the rope broke). But the Decembrists were confused in motivation, half-hearted in planning, and let down by the defection of two of their leaders. In its non-stop bathos their attempted coup was indeed a Byronic event: but out of Beppo, not out of The Corsair. Mickiewicz’s attempt to start (not a Polish, but a Jewish Legion) to fight the Russians, was a waste of time (not unlike Byron’s attempt at organising the Greeks in Missolonghi); and what he actually wrote was,

I read only Byron, and cast aside books if written in a different spirit, since I don’t like lies; if there’s a description of happiness, family life, this rouses my indignation as much as the sight of married couples and children; this is my only aversion.

… which is hardly a revolutionary sentiment. As for Lamartine, it’s true that he inscribed his name beneath that of Byron when he visited Tasso’s cell in Ferrara, that he followed in Byron’s tracks in Greece and Turkey, and that he tried to turn Childe Harold’s face back to religion, in his “completion” of Byron’s work. In Le Dernier Chant de Childe Harold, Harold leaves Italy for Greece, where he rests not at Missolonghi but in a monastery, claiming to seek God. In a dream he is faced with the choice between a vessel containing the fruit of the Tree of Life, and one containing a
serpentine Satan. He chooses the latter, and dies. It’s that silly. In making his fifth canto of *Childe Harold* into a narrative, Lamartine shows that he hasn’t read the first four. The Neapolitan General Pepe challenged him to a duel over the poem, in which he describes Italy as a land of the dead.

He deplored *Don Juan* as an example of “l’école du rire”.

Nevertheless, in the late 1820s, after Byron’s death in Greece, he expressed the desire to “Assister à cette résurrection d’un empire sur la terre des souvenirs, et y participer moi-même, comme Lord Byron …” His ambitions were realised distantly when, late in 1826, he indeed had an affair (of sorts) with Teresa Guiccioli (who was from Ravenna, not Venice); and they were briefly fulfilled when, under the Second Republic of 1848, he was Foreign Minister, where he did not cut a glorious figure: as Heine commented, “He bored us in verse and betrayed us in prose”. On falling from power (in the presidential election he gained 17,000 votes to the five-and-a-half million of Louis Napoleon) he had to live again by the pen, and among his later works is a derivative life of Byron.

Schmidt adduces Felice Orsini as another hero of European Byronism. In 1858 Orsini hurled a bomb at Napoleon III, missed him, and killed eight bystanders, injuring 150 more. He often quoted Byron. Perhaps it was because he was such a deplorable advertisement for Byronism that Napoleon permitted the publication of his testimony.

Schmidt is very good on the eighteenth-century background to Byron’s perception of Italy; most important is his argument about the influence of Napoleon, who “contributed to Italian nationalism by unifying Italy (except for Sicily) under a single ruler for the first time since the Roman empire” (p.18). The way he plundered the country of her artworks did not decrease her new sense of a unified selfhood. Byron was made aware of the Napoleonic legacy when he crossed the magnificent new Simplon pass (which made “it faster and easier to travel from Milan to Paris than from Milan to Naples”: p.20), and in his encounter with Alessandro Guiccioli, whose wealth came in part from Napoleon’s sale of church lands (very few of which were returned after 1815). His friends the Gambas were likewise beneficiaries of the land-sales, and they became Carbonari upon the restoration of the autocrats. The soldiers who fought for Napoleon fought not as provincials, but as Italians – this too increased the new sense of nationhood.

The following section, on Byron’s influence on Italian literature and therefore on politics, is unconvincing. It’s true that di Breme, Pellico and Rossi admired and translated him, but I find no Byronic influence in *I Promessi Sposi*, and Leopardi seems to have found Byron distasteful. He was contemptuous about what he read as Byron’s constant striving for effect:

> Lascio l’incredibile, continuo e manifestissimo stento con cui il povero lord suda e si affatica perché ogni minima frase, ogni minimo aggiunto sia originale e nuovo, e non ci sia cosa tanti milioni di volte detta, ch’egli non la ridicola in un altro modo, affettazione più chiara del sole, che disgusta eccessivamente, e otracciò stanca per l’uniformità e per la continua fatica dell’intelletto. [*I shall ignore the continuous, unbelievable and evident effort which makes the poor lord sweat and labour to render the shortest sentence and the smallest addition new and original; and there is not a single thing not already told a million times that he does not repeat in a different way – an affectation as plain as daylight, which is exceedingly disgusting, and is furthermore tiring for its monotony and for the uninterrupted effort of the mind.*][9]"

Leopardi’s pessimism is quite unlike Byron’s. When he writes …

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9: Quoted Zuccato at Cardwell III, i, 86.
Al gener nostro il fato
non donò che il morire. Omai disprezza
te, la natura, il brutto
poter, che, ascossco, a comun danno impera,
e l’infinita vanità del tutto.\textsuperscript{10}

[“To human kind fate has only appointed dying. Scorn nature now, the brutal power which
governs to the universal hurt, and the infinite vanity of everything.”]\textsuperscript{11}

… he’s neither smiling nor being histrionic.

Francesco Dall’Ongaro’s \textit{Il Venerdì Santo} (in which Byron takes Allegra to a
hilltop one Good Friday, and tells her that – \textit{after he returns from Greece} – he will take
her to London and introduce her to Augusta Ada), shows just how sentimental his
reading of Byron was. The gist of Schmidt’s section here is that Italian writers took
from Byron the idea that the best literature was political: but although Byron meditates
on Italian politics, he never uses poetry as a call to action on the peninsula (writing in
English would have been a barrier to doing so, anyway). Had the 1820 / 21 uprising
have taken place, he would have celebrated the fact by “prophesying” it in \textit{The
Prophecy of Dante}; but the uprising didn’t happen, and Byron, disillusioned – he had
been hinting at an approaching cataclysm for some time in his letters home –
discontinued the poem, and ceased to hope for anything from the Italians. It’s true that,
as Schmidt writes, “The authors who admired Byron saw literature as creating a
national consciousness” (p.31): but from the middle of his stay in Ravenna, Byron
ceased to do that (the translation of \textit{The Prophecy} to which Schmidt refers was
produced, not in Tuscany as Schmidt says, but in Paris).

Schmidt does not believe in humour as a vehicle for political expression:
“[\textit{Byron’s}] satiric bent often predominates over thoughtful, reasoned discourse”, he
writes: one can’t quite tell whether he objects or not. But what Byron found among the
would-be Italian insurgents of his day could only furnish food for his “satiric bent”. The
following extracts from his Ravenna Journal would have been available to any English
reader from 1831 onwards:

\begin{quote}
January 8th, 1821, Monday.
Rose, and found Count P[ietro]. G[amba]. in my apartments. Sent away the servant. Told
me that, according to the best information, the Government had not issued orders for the
arrests apprehended; that the attack in Forli had not taken place (as expected) by the
Sanfedisti – opponents of the Carbonari or Liberals – and that, as yet, they are still in
apprehension only. Asked me for some arms of a better sort, which I gave him. Settled that,
in case of a row, the Liberals were to assemble here (with me), and that he had given the
word to Vincenzo G[allina]. and others of the \textit{Chiefs} for that purpose. He himself and
father are going to the chase in the forest; but V[incenzo]. G[allina]. is to come to me, and
an express to be sent off to him, P[ietro]. G[amba]., if any thing occurs. Concerted
operations. They are to seize – but no matter.
I advised them to attack in detail, and in different parties, in different \textit{places} (though at
the same time), so as to divide the attention of the troops, who, though few, yet being
disciplined, would beat any body of people (not trained) in a regular fight – unless
dispersd in small parties, and distracted with different assaults. Offered to let them
assemble here if they choose. It is a strongish post – narrow street, commanded from
within-and tenable walls … At nine and a half came in Il Conte P. and Count P[ietro].
G[amba].\textsuperscript{12} Talked of a certain proclamation lately issued. Count R[uggiero]. G[amba]. had
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{10}: Leopardi, \textit{A sè stesso}, conclusion.
\textsuperscript{11}: Tr. George Kay.
\textsuperscript{12}: There is only one Conte P.G. – Pietro Gamba. Mo. may have misread “R” (“Ruggiero”), for “P”.
been with * * (the * *), to sound him about the arrests. He, * *, is a trimmer, and deals, at present, his cards with both hands. If he don’t mind, they’ll be full. * * pretends (I doubt him – they don’t – we shall see) that there is no such order, and seems staggered by the immense exertions of the Neapolitans, and the fierce spirit of the Liberals here. The truth is, that * * cares for little but his place (which is a good one), and wishes to play pretty with both parties. He has changed his mind thirty times these last three moons, to my knowledge, for he corresponds with me. But he is not a bloody fellow – only an avaricious one.

It seems that, just at this moment (as Lydia Languish says) “there will be no elopement after all.” I wish that I had known as much last night – or, rather, this morning – I should have gone to bed two hours earlier. And yet I ought not to complain; for, though it is a sirocco, and heavy rain, I have not yawned for these two days.

January 24th, 1821.
Dined – (damn this pen!) – beef tough – there is no beef in Italy worth a curse; unless a man could eat an old ox with the hide on, singed in the sun.

The principal persons in the events which may occur in a few days are gone out on a shooting party. If it were like a “highland hunting,” a pretext of the chase for a grand re-union of counsellors and chiefs, it would be all very well. But it is nothing more or less than a real snivelling, popping, small-shot, water-hen waste of powder, ammunition, and shot, for their own special amusement: – a rare set of fellows for “a man to risk his neck with,” as “Marishal Wells” says in the Black Dwarf.

If they gather, – “whilk is to be doubted,” – they will not muster a thousand men. The reason of this is, that the populace are not interested, – only the higher and middle orders. I wish that the peasantry were; they are a fine savage race of two-legged leopards. But the Bolognese won’t – the Romagnuoles can’t without them. Or, if they try – what then? They will try, and man can do no more – and, if he would but try his utmost, much might be done. The Dutch, for instance, against the Spaniards – then, the tyrants of Europe – since, the slaves and, lately, the freedmen.

January 26th.
Went out – found Teresa, as usual – music. The gentlemen, who make revolutions and are gone on a shooting, are not yet returned. They don’t return till Sunday – that is to say, they have been out for five days, buffooning, while the interests of a whole country are at stake, and even they themselves compromised.

It is a difficult part to play amongst such a set of assassins and blockheads – but, when the scum is skimmed off or has boiled over, good may come of it. If this country could but be freed, what would be too great for the accomplishment of that desire? for the extinction of that Sigh of Ages? Let us hope. They have hoped these thousand years. The very revolvement of the chances may bring it – it is upon the dice.

Such diary entries seem to me free of the “performative” or “self-creative” poses which Schmidt (p.34: echoing Paul Elledge) finds bewildering in much of Byron. Byron here means what he says – he may be smiling, but he isn’t being histrionic. Byron had an entire guerilla’s battle-plan worked out: but Pietro and Ruggero Gamba – his closest Carbonaro allies – had been bluffing all along. Faced with an Austrian invasion, they went off on a hunting trip. Schmidt summarizes these diary entries, but leaves the bits out which document the Gambas’ defection. If for the most part he seems struggling to make an upbeat interpretation of his evidence, here we can accuse him of suppressing it.

In his diary entry for September 19th 1822, Hobhouse confirms the tale:

Byron told me that Gamba the son and a friend went out shooting for several days at the very time they expected to rise and revolutionize Italy. It was represented to them that they

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14: B. refers to Ruggero and Pietro Gamba.
15: See Scott, The Black Dwarf (1816), chapter XIII.
16: Pietro and Ruggiero.
should not be absent at such a conjuncture, but they resolved to go, and did go where no
letters could reach them. These are patriots – and Italy is to depend on them.\(^{17}\)

Byron had made the mistake of taking Italian rhetoric for Italian sincerity. The
defection of Ruggero and Pietro (“and a friend” is Byron being polite to the senior
Gamba), just as things were getting hot, revealed to him his misjudgement. He
remained with the Carbonari, and the Gambas’ half-heartedness did not preclude their
subsequent persecution by the authorities: but the honeymoon was over with no
“elopement” having occurred.

On February 18th 1821 his Ravenna Journal has

To-day I have had no communication with my Carbonari cronies; but, in the mean time,
my lower apartments are full of their bayonets, fusils, cartridges, and what not. I suppose
that they consider me as a dépôt, to be sacrificed, in case of accidents. It is no great matter,
supposing that Italy could be liberated, who or what is sacrificed. It is a grand object – the
very *poetry* of politics. Only think – a free Italy!!! Why, there has been nothing like it since
the days of Augustus. I reckon the times of Cæsar (Julius) free: because the commotions
left everybody a side to take, and the parties were pretty equal at the set out. But,
afterwards, it was all praetorian and legionary business – and since! – we shall see, or, at
least, some will see, what card will turn up. It is best to hope, even of the hopeless. The
Dutch did more than these fellows have to do, in the Seventy Years’ War.

This passage has, though famous, received little critical attention (Schmidt quotes
only part of it, from “Italy” to “Italy!!!”: p.41). I think embarrassment is the reason. The
Carbonari, afraid to store their arms themselves, use Byron’s house as their arsenal, and
Byron as their fall-guy. He’s the only one dumb enough to believe their posturing – let
him carry the can if the police swoop. In addition, Byron’s history here is very odd. If
“the days of Augustus” (the first years of the Empire), were the last free times in Italy,
how can the time immediately previous, those “of Cæsar (Julius)” have been free, too?
Brutus and Cassius would have disagreed with both assertions. Byron’s analysis is so
bad that we may think he is joking. When was “the Seventy Years War”, and how were
the Dutch involved in it? Their struggle to rid themselves of the Hapsburgs is called the
Eighty Years War (1568-1648). And the central phrase “the very *poetry* of politics” is
hot air. If Byron, after his disillusionment with English politics, could imagine, after his
recent further disillusion with the Gambas, that poetry could be found in Italian politics,
then he was a simpleton (unless he’s being sarcastic, which is a possibility).

On March 7th, at the battle of Rieti, the Austrians faced what there was of a
Neapolitan army, which dissolved and ran away without firing a shot.

“Few historians,” writes Schmidt, “see Byron as a prominent Carbonaro leader …
If these authors do not communicate the historical truth about Byron, they do reveal the
ideological and polemical truths about him that Italians told each other” (p.40). Surely
he means “ideological and polemical *lies*”? The Carbonari were Masonic in idiom, and
had as aims, in addition to ridding the land of Austrians, the discouragement of
gambling, drunkenness, and adultery. They weren’t smiling, but they were being
histrionic. Later in the century, Mazzini would have nothing to do with them. Wicked
people have held them to be the ancestors of our own day’s P2, of unsavoury
reputation. I wonder if Berlusconi (himself an erstwhile P2-ist) reads Byron?

Later, after dwelling on Byron’s evil reputation in nineteenth-century England,
Schmidt describes, by way of contrast, the admiration which the Italians felt for him:

\(^{17}\) B.L.Add.Mss. 56546.
This admiration appears in a variety of common tropes that Italian representations of Byron share. They praise his affection for Italy, which they characterize as stronger than his feelings for his native Britain, and even more than for Greece, as Corrado Lacchetti wrote in 1919 (7). Italians make classical allusions that connect Byron with prominent figures from antiquity. Often associated with other great European authors and thinkers, Italians consider Byron a vatic poet, sometimes greater than many of the peninsula’s own authors. He most frequently appears compared with Dante, both poet-patriots, both exiles who lived in Ravenna. Giuseppe Torelli, in an 1844 biography, employs language that becomes typical, lauding Byron as a “philosopher like Kant, a poet like Dante” (1). Like many great people, Byron pays a price for his talents; solitary, the departure from his homeland and the exceptional nature of his personality contribute to his loneliness. Showered with glory as a heroic activist for Greek and Italian self-determination, Byron remains unmoved by worldly praise. That praise includes accolades for the sacrifice of his life at Missolonghi, a sacrifice that Italians occasionally compare grandiloquently with that of Christ’s crucifixion (pp.58-9).

Schmidt presents all this flannel without criticism, and we can’t quite tell whether he sees through it or not (“grandiloquently” is his only concession to irony). In vain we point out that whereas Dante could not return to Florence unless he wished to be burnt at the stake, Byron could go home any time he wanted, and sometimes even threatened to do so. No two things could be further apart than the poetical / theological system of Dante, or the philosophical system of Kant on the one hand, and the comical, haphazard, endlessly self-contradictory poetry of Byron on the other. The Greeks had the excuse that very little of Byron’s poetry was translated into Greek. In Italy, most of it was – well translated, in the cases of Leoni and Niccolini, as Schmidt writes. But “the rhetoric” they derived from it wasn’t based on their reading of what Byron had written, but from what – from their perspective – he should have written. Thus fortified, they held costume balls (with people dressed as Conrad, Parisina, and so on), and of course, wrote operas – at least one of which, Rossini’s The Siege of Corinth, has nothing to do with Byron’s poem at all. Their version of Byron became hammer and hammer: he “went to Greece like Orestes to Tauris to free them from the furies”: Jacopo Foscari “could not love Venice as he loved it”: “Rain again your blood, oh Christ of liberty”. Schmidt quotes these and many more, finally conceding (it comes as a relief) that some are “more like hagiography than literary criticism”.

Schmidt has researched this section massively. His section on the Sicilian poet Giuseppina Turrisi-Colonna is especially informative. Her Byron is sincere and monogamous: Teresa Guiccioli is Medora to his Lara / Manfred. In Ravenna, Dante himself speaks from the tomb, telling him that Greece awaits him … and so on.

Further massive and useful research is found in Schmidt’s section on the critical reception of Byron. He seems to have been through every issue of the rival journals, the Conciliatore and the Biblioteca Italiana, and sums up their differences economically. The gist of his next section is that, whether sceptical, anti-clerical, or pious, all mid-nineteenth century Italian writers needed to get Byron on their side (compare Maria Schoina’s work on the use of his name in Greece under the Colonels): when a writer has become an icon, what he wrote is, as Lady Bracknell would say, “immaterial!” Likewise with the classical / romantic dichotomy – if you were a romantic you could claim Byron as your own, ditto if you were a classicist. With the obvious exception of the Ave Maria stanzas in Don Juan IV (much quoted by the religious), these factors again led to the neglect of those poems in which Byron owes most to Italian poetry. The ottava rima works are neither classical nor romantic, but a new departure entirely. Schmidt never makes this point, but satirical verse like Don Juan is dangerous under an
autocracy, and facetious verse like *Beppo* is in bad taste when the nation’s freedom, unity and identity are reckoned to be at stake.

It looks as if Schmidt discovered halfway through the game that there wasn’t a whole book to be written on the theme of Byron and Italian nationalist rhetoric, and decided that he needed to widen his field. This he does – but doesn’t confess to doing so.

I wonder if we need the long historical preamble which starts his Venice chapter (it speaks well of the horrible First Crusade, omitting the sack of Constantinople, which gave St Mark’s its four horses). And I wonder if *Marino Faliero* and *The Two Foscari* really do function as a warning to English imperialism in the way Schmidt says. The threat or warning in *Faliero* is to any unwise patrician who allies himself with proles, not, as Schmidt suggests, to any unwise proles who trust megalomanic patricians. The idea that “Byron associated with working-class radicals and physical force revolutionaries, and in Ravenna, became a leader (capo) of a chapter of the *Carbonari* called *i Cacciatori Americani*” (p.33): implying that, like Conrad, Selim, or Ulric in *Werner*, he led them on exciting (or self-destructive) adventures – shows Schmidt’s by now ingrained habit of giving the smallest bit of evidence a glowing interpretation.

Two important facts emerge about Schmidt’s treatment of the Venetian plays: firstly, he is able to point out several historical inaccuracies in them, but with reference to numerous modern Italian historians to whom Byron could not have had access; and secondly, he adduces no nineteenth-century Italian patriot who incorporates them into his rhetoric. This last makes one wonder if the chapter (which is as usual extremely well-researched) fits into the book at all. It’s easy to see why the plays made no impact. (A) the image of Italian politics they present is unsparing and pessimistic and (B) they’re a bit long and boring. Such a mundane issue as the latter is, however, beside Schmidt’s point. But it would in any case be impossible to romanticise Faliero or either of the Foscari into a freedom fighter, as Cesare Abba did with Lara, Conrad, and Mazeppa.

There are several “romantic” statements.

*Marino Faliero* “features a community of men [*the arsenalotti*] not dissimilar from the disenfranchised workers of Britain whom Byron supported in his speech against executing Luddites” (p.117): one thing Byron most emphatically did not advocate, in the Lords or anywhere else, was the enfranchisement of the workers. Neither would he, I think, have described English peasants as “a fine savage race of two-legged leopards”.

“The doge in his statements about ‘liberty,’ like Byron in similar comments in his poetry and letters, remains vague about mechanisms for sharing aristocratic power with the people” (p.117): does Schmidt have such “vague” things as these in mind? Of Peterloo Byron writes:

> Why our classical education alone – should teach us to trample on such unredeemed dirt as the dishonest bluntness – the ignorant brutality, the unblushing baseness of these two miscreants [*Hunt and Cobbett*]; – and all who believe in them. – – – I think I have neither been an illiberal man nor an unsteady man upon politics – but [I think also that] if the Manchester Yeomanry had cut down Hunt only – they would have done their duty – – as it was – – they committed murder <for> {both in} what they did – and what they did not do, – in butchering the weak instead of [piercing] the wicked, in assailing the seduced instead of the seducer – in punishing the poor starving populace, instead of that pampered and dimmered blackguard who is only less contemptible than his predecessor Orator Henley because he is more mischievous. – – – – 18

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18: Byron to Hobhouse, April 22nd 1820: text from NLS Ms.43440; BLJ VII 80-2.
Of democracy he writes:

The Roman Consuls make a goodly show, but then they only reigned for a year, and were under a sort of personal obligation to distinguish themselves. It is still more difficult to say which form of Government is the worst – all are so bad. As for democracy, it is the worst of the whole; for what is (in fact) democracy? An Aristocracy of Blackguards. 19

Byron’s opposition to sharing power with the people was not “vague”, but visceral.

“Byron [was] familiar with the treatment that political prisoners received from repressive governments from the time he spent among the revolutionary Carbonari” (p.130): again, the ill-documented association between poet and would-be plotters gives no evidence of this, and I’d say he learned more about the subject from Tita Falcieri’s incarceration after the Pisan Affray. 20

Does Schmidt really think that in order to contextualise Byron’s narrative voice in *Don Juan*, we need a history of the Italian salon from the thirteenth century onwards, or that Byron learned anything of value from the salons of de Staël, Albrizzi or Benzoni? “… salons and conversazioni may have offered species of female empowerment,” as he writes, but as he points also out, “Byron occasionally complains in his letters of banal interactions” at Venetian conversazione (p.147); and it’s not clear to me that *Don Juan* offers “empowerment” to either sex. More importantly, does Schmidt think such a theme of relevance to the title of his book? *Don Juan “forces [readers] to recognize the complexity of reality”* (p.148), which would seem to militate against Italian rhetoric of any kind (unless you see carefully-crafted improvisational chattiness as a species of rhetoric in itself).

The by-now standard use of improvvisatori such as Sgricci as a model for Byron’s ottava rima work is misplaced. From the most extended description of a Sgricci performance that we have (Hobhouse’s diary entry for October 25th 1816) we learn that the audience suggestions upon which Sgricci improvised were vetted either by the police or by Vincenzo Monti, that several suggestions were refused – on doubtful grounds – and that both the pit and the boxes gradually emptied as he went on and on. This is not a model for *Beppo* or *Don Juan*, and disproves Schmidt’s argument that “the transitory nature of the improvvisatore’s art allowed performers to escape censorship and explore contemporary themes and social criticism” (p.150).

Although it’s true, as Schmidt writes, that *Don Juan* is against imperialism and only in favour of those wars which are fought for freedom, he has no evidence that nineteenth-century Italian patriots read it. The mock-epic tradition from which it stems was not then held in high repute (indeed, very few modern Italians have even heard of Casti, the poet to whom *Don Juan* owes most).

I kept waiting, during Schmidt’s long section on Suvorov (much of it based, again, on modern research to which Byron had no access), for comparisons to be made with Garibaldi, another warrior with the common touch: but none came, and I wondered again why such a section was necessary. Byron’s comparison of the Russian artillery with Mount Ætna doesn’t seem an adequate substitute. *Don Juan’s* portrait of Suvorov “forces [readers] to recognize the complexity of reality”: on the one hand, in defeating the French, Suvorov indirectly encouraged Italian patriots, but on the other, in

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20: I’d like to have been present in the Pisan jail on the evening when Tita, who was to be released the next morning, ordered a multi-course, slap-up meal for all his co-incarcerates.
assisting the Holy Alliance, he directly thwarted them. Again, not a factor supportive of nationalist rhetoric.

Even though Schmidt finally concedes that “… the words and biography of Byron amid the Italian people has a chameleon-like quality, appearing as all things to all people, at times revealing more about them than about him” [p.186: my italics], he still seems to think that the Italians were right to use Byron as an iconic hero. But the Italians needed Byron no more than the Greeks did. Without having the Greeks’ excuse – that his work was inaccessible – they misread his poetry, and constructed an alternative Byron to fit into their own self-image. This problem may be inferred from the book, but the book does not articulate it.

What the Byronic image gestured towards, the Garibaldian image fulfilled. Where Byron’s ambitions to be a man of action led nowhere, Garibaldi was an incontrovertibly real man of action, and he achieved quite a bit. His invasion of Sicily, embarking in stolen boats from a country which wasn’t at war with Sicily (and whose foreign minister, Cavour, was furious at the venture), out-Corsairs anything Byron conceived, in life or in art. And it succeeded, which the venture which Byron tried to join didn’t, and which nothing any Byronic hero attempts must ever do! Lucy Riall’s much-praised volume makes it clear that, as with Byron, it was the image as much as the reality that was important: and, thanks to a larger and more flourishing media industry (including the theatre!) and improved standards of literacy America, in most of western Europe (though not in Italy!) Garibaldi’s image was able to make much more of an impact than Byron’s had.

Italy in 1860 was reader for action than it had been in 1820. Perhaps because of the growth of the media (as Liall documents), there was a strong sense of incipient nationhood, to which Garibaldi could appeal publicly in a way which the Carbonari’s very idiom precluded. The comparison with Greece is even more striking, and goes a long way to explaining the still greater contrast between Garibaldi in 1860 and Byron in 1823-4. Most Greeks then were illiterate, and the sense of Greek nationhood was seriously underdeveloped: Byron had little or nothing to appeal to by way of patriotism.

Where Byron had Moore (and the London Greek Committee, and Pietro Gamba) to create his heroic image, Garibaldi had dozens and dozens of writers, Victor Hugo, George Sand and Alexandre Dumas not least among them. In addition to them he had (as I’ve written) Mazzini, who had earlier described Byron thus: “He never deserted our cause: he never betrayed a single human sympathy. Lonely and unhappy since childhood … slandered … beset by pecuniary problems; forced to leave his country … without friends” … and so on (p.34). Where with Byron Mazzini had had to select and romanticize, with Garibaldi neither he nor the rest had any need to – not, at least, to romanticize so much: the exact nature of Garibaldi’s radical politics, and his active love-life, still had to be airbrushed out to make a more sentimental and comforting hero for well-wishers to identify with. For, “In 1859,” as Riall points out, “no obvious distinction was drawn between the political leader and the literary hero” (p.205). The ideal picture of Garibaldi had to have “pliability and resonance” (p.147); it was “tailored specifically to the demands of women readers” (p.154). Liall shows us how it was tailored in the Illustrated London News:

Garibaldi seems young, he is sultry, unkempt and hirsute and he dresses unconventionally in flowing, brightly coloured clothes. He is strong and fierce, and he makes camp ‘like an Indian’: he is sunburnt and he sweats. His look is not self-controlled and classical but that of a hero of the
Middle Ages; and while his speeches exalt violence and courage, they also appeal to sex and love. Garibaldi’s followers are ill-disciplined, they include strong women and a black ex-slave, and, when they leave Rome, they are beautiful, romantic, and sad. A female eyewitness longs for Walter Scott to be alive and see them go. Garibaldi, in other words, is an intensely romantic figure, rebellious, independent and emotive rather than austere, conformist and authoritarian. In political terms, he represents a distinctly democratic and inclusive ideal. He seeks to be a living embodiment of the people’s aspirations, and he is a part of the community and the nation rather than a ‘great man’, alone capable of great deeds. (p.96)

He’s a Byronic hero with the common touch. No Byronic hero would seek “to be a living embodiment of the people’s aspirations”.

Like Byron, but with fractionally less injustice, Garibaldi was sometimes compared to Christ (p.230), as well as to Charlemagne and Michael the Archangel. His letters were published all over Europe and America. His own memoirs (which exist in many embroidered versions), also cast a qualified Byronic hue over his career. Of his insurgent company in South America he writes,

… we were transformed into not brilliant but awe-inspiring knights, and we were feared … The people who accompanied me, a real cosmopolitan crew, were made up of all colours and of all nations. I treated them with kindness, perhaps too much kindness … [but] they were not without courage, and this seemed enough to me (p.158).

… it’s a more friendly and democratic version of the roving bands of Conrad, or of Selim. One of his followers records,

That man responsible for miraculous acts, that man whose name is spoken with respect throughout the entire world, was sitting there on a barrel of fresh water … singing along with us … (p.245)

There was obviously no “laughing devil in his sneer” as there is in Conrad’s: indeed, Garibaldi doesn’t seem to have had a sneer in his repertoire, any more than Conrad had singing in his.

As Riall writes, Garibaldi, semi-fictionalised in this way, fits into the “romantic” tradition of freebooting bandit-hero, including Schiller’s Karl Moor and Scott’s Rob Roy (p.66). And where we worry, if we look carefully, at the private lives of Byron’s versions of the archetype, Conrad and Selim, and examine the nature of their sexuality with some trepidation, the semi-fictionalised Garibaldi presented no such problems. He had – what no Byronic protagonist ever has – a loving, passionate wife, who shared his political ideals, accompanied him in his combats and his disasters, and died in childbirth while escaping with him. Had Garibaldi been chained to a wall in a tower like Conrad, threatened with impalement on the morrow, and had some Uruguayan Gulnare killed his enemy and offered him escape, he wouldn’t have turned her down, but would have jumped at the chance – just as any normal insurgent would.

“… it was in this kind of literature,” writes Riall, “that the symbols and tropes of romanticism became part of popular culture” (p.133). I’d say rather that they were given a credible human dimension which brought them down from their “romantic” pedestal into the realm of the ordinary. No-one who really read Byron’s “romantic” poems identifies with their heroes, unless they’re retarded adolescents.

Riall has an excellent chapter on Garibaldi’s visit to England in 1864: the year of the Staffordshire pottery figures, the year when he met Florence Nightingale (though it seems the biscuit was named after him already). Not everybody was ecstatic: Queen Victoria thought it “a very absurd and humiliating exhibition” (p.339). But his English admirers found that his humbleness and moral dedication reminded them of the best
virtues of the English gentleman – he was compared to Raleigh and Drake, and his anti-Papal stance made people rank him with protestant heroes. One set of Staffordshire figures even placed him with Shakespeare. Here the contrast is with the cult of Byron, whose lack of orthodoxy removed him from the realm of the sentimental/patriotic.

Mussolini often read Byron. One thing Garibaldi’s lieutenant Bixio did after landing in Sicily was to put down a peasant revolt in favour of land reform, and execute its ringleaders with maximum ruthlessness. (p.216). Byron’s ideal of a free Italy – “the very poetry of politics” – was realised, wrote Antonio Gramsci (from inside one of Mussolini’s prisons), as “a kind of ‘bastard’, and inherently unstable … without an effective opposition and based on a mixture of coercion, corruption and incompetence” (p.9). The Garibaldi industry which Lucy Riall documents was a development of the previous Byron industry, and was a way of sweetening this distasteful process.