

Byron's Letters

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‘If I had to introduce Byron to a student who knew nothing of his work, I would tell him: “Before you attempt to read any of the poetry, read *all* of the prose, his letters and journals. Once you have read these, you will be able, when you come to the poems, to recognize immediately which are authentic and which are bogus.”’ So wrote W. H. Auden in introducing his selected edition of Byron. Auden thought that the ‘poems that made [Byron’s] reputation among his contemporaries, *Childe Harold* and the Tales’, were ‘unreadable’;¹ the *ottava rima* works – *Beppo*, *Don Juan*, and *The Vision of Judgment* – on the other hand, were, he thought, incomparable adornments of the English comic verse tradition. Byron was for Auden, as for many of Auden’s contemporaries, a wheat and chaff assemblage, one that benefits from a selective approach.

In Auden’s schema, it is Byron’s letters that provide the key to his written legacy.² The letters, Auden thought, have a ‘tone of voice’ that ‘rings true and utterly unlike anybody else’s’; they participate in and authenticate the great comic poetry while exposing the

¹ *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Byron*, ed. W. H. Auden (New York: Signet, 1966), vi-vii. Hereafter, page references are given in the main text. Compare Auden’s homage to *Don Juan*, ‘Letter to Lord Byron’, in which *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* is dismissed as ‘trash’ (*The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson [London: Faber and Faber, 1977], 169).

² For the history of the publication of Byron’s letters please see the chapter by Paul Curtis in this volume.

‘serious’ Byron as ‘bogus’. Harold was a usurper, but while he held sway, the true Byron was always, as Ronald Bottrall puts it, ‘ready to hand in [the] *Letters and Journals*’.³

This view, that Byron’s writing matures in the full alignment of the poet with the epistolary self, has its attractions. While Byron the poet was preoccupied with the – at times – unwieldy, neo-Spenserian *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* I-II, Byron the letter writer was much closer to the prismatic comic genius of *Don Juan*. In a letter to his mother, from Newstead, dated 9 September 1811, he describes the predicament of his motley retinue:

Poor Murray [Joe Murray, Newstead’s elderly steward] is ill again, & one of my Greek servants is ill too, & my valet has got a pestilent cough, so that we are in a peck of troubles, my family Surgeon sent an Emetic this evening for *one* of them, I did not very well know *which*, but I swore that *Somebody* should take it, so after a deal of discussion the Greek swallowed it with tears in his eyes, & by the blessing of it & the *Virgin* whom he invoked to assist *it* and *him*, I suppose he’ll be well tomorrow, if not *another* shall have the *next*. (*BLJ*, 2, 94)

The Shandean haplessness, the compressed touches of character, the feel for narrative, the grasp of and capacity to illuminate the absurdities that filter through everyday experience and language: all are qualities we associate with the later *ottava rima* poetry.

Reading the letters led Auden to the conclusion that ‘Byron’s genius was essentially a comic one’ (xi) and that his comic genius was of a particular type. Byron was not, in Auden’s

³ Ronald Bottrall, ‘Byron and the Colloquial Tradition in English Poetry’, reprinted in *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. M. H. Abrams ([1960] New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 210-27 (214).

view, a ‘Romantic’ poet – a poet of the imagination – because he was ‘utterly deficient in the power of invention’ (x). For this reason, too, he was not a good dramatist because to be ‘unable to invent is to be unable to dramatize, even to dramatize oneself’ (x). Byron was inauthentic, according to Auden, even as a (Juvenalian) satirist: his comic vein was ‘good-tempered and pessimistic’ rather than ‘angry and optimistic’ (x).

Writing about a letter he has received from Leigh Hunt (Byron is a notable meta-correspondent), he tells Thomas Moore that

Hunt’s letter is probably the exact piece of vulgar coxcombry you might expect from his situation. He is a good man, with some poetical elements in his chaos; but spoilt by the Christ-Church Hospital and a Sunday newspaper, – to say nothing of the Surry Jail, which conceited him into a martyr. But he is a good man.

Turning to Hunt’s poetry, Byron writes of *Foliage, or Poems Original and Translated* (1818), that ‘of all the ineffable Centaurs that were ever begotten by Selflove upon a Nightmare, I think this monstrous Sagittary the most prodigious’. But then Byron turns again:

Leigh Hunt is a good man, and a good father – see his Odes to all the Masters Hunt; – a good husband – see his Sonnet to Mrs. Hunt; – a good friend – see his Epistles to different people; – and a great coxcomb and a very vulgar person in every thing about him. But that’s not his fault, but of circumstances’ (*BLJ*, 6, 46-7).

Byron could be a waspish observer of contemporary political and literary trends but, as Auden saw, he was not an all-in Juvenalian. His anger is a constituent energy within a larger structure of thought and feeling that finds its linguistic sign in the repeated conjunction: ‘He

is a good man; 'But he is a good man'; 'Leigh Hunt is a good man'; 'But that's not his fault, but of circumstances'. Byron the satirist inhabits a broader self-questioning scepticism that permits a range of readings, Auden's resigned optimist among them.

Byron can attack and defend Hunt simultaneously as long as he keeps the (good) man and (bad) writer distinct. But it is characteristic of Hunt's vulgarity, his 'chaos', that he fails in such distinctions himself. Byron exposes this 'chaos' before allowing it to unravel. His evidence for Hunt being a good man becomes – chaotically – his (bad) writing: 'see his Odes to all the Masters Hunt'; 'see his Sonnet to Mrs. Hunt'; 'see his Epistles to different people'. Hunt's erosion of propriety and unbalancing of life and writing were, Byron thought, marks of a literary culture that had abandoned the classical virtues represented by Pope for the intellectual onanism of (among others) Wordsworth, Hunt, and Keats.

Byron's fondness for paradox and his readiness – in the line of Laurence Sterne – to disappear amidst the folds of fact and fiction have attracted, with mixed results, committed postmodernist readings. But Byron's instinct for the uncontrollable potentialities of the text runs alongside a defensive commitment to literary propriety and tradition. He did not favour the blurring of poetry and prose championed by Wordsworth (in theory) and implicit in Auden's folding of Byron's correspondence into the *ottava rima* poetry.

When John Ruskin praised Byron as a 'writer of 'measured and living truth', he chose his examples not from the poetry, but from the letters.⁴ This was not because he thought the letters privileged in their access to a 'true' or 'real' Byron, but because the poet's 'modes of rhythm involve other questions than those with which I am now concerned'.⁵ Although oblique, this points to the fact that there are continuities of poetic technique, of rhyme and

⁴ John Ruskin, *Praeterita*, ed. Francis O'Gorman (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 96, 98.

⁵ Ruskin, *Praeterita*, 96.

versification, as well as of the lyric voice, that align *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* with *Don Juan* and that set both poems apart from the familiar prose. Auden's incision along the serious/comic seam of Byron's *oeuvre* ignores technical and historical facets of verse writing that for Ruskin – as for Byron himself – could not easily be dismissed.

Letter writing draws on different semantic resources and traditions to verse writing and calls for differing interpretative approaches. The distinction between familiar prose and published literature is not, however, absolute. English letter writing, in the century previous to Byron's own, had attained new heights of literary sophistication in the hands of Chesterfield, Walpole, Gray, Cowper, and others. In France, letter writers such as Madame de Sévigné were widely admired. Volumes of these letters were considered canonical and sold well. As the sale catalogues of Byron's books show, the poet read extensively among these models. He was also an attentive student of formal rhetoric and when the mood took him – or the occasion demanded – he could write with great elegance and tact.⁶ As well as literary figures, he had a particular interest in published correspondence relating to politics and public life. Alongside standards such as Junius, entries in the sale catalogues include 'Lord Chatham's Letters'⁷ and 'Cartwright's Letters' (the redoubtable Nottinghamshire reformer Major John Cartwright, on whose behalf Byron submitted an eloquent petition to the House of Lords in June 1813). Byron also took an interest in letters he came across in his dealings with Italian booksellers and in various Italian archives. His letter to Murray of 12 April 1818,

⁶ See Matthew Bevis, *The Art of Eloquence: Byron, Dickens, Tennyson, Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 32 and *passim*. For examples of Byron's formal, courteous letters, see *BLJ*, 2, 179 (to Bernard Barton) and *BLJ*, 6, 81 (to Major Wildman).

⁷ Probably *Letters Written by the Late Lord Chatham to his Nephew Thomas Pitt Esq.* (London: T. Payne, 1810).

from Venice, serves in part as a letter of introduction for the Italian bookseller Giorgione Batista Missiaglia, who hoped, with Byron's help, to further his business contacts in London. Missiaglia brought with him a large parcel of manuscript letters, in various languages, addressed to Francesco Aglietti, a noted figure of Italian eighteenth-century literature, and a very well-connected correspondent. The writers Byron lists include Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Garrick, and Hume (*BLJ*, 6, 30).

The publication of notable letters blurs the distinction between private and public discourse. Such blurring was a significant feature of the epistolary culture of Byron's day. As Clare Brant has shown, eighteenth-century letters were often intended to be read among groups of friends or shared within communities.⁸ This is most obviously true of the letters Byron wrote to Murray from Italy, which the poet knew would be shown by his bookseller to a wider circle of friends and associates. This has implications for Byron's choice and treatment of his subject matter, especially when we consider that Byron was writing with the certain knowledge that his surviving correspondence would be published and pored over after his death. Part of the appeal of the letters – especially the Italian letters to Murray – is their immediacy, the feeling that Byron is speaking to us directly. In a sense he was.

⁸ See Clare Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), 3-6.