There are three kinds of Byron portraits: firstly, those he sat for as mementoes for his friends and relations; secondly, those done, from life, for fame or publicity; and last, engravings and other spin-offs from both categories, done just for publicity. The second two categories are mendacious to a greater or lesser extent, motivated as they are by a desire to enlarge and exploit his legend, his myth, or, as we would say, his image. The desire to create, possess, or just gaze at this image was fuelled by the public taste, which, like public taste now, was sentimental, sensational, cheap, easily exploited, and all too eager to be exploited; and it had little to do with either Byron or his works, which, then as now, few could read with understanding. Anything to avoid having to read him: to place any emphasis on his writings was to miss the point.

So, when Robert Beevers writes, on only his sixth page

Whenever we look at a portrait we need constantly to remind ourselves that we are looking at an artifact: **This is not Lord Byron.**

… the generalisation shows that he’s already missed the point, and is going to avoid the most important question: which portraits do give us an impression of what Byron looked like, and which portraits merely perpetuate the philistine myth which to this day prevents people from taking Byron seriously, and from reading him? The myth which gives university English faculties, anxious to preserve themselves from vulgarity, another excuse to exclude him from their syllabuses? The myth which makes him the only English “romantic” poet about whom movies get made? Beevers has already said that he doesn’t want to “depreciate original portraits” (p.4); but that is what he does throughout the book. The Byronic myth, which relegate what Byron and his writings were really like, and what Byron really looked like, into irrelevancy, was a product of commercially-instigated ignorance – anyone who writes about it, and its artefacts, must face this salient fact.

The earliest formal portrait of Byron is the windswept maritime one by George Sanders, showing Byron standing on a coastline, leaning against a rock, with a small vessel in the background, cliffs behind that, and, to the right, a boy (perhaps Robert Rushton) holding the rope of a rowing boat, and staring up at Byron with anticipation. Beevers describes it as “the most perceptive portrait of Byron ever painted” (p.8). Sanders also did one or more miniatures, of which at least one still exists; it is recognisably the same Byron as in the maritime portrait, though more innocent and vulnerable, the lifted eyebrows suggesting compassion, or disappointment. It may be this of which Byron wrote to Hobhouse, calling it “… the best picture of me the Newstead Miniature!!!”

Sanders painted these pictures between 1808 and 1809, before Byron left for the Levant, and when the only poem for which he was at all famous was *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. It is not possible to see any connection between the practical-seaman image in the portrait, the vulnerable young man in the miniature, and the mind which created the scathing satire. Byron the Poet is irrelevant to the portraits: the maritime one is a tribute to Byron the Traveller, even though when he sat or stood for it he’d done no travelling.

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1: Beevers p.6. Bold characters as in original.
3: Peach fig.12; not in Beevers, though see Beevers p.40.
4: BLJ III 15 (letter of January 17th 1813), quoted Beevers p.39. Byron’s anger is because Caroline Lamb has stolen the picture.
Both portraits were intended as presents for Byron’s intimates: the maritime painting was a gift for his mother. When Henry Meyer made an engraving from the miniature, Byron demanded that it be destroyed: “I have a very strong objection to the engraving of the portrait & request that it may on no count be prefixed [to Childe Harold], but let all the proofs be burnt, and the plate be broken”.

With the next two portraits, things have changed, for Byron has returned from the Levant, Murray has published Childe Harold I and II and The Giaour and perhaps The Bride of Abydos, and Byron is famous. The portraits were both painted in 1813-14, are by Thomas Phillips, and are the Cloak portrait and the Albanian portrait: both were finished in time for the Royal Academy exhibition in May 1814 – by which time The Corsair, too, had been published.

Both show a strange series of advances on Sanders. Byron is now simultaneously aristocrat, traveller, and poet. His gaze, now arrogant, as opposed to practical and inquisitive as in Sanders, shows a man of experience, if not satiation. He has been where others have not, seen what others cannot, and experienced strange cultures, if not actually joined in and partaken of them, as the Albanian costume (including a moustache) would indicate. Where in the Sanders portrait his “gaze off” is in the interest of solving the immediate nautical problem (whatever that may be), here, in both Phillips paintings, it is a “gaze off” to avoid the vulgar need to look at the spectator, in whose presence Byron is not interested, if he is not actually hostile to being gazed at. His presence is an act of unwilling condescension: he would rather be somewhere else. This effect is lessened in the cropped engraving done for publication by Murray by John Agar: here the lifted eyebrows and the eyes, milder than in Phillips’ original, seem more accommodating. And yet Byron disliked Agar’s engraving: Augusta and Dallas, he wrote, “hate it,” and he ordered Murray to have the plate broken.

It was a common trick of Byron’s to attribute one of his own extreme decisions to others, so that they would have the responsibility of any act resulting from his instinct.

These two acts of destruction – of the Meyer engraving of Sanders and of the Agar engraving of Phillips – are the only two instances of Byron asking for portraits to be interfered with: and yet the myth persists that he manipulated his own image in the interest of furthering the sales of his works.

Hobhouse may have been in part responsible for Byron’s distaste for versions of Phillips being used as publicity: on Saturday March 19th 1814 his diary records, with brutality:

Read a part of second canto of the Divina Commedia – went with Kinnaird, Frederick, and young Dr Chambers, to see three pictures which Philips R.A. is painting of Lord Byron – I see no resemblance in any or either one …

Beeveres, contrariwise, admires “the warmth of the flesh and the delicate radiant light of the eyes” in the Cloak portrait (p.32), but dislikes the Albanian portrait, in which, he writes, Byron is “literally travestied” (p.30).

Also in 1813 was painted – in a single sitting – the portrait by Richard Westall, with Byron gazing left as in both portraits by Phillips, but in profile, and looking milder, in reverie, his head on his hand, as if unconscious of being looked at. Westall did another painting from this, giving Byron a more hooked nose and more distasteful sneer, and both were reproduced in numerous engravings, becoming indeed one of the most famous images of Byron. “The general effect,” writes Beeveres (p.57), “is more theatrical than dramatic” – a

5: Meyer was a nephew of Richard Hoppner, who was the father of Byron’s friend Richard Belgrave Hoppner, the English consul in Venice, who was godson to William Gifford, whom Byron described as his “literary father”.
7: Peach figs.31 and 32 (Cloak) and fig.38 (Albanian); Beeveres p.25 (Cloak) and p.29 (Albanian).
8: Beeveres p.35.
9: BLJ IV 145, quoted Beeveres p.34.
10: Peach fig.19, Beeveres p.56.
11: Beeveres p.58.
careful distinction. The 1815 engraving of the first Westall painting, by Charles Turner,\textsuperscript{12} is excellent,\textsuperscript{13} making Byron less camp and more intelligent.

Both Phillips and Westall give Byron an open-necked shirt (Sanders gives him a billowing neck-tie); and the feature became a Byronic cliché, though, as Beevers points out (p.33), and as Germaine Greer has written, open-necked shirts and distant “gazes off” had been necessary items in portraits of poets since the Renaissance. Even the unromantic Alexander Pope had to have an open-necked shirt. In fact Byron dressed carefully, and never wore an open-necked shirt.

In none of these paintings is Byron one of us. We cannot follow him. His mind is elsewhere, and his eyes are fixed on a point to which we do not have access. Perhaps by purchasing and reading one of his books we might understand where he is in spirit: though as he’s never portrayed as a writer, none of the portraits would, alone, imply reading him as a solution to the riddle they pose. They exist to bamboozle and fool us – to humbug us – into a state of awe. They’re the 1813 equivalent of publicity shots.

Meanwhile miniatures were being made, for a different market – indeed, not for a market at all, but for those people who might have been expected to see through publicity portraits, and might have wanted pictures of Byron as they knew him intimately. One such was by James Holmes,\textsuperscript{14} showing the poet in incongruous sixteenth- or seventeenth-century costume. This was then engraved by Holmes’s colleague Henry Meyer,\textsuperscript{15} and achieved a wide circulation – for private miniatures soon became public property. Holmes’s original illustrates a very difficult problem, which most artists just ducked: what to do with Byron’s eyes, the right-hand one of which was, as all noticed, larger than the left-hand one. Holmes solves it by putting the head at such an angle that Byron’s right eye is almost invisible around the bridge of his nose, but not quite. Meyer, in his engraving, brings the head round more; but shrinks the eye, so the discrepancy is not observable. His 1824 engraving\textsuperscript{16} makes both eyes bigger, giving Byron a very soft, young, feminine appearance.

Perhaps because of the eye problem, perhaps because, as Beevers writes, “Painters of portraits in miniature generally tended to present their subjects so as to please; to soften, even sweeten the image” (p.45), we must be on our guard against trusting many of these portrayals either; but they certainly give us a different Byron from the distant and arrogant versions of Thomas Phillips.

More distant and arrogant still is the 1815 drawing by George Henry Harlow.\textsuperscript{17} It portrays Byron as so distant and arrogant as to be comical (though Beevers describes it as portraying “the solitary artist, alienated from society” – p.68). Harlow frequented showbiz circles – was a bit happy himself, to judge from his self-portrait\textsuperscript{18} – and his eye for a pose seems to have been acute. He gives us a profile again, thus covering the right eye, and conveys upon his subject all the arrogance implicit in Phillips, plus an element of satire which, after the solemnity of all previous portraits, is most refreshing. Humourless women like Claire Claremont and Marianne Hunt ignored the implicit satire, and described the Harlow drawing as if it were intended as an attack.

Harlow employed Henry Meyer to engrave his drawing, as had Sanders and Holmes before him. Later he travelled to Venice, did another picture of Byron,\textsuperscript{19} and the only known portrait of Margherita Cogni,\textsuperscript{20} showing her all nun-like and chaste. It looks like another Harlowe joke – but it ended as one of Finden’s engravings.

By this time Byron was married, and all his Turkish Tales were published except for Parisina and The Siege of Corinth.

\textsuperscript{12}: Beevers p.60.
\textsuperscript{13}: This can be tested by flicking from Beevers p.56 to Beevers p.60 and back.
\textsuperscript{14}: Peach fig.35; not in Beevers.
\textsuperscript{15}: Peach fig.47; Beevers pp.44, 49 and 50.
\textsuperscript{16}: Beevers p.49.
\textsuperscript{17}: Peach figs.37, 41 and 42; Beevers cover and p.69.
\textsuperscript{18}: Beevers p.67.
\textsuperscript{19}: Peach fig.65; Beevers p.78.
\textsuperscript{20}: Beevers p.77.
Two kinds of portrait dominate Byron’s life in exile. Of the intention behind miniatures, I have written: but there remain several important miniatures to write of (Beever mentions none of them). Nothing seems to be known of the life of Girolamo Prepiani; but he is credited with at least four small portraits of Byron, which seem most detailed and intimate, but which resemble none of the other portraits at all, apart perhaps from the Holmes.

All show Byron with curly hair, oiled and thinning; three, the weakest (perhaps done by Prepiani’s students), are three-quarters profile, and make no attempt at displaying the enlarged eye: the fourth, a portrait of exceptional interest, is full-faced, and suggests that the right eye may indeed be bigger than the left, and could indeed have earned Byron the “eighteen-pence” nickname which he had at school. None resemble the posed Byron of Westall, Phillips, or even of the witty Harlow. This Byron is young, sensitive, and – especially the full-faced version – extremely self-conscious: but is not a man capable of masking his insecurity with theatricals, still less dramatics. You can believe that this man bites his nails, as Byron did. The gaze, straight at the viewer, is a statement of oneness with the viewer, an implication of relationship. He could very well be someone used to having his personality placed before a world which does not know him as well as the viewer does. But he appears to have no sense of humour. The one which gives us Byron full-face is at Newstead Abbey.

Augusta inscribes it “This / miniature / of my poor / brother was / the last taken / & sent to me / on my birthday / A.L.” Annette Peach dates it to Venice, in 1818. The suspicion that the Prepiani miniatures are more accurate renditions of Byron without his public mask seems worth entertaining.

A marble bust is something the subject of the Prepianis would not seem to demand, and the intention behind the carving of one is one we’ve not encountered so far.

When he was in England, Byron had been a kind of literary-showbiz freak: once he got to Italy, and had written Manfred, and Childe Harold III and IV, he had metamorphosed into a European phenomenon, and a trail-blazing figure in “Romanticism”. As part of the Byronic paradox, he had at the same time, via Childe Harold IV, signalled a continuity between his own work and the culture of the Greeks and Romans. He was thus a romantic classicist – a classical romanticist. Hobhouse, who had, while writing his own impressive but dense volume, Historical Illustrations to the Fourth Canto of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, been his orgying-companion (“I have not unfrequently been witness to his lordship’s coupleting” was how he put it), would probably have seen their life-style as further evidence of the classicism he was underlining – yet more evidence of what Byron owed to the worlds of Ovid, Horace, Juvenal, and Catullus.

It was Hobhouse who commissioned a bust of Byron from the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorwaldsen. Byron had sat for it in May 1817, and after Byron’s death it metamorphosed into what has become the classic statement of Byron’s immortality: the statue in the Wren Library at Trinity College Cambridge. The subsequent bust by Lorenzo Bartolini (the one which Byron said made him look like a superannuated Jesuit) is weak by comparison. Where in the London portraits Byron had been arrogant, he is now proud, but modest; where he had “gazed off” with mystic pretentiousness, he now stares slightly right, awaiting inspiration (for, in the Trinity statue, he

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21: Peach figs.51, 52, 56 and 57.
22: Peach p.93.
23: Peach pp.93-5. Peach quotes BLJ VI 74.
24: Peach fig.49; Beever pp.87 and 91. This is the bust which Hobhouse wanted to wear laurels, an idea rejected by Byron, who didn’t want his head “garnished like a Xmas pie with Holly – or a Cod’s head and Fennel” (BLJ V 243).
25: Peach fig.48; Beever pp.97 and 99.
26: Peach figs.58 and 59; Beever p.110.
27: BLJ IX 214.
has a pen and book, and is writing, an unusual concession); where he had there been open-necked-shirted, he now sports, in the bust but not in the Trinity statue, not an open-necked shirt, but an open-necked tunic: in the Trinity statue he has modern dress, and a neck-tie, as in Sanders, and as in real life. He is 1817’s answer to Michaelangelo’s Brutus, and as devoid of personality or expression.

And yet the joke is that, as ever, Byron had, within a few months of Thorwaldsen’s bust being worked at, moved on. Even while Hobhouse was slaving ignominiously at *Illustrations*, he had witnessed (without seeing its significance) the writing of *Beppo*. And *Beppo*, together with its offshoots *Don Juan* and *The Vision of Judgement*, are the poems we now value most highly. But no-one saw fit to paint, draw, sketch or sculpt the Byron who wrote them. How to depict a poet “gazing off” with a wicked, banal, deflationary grin on his face? George Henry Harlowe could have done so: but he died in 1819.

It’s Robert Beevers’ failure to acknowledge this problem which is his book’s biggest weakness. “So Long Live the Myth!” he writes “provided of course that we recognise it for what it is” (p.149). But I don’t think he does recognise it. To counter the myth, you have to have an alternative Byron against which you measure it. Byron the Poet finally escaped depiction by all the artists who would have entrapped his identity for the stare of posterity: and he escapes this book’s stare, too.