

## **The Cambridge Introduction to Byron**

Richard Lansdown

CUP 2012

ISBN 978-0-521-12873-5

xvii-174pp. paperback

This book seems aimed, with a degree of calculation on the part of Cambridge University Press, at the student market. Students had best beware of it, for it is a confused thing. On pp.144-7 it takes issue with Jerome McGann's historicist angle on *Don Juan*, despite having given, on pp.17-46, a long section on the history of Byron's times – which it doesn't relate to any of Byron's poems. This lengthy demonstration validates the book's later anti-McGann argument, but without referring to McGann, and is thus irrelevant – why, in an anti-historicist book, is it there anyway?

The long historical section tries to perpetrate some singular conservative ideas. The post-Vienna settlement “underwrote peace in central Europe until 1914” (p.17)? Well, I suppose the Franco-Prussian War (1870) was not in *central* but in *western* Europe; the Austro-Prussian War (1866), however, was firmly and confidently central. But Lansdown would persuade us that Vienna was a good thing, and that Byron misunderstood it. Lansdown doesn't actually praise Castlereagh or Southey – but his drift would imply approbation of them.

The Tory government responded to proletarian unrest “with varying degrees of moderation and good sense” writes Lansdown on p.24, then, on p.25, lists seventeen executions at York in 1813, three in Derbyshire in 1817, and of course eleven killed in Manchester in 1819. He also makes the standard evaluation of Cato Street, ignoring the role played in it by the government's *agent provocateur*. “... most social unrest in the period involved food and work rather than politics”, he writes on p.26, as if food and work were not political issues.

On p.17 he refers to “the democratic Reform Bill of 1832”, and on p.19 tells us that it “increased the male suffrage by 45 per cent – from 3.2 per cent to 4.7 per cent of the general population”. This is an interesting definition of democracy (and what 1832 did for the female suffrage, he's too coy to say).

We groan when we find that Lansdown next has a section on “Romanticism”, and groan more deeply still when, within two paragraphs, he shows himself trapped within that useless abstraction as securely as anyone before him: “the nature of Romanticism is difficult to establish because it is so diverse” (p.37). Despite elaborating this thesis throughout p.38, he goes ahead and tries to establish it: he just can't step aside from market-driven cliché and try any new approaches:

Narrowing the discussion down either to semantics or particular intellectual categories can lead us into an intellectual thicket, in which we find ourselves

agreeing that the Romantic reaction hardly even [*sic: for "ever"?*] took place and that there is hardly anything left to discuss at all. (p.38)

From which frightening impasse, good Lord, deliver us. Nothing sells books better than having “Romantic” in the title. The usefulness (to students) of his analysis of the change from “enlightenment” to “romanticism,” is well displayed here:

Some Romantic writers (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott, Austen) swam with that tide; others (Blake, Hazlitt, Shelley, Byron) swam against it. (p.44)

Not since Edward Said’s time have writers been listed so mystifyingly. Later (p.105) Lansdown describes *Don Juan* as “the greatest Romantic narrative poem” – thus showing, in a way useful for brighter students, the complete uselessness of the word “Romantic”.

By the time Lansdown starts discussing Byron, he’s 46 pages into a 159-page book.

His first truly Byronic section, on the letters, shows that he knows this aspect of his subject, and he chooses his examples with expertise. But he balks at the question of Byron’s “sincerity”. He quotes Peter Porter to the following effect:

“The letter-writer and the author of *Beppo*, *The Vision of Judgment* and *Don Juan* are clearly the same person ... but what of the Byron who thrilled his contemporaries and inspired poets in every European language – the legend-maker who wrote *Childe Harold*, *The Corsair* and *Manfred*?” (p.48)

There are two objections to this. Firstly, it assumes that all Byron’s letters are homogenous – but compare a stilted letter to Annabella Milbanke before the marriage and a funny one to Hobhouse at any period, and the idea falls dead. Byron’s letters are crafted for their recipients (in fact, most of them are crafted anyway – he revises them all the time, and never makes neat copies, leaving his erasures legible). Secondly, although the ottava rima poems are close in tone to his “more spontaneous” letters, they too are crafted – but for a different audience. The idea that even Byron’s letters, as well as the different poetic styles in which he wrote, are not sincere effusions, but performative acts, is too distressing for students, who expect all English Romantic Poetry to be as spontaneous as Wordsworth claims to be.

The decision to refer international students to the Clarendon edition (“CPW”) in the sections on the poetry is not helpful, so difficult are those volumes to obtain nowadays. And students will be baffled, after reading the unambiguous “*Childe Harold* is a narrative poem” on p.69, when they look for its plot. Indeed, Lansdown doesn’t mention one – which will baffle students still more. There was, in fact, a sort of plot in the original version of Cantos I and II:

it concerned Harold's journey to the hell that was Ali Pasha's palace at Tepellene, but was edited out by Byron, probably at the suggestion of R.C.Dallas, prior to publication. Lansdown doesn't mention this. His statement that, in Canto IV, St Peter's in Rome is a temple "to Renaissance humanism" (p.78) will need explanation, especially to students in Catholic countries.

Fans of Martin Sheen and Sissy Spacek will wake up when told that the Turkish Tales are located "in the Graeco-Turkish badlands of the Eastern Mediterranean" (p.83). The implication of Byron's statement to Murray, that *Lara* (in theory set, anyway, in the Western Mediterranean), was in fact set on "the Moon" (BLJ IV 146) must not be mentioned. Lansdown's later, strangely-worded concession, that the Tales are "*purportedly* a product of the Islamic cultural zone vicariously laid on for the inquisitive Western reader" (my italics) could be enlarged. Byron *purported* to write with a pride in the accuracy of his oriental details – to inform his readers, not pander to their credulity or, in the case of his female readers, to their appetite for sexual fantasy, (Lansdown describes sexual relations in the Turkish Tales as "idealized" – p.98).

We mustn't make value-judgements in 2012 – someone might disagree, with a counter-value-judgement. Lansdown is scrupulous in implying all Byron's works to be of equal importance: he won't even concede that some are more equal than others:

... we have also a more diverse group of works which emerge from a collision between the historical and the timeless – two biblical 'mysteries', *Cain* and *Heaven and Earth*, and the uncategorizable fantasies, *The Vision of Judgment* and *The Deformed Transformed* ... (p.112)

One of these works is a perfect masterpiece, the others not: but you mustn't upset people by saying that.

The disinterested approach is seen at its most misleading in the section on *The Island*, where Byron's deliberately wobbly focus on the causes of the mutiny on the Bounty isn't mentioned (he didn't, conservative that he was, want to encourage disobedience in The Fleet). *The Island*, like *The Age of Bronze*, is written for a new, downmarket audience with whose sensibilities Byron thought himself, erroneously, to be familiar: but students won't learn that from this book.

Lansdown is generous with statements which invite riposte. "After leaving England in 1816," we read (p.112), "Byron became increasingly interested in the study of history". I suppose therefore, if his pre-1816 interest was 100%, his post-1816 interest must have been 150%. In his plays, "Byron has room for long passages of dialogue in which the protagonists' reactions to events outnumber the events themselves" (p.117): a wonderful way of saying that his plays are long-winded, undramatic and dull. "The relation of all this to Byron's own position vis-à-vis the politics of his native Britain and post-Napoleonic Italy is

complicated by the author's political ambivalence as both rebel and aristocrat" (ibid). What this means is that he had a lot of money in the English government funds, and didn't like the idea of any revolution which threatened it, but no corresponding stake in Italy, so a revolution there would be O.K. Subplots shouldn't "provide relief" (ibid.) – by skilful intertwining, they should counterpoint the main plot and reinforce its tension. The most amazing example of a statement inviting riposte is on p.119: "Neoclassical drama draws its strength from the graphic presentation of rival forces (reason and mania, for example), not from subtleties of dramatic interrelation". This is, I think, no-one's reaction to Sophocles' *Antigone*, or Racine's *Britannicus*, which abound in "subtleties of dramatic interrelation": our objection is not that Byron writes neo-classical plays, but that he writes boring ones.

There's the usual quota of errors. Teresa Guiccioli was 21, not 19, when she and Byron fell in love (p.10); Francis Cohen didn't edit *The Golden Treasury* (p.54) – that was his son; it was not William Stewart Rose who brought *Whistlecraft* to Venice, but the Kinnaird brothers (p.131); the Ukrainian girl in *Mazeppa* is not Mazeppa's lover (p.105); Admiral "Foul Weather Jack" Byron never had a mutiny on his hands (p.109); Pryce Gordon gave Byron Casti's *Novelle Galanti* not at Geneva (p.130), but at Waterloo; it's not The Giaour who "is revisited by his dead lover" (p.154), but Alp in *The Siege of Corinth*; and, on a comic note, Achilles' heel was not "crippled" (p.127): it was a vulnerable spot, but until Paris shot him in it, it was just as good a heel, *qua* heel, as the other one.

The section on *Don Juan* (pp.129-47) holds that interrupted masterpiece at arms' length, analysing its genre, its vision and attitude, its philosophy, and its attitude to women ("Though these women conform to a narrow range of patriarchal stereotypes, they are not fixed quantities" – p.141). Students reading these pages will be surprised, upon opening *Don Juan*, to find that it's very funny. When finally jokes are mentioned – those in the siege cantos – we're told they're "coarse" (p.146). Rabelais ("the French writer" – p.143) is glanced at, but not as the author of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*: and he seems to be too coarse to be included in the index.

In what way Mr Rochester's "habit of galloping around the Yorkshire countryside after dark" (p.154) makes him Byronic, is a mystery – unless by now Lansdown is joking, in desperation. Rochester's vein of self-critical humour, I'd argue, precludes his being thought of as a Byronic Hero.

The three paragraphs on the Founder of Zionism, Theodor Herzl (pp.156-7), describing Byron's influence on him, are fascinating – did *Hebrew Melodies*, then, lead to the foundation of the state of Israel? Malcolm Kelsall argues that Byron's poetry led to Leni Riefenstahl!<sup>1</sup> But euphoria evaporates when

---

1: Malcolm Kelsall, *One Freeman More America To Thee! Lafayette, Byron and the Atlantic Revolution*, in Thérèse Tessier (ed.) *Lord Byron A Multidisciplinary Open Forum*, Paris 1999, p.6.

inspection of all seven volumes of Herzl's diaries and letters yields no reference to Byron at all.

A wonderful legend (which can't be true) circulates about Cambridge University Press. Some time back, it's said, they published an encyclopaedia, and when the first print-run was out, it was found to have at least two factual errors on every page. "Oh, that doesn't matter!" they said, "we're selling the first 50,000 copies to an American book club!"

I wonder to which bit of the market they're aiming *The Cambridge Introduction to Byron*?