

BYRON AND LEIGH HUNT: “THE WIT IN THE DUNGEON”¹

[Italicised passages are from Leigh Hunt, Lord Byron and some of his Contemporaries (“L.B.” here and in the notes) 2 vols, 1828.]

1) England

It’s in the nature of dungeons to make their occupants seem more interesting than they appear when they’re freed. I remember two victimised theatre-performers whom the Soviets prevented from emigrating for years and years, and who were blown up by their western supporters into stifled geniuses. They were freed – put on their first show ... and were promptly forgotten.

I saw nothing in Lord Byron at that time, but a young man who, like myself, had written a bad volume of poems – Hunt on his first sighting of Byron, swimming, in 1812. L.B. p.2.

What drew Byron’s initial attention to James Henry Leigh Hunt was Hunt’s imprisonment for libelling the Prince Regent in *The Examiner*, the Sunday paper he and his very different brother John edited, and in part wrote. The Prince, wrote Hunt (among much else),

... was a violator of his word, a libertine over head and ears in debt and disgrace, a despiser of domestic ties, the companion of gamblers and demireps, a man who has just closed half a century without one single claim on the gratitude of his country or the respect of posterity!²

This was published on March 22nd 1812, less than a month after Byron’s Lords speech on the Luddites, which was given on February 27th, and a month before his Roman Catholic Claims speech, which was given on April 22nd. The brief window which the world had on to Byron’s explicit, parliamentary Whiggism coincided with the *Examiner’s* article on the future George IV.

For publishing such universally-acknowledged truths, the Hunts got two years (in separate jails) and a fine of five hundred pounds. National heroes, they were imprisoned on February 13th 1813, served their full terms, and were released on February 2nd 1815. They continued to edit *The Examiner* while incarcerated. During Leigh’s imprisonment, Byron visited him (at Surrey Jail in Horsemonger Lane, Southwark). His first visit was with Moore on May 20th 1813, and he continued throughout the year until Hunt’s wife Marianne rejoined

Quotations from *The Story of Rimini* are from the first edition, London 1816.

1: B.’s phrase for Hunt in a verse-letter to Moore, May 19th 1813 (BLJ III 49).

2: *The Examiner*, 22nd March 1812, p.179.

her husband in prison – Byron and Marianne seem never to have got on.³ A friendship grew between the two literary men. In October 1814, while preparing to be married, Byron sent Hunt a hare, a pheasant, and two brace of partridges.⁴ It appears that Byron did not visit John, who was in later years, after the severance with Murray, to be his printer and publisher, and who introduced him to a wider, lower-class readership.

In political terms, Byron and Hunt had much in common. Both favoured Catholic emancipation; both were admirers of Napoleon; neither admired either the Court and Tories, or the corruption of public life on which the Court and Tories thrived; both favoured the freedom of the subject; both favoured some measure of parliamentary reform, though both were nervous, as many were, about stating what kind of reform, and how much reform, they favoured. Both despised poets who put slavishness to political paymasters before creative independence.

He [Byron] was a warm politician, and thought himself earnest in the cause of liberty. His failure in the House of Lords is well known. He was very candid about it.
– L.B. p.4.

Byron's admiration for Hunt's politics led him to place himself in a false position with regard to Hunt's literary ability. On December 2nd 1813 he wrote to Hunt:

It is my wish that our acquaintance or – If you please to accept it – friendship may be permanent – I have been lucky enough to preserve some friends from a very early period – & I hope as I do not (at least now) select them lightly I shall not lose them capriciously. I have a thorough esteem for that independence of spirit which you have maintained with sterling talent and at the expence of some suffering. – You have not I trust abandoned the poem you were composing when Moore & I partook of your hospitality in the summer? – I hope a time will come when he & I may be able to repay you in kind for the latter – for the rhyme – at least in quantity you are in arrear to both ...⁵

“The poem you were composing” was *The Story of Rimini*, Hunt's version of the tale of the lovers made famous by Dante in Canto V of the *Inferno*, “where it stands,” writes Hunt in a later preface, “like a lily in the mouth of Tartarus.”⁶ Such sentimentality shows, at the very least, that he doesn't share Dante's evaluation either of carnal transgression, or of the seductive power of tales of carnal transgression. It is Hunt's major attempt at a serious poem, and enables us to place his poetic talent under close and uneasy scrutiny.

Lord Byron ... told me, that sight of my volume at Harrow had been one of his incentives to write verses, and that he had the same passion for friendship that I had displayed in it. – L.B. p.2.

A man “with a ‘hypochondriac’ anxiety for company and community”,⁷ and a “horror of being left alone *even for an hour!*”,⁸ Hunt developed a style filled with what Nicholas Roe calls “uniquely odd cadences,” by which he “unsettles received ideas of elegant poetic diction to create a modish, colloquial classic”.⁹ The effect of this attempt at colloquialism is unnerving, for as well as being insecure, Hunt was arrogant, and with his arrogance went a determination that his style should be unlike anyone else's. As he was not a genius, the “uniquely odd cadences” read to the unsympathetic eye more like lapses in taste. He's a

3: Nicholas Roe suggests (*Fiery Heart, The First Life of Leigh Hunt*, hereafter *Roe*, Pimlico 2005, p.197) that Hunt's intimacy with his sister-in-law may have encouraged Byron in his own relationship with Augusta.

4: See BLJ IV 209.

5: BLJ III 189.

6: Leigh Hunt, *Poetical Works*, (1832), p.lxiii.

7: *Roe*, p.169.

8: Benjamin Robert Haydon, quoted *ibid*, p.89.

9: *Ibid*, p.127.

vulgar little boy breaking the rules – testing the limits of what’s permitted and defying us to criticise him.¹⁰

Style apart, Hunt offended nearly everyone in those far-from-levelling times by addressing Byron in his dedication, incorrectly, as from a commoner to a lord, omitting his title:

MY DEAR BYRON,

You see what you have brought yourself to by liking my verses. It is taking you unawares, I allow; but you yourself have set example now-a-days of poet’s dedicating to poet; and it is under that nobler title, as well as the still nobler one of friend, that I now address you. (p.v)

Byron may have grinned and forgiven him,¹¹ but few others did. What Byron may have had greater difficulty ignoring or forgiving (he never refers to it) was the way in which, in his preface, Hunt denigrates Pope:

All these [*Dryden, Spenser, Milton, Ariosto, Shakespeare and Chaucer*] are about as different from Pope, as the church organ is from the bell in the steeple, or, to give him a more decorous comparison, the song of the nightingale, from that of the cuckoo. (p.xv)

It’s hard to imagine Byron turning a completely blind eye to such a statement: but Hunt’s martyrdom excused the offence against Byron’s Augustan standards.¹²

The poem’s heroine, Francesca, a young noblewoman of Ravenna, is to be married to Giovanni Malatesta, Lord of Rimini. As the wedding-procession approaches, Hunt describes the throng (among which there are two familiar Byronic figures):

There, talking with the ladies, you may see,
As in some nest of faery poetry,
Some of the finest warriors of the court, –
Baptist, and Hugo of the princely port,
And Azo, and Obizo, and the grace
Of frank Esmeriald with his open face,
And Felix the Fine Arm, and him who well
Repay his lavish honours, Lionel,
Besides a host of spirits, nursed in glory,
Fit for sweet woman’s love and for the poet’s story. (p.8)

We see neither of the characters from *Parisina* again.

Hunt gives us a medieval pageant, an Italianate version of one of those in *Marmion* or *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (without Scott’s mastery of obscure detail):

While thus with tip-toe look the people gaze,
Another shout the neighb’ring quarters raise:
The train are in the town, and gathering near,
With noise of cavalry, and trumpets clear;
A princely music, unbedinned with drums;
The mighty brass seems opening as it comes;
And now it fills, and now it shakes the air,
And now it bursts into the sounding square;
At which the crowd with such a shout rejoice,
Each thinks he’s deafened with his neighbour’s voice. (pp.10-11)

10: Of the line *Daisies with their pinky lashes* from Hunt’s *The Descent of Liberty*, Nicholas Roe writes, “... the ‘pinky lashes’ are entirely Hunt’s own: as an image of a daisy it is sensually accurate, yet also artfully naïve – almost a form of baby-talk” (Roe, p.216). Barnette Miller (*Leigh Hunt’s Relations with Byron, Shelley and Keats*, New York 1910 p.62) lists *fledgy, pipy, paly, towery, surgy, spermy* (sic), and *orby* among Hunt’s neologisms in *Rimini*.

11: In Genoa Byron once addressed a letter starting “Dear Lord Hunt” (L.B. p.61).

12: Hunt disliked Pope’s Homer: see *ibid*, p.64.

The narrative focuses on Francesca. This is Hunt's way of lauding her charms:

What need I tell of lovely lips and eyes,
 A clipsome waist, and bosom's balmy rise,
 The dress of bridal white, and the dark curls
 Bearing an airy coronet of pearls?
 There's not in all that crowd one gallant being,
 Whom if his heart were whole, and rank agreeing,
 It would not fire to twice of what he is,
 To clasp her to his heart, and call her his. (p.10)

"... twice of what he is" is characteristically loose phrasing, the words racked to provide a rhyme. It emerges that the prince who has been sent is not Giovanni, the groom, but his brother Paulo (*sic*). The groom had

Dispatched the wished for prince, who was a creature
 Formed in the very poetry of nature,
 The effect was perfect, and the future wife
 Caught in the elaborate snare, perhaps for life. (p.28)

... "perhaps" is again typical. There's no room for it in the thought, for we know the snare will be for life – but the scansion needs a bisyllable, so in it goes.
 Giovanni ...

Had sent his brother Paulo in his stead;
 "Who," said old Guido, with a nodding head,
 "May well be said to represent his brother,
 For when you see the one, you know the other." (p.28)

Even by this early point we're getting worried about the way in which Hunt controls his tone. When Paulo addresses the distressed Francesca with a flourish ...

That air, in short, which sets you at your ease,
 Without implying your perplexities (p.29)

... we know we're in the presence of a writer, with no ear to warn himself against bathos, and with a sure instinct for creating it instead. This is not the style in which tragic events are narrated. As the bride leaves the town with the proxy groom, a group of old people wave her farewell:

Bending they stood, with their old foreheads bare,
 And the winds fingered with their reverend hair. (p.32)

Banality is not something Hunt shies away from. We're told that

It was a lovely evening, fit to close
 A lovely day, and brilliant in repose. (p.32)

We can see here where Keats got the confidence for some parts of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. As their riders take Paulo and Francesca downhill, Hunt assays a triplet (he often does): the coach's speed, he says, is such as at

Another time they would have scorned to measure;
 But now they take with them a lovely treasure,
 And feel they should consult her gentle pleasure. (p.34)

We're told nothing of the conversation between the protagonists as they travel from Ravenna to Rimini, still less of any feelings that may stir between them. Hunt is so concerned to describe the landscape on the journey that he forgets his poem's main theme.

However, he remembers it at the start of his third canto, when Francesca discovers

That she had given, beyond all power to part,
Her hope, belief, love, passion, to one brother,
Possession (oh, the misery!) to another! (p.44)

The uncertainty of touch is by now so noticeable that when (p.45) Hunt uses "martialler" as a rhyme word, the reader's mind forgets that it's the second rhyme in the couplet, and anticipates the equally unlexicographic "partialler" as its fellow – as though this were *Don Juan*. But Hunt, we have to remind ourselves, is being serious. His rhyme for "martialler" is "would prefer".¹³

Giovanni, he tells us, had "an eagle's nose" (p.45) and "kept no reckoning with his sweets and sour" (p.47); whereas Paulo had

... a face, in short, seemed made to shew
How far the genuine flesh and blood could go; –
A morning glass of unaffected nature, –
Something, that baffled every pompous feature, –
The visage of a glorious human creature. (p.46)

Byron had commented on this passage in manuscript with great politeness:

Excellent – particularly the first & last of the triplet – I would cut out the second not because bad but unequal to the other two. –¹⁴

Hunt had ignored his advice, and retained the triplet. For similar details, see below. Paulo told stories so well ...

Or touched the music in his turn so finely,
That all he did, they thought, was done divinely. (p.51)

Giovanni, on the other hand, is Hunt's version of a Byronic hero:

And so he made, 'twixt virtue and defect,
A sort of fierce demand on your respect,
Which, if assisted by his high degree,
It gave him in some eyes a dignity,
And struck a meaner deference in the many,
Left him at last unloveable with any. (p.49)

Lady Byron ... liked my poem, and had compared his (Byron's) temper to that of Giovanni, my heroine's consort. – L.B. p.8.

Here is Hunt's version of Paulo's fatal passion:

... every sweet thing her looks,
Which sometimes seemed, when he sat fixed a while,
To steal beneath his eyes with upward smile:
And did he stroll into some lonely place,
Under the trees, upon the thick soft grass,

13: See also "at your ease / perplexities" (p.29); "gratuitous / house" (p.49); "from his eye; / sensibility" (p.46); "some there were / tastefuller" (p.64); "tried to shun / too kind a one" (p.65); "think of it! / hypocrite" (p.84); "sensation / humiliation" (p.90); and "dejected / expected" (p.107).

14: CMP 214.

How charming, would he think, to see her there!
 How heightened then, and perfect would appear
 The two divinest things in earthly lot,
 A lovely woman in a rural spot! (p.58)

Which of the “two divinest things” has his greater loyalty, we wonder – the woman, or the rural spot?

In short, by the time the climax arrives, such is Hunt’s way of debasing everything he touches, we care for nothing that’s going on. The last thing he has done is learned from Dante. He even hints at dirty jokes. Giovanni, for example, was

Secure in his self-love and sense of right,
 That he was welcome most, come when he might. (p.62)

... which could be from *The Country Wife*.¹⁵ Hunt doesn’t of course mean that “he was welcome most,” but that “he *thought* he was welcome most.” He wasn’t “welcome” at all. But that wouldn’t scan.

In eschewing Pope’s standard of patrician elegance and poise, Hunt only creates an alternative standard of petty-bourgeois smirking and self-satisfaction.¹⁶

Byron stored up several things when reading *The Story of Rimini*. Paulo’s mooning inspires the hero’s in *Don Juan* Canto I, and his self-delusion (“... as to thinking, – where could be the harm, / If to his heart he kept its secret charm?” – p.59) inspires that of Donna Julia in the same section. Where Hunt aims at, but doesn’t achieve, tragedy, Byron sees the potential for comedy. He turns the derision he feels for Hunt’s bad rhymes into satire directed at his own fictional lovers.

When he writes in a style which emanates in part from memories of *Rimini* (using it as a standard of the kind of banality to avoid), he doesn’t forget Dante:

Alas! for Juan and Haidee! they were
 So loving and so lovely – till then never,
 Excepting our first parents, such a pair
 Had run the risk of being damned forever; 1540
 And Haidee, being devout as well fair,
 Had, doubtless, heard about the Stygian river –
 And Hell and Purgatory – but forgot
 Just in the very Crisis She should not. –¹⁷

Hunt’s lovers, having made love twice, pine almost away with guilt – in contrast with those of Dante and of Byron, who can’t get enough of one another, and experience no guilt at all – at the time. However, Hunt’s lovers still derive twice as much pleasure from their passion as do the Paolo and Francesca of Silvio Pellico, in the tragedy which Byron helped Hobhouse to translate: the Italian pair (the Pellican pair) exercise maximum Christian self-control, aren’t guilty of anything, but are still killed, under a misapprehension.

Giovanni hears Francesca murmur something in her sleep (just as Iago claims to hear Cassio, and Azo hears Parisina – though Byron wrote *Parisina* before Hunt wrote *Rimini*).¹⁸ Leaving her asleep, he goes to Paulo’s bedroom, where the following altercation occurs:

“May I request, sir,” said the prince, and frowned,
 “Your ear a moment in the tilting ground?”
 “*There, brother?*” answered Paulo, with an air

15: SIR JASPER: What ho, wife! Milady Fidget! He’s coming into you the back way! LADY FIDGET: Let him come and welcome, which way he will!

16: But “Hunt’s ‘vulgar’ poetry and ‘plebeian’ readership were vitally aligned with the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798” (Roe, p.306).

17: Byron, *Don Juan* II st. 193.

18: See Andrew Nicholson’s argument at CMP 540; Roe (*Roe*, p.244) says the two poems were written in parallel.

Surprised and shocked. "Yes, *brother*," cried he, "there."
 The word smote crushingly; and paler still,
 He bowed, and moved his lips, as waiting on his will. (p.92)

Which reminds one of nothing so much as

"Sir!" said the Count with brow exceeding grave,
 "Your unexpected presence here will make
 'It necessary for myself to crave
 "Its import – but perhaps 'tis a mistake; 700
 "I hope it is so, and at once to wave
 "All Compliment – I hope so, for *your* sake;
 "You understand my meaning, or you *shall*" –
 "Sir" (quoth the Turk) "'tis no mistake at all,
 "That Lady is *my Wife!*"¹⁹

The passage in *Rimini* was, however, singled out for praise by the *Quarterly Review*.²⁰
 Dante's Giovanni Malatesta slew the lovers when he discovered them *in flagrante*. But
 Hunt's Giovanni is far too polite even to implicate his wife:

"I wish to tell you, as a gentleman,
 "That what you may confess," (and as he spoke
 His voice with breathless and pale passion broke)
 "Will implicate no person known to you,
 "More than disquiet in its sleep may do." (p.93)

Paulo refuses to fight with him, but is shamed into doing so. The brothers' pages stand
 apart:

The one half sullen at these dreadful freaks,
 The other with the tears streaming down both his cheeks. (p.97)

... in case we should imagine only one of his eyes to be weeping.

Paulo fights a defensive match at first; but finally, via a feint, throws himself on
 Giovanni's sword. The weeping pages carry Paulo's body away, then one of them goes to tell
 Francesca the sad news. He finds a Keatsian nurse in attendance:

The door, as tenderly as miser's purse,
 Was opened to him by the aged nurse,
 Who shaking her old head, and pressing close
 Her withered lips to keep the tears that rose,
 Made signs she guessed what 'twas he came about,
 And so his arm squeezed gently, and went out. (p.101)

Her squeezing of his arm is meant by Hunt to convey a touching reality on the scene: but
 it gets in the way, a sentimental domestic detail in a scene of tragedy. A more self-critical
 writer would have cut it. Hunt is not able to see what contributes to the effect he wants,
 because he doesn't know what the effect is that he wants.

The pages and ladies look in to Francesca's room:

There lay she praying, upwardly intent,
 Like a fair statue on a monument,
 With her two trembling hands together pressed,
 Palm against palm, and pointing from her breast.
 She ceased, and turning slowly to the wall,

¹⁹: Byron, *Beppo*, sts. 88-9.

²⁰: *Quarterly Review*, January 1816, p.476. *The Romantics Reviewed C* (Keats-Shelley) II p.754.

They saw her trembling sharply, feet and all, –
 Then suddenly be still. Near and more near
 They bent with pale inquiry and close ear; –
 Her eyes were shut – no motion – not a breath –
 The gentle sufferer was at peace in death. (p.105)

To quote *Twelfth Night* in your own most pathetic section is unscrupulous. And “... feet and all” is the last nail in the coffin. For a heroine dying of loss and misery, compare

And then a Slave bethought her of a harp;
 The harper came, and tuned his instrument;
 At the first Notes, irregular and sharp, 515
 On him her flashing Eyes a moment bent,
 Then to the wall She turned, as if to warp
 Her thoughts from Sorrow through her heart re-sent,
 And he begun a long low Island Song
 Of ancient days, ere Tyranny grew strong.²¹ 520

The reviews of *Rimini* were for the most part harsh. The *Quarterly* (in fact, Croker and Gifford) reserved its most cutting blow till last:

Mr. Hunt prefixes to his work a dedication to Lord Byron, in which he assumes a high tone, and talks big of his ‘*fellow-dignity*’ and independence: what fellow-dignity may mean, we know not; perhaps the *dignity* of a *fellow*; but this we will say, that Mr. Hunt is not more unlucky in his pompous pretension to versification and good language, than he is in that which he makes, in this dedication, to *proper spirit*, as he calls it, and *fellow-dignity*; for we never, in so few lines, saw so many marks of the vulgar impatience of a low man, conscious and ashamed of his wretched vanity, and labouring, with coarse flippancy, to scramble over the bounds of birth and education, and fidget himself into the *stout-heartedness* of being familiar with a LORD.²²

The *Edinburgh* was critical of *Rimini*’s stylistic mixture, even though it eventually voted for the poem:

Though he has chosen, however, to write in this style, and has done so very successfully, we are not by any means of opinion, that he either writes or appears to write it as naturally as those by whom it was first adopted; on the contrary, we think there is a good deal of affectation in his homeliness, directness, and rambling descriptions. He visibly gives himself airs of familiarity, and mixes up flippant, and even cant phrases, with passages that bear, upon the whole, the marks of considerable labour and study. In general, however, he is very successful in his attempts at facility, and has unquestionably produced a little poem of great grace and spirit, and, in many passages and many particulars, of infinite beauty and delicacy.²³

This was written by Jeffrey, assisted perhaps by Hazlitt. Their politics had something in common with those of Hunt, hence their uncertainty whether to love or to hate the poem.

But *Blackwoods* was abusive, impugning Hunt’s attempt, as they saw it, to rise above his class, an idea with which they became carried away:

... such is the wretched taste in which the greater part of the work is executed, that most certainly no man who reads it once will ever be able to prevail upon himself to read it again. One feels the same disgust at the idea of opening *Rimini*, that impresses itself on the mind of a man of fashion, when he is invited to enter, for a second time, the gilded drawing-room of a little mincing boarding-school mistress, who would fain have an *At Home* in her house. Every thing is pretence,

21: Byron, *Don Juan* IV st. 65.

22: *Quarterly Review*, January 1816, p.481. *The Romantics Reviewed* C (Keats-Shelley) II p.756.

23: *Edinburgh Review*, June 1816, p.477. *The Romantics Reviewed* C (Keats-Shelley) I p.378.

affectation, finery, and gaudiness. The beaux are attorney's apprentices, with chapeau bras and Limerick gloves – fiddlers, harp teachers, and clerks of genius: the belles are faded fan-twinkling spinsters, prurient vulgar misses from school, and enormous citizens' wives. The company are entertained with lukewarm negus, and sounds of a paltry piano forte ...

... The poetry of Mr Hunt is such as might be expected from the personal character and habits of its author. As a vulgar man is perpetually labouring to be genteel – in like manner, the poetry of this man is always on the stretch to be grand. He has been allowed to look for a moment from the antechamber into the saloon, and mistaken the waving of feathers and the painted floor for the *sine qua non's* of elegant society ...²⁴

Hunt had sent the first three cantos of *Rimini* to Byron in manuscript, for comment. At once this had placed Byron in a quandary, of the kind that his much closer friendship with Shelley was to place him later. On October 22nd 1815, he wrote a letter to Hunt which is full of small reservations. My italics in the following

My dear Hunt – You have excelled yourself – if not all your Contemporaries in the Canto which I have just finished – I think it above the former books – but that is as it should be – it rises with the subject – the conception appears to me perfect – and the execution *perhaps* as nearly so – *as verse will admit*. – – There is more originality than I recollect to have seen elsewhere *within the same compass* – and *frequent & great* happiness of expression – in short – I must turn to the faults – *or what appear such to me – there are not many – nor such as may not be easily altered being almost all verbal*: – and of the same kind as those I *pretended to point out* in the former cantos – *viz occasional* quaintness – & obscurity – & a kind of harsh & yet colloquial compounding of epithets – as if to avoid saying common things in the common way – “*difficile est proprié communia dicere*” seems at times to have met with in you a literal translator. – I have made a few & but a few pencil marks in the M.S. – which you can follow or not as you please. – – The poem *as a whole* will give you a very high station – but where is the Conclusion? – don't let it cool in the composition? ...²⁵

What he really felt about Hunt didn't become clear until it looked as if there was sufficient distance in time and place between him and Hunt for frankness to be possible – that is, when he thought they'd never meet again. To Moore he wrote from Venice, on June 1st, 1818:

. . . Hunt's letter is probably the exact piece of vulgar coxcombry you might expect from his situation. He is a good man, with some poetical elements in his chaos; but spoiled by the Christ-Church Hospital and a Sunday newspaper, – to say nothing of the Surrey Jail, which conceited him into a martyr. But he is a good man. When I saw “*Rimini*” in MSS, I told him that I deemed it good poetry at bottom, disfigured only by a strange style. His answer was, that his style was a system, or *upon system*, or some such cant; and, when a man talks of system, his case is hopeless; so I said no more to him, and very little to any one else.

He believes his trash of vulgar phrases tortured into compound barbarisms to be *old* English; and we may say of it as Aimwell says of Captain Gibbet's regiment, when the Captain calls it an “old corps.” – “the *oldest* in Europe, if I may judge by your uniform,” He sent out his “*Foliage*” by Percy Shelley * * *, and, of all the ineffable Centaurs that were ever begotten by Selflove upon a Night-mare, I think this monstrous Sagittary the most prodigious. *He* (Leigh H.) is an honest Charlatan, who has persuaded himself into a belief of his own impostures, and talks Punch in pure simplicity of heart, taking himself (as poor Fitzgerald said of *himself* in the Morning Post) for *Vates* in both senses, or nonsenses, of the word. Did you look at the translations of his own which he prefers to Pope and Cowper, and says so? – Did you read his skimble-skamble about [Wordsworth] being at the head of his own *profession*, in the *eyes* of *those* who followed it? I thought that Poetry was an *art*, or an *attribute*, and not a *profession*; – but be it one, is that * * * * * [Wordsworth] at the head of *your* profession in *your* eyes? I'll be curst if he is of *mine*, or ever

24: *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, October 1817, pp.38-40. *The Romantics Reviewed* C (Keats-Shelley) I pp.49-50.

25: BLJ IV 320.

shall be. He is the only one of us (but of us he is not) whose coronation I would oppose. Let them take Scott, Campbell, Crabbe, or you, or me, or any of the living, and throne him; – but not this new Jacob Behmen, this – whose pride might have kept him true, even had his principles turned as perverted as his *soi-disant* poetry.

But Leigh Hunt is a good man, and a good father – see his Odes to all the Masters Hunt; – a good husband – see his Sonnet to Mrs Hunt; – a good friend – see his Epistles to different people; – and a great coxcomb and a very vulgar person in every thing about him. But that’s not his fault, but of circumstances.²⁶

It’s helpful to keep this later evaluation in mind when we read how Byron wrote to Hunt, and commented on his manuscript, in 1815. We have no indication that he thought any more highly of Hunt at that earlier time.

On October 30th 1815, Hunt wrote back to Byron, in terms which enable us to see the problem from Byron’s perspective when bearing in mind the 1818 letter to Moore. What tone to adopt when addressing such a person, who assumes equality with you even though your common sense tells you there is none? Hunt wrote:

And now allow me to give you my hearty thanks for your observations on the MS. I shall avail myself of the objecting ones for alteration in some instances, and if I do not do so in the greater number, you will do me justice enough to believe that it is not from mere vain rejection, but in vindication of a theory which I have got on the subject, and by which it appears to me that the original part of my style – if the attempt to bring back an idiomatic spirit in verse can be so called – must stand or fall. At the same time, I have a great horror of the prosaic, and still more so of the eccentric; and if you will take the trouble, when I have the pleasure of seeing you again, of running over the marked passages with me once more, I trust that where I am stout in my defence, you will be equally so, if you see necessity, in your attack. Upon the “obscurities” pray have no mercy, for if you tell me that such and such a line is not clear to you in the reading, I promise to have no mercy on it myself. It shall be the same with the “occasional quaintnesses,” that is to say, if they are deviations from recognized and natural modes of speaking, and not merely from some of the politer forms of versification: – for here is the point in question; and I am vain enough to think that you, who are carried so instinctively, in your own poems, to native and undisguised emotion, will, of all writers, think with me before long. You have the complete thing in point of feeling and character – why not, always, in point of words? The plain matter is this: it appears to me that we often hurt the effect, in modern poetry, of very true feelings and descriptions by putting them in false language, that is to say, we accommodate ourselves to certain habitual, sophisticated phrases of *written* language, and thus take away from real feeling of any sort the only language *it ever actually uses*, which is the *spoken* language. Does not this constitute the main difference, in point of style, between the higher and middle species of *drama* – for instance, English drama?²⁷

Reading *The Story of Rimini* and the correspondence that accompanied it is very unsettling – unsettling in showing how bad Hunt’s poetry is, and yet in showing how good Byron’s critical (and self-critical) faculty is, and in showing how tactful Byron had to be, having put himself in such an impossible situation with someone who imagined himself – on scant evidence – to be a fellow-creator. He is a “man of fashion” being asked for advice on dressing and deportment by an “attorney’s apprentice”.

Some of Byron’s marginal comments on *Rimini* have survived.²⁸ In them we see him straining to be polite. Here is the start of Canto III (as it was in manuscript):

Enough of this. Yet how shall I disclose
The weeping days that with the morning rose,
How bring the bitter disappointment in, –
The holy cheat, the virtue-binding sin, –
The shock, that told this lovely, trusting heart, 5
That she had given, beyond all power to part,

26: BLJ VI 46-7.

27: LJ III 417-20.

28: CMP 213-17. I have added the line numbers and changed the inverted commas in the quotations below.

Her hope, belief, love, passion, to one brother,
 Possession (oh the misery!) to another!
 Some likeness was there 'twixt the two, – an air
 At times, a cheek, a colour of the hair, 10
 A tone, when speaking of indifferent things;
 Nor, by the scale of common measurings,
 Would you say more perhaps, than that the one
 Was somewhat stouter, t'other finelier spun;
 That of the two, Giovanni was the graver, 15
 Paulo the livelier, & the more in favour.

Byron allows the first eight lines with “all good”. But he sees, what Hunt their creator can't, that the last eight, in admitting, from the narrator's viewpoint, collusive with that of the heroine, that there really isn't that much to choose physically between the husband and the brother-in-law, trivialise what should be a tragic conflict and turn them into the fantasies of a silly adolescent. If sexual passion is as transferable as this, why get moralistic about it? It certainly isn't worth dying for. At line 10 Byron suggests “smile” instead of “cheek,” and at “colour,” writes “suppose you say ‘a colour<ing> of the cheek or hair’ – or in lieu of ‘cheek’ ‘a smile’”. At line fourteen he suggests “more robust the other” for “somewhat stouter, t'other”. Finally he writes “very good too – as a whole –” which leaves his conscience latitude enough, implying as it does “as a whole – but I have grave doubts about many details,” aware that Hunt's vanity won't allow him to see what he implies.

In fact Hunt changed the opening three lines without, so far as we know, any suggestion from Byron. They go, in the final version:

Now why must I disturb a dream of bliss,
 And bring cold sorrow 'twixt the wedded kiss?
 How mar the face of beauty, and disclose ... (p.43)

“My pencil marks on the margin of your former M.S.S. I never thought worth the trouble of deciphering,” Byron writes to Hunt on January 29th 1816.²⁹ We have evidence that he did decipher them: Hunt incorporated just three of the ten substantive changes Byron suggested.³⁰

Hunt had further incurred Byron's goodwill by a long note he'd appended to another poem, *The Feast of the Poets*, which he'd also revised in prison, and which had come out in 1814. Byron has only a small part in the satirical pageant as a whole, and that in the second edition; but the notes are longer than the poem, and near the end we read the following:

If there is any living poet, whom from his situation in life, from his early genius, and from the complexion of his writings, a cordial observer might venture to remind of these matters, it is a young nobleman who has been lately rising in celebrity, and who, as far as the world is concerned, is now moving in the very thick of the luster. Early his own master, and of an elevated rank, Lord Byron has had disadvantages as well as advantages, of no ordinary description ...³¹

Hunt has some advice for Byron: firstly, that “he would habituate his thoughts as much as possible to the company of those recorded spirits and lofty countenances of public virtue, which elevate an Englishman's recollections, and are the true household deities of his country;” that he “would study politics more and appear oftener in parliament;” that he “would study society ... in those middle walks of life, where he may find the most cordial

29: BLJ V 18-19.

30: CMP 213-17 and 541-2.

31: Hunt, *The Feast of the Poets* (1814), Woodstock facsimile, 1989, pp.126-7.

sum of it's happiness;" and lastly, "that he would consider what he has done as too full of promise to warrant his resorting at any time to a common property in style, or his use of such ordinary expedients in composition, as a diligent student of our great poets will be too proud to adopt". Hunt further wishes that Byron "might be induced to look a little more to the useful as well as the beautiful in writing, and be diverted from that tendency to view men and things on the dark side, which generally proceeds from a want of acquaintance with the truly bright one."³²

What Hunt appears to be saying is that Byron should mix more with men like him, and write more in a style like his. He records that his own favourite Byron poems are "the little effusions at the end of the Childe Harold".

Byron expressed himself touched and grateful for *The Feast of the Poets* and its notes. On February 9th 1814 he wrote to Hunt (who was still in jail):

Of myself you speak too highly – & you must think me strangely spoiled – or perversely peevish – even to suspect that any remarks of yours in the spirit of candid criticism could possibly prove unpalatable. – Had they been harsh – instead of being written as they are in the most indelible ink of good Sense and friendly admonition – had they been the harshest – as I knew & know that you are above any personal bias at least against your fellow bards – believe me – they would not have caused a word of remonstrance nor a moment of rankling on my part.³³

He assisted Hunt as he assisted Coleridge, and recommended that Murray should publish *Rimini*:

I have written to Mr. L[eigh] Hunt stating your willingness to treat with him – which when I saw you – I understood you to be – – terms & time I leave to his pleasure & your discernment – but this I will say – that I think it the *safest* thing you ever engaged in – I speak to you – as a man of business – were I to talk as a reader or a Critic – I should say it was a very wonderful & beautiful performance – with just enough of fault to make its beauties more remarked & remarkable.³⁴

Murray was not at first happy, perhaps with the qualification in Byron's last sentence meaning more to him than it would to someone who didn't know Byron. He might have raised an eyebrow at "... but this I will say," which one of Sir Fretful's lines in *The Critic*. However, he arrived at an accommodation with Hunt whereby the poem would have an imprint of 750 copies, the profits to be split, and copyright on all subsequent editions to revert to Hunt. By March 28th 1816, 446 copies had been sold; Hunt was, wrote Murray, therefore owed £42 10s – which he'd happily round up to £50. Hunt tried to bargain further, but Murray would not.³⁵ Another edition was brought out in 1818 by Taylor and Hessey.

When Byron's marriage disintegrated early in 1816, Hunt wrote in the *Examiner* in his support:

We have the honour of knowing the Noble Poet; and as friendship is the first of principles in our theory, involving as it does the final purposes of all virtues itself, we do not scruple to confess, that whatever silence we may have thought ourselves bound to keep with regard to qualities which he could not have possessed, had he been such as the scandalmongers represented him, we should nevertheless, if we thought our arm worth his using, have stood by him and his misfortunes to the last. But knowing him as we do, one fact at least we are acquainted with; and that is, that these reckless calumniators know nothing about the matter; – and we know further, that there have been the vilest exaggerations about it; – and that our Noble Friend with all his faults, which he is the last man on earth to deny, possesses qualities, which ought to crumble the consciousness of these men into dust.³⁶

32: Quotations from Ibid, pp.128-9.

33: BLJ IV 49-50.

34: BLJ IV 331; letter of November 4th 1815.

35: *Roe*, 263-4.

36: *The Examiner*, No 434 (April 21, 1816) pp. 248-9 (quoted William H. Marshall, *Byron, Shelley, Leigh Hunt and The Liberal*, Pennsylvania 1960, hereafter Marshall, pp.8-9).

Friendly with Byron though he was, Hunt too knew nothing about the matter; but Byron had praised *Rimini* in a letter to Moore:

Leigh Hunt has written a *real good* and *very original* Poem, which I think will be a great hit. You can have no notion how very well it is written, nor should I, had I not redde it.³⁷

It's very carefully phrased: "You can have no notion how very well it is written, nor should I ..." is wide open to a construction opposite to what it seems to mean. Hunt must have known that Byron appeared to be on the side of his poem, but didn't appreciate how careful he was in his praise.

Again Byron wrote to Moore, on February 29th 1816:

Leigh Hunt's poem is a devilish good one – quaint, here and there, but with the substratum of originality, and with good poetry about it, that will stand the test. I do not say this because he has inscribed it to me, which I am sorry for, as I should otherwise have begged you to review it in the Edinburgh. It is really deserving of much praise, and a favourable critique in the E[dinburgh] R[eview] would but do it justice, and set it up before the public eye where it ought to be.³⁸

And yet again to Moore, on April 11th 1817:

I thought, and think, very highly of his Poem; but I warned him of the row his favourite antique phraseology would bring him into.³⁹

He'd praised it to Hunt himself:

Pray let me have the rest of "Rimini["] you have 2 excellent points in that poem – originality – & Italianism – I will back you as a bard against half the fellows on whom you throw away much good criticism & eulogy ...⁴⁰

When he visited Ravenna in 1819, he promised Hunt he'd do some research on the poem: but all he could find was the fact that the sea had withdrawn so fully from the town as to render one line ("Old Ravenna's clear-shown towers and bay") inaccurate.⁴¹ This was after the letter to Moore in which he revealed his true opinion of Hunt, and of *Rimini*.

37: BLJ IV 330; also letter of November 4th 1815.

38: BLJ V 34.

39: BLJ V 211.

40: BLJ IV 326; letter of October 30th 1815. See also BLJ V 58-9.

41: BLJ VI 189; letter of July 30th 1819.

2) Italy⁴²

From the time of my taking leave of Lord Byron in England, to the moment of our meeting in Italy, I scarcely heard of him, and never from him. He had become not very fond of his reforming acquaintances. – L.B. pp.12-13.

A man from Romagna had been put in charge of this daily expedition [to fetch water to the Villa Dupuy at Montenero]; he was a shoemaker by trade, and had been expelled from Faenza, the place he hailed from, for unruly conduct. The young Count [Pietro Gamba], who was unaware of the latter circumstance, had recklessly welcomed him to his house in Pisa out of kindness, because that man claimed to have belonged to one of the Liberal factions, and to have been persecuted for it. He was retained in Montenero, at the time, as an odd-job man. Now, this man, by his temperament and place of origin, was used to wielding a knife; and when the time came to set out for the fountain, he refused to do so on that particular day, railing at the rich and the nobility, and talking of equality and fraternity, with the kind of logic that in ignorant minds, when linked to a bad character, goes clean contrary to justice and brotherhood.

When it became clear that his answer to rebukes from the others was to menace them with a knife he had snatched up, they called for Count Pietro, convinced that his presence would be enough to get the fellow, who owed everything to him, to see reason. But whether he was under the influence of drink, or out of native savagery, he flung himself upon the Count as soon as he appeared, and slashed him on the cheek with his knife, brandishing the weapon and continuing to threaten everybody.

It only took a moment for Count Pietro to go up to his room and seize his pistols, and he was about to treat the wretch according to his deserts, and to defend the others from his menaces, when Lord Byron – who at that moment was at a sitting the Countess was giving to the American painter on the ground floor – hearing the shouts from the servants' hall, left the chamber and collided with Count Pietro. The latter, beside himself with rage, holding his pistols, and his face covered in blood, was rushing down the stairs to knock some sense into the scoundrel as he deserved, and to protect the people he was still threatening. It took all the authority that Lord Byron had over the Count to check him in the heat of such righteous anger, and to entrust the matter – and make the Count resigned to leaving his revenge – to the law.

While Lord Byron was sending word to the Leghorn police, so that justice could take its course, the wretched man, who had dashed out of the house, was prowling up and down in front of the main entrance like a wild beast in its cage, sobbing and swearing at the same time.

It was at this very moment that Shelley arrived at Montenero with Leigh Hunt, who had come to Italy for the ill-starred project which Shelley had persuaded Lord Byron to take on, so as to lend assistance to Hunt. They were therefore witnesses of part of that strange and violent episode, which Mr. Hunt has described in his narrative called *Lord Byron and Some of his Contemporaries*. This description, in which he says that he thought he had been transported into one of the scenes in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*,⁴³ is one of the rare truthful passages in this account, which is no more than a shocking act of vengeance by Mr. Hunt – a tissue of perversity and falsehood. It was even contrary to the author's conscience, but in his poverty he was bribed to write it. The price of that conscience was willingly paid by Lord Byron's unrelenting enemies; and payment was the more readily accepted by the writer, in that his straitened circumstances and hate for Lord Byron were allied to his wrath on discovering, when back in England, that Lord Byron was being judged impartially and favourably by several biographers. They included Moore and Mrs. Shelley, in her *Last Man*, where, under the name of Lord Raymond, she had portrayed Lord Byron as she thought of him, that is, as a being above the common run of humanity by his beauty, his kindness, his genius, and so forth. That infuriated Hunt, who wished to issue a counter-blast.⁴⁴

Thus Teresa Guiccioli narrates, and comments on, the first scene Hunt witnessed on arriving at Byron's temporary residence in Italy, on or about July 1st 1822. Hunt, in

42: I'm grateful to Nora Crook for help with parts of this section.

43: "I fancied myself pitched into one of the scenes in 'The Mysteries of Udolpho', with Montoni and his tumultuous companions" – L.B. p.10.

44: Teresa Guiccioli, *Lord Byron's Life in Italy*, (tr. and ed. Rees and Cochran, Delaware 2005), pp.458-60 (adapted).

comparing it to an event in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, may speak with greater accuracy than either he or Teresa think, for the unruly servant had probably been set up by the police to make trouble for Byron and force him out of the state. The violence the hysterical man created from nothing gave the authorities an excuse to harass the Gamba family – Byron’s friends – yet again, as they had done only recently in the affair of Sergeant-Major Masi in Pisa, as a result of which the Gambas had had to leave that city. There was a lot going on here not only that Hunt didn’t understand, but that neither the Gambas nor Byron understood.

Upon seeing Lord Byron, I hardly knew him, he was grown so fat; and he was longer in recognizing me, I had grown so thin. – L.B. p.15.

The English establishment was comically corrupt and hypocritical, and cruelly coercive, yet there was always a potential John Bullish freedom to dissent, which the law – if you got the right jury – often supported. In Italy, there were no juries. Much of the country was controlled by the Austrians, who appointed their own countrymen to all the most important legal positions, and who operated a flourishing, if incompetent, secret police, no less dangerous for being mendacious and stupid. Many of those parts not controlled by the Austrians, such as Ravenna, were controlled by Rome, and Rome was not a whit more in favour of dissent than was Austria.

This was not the Italy Hunt had anticipated six years previously, when, in the *Examiner* for April 28th 1816, the number following the one in which he had written in Byron’s moral support, published three days after Byron had left England, he had described it thus:

Thus did she reign, bright-eyed, with that sweet tone
Long in her ears; and right before her throne,
Have sat the intellectual Graces three,
MUSIC, and PAINTING, and wing’d POETRY,
Of whom were born those great ones, thoughtful-fac’d,
That led the hierarchy of modern taste; –
Heavenly Composers, that with bow symphonious,
Drew out, at last, music’s whole soul harmonious;
Poets, that knew how Nature should be wooed,
With frank address, and terms heart-understood;
And painters, worthy to be friends of theirs, –
Hands that could catch the very finest airs
Of natural minds, and all that soul express
Of ready concord, which was made to bless,
And forms the secret of true amorousness.⁴⁵

I don’t think this took Hunt very long to write; but the knife-wielding servant (whose levelling ideas were quite close to his own), must rapidly have banished all thoughts of even such an ill-focussed Eden as this from Hunt’s mind. The Pisan authorities took advantage of what the servant had done to exile Ruggiero and Pietro Gamba, who had to go north to Lucca.

Hunt had been thinking of coming out to Italy since late 1819. He had, in the years since Byron left, gone on editing and writing for the *Examiner*; published another book of verse, *Foliage*; planned but not completed a Venetian comedy, and written a tragedy of *The Cid* (it was turned down). He had become leader of – as the Tory press described it – the Cockney School of poetry, principal among the pupils in which were Keats and Shelley, who vied with one another as the favourite Son of Hunt. He’d started a new journal, *The Indicator*, but it had closed after seventeen numbers. He and his wife had started to drift apart even while living together, and he was now father of six children: Thornton, John Horatio, Mary Florimel, Swinburne Percy, Percy Bysshe Shelley (sic), and Henry Sylvan.

Keats died of T.B. at Rome on February 26th 1821.

45: *The Examiner*, April 28th 1816, pp. 266.

Overwork and stress were contributory factors, but it was the worsening political situation in England which decided Hunt finally on the move to Italy. The government became still more repressive after Peterloo (August 1819), than it had been before, and liberty of speech and assembly were further curtailed. J.C.Hobhouse was imprisoned on the evidence of a syntactical misconstruction. The so-called Cato Street Conspiracy (in reality a pre-election Tory stunt, by which even Byron was taken in), made “revolution” look a “possibility”. Publishing any free-thinking material would, Hunt saw, get more and more dangerous (John Hunt was imprisoned again in February 1821). So the exhausted Leigh and the seriously ill Marianne embarked from London on November 21st 1821. They were broke. Byron had lent them £250 and was to lend them more, Shelley lent them £220, and Ollier the publisher £200. To John Hunt they already owed £1,868 6s 5d.

The voyage was terrible. Taking Shelley’s advice, they went by sea. They were delayed over and over again, and didn’t arrive at Leghorn until June 30th 1822. When they returned in 1825, they went by land, and it took a month.

The aim was to start a radical journal in Italy, for an English readership. Its name was at first to be *Hesperides*, but this was changed (by Byron, according to Hunt),⁴⁶ to *The Liberal – Verse and Prose from the South*. The original idea may have been Shelley’s – that was the opinion of Hunt himself, and of Thomas Medwin; it may have been Byron’s – so Mary Shelley thought. It was certainly not Hunt’s. Most likely Byron first voiced the idea, in summer 1821 at Ravenna, and Shelley grasped and promoted it.⁴⁷

It was to form a sad anti-climax to Byron’s life in Italy, and to his entire literary connection with England.

On August 26th 1821, Shelley wrote to Hunt:

He [*Byron*] proposes that you should come out and go shares with him and me in a periodical work, to be conducted here; in which each of the contracting parties shall publish all their original compositions, and share the profits. He proposed it to Moore, but for some reason or other it was never brought to bear. There can be no doubt that the profits of any scheme in which you and Lord Byron engage, must from various, yet co-operating reasons, be very great. As for myself, I am, for the present, only a sort of link between you and him, until you can know each other, and effectuate the arrangements; since (to entrust you with a secret which for your sake, I withhold from Lord Byron) nothing would induce me to share in the profits, and still less, in the borrowed splendour of such a partnership. You and he, in different manners, would be equal, and would bring, in a different manner, but in the same proportion, equal stock of reputation and success. Do not let my frankness with you, nor my belief that you deserve it more than Lord Byron, have the effect of deterring you from assuming a station in modern literature, which the universal voice of my contemporaries forbids me either to stoop to or aspire to. I am, and I desire to be, nothing.⁴⁸

Hunt replied on September 21st:

We are coming. I feel the autumn so differently from the summer, and the accounts of the cheapness of living and education at Pisa are so inviting, that what with your kind persuasions, the proposal of Lord Byron, and last, to be sure not least, the hope of seeing you again and trying to get my health back in your society, my brother as well as myself think I had better go. We hope to set off in a month from the date of this letter, not liking to delay our preparation till we hear from you again, on account of the approach of winter; so about the 21st of October we shall all set off, myself, Marianne, and the six children. With regard to the proposed publication of Lord B., about which you talk so modestly, he has it in his power, I believe, to set up not only myself and family in our finances again, but one of the best-hearted men in the world, my brother and his. I allude, of course, to the work in which he proposes me to join him ... I agree to this proposal with the less scruple, because I have had a good deal of experience in periodical writing, and know what the getting up of the *machine* requires, as well as the soul of it. You see I am not so modest as you are by a great deal, and do not mean to let you be so either. What? Are there not three of us? And

46: L.B. p.80.

47: See Marshall pp.22-6.

48: Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964 (hereafter “Jones”), II 660.

ought we not to have as much strength and variety as possible? We will divide the world between us, like the Triumvirate, and you shall be the sleeping partner, if you will; only it shall be with a Cleopatra, and your dreams shall be worth the giving of kingdoms.⁴⁹

The “Triumvirate” parallel was not a happy one to have thought up. Which poet was Antony, which Octavius, and which Lepidus? Which would go under first?

Before Hunt had even got to Italy, Moore (whom Byron would have liked to join in the venture) made it clear to Byron what he thought. In January 1822 he wrote:

I heard some days ago that Leigh Hunt was on his way to you with all his family; and the idea seems to be, that you and Shelley and he are to *conspire* together in the Examiner. I cannot believe this – and deprecate such a plan with all my might. Alone you may do any thing; but partnerships in fame, like those in trade, make the strongest party answerable for the deficiencies or delinquencies of the rest, and I tremble even for you with such a bankrupt Co. – ****. They are both clever fellows, and Shelley I look upon as a man of real genius; but I must again say, that you could not give your enemies (the ***’s, “et hoc genus omne”) a greater triumph than by forming such an unequal and unholy alliance. You are, single-handed, a match for the world, – which is saying a good deal, the world being, like Briareus, a very many-headed gentleman, – but, to be so, *you must stand alone*. Recollect that the scurvy buildings around St. Peter’s almost seem to overtop itself.⁵⁰

Hazlitt commented later⁵¹ on Moore’s “ridiculous trepidation” at the proposal. Moore was clearly jealous. He expressed his worry about Shelley’s influence on Byron, and Byron, as Moore might have anticipated,⁵² showed his letter to Shelley. Shelley wrote to Horace Smith reassuring the world, via Smith, that he had no influence on Byron whatever.

Hobhouse, at the expense of whose radical pretensions the *Examiner* was often ironical, was also opposed to the alliance, as was Kinnaird. John Murray’s opinion we shall see later. Other, still more conservative voices were derisive:

’Twould be wrong, noble Bard, Oh! Permit me to tell ye,
To establish a league with Leigh Hunt and Byshe Shelley.⁵³

And, mimicking Byron sarcastically:

Lack-a-day! but I’ve grown wiser,
Since Master Hunt has come to Pisar.⁵⁴

Before Hunt arrived, things between Byron and Shelley had gone seriously wrong. On February 17th 1822 Shelley wrote to Hunt:

Many circumstances have occurred between myself & Lord B. which make the intercourse painful to me, & this last discussion about money particularly so. However the mode in which it was put, – & more particularly the advantage to you, in some degree reconcile me to it for the present. He expresses himself *again* warmly about this literary scheme, & I am sure you would do well to engage with him. – I shall take no more share in this or in any other conjunction than is absolutely necessary to your interests. – You will feel my dear friend that both the tone I assume & the things I say spring from my perfect confidence in your discretion, no less than your indulgence. – I shall have much to say on these subjects when we meet.⁵⁵

49: Quoted Marshall, 27-8.

50: Dowden II, 502.

51: Hazlitt, *On Jealousy and Spleen of Party*, quoted Marshall pp.41-2, Miller, op.cit., p.111n; and L.B. p.93n.

52: “... Lord Byron always showed the letters that were written to him” (L.B. p.99).

53: *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, XI (1822), p.460; quoted Marshall p.47.

54: *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, XI (1822), p.463; quoted Marshall p.47.

55: Jones II, 389-90.

Possible reasons for Shelley's sudden distaste are multifold. Shelley may have resented the fact that, though he and Byron had a bet on that whoever came into his inheritance first should pay the other a thousand pounds, Byron, who had lost, had not paid the money. Shelley had also, for years, been attempting to create an understanding between Byron and the wretchedly unhappy Claire Claremont, over who should look after Allegra – a business which brought out in Byron everything that was coldly misogynistic (Allegra died on April 19th 1822). Lastly, Shelley may have gathered that Byron believed the Elise Foggi rumour that Claire had had a child by Shelley – which would have been the unkindest cut of all, making all “intercourse” intolerable.

Lord Byron himself he [Shelley] spoke of as a man the most disagreeable to have anything to do with, and one whose connexion he would have given up for ever, had he not thought it might turn to my advantage, and perhaps to the noble Lord's in consequence. – L.B. p.xxviii.

But by March 2nd Shelley's tone had mollified, and it appears that he was prepared to suffer Byron in silence for Hunt's sake. He wrote:

My dearest friend

My last two or three letters have I fear given you some uneasiness, or at least inflicted that portion of it which I felt in writing them. – The aspect of affairs has somewhat changed since the date of that in which I expressed a repugnance to a continuance of intimacy with Lord Byron so close as that which now exists – at least it has changed as far as regards you & the intended journal. He expresses again the greatest eagerness to undertake it & proceed with it, as well as the greatest confidence in you as his associate. He is forever dilating upon his impatience of your delay & his disappointment at your not having already arrived. He renews his expressions of disregard for the opinion of those who advised him against this alliance with you, & I imagine it will be no very difficult task to execute that which you have assigned me – to keep him in heart with the project until your arrival. Meanwhile let my last letters, as far as they regard Lord Byron – be as if they had not been written. – Particular circumstances, – or rather I should say, particular dispositions in Lord B's character render the close & exclusive intimacy with him in which I find myself, intolerable to me; thus much my best friend I will confess & *confide* to you. – No feelings of my own however shall injure or interfere with what is ever nearest to them – your interest, & I will take care to preserve the little influence I may have over this Proteus in whom such strange extremes are reconciled until we meet – which we now must at all events soon do. – Of course my letters to you are confidential – there is only one point in which I wish to recall your attention to them – & that is that the money sent by Lord Byron ought to be treated as a *loan* not as a *gift*, although he seems now in a fit of returning generous feeling to wish to put the latter construction upon it, although the arrangement which I stated to you, & to which I pledged myself, was on the arrival of your letter fully understood. –⁵⁶

But a fortnight before Hunt arrived, Shelley remained uneasy in Byron's proximity. He wrote to John Gisborne on June 18th:

Hunt is not yet arrived, but I expect him every day. I shall see little of Lord Byron, nor shall I permit Hunt to form the intermediate link between him and me. I detest all society – almost all, at least – and Lord Byron is the nucleus of all that is hateful and tiresome in it. He will be half mad to hear of these Memoirs.⁵⁷ As to me, you know my supreme indifference to such affairs, except that I must confess I am sometimes amused by the ridiculous mistakes of these writers. Tell me a little of what they say of me besides being an Atheist. One thing I regret in it, I dread lest it should injure Hunt's prospects in the establishment of the Journal, for Lord Byron is so mentally capricious that the least impulse drives him from his anchorage.⁵⁸

56: Jones II 393-5.

57: Shelley refers to John Watkins, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Lord Byron, with Anecdotes of Some of his Contemporaries* (1822).

58: Jones II 434-5.

What Shelley knew, but Byron may not have known, was that Hunt had relinquished the proprietorship of the *Examiner* to John before leaving. He no longer had a regular income from it, and so would depend on the new venture in a way that Shelley understood but Byron did not.

On July 1st 1822 the Hunts arrived at Montenero, and almost at once a terrible disaster occurred. On July 8th, Shelley, his friend Edward Williams, and the boat-boy Charles Vivian all drowned, off Leghorn, while they were heading towards the Bay of La Spezia, some fifty miles north. The sea currents, moving northwards, washed their corpses on the Tuscan shores (Williams), on the beach of Viareggio (Shelley) in the State of Lucca, and on the shores of Montignoso (Vivian), in the Duchy of Massa-Carrara. These places, contrary to legend, were all well outside the Gulf of La Spezia, which is in Liguria, yet another region.⁵⁹

Byron and Hunt were now without intermediary.

From that time Italy was a black place to me. – L.B. p.30.

It's hard not to believe that had Shelley lived *The Liberal* would have been more successful. Needing a publishing outlet, he would have written original material especially for it, as Byron never did. On July 12th – four days after Shelley's death – Byron wrote to Moore asking to be helped out, and saying that the journal was Hunt's initiative:

Leigh Hunt is here, after a voyage of eight months, during which he has, I assume, made the Periplus of Hanno the Carthaginian, and with much the same speed. He is setting up a Journal, to which I have promised to contribute; and in the first number the "Vision of Judgement, by Quevedo Redivivus," will probably appear, with other articles.

Can you give us any thing? He seems sanguine about the matter, but (entre nous) I am not. I do not, however, like to put him out of spirits by saying so; for he is bilious and unwell. Do, pray, answer *this* letter immediately.

Do send Hunt any thing in prose or verse of yours, to start him handsomely – any lyrical, *irical*, or what you please.⁶⁰

Moore contributed nothing to *The Liberal*.

The affair of the hysterical servant, which had introduced Hunt to Italian social and political life, had enabled the Pisan authorities to refuse Ruggiero and Pietro Gamba a return from Lucca, and so in late September 1822, Byron, with Teresa, Hunt, Marianne and the children in train, left for Genoa, where Byron's group put up at the Casa Saluzzo, at Albaro, on the outskirts of the city, while the Hunts, with the widowed Mary Shelley and her son Percy Florence, lived in the Casa Negroto, a mile down the hill. There the two *ménages* lived for a year, until Mary went back to England, and the Hunts moved to Florence.

... there was something not unsocial nor even unenjoying in our intercourse, nor was there any appearance of constraint; but, upon the whole, it was not pleasant: it was not cordial. There was a sense of mistake on both sides. – L.B. pp.64-3.

A major cause of stress lay in the behaviour of Thornton, John Horatio, Mary Florimel, Swinburne Percy, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Henry Sylvan. Even though the two establishments were a mile apart, Byron, who professed, as we know, a great admiration for King Herod, wrote to Mary Shelley on October 4th:

I have a particular dislike to any thing of S[helley]'s being within the same walls as Mr. Hunt's children. – They are dirtier and more mischievous than Yahoos[;] what they can[t] destroy with their filth they will with their fingers ...⁶¹

⁵⁹: Based on an analysis by Professor Mario Curreli.

⁶⁰: BLJ IX 183.

⁶¹: BLJ X 11.

The first number of *The Liberal* came out on October 15th 1822, in a run of 7,000, costing £400 to print. A copy cost 5s.⁶² It contained Byron's finest completed poem, *The Vision of Judgement*.⁶³ He had finished it early in October 1821, and sent it to Murray at once; but Murray had been terrified by its *lèse-majesté* and apparent blasphemy, and had sat on it, like the dog in the manger. Byron, who had neither manuscript nor proof with him in Italy, finally ordered Murray to give the corrected proof to John Hunt for printing.

The finest document in the whole story is a letter from Murray to Byron describing John Hunt's visit to ask for the proof. It shows with immense comic effect what the London literary scene thought of the Hunts, and of Byron's dealings with them. It also contains an excellent portrait of John. It is written at 50, Albemarle Street, and is dated September 25th 1822:

... With regard to my reception of Mr John Hunt whom I was not aware your Lordship had ever seen, he sent up word that "a Gentleman" wished to deliver into my own hands a letter from Lord Byron, &, with instantaneous joy, I went down to receive him – then I found Mr Hunt & a person obviously brought there as a *witness* – He delivered the letter in the most Tipstave & formal manner to me staring me fully & closely in the face as if having administered a dose of Arsenick he wished to see its minute sensations – & to all that I civilly & simply replied – with the same assassin look, he ever repeated "are these your words Sir[?]" – "is that your answer Sir[?]" – "am I to write these words to Lord Byron[?]" In fact if you knew the insulting behaviour of this man – you would I am sure excuse me for having directed my confidential Clerk to tell him when he called again that he might be answered that whatever papers Lord Byron directed Mr Murray to send to him would be carefully, and as speedily as possible, delivered at his house but that personal interview was not agreeable & could not be necessary. A friend of yours!!! My heart & soul all I have ever been with any & every friend of yours –⁶⁴

To John Hunt, we can see, Murray was a mere creature of that establishment which had deprived him of three years' liberty. To treat with him politely would be to ignore the root class-enmity between them. To the timorous Murray, John was the dark face of sedition and anarchy, aiming its evil bludgeon directly at his head; added to which the sad publisher was, as Hunt writes, "jealous and in a frenzy".⁶⁵

John Hunt left Albemarle Street with a proof of *The Vision of Judgement* – but it was not the corrected proof, and it lacked the prose preface which Byron had written, supposedly to soften the effect of his satire. Thus *The Liberal* N^o 1 went out, in effect, sabotaged by John Murray (though the blame for the missing preface and the uncorrected proof was more likely Douglas Kinnaird's). Neither corrected proof nor manuscript preface have ever been found; but they were used by John to bring out a second issue of the first number, which appeared on January 1st 1823, the same date as the second number, which had a run of 6,000, and cost £560 2s. The sale of the first number, however, yielded only £518 8s.⁶⁶

It's misleading to speak of a collaboration between Hunt and Byron over *The Liberal*. All four major Byron works which it carried – *The Vision* (in N^o I), *Heaven and Earth* (in N^o II), *The Blues* (in N^o III), and the translation of the first canto of Pulci's *Morgante Maggiore* (in N^o IV) – had been conceived and written independently of the journal, for publication by Murray, well before Hunt arrived in July 1822. None was written after the end of 1821,⁶⁷ and none were conceived with the *The Liberal* in mind. All four were anonymous; this was not a disadvantage in the case of *The Vision*, whose authorship no-one could doubt, but may have been for the other three. It would take a very skilful eye to work out who wrote *The Blues*, and indeed no-one did. For works by Byron custom-written for *The Liberal*, and thus for a broader audience than hitherto, we must look at *The Age of Bronze* and *The Island*. At first

62: Marshall pp.148-9 and 162n.

63: "... the most masterly satire that has appeared since the time of Pope" (L.B. p. 216).

64: John Murray Archive (National Library of Scotland).

65: L.B. p.88.

66: Marshall pp.148-9 and 162. Marshall does not say how large the print run was of *The Liberal* N^o I, second issue.

67: *TVoJ* was written between May 7 and 4 October 1821; *HandE* entirely in October 1821; *The Blues* had been sent to Murray on 7 August 1821; and the first canto of the *Morgante* had been translated between 29 October 1819 and 20 February 1820.

Byron had intended both for *The Liberal*; but he changed his mind and demanded that they be published separately. He even tried, as John Hunt understood, to prevent *The Liberal* passing its second number. On February 25th 1823 John wrote to Leigh:

On Monday week I received a note from M^r Kinnaird, stating that {Lord Byron had written to him to say that} the *Age of Bronze* was to be published by itself, and that the 3^d No. of the *Liberal* was not to appear. When I got Mr K[innaird].’s note, I should have waited upon him, but he had left town for a week ... This intelligence from M^r Kinnaird, that the 3^d No. is not to appear, of course embarrasses me greatly, for many reasons; but till I hear further, I forbear to dwell upon it.⁶⁸



John Hunt

Kinnaird exceeded his remit here. On February 1st Byron had written to him, with, we have to concede, a certain enigmatic quality:

By the way – this poem [*The Age of Bronze*] was intended for a third number of H[unt]’s publication – but as that will not be published – and this is a *temporary* hit at Congress &c. – (as you will have seen by the poem if you have received it) perhaps it had better be published now alone ...⁶⁹

What evidence Byron has for saying that Vol. III won’t come out isn’t clear – but he doesn’t *forbid* it to come out, as John Hunt gathers from Kinnaird that he did. On March 10th Byron chastised Kinnaird, in a passage full of disclaimers that he had anything to do with running the magazine:

Mr. J[ohn] H[unt] writes to his brother that you desired him to *stop* the *L[iberal]*. – You forget that we have no power to stop the publication of a work over which we have no control – there is the Pulci translation for his next number if he pleases. The things I sent to *you* – are *not* to be inserted in the *Liberal* – but it does not follow – that that Journal is to cease – and L[eigh] H[unt] says that it will do him great harm if that Journal stops. – If there must be a sacrifice – I would rather risk myself than other people.⁷⁰

It looks as if Kinnaird had the right attitude, but had in this case gone a bit too far, leaving it easy for Byron – whose intentions, Byron now claims, he had misread – to deny responsibility. We know Kinnaird disliked Byron’s radical connection as much as did Moore, Hobhouse or Murray. On December 5th 1822 he’d written to Byron:

I pretend not to judge, or obtrude any opinion of my own between you & M^r Hunt – But I certainly have not heard a good word of the liberal – The *Vision* is not felt as it deserves – I mean its talent – The reason of this I really believe to be that the Public is sick of religious disputes – & – blasphemy & all that stuff –⁷¹

Thus Byron, finding his association with the periodical an embarrassment, sabotaged it in part, and left his colleagues in London to try and sabotage it completely. Of *The Island* he wrote, “It is too long for ‘the Liberal’”.⁷² *The Island* is 94 pages long as printed by John Hunt:

68: BL.Add.Mss. 38108, f.257.

69: BLJ X 94.

70: BLJ X 121.

71: John Murray Archive (National Library of Scotland).

72: BLJ X 117.

The Liberal N^o III, 204 pages, and N^o IV, 185 pages. With friends like these, *The Liberal* didn't need enemies.

From the moment he saw the moderate profits of "The Liberal," (quite enough to encourage perseverance, if he had had it, but not in the midst of a hundred wounded vanities and inordinate hopes), he resolved to have nothing farther to do with it in the way of real assistance. He made use of it only for the publication of some things which his Tory bookseller was afraid to put forth. – L.B. p.87.

The weightiest of the four numbers of *The Liberal* is the first: not merely because it carries *The Vision of Judgement*, but because it carries Shelley's translation of the scene he calls *May-Day Night* (Walpurgisnacht) from Goethe's *Faust*. This furnishes an excellent if fortuitous counterpoint to Byron's poem, in its depiction of the lively home-life of that Sathan / Mephistopheles whom we see, in *The Vision*, on public display. Where a Tory might condemn such a scene direct from the pen of either Byron or Shelley, he'd be harder put to condemn it as written by the distinguished Goethe, whom no-one ever accused of being a radical or an atheist. And after all, "German," as Miss Prism says, "sounds a very distinguished language, and indeed, I believe, is so".

Hunt provides a fighting preface. Responding to the advance notions of the journal ("They say that we are to cut up religion, morals, and everything that is legitimate; – a pretty carving"),⁷³ he sums up with gusto what he and Byron (and Shelley, too, if only he were still alive) are writing against:

... when we know, – and know too from our intimacy with various classes of people, – that there is not a greater set of hypocrites in the world than these pretended teachers of the honest and experienced part of our countrymen; – when we know that their religion, even when it is in earnest on any point (which is very seldom) means the most ridiculous and untenable notions of the DIVINE BEING, and in all other cases means nothing but the Bench of Bishops; – when we know that their morals consist for the most part in a secret and practical contempt of their own professions, and for the least and best part, of a few dull examples of something a little more honest, clapped in front to make a show and a screen, and weak enough to be made tools against all mankind; – and when we know, to crown all, that their "legitimacy," as they call it, is the most unlawful of all lawless and impudent things, tending, under pretence that the whole are as corrupt and ignorant as themselves, to put it at the mercy of the most brute understandings among them, – men by their very education in these pretensions, rendered the least fit to sympathize with their fellow men, and as unhappy, after all, as the lowest of their slaves; – when we know all this, and see nine-tenths of all the intelligent men in the world alive to it, and as resolved as we are to oppose it, then indeed we are willing to accept the title of enemies to religion, morals, and legitimacy, and hope to do our duty with all becoming profaneness accordingly. God defend us from the piety of thinking him a monster!⁷⁴

There is much more of comparable boldness in the preface, including the excellent parroting of a John Bullish country gentleman wishing *The Liberal* well:

Cut up SOUTHEY as much as you please. We all think him as great a coxcomb as you do, and he bores us to death; but spare the King and the Ministers and all that, particularly LORD CASTLEREAGH and the Duke of WELLINGTON. D—d gentlemanly fellow, CASTLEREAGH, as you know; and besides he's dead. Shocking thing – shocking.⁷⁵

Most of the rest of the number does not, however, live up to its preface. *The Vision* attacks cant as cant had never been attacked before or since; but, the brief *Epigraphs on Castlereagh* apart, there is nothing else with any overt political agenda.

⁷³: *The Liberal* No 1 (1822), p.v.

⁷⁴: *Ibid*, p.vi.

⁷⁵: *Ibid*, p.ix.

The first number was assailed with great vigour by the Tory critics, and John Hunt was prosecuted for blasphemous libel by the Constitutional Association (patron: the Duke of Wellington), on account of *The Vision*. His case came to court on January 15th 1824 – after the magazine had folded – before a special Middlesex (that is, a packed) jury; he was found guilty, and fined £100 – which Byron would have paid; but by the time sentence had passed he was dead.⁷⁶

The *Liberal's* second number opens with *Heaven and Earth*,⁷⁷ which, though interesting as a follow-up to *Cain*, also has nothing like the political impact of *The Vision of Judgement* – Gifford had tamed its text slightly, but Murray had sat on it notwithstanding, so Byron gave it to the journal. He would have given *Werner* as well – which could have filled an entire number – but Murray published that; it was the last work by Byron that he brought out. Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* was also mooted for Vol. II, but a correct text proved hard to obtain. The second number also contains Hazlitt's *On the Spirit of Monarchy*, which, as Duncan Wu has suggested, is so radical that it may have made Byron even more uneasy about his association with such writers than he was already. It helps considerably towards enabling *The Liberal* to live up to the aims Hunt proclaimed in his preface, as does *The Suliotes*, an essay by Captain Christo Pervò on the victims of Ali Pacha, at whom Byron had glanced already in *The Isles of Greece*.

The second number met with a marked decrease in critical reaction, not only in quantity but in vehemence. Byron affected to attribute its relative failure to his own unpopularity.

The third number (which came out on April 26th 1823) is at once weaker. It starts with a work of Byron's (*The Blues*) in which no-one has ever expressed interest since. Though Hazlitt contributes *My First Acquaintance with Poets*, and T.J.Hogg an excellent essay on Apuleius, the number has little more of substance. It contains nothing political; the promise of Hunt's first preface has been forgotten now, in the scramble to find material of any sort. *Blackwoods* wrote, perhaps with cruel accuracy:

I only wonder what the deuce it can have been, that made him [Byron] countenance them [his associates on *The Liberal*] even for the little time he did. His articles were libellous sometimes, (these fellows, by the way, can no more libel, than a tailor can ride) but they had no connection with, or resemblance to the sort of trash the Cockneys stuffed them in the heart of – The last Number contains *not one line* of Byron's. Thank God! He has seen his error, and kicked them out.⁷⁸

Notice the writer doesn't consider *The Blues* to be by Byron.

Byron's attitude to his translation of the first canto of Pulci's *Morgante Maggiore*, which opens the fourth number, was more than usually positive: he had already described it to Murray as "the best thing I ever did in my life",⁷⁹ and "my grand performance".⁸⁰ His motive in writing and printing the work is clear from his preface: he wishes to confer the dignity of a tradition on his own corpus of ottava rima work, which now stands complete before the public, *Don Juan* XV and XVI having been published by John Hunt on March 16th. When he writes ...

He [Pulci] is no less the founder of a new style of poetry very lately sprung up in England. I allude to that of the ingenious Whistlecraft.⁸¹

76: "Of course the death of Lord B. is a heavy blow to me, as I had only just begun to obtain some advantage from the connection" – John to Leigh Hunt, June 19th 1824 (BL.Add.Mss. 38,108, f. 325).

77: John to Leigh Hunt, February 25th 1823: "In my judgement, the Poem *Heaven and Earth* is one of the finest in the English Language, for sublimity, passion, pathos – and I am satisfied, that had it not come from the pen of a 'liberal,' it would have been lauded in all quarters to the skies" (BL.Add.Mss. 38,108, f.257).

78: *Blackwood's*, XIII (1823), p.607; quoted Marshall p.183.

79: BLJ VII 182 (letter to Murray, September 28th 1820).

80: BLJ VIII 65 (letter to Murray, January 19th 1821).

81: *The Liberal*, Vol. IV, pp. 193-4.

... he must assume that everyone will know that Whistlecraft led on to his own superior development of what Whistlecraft initiated, and that in so far as it treats religion as casually as Pulci did, writing in fifteenth-century Florence, it can't be so very irreligious. But it's hard to see many English readers, of whatever political persuasion, getting much out of it. John Hunt's way of printing the entire translation first, and then Pulci's original in smaller type (to save space?), instead of giving parallel texts, does not assist the reader's appreciation of Byron's translating skill, which is very great.

Very little in any of the periodical's four volumes justified either the establishment's apprehension before it came out, or the furore that erupted after its first number. Very little lived up to the promise Hunt made in his preface to Vol. I. "From the South" is a misleading subtitle, for there is little or nothing about contemporary Italian politics. Byron may, on the western side of the Appenines, have withdrawn from the close contact with Italian pseudo-subversives that he had when in Ravenna; and there is nothing in the journal like the concern with Italy's political present which he showed in *Childe Harold IV*. At the same time, little or nothing engages with English politics. *The Vision of Judgement*, Hunt's weak satire *The Dogs*, and Hazlitt's essay on monarchy apart, there's nothing either to afflict the English comfortable, or comfort the English afflicted.

One motive for Byron's eagerness to depart for Greece (he had many, few of them pure and idealistic) was an anxiety to untangle himself from Leigh Hunt. He left Genoa on July 13th 1823, and *The Liberal* N^o IV appeared on July 30th. On October 31st the *Examiner* announced that its Italian cousin would appear no more.

In the event, Hunt wrote most of *The Liberal*: thirty-four items totaling 321 pages. Byron was a poor second, some way behind: nine items⁸² totaling 168 pages. No-one else was in competition. Hazlitt came third, with five items totalling 87 pages.⁸³

Byron had been misled by his initial admiration for Hunt, firstly into his misguided charity in supporting Hunt's literary efforts, and then into entering the strange collaboration-which-was-no-collaboration over the *Liberal*. His good nature placed a ball and chain about his own leg, which was a source of major humiliation to him; and his defensive sense of his own aristocratic status severed it. He was not a radical, as the Hunts were, and the close proximity of Leigh must have made this clear – and distasteful. It was one thing to have conversations about Final Things with his fellow-aristocrat Shelley; quite another to have Hunt and family running all over the ground floor of his mansion.

The journal's failure was also a major humiliation for the Hunt brothers. Unsold copies of the periodical were rebound into sets, but this expedient failed; and those which could not be so bound were sold for waste paper.⁸⁴ Doubtless they ended their lives as those things Byron so often joked about – pie-wrappings, or trunk- and hat-linings: perhaps, even, Dryden's "relics of the bum".

In 1828 Hunt published *Lord Byron and some of his Contemporaries*, a book which made all Byron's friends angry. Moore wrote a poem comparing Hunt to a small dog urinating on the dead body of a lion. Teresa Guiccioli, who stood to be very much hurt by it, was warned off it by Mary Shelley, and didn't read it until 1858, the year before Hunt died. Still she was upset and infuriated by it. But, despite, even because of its animus, it contains much of interest. Some passages, particularly those on poetry, are spiteful (see essay on Shelley). Others, such as the one in which Hunt claims that Byron

82: The four major works already listed; three *Epigrams on Castlereagh*; and *A Letter to the Editor of "My Grandmother's Review"*.

83: Marshall, pp. 238-9.

84: Marshall p.204.

was ostentatious in his charity,⁸⁵ can readily be contradicted from elsewhere. The money he gave to the Greeks really was a gift, and not a loan.⁸⁶ But there are passages of amusing literary insight:

Spenser he could not read; at least he said so. All the gusto of that most poetical of the poets went with him for nothing. I lent him a volume of the "Fairy Queen," and he said he would try to like it. Next day he brought it to my study-window, and said, "Here, Hunt, here is your Spenser. I cannot see anything in him:" and he seemed anxious that I should take it out of his hands, as if he were afraid of being accused of copying so poor a writer. That he saw nothing in Spenser is not very likely; but I really do not think that he saw much. Spenser was too much out of the world, and he too much in it.⁸⁷

Elsewhere Hunt writes well of the gaps in Byron's cultural understanding:

Pope, before he spoke of Handel, applied to Arbuthnot to know whether the composer really deserved what was said of him. It was after making a similar enquiry respecting Mozart, that Lord Byron wrote the passage in his notes to *Don Juan*, [XVI, 45, 6n] giving him the preference to Rossini. Rossini was his real favourite. He liked his dash and animal spirits. All the best music, he said, was lively; – an opinion, in which few lovers of it will agree with him.⁸⁸

The book still arouses the wrath of all who admire Byron without reservation, despite the evidence of others, including (especially) those who loved him, like J.C.Hobhouse and Augusta, that he was often very hard to live with. Hunt, not loving him, and having nothing to hide, unlike Hobhouse, Augusta, and Teresa Guiccioli, can afford to be frank. Hobhouse couldn't have written a truthful book about Byron with a pistol to his head; and Teresa's two books perform miracles of prestidigitation with the truth. Hunt writes such things as:

An immeasurable vanity kept his adorers at a distance; like Xerxes enthroned, with his millions a mile off. And if, in a fit of desperation, he condescended to come closer and be fond, he laughed at you for thinking yourself of consequence to him; and hated you if you stood out, which was to think yourself of greater consequence. Neither would a knowledge of all this, if you had made him conscious, have lowered his self-admiration a jot. He would have thought it the mark of a great man, – a noble capriciousness, – an evidence of power, which none but the Alexanders and Napoleons of the intellectual world could venture upon. Mr. Hazlitt had some reason to call him "a sublime coxcomb."⁸⁹

As long as we remember and stress the *sublimity* of the coxcombery ...

Epilogue: Leigh Hunt and the question of theft⁹⁰

In January 1829, J.C.Hobhouse was honeymooning in Genoa. He'd left Dover on August 12th 1828, and had noted in Calais that Galignani "has found / thought it worth while to publish an edition of Leigh Hunt's *Lord Byron and Hazlitt's Contemporaries* – most trumpety works."

85: "Lord Byron was not a generous man; and, in what he did, he contrived either to blow a trumpet before it himself, or to see that others blew one for him" (L.B. pp.133-4).

86: L.B. pp. 38-9.

87: L.B. p.77.

88: L.B. pp.126-7.

89: L.B. pp.124-5.

90: For the story of Hunt stealing money intended by Byron for Mary Shelley, see Miranda Seymour, *Mary Shelley* (John Murray 2000), pp. 324-5. Seymour says evidence came from Hobhouse, who saw the receipt in Genoa. She gives "1828" in her text and "1.5.1829 (BL Add. Mss 43744-43765)" in her notes. The BL numbers are those of Hobhouse's diary from April 1842 to July 1863.

The newlyweds reached Geneva on August 21st, crossed the Simplon on September 2nd, and were in Milan by September 6th.

Hobhouse's diary entry for January 5th 1829 goes as follows:

This morning we were surprised by a fall of snow and a total change of weather, of which the hot sun of yesterday is, we were told, not unfrequently a forerunner. Julia was obliged to stay within doors, but I walked in the wet and called on Mr Barry, who talked to me a good deal about Byron as usual, and about the scoundrel Leigh Hunt. It seems that Leigh Hunt followed Byron to Genoa, but did not live with him – indeed, did not see him often. It was on some occasion respecting giving money to Mrs Shelley, as I before heard Barry tell, that Leigh Hunt wrote to Byron accusing him of abandoning the widow of his best friend, on which Byron wrote a note, saying “I suppose you call yourself also my best friends [*sic*] – but it is by such friends that I have lost my money, and what is more, my character, and I shall now, &c.” Byron put aside £30 for Mrs Shelley, telling Barry that if Hunt did not draw for it he was not to send it – but Hunt did draw for it, I saw his receipt.

Barry gave me fragments of this precious scoundrel's writing, abusing Douglas Kinnaird. He lent *Blackwood's Magazine* to me, and I read the attack in this man's book. It is ill done – but I was horror-struck at the thing itself, and I think I must take this thankless villain in hand.

We dined at home. Barry came in the evening.

This seems to me a slender basis for the statement, often made, that Hunt pocketed the money Byron had intended for Mary Shelley. Hobhouse is as prejudiced against him as Kinnaird (now dead), or Moore, would have been. The fact that Hunt signed a receipt doesn't mean that he didn't try to forward the cash, and Mary was, we know, having trouble with accepting Byron's charity. Byron knew she would probably not accept it from him, but made the gesture anyway. What happened to the money isn't clear, but it was Trelawny who assisted her with the cost of the trip home, and Hunt may have been left with thirty pounds, no Mary to give it to, and no Byron to return it to. More evidence is needed than Hobhouse's diary supplies.