

ROSEMARIE ROWLEY

## Byron's Constant Love – The Sea

FROM SESTOS TO ABYDOS – HIS PASSIONATE AND HEROIC  
TRAJECTORY

Is it prophetic for our times?

Looking out from the deck of the sailing “Spider” across the familiar, yet unfamiliar shore, Byron was moved to write on 14<sup>th</sup> November 1809 when he was just twenty-one years old:

*Through cloudless skies in silvery sheen*

*Full beams the moon on Actium's coast*

*And on these waves, for Egypt's queen,*

*The ancient world was won and lost.*

(“Stanzas Written in Passing the Ambracian Gulf”)

In a world of shifting values, from the present to the past, which are eternal in their very transience, Blackstone has commented on the magisterial note, the complete finality of this statement, the classical economy which came from a mind conscious of the human oxymoron.

The poem was written after swimming from Sestos to Abydos – across the Hellespont in Greece, in imitation of the classical hero, Leander, who swam for love. However, the flippancy of tone with the serious existential import – from the historical recreation of the past to the mythological and poetical present – show how Byron had already found his genius.

It is a hinge moment in Byron's career as a poet, perhaps his greatest moment. Having placed himself in the modern world, and re-enacted the glories of the past, simultaneously with their departure and decay, what implications does it have for Byron's poetry?

At that point, the Byronic hero has his true birth – the heroic ideal is now embedded securely into his own life. That famous swim is the first occasion on which this becomes absolutely clear. Here the myth and meaning of Byron begins. Byron now has to find his role as poet and prophet for the coming ages.

However, his immediate reaction was to celebrate his mastery of physical limitations. He declared, on completing the swim, that it meant more to him than any other kind of glory – “political, poetical, or rhetorical.”

In a life celebrated for inexhaustible variety and noted for adventure, both the amorous and exploratory, there is one constant – Byron's love of the sea, his abiding passion.

This one constant in his life and work was essentially a predisposition from birth, and a permanent feature of his changeable character. In a life celebrated for diversity, variety, amours varied in every possible way, the inexhaustible and infinity variety of the Byron legend was in a very real sense counterparted by his steady and constant adoration, to a natural feature which itself under the appearance of eternal flux was in essence and as simple of the concept of H<sub>2</sub>O.

Byron was aware of his unusual attachment from the sea from a very early age. To the star and confidante of his life, his half-sister Augusta, who however was not a constant presence, (1816) Byron wrote:

"A strange doom is thy father's son's and past  
Recalling, as it lies beyond redress;  
Reversed for him our grandsire's fate of yore  
He had no rest at sea, nor I on shore."

Since he and Augusta shared the same father, but not the same mother, it could be said she was the one person with whom he could truly and essentially be himself. From this epigraph I shall draw a connection between Byron's love of the sea and his sense of doomed destiny, how it afforded a view of infinite nature as opposed to the limited and shallow human relations, (with certain exceptions including Augusta – his one true star ), and how, even at the end, a tranquil mind eluded him, and could be revived only by the dream of liberating Greece – and how significant it was that the adventures he loved so well were initiated by a series of voyages on ships. There are many witnesses of Byron's poems having their first incarnation at sea, with Byron composing as he stood on deck, and most notably, when the ship bore him away from shame and hostility and painful celebrity in London in 1816

Predisposed through ancestry – the nature versus nurture debate finds in Byron an exemplary for the most dedicated researcher in the annals of mankind – he furnishes irrefutable material, it would seem, for the avid geneticist. Many of you here at the International Byron Conference will be well-versed in the Byron genealogy, from the

first mention of Ralph de Burun, who came over with William the Conqueror, the establishment of the family seat at Newstead, and the family's extraordinary relationship with the sea. Ralph de Burun's direct descendants, William (5<sup>th</sup> Lord Byron born on 5 November 1722; and John Byron, born 8 November 1723, (sons of William 4<sup>th</sup> Lord Byron and Frances Berekley at Newstead) both had careers in the Royal Navy. William, known as the "Wicked Lord", was appointed as a Lieutenant on the *Falkland* while his brother, later known as "Foul Weather Jack", joined *The Wager* as midshipman where on 14 May 1741 it was wrecked on the coast of Patagonia, north of the Strait of Magellan. Imprisoned for three years by the Spaniards, John Byron would later write of his experience in his *Narrative*, \* published London 1768) which his grandson the poet Byron used the incident to great effect in *Don Juan*.

There are further family connections with the sea. In 1758, George Anson Byron, uncle of the poet and named for the First Lord of the Admiralty, was born. The Byron grandfather was promoted through various stages to Vice Admiral before retiring.

William resigned from the Royal Navy on reaching his majority, while "Foul Weather Jack" returned to England, was promoted to captain, and given command of the frigate *Syren* in 1746. Two years later he married

His first cousin, Sophia Trevanion. As any genealogist worth their salt will tell you, the union of cousins accentuates family traits and doubles the odds of their appearing in their progeny. If anything, if the saying "the sea ran in his blood" is to have any meaning, a study of the Byron line would provide rich evidence that in some way the Byron inheritance included a strong attachment and a predisposition for a life on the

sea. We may now have found the gene yet, and I would be surprised if it could be pinned down to one gene, but there is no doubt of the richness of Byron's genetic inheritance when it came to all matters relating to the sea.

The son of these cousins, the poet's father, known as "Mad Jack Byron" was born on 7 February, 1756.

"Mad Jack" duly grew up, if it can be said he ever did that, and after a spell in the army, married a divorcee - close on the heels of a society scandal- Amelia D'Arcy Baroness Conyers.

In 1784, on 26 January, Byron's half-sister, Augusta was born. The same year her mother, Amelia died, and "Mad Jack" Byron married Catherine Gordon of Gight on 13 May 1785 – whose father, George Gordon had drowned in a suspected suicide in the Bath Canal, his father, in turn, Byron's great-grandfather, had also drowned himself - they were the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Lairds of Gight. - and would furnish more material for our geneticist. Catherine Gordon herself was descended from Annabella Stuart, daughter of James I of Scotland whose ancestral brief included five murders, two hangings, one excommunication, and a possible suicide.

But whereas the Byron ancestors led a life of extraordinary activity at sea, in some strange but interlinked genetic reverse dance, the only place where Byron found repose and quiet was at sea. It is almost as if the genetic dance had acquired different steps, much as the set dances of the time, (now extant in Irish "set dancing") originating in the army, had "advance and retire" in their choreography, Bryon's

genetic choreography was compounded by a double legacy which invented new steps and variations on the family theme of the sea.

Not only was Byron genetically superimposed with a blueprint for this audacious balancing act, but it seems every experience he encountered in his early years in some way furnished him with the materials to develop his personality into a unique mould and vision with the sea at its center. A recent book published on the Nature versus Nurture debate (*Nature via Nurture*, by Matt Ridley, reviewed by Stephen Rose in “The Guardian” of 19.4.03) has shown that genes interact with the environment, and the environment with genes, in a hitherto unsuspected way, so no one is as determined as the geneticists would have us believe.

If Byron’s bloodline furnishes us with a kind of determinism as to his provenance and life chart, his environment, or his experiences in the world from the time he was born, add a classic counterpart to a study on how environment can affect temperament. His abandonment at the age of two-and-a-half by his father, the angry rows between them, his mother’s recorded blackness of mood and changes of reaction, (the infamous taunt of his mother: “lame brat!” and her savage biting of the teacup) – “my springs of life were poisoned” he wrote in one of his desperate letters to his half-sister and the Pigots between 1804- 1807 – there he sought purer springs, and the source of incomparable purity, the sea, as it was then.

To understand this, we have to go back to Byron’s early years when he experienced a malign fate. Having been born with a club foot, his own sense of revulsion, and the taunts he endured from everyone around him, gave him a sense of horror, of being doomed.

He also had to deal with his father's abandonment of him at the age of two-and-a-half, which left him very little to counteract his sense of a flawed heredity – son of “Mad Jack” with two suicided forebears on the Gordon's his mother's side.

His overshadowing sorrow as a result of his mother's cruelty to him was life-long. Her terrible rages left him very vulnerable, with very little chance of healing the psychic wound caused by his physical deformity. In the latest biography of Byron by Fiona McCarthy, there is evidence that the infant Byron was sexually abused by the sister of his nursemaid, Agnes Grey. His mood swings, vacillating temperament, and a great capacity for boredom and an inability to form last sexual attachments would indicate a history of sexual abuse.

But perhaps he suffered most of all from a sense of confinement with vociferous females at an early age, having no male role model to inspire him. It seems he associated the mountains with their voluminous overhanging power with his mother, and the sea, with its openness and abandonment, with his father. Bernard Blackstone has written that Byron is very much the poet of flight – of almost hysterical escaper from life situations in which he found himself trapped, that his initial impulse was the “overmastering need to get away from his foolish mother.”

Dreaming about the exploits of his ancestors, who had remarkable careers at sea, Byron, a child with a physical handicap, found the locus of his imagination in the sea. The vista of the open sea furnished him with a way of escape from physical realities –

where on long stretches of sand he had glimpses of an infinite and an absolute, in contrast to his very early years, where he had experienced confinement and abuse.

Where the streets in Aberdeen sped down to the shore, he found a correlative for his own passionate nature and his identity as a boy. We know that his spirit must have been nourished by the beautiful scenes, for as he says himself, his early nature was affectionate, and only spoiled by his mother's unpredictable and difficult personality.

Later, in his adult life, the raw and natural beauty of the sea inspired him far more than his own lovers or his exploits with the. It was the only element in which he was comfortable, because of his gait, and where he obtained a respite from the taunts of childhood.

Therefore Byron's unique destiny was for the sea, in every possible way. His personal life was merely a variation and a shadow in comparison to the ineffable feelings of beauty, majesty, repose, excitement and adventure which the sea conjured up for him. It was a resource for him, over and over again, where he could be endlessly renewed and at the same time constantly bidden to reflection on the awe and majesty of nature, as compared to the fickle passions of mankind, his own short-lived amours resulting in a fatal boredom, and a balm to a spirit tried and vexated by human society in its vanity, greed, and pettiness when focussed on a man who simply challenged them to think differently. The iron laws of convention were for him the expression of vanity, hypocrisy, self-seeking and an impediment to the spirit's journey to love, human development, an understanding of history and his own place in it at the point of its highest cultural achievements, and the eventual trajectory of



civilization to which he was willing to give important, authentic, and disinterested witness. There is no witness like Byron at that point in history where the possibilities for the future were endless, but uncharted, hopeful, because the past was called into question and repudiated in a spirit of resolute inquiry and adventure, while the spirit of love and adventure was as yet unpolluted by psychoanalytical discourse or linked to consumerist ends. Therefore when we speak of Byron and the sea, we are in some sense discoursing about what is a 19th century sea, and there is ample evidence from Byron's writings that he was aware even at that time what dangers lay ahead for that sea – in other words, he was what he would now call an early environmentalist.

The fact that Byron said he wanted to hang himself while on shore may sound dramatic, but it does show us very clearly that Byron himself was not an unconscious artist in the Freudian sense, and the modern tendency to view biography as some sort of apologia for a character defect would be quite lost on him. He knew very well who he was. He knew he had very little tolerance for merely social boundaries, and while he respected the human capacity for love and friendship, he would never sacrifice love and friendship to social expediency or teleology.

So in a way, he was loftier than the people around him, and was constantly frustrated by their narrower agenda. So he had to turn to the source of life itself, the sea, to refresh himself after these sometimes barren and time-wasting endeavours. It is to the deep self underneath which Byron returns to again and again to refresh himself after the limitations and ennui of social encounters. It is a kind of transcendence, but a transcendence which enhances the poet and draws a bigger picture of the world in which he found himself, and that world was the sea.

His will to overcome was extraordinary. As a student in Harrow, he had carried a boy on his back whilst swimming, showing his desire for physical supremacy allied with generosity of spirit. Physical mastery and the sea were a source of well-being – even on land, when he rode nearly every day, his chief delight was to ride along the seashore, where from being a troubled biped, he could in quadruped majesty survey the scenes he felt most inspiring.

More than that, the sea was his mirror image, as changeless and as changeable as himself, as inexhaustible as were his resources in the mind, for as Gerard Manley Hopkins says “the mind as mountains”, we can also say it has seas, polished surfaces and fretful bubblings, shore-lapping wave which hug the sand tenderly and repeatedly like a lover, the advance and retreat of relationships, the huge cataclysms of thundering water and the deep hostile depths, the hidden dangers and lurking shadows of intimacy, the promise of stillness and the infinite beauty of its relationship with the sky above – and in that time never encounter a scene the same, never see any feature exactly the same, but still able to trust the tides and in that slow motion ease a fretful spirit.

In finding his alter ego, or supreme self, mirrored in the sea, it was inextricable from Byron’s destiny as a man and poet. His ego was dissolved in the sea – losing the ego in a vast domain, such as the sea, or the sky, is known as the oceanic experience. This meant Byron understood the full scope of human life, in its implications as a moral destiny for everyone. His personal life was merely a variation and a shadow in comparison to the ineffable feelings of beauty, majesty, repose, excitement and

adventure which the sea conjured up for him, it was a resource for him, over and over again, where he could be endlessly renewed and at the same time constantly bidden to reflection on the awe and majesty of nature, as compared to the fickle passions of mankind, his own short-lived amours resulting in a fatal boredom, and a balm to a spirit tried and vexed by human society in its vanity, greed, and pettiness.

From that day, when he swam the Hellespont, he felt he had overcome a malign destiny. He knew he had found his true element, and was master of it.

Even from the moment the boat sped away from England's coast on that first voyage in 1809, there is no doubt Byron is experiencing joy unconfined as he composed the first cantos of "Childe Harold" with their lyrical songs set against the Spenserian stanzas.

“Adieu, adieu, my native shore  
Fades o'er the waters blue,  
The night-winds sigh, the breakers roar,  
And shrieks the wild sea-mew.  
Your sun that sets upon the sea  
We follow in his flight:  
Farewell awhile to him and thee  
My native Land – Good Night!”

A new world opened upon him as he left – the sense of release from all restrictions – maternal, social, and political – is palpable.

His revulsion from human contact, and his openness to the solitude of the sea is absolutely clear:

*And now, I'm in the world alone*

*Upon the wide, wide sea.*

Was he to find the springs of his own nature as pure and boundless? Perhaps that was the real meaning of the voyage – self discovery – in order to be the voice of the newly emergent man: as celebrated by the Romantic poets. The sea is now home to Byron – so he is voyaging to find his true home. This sense of home is paradoxically a love for freedom itself. It is the incarnation of the Romantic ideal.

*O'er the dark waters of the deep blue sea*

*Our thoughts are boundless, and our souls are free,*

*Far as the breeze can bear, the billows foam,*

*Survey our empire, and behold our home!*

*These are our realms, no limits to their sway*

*Our flag the sceptre all who meet obey*

*Ours the wild life in tumult still to range*

*From toil to rest, and joy in every change.*

- *The Corsair*

A physical love at-homeness” – tied with a spiritual love which was boundless, sublime, and infinite: - “trackless” as opposed to human relations and society – his complex and exuberant personality had found its true counterpart at sea.

Byron was beginning to find his place in Nature. In that boundlessness he was to test himself over and over again. In the words of Wallace Stevens, he found himself “more truly and more strange.”

From the beginning – when he first set sail – the sea was the source of Byron’s inexhaustible adventures – human, artistic, poetical and philosophical.

*The exalting sense – the pulse’s maddening play*

*That thrills the wanderer of that trackless way.*

Byron, like all the Romantics, felt himself to be a pioneer. And indeed, the sea was trackless then, or virtually so. Its depths had not been plumbed, and were largely mysterious, so tot hat extent, it was uncharted. Therefore, it was a place without boundaries, infinite, into which he could voyage and discover his own meaning.

The sea was thus means of healing his innate disorder. At sea, his limitations became an inverse mirror of his true capacities – the boundless, inexhaustible adventures both of mind and body, and the sea furnished him with exactly the right backdrop for this inspired leap of the imagination – not only in the sense of being visible and present everywhere in the poetry as description, but also, like an endlessly refracting mirror lighting up in augmented and perfectly poised culmination his spirit of adventure –

what is remarkable about Byron is that none of his limitations became the subject of his poetry – on the contrary, they seemed merely to serve as a springboard on which he could perform his graceful arabesques of rhyme and thought, of humour and philosophy.

As Byron moved from “paradise” to “paradise” – mostly by sea, in those days distance was an enhancing factor and allowed time to absorb different experiences – each time he was aware that he was a witness to what had gone before him, and that he was uniquely placed in that history. Each time he learned something about himself, and his relation to nature, and to human nature, and to what had gone before. He wrote prolifically – *Childe Harold* was the great work of this voyage – and the culmination of his thought at this time.

The famous occasion “Sestos to Abydos” indicates to us that at that point Byron had not arrived at a complete identification of the present with the past – as he achieved in the Forum, the coliseum and the Olympian stanzas of *Childe Harold* – what is interesting is that he has not yet totally aligned himself with flawed human nature to the extent that he considers himself part of it, and its lost civilisations. There is grandeur in his detachment and his authority as witness to all human endeavour is asserted.

However, he did recognise himself as a “degenerate modern wretch” – and his intellectual honesty is a gift to us and thus makes his voice prophetic. He places himself in the context of his times – at some distance from classical ideals of heroism. Contemporary idea had diluted the ancient wisdom, with its reverence for nature – and

his is aware of his shortcomings. Notable ideas of love did not exist for him. In order to write love poems, he had drawn upon a wealth of disparate sources – novel reading, customs, social status, personal insecurities – even physical facts like glands – even boredom. Love and sex had been experienced by him – without the value of a proper context – purely as an individual – without a ceremony or myth which would locate for him a universal meaning. The search for a personal myth became the preoccupation of the modernists who followed him, Yeats and Joyce in the twentieth century. But Byron felt personally depleted, though not in need of a myth. And when he swam, it was for glory, for himself, and not for love.

As heir to the Enlightenment, his individual story becomes the biography of a poet – a witness to that age, which had felt itself to be the golden age of reason. Byron expects little from his human relations – love is not in the ascendant when reason rules the world. Though rebelling against the austerity of the Augustans, and trying to find his own meaning in the wide scope of his passions, he knows that a grand amour is not for him.

He already had found himself ore by ideas of love and human ties. He wrote from Turkey, to Adair, in 1810 –

“I am never well adapted or very happy in society.”

The rise of the individual and the dawning freedoms it promised had not resulted in a golden age of wonderful people. In age when individual potential was dawning, Byron had already reached satiety when it came to people.

From the beginning he was aware of the limitations of human nature, and how he could see opening before him the pages of his own human destiny. Even as he embraced the openness of the sea, he is always conscious of human limitation and how it spoils the landscape and the dreams of infinity the sea brings to mind.

Even at the beginning of the voyage, on 2 July, 1809, when Byron was writing his exuberant poetry, his letters show another side of him that is deeply reserved and pessimistic.

“I leave England without regret – I shall return to it without pleasure. I am like Adam, the first convict sentenced to transportation, but I have no Eve, and have eaten my apple, but what was as sour as a crab – adieu!”

The symbolism of the apple is obvious – Byron as man and poet experienced in his psyche, even then, the bitterness of the fall of man – and at that young age. While progress and the ideas of Rousseau were claiming that man was innocent, here Byron was experiencing the ancient sadness at the Fall. Psychological and sociological theory would find here the remark of a damaged spirit, and would link it to his early history of abuse – which Byron, however, would probably not have accepted as causative in his dysfunctional sexual life. He would think himself responsible, and accountable, and attribute the fall to his sense of corrupt human nature – to which he had a presentiment he might one day fully belong. He seemed, even then, to carry the weight of sinful humanity with him, like an albatross around his young neck.



Byron's 'Ancient Mainer' stance struck the novelist John Galt, who was a fellow-passenger on the Townshend Packet which carried Byron from Gibraltar to Malta at a later stage in the tour:

. . . "…he seemed almost apparitional, suggesting dim reminiscences of him who shot the albatross"

Blackstone comments that the Coleridgean echo is unmistakable, but that the Childe welcomes the desolation which fills the Mariner with dread (stanza 10).

It seemed a preternatural guilt hung over Byron – a sense of how the fall of man had affected and was going to affect nature – how the infinite sublime was threatened by man himself.

In this new age, the past has been called into question and repudiated in a spirit of resolute inquiry, while the spirit of love and adventure, though personally not satisfying to hi, was as yet unpolluted by psychoanalytical discourse or linked to consumerist ends, though these modern preoccupations were looming into sight. Byron's temptation as the first modern was to institute the biography of the soul – however he always linked such introspective tendencies to a wider view of human nature, which embraced the comic and the irrational. At the beginning of the new industrial age, it seemed Byron had a presentiment that human folly would win out every time, and indeed its concomitant pollution and mismanagement of nature with which we live today would justify his sense of pessimism and absurdity.

Byron was an authentic witness – because of his intellectual and personal honesty. There is no witness like Byron at that point in history where the possibilities for the future were uncharted – not only was the past not completely mapped, but the future was hopeful with new discoveries. Both Keats and Shelley believed in the new doctrine of the essential goodness – the perfectibility of man, who was born free, but was everywhere in chains, according to Rousseau.

Both these poets had such an idealized vision for humanity that they failed to take account of the reality which was beginning to filter through to them, that the actual progress of materialist ideas resulted in mechanization, commerce and exploitation, was more summarized by Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" than by their visions of ethereal and idealised goodness.

Of the Romantic poets, Byron is the one with his feet on the ground – despite his difficult balancing act. Neither Keats nor Shelley, the Romantic poets of the age, had experienced so much of fallen humanity as Byron had.

Blackstone points out that Byron (with Blake) was the most aware of the Romantics of the problems of what we have come to call pollution. Without being fully aware of it, he was called to be witness to the beginnings of how Nature herself was being affected by the social development of mankind – in commerce.

He was also speaking from a particular vantage point – the early nineteenth century. When we talk of Byron and the sea, we are in some sense discoursing about what is a

19<sup>th</sup> century sea, since at that time it was unbounded and unspoilt – and still linked inextricably with man’s idea of himself as an infinite being. Since that idea was being interrogated, often Nature, and the Sea, was presented as a vast and infinite void, into which a terrified spirit and mind is projected.

However, in Byron’s case, it is the sea as an infinite resource for humanity that is present in his poetry, and there is evidence even at that time that he was aware of the dangers that lay ahead for that precious relationship – it would not be an exaggeration to call him an early environmentalist, were the word not strange to him, for he would never have considered the sea as a separate entity from the human state of being. All the more poignant today, as we recall, even at the beginning of the last century, on 16<sup>th</sup> June, 1904, Joyce was still able to summon the sea as the “ineluctable modality of the visible” – a concept that seems almost medieval to us today.

Byron’s sense of an uncaring Creator must have been well-nigh absolute – in the sense that God does not directly intervene in Nature, for He had certainly not intervened in Byron’s case and cured him of his club foot – so the focus was on humanity – what was man to make of creation? More specifically, what was Byron, the poet, to make of creation? And it does seem, for a while, in embracing the openness and freedom of the sea that he had found his redemption.

However, as he voyaged on, Byron saw how nature’s glories would be subsumed in a ceaseless pursuit of wealth:

*And Mammon wins his way where*

*Seraphs might despair!*

Byron foresaw that the destruction of Nature would cause angels to weep in heaven.

These are the prophetic lines in the first Canto of *Childe Harold*.

In our age the result of Mammon are entirely manifest. The grotesque attenuation of individual rights to untrammelled power without responsibility, which had begun in a search for equality, has now robbed and despoiled the natural world, especially the sea.

So, after the boundlessness, and the oceanic experience, it is to the deep and dark-blue ocean, after all the deserts and caves, physical and spiritual, of Cantos II and III that Byron returns in his grand finale to *Childe Harold*.

So there is a strong indication that Byron foresees the role of greed in the eventual outcome for the sea – that darkness will overcome. Being a poet, and therefore in a prophetic role, he also felt portents that time would bring with it signs of spiritual oppression – an inkling of the materialist philosophies which were to swamp mankind in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

“no breath of air breaks the wave”

which is an extraordinary image of suffocation.

The scene is thus set for the famous Canto 4, the roll-call of ruined cities and civilizations to which the sea is both witness and survivor.

It is clear that he does not envision a civilization which will last or which will rise above its pretences. He raises the question as to where his own civilization is going – as to his own life, he is not, as in the Forum, “a ruin among ruins” – there were still hopes of a good life, and marriage to look forward to.

Having established himself as a poet on his return from his first voyage and led the life of a celebrity his world crashed around him at the failure of his short-lived marriage and the revelations that he had had a sexual relationship with his half-sister, Augusta, which led him to leave England, finally in 1816.

The second departure from England was must as relived as the first – even more so. The 1816 tour was more desperate affair altogether. As noted, Byron had always been concerned with preternatural guilt and human existence – but after his disastrous relationship with Augusta, when he realized the full extent of his own fall, it was brought home to him very strongly indeed. From being a man who despised society, he felt himself to be an outcast – by them

At first the variety of his experiences and his reception as a famous poet, kept him going – he is amused, but much taken with his reception. But the well-springs of his nature had been irretrievably damaged. As he moved from place to place in search of adventure and beauty – in a vital sense his capacity to contemplate beauty was totally impaired.

The consummation of the relationship with Augusta and the scandal besmirching of their true love and friendship meant that the source of infinite purity. Nature herself had been polluted, and Byron's capacity to have a sense of tranquillity became well-nigh impossible. His mental anguish was great:

He wrote:

*I was disposed to be pleased – I am a lover of Nature – and an Admirer of Beauty – I can bear fatigue – and welcome privation – and have seen some of the noblest views of the world - but in all this – the recollections of bitterness – and more especially of recent and more home desolation which must accompany me through life (author's emphasis \_ - having preyed upon me here – and neither the music of the shepherd – the crashing of the Avalanche – nor the torrent – the mountain – the Glacier – the Forest – nor the Cloud – have for one moment lightened the weight upon my heart – nor enabled me to lose my own wretched identity in the majesty and the power and the Glory – around – above and beneath me.*

This was written on 20 September, 1816, a final entry in the journal he was keeping for Augusta. The fact that he stopped writing the journal at this very point would indicate that some great intuition had been lost – for ever. His dialogue with himself – and his soul-mate Augusta – had become too painful.

She had been the “one true star” of his life, whom he had met as a child, when, as an only child, he had longed for a sister, and had found her. Through her he realized his deepest yearnings for wholeness – he could see himself in the context of family history and find his own part in it – in a way, Augusta helped him to realize who he was:

A strange doom is they father’s son’s and past  
Recalling as it lies beyond redress;  
Reversed for him our grandsire’s fate of yore  
He had no rest at sea, nor I on shore.

Lines to Augusta, 1816

In a reverse genetic dance, he was different from his ancestors – finding rest at sea – the sea was where he realised himself fully.

He knew he would find himself at sea, but what is more apparent; the word “doom” anticipates that he would meet his end there.

From his pacing the shores at Seaham as he courted Annabella, to the extraordinary declaration on his wedding night “I am in hell” – which was uttered behind a curtain in a strange house, on land, - it was inevitable he would find his destiny at sea, but all hope of having a normal married life were capsized in that moment of realization.

We know that the two-year delay in Annabella's accepting him and irretrievably harmed his hopes. He bitterly reproached her that if she had accepted him when first he proposed, he would not have fallen into the temptation of the incestuous union with his half-sister – whom he had always loved from first meeting her age eight, but which need not necessarily have become a sexual relationship – were it not for the dysfunctional nature of his sexuality, already discussed, the proximity of someone he loved, and the sense of hopelessness which he had around women.

We know from his lines to Augusta, as revulsion and a regression from the disappointment of his marriage brought him back to his only true star and confidante that their love had initially been the pure love of brother and sister. However, recent discoveries, called the Westermarck effect, show that children reared together before the age of three do not have any sexual inclinations towards each other as adults, while those reared apart may do. With more and more families breaking up to create new families, the case of brother and sister meeting each other later, and falling in love has become not so unusual. Indeed, Freud's whole incest theory would likely never have occurred to him at all, were he himself reared by his own mother – his nursemaid was his mother figure and he knew his mother only as a relative until he reached the age of seven. He then assumed his feelings towards her were a universal occurrence.

The pure love of brother and sister, of the Byron half-siblings, had its element in the eternal flux of water, as would be natural with their inheritance. In writing about Augusta, Byron harks back to the source of life itself, back to the streams of life and death, where in his father's loins, he and she had their preternatural existence.



In the cycle of water from the fountain to sea, to the sky, and back again to the rivers,  
he traced his love for Augusta,

*Could I renounce the river of my years  
To the first fountain of our smiles and tears,  
I would not trace again the stream of hours  
Between their outworn banks and withered flowers  
But bid it flow on now, until it glides  
Into the number of the nameless tides.*

From being united in their fathers loins, to the physical existence as children, and then, to their union as lovers – this last was a journey that Byron should not have embarked upon, he writes. The result had been burn-out, and shame “outworn banks, and withered flowers” – far better that their love had remained pure and unnamed, anonymous, and unexpressed, losing itself into the vast numbers and nameless tides of the sea, where it would be lost to oblivion.

There is no doubt that Byron felt, in these lines, that the pure springs of his love for Augusta, their innocent and preternatural union before birth, had been sullied both a experience, and by scandal, and this of course, led him to the conclusion that his own human nature was fatally flawed.

He long for

*.. a purer fount, on holier ground*

*And deemed to spring perpetual*

which would nourish his sense of the infinite, but he goes on to write that such hope is

*.. in vain*

And he does not finish the poem.

The contemplation of the infinite – its purity and beauty were useless to him now – just as the sea was becoming spoiled by having her mysteries probed and the wellsprings of her being adapted to commercial ends by those who betrayed her true nature.

As his sense of doom increased, he found a parallel for his illicit affair with Augusta – by the contemplation of another sort of unlawful union, as found in the Bible. That unlawful union, that of the sons of God with the daughters of men, seemed to touch the morbid springs of his character. His beloved sea now becomes the agent of destruction, as in the days of Noah, when God repented that he had created humans.

It is almost as if Byron longed for total forgetfulness in water – where once his ego had dissolved itself, he now longs to draw on, and he writes of the return of the children of Cain, when water will have its apotheosis.

*Earth shall be ocean!*

*And no breath,*

*Save of the winds, be on the unbounded wave!  
Angels shall tire their wings, but find no spot:  
Not even a rock from out the liquid grave  
Shall lift its point to save,  
Or show the place where strong Despair hath died,  
After long looking o'er the ocean wide  
For the expected ebb which cometh not:  
All shall be void,  
Destroy'd*

This tells us something of his state of mind. Byron was particularly morbid after the death of Shelley by drowning – the immolation of his dear friend and fellow poet's corpse on the beach had brought him to a new pitch of despair – he compared the once noble Shelley to what resembled a black silk handkerchief, almost nothing at all.

Byron found for the first time that the sea utterly failed him. Although that day, he managed to swim out to his yacht, risking sunburn; he did not have the heart to go for a sail in her.

For a while he stayed on in Venice – for the next few years it as if he is contemplating his past and his future in one, and also the only example of a long-standing relationship with a woman he loved, Teresa – he had met her in Venice, but a few months later followed her to Ravenna. But it did not last. – Venice was the place where he had his most amours. It seems in this environment of islands, seas, and canals, Byron's imagination in some sense found a place he wanted to call home, but

with this discovery, there also emerges his first purely psychological sense of confinement as the roles of male and female, and in some way this particular place exerts a hold on him as an exact parallel of his own experience in those roles.

At times, he was still open to possibilities of beauty, love and friendship, as Venice looked out to the openness of the sea, and, at the same, its masculine freedom -

*I could endure my dungeon, for 't was Venice;  
I could support the torture, there was something  
In my native air that buoy'ed my spirits up  
Like a ship on the ocean toss'ed by storms,  
But proudly still bestriding the high waves  
And holding on its course;*

In the play "The Two Foscari" we have the long shadow of his broken relationship with his father. Again, the sea is his metaphor

*"as the wave  
Sweeps after that before it, alike whelming  
The wreck that creaks to the wild winds, and wretch  
Who shrieks within its riven ribs, as gush  
The waters through them, but this son and sire  
Might move the elements to pause..."*

and later in the play there is a Freudian, if I may be reductionist for a moment, opposition of the male principle, (freedom and the sea) to that of the dungeon (female, and full of snakes)

*"A cell so far below the water's level,  
Sending its pestilence through every crevice"*

which tells us something of his state of mind at the time. In some sense, Venice though laced with canals, was dungeon, and eventually he had to go. He is always looking out for those things and he continues on with the prophetic words which are also the bye word of sea-faring men:

“the wind may change.”

And its accompanying and endless vacillation which is the nature of love itself. His love for Teresa changed – after three years it seemed he wanted to move on and consummate his political ideals rather than his romantic ones.

At Venice, there is a sense of his postponing his destiny. There was little else to explore. Since the affair with Augusta, the sea as infinite spiritual resource was no longer available to him – therefore there was left only his sense of adventure, which became tied up to his own idea of doom. In Venice, he confided to Lady Blessington that he brought harm to everyone and everything he touched. After the death of Shelley, his brooding increased.

It is this sense of futility and doom, reinforced by his conviction of his mad bad line, that he poisoned everything and everyone he touched, as he confided in Lady Blessington this was how he was himself, this sense of doom finally overwhelmed him and caused him to embark on his final adventure at Missolonghi in the hope of rescuing his most idealist passions.

That last adventure at sea is irretrievably bound up with his decision to fight for a nobler cause than his own flawed nature, which could only be redeemed by an act of selfless generosity – his desperation shows through in his reckless spending. In Venice, there is a growing sense that poetry itself did not seem sufficient justification of his actions or his life – far better to embrace a wider, worthier cause, hence his decision to join the struggle for Greek independence, and in the anonymity and struggle of a different people, in the name of the vague but noble ideals of brotherhood, in a different country, and for a different cause, to find a way in which he could be counted honourable.

Byron's epitaph could thus be as easily summed up as those lines he wrote of lost civilizations – those lines written for another, more ancient world. Just as that ancient world had been won and lost for a whim, his lines are as witty and as futile and therefore as poignant as his own destiny. He was to triumph over great personal odds, achieve remarkable works, and yet, for a human passion, to lose all he gained – especially that world which could still have been his – a better world, and its possibilities, had he but the will to follow his finer instincts – a world which had not yet been lost to him – on that marvelous day when he was 21, swimming from Sestos to Abydos.

**This essay was given as a paper to the International Byron Society, at the University of Liverpool, 2003, and first published in the journal of the French Byron Society, *Société Française des Études Byroniennes* 2005**

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BYRON        The Works of Lord Byron  
              Wordsworth Poetry Editions, 1994
- BYRON        by Elizabeth Longford  
              Hutchinson/Weidenfeld& Nicolson, 1976
- BYRON – LIFE AND LEGEND  
              By Fiona McCarthy John Murray, 2002
- BYRON, A SURVEY,  
              Bernard Blackstone, Litt. D., Longman, 1975
- BYRON – THE CRITICAL HERITAGE  
              Andrew Rutherford, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970  
              With Barnes & Noble
- Byron        LIVES OF THE GREAT ROMANTICS  
              Ed. Christ Hart and William Pickering, London, 1996
- GEORGE GORDON, LORD BYON  
              A comprehensive annotated research bibliography  
              Of secondary materials in English, 1973-94  
              Scarecrow Press, Lannan Md& London 1997