Byron and the Forms of Thought

Anthony Howe

Published by Liverpool University Press

Howe, Anthony. 
Byron and the Forms of Thought. 
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/72705.

⇒ For additional information about this book 
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/72705
Coda: ‘In short’

In short, I deny nothing, but doubt everything’ (BLJ, ii, 136)

The first two – easily ignored – words here are important. To understand Byron as a thinker we need to pay close attention not just to his direct philosophical claims, but to the self-conscious forming of his articulations. ‘In short’ is more than throat clearing because it acknowledges the fragmentary relation of the utterance to the eternity of thought in which it participates. Something of this is also recognized in the form of the claim itself which acknowledges the intellectual force of scepticism but also the possibilities that attend scepticism’s self-cancellation. Doubt is an encompassing inevitability for the thoughtful life, yet its very thoroughness offers to conjure us away from its apparent entrapment. This moment, in which for Byron philosophy (‘she too much rejects’) and truth part ways, is, as this book has argued, the opening act of Byronic poetics. Writing, for Byron, whether prose literary criticism or visionary poetry, must understand its own compacted provisionality in the face of what it cannot hope to capture. What is written is only a miniature or outline or sketch of what writing acknowledges. This shortfall is refigured as hope in the person of a reader who, during Byron’s post-John Murray years, is both invested in and mistrusted to an unprecedented extent. Where poetic agency in these terms is seen to be misunderstood or misappropriated, Byron turns the logic of vision to the purposes of satire. ‘Lake School’ sublimity is for Byron a mock-up, something claimed by the author rather than offered to the reader. It misconstrues the sublime by failing to reach a poetics of the concrete. ‘Cant Poetical’ and ‘Cant Political’ being closely linked for Byron, the problem is reformulated, in the siege cantos of Don Juan and elsewhere, as one of political dishonesty. The corrupt historian’s failure to acknowledge the relation between narrative and world is an act of moral violence that is also a desecration of the poet’s obligation to see.

Across these negotiations, the visionary tradition permeates and is
transmuted through Byron’s thought, connecting up the poet’s Romantic
durability with his energies as a literary critic, satirist and political
commentator. This unprecious, immediate and mobile sense of vision is
not, as is sometimes thought, a less serious version of what we get from
Byron’s major contemporaries. It is, rather, the evolution of a Romantic
paradigm seen as already drying up into its own language. It is not
like Blake’s sense of vision because it is happy to see in concrete and
pugnaciously ironic ways. Byron sees, in other words, that looking at
real things directly and being ironic about them can be visionary when
this looking also glimpses that which evades words and thus makes
irony real.

In the tradition of several critics quoted in it, this book makes a
case for taking Byron seriously as a thinker. In doing this it tries to
avoid reading the poetry into the service of a single philosophical,
historical or political position. Of course, it would not be desirable to
do this entirely because Byron does make commitments, he does stand
for things and believe things directly; but we need to understand that
these commitments are altered in our denaturing of them (our removal
of them from poetry). Our understanding of Byron’s poetry, I think,
continues to suffer from the claims upon it, especially where those
claims are generated by a careerist or market-led need for sheer and clear
novelty. Byron already exists – we don’t need a new one. The originality
business, where it involves rewriting Byron as a philosopher, involves an
especial misapprehension because Byron, again as this book has argued,
self-consciously inhabits a tradition (one he found bits of in Horace,
Montaigne, Pope, Johnson, Shelley and others) that identifies the unique
articulations of poetry as irreducibly distinct from the narratives of
argument. The reading of Byron’s poetry, it follows from this, becomes
a primary mode of critical argumentation because it is only in accepting
Byron’s invitation to think, read and imagine that we can comprehend
the depth of his (philosophical, political, historical-ongoing) legacy. We
must partake as well as behold, otherwise we have not understood what
Byron is urging us (not) to do.

The visionary poet is in flux across Byron’s works; there is the wise,
embattled seer of The Prophecy of Dante; there is the naïve, frustrated
rationalist of Cain; there is also the serio-comic narrator of Don Juan
who presides over an encounter between a newly theorized sublime and
a spectacularly concretized and politically aware poetic practice. Things
look different again in The Vision of Judgment, which, as Byron’s most
self-contained and precise satire, seems far from dependent upon or even
interested in the beyondness its title ironically invokes. Its brilliance depends precisely upon the tangible economy of its post-Miltonic inventiveness. Thus the angel tasked with recording human ‘vice’ and ‘woe’ who ‘had stripp’d off both his wings in quills, / And yet was in arrear of human ills’ (*The Vision of Judgment*, 3) calls for no visionary anxiety concerning the translation of divine into human. Such matters seem gloriously irrelevant to a sharply comic poetry that appears to have other priorities than ministering to the beyond:

Saint Peter sat by the celestial gate,
   And nodded o’er his keys; when, lo! there came
A wond’rous noise he had not heard of late—
   A rushing sound of wind, and stream, and flame;
In short, a roar of things extremely great,
   Which would have made aught save a saint exclaim;
But he, with first a start and then a wink,
   Said, ‘There’s another star gone out, I think!’

(*The Vision of Judgment*, 16)

What is unseen here, it would seem, is not some inexpressible sublime, but the cretinous bluster surrounding the death of George III back on earth. Byron’s ‘In short’ is not in any obvious way about drawing our attention to the provisionality of the written; it appears to signal, rather, a form of ironic impatience to get on with being (so impressively) in control.

The profound problems situated so humbly and movingly by Milton’s Raphael are turned, here in the description of another archangel (Michael), to the purposes of immediate satire:

And from the gate thrown open issued beaming
   A beautiful and mighty Thing of Light,
Radiant with glory, like a banner streaming
   Victorious from some world-o’erthrowing fight:
My poor comparisons must needs be teeming
   With earthly likenesses, for here the night
Of clay obscures our best conceptions, saving
Johanna Southcote, or Bob Southey raving.

(*The Vision of Judgment*, 28)

Byron’s poet is a long way from the existential angst of Cain. He glories in his acknowledged darkness and mire. He delights in getting his hands dirty, in moulding and working the clay he has been bequeathed into some of his filthiest jokes, notably this one about those ‘damn’d souls’ who are allowed to ‘range freely’:
They are proud of this—as very well they may,
   It being a sort of knighthood, or gilt key
Stuck in their loins; or like to an ‘entrée’
   Up the back stairs, or such free-masonry:
I borrow my comparisons from clay,
   Being clay myself. Let not those spirits be
Offended with such base low likenesses;
We know their posts are nobler far than these.

(The Vision of Judgment, 54)

Poet and language, rather than stumbling into the frustrating misalignment of the ‘voiceless thought’, become one down in the dirt. Yet clay is not just dirt; it is also the material of origin. If we are down in the mire then we are at least alive and real and able to create amidst a semantic plurality that resists the incursions of cant. Poetry is thus not just a way of attacking people but a way of seeing and thinking and recreating our lives. It tells us first that language can kill us and second that language can save us. More important than Byron’s being disgusting here, then, are the terms of his disgust. It is Byron who is offended in The Vision of Judgment – by Southey – and not just because of the latter’s suggestions about his personal life. Southey disgusts Byron because he represents bad poetry with no distinctness or outline but also no sense of the ethics of the fragment; his writing only hawks the deceits of those who would have us for their own ends. The bad poet can’t be brief, even ironically. He can’t sketch or outline things because he only deals, in full, in what he has been told to say. He is ‘multo-scribbling Southey’ (The Vision of Judgment, 65), all plenitude, no responsibility.

Southey’s sham celebration of George III, which is of a piece with the monarch’s funereal opulence, is a spectacular performance of cant:

He died! – his death made no great stir on earth;
   His burial made some pomp; there was profusion
Of velvet, gilding, brass, and no great dearth
   Of aught but tears—save those shed by collusion;
For these things may be bought at their true worth:
   Of elegy there was the due infusion—
Bought also; and the torches, cloaks and banners,
Heralds, and relics of old Gothic manners,

Form’d a sepulchral melo-drame. Of all
   The fools who flock’d to swell or see the show,
Who cared about the corpse? The funeral
   Made the attraction, and the black the woe.
There throb’d not there a thought which pierced the pall;  
And when the gorgeous coffin was laid low,  
It seemed the mockery of hell to fold  
The rottenness of eighty years in gold.  

(\textit{The Vision of Judgment}, 9–10)

Amidst this groundless ‘profusion’, everything is misunderstood; the 
mystery of death is lost to the spectacle of burial as the honesty of poetry 
is lost to the falseness of purchased ‘elegy’. There is no voice here to 
pierce the ‘pall’ of moral idiocy that hangs over the scene like the rich 
tapestries covering the coffin.

Byron wished that Wordsworth would change his lakes for ocean. 
This was not, of course, a desire for him to write more, only for him to 
think more about the contending claims of rhetoric and form as means 
of addressing the sublime. As well as a moral and political failure, the 
attempt to write or think boundlessness (Byron thinks about what this 
might mean in \textit{Cain}) is a failure of poetics. Southey’s eternal productivity 
is a silly case in point:

\begin{quote}
He said—(I only give the heads)—he said,  
He meant no harm in scribbling; ’twas his way  
Upon all topics; ’twas, besides, his bread,  
Of which he butter’d both sides; ’twould delay  
Too long the assembly (he was pleased to dread)  
And take up rather more time than a day,  
To name his works—he would but cite a few—  
Wat Tyler—Rhymes on Blenheim—Waterloo.
\end{quote}

He had written praises of a regicide;  
He had written praises of all kings whatever;  
He had written for republics far and wide,  
And then against them bitterer than ever;  
For pantisocracy he once had cried  
Aloud, a scheme less moral than ’twas clever;  
Then grew a hearty antijacobin—  
Had turn’d his coat—and would have turn’d his skin.

He had sung against all battles, and again  
In their high praise and glory: he had called  
Reviewing ‘the ungentle craft,’ and then  
Become as base a critic as ere crawl’d—  
Fed, paid, and pamper’d by the very men  
By whom his muse and morals had been maul’d:
He had written much blank verse, and blanker prose, 
And more of both than any body knows. 

(The Vision of Judgment, 96–8)

Here are two acts of summary. Southey’s – ‘he would but cite a few’ – which serves only to betray the moral chaos over which he presides. His unwittingly honest selection from his own bulging oeuvre speaks only of self-interest and political complicity. There is no craft or integrity to his brevity. This is being ‘visionary’ in the way Johanna Southcote is visionary in that everything is present and complete and interpreted in its haziness, but also meaningless because it doesn’t stand for anything. Byron hates this and returns to it (recall Don Juan, iii, 95) because it travesties the dynamics of vision he establishes in the textures and forms of his own best work. His own speaking in short – ‘I only give the heads’ – is thus by contrast a gesture of ironic control generated in rigorous, undepressed and unfinished acceptance. Byron, that is, draws attention to the provisionality of his critique, but then challenges any sense of restriction in the satirical plenitude that follows.

Where Southey’s proliferations constitute a travesty of the beyond, the Byronic ‘in short’ stands in an honest relation to what the poet is tasked with outlining. In not being an argument, but in trusting to the semantics of its own forms, the poem becomes about the possibility of real thought:

And this is not a theologic tract,  
To prove with Hebrew and with Arabic  
If Job be allegory or a fact,  
But a true narrative; and thus I pick  
From out the whole but such and such an act  
As sets aside the slightest thought of trick.  
’Tis every tittle true, beyond suspicion,  
And accurate as any other vision. 

(The Vision of Judgment, 34)

Byron is not a philosopher; he can spin off ‘tract’ and fact’ as a rhyme, but he cannot obey the imperatives that such words deploy over the world. His interest is in a different kind of truth-telling, one that comes through the selective processes that define his role as narrative poet. No vision can be ‘accurate’, but visions can occupy and emerge from a spirit of truthfulness that, as far as Byron was concerned, only the forms of literature can host and preserve. The poet must acknowledge the limits of poetic facture. He must understand that he can only pick things out
from ‘the whole’ to make something that is no more – or less – true than ‘any other vision’. When this is done, however, he will find himself at liberty in a real and meaningful sense. He will have understood and helped his readers to understand something about the world and the lies it tells us about thought. In so doing he might cajole us into taking a second look.