

Rosemarie Rowley: Byron: His Affinity with Joyce – A Kindred Spirit

By the wind

Even as the page is rustled while we look

So by the poesy of his own mind

Over the mystic leaf his soul was shook

Byron has had an abiding influence on literature, and none more great than in those poets and writers such as Joyce who specifically admired him and found a correspondence with him as artist and poet.

It is likely that Joyce first came on Byron's work at home. In the late 19th century when Joyce was growing up in Ireland, Byron was regarded with Victorian suspicion because his private life was "immoral" and well publicized, because his attitudes towards Church and State were irreverent, and furthermore, he was ironic in his treatment of society. In the famous scene of the family argument at Christmas dinner, Joyce's father favoured the sexual outcast Parnell over the strictly moral and often hypocritical Church, so lacking in charity when in fact its founder Jesus demonstrated a special affection for the sexual sinner. Joyce as a young boy would have taken his cue from this attitude, and later found other models who had transgressed sexual boundaries but in some way were heroic as artists. Byron was thus Joyce's favourite poet from his earliest days.

There is a vivid account in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* when a love of Byron's poetry and a consequent imposed isolation are described. Stephen's schoolmates engage him in a discussion as to who is the greatest writer, he answers, being true to himself, that "Tennyson is only a rhymester" whilst the greatest poet is Byron "of course". The other boys mock him by protesting that Byron is "only a poet for uneducated people" and, with conclusive triumph, that he was a "heretic and immoral too". This reminds them that Stephen's class essay had been criticized for heresy. The boys then beat Stephen with a cabbage stump and push him up against a barbed wire fence, bullying him to admit that "Byron was no good". However, he continues to resist and eventually he escapes. Stanislaus Joyce, his brother, also recounts this incident, so we can be fairly certain it was a part of Joyce's character-formation and is true to life.

This is a crucial moment in Stephen's career. It is no accident that Byron is the poet with whom Stephen should be associated in this moment of danger, and consequent separation from the values of the crowd, or the mob, are richly intermingled with ideas of love, heresy and artistic destiny.

In discovering his own alienation from his country and his contemporaries, he sought affirmation from those heroic poets who had preceded him. In looking to the world for

what images possessed his soul, in which “his soul was shook” it is evident that from his early years Byron was the main influence, as poet practitioner, and as a model of what the artist should be.

The genesis of this artistic development is shown in detail in the first draft of the *Portrait*, which is so different from the final version that it retains the name “Stephen Hero”. Byron is at every turn Joyce’s poetic exemplar and provides Joyce with a suitable model for scansion as he and his brother read the lines:

*My days are in the yellow leaf
The flowers and fruits of love are gone
The worm, the canker and the grief
Are mine alone.*

which is, of course, a stanza from Byron’s “On This Day I Complete My Thirty-sixth Year” (Jan 22, 1824).

The two Joyce brothers, James and Stanislaus, named Stephen and Maurice here, try out their theory of reading poetry and “it yielded wonderful results”.

*Soon Stephen began to explore the language for himself and to choose, and
thereby rescue for once and for all, the phrases most amenable to his theory.*

In *Portrait of the Artist*, Joyce developed his credo as an artist, to find in the real world the insubstantial image which his soul so constantly beheld. He is profoundly influenced by Thomas Aquinas, with the aesthetic categories of clarity, harmony, and wholeness, but the erotic takes precedence. As a schoolboy Stephen finds himself on the verge of his first physical encounter and is carried away with the image of a woman on a tram, the woman he names as “E.C”. His first act of homage to her is to try to compose a poem in the manner of Lord Byron, which he describes as follows:

On the first line of the page appeared the title of the verses he was trying to write: To E-C-. He knew it was right to begin so for he had seen similar titles in the collected poems of Lord Byron by dint of brooding on the incident, he thought himself into confidence. During this process all those elements which he deemed common and insignificant fell out of the scene. There remained no trace of the tram itself, nor of the tram-men, nor of the horses: nor did he and she appear vividly. The verses told only of the night and the balmy breeze and the maiden lustre of the moon. Some undefined sorrow was written in the hearts of the protagonists as they stood in silence beneath the leafless trees and when the moment of farewell had come the kiss, which had been withheld by one, was given by both. After this the letters L.D.S. (‘Laus Deum Semper’, Latin for ‘Praise God always’) were written at the foot of the page and having hidden the book, he went into his mother’s bedroom and gazed at his face for a long time in the mirror of her dressing-table.

Joyce's description of the manner in which this immature poem shakes itself free of mundane realities such as horses and tram-men reflects his view of lyrical poetry and owes much to Byron's early lyrics, which were ethereal and insubstantial in keeping with the new spirit of Romanticism.

That the kiss was purely imaginary shows the erotic hold which Byron's spirit and his works held over his development and formation as an adolescent, and the unblinkingly self-critical image of Stephen gazing into the mirror after this first attempt at poetic composition presents a narcissistic urge which is often associated with Byron and with romantic literature in general.

Although Byron first appealed to Joyce's auditory imagination, as a poet of love, and a celebrant of the encounters between men and women, it is Byron the outcast and fellow pilgrim with whom Joyce, as he grew to be a young man, found an answering echo in his own character formation. Byron would take his place in Joyce's pantheon of hero artists, as Joyce developed his own character after the idea of the Byronic hero, a breaker of rules.

In *A Portrait* Stephen, who is Joyce's autobiographical character, had found little justice, being punished for having accidentally broken his glasses, so he develops as one who does not follow the rules laid down by his religious teachers. Hence very early on he saw himself as an outcast. Joyce's spiritual nature was from time to time in thrall to the makers of rules, the Jesuits, and his adolescent crisis was a turning point in which he had to choose his destiny either as priest, or artist. Just after the retreat when his soul is in turmoil, he takes a walk to Dollymount Strand, and passes what he names as Byron's public house in Clontarf (Chapter 4). This naming of the public house is entirely fictional, though there was in historical fact a public house owned by Patrick Powell, a wine merchant, which existed on what is now Clontarf Road near the chapel. This mention of a Byron pub in Clontarf, scene of the victorious battle, marks the transition point between Stephen the putative priest and Stephen the artist, where he takes a turn and finds himself contemplating mortal beauty instead of immortal virtue. Further on in the same chapter in *A Portrait* he offers the semi-mystical delineation of the young woman bathing who became half bird and half human – both of which sounded in him the erotic impulse. But throughout this search Byron held him as exemplar of the Romantic impulse to beauty, both beauty of women, and the beauty of words in a lyric verse. Thus, Byron's example as a poet and artist was much more than a pretext for self-contemplation or even self-expression.

Choosing to name the pub at the beginning of this journey after Byron was a deliberate identification for Joyce when he began to understand the public role and life as an artist, with all the rejection that entailed. In opting for the public life of an artist or poet, instead of the private and inner life of a priest, Joyce was being faithful to those lessons he had learnt from his father about the ignominious nature of public life, and how the public, or the rabblement, rarely deserved to hear the artist, who nonetheless, like Byron, poured forth his works and his verses on the public ear.

Joyce began to distinguish between the public role of the artist and the inability of the mass of burghers to be sympathetic to that role;

The burgher notion of the poet Byron in undress pouring out verses just as a city fountain pours out water seemed to him characteristic of most popular judgments on aesthetic matters (p.37)

he writes in the first draft of his novel, *Stephen Hero*. Such grossness of the public taste forces him to conclude: "Isolation is the first principle of artistic economy".

This detachment and identification with Byron as hero became an armour for Joyce, whose first published piece was entitled *The Day of the Rabblement*, where he pays homage to Ibsen, but the theme owes much to his reading of Byron.

From Byron he learned that the need for isolation, particularly from the generality in society who were too ignorant to understand the poet's true nature, was crucial. And public opinion, which was the cause of Byron's exile, was fickle. Moreover, the public house was where his father met his daily humiliations, and triumphs, and gave James Joyce from his earliest days his extraordinary perspicacity and his ability to delineate and recognize traits in all the human beings he saw. The tragedies and the penury of Joyce's early life stood him in good stead as creator and celebrator of the comic spirit in humanity, the public house in Joyce's peregrinations as the centre of what it is to be human, parallels the adventures of the Byron into the human beings he meets on his odyssey around Europe. Byron was the main impetus for Joyce's exile into Europe, and the departure point for his life with Nora Barnacle and his work as a fully realized and conscious artist.

It was not long before the dialogue of soul, self and the world, became a primordial drama of the lost or doomed soul. When Byron came to the bleak conclusion in *Manfred* that the tree of knowledge is not the tree of life, he was continuing on questions which had arisen as far back as biblical times, the story of the damned soul. Byron became in *Manfred* the articulation of a spirit which is unbounded, which is not part of the herd, which is the lonely wolf upon the crag, sick to the heart of human misery. Joyce in his adolescent sinning knew something of that despair. He learned of the need of sheer egoism when the self has sabotaged itself by engaging in acts inimical to it. After an initial reconciliation at the Jesuit retreat, he moves into the position of artist gazing unflinchingly at his own doom:

*I stand the self-doomed unafraid
Firm as the mountain ridges where
I flash my antlers in the air*

he writes in *The Holy Office* which recalls the locus of Manfred's encounters – Joyce's whole poem encompasses an attitude he owes to a reading of *Manfred* who refuses all human knowledge and comfort from the abbot who has tried to find redemption for him.

As his work as an artist progressed Joyce adapted the mundane world to fit his artistic project, and often this is in direct contrast with his earlier lyrical evocations as his mature work focuses on un-poetic details. As a mature artist, Byron's exploitation of cliché, stale language, and poetic convention may have appealed to Joyce as well as his attention to physical realities, the introduction of trivial particularities and peculiarities and Byron's use of the mock-heroic. Yet there are marked differences in their works. Joyce's exploitation of aural analogies and his type of word-music are very much his own, but for the creation of his own artistic persona, the "self-doomed, unafraid" we have seen that he owes much to Byron.

The early lyrics in both poets gave way to mock-heroic encounters, and both Joyce's *The Holy Office* and *Gas from a Burner* employ the Byronic jest of shocking humour and comic despair. It is clear that as Joyce progressed from Romantic poet to the prose poet of *Ulysses*, Byron's example exerted considerable influence. Byron's mature style was a poetry that skirted the boundaries of prose, whilst Joyce's mature style was prose that skirted the boundaries of poetry. In an important theme, with Byron as a model, Joyce's story from childhood to adolescence is a descent from the spiritual vocation of finding parallels in the real world to sordid encounters in Dublin's Nighttown.

One of his short stories, *A Little Cloud* is the sad tale of a poet who finds himself in the sordid world of Dublin where over a quarter of the population lived in emotional and material poverty. For Chandler in *A Little Cloud* Byron provides a poetic model but Chandler's desire to make a Byronic break with home is as unrealistic as his poetic ambitions. Returning from a meeting with the successful émigré Ignatius Gallagher, he goes home to find a volume of Byron's poems open on the table.

He opened it cautiously with his left hand lest he should waken the child and began to read the first poem in the book.

*Hushed are the winds and still the evening gloom,
Not e'en a Zephyr wanders through the grove
Whilst I return to view my Margaret's tomb
And scatter flowers on the dust I love.*

This is the opening poem of Byron's *Hours of Idleness* (1807) and has a particular poignancy as it is about the death of a young lady, a cousin of the author, and very dear to him. The corpse of the young lady has more power over Chandler's imagination than the real presence of his own child. Chandler dares to hold the poetic mood and speculate about his own capacities as a poet. However just then the child awakens and screams. Chandler is called to domestic duties to rock his child, breaking the poetic mood. There was no role for the Byronic hero as child minder or self-sacrificial father in Dublin, though strangely enough, both Joyce and Byron show evident paternal solicitude at times, even though they were robustly against the

institution of the family as promulgated by the Church and society in general.

As I have mentioned, Joyce learnt from Byron, that the position of artist was to be isolated, even outcast, and it was this sense of being an outcast, combined with his moving from residence to residence, that augmented Joyce's reincarnation of Byron as a wanderer, and led to his conceptualization of Leopold Bloom, the archetypal Jew wanderer, and the Jewish civilization, just as the earlier Byron found inspiration in *Hebrew Melodies*.

When it came to writing his own mock-heroic epic, the example of Byron stood Joyce in good stead. Both were also Hellenists, though in different ways. Byron knew and spoke Greek, and Joyce aspired to know all languages, even to inventing his own. Their epicenter was the character of Odysseus, the fully rounded human, and was the basis of their construction of the anti-heroic Don Juan and Leopold Bloom. Indeed, Byron may have been the direct inspiration for this most famous of 20th century novels.

The scholar Hermione de Almeida has written an entire study on the parallels between Homer's *Odysseus*, Joyce's *Ulysses* and Byron's *Don Juan* in her work, *Byron and Joyce through Homer* published by Macmillan, London in 1981, where she traces their literary development; and although she detects the influence of a vast number of writers, Petronius, Ariosto, Rabelais, Montaigne, Cervantes, Fenelon, Fielding, Sterne and Flaubert, she claims a precedence for both writers in betraying a self-conscious ambivalence towards those traditions, and displaying a radical innovativeness and recurring paradoxical formations, which ultimately supersede these predecessors, so much so that they become, in function, most like Homer and thus show a true originality. She argues that both *Don Juan* and *Ulysses* serve the world and its culture in much the same way as the Homeric poems served early Aegean civilization.

Both Byron and Joyce displayed the comic spirit in abundance and never more so than in the romantic lives of their characters, Don Juan and Bloom respectively. To enumerate each of these comic occasions would be beyond the scope of this essay, so I will confine myself to mentioning those immediately striking.

In *Ulysses*, Molly Bloom's suitors are all seen as Byronic poets, and the text is rich in comparison of these Byrons. The dispossessed Irish take on the role of "the other" and are romanticized, just as Byron, along with the Irish poet Moore, romanticized the Orient. Lady Hester Stanhope's visit to Byron in Athens after she had seen him swimming naked outside Piraeus in 1810 are counterpart to Molly's imagining and remembering her suitors in her girlhood in Gibraltar. Later, as a married woman, when she sees Stephen, whom Bloom has mentioned as a poet, Molly hopes the young man hasn't got

long greasy hair hanging into his eyes or standing up like a red Indian what do they go about like that for only getting themselves and their poetry laughed at

- yet she dreams of a liaison with Stephen. She says that during their courtship, Leopold Bloom made Molly a present of Lord Byron's poems and three pairs of gloves, and according to her, Poldy was

Very handsome at that time trying to look like Lord Byron I said I liked though he (Byron) was too beautiful for a man and he (Bloom) was a little like before we got engaged (Ulysses, p. 664)

She recalls that once she thought he was a

poet like Byron and not an ounce of it in his composition

- Molly's imagined, real and potential lovers are all Byronic heroes in their romantic otherness.

In his next magnum opus, Joyce once again turned to his early love of Byron, as there are numerous references in *Finnegans Wake* both to Byron and his works, although these can be hard to disentangle because Byron can be confused with Brian Boru, the Irish king who defeated the Danes at Clontarf in 1014, and Childe Harold is confused with various kings.

In *Finnegans Wake*, in the deep layers of memory, Joyce's knowledge of Byron's poetry bubbles through to the surface over a variety of references. In Book III, what has been designated the Book of the People, he arrives at the reincarnation of the hero Sean as the compound Jaun, a mixture of Sean and Juan. Juan makes his appearance in Chapter 2 of this section, before the young ladies of St Bride's academy and uses as sub-text Byron's *Maid of Athens*. Joyce's use of this poem generally seems to involve motifs of love and sexuality but this love is threatened by imminent departure and separation. The theme of separation connects those passages where a declaration of love is immediately followed by a parting. *Meed of anthems here we pant* includes a sexual theme and links the poem with Shelley but in the main it is a poem of valediction as is Byron's poem *Fare thee well! And if for ever/ Still for ever fare thee well*.

Continuing with the juxtaposition of a declaration of love and parting, Jaun's departure also recalls Childe Harold's

Goodnight! Farewell awhile to her and thee.

Jaun's valediction to his sister Issy is based on those lines, *So for e'er fare thee well!* (p. 454) which becomes transmogrified into *Fare thee well, fairy well!*

and *Tell Queen's road I am seilling, Farewell, but for ever. Buy!*

That Joyce never tired of Byron is evident from a perusal of all his life works. Thus the exiled novelist turned to the exiled poet Byron as master of partings, where he introduces a comic note to sound the despair.

The *Maid of Athens* is made use of by Joyce again when he associates the *Maid of Athens* with Anna Livia, when the washerwoman says *Then a toss nare scared that lass, so aimai moe. that's agapo* which echoes Byron's poem which begins *Maid of Athens, ere we part*, and ends with the Greek *Zoe mou, sas agapo* (p. 202)

There is also, in *Finnegans Wake*, an extensive parody of Byron's *The Waltz*. Jaun, the reincarnation of Sean and Juan, addresses the young ladies of St. Bride's Academy.

Mades of ashens when you flirt spoil the lad but spare his shirt! Lay your lilylike long his shoulder but buck back if he buts bolder and just hep your homely hop and heen no horning but if you've got some brainy notion to raise cancan and rouse commotion I'll be apt to flail that tail for you till it's borning.

The Waltz provides another detail in the same context which is beautifully apposite to one of the central motifs of *Finnegans Wake*. Byron's poem is attributed to a country gentleman called Horace Hornem - hence, no doubt 'horning' in his preface he refers to his shock and surprise at discovering his wife waltzing with a huge "hussar-looking gentleman". He describes how with Mrs. Hornem's hand on his shoulder.. *they walked about a minute, and then at it again, like two cock-chafers spitted on the same bodkin.*

The ambivalence of this posture is indicated in the *volses of lewd Buylan*, for innocence, (p. 435) which not only juxtaposes innocence and lewdness but, one can assume, Lord Byron as the speaker supposedly scandalized by a lascivious foreign dance and that most famed suitor, Blazes Boylan. It is therefore probably no accident that Jaun in *Finnegans Wake* warns against

That alltoocommon fagbutt habit of frequenting and chumming together with the braces of couples in Mr Tunnelly's hallways (smash it) wriggling with lowcussness and cockchafers and vamps and rodants, with the end to commit acts of interstipital indecency (p. 435-6)

The references grow even denser with the introduction of the character of Thomas Moore, in which Joyce takes on Byron's poem on Thomas Moore and the poet Byron drinks a double health to the author of *Moore's Melodies*, several of whose poems are also involved in this invocation.

Gulp a bulper at parting and the moore involved in passing: Gulp a bulper at parting and the moore the melodiest! Farewell but whenever (p. 468)

Joyce also refers to his *pill-grimace of Childe Horrid* (p. 423) mentions the *oils of grease* and remembers the destruction of Sennacherib when *the osirian cumb dumb like the whalf on the fiord*.

There are numerous references to Byron as outlaw and wanderer throughout Joyce's oeuvre. Corsairs and giaours appear regularly under different guises and spellings. On one occasion the corsair is associated with Barbary pirates, with Berbers and with wolves. The word corsair of course can be read as "coarse hair" and it generates a number of hairy contexts and hairy puns. Robert Gleckner claims that "Horrid Hairwire" (p. 169) includes Childe Harold and by virtue of the pun "Harold Coarsehair". He finds that the horrid Harold is also, "bristling, rough, shaggy" in the older Latinate sense of the word.

Then in keeping with the tone of *Ulysses*, Joyce creates in *Finnegans Wake* a compound called "jewr" which includes giaour or Christian and Jew and so combines two archetypal wanderers and outsiders.

This theme involves HCE or *Here Comes Everybody* or *Haveth Childers Everywhere* as guilty offender, Shem as writer which has the homonym shame, Joyce himself, and Byron. Byron also bore a badge of shame as an outcast, and Joyce refers to this shame as "lordbeeron brow" (p. 563). Also, in *Finnegans Wake* Joyce alludes to Byron's supposed incestuous relations with Augusta: *Like Boyrun to sibster* (p. 465).

Byron knew even more than Joyce the depths of despair, as he is an outcast, though not entirely voluntarily, by virtue of the scandal surrounding his supposed sexual relationship with his half sister Augusta. Joyce also chose exile, and though initially there was scandal attached to the fact that he was unmarried to Nora Barnacle, he was fortunate in a life long relationship with her, culminating in marriage. Joyce lived to be just sixty, while Byron died at the relatively young age of thirty-six, at a point when his life as amatory explorer had become tedious to him, until his relationship with Teresa Guiccioli – but to the end, he had the need to seek the heroic cause.

The portrait of Shem in *Finnegans Wake* gives us a multilayered view of how Joyce saw himself, and presents a view of the artist which no longer claims the role of indifferently paring his fingernails. Shem, we are told,

used to stipple endlessly inartistic portraits of himself (p.182)

while his creator Joyce took on protean personalities of Here Comes Everybody.

However, he retained his view of the world in Byronic fashion as a projection of himself and his encounters.

On this road to mature self development his self image progresses from his narcissistic viewing of himself in the mirror as a possible Byron to a fully fledged artistic persona. When it came to artistic exemplar, Byron was always on Joyce's mind, in keeping with the fact he had known his predecessor's poetry from his earliest days.

In later life, Byron provided further texts for the misunderstood artist. Responding to a review of *Ecce Puer* (perhaps one of his best poems) Joyce writes of "One English reviewer – probably a Scotch bard after office hours" (Letters I, p. 336).

In another letter (Letters, I, p. 231) he remarks of an article by Louis Gillet "it will act like the Quarterly, savage and tartarly"- the reference is to the short verse which reflects on the death of Keats (who, as Byron expressed it in *Don Juan*) had allowed himself to be "snuffed out by an article".

During the time he was writing *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce was also trying to write the libretto of an opera when he tries to get Byron's work *Cain* to be sung by the Irish tenor Sullivan- a much admired friend - and to be produced on the stage. The text which he chose was Byron's *Cain* which he sent to the composer George Antheil (who lived above Sylvia Beach's bookshop in Paris) in the belief that it would make the basis of a fine libretto. (Letters, I, p. 292) Antheil remarked that the second act could not be sung and Joyce agreed that he would have to provide "some kind of figured intermezzo". (Letters, I, p. 293) But the first and third acts, if cut heavily, were capable of 'great stage effect'. Joyce then proposed a second tenor for Abel, a baritone for Lucifer and a bass for Adam but he is puzzled by the Angel of the Lord and suggests jokingly: "Perhaps you could borrow the loudspeaker they have in Rouen station".

Some months later he announces that he has found a male soprano for the part, and that he has completed his adaptation of Act One. He tells Antheil that this is "the great opportunity of your career as composer. A magnificent subject never treated before in opera, the work and name of a great poet and the most remarkable operatic voice in the world of our time". (Letters, I, p. 296) However, this was not enough to convince Antheil who suggested that Joyce should write the libretto himself. Joyce protested that he would never 'have the bad manners to rewrite the text of a great English poet' and that he was "quite content to go down to posterity as a scissors and paste man".

Antheil was so reluctant that Joyce threatened to hand the project over to Stravinsky (Letters, III, p. 209). However, he didn't do this but tried to involve another composer, Othmar Schoeck, but finally he was unable to persuade him either.

Hope it is clear from the foregoing that I have shown that Byron was a poet who stayed with Joyce all his days, from his very first compositions as a schoolboy to when as an old and ailing man, he wanted the works of Byron to be cast into operatic form and be better known and loved. Byron as precursor was with him even in his last days in Paris. One evening at dinner, he presented his secretary, Paul Leon, with a copy of Byron's *Don Juan*. Paul Leon was so devoted to Joyce that he delayed leaving Paris and ended up in the hands of his captors in a concentration camp, after Joyce's death.

It seems that Joyce was also reading *Don Juan* at the end of his life as his last letters contain at least two quotations from the poem.

That Joyce in spite of an overwhelming appetite for novelty and curiosity retained a faithful heart is evident in his life and his admiration of Byron - the index of two great poets who were separated by a century, by an ages old antipathy to their quest, but who found an answering echo in their common vocation as artists and wanderers, who would not be part of the mob and who risked all - even their very souls - for the sake of being true to the music of their hearts. That they hear each other sigh if only in the minds of their readers is beyond question. The wind that rustled Joyce's pages was that of the free spirited imagination which was Byron's legacy to the modern world.

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