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Life and contexts

Introduction

This part attempts to sketch Byron's life as a *writer* and show how his poetry was produced through interaction with specific literary cultures in Regency London and abroad. The circumstances of the composition of the verse will be mentioned here briefly but the major poetry will be discussed in more detail in Part 2 and different critical views of it will be indicated in Part 3. Byron's adventurous life has inspired many biographies, discussed in the 'Further Reading' at the end of this section. Reference will be made to these in parenthesis and also to *Byron's Letters and Journals* (*BLJ*) and to accounts of the poet written by his contemporaries.

Childhood and family background, 1788–1805

George Gordon Byron was born on 22 January 1788 at 16 Holles Street, Cavendish Square, London, the son of aristocratic parents: Captain 'Mad Jack' Byron and Catherine (née Gordon). His father was a handsome English fortune hunter who soon ran through his plain Scottish wife's money, and the marriage disintegrated not long after the birth of the baby. Mrs Byron returned to Scotland and took lodgings in Aberdeen in 1789, then in 1791 rented an apartment at 64 Broad Street. Captain Byron died in the same year and she was left to bring up her son alone on only 150 pounds a year. At this time 500 pounds per annum was considered the minimum income for the gentry, and a nobleman needed 10,000 pounds per annum to participate fully in the social season, so this modest lower-middle-class standard of life was considered akin to poverty by an aristocrat such as Catherine Byron.

George had been born lame, perhaps with a club foot, and suffered throughout his childhood both from the stares and taunts of others and from the painful contraptions and treatments ordered by doctors who tried to straighten out his foot. He grew to be handsome like his father yet self-conscious about his disability and also about his tendency to put on weight because of the inability to take much exercise. Yet he loved swimming and riding and also cricket, where another boy ran when he batted. He was spoilt by his mother and did not take kindly to

teachers' discipline but was an omnivorous reader with a retentive memory. He would later look back nostalgically on his Scottish childhood and occasional visits to the wild countryside of the Highlands (see Works, **p. 32**). In 1794 he had begun his education at Aberdeen Grammar School, but when the news came in May 1798 that, through a succession of unforeseen deaths, he had inherited the Byron title and family estates, he and his mother moved to England. When they arrived at Newstead Abbey, near Nottingham, they found the mansion to be near derelict but were nevertheless enchanted with the scene of picturesque desolation, which would later inspire Byron's earliest verses.

On both his Scottish mother's side (the Gordons of Gight) and his English father's (the Byrons of Lancashire and Nottinghamshire), the noble families from which Byron was descended had lost their wealth and importance. This was largely as a result of their own profligacy, but also because power was beginning to pass from the landed aristocracy to the mercantile classes in the nineteenth century (Rowse 1978: 117–52). His mother was a fervent Whig and supporter of the French Revolution, and the young Byron inherited both her aristocratic pride (made hypersensitive by their impoverishment) and the radical politics which seemed so incompatible with it.

Byron's social status is an important clue to his interest in creating characters who are proud outsiders or out of joint with the times. Because of his rapid transformation from middle-class schoolboy to becoming the sixth Baron Byron of Rochdale, Mrs Byron and her young son were both extremely sensitive about their rank. This was exacerbated by the fact that in the eighteenth century the Byrons had become a disreputable family and were, anyway, only on the lower rungs of the nobility, so young George would not have been welcome in the very highest circles had he not made a name for himself in literature. His income from the estate was inadequate to pay for the necessary repairs to the mansion and to fund an aristocratic lifestyle, so Newstead Abbey had to be rented out. His mother stinted herself to fund Byron's education at Harrow (1801–5) and then at Cambridge (1805–7) in accordance with his rank. But for all his early life, until Newstead was sold and the purchase money for the mansion finally paid in February 1819, Byron was plagued by lack of ready money and amassed large debts by attempting nevertheless to live in a suitably lordly style (Beckett 2001: 126–28). He was also uneasy for a long time as to whether a nobleman was lowering himself by engaging in the trade of publishing.

Religious heritage

Byron had been brought up by his mother and tutors in Scotland as a Presbyterian and knew his Bible inside out, particularly the Old Testament (Looper 1978: 287–95). Scots Presbyterians, like English Dissenters, identified with the Jews, having been persecuted and deprived of full civil rights in the historical past because of their religious beliefs. Byron would grow up to be critical of the way the Tory government made loyalty to the Anglican church and monarchy the cornerstone of British patriotism at this time of the Napoleonic wars, when Britain was at war with France. He advocated religious toleration instead. When he became sceptical about orthodox religion as a young man, Byron would

vehemently reject the Calvinist belief in which he had been educated: that only a few, 'the Elect', were predestined by God to be saved, while the majority were consigned to eternal damnation regardless of their good works. Nevertheless, he could not entirely shake off the pessimism and fatalism which were the heritage of this austere theology.

This was exacerbated by his belief in aristocratic 'blood': he knew that his own father had been a dissolute rake, and his great uncle another, who had also killed his neighbour in a duel in dubious circumstances and was tried by the House of Lords and disgraced. When his volatile mother shouted at her headstrong son, she reproached him for following in the footsteps of the Byrons. She was superstitious and probably also saw his club foot as a taint. The lame boy was a prodigious reader (Moore 1860: 20) and particularly fascinated with Gothic fiction such as William Beckford's *Vathek* (1786), John Moore's *Zeluco* (1789) and Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), in each of which the sinful protagonist was drawn on by fate to commit evil deeds. He would later find decadent aristocrats portrayed as guilt-ridden villains in the Gothic novels of Mrs Radcliffe and Walter Scott's poetry, and the younger sons of minor aristocrats turning to banditry in the *Sturm und Drang* plays of Friedrich Schiller and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. When he became a writer himself, he explored his own ambivalence towards aristocracy through elaborating and combining the characteristics of such anti-heroes, resulting in the creation of a succession of noble outlaws (see Works, **p. 51**). Critics have labelled this character 'the Byronic hero', not because it originated with Byron, but because he created a memorable series of such protagonists and many readers imagined they had something of the poet's own personality (Thorslev 1962).

Education and reading, 1794–1807

It was clear that Byron could not rely on an empty title to provide him with a place in the world. He needed to make his own way through merit. In Scotland, he had attended a day school and then the Grammar School at Aberdeen, but on inheriting the title he was sent to Dr Glennie's school at Dulwich to prepare him for entrance to public school. In 1803 his mother rented out Newstead and took a house at nearby Southwell, economising in order to provide him with the requisite upper-class education at Harrow and then Cambridge. Byron took some time to settle at Harrow, but eventually made close friends there and looked back nostalgically at his schooldays in his early verse (see Works, **p. 31**).

Byron was judged an indifferent scholar in the classics, then central to the curriculum at public school and university, by his chosen biographer; but the nineteen-year-old made a memorandum of an astonishing number of books he claimed to have read for his own amusement: mainly histories, biographies and literature in English and French (Moore 1860: 29, 46). History was then dominated by accounts of heroic men of action shaping the destiny of nations. Such a role seemed barred to a youth with a club foot. But a writer was an equally masterful figure: the French revolution had demonstrated the intoxicating power of ideas, disseminated in print, to inspire the populace to action.

The public schools of Byron's day, which trained their upper-class pupils to become leaders of their country, specialised in oratory. Many boys grew up to

become statesmen, and the future prime minister, Robert Peel, was Byron's classmate. Byron himself would be entitled to take his seat in the House of Lords at the age of twenty-one, and, though it was less important politically than the House of Commons, it was still a vital part of government. In fact, his mother cherished ambitions that he would become a political leader. Byron performed in three Harrow Speech Days, where the best boys gave recitations to an audience of their friends and relations. He chose passages from Virgil's *Aeneid*, Edward Young's *The Revenge* and Shakespeare's *King Lear* respectively. The scholar Paul Elledge has argued that Byron's self-creation in literature and in life began here, with 'a testing and accumulation of roles, a defining of identity through performance' (Elledge 2000: 3).

Whilst at Cambridge from October 1805 to December 1807, Byron did not spend much time studying, but enjoyed himself and got into debt. He indulged his love of animals and rebellious sense of humour. For example, when the college authorities objected to his keeping a dog, he obtained a bear instead and had it entered for a masters degree. He made some close friends, some of whom he kept for life. These included John Cam Hobhouse, Charles Skinner Matthews and Scrope Berdmore Davies, who were all witty liberal sceptics who shared his passions for literature and politics. Matthews, Hobhouse and Byron were also drawn together through a common gay identity at a time when homosexual acts were a capital offence and there was a rabidly homophobic climate (Crompton 1985: 129). Byron was bisexual: as a schoolboy and student, he experienced intense romantic friendships with boys, such as that for the Cambridge chorister, John Edleston (see Works, **p. 37**).

Byron was an avid theatre-goer and spent much of the time he should have been studying going to plays in London. In 1806 he also took the lead in organising and starring in two amateur theatrical productions at home in Southwell. For Byron the idea of making a speech to an audience and moving the listeners to action would perhaps always be even more important than the power of the printed word to transcend the historical moment of transmission. His love of theatre, his training in oratory and the examples, in the school and university syllabi, of classical rhetoricians who sought to persuade and move their hearers imbued him with a concept of poetry as performance.

Early writing

This performative aspect of Byron explains why he produced so much 'occasional' verse: short poems written on specific occasions to particular people. Through verse he attempted to seduce women, argue with friends, ridicule enemies or set down his response to events of the day. He passed his poems around in manuscript and literary friends would respond in kind. This began when he was a teenager. It was his interaction with the provincial circle at Southwell that inspired him to pay a local printer at Newark in 1806 to publish a collection of such verse, *Fugitive Pieces*. Second thoughts led him to revise the anthology and entitle it *Poems on Various Occasions* in 1807 (Pratt 1973: 29). The poems were originally meant only for the entertainment of those who recognised themselves or knew the recipients. Most were love poems, some of which

were risqué enough to outrage the local worthies. The furore persuaded the ambitious youth to make great changes when launching the volume in London, now retitled *Hours of Idleness* (1807) and designed for the public at large (see Works, **p. 31** and Criticism, **p. 85**). Byron chose fewer erotic love poems now, concentrating more on melancholy lyrics exploring his innermost and mixed feelings about his ancestry and ruined mansion and regret on leaving behind the camaraderie of schooldays. The lyrics were not especially promising, but they were unusually personal. They were well reviewed on the whole, and a second edition was published in March 1808 as *Poems Original and Translated*.

However, Byron was enraged and humiliated when *Hours of Idleness* was remorselessly mocked in the leading periodical of the day, the *Edinburgh Review*, as the pretentious trifling of a dilettante whose preface had simultaneously attempted to overawe the public with his rank and obtain sympathy on account of his youth. The crusading Whig lawyer Henry Brougham was the anonymous reviewer, though Byron assumed it was the editor, Francis Jeffrey. The attack was the best thing that could have happened, for it galvanised Byron into declaring himself a serious writer with a moral purpose: the stance he now adopted in a withering riposte to the *Edinburgh Review*, a Popeian satire in rhyming couplets entitled *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809), which attacked the *Edinburgh Review* as well as many of the leading contemporary poets of the day for good measure (see Works, **p. 32** and Criticism, **p. 85**). The adoption of the Roman satirist Juvenal as a model also enabled the noble poet to retain a patrician persona in his condemnation of shoddy bourgeois culture. This boisterous and unsubtle poem made Byron's name, going through four editions before Byron suppressed it, for its attack on the Whig periodical eventually proved politically embarrassing for him. In July 1809 he now left England with his friend from Cambridge, J. C. Hobhouse, to make his Grand Tour.

The Grand Tour and the poetry of place

The Grand Tour was the conventional way an aristocrat completed his education, visiting sites associated with classical history, Renaissance art and European culture. Because Europe was ravaged by the Napoleonic wars, the two friends could not take the usual route to Italy to study the great masters. Since 1793 Britain had been at war with republican France, and at this point Napoleon Bonaparte seemed unstoppable in his conquest of Europe. In 1798 he had taken Switzerland, northern Italy and Malta, and in 1804 declared war on Spain and had himself proclaimed an emperor. Byron and Hobhouse were thus not able to travel through France or Italy, so they decided to follow in the steps of the British army who were supporting the Portugese and Spanish insurgents against the French invaders in the Iberian peninsula.

The aim of the two young men was to seek adventure, first by vicarious experience of the Peninsular war. Then they would strike east, into the Ottoman Empire, little known by Westerners, their destination being Turkey itself and also the outlying provinces which today constitute Greece and Albania, where their only British fellow travellers would be the occasional diplomat or military attaché. The Orient had long functioned for British artists as an imaginary realm of luxury,

violence and sensuality (see Criticism, **pp. 111–14**). Byron and Hobhouse intended to find material for travel writing, in subjective poetry and antiquarian prose respectively. Byron's poetry would play a pivotal role in transforming the experience of the aristocratic Grand Tour into an exotic excursion into the cultural Other (Buzard 1993: 114–28) and would be instrumental in popularising travel amongst the middle classes later in the century.

Athens was Byron's and Hobhouse's ultimate destination. For both men were interested in Philhellenism, the idea of Western nineteenth-century intellectuals that the republican ideals of classical Greece could be recuperated by helping the Christian inhabitants of that part of the Ottoman Empire approximating to 'Hellas' to rebel against their Turkish masters and form a new nation-state. Byron would soon discover that the present 'Romaic' (Eastern Orthodox Christians) population of the region had no knowledge of the civilisation of the classical Greeks and certainly no more understanding of the modern concept of a nation-state than their city-state ancestors had done.

But first the friends would sample Orientalism nearer home in the Moorish influence on the Iberian peninsula, for they had taken a last-minute opportunity to depart from Britain on the Lisbon packet. Spain inspired Byron, as would Venice later, as a place where Christian and Islamic culture collided. Byron had been drawn to exotic places through his extensive reading of travel books and he was not the only one. Spain was to become mythologised by other poets such as Robert Southey, Walter Scott and Walter Savage Landor at this time. Spain became the focus of Romantic writing because 'Since the first explorations of the Mediterranean in remote times, this land was identified with the extreme Western limits of the known world, the *Finis Terrae*, the end of the organised cosmos and a place where order and disorder mixed' (Saglia 1996: 45). British readers were particularly fascinated with evocations of the peninsula at this moment because it was the scene of the protracted campaign which would be the turning point of the war with Napoleon. Byron and Hobhouse donned British military uniforms to identify themselves with the army, whose route they were following. They visited Sintra in Portugal and Cadiz and Seville in Spain before sailing to Gibraltar, arriving on 4 August 1809. From thence they sailed to Malta where Byron had a love affair with Mrs Spencer Smith, whom he would address as 'Florence' in a series of lyrics. These would be published in 1812 with Cantos I and II of the long topographical poem inspired by his travels and written in Spenserian stanzas, later entitled *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

On 19 September Byron and Hobhouse departed for Patras in Greece. They journeyed over wild mountainous terrain to Janina in the Epirus, to visit the court of Ali Pasha, the cunning and unscrupulous Albanian governor who was just then disposed to welcome noble British visitors as he was courting British support against the French in his bid for control of the Ionian islands. Though supposedly governing his fiefdom under the suzerainty of the Sultan, Ali Pasha displayed near independence. He had risen from little more than a bandit leader and, having subdued the inhabitants of the region and even fierce tribes such as the Suliotes by ruthless warfare, ruled as a despot over the Epirus while his son controlled the Morea. On 5 October Byron and Hobhouse arrived at Janina, but the Pasha was away, so they travelled on an arduous journey through even more remote regions to Tepelene, where they arrived on 19 October. This was the high spot of their

tour, surveying the unforgettable scene of the picturesque Albanian troops garrisoned before the Pasha's exotic palace and mosque, before being treated to a royal welcome from the romantic warrior leader himself.

By 31 October 1809 Byron had begun the first draft of the first canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. The poem would make his name throughout Europe and in his lifetime was considered his best work. The protagonist was a world-weary young aristocrat weighed down by unexplained sorrow and guilt, who travels to relieve his *ennui*, meditating on the passing away of ancient heroism as he contemplates the ruins of past civilisations. The narrator gave way increasingly to lyric introspection of his own as the poem progressed, for Harold was too flat a character to express a great range of feeling. In later installments of the poem, the narrator would virtually abandon his protagonist, as his own volatile subjectivity coloured the reader's view of the landscapes. But even in the first two cantos, this poem was startlingly personal and intimate.

Harold's journey east in Cantos I and II took him deep into the fierce warrior culture of Albania which Byron depicted as stirringly picturesque. The poet would, from henceforth, set many of his romantic verse tales and even later comic episodes in *Don Juan* in the Ottoman Empire. His portrayals of tyrannical pashas and of the Greek brigands or *klephtes* who rebelled against Turkish rule were inspired by his time at Ali Pasha's court, and Byron's poetic fictionalisation of his travels can be usefully compared with the long, vivid letters he wrote to his mother at this time (*BLJ* Vol. I, 223–4, 226–31, 234–6, 242–3, 249–52; Vol. II, 3–4, 8–9, 17–18, 34–5).

The friends now travelled back to Prevesa by way of Ali Pasha's inadequately skippered armed vessel (which nearly sank) and then, accompanied by a contingent of his soldiers, they made their way to Missolonghi in Greece. As aristocrats, they travelled in style, so were in great danger of robbers in this wild country. But every night the picturesque Albanian soldiers sang and danced around their campfires, and Byron took phonetic transcripts of their war songs and ballads so that he could have them translated and incorporate them into his poem, as well as try his hand at imitating them. From Missolonghi, having crossed the gulf to Patras, they began the long trek to Athens which they would not reach till Christmas Day 1809. On their way, the young men saw Mount Parnassus, visited Delphi and many ancient sites their classical education had invested with significance. But they also heard more folksongs and patriotic war songs sung by modern Greeks. These included 'Greeks Arise' by Constantine Rhiga, who had founded a nationalist society, the Hetairia, and, as a result, had been executed by the Turks in 1798. Byron and Hobhouse's young host at Vostitza, Andreas Londos, though he was the governor of the town under the Turks, recited 'Greeks Arise' with tears streaming down his face. In time to come, Londos would be a leader of the Greek war of Independence, where Byron was to lose his life. These experiences were to be crucial in shaping the sort of Philhellenist verse Byron was writing at this time. Philhellenism had a long literary pedigree. But Byron's work would be different from that of most of his predecessors in that he conveyed his personal experience of the landscape and of the contemporary culture, rather than antiquarianism and book knowledge of classical civilisation.

Athens then was the size of a large village. Its population of 10,000 Greeks, Albanians and Turks was ruled by a *waiwode* or governor appointed by the

disdar aga, an officer of the Sultan whom Byron later contemptuously described in the notes to *The Giaour* (1813) as 'the slave of the seraglio and guardian of the women . . . a pandar and eunuch'. However, as long as they paid their tribute, the Greeks were leniently treated, though, as Christians, they were second-class citizens. Their own aristocracy and bishops enjoyed the power to collect the taxes for the Turks and enriched themselves in the process.

Byron and Hobhouse had to obtain Turkish permission to visit the Acropolis which was being used as an arsenal and munitions store (the Parthenon would be greatly damaged by an explosion in 1827). They were accompanied by the Neapolitan painter Giovanni Battista Lusieri who was employed by Lord Elgin to make drawings of the Acropolis and then to dismantle and ship its famous sculptures to England. (They are, despite recent calls for their return from the Greek government, still displayed in the British Museum, which paid 37,000 pounds for them in 1816.) Byron became very indignant at this arrogant plundering of the Greek heritage, though supporters of Elgin argued that the British would at least preserve the marbles for posterity. He added an attack on Elgin to the second canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* whose first draft was finished on 28 March 1810. A year later he would compose a brief satire, *The Curse of Minerva* on the same subject.

The friends visited Sunium and Marathon and in March 1810 they sailed to Smyrna in Asia Minor, from where they travelled to Ephesus and the plains of Troy. In May Byron swam the Hellespont, in imitation of the Roman poet Ovid's legendary lover Leander, who did this nightly to meet his mistress. The lame poet boasted about this feat interminably in all his letters home, though he had to admit that, unlike Leander, he had only swum one way and hadn't made love either! On 13 May the friends visited Constantinople and saw gruesome evidence of Turkish despotism such as the heads of executed criminals displayed at the gates of the Seraglio. They attended an audience with Sultan Mahmoud II on 10 July, but left the city a few days later, when Hobhouse returned to England.

Byron stayed on in Athens for another nine months, lodging in a Franciscan monastery. He swam every day at Piraeus and one day witnessed a procession carrying a Turkish girl sewn up in a sack, who was to be ceremonially drowned in the sea as a punishment for illicit sex. Byron intervened but had to draw his pistol to stop the proceedings, and then to bribe the officials to procure her escape to Thebes. This horrifying incident was to inspire his verse tale, *The Giaour* (1813) (see Works, **pp. 51–4**). Byron's acquaintance, Thomas Medwin, who posthumously published somewhat unreliable accounts of his conversations with the poet, asserted that Byron had told him the incident was particularly chilling because the punishment was the result of the poet's own attempt to arrange an assignation with her, but there is no proof of this (Lovell 1969: 86–9).

In fact, one of the reasons Byron sojourned so long in the Ottoman Empire was to indulge his taste for young boys and to experience a culture that was tolerant of this. England, by contrast, had the most homophobic and intolerant laws in Europe or the USA, and hanged sixty men for sodomy in the first three decades of the nineteenth century and twenty more under its naval regulations (Crompton 1985: 17–18). When Byron returned to England in the summer of 1811, his emotional life came to a crisis. His mother died suddenly before he arrived at Southwell; then, two days later, he learned that his homosexual friend Matthews

had been found drowned at Cambridge. Within the next two months, Byron discovered that John Edleston, the young Cambridge chorister with whom he had had an intense but almost certainly Platonic romantic friendship had also died. Byron wrote a series of elegiac lyrics in his grief for the latter, but when some of these were published with *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, their careful omission of personal pronouns and the use of a feminine name 'Thyrza' for the addressee misled readers speculating on their biographical source (see Criticism, **pp. 115–16**).

Politics

It was with some trepidation that Byron rejoined the literary world of London, not least because he had to make peace with many angry poets who had been mercilessly mocked in his satire *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. The Irish lyricist Thomas Moore even challenged him to a duel, but, after an exchange of posturing letters, the two met and became the best of friends. At this time, Byron also made the acquaintance of two older poets whose work he admired: Samuel Rogers and Thomas Campbell. All three literary men were Whigs and denizens of Holland House, where Lord Holland masterminded party affairs. Byron had joined the Cambridge Whig club in 1807, and, when he came of age in January 1809, he had taken his seat in the House of Lords and intended to take an active part in opposition politics. At first the Whig party was not sure what to make of him, as it had been assumed that the author of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, whose main target was the Whiggish *Edinburgh Review*, had been a Tory. But after attending the house several times to listen to debates, on 27 February 1812 Byron made his maiden speech: a blistering attack on the Tory administration's proposal to make frame-breaking or 'Luddism' a capital felony.

As a Nottinghamshire landowner, Byron was intensely aware of the exploitation of the workers in the Midlands hosiery trade, their attempts to organise themselves to fight shoddy mass production that threw them out of work and their grinding poverty. 'Luddism', or the smashing of machinery designed to circumvent the need for skilled craftsmanship by manufacturing inferior cut-price goods for export, was at its height in 1811–12, as well as constitutional protest, in the form of petitioning parliament to pass a bill regulating the industry. Thousands of soldiers were prevented from swelling the army engaged in the Peninsular war, kept at home to maintain order in the riot-torn Midlands (Thompson 1963: 604–59).

Byron's speech was a passionate powerful piece of oratory in support of the workers which can only be described as 'radical' rather than Whig. It must have come as quite a shock to his drowsy audience of mediocre placemen that a nobleman could denounce the catastrophic effect on the poor of unfettered capitalism and reject the death penalty as the knee-jerk reaction of an unfeeling oligarchy. It certainly disconcerted Lord Holland and the Whigs, who planned merely to minimally amend the Government's proposals. Byron reminded his upper-class audience: 'It is the Mob, that labour in your fields & serve in your houses, that man your navy & recruit your army, that have enabled you to defy all the world, & can also defy you, when neglect & calamity have driven them to despair' (*CMP* 25).

Byron next spoke on 21 April 1812 when, according to Hobhouse, he kept the Upper House 'in a roar of laughter', in a witty speech advocating extending full civil rights to Roman Catholics. On 1 June 1813 he presented the tireless campaigner Major Cartwright's petition in support of parliamentary reform.

Byron's poetry has traditionally been considered as part of the radical tradition (Foot 1988). His verse certainly inspired young revolutionaries throwing off oppressive regimes throughout nineteenth-century Europe. However, his correspondence shows he was nervous of the new working-class agitators in his own country. Many of his views, it has been argued, were congruent with those of eighteenth-century aristocratic Whigs (Kelsall 1987: 5). Yet Byron was a revolutionary not a reformer, soon becoming bored with what he called 'parliamentary mummeries', for he preferred action to constitutionalism. But this is to anticipate.

The Murray coterie and the marketing of Byron

On 10 March 1812, less than a fortnight after his maiden speech, came the publication of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, by Byron's new publisher, John Murray. This event was enough to eclipse thoughts of his parliamentary career for the time being, for the poem became an overnight sensation (see Works, **pp. 34–7** and Criticism, **p. 85**). In three days, the first edition of 500 copies had sold out and 4,500 copies were sold within six months of publication. Byron became the literary lion of London. For the next four years he reigned supreme, and every poem he published increased his fame. He would in time write two more cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, the poem for which he became renowned throughout Europe, where it was translated into many languages.

He followed up the success of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* with a series of extraordinarily popular adventure tales in verse, set in the Ottoman Empire: *The Giaour* (1813), *The Bride of Abydos* (1813), *The Corsair* (1814) and *Lara* (1814) (see Life and Contexts, **pp. 5–9**). In the early twentieth century, these tales were dismissed by British critics as mere fashionable entertainment. Yet, in Part 3 it will be shown how contemporary cultural historians have rediscovered this conflicted verse, seeing it as the product of a Romantic Orientalist who resolutely opposed imperialism yet who recognised that his own poetry participated in its discourse – by recommending the extension of the values of British liberty over the world (Leask 1993: 16).

Byron's contemporary popularity can hardly be overstated. Six thousand copies of *The Bride of Abydos* were sold in a month, and 10,000 of *The Corsair* on the first day of publication alone. Byron had modelled himself upon, but far surpassed, Walter Scott, whose verse romances in medieval settings had sold in huge numbers. Secular books were a highly priced luxury commodity in the first twenty-five years of the century, and exotic love poetry by a handsome young aristocrat particularly appealed to the aspirational mercantile classes and especially to women readers. The notes to Byron's orientalist poetry emphasised his personal experience of the East, and confessional lyrics included in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, either put in the mouth of the hero or merely added at the end of the volume, encouraged the reader's interest in the poet's own personality

and life story. The word 'commerce' in the eighteenth century meant communication in general; its secondary meaning was trade. But the Romantic poet's intimate relationship with the reader seemingly brought the two meanings into violent collision by making his frankness and self-revelation a selling point instead of a guarantee of disinterested sincerity (Martin 1982: 29; Christensen, 1993: xvii–xxi). John Murray, Byron's entrepreneurial young publisher, with the collusion of the poet himself, marketed the verse by shaping a Byronic image. Engravings adorned many a frontispiece, based on a famous portrait by Phillips, showing the dark-clad curly haired poet's white throat bared in an open-necked shirt. This instantly recognisable image imparted a dashing air of freedom which accorded with the exotic subject matter of the verse and its call for political and sexual emancipation. But because John Murray was a Tory who published the eminently respectable *Quarterly Review*, which had links to the Tory government itself, and because the poet's rank seemed incompatible with radicalism, then a façade of the utmost respectability was maintained.

This meant that from 1812 to 1816 Byron's poetry was favourably reviewed in virtually all the leading periodicals of the day, whether Tory or Whig, whether Evangelical, Nonconformist or Anglican, with only the mildest of censure for its religious skepticism or failure to sufficiently censure immoral characters (Walker 1979: 18). In order for the alliance to succeed, Byron had to work closely with Murray's team of literary advisers, sometimes by toning down objectionable passages or adopting self-censorship. He always wrote with an audience in mind: the addressee, his coterie of literary friends, his rivals and enemies, as well as the anonymous mass public. Byron did not write primarily for posterity: he wanted an immediate response from his readers. He tested his poems out on trusted advisers and an inner circle of friends before publication, and Murray targeted differently priced editions at different classes of readers (Franklin 2000: 37–60). Byron enjoyed this entrepreneurial aspect of authorship and the cachet of being able to command huge sums of money should he deign to accept them. Murray had offered him the fabulous sum of 1,000 pounds for *The Giaour* and *The Bride of Abydos* but, as an aristocrat, for many years he would only accept payment in order to confer it on other more impecunious authors such as his literary agent R. C. Dallas or the radical philosopher William Godwin (Smiles 1891: 1, 222). In this way he conflated the role of an aristocratic patron with the bourgeois business of authorship.

Amours

Literary fame achieved for Byron what his raffish ancestry could not: entry to the very highest echelons of aristocratic society. The poet became a sort of Whig anti-laureate and took all their women by storm, especially those in Melbourne House, the household of William Lamb – who would later become Queen Victoria's staid prime minister, Lord Melbourne. First Byron had a tempestuous semi-public adulterous affair with William's brilliant and eccentric wife, Lady Caroline Lamb, whilst making a confidante of his mother, Lady Melbourne, and proposing (unsuccessfully at first) to his heiress cousin, Annabella Milbanke. Then he dispatched Caroline and took as his mistress the political fixer, Lady Oxford, a middle-aged beauty with a bevy of handsome children by different

fathers. Under her influence, he now joined the faction of Sir Francis Burdett, on the left of the Whig party. Byron would later reminisce about and fictionalise his experience of these years in high society in the English cantos of *Don Juan* (see Works, **pp. 73–5**).

But of most immediate significance for the direction his life and poetry would now take was the most controversial of his affairs: that with his own half-sister, Augusta Leigh. The theme of brother–sister incest had featured in the first draft of *The Bride of Abydos* (1813) and would be prominent in *Manfred* (1817) and *Cain* (1821) (see Works, **pp. 55–6, 59–62, 79–83**). Byron's literary depictions of sibling incest are usually explained as the therapeutic outpouring of self-revelation, but it should be borne in mind that several other Romantic and Gothic writers explored this theme, presumably without the benefit of personal experience. Byron and the motherly Augusta, who was five years older than him and was married with several children, had seen little of each other while growing up. Byron had no family except Augusta, and he enjoyed showing off his new acquaintances to her. Their warm, easy relationship seems to have become sexual in nature in 1813. It is even possible that Augusta's daughter Medora was her brother's child. Like many aristocrats in Regency society, they both had a permissive attitude towards sexuality; but, for Byron, breaking the incest taboo gave the relationship a special attraction. He now had a guilty secret like that of so many villains in Gothic fiction. However, the poet's ambivalence about his libertinism and the necessity of settling his mounting debts impelled him to marry an heiress and to reform forthwith. He married Annabella Milbanke, an earnest moralist with a penchant for mathematics, on 2 January 1815.

Marriage, separation and exile

Perhaps as a mark of his good faith, Byron now threw himself into a project to write biblical lyrics to settings of Jewish traditional airs arranged by musician Isaac Nathan, published as *Hebrew Melodies* in 1815. But he also infused into the collection an unmistakably Byronic championing of the Jewish people as victims both of the Roman Empire of old and contemporary anti-Semitism. He then wrote two more verse tales, *The Siege of Corinth* and *Parisina*, which were published early in 1816. The same year, 1815, he was also persuaded to join the amateur sub-committee running the newly rebuilt Drury Lane theatre (Lansdown 1992: 11–58). His role was to read scripts offered for performance and to commission new drama. This experience would undoubtedly influence his own poetic dramas in the years to come, for Byron became the most important dramatist of all the Romantic poets.

Byron's marriage was an unmitigated disaster. Though his Newstead estate was valuable, the poet was short of ready money, and bailiffs entered his Piccadilly house ten months after the wedding. On 15 January 1816, Annabella left her husband for a visit to her family, taking their month-old baby daughter, Augusta Ada (known as Ada), with her. Though Annabella wrote to him affectionately, she never returned or gave a reason for this. No one can be sure exactly what happened, but it is most likely that, in her naivety, she told her parents about Byron's incestuous relationship with Augusta in 1813, which he had confessed to

her, and they persuaded her to separate. Byron had certainly vented on his pregnant wife the bad moods his volatile temperament generated, exacerbated by money worries and sexual guilt. During the acrimonious proceedings of a legal separation, an enormous scandal blew up, whose flames were undoubtedly fanned by the mischief-making Caroline Lamb circulating hints of her ex-lover's bisexuality. Rumours about the excesses of Byron's sex life and his brutal treatment of his wife split high society into two camps: those who championed the rights of the wronged wife and those who characterised her as a humourless prude. The society hostesses now ostracised Byron and made it impossible for him to stay in London.

Wives, in those days, were 'covered' by their husbands in the eyes of the law: in other words, treated as minors. Custody of a child was therefore normally awarded to the father; and, anyway, wives were very rarely allowed to instigate divorce. But incest was one of the few crimes that had persuaded courts to grant an aggrieved wife a divorce. It seems likely that an unspoken understanding or stand-off existed whereby Byron did not press for his custody rights as long as Lady Byron did not accuse him of incest. She did not; in fact, she continued to act as a 'friend' and sister-in-law to Augusta. Nevertheless, the scandal marked a watershed in British sexual mores, for Byron represented the aristocratic promiscuity which was no longer acceptable in the dawn of a new age of moralism and domestic virtue symbolised by his wife. The first canto of Byron's *Don Juan* would fictionalise and satirise the separation.

The newspapers and theatres became filled with lampoons of the poet in one of the greatest scandals in the nineteenth century. Byron was in the habit of passing round poems in manuscript to his inner circle, and his poems on the separation ('Fare Thee Well' to Annabella and satires on her friends) were pirated and printed in the newspapers. These then inspired broadsheet replies and imitations. Caroline Lamb represented him as a Gothic villain in her *roman à clef* (a novel fictionalising real people and events, sometimes for satiric purposes), entitled *Glenarvon* (1816). As the historian Thomas Babington Macaulay wrote in 1831: 'It is not every day that the savage envy of aspiring dunces is gratified by the agonies of such a spirit, and the degradation of such a name' (quoted in Massie 1988: 74).

The personal suffering the poet endured in the loss of his wife, daughter and sister, and the blackening of his reputation both as a man and a poet, did have the effect of stimulating him to prove himself once again in the face of adversity. So for poetry readers it turned out a fortunate fall. On 25 April 1816, Byron left Britain, never to return.

Writing poetry in Europe after the defeat of Napoleon

Byron's personal crisis had coincided with that of Europe, as 1815 was the year that Napoleon Bonaparte was finally defeated by the allies on 18 June at the battle of Waterloo. The egotistic poet didn't find this surprising; in fact he compared himself with the fallen military hero. When he had to adopt the forename 'Noel' to inherit a bequest, he enjoyed using his new initials and had a travelling coach

made in imitation of that of the Emperor. In 1814–15, the Congress of Vienna was held to dismember Napoleon's empire and to restore the Bourbon monarchy to power in France. The four main powers, Britain, Russia, Prussia and Austria, bound themselves together into an alliance and attempted to create a balance of power so that war would not break out again in Europe. However, this meant that they ignored the emergent nationalist feelings of various territories, which were parcelled out to monarchical and dynastic rulers in an attempt to reinstitute the *ancien régime*.

Byron was in despair that the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity that had inspired the French revolution and its republic had been first perverted into a bloodthirsty dictatorship and then finally extirpated by the forces of conservatism, and that his own country was enforcing the restoration of monarchies throughout Europe. He now adopted Europe as his stage and became the self-appointed spokesman of all heterogeneous peoples ruled over by imperial dynasties and absolutist regimes.

The poet embarked upon a sort of second Grand Tour, visiting the region now known as Belgium, Germany and Switzerland in the spring of 1816, accompanied by Hobhouse. As during their first travels together, they were keen to vicariously experience the recent warfare. One of the first places they visited was the 'place of skulls', the battlefield of Waterloo, where Byron collected some helmets and sabres as souvenirs. That May he resumed his travel poem, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, and would publish the third canto on 18 November 1816 (see Works, **pp. 37–43** and Criticism, **pp. 86, 102**). The figure of the solitary wanderer now became a portrait of the exiled Romantic genius, exploring the creative springs of his own imagination in nature and art. Byron dramatised himself through ironic analogy with Napoleon, whilst questioning the possibility of heroism in the modern world (Bainbridge 1995: 134–82).

The poet had already expressed his mixed feelings obliquely about this military genius in the series of portraits of renegade leaders in the oriental tales, overtly in his journal 1813–14 (*BLJ* III, 204–58) and publicly in the 'Ode to Napoleon Bonaparte' and a series of short poems ventriloquising different views of Bonaparte's abdication and subsequent return to power, the romantic episode of the 'Hundred Days'. Now he began to set down his imaginative evocation of its climax in the battle at Waterloo and his considered evaluation of Bonaparte's demonic overreaching energy in stanzas soon to become famous. Reading them, Walter Scott would speak for many when he declared himself shocked at Byron's startling omission: his lack of patriotic pride in Wellington's victory. In the preface to Canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron would respond by deploring 'the bacchanal roar of the songs of exultation still yelled from the London taverns, over the carnage of Mont St. Jean, and the betrayal of Genoa, of Italy, of France' (*CPW* II, 124). He even defiantly puffed Hobhouse's Bonapartist history, *The Substance of Some Letters Written by an Englishman Resident in Paris during the last Reign of the Emperor Napoleon* (1816) (see Works, **pp. 43–51** and Criticism, **pp. 87, 92, 102**).

Dialogues with Shelley

After travelling up the Rhine, Byron settled for a while in Switzerland. At Sécheron on 27 May he met Percy Bysshe Shelley and now commenced the most important literary friendship of his life (Robinson 1976). That summer, Byron rented the romantic Villa Diodati on Lake Geneva near Shelley's house, and the two men spent the next three months constantly in each other's company. Their meeting was no accident, for Shelley admired Byron's verse and had sent him a copy of his own youthful poem, *Queen Mab*. His eighteen-year-old mistress and later wife, Mary Godwin (daughter of the philosophical anarchist William Godwin and feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft), had already been introduced to Byron in London by her younger step-sister Mary Jane 'Claire' Clairmont, who had instigated an affair with the poet before his departure. Byron was a magnet for other British writers who flooded into Italy, now that the end of the wars made travel possible, and especially for disappointed liberals who now made the liberation of the Italians from their Austrian imperial government a new cause to set alongside Philhellenism.

Shelley and Byron were both aristocratic radicals self-exiled because of their politics and sexual permissiveness. But Shelley's atheism and Godwinian progressivism were in contrast to Byron's dark pessimism, which consisted of Humean skepticism in uneasy dialectic with a Calvinist conviction of damnation (Priestman 1999: 238–44). Shelley was perhaps the first intellectual who both took Byron seriously as a poet and challenged him to defend his philosophy. Their conversations that summer influenced the second half of the third canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, the most idealistic and Wordsworthian of Byron's poems (see Works, **pp. 37–43**). Even the returning pessimism of 'The Dream', 'Darkness', 'The Prisoner of Chillon', 'Prometheus' and the agonized *Manfred* may be seen as generated by Byron's need to answer Shelley's visionary liberalism with philosophical depth of his own. Also, both poets were inspired by each other's literary experimentation and preoccupations, for example, with orientalism, the Gothic, the myth of Prometheus, the representation of sibling incest, and subjectivity and solipsism.

One thundery June night, Byron instigated a ghost-story competition amongst the group. The only successful attempt was Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), though Byron's doctor, John Polidori, later published *The Vampyre*, which would become one of the inspirations behind Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The week following the competition, Shelley and Byron read the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau together, explored places associated with the Swiss philosopher and visited the Chateau de Chillon (see Works, **p. 41**). The Shelley party departed at the end of August. Claire went on to bear Byron a daughter, Allegra, on 12 January 1817, whom her father brought up until her death in 1822, but Byron and Claire's relationship was a short and acrimonious one.

After the Shelleys and Claire had returned to Britain, Byron toured the Bernese Alps with Hobhouse in September 1816 and kept a journal of his impressions for his sister (*BLJ* V, 96–105). Shelley delivered the manuscript of Canto III of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* to Murray, together with *The Prisoner of Chillon*, a moving dramatic monologue spoken by an inmate of the castle dungeon. The publisher

paid the enormous sum of 2,000 guineas for the manuscript. By now, Byron was accepting remuneration for his verse and even haggling for more. At this time also, Byron renewed his acquaintance with the novelist and cultural theorist Madame de Staël at her country house at Coppet. The poet had long been an admirer of Staël's work, and her travelogue-novel *Corinne, or Italy* (1807) influenced the fourth canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* which would be published on 28 April, 1818 (Wilkes 1999: 100–38). He met many of her circle of European intellectuals, which included literary critic August Wilhelm von Schlegel, whose *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (1815) Byron read in translation.

Byron may have been partly inspired by Schlegel's enthusiasm for Renaissance theatre in composing his first experimental lyrical drama, *Manfred* (1817), as well as by hearing the Gothic novelist, M. G. Lewis translate passages from German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's verse drama, *Faust* (see Works, **p. 59**). However, in the 1820s, he would react against Schlegel's idolisation of 'Romantic' or Shakespearian drama by adopting a neo-classical stress on the unities in his later plays.

Italy, its culture and politics

On 5 October 1816, Byron and Hobhouse travelled to Italy, which would remain the poet's chosen domicile for seven years. It was a collection of regions and city-states, never having been a unified 'country', except in the eyes of classically educated tourists and its conqueror, Napoleon. Much of it had been given to the Hapsburg Austrian Empire by the Congress of Vienna (1815). The experience of colonialism was beginning to generate patriotic feeling, but, as with 'Greece', local rivalries impeded the development of this into nineteenth-century nationalism. Byron was instrumental in promoting the concept of nationalism in Italy through rhetorical verse, such as the fourth and final canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1818) (see Works, **pp. 43–51**). This fictionalised his own tour of Italy, which country became the focus of his political ideals for some years. He had already studied the language and history and now saturated himself in Italian literature past and present (Vassallo 1984: 1–23). As with his predecessors, Chaucer and Shakespeare, the influence of Italian poetry was the key to Byron's greatest verse. Until his death he experimented with Italian forms and metre: *terza rima*, *ottava rima*, neo-classical tragedy and extempore burlesque comedy, for example.

The friends stayed in Milan in October 1816, meeting literati and 'patriots' such as Ludivico de Breme, dramatist Silvio Pellico, poet Vincenzo Monti, writer Pietro Borsieri and the French novelist Henri Beyle, later known as 'Stendhal'. With the help of these new friends, Byron read some satires of Pietro Buratti in Venetian dialect. He learned to appreciate the different local cultures of northern Italy. Then he travelled to Venice itself, whose melancholy decayed grandeur appealed greatly to Byron's mood. Like many Britons, he thought of his native land as a successor to Venice in founding its own maritime empire. He continued his study of the dialect with Marianna Segati, his landlord's young wife, who rapidly became his mistress. That winter, while his antiquarian friend Hobhouse toured Italy, Byron lived quietly at Venice, reading much and keeping his mind

sharp by studying Armenian at the monastery of San Lazzaro. He enjoyed explaining to friends back in puritan Britain that so relaxed were Italian sexual mores that Venetian wives could openly take one declared lover or *cavalier servente*. He experienced the colourful carnival and regularly attended literary salons.

The poet resumed sightseeing in spring 1817, visiting Padua, Ferrara, Bologna, Florence and then exploring Rome with Hobhouse. When he returned to Venice in June, Byron rented the Villa Foscarini at La Mira and devoted himself to reading and writing. He had completed his first verse drama, *Manfred*, which was published on 16 June, and now began writing a series of important poems inspired by the landscape, culture and politics of Italy. 'The Lament of Tasso' was an example of his continuing preoccupation with ventriloquising exiled, imprisoned or misunderstood genius. The theme was continued in the elegiac fourth and final canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, completed that year.

This began with a meditation on Venice and then followed a sort of secular pilgrimage to Rome. The third canto had hymned nature, but in the fourth Italy is apprehended via art, as the narrator remembers its representation in literature by the great medieval and Renaissance poets Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca), Giovanni Boccaccio, Alighieri Dante, Ludivico Ariosto and Torquato Tasso, as well as the eighteenth-century dramatist Vittorio Alfieri. The shape of the fourth canto was determined more by the conventions of travel than the subjectivity of the traveller. Also, as we shall see in Part 3, critics have felt that Byron's later incorporation of many additional stanzas to the first draft made this last canto more disjointed and dislocated in mood than its predecessor (see Works, **p. 43** and Criticism, **p. 105**). On the other hand, Byron found his own voice in embracing such disjunctions, when the melancholic narrator views Italy's ruins, contemplating the discrepancy between its cities' former republican glories and degraded present. As the French revolution passed into history, art was seen as the only hope of preserving the ideals of freedom for the future.

Hobhouse published his antiquarian notes on the sites mentioned in the poem in a separate volume. The canto and the accompanying *Historical Illustrations to the Fourth Canto of Child Harold's Pilgrimage* were both published by Murray on 28 April 1818. Cantos III and IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* were greater poems than anything Byron had ever written before, and the best British critics acknowledged as much. But the vituperation of Byron in the press increased in intensity because of his outspoken criticism of British foreign policy and reputation as a libertine. He eventually made Italy his home until he departed for Greece in 1823.

In August 1817 Byron took or was taken by another mistress, Margarita Cogni. In fact he threw himself into a frenzied round of pleasure and sexual dissipation for the next two years that shocked his English friends. That October, Byron wrote an experimental poem inspired by the Venetian carnival, *Beppo* (1818). This was the poet's first attempt at a burlesque comic tale in the style of the fifteenth-century Italian writer, Luigi Pulci, who wrote in a disarmingly digressive manner in *ottava rima* metre. Byron had been visited in September 1817 by his friends Douglas Kinnaird and William Stewart Rose, who presented him with a copy of John Hookham Frere's poem, *Whistlecraft* (1817). This was a very mildly satiric mock-heroic in the style of Pulci, with a garrulous narrator and

medley style. Byron seized upon the Pulcian maner, which he knew would admirably suit his own confessional writing persona, with its 'mobility' of temperament that changed mercurially from melancholy to passionate joy. He aimed to recreate in English verse an impression of the Italian art of improvisation.

But Byron wanted to sharpen not blunt the edge of Pulcian burlesque. He was inspired by the example of another Italian poet, the eighteenth-century satirist Giambattista Casti, whose subject matter was the sexual hypocrisy of the *ancien régime*. In March 1818 he read W. S. Rose's free translation of Casti's *Animali Parlanti* published anonymously in 1816 as *The Court of Beasts*. Though he pronounced it 'excellent', Byron, who spoke and read Italian, was doubtless aware that Rose had toned down the politics of the original, which had been inspired by the French Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire's contempt for all political systems and condemnation of imperial warfare (Vassallo 1984:111). These were Byron's views too, and, if *Beppo* succeeded, he decided to use his new writing style in composing an ambitious indictment of the *ancien régime* in Europe on the eve of the French Revolution. Byron published *Beppo* anonymously, for it was a trial balloon to see how the public responded. It was an immediate success. Quite a few readers took some persuading that the melancholy poet mocked as 'Mr Cypress' in comic novelist Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* (1818) had written this bawdy comedy.

Byron began his sexual satire *Don Juan* in July 1818, when he knew for certain *Beppo* had been acclaimed, and he would publish the poem in various installments so that he could ascertain its popularity before continuing (see Works, **pp. 62–5**). Percy Shelley visited him on 23 August, and they rode together along the lido discussing poetry, philosophy and politics. Shelley fictionalised the occasion in 'Julian and Maddalo'. Shelley had urged his friend to consecrate his powers to a great epic on the subject of the French Revolution. But since *Don Juan* was not the type of work he had in mind, the younger poet attempted the task himself (*The Revolt of Islam* 1818). Nevertheless, Shelley was one of the few of Byron's contemporaries to recognise and respect the originality of *Don Juan*: the startling combination of Romantic idealism with bitter irony.

Of course, the new satire was inspired by personal grievances as well as by politics and philosophical skepticism. Byron wrote this sexual satire to revenge and justify himself after British society had turned its back on him because of his libertinism. For the same reason, he began to write his memoirs in the summer of 1818 for posthumous publication (*BLJ* VI, 261). By October 1819 he had entrusted them to his friend Thomas Moore, who was allowed to show them to whomever he pleased. In September 1821, he instructed Murray to request copies of his letters from early correspondents, so that Moore could use them in composing a biography. We can see that – expecting obloquy – Byron was consciously attempting to shape and control the construction of the image he would leave posterity. That summer, as well as beginning *Don Juan* and the memoirs, the prolific poet had written another verse tale, *Mazeppa*, in which an old soldier wryly tells the story of his youthful passion.

The myth of the legendary lover Don Juan had originated in the Spanish monk Tirso de Molina's morality play *El Burlador de Sevilla* (1630), but had been adopted and adapted by various European playwrights, including the eminent

French dramatist Jean-Baptiste Poquelin (Molière). At Venice, Byron would certainly have seen the opera *Don Giovanni* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Lorenzo da Ponte, and Goldoni's comedy, adapted from Molière's, *Don Giovanni Tenorio, o sia Il Dissoluto* (Boyd 1958: 35). Neither was the legend merely the preserve of high art: during Byron's lifetime there was a craze for the character in popular London theatres, which rivalled each other with numerous burlesques and pantomimes, where the Don had metamorphosed from an impious overreacher, thankfully consigned to Hell, into the pasteboard villain of musical comedy (Haslett 1997: 36–51). Byron's poem is different from most manifestations of the legend in portraying the Don sympathetically and having the women, more often than not, taking the sexual initiative.

Byron saw an opportunity here for fictionalised autobiography and self-justification. He may well have been responding to poet and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge's criticism of the deleterious morality of seductive Byronic anti-heroes, glamorised and excused by their authors. Coleridge, in Chapter 23 of *Biographia Literaria* (1817), called instead for a contemporary update of the seventeenth-century dramatist Thomas Shadwell's didactic tragedy *The Libertine*, where Don Juan is a straightforward villain shown being sent to Hell. Coleridge speculated that the anarchy into which the French Revolution had descended would be an appropriate modern version of Hell, demonstrating where religious skepticism and sexual promiscuity led. Byron answered this appeal with a version of the myth which denounced not libertinism but hypocrisy. He began with an attack on his wife and all the female moralists of the nineteenth century, whose passion for reforming the world, he thought, was a disguised play for power. But he did plan to have Juan eventually guillotined in the Terror, though, not as a villain, but as a naïvely utopian aristocratic idealist (*BLJ* VIII, 78).

By 19 September Byron had completed the first canto of *Don Juan*, together with a satirical prefatory 'dedication' to the Tory poet laureate, Robert Southey, with whom Byron had commenced a feud. He abominated Southey (as well as his fellow Lake poets, William Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge) because he saw him as a renegade who had abandoned his earlier radical views (he had supported the French Revolution) in order strenuously to support the Church, King, Tory Government and Empire (see Life and Contexts, **pp. 23–4** and Works, **pp. 64–5**). As always, while he waited for the reaction of Murray and his circle, Byron sent on extra stanzas and emendations. Though he was an egoist, Byron also needed reassurance about new work. The heavily revised manuscript is evidence that his mastering of the new stanza and style, and his carefully crafted impression of extempore careless writing, had actually cost him much effort.

By mid-January 1819, Murray's coterie had sent the poet news of their unanimous decision that the poem was unpublishable because of its sexual freedom, its radical politics and its satirical attacks on individuals. After a battle by post where the poet defended his new work and defined his intentions in it (see *BLJ* VI, 67, 76, 91, 94–9, 101, 104–7), Byron made some concessions, such as omitting the mock dedication and stanzas castigating the foreign secretary Viscount Castlereagh, for allying himself with dynastic imperialism in the Congress of Vienna. He had meanwhile written a second canto and both were published on 15 July 1819 after an exciting advertising campaign. But the poet had to agree to the indignity of the poem being published anonymously and without even the

publisher's name, in an attempt to avoid prosecution. Even then, Murray disobeyed Byron's instruction of 'no more gelding' by substituting asterisks for some passages.

Don Juan was written at a time of working-class turbulent agitation for reform. Now that the war against France was over, it could no longer be painted as unacceptably unpatriotic to criticise the Establishment. Chartists and early socialists criticised British society as corrupt from top to bottom: from the profligate Regent, the Prince of Wales, to the unrepresentative Houses of Parliament, to the rapacity and brutalities of empire and unrestrained capitalism's creation of urban slums and poverty in the newly expanded cities. The year 1819, when the poem was published, saw the 'Peterloo Massacre' when the government congratulated the yeomanry for charging a peaceful meeting of men, women and children at St Peter's field, Manchester, and killing and injuring several. Radicals, such as Byron and Shelley, were outraged. However, the Government was terrified that lower-class demands for democracy meant that a repetition of the French Revolution was on hand, and they blamed the power of print for spreading inflammatory ideas. The infamous Six Acts were passed, which included measures against the circulation of political literature and increases in paper tax and stamp tax to prevent cheap newspapers. Already harsh penalties of long imprisonment for seditious and blasphemous libel were augmented; now a second offence incurred banishment for seven years.

What did all this have to do with a Romantic poem by an expatriate nobleman? Byron's *Don Juan* put the authorities in an awkward position. The work of an aristocrat, it was published by a staunchly Tory publisher whose periodical, the *Quarterly Review*, had links with the government. But when the poem wasn't prosecuted, despite its liberalism and libertinism, radical propagandists – such as William Hone – were quick to point the finger at the double standard and renew their calls for a free press and an end to censorship. The pirates took advantage of Murray's timorousness and undercut his expensive editions. He initially hesitated to sue them for infringing his copyright, since the poem had come out minus the author's or publisher's names, to protect the publisher from being prosecuted and imprisoned for obscenity or sedition.

Byron received the handsome sum of 2,000 guineas for *Mazeppa*, the 'Ode on Venice' and the first installment of *Don Juan*. But since his disgrace and because of his radical politics, Byron had lost favour with the wealthy readers of his 'years of fame' (*BLJ* VI, 237). He was in great demand, however, from a burgeoning lower-class readership, and *Don Juan* would become a staple text of working-class reformers in the years before 1832. However, the respectable Murray would be very reluctant to publish any more of the poem in the future, especially as it caused an outcry in the conservative and religious periodicals.

At the beginning of April, Byron met and fell in love with the teenage Countess Teresa Guiccioli, who was married to a sixty-year-old wealthy and slightly sinister aristocrat. They lived in Ravenna, the capital of the province of Romagna, in north-eastern Italy. He wrote her, 'Now I love *you*, there is no other woman in the world for me' (*BLJ* VI, 112), gave up his libertine lifestyle and became her acknowledged *cavalier servente*. In June Byron visited Ravenna to be with Teresa. In August he followed the Guicciolis to Bologna, then returned to Venice with Teresa in September. At the end of 1819 he stayed with the Guicciolis in Ravenna

before finding his own house there, opposite the tomb of Dante. He identified with the medieval Italian poet, whom he saw as an Italian patriot. Dante, like Byron, had been exiled from his home city and misunderstood in his own lifetime. By July 1820, Teresa formally separated from her husband and would live with Byron until he departed for Greece.

Byron steeped himself in the literature, culture and politics of his adopted country. He continued *Don Juan*, boasting to friends about the poem's unique burlesque conversational style (*BLJ* VI, 232); discussing his plans for the hero (*BLJ* VI, 206–8); and trying to persuade the reluctant Murray to continue publication of more stories of the epic lover. He also set himself some tough exercises. He began a close translation of the first canto of Pulci's sprawling epic poem, *Morgante Maggiore*, to get more attuned to the literary techniques of one of his models (Vassallo 1984: 143–55). He had been reading Dante's *Divine Comedy*, both in translation and in the original Italian. In the summer of 1819 he began writing *The Prophecy of Dante* in the tricky *terza rima* metre. As with *ottava rima*, the metre is easier in Italian which has more rhyming words than English. Byron had also long admired the patriot dramatist Vittorio Alfieri, and he adopted him as a model when he began a strict neo-classical tragedy, *Marino Faliero*, conforming to the unities. All these literary enterprises may be seen as evidence of the serious and disciplined honing of his craft and extension of his range and belie the poet's pose of aristocratic indolence and carelessness, affected whenever he wrote of poetry to his friends.

By early 1820 Byron had completed *The Prophecy of Dante*, where the medieval poet is made to speak from beyond the grave: the very embodiment of Italian patriotism. The poem appeals to the Italians to forget their local rivalries and to unite in revolution. He had also completed the third and fourth cantos of *Don Juan*. But Murray had now applied for an injunction to suppress the piracies of the first installment, and Byron himself became worried that if this was denied on grounds of obscenity and blasphemy, he might lose paternal rights to custody of his legitimate daughter Ada, as had happened to Shelley over the publication of *Queen Mab*. He even offered to refund the money he had already received for the copyright of the first two cantos. In the event, the Chancellor granted the injunction. But Byron was nervous enough to urge that anonymity be continued in publishing Cantos III and IV. However, Murray procrastinated. He had no wish to publish any more of *Don Juan* or any overly contentious verse, yet could not bring himself to sever his flatteringly close relationship with his most prestigious and aristocratic client.

Later, Byron's enthusiasm for the poem revived. He began the fifth canto in autumn 1820 and by the end of the year had sent the completed manuscript to his financial adviser, Douglas Kinnaird, preparatory to negotiations with Murray in publishing Cantos III, IV and V together. The poet defiantly refused to consider killing the Don off. In fact, he ebulliently sketched for Murray his further plans for the hero, who was to have many more adventures in Europe before being guillotined in the French Revolution (*BLJ* VIII, 78). But Murray was silent. All was at a standstill regarding publication.

Meanwhile Byron was becoming involved in Italian revolutionary politics. Teresa's father, Count Ruggero Gamba Ghiselli and brother Pietro were the leaders of the Romagnan Carbonari, a secret society plotting to overthrow the

Austrian government. In summer 1820, Byron, who was popular amongst the poor because of his charity, had become initiated into the Carbonari as honorary leader of the *Turba* or section of working men. He allowed his mansion to be used as their arsenal and helped to plot an uprising. Despite this, when the district commandant was assassinated outside his house, he had the body carried inside and described the incident in *Don Juan* V, 33–9. The poet was watched closely by spies and his letters were opened by the authorities. The fourth canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *The Prophecy of Dante* were proscribed in Italy because they fomented Italian nationalism. Byron's letters were full of guarded references to his hopes for the revolution, but then the leaders were betrayed just in time to stop the plot, on 24 February 1821. The Ravenna journal which the poet kept from 4 January to February 1821 (*BLJ* VIII, 11–51), and 'Detached Thoughts' intermittently from 15 October 1821 to 18 May 1822 (*BLJ* IX, 11–52) give a detailed impression of his day-to-day life, reading and reminiscences at this time.

In despair over the failure of the uprising, Byron threw himself into finishing *Marino Faliero*, an historical play set in Renaissance Venice, which nevertheless echoes this contemporary context of revolution. Byron had been struck by the black-veiled empty space amongst portraits of the doges when he had visited the Ducal Palace at Venice, and felt inspired by the story of the duke who had conspired with the artisans to overthrow the aristocratic oligarchy and restore true republicanism (see Works, **p. 78** and Criticism, **p. 117**). He personally identified with this romantic idea of a noble but charismatic leader of the People, both in Italy and even (in fantasy anyway) in Luddite Nottinghamshire.

The year of 1821 saw the death of Byron's fallen hero, Napoleon Bonaparte. Though the French Revolution had been extinguished, its ideals were invoked that year in the Greek War of Independence, in Simón Bolívar's Venezuelan war of independence against Spain and in the uprising of Naples, which was suppressed like that of Romagna. It was the year in which Byron devoted himself to writing disciplined tragedy to express his political and liberal views. He had decided that he himself and the other poets we now label 'Romantics' were on the wrong tack in embracing the lyrical impulse so wholeheartedly in their verse, because it could lead to solipsism and sentimentalism. He felt that the satiric tradition, so prevalent in the eighteenth century, had endowed the poet with the valuable role of critic of society and should therefore be preserved. He wrote two letters in defence of Alexander Pope to the sonneteer Revd William Lisle Bowles, who had disparaged Pope's poetry, and published a letter to Murray on 31 March 1821 on the same subject.

Byron also fulminated against 'bardolatry' and the pseudo-Elizabethan plays of his contemporaries. Though Byron was not a very impressive theorist and critic of poetry, he was sincere in his attempt at this time to embrace a severe neoclassicism in his historical dramas, which he thought more appropriate to their politics, and he wanted each play to focus on one moral dilemma rather than an extravagant web of story (*BLJ* VIII, 57, 210). In spite of his intentions, the plays do have strongly Romantic elements, however, such as an intense concentration on the psyche of the protagonist. Byron's experience as a member of the Drury Lane subcommittee had convinced him that an irremediable fracture had developed between page and stage. Serious dramatists could rarely now please the popular audience. Therefore, experimental drama, especially with political

or religious themes, could only be produced for the private reader in his study (Simpson 1998).

These issues came to a crisis when four days after its publication on 21 April 1821, a severely censored version of *Marino Faliero* was staged in Drury Lane without Byron's or Murray's permission. Though the lower classes cheered such liberal sentiments as had been left in, the performance was not a tremendous success, mainly because the actors were under-prepared. Though he might have been swayed had he tasted the honey of popular acclaim, Byron always firmly declared himself to be writing for the 'closet' (*BLJ* VIII, 59, 64). He continued writing two more historical dramas: *Sardanapalus* and *The Two Foscari*.

Teresa objected to his writing the bawdy *Don Juan*, and Byron used this as an excuse to discontinue the poem. The announcement of this seems to have broken the stalemate with the reluctant Murray, who eventually published Cantos III, IV and V on 8 August 1821. They were a great success, causing a traffic jam outside Murray's offices in Albemarle Street, Piccadilly, where copies had to be thrown out of the window to the booksellers' messengers. Byron wrote a series of letters to the publisher and his circle, in which he reasserted his belief in the value of the poem which they so much deplored (*BLJ* VIII, 192, 198, 209; IX, 54).

The Pisan circle, *The Liberal* and the break with Murray

In July 1821 Teresa's father and brother were banished from the Romagna because of their suspected involvement in the failed uprising. As a separated woman, Teresa was compelled to live under her father's roof, so she left with them for Florence. Byron stayed on in Ravenna until October in a frenzy of writing. He began the iconoclastic biblical dramas *Cain* and *Heaven and Earth*. In these plays Byron used biblical stories to question the notion of original sin and the function of evil and suffering in the world and to imagine a universe ruled by an authoritarian tyrannical Old Testament deity. Sceptical questioning of religious precepts was interwoven with an acceptance of the inevitability of sinfulness and damnation, producing a dark vision of an irrational cosmos.

These plays were so tendentious in their questioning of orthodoxy that Byron had to write to Murray denying that Lucifer's speeches in *Cain* reflected the author's views (*BLJ* IX, 53–4, 103). On 19 December 1821 were published *Sardanapalus*, *The Two Foscari* and *Cain*. The skepticism of the latter caused an outcry among the clergy and immediately attracted the attention of radical publishers and pirates (see Works, **pp. 79–83**). Murray appealed to the Chancellor, but the poem was declared to be blasphemous and was therefore free to be pirated without prosecution. (This was an unintentionally absurd effect of the laws of the time.) The plays were harshly criticised by Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review*, and even Hobhouse denounced *Cain* in a letter to his friend. Byron felt that the educated public had turned against him.

The poet also completed two satires: *The Blues* was a weak squib, but *The Vision of Judgment* was a brilliant parody in *ottava rima* of Poet Lareate Robert Southey's pompous and clumsily written apotheosis of the late King George III's

beatification and entry into Heaven. Byron had been incandescent with rage at the preface to Southey's poem which referred obliquely to him as the leading light of 'the Satanic school' of poetry, whose obscene poem (*Don Juan*) was poisoning the waters of literature. Southey even pictured Byron repenting on his deathbed in vain! Byron was careful, therefore, to use Horatian geniality, not Juvenalian harshness, in his satiric riposte, in order the better to bring out the intolerant sectarian hatred underlying Southey's religiosity (*BLJ* IX, 62). He intended the satire for anonymous publication. Southey had already written to *The Courier*, protesting against an earlier attack on him in a note appended by Byron to *The Two Foscari*. The feud had been fuelled by rumours and gossip. For the exiled poet had been told that Southey had circulated rumours that Byron and Shelley had formed a 'league of incest' with Shelley and the 'two daughters of Godwin' in Switzerland in 1816, while doubtless Southey had been informed by the Murray circle of Byron's suppressed satiric dedication of *Don Juan* to him, where his attempts at poetic sublimity were likened to a man having intercourse without being able to achieve climax.

Shelley visited Byron that August, and the friends decided to settle in Pisa, where they would form an expatriate community with other liberal writers such as Edward Williams, John Taaffe and Edward Trelawny (Cline 1952). Byron's writing career post–1816 should be seen in the context of his perception that he could take on the leadership of a new generation of Romantic poets on the liberal/radical side in politics and make war on the older generation who had become supporters of the Tories and enemies of reform. The irony was that his own publisher, Murray, ran the *Quarterly Review*, of which Robert Southey and the pro-Establishment acerbic critic John Wilson Croker were the leading lights.

Byron had always enjoyed the cut and thrust of competition amongst the literary coteries and cabals of literary London. In Regency times the hugely influential periodicals were intensely ideological, and reviewing could be brutal. Byron and Shelley were impatient with the opponent of the *Quarterly Review*, the heavy, Whiggish *Edinburgh Review*, which was old-fashioned in its literary judgements. Byron had long thought of founding his own more radical and lively periodical, and Shelley was equally keen. Shelley, and now even Byron, experienced difficulty in having radical works published. Both wanted some control over the publication process. It was becoming painfully obvious that Murray was unwilling to publish more of Byron's increasingly radical poetry, such as *Heaven and Earth* or *The Vision of Judgment* (*BLJ* IX, 118, 136, 163). Murray had set up the former in press but after the outcry about *Cain*, he could not bring himself to print. Byron wrote to him repeatedly without effect. The successful partnership of many years was about to break up.

In 1822, the two poets invited Shelley's friend, the poet and journalist Leigh Hunt, to join them. Byron knew Hunt and had visited him in prison in 1813 when he was serving a two-year sentence for libel on the Prince Regent, for contradicting in rudely explicit detail a sycophantic Tory newspaper which had described the corpulent heir to the throne as 'an Adonis of loveliness'. Leigh and his brother John Hunt had run the brilliant radical newspaper, *The Examiner*, for fourteen years. This supported many humanitarian causes. It also drew attention to a whole panoply of abuses from the dissolute royal family and unreformed parliament, to the corruption and patronage running through the professions and

administration. Hunt combined radical politics with cultural commentary. He was an astute and influential literary critic and had been a mentor to Shelley as well as the younger John Keats. His influence was sufficient to stimulate the Tory wits of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* to lampoon and deride the 'Cockney School' at every opportunity (Cox 1998: 30–7).

Shelley wrote to Hunt on 26 August 1821 to invite him to help them run the journal, and Hunt arranged for his nephew to edit *The Examiner* in his absence, since his brother John had again been imprisoned for libel. Meanwhile, in November, Byron took up residence in a grand and historic mansion, the Casa Lanfranchi in Pisa. In January 1822 he received an addition to his coffers on the death of his mother-in-law, to add to the comfortable income he received from interest on the capital realised following the sale of Newstead. Hunt therefore saw him as an aristocratic patron. But Byron was becoming miserly and was especially unwilling to be regarded as a bottomless purse, when he realised, on getting to know Hunt better, that the latter was incapable of managing money. Nevertheless, in February 1822, he paid for the Hunt family to travel to Pisa and invited them to stay with him. They arrived at the beginning of July. But within days of this, tragedy struck. On 8 July, Percy Shelley and Edward Williams were drowned in a sailing accident.

Byron, Hunt, and Shelley's friend, the adventurer Edward Trelawny, searched the beaches for Shelley's body, until they were informed on 18 July that it had been found with Hunt's copy of Keats's *Lamia* still in his jacket pocket. They ceremoniously cremated the body on the beach, so the ashes could be interred in the Protestant cemetery in Rome. Byron's grief, coming on top of the recent death of his natural daughter, Allegra, was channelled into writing and into making a success of the journal. This was fuelled by disgust at the gloating treatment of the accident by Tory newspapers.

Byron tried hard to get his friend Thomas Moore to contribute to the new periodical, which he had named *The Liberal* (*BLJ* IX, 183, 197). But Moore, Hobhouse and all Byron's Whiggish old friends disapproved of the Hunt circle as too radical. Hunt and Byron had more success when they invited left-wing journalist and brilliant essayist, William Hazlitt, to contribute to the new magazine. Byron also wrote to Leigh's brother John, newly released from gaol, instructing him to collect miscellaneous manuscripts from Murray, including *The Vision of Judgment*, for publication in the journal. Out of spite, Murray disobeyed Byron's written instructions to include the preface, in which Byron attempted to evade prosecution by explaining that the poem's target was Southey rather than the Monarch. This action facilitated the prosecution of John Hunt when the satire appeared in the first number of *The Liberal* on 15 October 1822. Murray also published the innocuous popular play, *Werner*, without Byron's permission on 23 November. Simultaneously, he showed around some gossipy letters previously received from Byron, which spoke disrespectfully of Hunt and the journal, thus causing maximum embarrassment to the venture. This spelt the end of Byron and Murray's business relationship, and Byron withdrew from him on 18 November 1822, though he continued to write to him as a friend. Byron told Hunt he believed Murray was being used by the establishment to muzzle him.

Murray certainly did all he could to scupper the new periodical by relaying and exaggerating adverse criticism of it and of Hunt. In this he eventually succeeded,

for Byron's name was its main draw and the poet lost heart with it too soon, as we shall see. For all his swagger, his confidence was easily dented. The first number featured one of his best poems, *The Vision of Judgment*, together with some scurrilous epigrams on Castlereagh and a boyish spoof addressed to the editor of the reactionary *British Review*. Also included were Percy Shelley's fine translation of the Walpurgisnacht scene from Goethe's *Faust*, together with a stirring preface, chatty travelogue and other satirical and humorous pieces from Hunt. The periodical was an original and lively miscellany, much in contrast with the heavy quarterlies of the day. It caused enormous controversy: producing the prosecution of John Hunt for seditious libel on account of the *Vision* and inspiring right-wing parodies (see Criticism, **p. 90**). In consequence, it sold very well, though Hunt had overestimated the number of copies needed, so the first number made a financial loss (Marshall 1960: 118–34).

Byron had also been newly inspired by the presence of Shelley, Hunt and the excitement of the journal scheme to resume *Don Juan* that July. He had decided 'in the present clash of philosophy and tyranny, to throw away the scabbard' (*BLJ* IX, 191). The centrepiece of the new cantos he now wrote was 'a technical description of a modern siege' and 'satire upon heroes and despots' of dynastic imperialism (*BLJ* IX, 196). By Christmas 1822 he had seven more cantos ready for publication and now offered them to Leigh's brother, the publisher John Hunt, for publication at the author's risk (see Works, **p. 62**). Byron wanted to try retaining the copyright and taking a proportion of any profits instead. By May 1823, eleven unpublished cantos had mounted up. Before he left for Greece Byron arranged for Hunt to publish them all and to provide cheap editions to rival the pirates. He had written a searing new preface, championing the freedom of the press on behalf of the radical publishers as well as himself and rededicating the poem to the liberal cause (see Works, **p. 71**). Hunt was the most respectable of the radical publishers, but he was still beyond the pale as far as the conservatives of the literary world were concerned. Murray's coterie completely failed to understand why a British lord would ally himself with such people. They could only suppose he was a poseur who courted singularity.

On 1 January 1823 the second number of *The Liberal* was published with Byron's Biblical drama on Noah's Flood, *Heaven and Earth*, the leading piece (see Works, **p. 79**). Contributions from Mary and the late Percy Shelley, William Hazlitt, Hunt and others provided a medley of poetry, essays, fiction, and discussions of Italian culture. By February 1823, Byron finished a satire, *The Age of Bronze*, and a verse tale, *The Island*, on the mutiny of *The Bounty*, both of which he wrote for the periodical. But ironically, though the second number would be extremely well received, reports only now began to arrive in Italy of the ferocious attacks in literary London mounted on the first number.

Instead of riding out the storm, Byron began to panic. Rather than realising that the furore was an indirect compliment, he decided that the journal was a failure and that his own personal unpopularity was to blame. He withdrew the *Age of Bronze* and *The Island* from it, so that the next two numbers contained only his weak satire *The Blues* and the translation from Pulci. It was widely assumed that he had pulled out of the venture, and this rumour sounded the death knell of *The Liberal*.

The Greek War of Independence

Byron now decided to consecrate his remaining energies to supporting the war for Greek independence from the Ottoman empire. He was visited by Edward Blaquiere, from the London Greek committee, who flattered him that he could become a leading man of action on this heroic scene. Actually the committee wanted to use his magnetic personality as a figurehead to attract others to the cause. Byron agreed to depart and provide them information on the course of the war. He instructed Kinnaird to raise ready money, and chartered a brig, the *Hercules*, then ordered showy uniforms and helmets in which to make his entrance on the theatre of war.

In all the emotional upheaval that his imminent departure caused for Teresa, and in tying up his financial support for Leigh Hunt and for Mary Shelley, tempers flared, recriminations began, and Byron managed to alienate both the latter. He went on board on 13 July, with Teresa's brother, Pietro Gamba, and Trelawny, and they eventually landed at Argostoli, Cephalonia on 3 August. His arrival caused a sensation. If Greece was exotic terrain to the poet, then the British lord was in turn a picturesque sight to the inhabitants. He became a magnet to all parties wanting funding and support. Byron took on some tough Suliote tribesmen as his bodyguard, but they soon became unruly. He now put the shrewd Scottish practical side of his personality into action, discarding his dreamy idealism and taking stock of the situation.

The year previously, after initial successes, the Greeks had elected Alexander Mavrocordatos their first president. However, the Greeks were riven by factionalism which was intensified when the Turks began to reassert themselves. The leaders of the provisional Greek government and churchmen lacked control over the local chiefs, who constituted Greek military strength, but who were short on nationalistic feeling and saw the conflict in purely religious terms as the extermination of Muslims. The Romaic population would have been content merely to drive out the Turks, leaving their regional governments untouched. It was Westerners and expatriate Greeks who had been educated in Europe who imagined a nation embodying the supposed restoration of Hellas (St Clair 1972: 150–94).

Byron was joined on 22 November 1823 by another agent of the London Greek committee, Colonel Leicester Stanhope – a radical influenced by the Utilitarian ideas of philosopher Jeremy Bentham, and great believer in enlightenment through education. A greater priority for this doctrinaire army officer than military supplies was the setting up of printing presses. He was nicknamed the 'typographical Colonel' by the poet, who, paradoxically, thought action should take precedent over words. Though their Philhellenism was of differing moulds, Byron tried to work with Stanhope. They set sail for the mainland and arrived in Missolonghi on 30 December 1823, after being menaced by Turkish ships and being blown onto rocks by a storm.

Byron soon met Mavrocordatos and settled himself into the officers' quarters where he and Stanhope began to plan forming an artillery corps and raising a loan for the provisional government to be administered by the British. Byron was glad when the fire master William Parry arrived with a consignment of military

supplies and much practical experience. The plan was to take the nearby fortress of Lepanto.

The previous August the poet had helped some refugees, a Greek woman and her daughters who had been caught up in the fighting. The mother asked if her fifteen-year-old son, Lukas Chalandritsanos, could join them. Lukas became Byron's favourite, and what little poetry he wrote in the last months of his life were bittersweet lyrics, inspired by his patriotic desire to die nobly for the cause and his unrequited love for the boy. The most well known of these is the poem written on his birthday, 'On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year'.

On 15 February 1824, Byron had a serious seizure, the first sign of the illness that would eventually prove fatal. His depression at the disunity of the Greeks, the unruliness of the Suliotes, the naivety of the Western Philhellenes and the continual call on his money from all quarters contributed to his continuing poor health. On 21 February there was an earthquake. The following month Byron was invited to meet the military leader Odysseus in Salona. Mavrocordatos would accompany him. Byron hoped to use the occasion as an opportunity to unite the military and governmental parties. He was then invited to visit the Greek Government at Kranidi in the Morea and to accept the office of Governor General of Greece (Marchand 1971: 444–60).

Whilst he was delayed by bad weather from the first of these projected journeys, Byron was laid low by a severe fever. As long as he had power to command, Byron resisted all attempts to bleed him. But, as he weakened, the doctors contributed to his end, as Byron guessed they would, with their purgatives and leeches, which drained his remaining strength. On Easter Monday, 19 April 1824, he died.

Byronism

Byron had done much to forge his own image and to encourage the cult of personality that made him a 'star'. However, the myth of Byron had a life of its own which outlasted the poet himself. His fine head and open-collared shirt was a recognisable image used not only by Murray to sell the poetry, but also adopted by the radical publisher and pirate William Benbow for his shop sign – for it had become an emblem of liberty. When the poet's literary executors and family decided to have the manuscript of Byron's memoirs, not published but cast into John Murray's fireplace, they unwittingly fed the flickering flames of scandal they intended to smother. Would-be readers probably imagined more salacious revelations than they actually contained. Byron would never be accepted by the Establishment and had to wait until the permissive 1960s before being commemorated in poets' corner, Westminster Abbey. Though Byron was the most popular British poet of the nineteenth century, quite soon after his death his poetry began to be unfavourably compared with that of Wordsworth by professional critics, engaged in forming the canon of English Literature now to be taught at schools and universities for the first time (Chew 1924: 258–62).

Byron was extremely influential, especially on his female contemporaries, Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon: the former's evocation of Italian patriotism was accomplished enough to sting him into competitive jibes in his letters. His experiments with the dramatic monologue would inspire further innovation by

Victorian poets, Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning. Women novelists were ambivalent about the poet's aristocratic individualism: his contemporaries Caroline Lamb and Mary Shelley fictionalised the poet himself in sinister portraits. The Brontë sisters, who read Byron's poetry avidly as girls, produced their own Byronic anti-heroes in their 1847 novels: Heathcliff of *Wuthering Heights* and Mr Rochester of *Jane Eyre*.

In 1869, the year of John Stuart Mill's feminist classic *The Subjection of Women*, the American novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe reactivated the gendered debate on the separation scandal by publishing for the first time the story of Byron's incest with his sister: information that her friend Lady Byron had confided to her. The Byron marriage was for Stowe, as for many women moralists and Victorian feminists, an illustration of the inequity of the marriage laws, and Byron an example of the domination of art by male libertinism. Other writers and artists assumed the Byronic pose and reworked it in their own Bohemian style. Some, such as novelist and dramatist Edward Bulwer Lytton and novelist and statesman Benjamin Disraeli, emulated the sexual ambiguity which shadowed the poet's performance of the Regency dandy (Elfenbein 1995), while the glamour of the fallen anti-hero became a staple of popular culture that has lasted into contemporary times (Wilson 1999).

Was Byron a Romantic?

This may seem a strange question, but up until twenty years ago, British and American scholars often defined Romanticism very narrowly. Though nominally included in the 'big six' male canonical British poets, Byron had become marginalised and even categorised as an anomaly (see Criticism, **p. 107**). The ostensible reason for this was Byron's use of satire and irony, which was construed as backward-looking and 'Augustan' rather than Romantic (see Criticism, **pp. 91–2, 100**). Of course, Byron mocked Romantic writing at times, including his own. He certainly vociferously championed Pope and experimented with neo-classical drama. Bernard Beatty has argued that Byron identified particularly with the 'exploratory pessimism and exuberant energies' of a particularly British unruly strand of eighteenth-century writing (in Bone 2004: 239). However, the uneasiness which some critics have felt about including Byron in the Romantic canon also stemmed from Byron's philosophical pessimism and scepticism, which were not congruent with Wordsworth's belief in the inspiration of Nature: the younger poet represented an unacceptably dark side of Romanticism (see Criticism, **p. 101**). Byron's revolutionary and nationalistic rhetoric continued to epitomise the ideology of Romanticism to European readers, even when mid twentieth-century British and American critics began cynically to cut the poet down to size, either as a poseur or as hopelessly backward-looking (West 1960, Martin 1982, Kelsall 1987). As we shall see in Part 3, Byron's critical fortunes changed when feminism and New Historicism together forced a much more inclusive view of writing in the period (see Criticism, **p. 107**). At last, Byron was once again acknowledged as one of the leading voices of European Romanticism.

Further reading

The best way to find out about Byron's life and times is to dip into his inimitable and lively letters: *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. L. A. Marchand, 13 vols (1973–94). A one-volume paperback selection, edited by Marchand, was published in 1982. Byron's friend Thomas Moore's *The Life, Letters and Journals of Byron* is a classic nineteenth-century biography, essential for Byronists (Moore 1860). Many other contemporaries wrote accounts of the poet's conversations, and Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. has arranged selections from these chronologially in a useful volume: *His Very Self and Voice, Collected Conversations of Lord Byron* (Lovell 1954). The most up-to-date reliable one-volume biography is Fiona MacCarthy's well-written *Byron: Life and Legend* (2002), though this is an account of the man rather than the poet. For a scholarly day-by-day chronology of the facts of Byron's life, consult for reference Leslie A. Marchand, *Byron: A Biography*, 3 vols (1957). There is also a condensed one-volume version (1971). For a medium-length account of the poet's writing life and participation in literary coteries, see Franklin (2000).

On Byron's ancestral home, see John Beckett with Sheila Aley's *Byron and Newstead: The Aristocrat and the Abbey* (2001). Allan Massie's *Byron's Travels* (1988) gives a brief but sound account of the poet's tours, with background information on the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the sporadic support for its Greek Christian subjects of Western powers, especially Russia, France and Britain who hoped to take advantage of their desire to rebel against the Turks. For information on Byron's marriage and the separation and its aftermath, consult Ethel Colburn Mayne's *The Life of Lady Byron* (1929). Margot Strickland gives brief entertaining biographies of the most important women in Byron's life in *The Byron Women* (1974), and his relationship with Teresa Guiccioli is portrayed in Iris Origo's *The Last Attachment* (1949). Byron's bisexuality is set in historical context in Crompton's critical biography *Byron and Greek Love* (1985). Studies of specific periods of the poet's life include Peter Quennell's readable *Byron: The Years of Fame* (1935) and *Byron in Italy* (1941). Scholarly accounts of Byron's participation in the Shelley and Leigh Hunt circle are provided in C. L. Cline, *Byron, Shelley and their Pisan circle* (1952), W.H. Marshall, *Byron, Shelley, Hunt and the Liberal* (1960) and in Nicholas Roe's recent biography of Hunt, *Fiery Heart: The First Life of Leigh Hunt* (2005). The role played by Byron in the Greek War of Independence is addressed by William St Clair in *That Greece Might Still Be Free* (1972); and Stephen Minta, *On a Voiceless Shore: Byron in Greece* (1998). Two books by Doris Langley Moore shed interesting light on Byron's life by taking unusual angles. *Lord Byron: Accounts Rendered* (1974) examines his finances and *The Late Lord Byron* details the events following the poet's death.