

WHAT IS HIS VOCATION? LORD BYRON (1788-1824)



Mary Russell Mitford is remembered as an author, but to speak of Lord Byron as a great poet is to refer to only one of his roles. He is also a distinguished traveller, a phenomenal swimmer, and a hero of the Greek struggle for freedom from Turkish rule. In Bertrand Russell's eyes, he is the archetypal "aristocratic rebel" who gives a great impetus to revolutionary movements in nineteenth century Europe. Although he dies at the age of thirty-six, his letters seem to record the events of a long and full

life, and that life is to a great extent the life of a tragic hero whose fatal flaw is his vulnerability to the charms of a half-sister to whom he does not relate as a brother since they have not been raised together. In a vain attempt to escape from his entanglement, he enters on a disastrous marriage and falls victim to what Macaulay calls "the British public in one of its periodical fits of morality."

As the son of a charming wastrel and the woman — his second wife — whose fortune he squanders before he deserts her, Byron begins his life inauspiciously. He also suffers from the birth defect of a deformed foot, and self-consciousness about his lameness casts an ugly shadow over his mind throughout his life. Besides growing up in a fatherless home, he is subjected to dismal religious teaching by two Calvinist nursemaids, one of whom also sexually abuses him. His mother sends him to day schools in Aberdeen, and in 1798, at the age of ten, he inherits the title Baron of Rochdale, together with the heavily encumbered estate of Newstead Abbey. Three years later, the family solicitor, John Hanson, arranges his enrolment at the great public school of Harrow. His early dislike for it melts away, and he acquires a love of the institution, where he makes lifelong friends. At home, he is less happy, for his mother has outbursts of raging temper, and he sometimes hates her.

From Harrow, Byron proceeds in 1805 to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he enjoys the freedom to engage in debauchery. Borrowing large sums from moneylenders, he sets sail on a sea of debt from which he never returns, though he sometimes comes within sight of land. He drops out of college, returns, and in 1808 manages, to his own surprise, to graduate with an A.M. Already he has published a volume of poems under the title *Hours of Idleness* (two earlier collections he has had privately printed) and has announced in the Preface that he expects to publish no more verse. The following year, goaded by the sneers of a writer in the *Edinburgh Review*, he fires off a vigorous but savage and indiscriminate satire named *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* and leaves for the Continent with his Cambridge friend John Cam Hobhouse. During a stay at Malta, he becomes infatuated with Constance Spencer Smith, the Austrian wife of a British diplomat, and later claims that only a peace agreement involving the transfer of the island to France prevented their elopement. Resuming their travels, the two young men eschew the conventional tour of France and Italy, choosing instead to visit Spain and Portugal before entering the Ottoman Empire. There they not only explore Greece and Turkey but venture into Albania, a country of warlords where few Englishmen have been. Byron's letters from these regions rival the Turkish letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu.

In 1811, still in love with the sunny skies and blue seas of Greece, and attached to its people although he can see their shortcomings, the poet returns to the grey damps of England, his creditors, and the termagant mother to whom he has written long, informative letters from abroad. Shortly after his return, this lady falls ill, and, about to visit her, he finds he has instead to go to her funeral.

When Byron returns to England, he brings with him two cantos of a poem he has written during his travels—*Childe Harold*. After early rejections, he finds a hesitant publisher in John Murray (there is religious scepticism as well as suspect politics in the poem), and with its appearance in March 1812, he discovers that this story in Spenserian stanzas about a misanthropic young man's travels in the East is a bestseller and he himself is famous. He follows up his success with a number of oriental verse tales. His political liberalism, which he never relinquishes, becomes apparent when he takes his seat in the House of Lords, where he pleads for relief for Roman Catholics and defends despairing weavers who are destroying the new machines that are depriving them of employment. He takes the trouble to visit the area where the weavers live and writes to Lord Holland, "I have seen the state of these miserable men, and it is a disgrace to a civilized country."

Byron is now a popular guest in high society, and in the spring of 1812 he enters into a rapturous love affair with Lady Caroline Lamb, who

is an Earl's daughter, a wife, a mother, and a vain, self-dramatizing woman. After about two months of what he admits was "delirium," he tries to break loose, but the lady pursues her conquest mercilessly for two and a half years. Byron thinks of marrying a wealthy woman as an escape from both Lady Caroline and debt, yet sends a proposal to the comparatively poor but intellectual Annabella Milbanke and is turned down. By this time, persecuted by Lady Caroline, recoiling from the English climate and its effect on his health, and harassed by creditors, he discloses to his friend, confidante and correspondent Lady Melbourne that he is in a worse scrape than any he has been in before. His letters do not specify what this is, but we know that he and Mrs. Augusta Leigh, who have the same father but different mothers, have fallen overwhelmingly in love. Byron tries to overcome temptation by a liaison with Lady Oxford, which makes him happy till she goes abroad, and then by a (just) platonic pursuit of Lady Frances Webster. Whether the love between himself and his half-sister was ever consummated is not absolutely certain—Byron's biographer Leslie Marchand concludes that the evidence falls slightly short of what a law court would require—but he is convicted by public opinion. Incest not then being illegal, the condemnation is moral and social.

At this juncture, Byron receives an unexpected letter from Annabella Milbanke, who is Lady Melbourne's niece. Although devout, Annabella is sufficiently fascinated by this rakish poet to enter into a correspondence with him, while she keeps the fact secret from all but her indulgent parents. An attraction of opposites is at work, and on the second day of 1815 they marry. For a year, they remain together. While Byron finds a new interest as an active member of the Sub-Committee of the Drury Lane Theatre, his financial plight becomes critical and his health suffers. He falls into rages, subjecting his wife to terrifying verbal abuse and behaving violently (though never striking her), so that his wife and even his sister fear that he may be mad. In January 1816, Lady Byron takes their newborn baby, Ada, on a visit to her parents, and the poet is soon astounded to learn that they are not returning. In conjunction with her parents and legal advisers, Annabella obtains a formal separation. There is a public scandal: society sides with Annabella, and rumours of sodomy and incest abound.

In April 1816, after having had a coach built on the model of the one used by his hero Napoleon, the overthrewer of reactionary monarchies, Byron again leaves Britain for the Continent. His entourage includes his servant William Fletcher, who was with him on his earlier travels, and the young physician John Polidori. Although he tries to grow a carapace over his pain, his underlying misery persists even as he finds pleasure in sight-seeing—he is especially moved by his visit to the field of Waterloo—and he longs, as he continues to do for the rest of his life, for news of his daughter,

Ada. A thwarted affection for Annabella conflicts with his raging hostility against her. To her parents and advisers, his hostility is unmixed. Making his way to Switzerland, he enjoys there the friendship and hospitality of Madame de Staël, a woman for whom he had some scorn in London, though he admired her writings. He sails on Lake Geneva, adds a third canto to *Childe Harold*, and relishes the company of Shelley and his partner, Mary Godwin, who writes *Frankenstein*. Present with them is the young Claire Clairmont, William Godwin's stepdaughter, whose pursuit of him in London has led to her pregnancy.

In Switzerland, despite his pleasures, Byron still suffers. Only when he has crossed the Alps into Italy in October and reached Venice in November does his new life begin. He now takes up the study of the very difficult Armenian language and settles down to a regime of writing, swimming, riding, relishing the Carnival, and attending the conversazioni or salons of Countess Benzoni and Countess Albrizzi. Additionally, he plays the philanderer with many lower and middle class women, whom he finds handsomer than their aristocratic counterparts. In the spring of 1818, he has Allegra Byron, his infant daughter by Claire Clairmont, brought to Venice and three years later places her in a convent, where, to his astonishment and horror, she contracts a fever and dies.

After Byron leaves England, his friend Douglas Kinnaird looks diligently after his financial and literary interests. Once the family estate of Newstead is sold, Kinnaird invests most of the money that is not used to reduce the poet's debts in the Government Funds, which never mature but pay interest in perpetuity. To the last months of his life, Byron urges Kinnaird to find a securer investment. The terms of the marriage settlement apparently make this too difficult.

In 1819, Byron begins a liaison with Countess Teresa Guiccioli and exchanges sexual promiscuity for what he likes to call "strictest adultery." When they meet, she is the nineteen-year-old third wife of the fifty-eight-year-old Count. This man is of a bullying disposition, and when he eventually rebels against the situation, the Pope, in July 1820, grants the Countess a formal separation and an allowance from her husband, but decrees that she must live either with her father or in a convent. To be near her, Byron moves to the historical inland city of Ravenna, where his social pursuits are similar to those he followed in Venice, though he finds the people superior to the Venetians. On excellent terms with Teresa's father, Count Gamba, and with her younger brother, Pietra, he becomes involved, alongside them, with the Carbonari, who are plotting a rebellion against the stranglehold that Austria has on the states into which Italy is divided. To his indignation, in the spring of 1821 a countrywide rising is aborted when the Austrians easily subdue its beginnings in Naples.

The authorities in the Papal States, where Ravenna is situated, become sufficiently suspicious of Count Gamba and his son to banish them. They and Teresa take up residence in Pisa, whither Byron, after a little time, follows them. Here they all remain till the poet and some companions have an encounter in March 1822 with a party of soldiers and find themselves involved in an affray in which a sergeant-major named Masi is dangerously wounded. Although this man recovers, distrust of Byron increases, and eventually he and the Gambas are driven out of the state of Tuscany and take refuge in Genoa.

During his years in Italy, Byron, despite his other activities, writes the fourth canto of *Childe Harold* and composes his greatest work, *Don Juan*. The latter's risqué scenes, political passages, and obvious allusions to its author's marriage worry his friends, including his publisher, John Murray. For all his misgivings, Murray publishes the first five cantos, but Teresa, on reading a French translation of the first two, is offended by its unromantic treatment of love and extracts from Byron a promise to abandon the poem. He may yield the more easily because his interest is straying to the creation of an English neoclassical drama which will outmatch the more loosely constructed Elizabethan. After a time, his enthusiasm for *Don Juan* revives, and he persuades the lady to withdraw her prohibition. He completes another eleven cantos.

While Byron works on Cantos Six through Sixteen, his thoughts turn more and more towards Greece, which is in revolt against its imperial master, Turkey. Prompted by a visit from Captain Edward Blaquiere of the London Greek Committee, he decides to both fund and take an active part in the campaign for independence. Urging Kinnaird to arrange as much credit for him as possible, he sails in July 1823 to the island of Cephalonia and at the end of the year proceeds to Missolonghi on the mainland coast. Among those with him are Pietra Gamba and William Fletcher. Recruiting and paying a band of Suliotes—warlike Albanians exiled from their own country—he works with Prince Mavrocordatos and comes to find himself in command of the forces of Western Greece with volunteer officers from several nations serving under him. To their own detriment, the Greeks are badly divided, undisciplined, and passionate about lining their own pockets. Fully aware of their faults, Byron finances their revolt lavishly, imposes order, and labours to overcome their divisions. He agrees to march onto the field with his Suliotes, prepared if necessary to die in battle, but instead succumbs to increasing pressure on his health. In February 1824, he has a fit during which strong men cannot restrain him and he is unable to speak. Physicians advise rest, but he is too devoted to the cause, and on 9 April, while riding with Pietra Gamba, he gets drenched once too often. Ten days later, he dies.

Byron's letters give vivid pictures of his life in the three countries in which he for the most part dwells – Britain, Greece, and Italy. From Athens he writes in 1811:

I am living in the Capuchin Convent, Hymettus before me, the Acropolis behind, the Temple of Jove to my right, the Stadium in front, the town to the left; eh, Sir, there's a situation, there's your picturesque! nothing like that, Sir, in Lunnun, no not even the Mansion House. And I feed upon Woodcocks and Red Mullet every day, and I have three horses (one a present from the Pasha of the Morea), and I ride to Piraeus, and Phalerum, and Munychia.

In January 1814, two and a half years after his return to England, he finds himself comfortably snowbound at Newstead Abbey:

I am much at my ease.... Our coals are excellent, our fire-places large, my cellar full, and my head empty; and I have not yet recovered my joy at leaving London.... The books I have brought with me are a great consolation for the confinement, and I bought more as we came along.

Very different are the delights of Venice in 1817:

The Carnival closed last night, and I have been up all night at the masked ball of the Fenice, and am rather tired or so. It was a fine sight – the theatre illuminated, and all the world buffooning. I had my box full of visitors – masks of all kinds, and afterwards (as is the custom) went down to promenade the pit, which was boarded over level with the stage.

Satisfying as his descriptions of scenes are, people loom larger than places in Byron's letters. His mother is the earliest of the many memorable characters prominent in them. The long succession that follows includes, among many others, Byron's fellow students at Cambridge, Lady Caroline Lamb, the Websters, Byron's half-sister Augusta, Lady Melbourne, Lady Byron, Shelley, Leigh Hunt, Byron's Italian mistresses, and the servant William Fletcher.

While still a young boy, Byron notes his mother's "*ungovernable appetite for scandal*" and considers that "finding fault" is "her favourite amusement." In later life he recalls how she was "as haughty as Lucifer with her descent from the Stuarts, and her right line, from the *old Gordons* not the *Seyton Gordons*, as she disdainfully termed the Ducal branch"; she insists on

“how superior *her* Gordons were to the southron Byrons, notwithstanding our Norman, and always direct masculine descent.” The behaviour of the husband who ruined and deserted her is reflected in her aspersions against his whole family. On holiday from Harrow, the young lord protests to his sister that, while generous enough with money, his mother habitually

flies into a fit of phrenzy, upbraids me as if I was the most undutiful wretch in existence, rakes up the ashes of my *father*, abuses him, says I will be a true Byrrone, which is the worst epithet she can invent. Am I to call this woman mother? Because by nature’s law she has authority over me, am I to be trampled upon in this manner? am I to be goaded with insult, loaded with obloquy, and suffer my feelings to be outraged on the most trivial occasions? I owe her respect as a Son. But I renounce her as a Friend.

Although he cannot endure her company and she quarrels furiously with him, on a deep level there is affection between them. Before he leaves the country in 1809, he carefully prepares Newstead Abbey for her residence in his absence, he sends her long letters describing his travels, and he writes to his lawyer Hanson from Constantinople to make sure she will not want for anything should he perish.

Almost at the same time as the pain of his mother’s death, Byron suffers the loss by drowning of Charles Skinner Matthews, one of the group of Cambridge friends to which his travel companion John Cam Hobhouse and the dashing Scrope Davies also belong. “To him,” he writes of Matthews, “all the men I ever knew were pigmies. He was an intellectual giant.” The survivors are afflicted, writes Byron, each in his own way:

For my own part, I am bewildered. To me he was much, to Hobhouse every thing. My poor Hobhouse doted on Matthews. For me, I did not love quite so much as I honoured him; I was indeed so sensible of his infinite superiority, that though I did not envy, I stood in awe of it... Davies is a wit and man of the world, and feels as much as such a character can do; but not as Hobhouse has been affected. Davies, who is not a scribbler, has always beaten us all in the war of words, and by his colloquial powers at once delighted and kept us in order. Hobhouse and myself always had the worst of it with the other two; and even Matthews yielded to the dashing vivacity of Scrope Davies.

In the early letters, Davies shines out as a wit, a mocker at religion, and an enthusiastic drinker. When the project of limiting intake of liquor to a

pint arises, Byron informs Hobhouse, "I have about the same conception of Scrope's company and a *pint* (of anything but brandy) that the close reflection of many years enables me to entertain of the Trinity." Davies, however, has a vice that proves his downfall. At the news that he has suffered heavy losses, Byron writes to Hobhouse from Venice that "such a man's destiny ought not to be in a dice box, or a horse's hoof, or a gambler's hand." Davies has to take refuge on the Continent, and Byron exclaims, "what is he to do? He can't *play*, and without play he is wretched."

Almost the antithesis of Davies is another Cambridge friend of the poet, a man who is himself a poet, Francis Hodgson. After some less than impeccable behaviour—Byron warns him in 1811, "You will never give up wine.... You drink and repent; you repent and drink"—Hodgson settles down as a respectable married clergyman and tries to persuade Byron to overcome his disbelief in revealed religion. Byron advises his intimate friend the poet Thomas Moore, who has just acquired a new neighbour in Hodgson:

You will find him an excellent-hearted fellow, as well as one of the cleverest; a little, perhaps, too much jappanned by preferment in the church and the tuition of youth, as well as inoculated with the disease of domestic felicity, besides being overrun with fine feelings about woman and *constancy* ... but, otherwise, a very worthy man.

In 1821, Byron recommends his own publisher, John Murray, to reissue two "excellent" long poems by Hodgson.

Literary fame can have penalties as well as rewards. Soon after *Childe Harold* is published in March 1812, the volatile wife of the staid William Lamb (later Lord Melbourne) throws herself at the new literary lion. For a few weeks, he is flattered and dazzled, but Caroline defies the rules of the social circle in which they both move, a circle that tolerates discreet and decorous adultery. Much of her delight lies in ostentatiously parading her conquest and her passion, and Byron is soon writing to her guardedly: "I never knew a woman with greater or more pleasing talents, *general* as in a woman they should be, something of everything, and too much of nothing. But these are unfortunately coupled with a total want of common conduct." He goes on to refer to the hold she has over him: "Then your heart, my poor Caro (what a little volcano!), that pours *lava* through your veins ... you know I have always thought you the cleverest, most agreeable, absurd, amiable, perplexing, dangerous, fascinating little being that lives now, or ought to have lived 2000 years ago."

By November, Byron has taken refuge in the welcoming arms of Lady Oxford, who soon receives a letter from the relentless Caroline. He persuades her not to answer the questions it contains, and bursts out to his friend Lady Melbourne, who is also Caroline's mother-in-law, "Is everyone to be embroiled by C.? Is she mad, or mischievous only?" When Caroline refuses to return his letters but demands her own, which "would '*ruin her*,'" as well as the trinkets she has given him, he informs Lady Melbourne that he has given the trinkets away but adds, "her *letters* I give up because she has a *child*." He treats the same friend to his version of what happened when Caroline stabbed herself with broken glass at a ball to publish her indignation at Byron's deserting her. Not until he is engaged to Annabella Milbanke does her persecution cease. While both parties lack moral restraint, it is not difficult to sympathise with Byron's proposal in 1814: "So if C. were fairly shut up, and bread and watered into common sense and some regard to truth, no one would be the worse, and she herself much the better for the process."

Whereas Lady Caroline matches today's Hollywood celebrities in her appetite for publicity, the sweet tempered Lady Oxford, whose children are known as the Harleian Miscellany because of the number of their fathers, is content to be with her lover of the moment without creating a disturbance. Byron enjoys life on the Oxford estate of Eywood and gives Lady Melbourne a glimpse of its mistress's behaviour when he alludes to the current controversy over the behaviour of the Prince Regent's wife: "She insists always upon the P[rincess]'s innocence, but then, as she sometimes reads me somewhat a tedious homily upon her *own*, I look upon it in much the same point of view as I should on Mary Magdalen's vindication of Mrs. Joseph, or any other *immaculate riddle*."

At one point, Byron briefly fears that he has made Lady Oxford pregnant: there can be no such suspicion in his subsequent dalliance with Lady Frances Webster, a woman who, her brother has told him, married to escape from an unpleasant family. A delicious comedy unrolls in a series of letters to Lady Melbourne. The lady in question, Byron says, is "very handsome, and very gentle, though sometimes decisive; fearfully romantic, and singularly warm in her *affections*"; she is also clever and only surpassed in good temper by Lady Oxford. Lady Frances's bumptious husband, James Wedderburn Webster, nicknamed "Bold Webster," invites Byron to join a party at Aston Hall, where he warns his host against his too obvious pursuit of a female guest:

what do you think [he writes] was his answer? 'I think any woman fair game, because I can *depend* upon Ly F.'s principles – she can't go wrong, and therefore I may.' 'Then, why are you

jealous of her?' 'Because – because – zounds! I am not jealous. Why the devil do you suppose I am?' I then enumerated some very gross symptoms which he had displayed, even before her face, and his servants, which he could not deny; but persisted in his determination to add to his '*bonnes fortunes*.'

Webster is anxious that his wife should not see the books in Italian, including Dante, that Byron has brought into the house, "because, forsooth, it is a language which doth infinite damage!!" Byron's letter continues: "Because I enquired after the Stanhopes, our mutual acquaintance, he *answers* me by another *question*, 'Pray, do you enquire after *my* wife of others in the same way?'" Provoked by the jealous husband, Byron makes advances to Lady Frances in the billiard room and later passes a note to her, aware of the risks involved:

It was received, however, and deposited not very far from the heart which I wished it to reach when, who should enter the room but the person who ought at that moment to have been in the Red Sea, if Satan had any civility. But *she* kept her countenance, and the paper; and I my composure as well as I could.

Lady Frances's answer makes it clear the attraction is mutual, but she wishes their relationship to remain platonic. Byron reports that, even as he is writing, Webster "has brought me a political pamphlet in MS. to decypher and applaud, I shall content myself with the last." He soon agrees to lend the man £1,000 to keep him away from moneylenders and advises him what to do when a former tutor who has helped him to carry on his adulteries threatens blackmail: "I have told him that if the discovery is inevitable, his best way is to anticipate it, and sue for an act of indemnity: if she likes him she will forgive, and if she don't like him, it don't matter whether she does or no."

The climax shows Byron at his best:

One day, left entirely to ourselves, was nearly fatal ... it came to this. 'I am entirely at your *mercy*. I own it. I give myself up to you. I am not *cold* – whatever I seem to others; but I know that I cannot bear the reflection hereafter. Do not imagine that these are mere words. I tell you the truth – now act as you will.' Was I wrong? I spared her ... yet I sacrificed much – the hour *two* in the morning – away – the Devil whispering that it was mere *verbiage*, etc. And yet I know not whether I can regret it – she seems so very thankful for my forbearance.

Lady Melbourne's response draws the comment, "Your approbation of my Ethics on *the* subject gratifies me much."

In Genoa, at the end of 1822, Webster re-enters Byron's life. He has not redeemed any of his £1,000 loan nor paid any interest on it. He is in pursuit of Lady Hardy, a friend and cousin of Byron, who writes to her, "The Chevalier persisted in declaring himself an ill-used gentleman, and describing you as a kind of cold Calypso, who had led astray people of an amatory disposition without giving them any sort of compensation." Soon "that little and insane James Wedderburn Webster" persuades a reluctant Byron (who appreciates the irony) to write to Lady Frances in an attempt to reconcile her to her husband. Webster is in debt and has no credit; his bills are not accepted unless endorsed by someone who has. Having resisted his pleas to endorse a £70 bill, Byron gives way in the case of two others and has to make good the money. Webster, he informs Lady Hardy, two months before he embarks to aid the Greeks in their struggle for independence, has absconded at Paris with one of Lady Frances's children, has been arrested, and has escaped from custody.

When Byron ends his relationship with Lady Frances Webster towards the end of 1813, he is left to cope with his dangerous passion for his half-sister, who is married to a military man whose reckless gambling brings hardship to her and her children. "Anything, you will allow," he has written to Lady Melbourne about his pursuit of Webster's wife, "is better than the *last*; and I cannot exist without some object of attachment." Augusta is not intellectual, and there is a glimpse of their relationship in a letter to Lady Melbourne written when the siblings are snowbound at Newstead in January 1814: "we never yawn or disagree; and laugh much more than is suitable to so solid a mansion; and the family shyness makes us more amusing companions to each other than we could be to any one else." His sister, he soon informs his fiancée, is "like a frightened hare with new acquaintances" but "the least selfish and gentlest creature in being." To Lady Melbourne, he asserts, "I know her to be in point of temper and goodness of heart almost unequalled," and he insists that she is all but blameless for their guilty passion, for "She was not aware of her own peril till it was too late." In exile, he remains devoted to Augusta, but the letters he receives from her in Italy do not contain the news from England that he wants and, worse still, are so cryptic – full of "paraphrase, parenthesis, initials, dashes, hints" – that he cannot understand what she is getting at. When she writes that she has a hope for him, he asks, "what '*hope*,' child?" What he does not know is that she is being terrorized by his devout wife, who persuades her that she has a chance of redemption by repentance for her sin and that she is being made to show his letters to his wife, letters in

which her husband refers to her as “one formed for my destruction” and “that infamous fiend.”

The lady whom Byron makes his confidante even in as delicate a matter as his incestuous passion is his elder by thirty-eight years. In her early sixties Lady Melbourne, no model of chastity in her youth, is wise in the ways of the world and still attractive. Byron relishes her company, her correspondence, and her counsel. The mischievous eyes and “wicked laughs” of his “dear Machiavel” serve as a garnish to the fine insight into men and women that qualifies her as his guide in the moral and social maze in which he finds himself. “I never,” he writes to her, “saw such traits of discernment, observation of character, knowledge of your *own sex* and sly concealment of your *knowledge* of the *foibles* of *ours*,” and he tells her that compared to the talk at Lady Oxford’s, “your conversation is really *champagne*.” When she gives him a ring, he is eager to bestow one on her, and when her niece Annabella accepts his proposal, he confides, “You can’t conceive how I long to call you Aunt.” He always acts as she recommends, or, as he puts it, “I have obeyed you in everything.” After the breakdown of his marriage, their friendship cannot continue, but on learning of her death in 1818, he recalls that she was “the best, and kindest, and ablest female I ever knew – old or young.”

Very different from Lady Melbourne is her intellectual niece, Annabella Milbanke, whom Byron first regards with great respect and who surprises him by concealing some poetic talent under what seems her placid exterior. He judges her pretty enough, though not “glaringly beautiful,” and learning that she is also a mathematician, refers to her as “my Princess of Parallelograms.” They share a contempt for the frivolities of fashionable society, but she is a devout Christian and a rigid moralist, while he, though not an atheist, is a spurner of revealed religion and a rake. He informs Lady Melbourne, “Somebody or other has been seized with a fit of amazement at her correspondence with so naughty a personage, and this has naturally given a fillip of contradiction in my favour which was much wanted.” Invited to stay with her family, he cannot trust himself not to fall in love with this “very superior woman, a little encumbered with Virtue.” On her part, she continues to correspond with this fascinating man, who advises her what ancient historians to read, pointing out that she already knows the best modern ones. Amused that she finds the highest good to be repose, he reminds her that this is Epicurean doctrine, perhaps himself forgetting that for the supposedly irreligious Epicurus elements of that repose are a temperate lifestyle and a clear conscience.

When he is unexpectedly accepted by Annabella in September 1814, Byron is flushed with happiness, vows to reform, and promises to listen to any arguments she puts and read any books she wishes in favour of re-

ligion. "I would," he soon assures Lady Melbourne, "do almost anything rather than lose her now." He does not care whether she has any fortune (she has only expectations from an uncle) but is satisfied he can support them both when he sells Newstead. He has no notion of the great difficulty he will have in selling it and the disastrous effect this will have on his marriage. After about a month, however, he begins to have doubts. "I have every disposition," he writes to Lady Melbourne, "to do her all possible justice, but I fear she won't govern me; and if she don't it will not do at all; but perhaps she may mend of that fault." At Annabella's home early in November, he finds her,

the most *silent* woman I ever encountered; which perplexes me extremely. I like them to talk, because then they *think* less. Much cogitation will not be in my favour.... I am studying her, but can't boast of my progress in getting at her disposition.

Her "agitations upon slight occasions" trouble him. By this time, lawyers are in the house working on marriage settlements, and Byron declares, "the die is cast; neither party can recede."

Annabella is aware that her notorious bridegroom has some little publicised virtues. In explanatory letters to her dumbfounded friends, she justifiably refers to his generous, charitable nature and his kind and dutiful treatment of his tenants. From his works and letters, she knows of his intellect and learning. However, while she is aware that he suffers from depression, she is ignorant of his furious temper, which often erupts in wild mood swings. Biographers relate how he dismays his wife on their honeymoon and later by veering between affection and dejection, endearment and abuse, and how he prowls the corridors at night with pistols and a dagger and makes mysterious self-accusations. When Annabella travels to the Milbanke house at Seaham with their newborn baby and refuses to return, her parents no doubt support her. Byron writes to her father admitting his irritable temper, attacks of despondency, and occasional acts of violence (though not against his wife). He asserts that she knows this is due to an unfortunate element in his constitution, not to anything she has done, and in a pleading letter to her asks whether she has never experienced any happiness with him and whether they have not enjoyed great reciprocal affection. From their letters, in which they used their pet names—she is Pip, he Dear Duck—it is clear that they have. It is difficult not to sympathise with both parties in this ill-judged marriage.

For about a year, as he later recalls, Byron does not give up hope of reconciliation. He is especially aggrieved that Annabella and her parents persistently refuse to reply to his reasonable request to be told what they

accuse him of, probably because the most serious charge of all is the charge of incest, for which there is no proof.

After the separation, Byron's attitude to his estranged wife varies between detestation and gentler emotions. She can be "that evil Genius of a woman, Ly. Byron (who was born for my desolation)," but at times he can realise that she did not set out to injure him. Very occasionally, he recognises that she, too, has suffered. "My Clytemnestra," he tells Hobhouse, "stipulated for the security of her jointure; it was delicately done, considering that the poor woman will only have ten thousand a year, more or less, for life, on the death of her mother." Thanking her for one of her rare concessions – agreeing to concern herself with the welfare of Augusta and her children after his death – he writes:

Yours has been a bitter connection to me in every sense, it would have been better for me never to have been born than to have ever seen you. This sounds harsh, but is it not true? and recollect that I do not mean that you were my *intentional* evil Genius but an Instrument for my destruction – and you yourself have suffered too (poor thing) in the agency, as the lightning perishes in the instant with the Oak which it strikes.

He is capable of writing to her civilly on practical matters such as investments, and he urges her to be quite sure that the maid she dismisses without a character (the wife his servant Fletcher has left behind) really is guilty of bearing false witness. Accompanying this plea is an account of the city of Ravenna and his life there. The specimen of the famous Italian poet Monti's handwriting that he sends to Augusta he suggests she might pass on to Annabella "as she is fond of collecting such things." In 1821, when the latter sends him a specimen of their daughter Ada's hair, he thanks her especially for the inscription because it is the only specimen of her handwriting (apart from a single word in an old account book) that he possesses.

In Venice, Byron compiles memoirs for posthumous publication by Murray. When Annabella declines his offer to let her read his account of their marriage and add comments, which he promises not to erase, he replies, "My offer was an honest one, and surely could be only construed such even by the most malignant Casuistry." He himself later rejects Murray's request that he reread his memoirs and perhaps make changes: "the pain of writing them was enough; you may spare me that of a perusal."

When Byron leaves Annabella and Lady Melbourne behind and takes up residence in Switzerland, he renews an old acquaintance. In London, he has written to Lady Melbourne, "As to Me de Staël, I never go near her; her books are very delightful, but in society I see nothing but a plain wom-

an forcing one to listen, and look at her with her pen behind her ear, and her mouth full of ink"; charging her with a craving for admiration, he has stigmatized her as "in many things a sort of C[aroline Lamb] in her senses, for *she is sane*." Now, in Switzerland, he discovers that the ugly duckling has turned into a swan, for not only does she try to promote the marital reconciliation Byron so much desires, but she gives him hospitality, companionship and introductions. "She has," he tells Murray, "made Copet as agreeable as society and talent can make any place on earth."

In Switzerland, Byron also meets Percy Bysshe Shelley, whose hostility to Christianity and to conventional morals, he finds as remarkable as his poetic gift, though less welcome. While disputing his high estimate of Keats's verse on the ground that it belongs to a "*secondhand* school of poetry," he reassures Shelley, "You also know my high opinion of your own poetry, — because it is of *no* school." In a letter to Murray, he confirms a report of how Shelley became mysteriously agitated one evening when ghost stories were followed by a recital of Coleridge's "Christabel"; to show that his friend has nevertheless great physical courage, he goes on to describe his behaviour as a non-swimmer when they were together in a boat that seemed likely to founder in a gale:

I stripped off my coat — made him strip off his and take hold of an oar, telling him that I thought (being myself an expert swimmer) I could save him, if he would not struggle when I took hold of him.... He answered me with the greatest coolness, that 'he had no notion of being saved, and that I would have enough to do to save myself, and begged not to trouble me.

Although Byron is disturbed by Shelley's profession of atheism, apparently not realising that it is only the anthropomorphic God of popular religion that Shelley disbelieves in, he is impressed by his fine character. "I regret that you have such a bad opinion of Shiloh [Shelley]," he writes to Richard Hoppner, the British Consul in Venice; "you used to have a good one. Surely he has talent and honour, but is crazy against religion and morality." To Thomas Moore, he protests:

As to poor Shelley, who is another bugbear to you and the world, he is, to my knowledge, the *least* selfish and the mildest of men — a man who has made more sacrifices of his fortune and feelings for others than any I ever heard of. With his speculative opinions I have nothing in common, nor desire to have.

Shelley, like Byron, has literary genius and a gentleman's deportment. Leigh Hunt, poet and essayist, has literary talent and a slovenly lifestyle.

All three are enthusiasts for liberty. Hunt's two-year sentence for an article expressing contempt for the Prince Regent wins him a prison visit from Byron followed by a letter of praise: "I have a thorough esteem for that independence of spirit which you have maintained with sterling talent, and at the expense of some suffering." Watching the growth of Hunt's poem "The Story of Rimini," which he praises for its "originality and Italianism," he warns him against his addiction to "antique phraseology." However, Hunt proves stubborn, and Byron later complains, "He believes his trash of vulgar phrases tortured into compound barbarisms to be *old English*." The man himself he sees as degraded by unfortunate experiences, so that he has become "a great coxcomb and a very vulgar person in every thing about him."

In 1822 Byron gives Hunt sufficient money to enable him to bring his family to Italy, where he is to edit *The Liberal*, a periodical to which Byron himself contributes and which Leigh's brother John publishes in England. For a time, Byron has the experience of lodging the Hunts in his villa, and he writes to Mary Shelley of the six children: "They are dirtier and more mischievous than Yahoos. What they can't destroy with their filth they will with their fingers." When Murray is indiscreet enough to show John Hunt a letter in which Byron criticises Leigh and his children, Byron writes to the grievously offended Hunt, admitting he made some, though not, he thinks, all of the alleged criticisms, but mildly warns the negligent father that if he does not improve his parenting his children will not bring him any happiness. He soon admits to Murray, "As to any community of feeling, thought, or opinion, between L. H. and me, there is little or none: we meet rarely, hardly ever; but I think him a good principled and able man, and must do as I would be done by." *The Liberal* is not a success, but Byron feels responsible for the support of Leigh Hunt and his family. To Kinnaid, he defends his loan of £250 to Hunt on the grounds that the latter stood by him in 1816, when so few did, and after Shelley's death leaves the burden on him alone, he defies Moore's objection to his contributing to *The Liberal* alongside inferior writers:

as to the other plan you mention, you forget how it would *humiliate* him – that his writings should be supposed to be dead weight! Think a moment – he is perhaps the vainest man on earth, at least his own friends say so pretty loudly; and if he were in other circumstances, I might be tempted to take him down a peg; but not now – it would be cruel.

Byron has no need to exercise such generosity to Samuel Rogers, whom he begins by admiring as "the Grandfather of living Poetry," but who seems

to become “a fellow who hates every body.” When the older poet decides to travel in Italy, the younger one is not eager for a reunion. He confides to Murray, “I hope that we shall not have Mr. Rogers here: there is a mean minuteness in his mind and tittle-tattle that I dislike, ever since I *found him out* (which was but slowly)”¹; this uneasiness does not stop him from relishing an exchange of outrageous scandal with his visitor as they cross the Appenines in a post-chaise.

When Rogers visits Italy late in 1821, Byron has become faithful to Countess Guiccioli, but his path to constancy has been long and eventful. On leaving England, he loses no time in seeking sexual encounters. At Cologne, he engages with a chambermaid at an inn while the innkeeper stands swearing outside the room, thinking that it is his wife who is with the traveller. His first serious liaison, however, is with the twenty-one-year-old Marianna Segati, the spouse of the Venetian merchant in whose house he lodges. In November 1816, he writes to Thomas Moore:

I have fallen in love, which, next to falling into the canal, (which would be of no use, as I can swim,) is the best or the worst thing I could do.... Marianna (that is her name) is in her appearance altogether like an antelope. She has the large, black, oriental eyes, with that peculiar expression in them which is seen rarely among *Europeans* ... I cannot describe the effect of this kind of eye, — at least upon me ... her figure is light and pretty, and she is a famous songstress.

To Augusta he declares, “We have formed and sworn an eternal attachment, which has already lasted a lunar month”²; to Hobhouse he exults, “She plagues me less than any woman I ever met with.” The undemanding charm he finds in her is made clear in a letter to Murray: “I fell in love the first week with Madame Segati, and I have continued so ever since, because she is very pretty and pleasing, and talks Venetian, which amuses me, and is naïve, and I can besides see her, and make love with her at all or any hours, which is convenient with my temperament.” Nevertheless, faced with a rival she can fight. One night when Marianna and her husband are out at a *conversazione*, her sister-in-law calls on Byron, and he is talking with her — nothing more — when in walks his mistress. Her reaction he describes to Moore:

Marianna Segati ... after making a most polite courtesy to her sister-in-law and to me, without a single word seizes her said sister-in-law by the hair, and bestows upon her some sixteen slaps, which would have made your ear ache only to hear their echo. I need not describe the screaming which ensued. The

luckless visitor took flight. I seized Marianna, who, after several vain efforts to get away in pursuit of the enemy, fairly went into fits in my arms; and, in spite of reasoning, eau de Cologne, vinegar, half a pint of water, and God knows what other waters beside, continued so till past midnight.

Byron reassures Moore that male jealousy is unfashionable in Venice, where husbands do not fight duels.

Far more formidable than the thoroughly feminine Marianna Segati is the object of the poet's next serious attachment, the fierce, handsome Margarita Cogni, the wife of a baker. Early in their acquaintance, Byron describes her as "a Venetian girl, with large black eyes, a face like Faustina's, and the figure of a Juno – tall and energetic as a Pythoness, with eyes flashing, and her dark hair streaming." On 1 August 1819, he writes a long retrospective letter to Murray telling their story. Meeting in public with threats from Marianna Segati, Margarita Cogni declares: "You are not his wife: I am not his wife: you are his *Donna*, and I am his *Donna*: your husband is a cuckold, and mine is another. For the rest, what right have you to reproach me? if he prefers what is mine to what is yours, is it my fault?" On another day, Byron recalls:

when she had made me very angry with beating somebody or other, I called her a *Cow* (*Cow*, in Italian, is a sad affront and tantamount to the feminine of dog in English). I called her 'Vacca.' She turned round, curtsied, and answered, 'Vacca tua, Celenza (i.e. Eccellenza).' 'Your Cow, please your Excellency.'

Eventually she leaves her husband, who has already retrieved her from Byron once, to install herself in the latter's house, where she assumes command, intimidates his servants, and reduces his domestic expenses by more than half. In time her wild behaviour – she can tear off the mask of a noblewoman who is leaning on the poet's arm at the Carnival – causes Byron to turn her out. Before she leaves, she threatens to take her revenge on him with a knife. "I told her," he reports, "that I had seen knives drawn before her time, and that if she chose to begin, there was a knife, and fork also, at her service on the table." Next night, in the dark and cold, she, a non-swimmer, overcomes her dread of deep water and jumps into the canal. She is rescued, and Byron sends her home.

She was always [he tells Murray] in extremes, either crying or laughing; and so fierce when angered, that she was the terror of men, women, and children – for she had the strength of an Amazon, with the temper of Medea. She was a fine animal, but

quite untameable. *I* was the only person that could at all keep her in any order, and when she saw me really angry (which they tell me is rather a savage sight), she subsided.

For all her ferocity, Margarita Cogni shows great fondness for Allegra, the poet's infant daughter by Claire Clairmont. Passages on this sprightly child enliven his correspondence from May 1818 to April 1822.

He is most grateful to his friend Richard Hoppner and his wife for providing "a whole treasure of toys" and, when he moves to Ravenna, is eager to have the furniture prepared for the child transported to his new domicile. When she is ill, he is not reticent about expressing his anxiety. He is not to be moved from his refusal to allow Claire to raise their daughter in the Shelleys' vegetarian and supposedly atheistic household: "the Child shall not quit me again to perish of Starvation and green fruit, or be taught to believe that there is no Deity." He will allow her mother to see her, but "If Clare thinks that she shall ever interfere with the child's morals or education, she mistakes; she never shall. The girl shall be a Christian and a married woman, if possible." He leaves this daughter £5,000 in his will, observing that her illegitimacy and such a small sum would be a bar to a good marriage in England, while "Abroad, with a fair foreign education and a portion of five or six thousand pounds, she might and may marry very respectably."

From the time that she and her nursemaid arrive at Venice, as Byron tells Hobhouse, Allegra is "much admired in the gardens and on the Piazza — and greatly caressed by the Venetians from the Governatrice downwards." Augusta learns that the eighteen-month-old child

is very pretty, remarkably intelligent, and a great favourite with every body; but, what is remarkable, much more like Lady Byron than her mother — so much so as to stupefy the learned Fletcher and astonish me ... she has very blue eyes, and that singular forehead, fair curly hair, and a devil of a Spirit — but that is Papa's.

By the age of four, her Byronic temper is more evident than ever — she has long been "obstinate as a mule, and as ravenous as a vulture" — and she is now "quite above the control of the servants." For her education, Byron places her in a convent, where, he reports, she is very happy though she longs for a visit from him. Confiding to Moore that he has a natural as well as a legitimate daughter, he says, "I look forward to one of these as the pillar of my old age, supposing that I ever reach — which I hope I never

shall – that desolating period.” All his hopes collapse in April 1822, when he learns that Allegra has caught a fever and died.

Two years before the tragedy, Byron writes of Allegra, “She has plenty of air and exercise at home, and she goes out daily with M[adam]e Guiccioli in her carriage to the Corso.” This young woman, who marries her much older husband soon after completing her convent education, is a famous beauty, “the great Belle of the four Legations.” She has the femininity and libido of Marianna Segati combined with an aristocratic refinement and an educated mind. She is “reckoned a very cultivated young lady,” Byron informs Murray, as he explains why he has consulted her about the meaning of a doubtful word used by the fifteenth century Italian poet Pulci. He teaches her French and mentions to Augusta that she has “that turn for ridicule” found in all the Byrons. She amuses him by composing a sonnet in which she swears eternal fidelity to her husband.

Teresa Guiccioli’s faults are tactlessness and an over romantic disposition. Early in their acquaintance, he describes how she “horrified a correct company at the Benzona’s by calling out to me ‘*mio Byron*’ in an audible key, during a dead silence of pause in the other prattlers, who stared and whispered their respective *serventi*.” When he follows her to Ravenna, they go to a high society gathering at the Marquis Cavalli’s, where, he writes, “The G.s object appeared to be to parade her foreign lover as much as possible, and, faith, if she seemed to glory in the Scandal, it was not for me to be ashamed of it.” Pride in her conquest co-exists with an excessively romantic view of love, which Byron attributes to her having devoured Madame de Staël’s novel *Corinna*, in which a British nobleman travels to Italy and has a passionate affair with a brilliant Italian lady. When the Count issues an ultimatum – Teresa must choose between himself and her lover – she urges Byron to elope with her. He has extreme difficulty in persuading her that this step – almost unknown in Italy, where it is accepted practice for a married but not a single lady to take a lover – would bring irremediable social ruin on herself as well as on her unmarried sisters. Eventually, the Pope grants her a formal separation from her husband on condition that she live either with her father or in a convent; Byron then has a similar difficulty in making her leave the Papal States, where the awful doom of confinement threatens her, and temporarily put a distance between himself and her while she joins her father in his exile in Florence. Reading his poem “Fare Thee Well,” the Countess marvels that it could have failed to bring Lady Byron back to him, and after perusing a French translation of the first two cantos of *Don Juan*, she stops him for about a year from continuing the poem since it treats love with so little feeling.

For all her romantic notions, the young Countess seems to have an appetite for physical love to match her lover’s, and their escapades belong

to the realm of Restoration Comedy. Byron discloses some of the scandalous truth to Hoppner:

By the aid of a Priest, a Chambermaid, a young Negro-boy, and a female friend, we are enabled to carry on our unlawful loves, as far as they can well go, though generally with some peril, especially as the female friend and priest are at present out of town for some days, so that some of the precautions devolve upon the Maid and Negro.

A letter to Hobhouse refers to “some awkward evidence about sleeping together, and doors locked – which like a goose had been locked, and then afterwards forgotten to be re-opened; so that he [her husband] knocked his horns against the doors of his own drawing-room.” Nevertheless, unable to provide the watertight proof of adultery required in Italy, the Count finds himself compelled by the Pope to refund Teresa’s dowry and pay alimony. His fury puts Byron in some danger of assassination, but he restricts his precautions to riding armed.

Byron recalls how, when he began his liaison with the Countess, “I only meant to be a Cavalier Servente, and had no idea it would turn out a romance, in the Anglo fashion.” He abandons what he terms “promiscuous concubinage,” and practises fidelity. “As to libertinism,” he assures Hoppner, “I have sickened myself of that, as was natural in the way I went on, and I have at least derived that advantage from vice, to *love* in the better sense of the word.” In 1819, he writes to Augusta about the possibility of a Scottish divorce as he wants to remarry, but by 1822 he is acknowledging that he is indebted to his wife for saving him from this mistake; marriage, he has decided, is “the way to hate each other – for all people whatsoever.”

Teresa’s younger brother Pietra is a great friend of Byron, whose zeal for promoting freedom he shares, but in the summer of 1821, when the two men propose to go to Greece to aid in the armed struggle against Turkish rule, Teresa weeps, and Byron writes to Moore:

It is awful work, this love, and prevents all a man’s projects of good or glory. I wanted to go to Greece lately ... with her brother, who is a very fine, brave fellow (I have seen him put to the proof), and wild about liberty. But the tears of a woman who has left her husband for a man, and the weakness of one’s own heart, are paramount to these projects, and I can hardly indulge them.

About this time, Byron writes to Augusta about his feeling for Teresa, “I can say that, without being so *furiously* in love as at first, I am more attached to her than I thought it possible to be to any woman after three years.” By

May 1823, when he has been elected to the London Greek Committee, he informs its Secretary that he wishes to go to Greece but must first overcome an obstacle “of a domestic nature.” When he and Pietra get their way, he expects, as he intimates to his friend Lady Hardy, either to return to Teresa in Italy, or, should Greece become settled enough, to send for her.

Pietra is an affectionate enough brother to write often to Teresa, and Byron adds his own message to Pietra’s. He speaks of a hoped for return in the spring and notes that he is treasuring up things to tell her that will make her smile, including stories about her brother’s adventures—some of them, he hints, of an amorous nature, including one that brought him a venereal infection.

While Byron’s life during his last four years in Italy centres on Countess Guiccioli, he frequently writes to several men who continue to have important roles in it. The one whose portrait emerges most clearly from his letters is his fellow scholar, author and liberal John Cam Hobhouse.

Hobhouse is never afraid to challenge Byron when he thinks—not always judiciously—the latter to be wrong. He opposes the publication of *Don Juan* and the composition of the memoir to be posthumously printed, and he is unpersuaded by his friend’s defence of his drama *Cain*. Perhaps his pugnaciousness, as well as his limited hardiness, contributes to his returning home alone from Turkey in 1810. Byron, recalling their Continental travels, remembers how “my friend Hobhouse, when we were wayfaring men, used to complain grievously of hard beds and sharp insects, while I slept like a top, and to awaken me with his swearing at them.” When their environment is less challenging, they enjoy an easy, bickering companionship. Longing for his friend’s company in London in 1811, Byron observes, “here there are so many things we should laugh at together, and support each other when laughed at ourselves.” He praises Hobhouse to Lady Melbourne as “a cynic after my own heart,” and boasts to Kinnaird, “I have fallen in love, and with a very pretty woman [Marianna Segati]—so much so as to obtain the approbation of the not easily approving H[obhouse], who is, in general, rather tardy in his applause of the fairer part of the creation.”

When Hobhouse embarks on a political career, fighting fiercely for the radical cause, one of his pamphlets, published before he has any immunity as a Member of Parliament, lands him in Newgate Jail. “You used to be thought a prudent man,” Byron upbraids him, “at least by me, whom you favoured with so much good counsel ... get into the House of Commons; and then abuse it as much as you please.” But he applauds his friend for owning up to the authorship to save the printer from prison, and, seeing an amusing side to the situation, composes a mocking ballad beginning,

How came you in Hob's pound to cool,
 My boy Hobbie O?
 Because I bade the people pull
 The House into the Lobby O.

Although this is not written to be printed, the subject is much offended. However, he emerges from Newgate to enjoy a distinguished parliamentary career. Byron reads reports of his speeches in the Continental English-language newspaper *Galignani's Messenger* and endorses his reformist aims, but he believes necessary reform should be carried out soberly by gentlemen like Hobhouse himself and Sir Francis Burdett. He warns him against the agitators Henry Hunt and William Cobbett, insisting, "I can understand and enter into the feelings of Mirabeau and La Fayette, but I have no sympathy with Robespierre and Marat, whom I look upon as in no respect worse than those two English ruffians if they once had the power."

The Irish poet Thomas Moore is also among Byron's closest friends. The two meet in curious circumstances. Back from the Continent in 1811, Byron receives a challenge from Moore, who takes offence at a passage in the former's *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. An explanation soon convinces Moore that no insult was intended, a duel is averted, and Byron is delighted to meet his challenger on friendly terms. He rapidly decides that Moore is "the epitome of all that is exquisite in poetical or personal accomplishments," and over the years he encourages him to publish copiously. While the two poets can laugh and drink together, on a more serious plane Byron confesses to Moore in 1818, "I don't much care what the wretches of the world think of me — all *that's* past. But I care a good deal what *you* think of me." Perhaps his highest praise of the author of *Irish Melodies* comes when he tells him, "Of all authors, you are the only really *modest* one I ever met with."

No very clear picture of the Honourable Douglas Kinnaird emerges from Byron's many letters to him. A friend of the poet at Cambridge and a fellow member of the Drury Lane Sub-Committee, Kinnaird is for a few years a Member of Parliament and one of the gentleman radicals that Byron thinks should reform that institution. He becomes a banker and, with exemplary dedication, oversees his friend's financial affairs and negotiates on his behalf with Murray and other publishers. The brusqueness of which Murray complains seems to accompany his efficiency and honesty. Indeed, when he is elected to the House of Commons, Byron cautions him, "you have not hypocrisy enough for a politician."

Whereas Hobhouse and Kinnaird are born into the aristocracy and Moore is a fellow poet, John Murray, who follows his father into publish-

ing, is a man of the middle class. Byron describes him to Moore as “fair, liberal, and attentive,” and, always anxious not to cause him any losses, often proposes that the royalties he pays be dependent on sales. He comes to think of his publisher as “really a very good fellow” whose defects “are merely the leaven of his ‘trade.’” During their uneasy negotiations over the first instalment of *Don Juan*, Byron writes, “Don’t suppose I want to put you out of humour: I have a great respect for your good and gentlemanly qualities, and return your personal friendship towards me.” He long remembers how, in November 1815, with his marriage in peril and a financial crisis tormenting him, he receives a gift from Murray to save him from having to sell his library; though he returns the bills, he declares, “Your present offer is a favour which I would accept from you, if I accepted such from any man.” From Italy, he sends him letters as personal, informative and intimate as those he sends to Hobhouse, Moore and Kinnaid, as well as requests for such comforts as tooth powder, magnesia and corn-rubbers.

Murray does not seem to mind that after sending him his manuscripts, Byron habitually bombards him with a stream of revised readings and additional passages and frequently asks for help with punctuating his work. The two differ, however, in their politics. As an inducement to publish the Tory John Taffe’s commentary on Dante, which “appears a desideratum in literature (especially in English literature),” he states, “His politics and religion are all in your own damned way.” He is less forgiving of Murray’s increasing delay over his decisions, his failure to acknowledge the receipt of manuscripts that have made the dangerous transit across Western Europe, and his failure to answer letters. The twofold nature of their relationship underlies the statement, “When I write to you as a friend, you will of course take your own time and leisure to reply; but when I address you as a publisher, I expect an answer.”

The letters Byron writes to Murray about his expatriate life lead the latter to ask for a “volume of manners, etc., on Italy,” but having lived intimately with families, he does not feel “authorized in making a book of them,” nor does he know how to make British readers “comprehend a people, who are at once temperate and profligate, serious in their character and buffoons in their amusements, capable of impressions and passions, which are at once *sudden* and *durable* (what you find in no other nation), and who actually have *no society* (what we would call so).”

Eventually Murray gets more and more nervous about his illustrious poet’s work – his *Cain* is suspected to be blasphemous and his *Vision of Judgment*, which ridicules royalty, is open to a charge of sedition. This leads Byron to transfer his allegiance to the less cautious John Hunt, brother of Leigh. In November 1822, believing that Murray is withholding one of his

manuscripts from Hunt, he breaks off relations with his long-time publisher and friend, writing,

I shall withdraw from you as a publisher, on every account, even on your own, and I wish you good luck elsewhere; but if you can make out that you treated H[unt] fairly, you may reckon me, in other respects, as

Yours very truly,
N[oel] B[yron]

Happily, one of his last letters is a missive to Murray from Greece, carrying news of his experiences there.

One professional man with whom Byron has a lifelong correspondence is John Hanson, the family solicitor who arranges his schooling and entertains him as a guest in his own family during some of the holidays. In 1811, he writes to him from Athens that he looks forward to sharing a bottle of port with him on his return. When he has been back in England for about three years, Hanson asks him one evening to rise early next morning, come to his daughter's wedding, and give away the bride. This ambitious lawyer is marrying his young daughter Mary Anne to the unstable and recently widowed Lord Portsmouth, one of whose trustees he is. (Later, Portsmouth's younger brother tries to have him certified insane and his marriage invalid; Byron testifies that he saw no sign of madness in the man.) In October 1814, Hanson infuriates Byron by his delay in accompanying him to the Milbankes' home to arrange the marriage settlement. The poet reminds the solicitor how "*I got up earlier for one of your marriages than you seem disposed to allow me to do for my own*" and warns him, "I can never look upon any one again as my friend, who has even been the innocent cause of destroying my happiness."

Despite some friendship, there is limited sympathy between the two men. Byron informs Moore that Hanson "has no very exalted notion, or extensive conception, of an author's attributes; for he once took up an *Edinburgh Review*, and, looking at it a minute, said to me, 'So, I see you have got into the magazine,' – which is the only sentence I ever heard him utter upon literary matters, or the men thereof." When Hanson visits him in Venice and, along with legal documents, brings, instead of the books he asked for, a kaleidoscope, Byron rages in a letter to Hobhouse:

I'll be revenged on Spooney – five men died of the plague the other day, in the Lazaretto – I shall take him to ride at the Lido; he hath a reverend care and fear of his health. I will show him the Lazaretto; which is not far off, you know, and looks nearer than it is. I will tell him of the five men.

Byron continues to chafe bitterly at Hanson's dilatoriness, and from early 1821, the letters he writes to him, though not hostile, concern only legal matters.

One character who is present throughout the letters belongs to a lower social class than Murray and Hanson. William Fletcher, Byron's valet, figures in the poet's story both as comic foil to its hero and as loyal retainer. Shortly before Byron leaves England in 1809, he reveals in a letter to his mother that Fletcher has corrupted the morals of Robert Rushton, a young boy committed to his care, by taking him to a prostitute. He resolves to dispense with the man's personal attendance, but to provide him with a farm or other means of livelihood for his wife's sake. A month later, he reports, "Fletcher begged so hard, that I have continued him in my service. If he does not behave well abroad, I will send him back in a *transport*." Fletcher proves to be a timorous individual and a traveller impossible to please. Mrs. Byron hears from her son: "We were one night lost for nine hours in the mountains in a thunderstorm, and since nearly wrecked. In both cases Fletcher was sorely bewildered, from apprehensions of famine and banditti in the first, and drowning in the second instance." Packing him off home after a year and a half, Byron complains of "the perpetual lamentations after beef and beer, the stupid, bigoted contempt for every thing foreign, and insurmountable incapacity of acquiring even a few words of any language." In fairness, he adds, "After all, the man is honest enough, and, in Christendom, capable enough."

When Byron marries Annabella Milbanke, Fletcher, now presumably a widower, marries Annabella's maid and in 1816 leaves her behind to accompany his master back to the Continent. From Brussels, that master writes to Hobhouse, "the learned Fletcher ... seems to thrive upon his present expedition; and is full of comparisons and preferences of the present to the last." In Italy, Fletcher is sometimes careless but can render valuable service. When the recently dismissed Margarita Cogni returns and snatches a knife, it is he who grabs her arms and takes her weapon. He reads in *Galignani's Messenger* about the political career of Hobhouse. At the news of the latter's imprisonment, Byron, writing to console his friend, protests, "I did not 'laugh' as you supposed I would; no more did Fletcher; but we looked both as grave as if we had got to have been your bail." Addressing Hobhouse on his parliamentary war of words with Canning, Byron writes, "Fletcher respects, and *expects* that you and Canning will *fight*, but *hopes not*." In Italy, duelling is not the custom, but assassination, to Fletcher's horror, is common. Less commendable are his superstitious fears in the old palazzo Byron rents at Pisa: "the learned Fletcher (my valet) has begged leave to change his room, and then refused to occupy his *new* room, because there were more ghosts there than in the other." For all his limita-

tions, Fletcher is devoted to his master, who emerges from a delirium caused by fever to find his valet and Teresa in tears on opposite sides of the bed. The letters disclose little about how Fletcher behaves during Byron's participation in the Greek freedom struggle, but he is in attendance at his master's deathbed.

By far the richest portrait to be found in the poet's letters is his self-portrait. Although Fletcher is the one English servant who accompanies him throughout his exile, he does not allow his debts to deprive him of an aristocratic lifestyle, which is dependent on a crew of attendants. In August 1813, he is about to escape from his troubles in England, but, as he explains to Webster, "My passage in the *Boyne* was only for one Servant, and would not do, of course."

Byron accumulates debt in his university days, when he borrows heavily from moneylenders—one even warns him about his imprudence. On the eve of his departure from England in 1809, he announces to his mother, "As to money matters, I am ruined—at least till Rochdale [an inherited estate] is sold; and if that does not turn out well, I shall enter into the Austrian or Russian service—perhaps the Turkish, if I like their manners."

Until his return from Greece, Byron clings stubbornly to his ancestral property of Newstead Abbey, but eventually concedes that it must go. At the end of 1817, after years of contention with Thomas Claughton, who pays a deposit but fails to complete the purchase, he is happy to sell it for a price "much better than could be expected, considering the times," to Major Thomas Wildman, his "old schoolfellow and a man of honour."

Part of the money from the sale Byron uses to pay off a major part of his debts; part is tied up through his marriage settlement and this Kinnaird invests in the Funds, from which, despite his much reiterated distrust in their safety, he receives large interest payments twice yearly. But should he return to England, he points out to Hobhouse, he would have to "live like a beggar with an income which in any other country would suffice for all the decencies of a gentleman." A letter of 1818 to Webster gives a notion of what Byron's idea of these decencies is, at least in an Italian setting:

You may suppose that in *two years*, with a large establishment, horses, house, box at the opera, gondola, journeys, women, and Charity (for I have not laid out all upon my pleasures, but have bought occasionally a shilling's worth of salvation), villas in the country, another carriage and horses purchased for the country, books bought, etc., etc.,—in short everything I wanted, and *more* than I ought to have wanted, that the sum of five thousand pounds sterling is no great deal.

In his later years in Italy, Byron takes gleeful pleasure in declaring to his correspondents that he has a great love of money, but at one point he explains that he wants it to travel to Greece or America to do good with. Having decided on Greece, he amasses as large a sum and obtains as much credit as he can to fund the rebellion against Turkish rule.

When Byron publishes *Hours of Idleness* in 1807, he has no thought of earning money by his poetry. His letters, however, show that he gradually becomes, in effect, a professional author, though he is never satisfied that poetry is, or should be, his vocation. He believes, moreover, that the most prominent poets of his time are heretics who have strayed from the neo-classical literary faith of the eighteenth century.

A violent attack in the *Edinburgh Review* on *Hours of Idleness* sets the young poet flailing out in too many directions in his powerful and bitter satire *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. Even before he arrives home from Greece, he writes to a friend, "At this period, when I can think and act more coolly, I regret that I have written it, though I shall probably find it forgotten by all except those whom it has offended." Some of those he has attacked, like Sir Walter Scott, in whose novels he is to delight, become his friends, and in 1817 he forbids Murray to include "this foolish lampoon" in a collection of his poems.

The two cantos of *Childe Harold* that Byron brings back from his travels contain "political and metaphysical parts" expressing an unpopular attitude to the Peninsular War as well as religious doubt—but, after some hesitation, Murray publishes the poem. After its appearance, Byron writes to Lord Holland that his mind is still full of eastern names and scenes. He composes a series of oriental verse tales, and for these, he explains, he has abandoned the Spenserian stanza he has fallen in love with and succumbed to the too easy measure of the octosyllabic couplet because it is the only one that the market accepts. Disclosing to Moore that he wrote *The Bride of Abydos* in just four days and *The Corsair* in ten, he observes, "it proves my own want of judgment in publishing and the public's in reading things, which cannot have stamina for permanent attention."

Byron tells his correspondents of his scorn for those who cater to fashion by writing about the East without having been there, and he protests to Murray, "I don't care one lump of Sugar for my *poetry*; but for my *costume*, and my *correctness* ... I will combat lustily." Misprints infuriate him: "I do believe," he chides Murray, "that the Devil never created or perverted such a fiend as the fool of a printer...there is an ingenuity in his blunders peculiar to himself."

On his return to Europe after the breakdown of his marriage, Byron resumes writing eloquent Spenserian stanzas to add the fine third and fourth cantos to *Childe Harold*, but in Venice he tries a new experiment.

Inspired by Italian poets and their recent English imitator, “Whistlecraft” (John Hookham Frere), he composes *Beppo: A Venetian Story*. Alluding to Francesco Berni (1490-1536), he explains to Murray, “the style is not English, it is Italian...Whistlecraft was *my* immediate *model!*... Berni is the father of that kind of writing, which, I think, suits our language, too, very well;—we shall see by the experiment. If it does, I’ll send you a volume in a year or two.” Beppo proves to be an admirable trial run for Byron’s greatest work, the comic epic *Don Juan* with its flexible *ottava rima* stanza that allows for expression in every kind of tone and mood. Comment on its composition and publication is prominent in his letters.

At first, not only is Murray doubtful about accepting the new work, but close friends like Hobhouse and Scrope Davies oppose its release. The risqué situations it depicts and the ridicule of the lady Donna Inez, who has obvious similarities to Lady Byron, make them most uneasy. Byron points to the sexual encounters in Fielding and Smollett and asks, “Are we more moral than when Prior wrote? Is there anything in *Don Juan* so strong as in Ariosto, or Voltaire, or Chaucer?” As for the ridicule of his wife, Byron insists, rather irrelevantly, that while the two may have something in common, Donna Inez is a foolish woman and not Lady Byron. In the event, the latter reads much of the opening cantos and confesses that the character made her smile at herself—and if others laugh she has no objection.

Early in the poem’s history, Byron defends its unusual variations in tone against the criticism of Francis Cohen (later the anthologist Sir Francis Palgrave):

I will answer your friend C—, who objects to the quick succession of fun and gravity, as if in that case the gravity did not (in intention, at least) heighten the fun. His metaphor is, that ‘we are never scorched and drenched at the same time.’ Blessings on his experience! Ask him these questions about ‘scorching and drenching.’ Did he never play at Cricket, or walk a mile in hot weather? Did he never spill a dish of tea over himself in handing the cup to his charmer, to the great shame of his nankeen breeches? Did he never swim in the sea at Noonday with the Sun in his eyes and on his head, which all the foam of Ocean could not cool?

In the same letter, Byron replies to Murray’s enquiry about what cantos he is to expect in the future:

You ask me for the plan of Donny Johnny: I *have* no plan—I *had* no plan; but I had or have materials.... Why, Man, the Soul of such writing is its licence...But a truce with these reflections.

You are too earnest and eager about a work never intended to be serious. Do you suppose that I could have any intention but to giggle and make giggle?—a playful satire, with as little poetry as could be helped, was what I meant.

A year and a half later, in February 1821, when he has written three more cantos, he informs Murray, alluding to the guillotining of Baron Cloodt in 1794:

The 5th is so far from being the last of *D. J.*, that it is hardly the beginning. I meant to take him the tour of Europe, with a proper mixture of siege, battle, and adventure, and to make him finish as *Anacharsis Cloots* in the French Revolution.... I meant to have made him a *Cavalier Servente* in Italy, and a cause for a divorce in England, and a Sentimental 'Werther-faced man' in Germany, so as to show the different ridicules of the society in each of those countries.... But I had not quite fixed whether to make him end in Hell, or in an unhappy marriage, not knowing which would be the severest.

Byron proudly claims that the poem is true to life—even that “Almost all *Don Juan* is *real* life, either my own, or from people I knew.” “You have so many ‘*divine*’ poems,” he tells Murray, and asks, “is it nothing to have written a *Human* one?”

While he is working on *Don Juan*, Byron conceives a new but less fruitful project. A devotee of theatre since early youth, he writes to Moore, “I am acquainted with no *immaterial* sensuality so delightful as good acting” and he enthuses over the great actors of his day. “Last night,” he reports to William Harness, “I saw Kemble in *Coriolanus*;—he *was glorious*,” and he acclaims Mrs. Siddons as Edmund Kean’s only equal in expressing the passions. In his work on the Sub-Committee at Drury Lane, as he afterwards recalls, he reads about five hundred plays.

During his residence in Rome, Byron labours to fill what he considers a gap in English literature by creating a drama which will be “neither a servile following of the old drama, which is a grossly erroneous one, nor yet *too French*, like those who succeeded the older writers.” Deeming the Elizabethan and Jacobean plays “pardoned only for the beauty of their language,” he denounces their flouting of the unities—the spreading of the action from place to place and its extension in time beyond a day as well as its dilution by the inclusion of a subplot. He writes a series of verse plays conforming to the unities, not wanting them to be produced “in the present state of the English stage” but confident that “the time will come when they will be preferred to any I have before written.” Unfortunately, he fails

to master the blank verse line as he has mastered the Spenserian stanza of *Childe Harold* and the *ottava rima* of *Don Juan*.

After his thorough education at Harrow in the ancient Greek and Roman classics, his favourite period in English literature is its most classical century, the eighteenth. Though highly appreciative of Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner" and "Christabel," he feels that with *The Excursion* Wordsworth, like Coleridge in his criticism, has strayed into unintelligibility. The work of Keats, except for *Hyperion*, his most classical production, he considers forced and of little worth. The poet he never tires of praising is the eighteenth century's most pre-eminent, Alexander Pope. At this time, enthusiasm for the Romantic Revival, headed by Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, has led to the unjust denigration of Pope, and Byron mounts a counterattack. With Pope, Byron couples Dr. Johnson, the great critic of the eighteenth century, whose *Lives of the English Poets* he regards as "the type of perfection." Referring to these two predecessors, he maintains, "had they lived now, I would not have published a line of anything I have ever written." Although his mind is saturated in Shakespeare, whom he frequently quotes in his letters, and although he once claims that the first two books of *Paradise Lost* are the world's finest poetry, he assures Moore that his preference is for the Augustan master:

As to Pope, I have always regarded him as the greatest name in our poetry. Depend upon it, the rest are barbarians. He is a Greek Temple, with a Gothic Cathedral on one hand, and a Turkish Mosque and all sorts of fantastic pagodas and conventicles about him. You may call Shakespeare and Milton pyramids, if you please, but I prefer the Temple of Theseus or the Parthenon to a mountain of burnt brick-work.

Byron scolds Murray, saying, "You are taken in by that false stilted trashy style, which is a mixture of all the styles of the day, which are *all bombastic* (I don't except my *own*—no one has done more through negligence to corrupt the language); but it is neither English nor poetry." (He has already published two cantos of *Don Juan* when he writes this.)

Byron clings to the neoclassical view upheld by Pope and Johnson that it is the business of the arts—Byron includes acting along with poetry, painting, and sculpture—to represent "nature" in the eighteenth century sense: that is, life as human beings experience it in every age. Occasionally, an observation in one of his letters reveals how he stores up memories and insights that may contribute to his rendering of "nature" in his poetry. Telling Lady Melbourne that he is glad the Websters amaze her, he adds, "anything that confirms, or extends one's observations on life and char-

acter delights me, even when I don't know people." Years later, a young Italian girl, "a little, pretty, sweet-tempered, quiet feminine being," wants to marry him and asks if he cannot rid himself of his wife. "You would not have me *poison her*?" he asks, and, he exclaims to Murray, "Would you believe it? She made me *no answer*." He comments: "I am not sure that my pretty paramour was herself fully aware of the inference to be drawn from her dead Silence, but even the unconsciousness of the latent idea was striking to an observer of the Passions; and I never strike out a thought of another or of my own without trying to trace it to its Source."

Passages in his letters early and late indicate that a range of compulsions and goals stimulate Byron to write poetry. He confides to his fellow poet Thomas Moore, "I feel exactly as you do about our 'art,' but it comes over me in a kind of rage every now and then, like ****, and then, if I don't write to empty my mind, I go mad." (The expurgation is Moore's.) When he is severely stressed by Shelley's death, financial anxiety, and difficult negotiations with Murray, he informs Kinnaird that to distract himself from his troubles, he has written nearly three additional cantos of *Don Juan*. At another time, he feels that his writing is simply a regular part of his life. "Every publication of mine has latterly failed," he tells John Hunt; "I am not discouraged by this ... I continue to compose for the same reason that I ride, or read, or bathe, or travel — it is a habit."

Although in the English-speaking world Byron is remembered primarily for his poetry, he is never fully satisfied that poetry is his vocation and at intervals he speaks of giving it up. He expresses his reservations about the art to Annabella Milbanke in 1813, when he has published two cantos of *Childe Harold* and *The Giaour*: "I by no means rank poetry or poets high in the scale of intellect. This may look like affectation, but it is my real opinion. It is the lava of the imagination whose eruption prevents an earthquake. They say poets never or rarely go mad."

The eighteenth century spirit so prominent in Byron's literary judgments is also at work in his Deist-like engagement with faith and doubt. He denies he is an atheist, but when his clerical friend Francis Hodgson tries to draw him to Christianity, he meets with the rejoinder, "I do not believe in any revealed religion, because no religion is revealed." When he alerts Kinnaird to the reader's need to dig beneath the surface of *Don Juan*, he is probably drawing attention to the vein of philosophical scepticism that runs through it. His doubt does not prevent him from finding much that is attractive in Roman Catholicism; declaring himself "a great admirer of tangible religion," he tells Moore that the Catholic "is by far the most elegant worship, hardly excepting the Greek mythology. What with incense, pictures, statues, altars, shrines, relics, and the real presence, confession, absolution, — there is something sensible to grasp at."

One thing Byron seems not to doubt is that a moral government is at work in the world. When Thomas Moore is appointed Registrar to the Admiralty in Bermuda and his deputy embezzles a large sum, which Moore must repay, Byron, though deeply sympathetic with his friend, observes, "It seems his Claimants are *American* merchants? *There goes Nemesis!* Moore abused America. It is always thus in the long run:—Time, the Avenger.... It is an odd World, but the Watch has its mainspring, after all." He finds the same force at work behind the suicide in 1818 of the lawyer Sir Samuel Romilly, who, having accepted a retainer from Byron, acted against him on Lady Byron's behalf. From Venice, he writes to Annabella: "Sir Samuel Romilly has cut his throat for the loss of his wife. It is now nearly three years since he became, in the face of his compact ... the advocate of the measures and the Approver of the proceedings, which deprived me of mine." Reporting Romilly's fate to Murray, he asserts, "I was yet young and might have reformed what might be wrong in my conduct, and retrieved what was perplexing in my affairs."

Byron often gives way to spasms of fury and occasionally conceives an implacable hatred—perhaps most intensely against Henry Brougham, for slandering him and urging Madame de Staël not to promote a reconciliation between him and Annabella. Nevertheless, the large element of compassion in his nature is frequently a blessing to the needy and unfortunate. In 1813 he gives—nominally lends—his friend Francis Hodgson a large sum to enable him to pay his late father's debts and marry, and long afterwards recalls how he also "travelled all night to beg his mother-in-law ... to let him marry her daughter." A few of his many charitable donations are mentioned in his letters, and in 1821, when he is planning his departure from Ravenna, he reports to Murray, "What you will *not* be sorry to hear is, that the *poor* of the place, hearing that I meant to go, got together a petition to the Cardinal to request that *he* would request me to *remain*."

At times Byron requires courage and magnanimity to act as his compassion prompts him. In Italy, he assists the Carbonari, the underground movement struggling for liberation from Austrian rule. When "a poor devil of a Neapolitan" involved in the movement comes to him "without breeches, and consequently without pockets for halfpence," he gives him charity and is interrogated (though "civilly and politely") for his pains.

A particularly alarming incident occurs one night when the local military commandant, an enemy of the Carbonari, ends up on his back in the street with five bullet wounds and none of the onlookers, who include a surgeon and a priest, will assist him. Byron has him taken into his house and placed him on Fletcher's bed, where, however, he soon dies. After the event, Byron tells Murray: "It seems that, if I had not had him taken into my house, he might have lain in the Streets till morning; as here nobody

meddles with such things, for fear of the consequences—either of public suspicion, or private revenge on the part of the Slayers.... He was a brave officer, but an unpopular man.”

No assessment of Byron’s correspondence can ignore the moral aspect of his relations with women, and especially his many sexual escapades in Venice. He is capable of boasting in one sentence of his riding, his swimming, and his sexual prowess: “I can,” he assures Murray, “get over seventy or eighty miles a day *riding* post, and *swim five* at a Stretch, taking a *piece* before and after, as at Venice, in 1818.” He is, however, not totally without doubts and scruples, as is seen in the case of Lady Frances Webster. In May 1810, he writes to Hodgson from the Dardanelles, “I am tolerably sick of vice,” but his resolution to reform does not last. Sixteen years later, when he is in command of troops in Greece, he has the decency to warn a British officer, who has recommended a poor washerwoman to the camp, that she should stop sending her daughter alone among the soldiers to save her from becoming a thief and a prostitute. To some extent, Byron accepts the sexual code of his time and his class. On learning that the son of a tenant has impregnated a girl of his own class, he tells his mother that the culprit should marry her: “if she were his inferior, a sum of money and provision for the child would be some, though a poor, compensation.” In connection with the Countess Guiccioli, he writes to Augusta, “when a woman is separated from her husband for her *Amant*, he is bound both by honour (and inclination at least I am), to live with her all his days; as long as there is no misconduct.”

In spite of his scruples, Byron is aware of his own moral fragility. When he returns to Greece to contribute to its uprising, he confesses to his banker, Charles F. Barry, that with his “propensity to be governed” there is the danger an opponent of his programme will undermine his fine intentions with the aid of “a pretty woman, or a clever woman ... with a turn for political or any other sort of intrigue.”

Byron sails to Greece knowing, as he confides to Kinnaird, that he may not return, but his moral values inform his actions as he strives, by bringing order and discipline to the fight for independence, to fulfil the duty he has assumed. To Hobhouse, he declares:

It is my duty and business to conceal nothing, either of my own impressions, or of the general belief upon the score of the Greeks, from the Committee. When I add that I do not despair, but think still that every exertion should be made on their behalf, in the hope that time and freedom will revive for them what tyranny has kept under, but perhaps not extinguished; I conceive that you will not despond, nor believe me desponding, because I state things as they really are.

The great enemy of the Greeks is their own disunity, and Byron labours mightily to unite the factions. His difficulties include lack of information and the appetite for money, which seems to be the chief driving force of many of the recruits. He informs Charles Hancock, an English merchant on the island of Cephalonia, how he behaved when the Greeks at first refused to help unload materials sent out by the London Greek Committee: "I turned out in person, and made such a row as set them in motion, blaspheming at them all from the Government downwards, till they actually did *some* part of what they ought to have done several days before, and this is esteemed, as it deserves to be, a wonder." The sole worthy Greek leader, Byron believes, is Prince Mavrocordatos, "the only civilised person (*on dit*) amongst the liberators" and a man notable for "not only talents but integrity." Writing to John Bowring, Secretary to the Greek Committee, Byron praises Colonel Napier, Governor of Cephalonia, one of the Ionian Islands, a British Protectorate. He feels that four men—Napier, Mavrocordatos, himself, and Colonel Stanhope, who has been sent out by the Committee, are in such agreement that they "should all pull together—an indispensable, as well as a rare point, especially in Greece at present."

Not all the foreigners who come to support the cause are as admirable as the English naval firemaster William Parry, "a sort of hardworking Hercules" who arrives with a military laboratory and a crew of artificers and is given the rank of Captain. Particularly troublesome among the foreign fighters are a number of German officers. In a letter to one, Byron explains why he had him arrested for terrifying the family with whom he lodged: "You ought to recollect that entering into the auxiliary Greek corps, now under my orders, at your own sole request and positive desire, you incurred the obligation of obeying the laws of the country, as well as those of the service." Some of the Germans want to flog a man for thieving, but Byron will not allow it; he hands the culprit over to the civilian police.

Byron declares that one of his aims in coming to Greece is "to alleviate as much as possible the miseries incident to a warfare so cruel as the present," and in this he has some small success. Among his acts of kindness to refugees and prisoners on both sides, one stands out for the letter that accompanies the released captives. At the end of 1823, his party sails from Cephalonia to Missolonghi in two vessels. Byron's own narrowly escapes being taken, but the other, which carries Pietra Gamba, as well as horses, a printing press and eight thousand dollars, does not. To Byron's astonishment, the captured ship is returned intact—by a strange chance its captain happened to have saved the life of the opposing vessel's captain in the Black Sea. In appreciation, Byron releases four Turkish prisoners with a letter in Italian saying:

These prisoners are liberated without any conditions: but should the circumstance find a place in your recollection, I venture to beg, that your Highness will treat such Greeks as may henceforth fall into your hands with humanity; more especially since the horrors of war are sufficiently great in themselves, without being aggravated by wanton cruelties on either side.

Byron's misgivings about the marshy terrain and unsalubrious climate prove all too prescient. On 19 April 1824, after it has plunged him into periods of delirium, a fever carries him off.

In Byron's letters, so rich in narrative, wit, characters, and description, contradictions common in human nature are writ large. Here is a man of humane feelings and humane principles liable to fits of ungovernable rage and capable of conceiving an implacable enmity. His aristocratic pride co-exists with his commitment to democratic reform. He is a great poet but unsure of his vocation. To Murray, he protests in 1819, "Your Blackwood [*Blackwood's Magazine*] accuses me of treating women harshly: it may be so, but I have been their martyr. My whole life has been sacrificed *to* them and *by* them." Yet he has already enjoyed nourishing friendships with Lady Melbourne, Madame de Staël, and Countess Benzoni. He can write to Lady Melbourne on one day of "the laughing turn of 'our philosophy,'" and on the next of Augusta's innocence, which he swears to "by that God who made me for my own misery, and not much for the good of others." While rejecting revelation, he is attracted by the "tangible religion" he finds in Roman Catholicism. For years, he can express utter hatred of England to his correspondents and then write to Count D'Orsay, "though I love my country, I do not love my countrymen—at least, such as they now are." Aware of how his mind fluctuates and changes, he confesses to Murray, "I never was consistent in any thing but my politics." On a foundation of moral weakness and moral strength, of profligacy and literary industry, of a failed marriage and zeal for liberty, Byron builds a life of extraordinary achievement.