

‘He describes what he sees’: Byron’s Letters from Italy.

Shortly after the publication of *Don Juan* (cantos I-II), in 1819, John Keats wrote to his brother George: ‘You speak of Lord Byron and me – There is this great difference between us. He describes what he sees – I describe what I imagine – Mine is the hardest task’.¹ Byron, Keats suggests, is a poet of what is often termed the ‘real world’, the actual and the factual, the apparentness of things present to our senses. He writes what he sees and as he sees. Keats’s pen, on the other hand, is wired straight to the imagination; he writes with a creative originality that, it is suggested, is evidently more profound. The distinction, along with Keats’s clear sense of priorities, is a familiar one and central to our basic conceptions about Romantic poetics. Byron, although he construed the distinction very differently, in a sense agreed: ‘I could not write upon any thing’, he observed to John Murray, ‘without some personal experience and foundation’.² He considered Keats, who did not appear to respect such standards of verification, as an unworldly fantasist hopelessly untethered from the actual. This made him, necessarily for Byron, a bad poet.

This mutually willed opposition, for all its ingrained intuitiveness, quickly becomes problematic as a way of understanding either poet. Byron’s idea that Keats’s imagination was discontinuous with real life, and particularly the social and political realities he witnessed, has been roundly rejected by recent Keats scholarship.³ Of similarly short range is Keats’s suggestion that Byron was somehow imaginatively deficient or un-poetically trammelled in fact. Such a notion overlooks a poem such as *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, one of the most intensely imaginative acts of poetic seeing in the English language. In saying this, *Childe Harold* does demonstrate a bias towards the factual and privileges physically inhabited experience in ways that set Byron apart from some of his major contemporaries. In collaboration with the rather pedantic Hobhouse, Byron provided a substantial body of notes to accompany his poem, especially the final, Italian canto. These were in some cases checked carefully

¹ *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), ii. 200.

² *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols (London: John Murray, 1973–94), v, 14. Byron’s letters hereafter quoted from this edition.

³ See, for instance, the various contributions to *Keats and History*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

by the poet, and, where necessary, corrected in letters back to his editor. It is difficult to imagine Keats imposing explanatory notes upon his poems, or becoming exercised about factual correctness in this way.

The fact that neither poet was quite right about the other does not mean that their disagreement is without intellectual interest. It points, rather, to a defining opposition within Romantic thought and to some fundamental questions about the Romantic writer's duty towards his world. What is the nature of experience and what happens when this is translated into (or discovered in) language? What role does imagination have to play in this, and how are we to assess the value of its contribution? This paper will approach these questions from Byron's point of view, and with particular reference to the modes of seeing we encounter in his letters from Italy. This seeing, I will suggest, has a double character. Byron, as Keats implies, has a strong empirical nerve to his writing and a stated bias towards what he has seen before him. But he also writes with an awareness of how verbal recollection can betray our attempts to disseminate the primal. As a post-Humean pessimist, for whom concept or memory can only stand in a faintly impressionistic relation to initial vividness, Byron, for all his pride in lived experience, finds that the apparent world repeatedly escapes his attempts to describe it. His confidence as a traveller, which Keats picks at and which Byron uses to pick on Keats, does not always extend into his reflections on writing.

This doubleness of vision is complicated by a shifting sense of audience. Byron has a tendency to shape himself to (and sometimes against) the character and prejudices of his correspondent. This, for instance, is from one of the first letters the poet wrote after arriving in Venice in November 1816. It details for John Murray some of his recent travels and their Shakespearian associations:

I was much pleased with the Lago di Garda & with Verona – particularly the amphitheatre – and a sarcophagus in a Convent garden – which they show as Juliet's – they insist on the *truth* of her history. – Since my arrival at Venice – the lady of the Austrian governor told me that between Verona & Vicenza there are still ruins of the castle of the *Montecchi* – and a chapel once appertaining to the Capulets – Romeo seems to have been of *Vicenza* by the tradition – but I was a good deal surprized to find so firm a faith in Bandello's novel – which seems really to have been founded on a fact (*BLJ*, 132).

Byron appears as a frank and assured figure. He is a sightseer, consuming culture and history for pleasure. He is an aristocrat moving in the social circles of the Austrian governor. He is an amateur scholar, speculating on *Romeo and Juliet* and its sources. There is a will to assert identity here, to disentangle fact and fiction, to give things as they really are. Byron's scholarly efforts, however, get no further than a telling 'seems really'. There is no hard and fast distinction to be drawn here between real and imagined, only a continuity of relative fictions. The claims of local 'tradition' are made of the same stuff as the literary texts in which they are bound up. Similarly, Byron's own identity is subject to textual distortion; it emerges from a piece of occasional prose and is shaped by the claims of correspondence on a peculiarly fluid consciousness. The character chatting here with the representatives of colonial tyranny is aware of his conservative reader, and is very different to the anti-tourist, anti-Austrian (and later Carbonari sympathizing) character we find elsewhere.

Keats's distinction, which Byron elsewhere endorses in reverse, is revealed as unsustainable within the complexities of these letters. The irretrievability of experience, combined with the fictive dependencies of the self, locates the imagination at the centre, and not on the margins, of the writer's grapple with experience. On one hand this leads Byron to play down his efforts as a travel writer, to defer to previous descriptions that will serve in the face of his own stymied interiority. On the other hand it offers a role for the imagination, and its aesthetic framing, within 'non-fiction' discourses that conventionally construe it as secondary or impertinent. Rather than a culpable sheering away from what is empirically available, the imagination becomes one among many inevitable betrayals of experience. In this company it may even claim the advantage of honesty.

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One especially complex letter from Italy, with respect to audience, is the dedicatory letter, to Hobhouse, which prefaces the fourth canto of *Childe Harold*:

It has been our good fortune to traverse together, at various periods, the countries of Chivalry, History, and Fable – Spain, Greece, Asia Minor, and Italy; and what Athens and Constantinople were a few years ago, Venice and Rome have been more recently. The poem also, or the pilgrim, or both, have accompanied me from first to last; and perhaps it may be pardonable vanity which induces me to reflect with complacency on a composition which in some degree connects me with the spot where it was produced, and the objects it would fain describe; and however unworthy it may be deemed of those magical and memorable abodes, however short it may fall of our distant conceptions and immediate impressions, yet as a mark of respect for what is venerable, and of feeling for what is glorious, it has been to me a source of pleasure in the production, and I part with it with a kind of regret, which I hardly suspected that Events could have left me for imaginary objects.⁴

Byron's proud sense of being on 'the spot' and his implied distrust of 'imaginary objects' seem grist to the Keatsian mill. Yet Byron has also been surprised by his feelings of regret ('I hardly suspected') in leaving behind the imagined mindscapes of *Childe Harold*. In practice, he has been unable to uphold his (anti-Keatsian) prejudices about 'imaginary objects'. The surface urge to favour empirical presence has foundered because the imagination, as Byron's poem more generally understands, is fundamental rather than incidental to any full conception of place. 'Chivalry, History, and Fable' is not a list of separate and separable qualities, but a grounding compounded adjective that ranges across the factual and fictive.

Byron's poem is troubled by its dependence upon imagination and repeatedly tries to figure it out:

I saw or dreamed of such – but let them go;
They came like Truth – and disappeared like dreams;
And whatsoe'er they *were* – *are now* but so:
I could replace them if I would; still teems
My Mind with many a form which aptly seems
Such as I sought for, and at moments found;
Let these too go – for waking Reason deems
Such overweening Phantasies unsound,
And other voices speak, and other sights surround.

⁴ Byron's poems are quoted from the late Peter Cochran's online edition, available at <http://www.newsteadabbeybyronsociety.org/works/poems.htm>.

(*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, iv, 7).

'Reason' and 'Truth' are distinguished from the seeming realm of 'Phantasies', with the preference given to the former on the grounds that the latter is 'unsound'. 'Phantasies' are also 'overweening' ('arrogance, self-conceit; over-estimation' (*OED*)), too complacently central, perhaps, to a 'Romantic' literary culture to which *Childe Harold* contributes but about which Byron, bound for the very different *Don Juan*, was having increasing doubts. Yet in personifying 'Reason' Byron also distances himself from its apparently decisive intervention. 'Reason' is recognized as part of the poet, but it also represents an Enlightenment sense of priorities by which the poet is not circumscribed. 'Reason' is cast as a believer to which narrative consciousness plays the sceptic. The poem thus refuses to ratify the conventional distinction around which the stanza is built.

Places, and especially such psycho-geographically rich places as Venice, the starting point for canto IV, extend far beyond what is present and tangible to the traveller. Venice is an aggregation of culture, politics and history, with its own artistic traditions, which are at least as fundamental to the place as its bricks and mortar. As Byron notes, it is Venice's intangibles that will prove most durable within the long sweep of time:

Ours is a trophy which will not decay
With the Rialto; Shylock and the Moor,
And Pierre, can not be swept or worn away –

(*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* iv, 4)

Perhaps with Shakespeare's own sonnet 55 in mind ('Not marble, nor the gilded monuments / Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme'), Byron reminds us that poetry is one of the raw materials from which 'Venice' has been made. The city's state of crumbling, pre-conservation disrepair in Byron's time would have underlined the point. In this context authorial ignorance of Italy – a *bête noir* of Byron's – is not such a drastic problem. Shakespeare's lack of travelled experience is in a sense irrelevant because his writing is fundamental rather than incidental to Venice's identity. He is, in an extended, imaginative sense – and certainly from the perspective

of an English poet – one of the city’s founders.

Byron’s self-conscious role as Shakespeare’s heir makes him not simply a visitor and observer who reports back to Murray and others, but a participant in an ongoing process of creation. The imaginative groundwork for this venture, which reaches its height of ambition in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, predates his arrival in the country, as he notes in a letter to Murray of 25th November, 1816: ‘Venice pleases me as much as I expected – and I expected much – it is one of those places which I know before I see them – and has always haunted me the most – after the East’ (*BLJ*, v, 132). Byron’s Venice is not limited by his direct experience of the place, his being ‘on the spot’, but is partially pre-formed in the processes of reading and imagination. Places can haunt us in their previousness to concrete encounter, the ‘personal experience’ that Byron, a dutiful reader of Horace and Johnson, often asserts as foundational for the writer. Thus Byron’s attempts to establish the authority of presence in the Preface to canto IV are hemmed in with qualifications. His poem is a ‘composition which in some degree connects me with the spot where it was produced, and the objects it would fain describe’. In ‘some degree’ and ‘would fain’ are not phrases of assurance. The very possibility of any adequate, written recollection of place, moreover, seems elusive. Canto IV, for all Byron’s attachment to it, is prefaced by a confession of inadequacy, of a poetic falling short of the ‘distant conceptions and immediate impressions’ that constitute (Byron’s) Venice. The poet’s authority is radically susceptible to the vagaries of the written.

The ghostliness of experience, its haunting of words that always fall short in their grasp, is an important subject of Byron’s travel writing, one that interrupts but also enriches his prose. Here he writes to Murray, in May 1817, about his experiences of Rome:

I have been riding my saddle horses every day – and been to Albano – it’s lakes – & to the top of the Alban mount – & to Frascati – Aricia – &c. &c. – with an &c. &c. &c. about the city & in the city – for all which—vide Guide-book. – As a *whole* – *ancient & modern* – it beats Greece – Constantinople – every thing—at least that I have ever seen. – But I can’t describe, because my first impressions are always strong and confused – and my Memory *selects* & reduces them to order – like distance in the landscape – & blends them better – although they may be less distinct. There must be

a sense or two more than we have as mortals – which I suppose the Devil has – (or t'other) for where there is much to be grasped we are always at a loss – and yet feel that we ought to have a higher and more extended comprehension (269).

Touristic achievement is quickly undermined by the jaundiced Romantic's sense of anticlimax. What should be a satisfying moment for the travel writer, the discovery of a place that exceeds even Athens and Constantinople, breaks down amid a flurry of etceteras.⁵ Byron is suddenly thrown by the recognition that however strong his 'first impressions' have been, recollection and description enervate his experience. These processes bring 'order' to what is initially 'confused', but they also leach the intense subjectivity that is indicated but not reproduced by Byron's pronouns. Recollection generalizes, as distance does in viewing a landscape, where the further we look and the more individual details lose their unpredictable attraction, the more the subjective blurs into the objective. What is gained ('blends them better') in terms of an actual representation of place – something knowable rather than confused and unfocussed – is offset by a loss of fidelity to strong initial impressions. The primal experience, while recreated comprehensively in language, is, Byron senses, forever being pulled into the orbit of the guidebooks so popular with Murray's proto-touristic customers.

Byron's bullish sense of authority, derived from travelled experience, rubs up against a narrative of defeat about the very possibility of conveying that experience at all. Description, for Byron, seems to be, at least in part, a process of loss, an acknowledgement that memory and writing are inadequate archivists of the human mind and its history. Yet this problem, and the torrid thoughtfulness it entails, energizes more than it defeats the poet. Here, in another letter to Murray, written from Venice in May 1817, Byron describes a public execution he has witnessed:

The day before I left Rome I saw three robbers guillotined – the ceremony – including the *masqued* priests – the half-naked executioners – the bandaged criminals – the black Christ and his banner – the scaffold – the soldiery – the slow procession – & the quick rattle and heavy fall of the axe – the splash of blood – & the ghastliness of the exposed heads – is altogether more impressive than the vulgar and ungentlemanly

⁵ 'Of Venice I shall say little. You must have seen many descriptions... (BLJ, v, 131).

dirty 'new drop' & dog-like of infliction upon the sufferers of the English sentence. Two of these men – behaved calmly enough – but the first of the three – died with great terror and reluctance – which was very horrible – he would not lie down – then his neck was too large for the aperture – and the priest was obliged to drown his exclamations by still louder exhortations – the head was off before the eye could trace the blow – but from an attempt to draw back the head – notwithstanding it was held forward by the hair – the first head was cut off close to the ears – the other two were taken off more cleanly; – it is better than the Oriental way – & (I should think) than the axe of our ancestors. – The pain seems little – & yet the effect to the spectator – & the preparation to the criminal – is very striking and chilling.

Part of this stands in the tradition of intelligent travel writing, in observing cultural difference and making relevant judgements. In this respect Byron is unsentimental. He recognizes the execution for what is: a spectacle, a ritual with a darkly useful social function, one that happens across his world and that has happened throughout history. This version has the advantage over the English equivalent, he thinks, in the way it makes its point ('very striking and chilling'), but also, more humanely, in its minimizing of pain. Yet Byron doesn't allow the spectacular nature of the event to remain in this safe sphere of distanced judgement. He refuses to hide his voyeurism, his questionable enjoyment (or something like it) of the execution as aesthetic event: 'I could hardly hold the opera glass' he confesses. This less processed aspect of Byron's response is expressed through style more than argument. We sense it in the dashing, breathless punctuation and feel it in the drastic details (that head cut off 'close to the ears'). The letter's narrative construct, the rational, reflective traveller who is writing to John Murray ('Byron'), has less control here. What we lose in orderliness, however, we gain in proximity to the initial event, the pre-conditioned moment or 'first impressions' that Byron takes to defy description.

Form, in Byron's letters, works against the enervation the poet found to be implicit in all serious descriptive writing. It keeps in play a sense of what is otherwise lost and thus describes a form of hope. It also brings its own kinds of honesty. Where it might be thought that an aestheticized response to the execution is inappropriate, it is in other ways entirely fitting. It acknowledges the event's own deliberately aestheticized nature (the '*masqued* priests' etc.), but it also represents an attempt to

grapple with experience as a primal event, rather than conveying an ordered and processed derivative. The stylistic element of the prose, which eschews cooled moral judgment, resists the 'vide Guide-book' moment, that in which the subjective fades towards the objective. Byron demarcates experience from reflection. The latter is addressed to John Murray. The former, always diminishing but never entirely lost, is less clearly intended.

Keats's distinction between seeing and imagining doesn't work for Byron's writing here because the aesthetic, and its imaginative framing, is integral rather than extraneous to the articulation of what is 'seen'. Byron recognizes that writing and seeing cannot be identical, and thus that writing is always in a sense 'imaginative' because of its necessary distance from origin. On one hand this inclines him to the tetchiness of 'vide Guide-book'; on the other it offers an opportunity to the writer in unmasking the myth that there is a hard and fast line between description and fancy. Furthermore, the letters show an awareness of the fictional compact that writer and addressee enter into in their correspondence. To mistake such social microclimates for the wider world they attempt to interpret involves the kind of bad faith that Byron, in the end, usually veers away from.

Consider another letter to Murray (of August 1st 1819), in which Byron relates, at some length, the story of his ex-mistress Margarita Cogni. Margarita's story is related mainly in pragmatic terms, with the cool, ironic detachment that frames much of the Byron-Murray correspondence. We learn that Margarita worked her way into Byron's affections – and domestic arrangements – and fought tenaciously to remain there, until, in the end, she had to be removed by force. As well as her physical attractions, she appealed to Byron as a Venetian peasant, 'with all their naïveté and Pantaloon humour' (*BLJ*, 193). She had 'the strength of an Amazon with the temper of Medea...She was a fine animal – but quite untameable'. This Margarita would not be out of place in *Beppo*, notably when her rustic charm is undone by her longing for 'a hat and feathers', which, although they 'did not at all become her', and despite Byron's repeated efforts to burn her aspirational purchases, were insisted upon. The peasant ideal so much valued in Romantic culture, and which is exploited in Byron's own earlier poetry, became, as Byron puts it, a 'travestie' (*BLJ*, vi, 195).

Byron, we might say, sees things as they really are. Fittingly, for a poet who has moved from *Childe Harold* to *Don Juan* (via *Beppo*), charm is discovered only on the other side of demystification. There are no fantasies of human perfectibility here, only a lurking and liberating bathos. Yet just as we misunderstand *Don Juan* if we think it an anti-Romantic poem, we mistake Byron here if we think him limited to the jaded persona addressing Murray. This is not the extent of the letter's consciousness, which both exceeds and corrects its dominant voice, just as Margarita is not the sum of what registers within the nexus of sophisticated assumptions that define Byron's correspondence with Murray. The letter writer can tell his ex-lover's story, he admits, only 'as far as it belongs to me' (*BLJ*, vi, 197).

All we can own of others are the fragments of their stories we have authored. This acknowledgement is an animating and profound presence in Byron's letters. In the case of Margarita we see it in her command of more than one narrative style. As well as the aspirational peasant misguidedly striving towards – as Byron would see it – a tacky, spiritually-moribund bourgeoisie, she is something else, something less certain and, as such, more demanding of Byron's literary powers. Towards the end of his story, Byron inserts an anecdote from which 'hat and feathers' Margarita is absent:

In the autumn, one day, going to the Lido with my Gondoliers – we were overtaken by a heavy Squall and the Gondola put in peril—hats blown away – boat filling – oar lost – tumbling sea – thunder – rain in torrents – night coming – and wind increasing. – On our return – after a tight struggle: I found her on the open steps of the Mocenigo palace on the Grand Canal – with her great black eyes flashing through her tears and the long dark hair which was streaming drenched with rain over her brows and breast; – she was perfectly exposed to the storm – and the wind blowing her hair & dress about her thin tall figure – and the lightning flashing round her – with the waves rolling at her feet – made her look like Medea alighted from her chariot – or the Sibyl of the tempest that was rolling around her – the only living thing within hail at that moment except ourselves (*BLJ*, vi, 196).

Here Margarita's identity is subject to flux and thus eludes the possibility of caricature. Is she a Sybil, itself a liminal figure, a Medea, or, a few sentences on, 'a

tigress over her recovered cubs’? The searching similes, as is often the case in *Don Juan*, amass symbolic potential without attempting to pinpoint identity. Where above she seems closer to a mock-heroic Medea, here she is something more primal; she has returned from Pope to Aeschylus. This sense of origin, moreover, does not begin with empirical experience, with Keats’s ‘seeing’ or Byron’s being ‘on the spot’. It is previous to such encounters, as Byron found Venice to be, and can be traced back to Byron’s formative imaginative reading.⁶ Margarita’s story, at least as far as it belongs to Byron, does not begin, as the version told to Murray does, on the banks of the Brenta in the summer of 1817. It extends beyond the bathetic narrative Byron has formed from the events in which he has participated. The story’s literary interpolations, therefore, do not represent a sentimental slip from the clear-sightedness that dominates the letter. They acknowledge, rather, that our telling of such experiences is always the product of both seeing and imagining.

⁶ ‘Of the Prometheus of Æschylus I was passionately fond as a boy – (it was one of the Greek plays we read thrice a year at Harrow) – indeed that and the “Medea” – were the only ones – except the “Seven before Thebes” which ever much pleased me (*BLJ*, v, 268).