

BYRON AND THE ESSENCE OF IMPRISONMENT

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(A paper given to the Newstead Abbey Byron Society)

When we think of imprisonment in Byron's day, we think of Elizabeth Fry, the saintly Quaker reformer whose Christian eloquence reduced hardened pimps, forgers and pickpockets to tears of sincere repentance. But from our Byronic perspective a problem arises as soon as we do so: for Byron was convinced that Mrs Fry, in confining her attentions to Newgate, an ordinary, obvious prison, had got it wrong: her definition of imprisonment was too narrow. Here are the stanzas (they are 84-7) at the end of *Don Juan* Canto X, in which he first identifies with her, and then chastises her:

He paused, and so will I, as doth a Crew
 Before they give their broadside; by and bye,
 My gentle countrymen, we will renew
 Our old acquaintance, and at least I'll try
 To tell you truths *you* will not take as true,
 Because they are so; a male M^{rs}. Fry,
 With a soft besom I will sweep your halls,
 And brush a web or two from off the walls. –

Oh M^{rs}. Fry! why go to Newgate? why
 Preach to poor rogues? and wherefore not begin
 With Carlton – or with other houses? try
 Your hand at hardened and imperial Sin;
 To mend the people's an absurdity,
 A Jargon, a mere philanthropic din,
 Unless you make their betters better – Fie,
 I thought you had more religion, M^{rs}. Fry!

Teach them the decencies of good threescore;
 Cure them of tours, hussar and highland dresses;
 Tell them that Youth once gone returns no more,
 That hired huzzas redeem no land's distresses;
 Tell them Sir William Curtis is a bore,
 Too dull even for the dullest of excesses,
 The witless Falstaff of a hoary Hal,
 A Fool whose bells have ceased to ring at all;

Tell them, though it may be perhaps too late
 On Life's worn confine, jaded, bloated, sated,
 To set up vain pretences of being great –
 'Tis not so to be Good; and be it stated
 The worthiest kings have ever loved least State;
 And tell them – but you won't; and I have prated
 Just now enough – but by and bye I'll prattle
 Like Roland's horn in Roncesvalle's battle.

Listening not once but twice to the formidable and systematic paper (*Byron and the Essence of Freedom*) given earlier this year by Professor Byron Raizis, I found myself impelled to think about Byron and Freedom in a slightly different way, and came to this conclusion: Byron was obsessed with Freedom because he knew much too much about its

opposite. For Byron, life was itself a prison – just as Hamlet says Denmark is to him – and all of us are prisoners in it. Freedom was therefore something to which Byron, like Hamlet, naturally aspired – the problem was, however, that there were so many different kinds of imprisonment wherever you looked, that finding one’s way out, to any kind of imagined freedom, seemed rather hard. In his poetry Byron explores the different kinds of prisons which he saw himself, and the rest of mankind, as inhabiting.

Look at the stanzas to Mrs Fry: her naivety, says Byron, lies in at least two assumptions: firstly, that the only important malefactors in the eyes of God are those who are actually *in* prison; and secondly, that Newgate really is what it claims to be – the most important prison in London, and therefore in England. No, Mrs Fry, replies Byron – Newgate is only the prison in London with the highest profile. Carlton House (home of the former Prince Regent, now King George IV) is a much greater nest of malefactors, and in so far as George IV (a famously unpopular sovereign) can only with difficulty be persuaded to leave it, it is a different kind of prison. Mrs Fry’s charity and Christian eloquence would be better employed there, and in the other great “houses” of the capital (to be fair to Mrs Fry, she did preach to the great as well – but perhaps Byron didn’t know that, and we can be sure that the message she gave them was not the one he would have given). “Poor rogues” are the ones unlucky enough to have been detected and caught, and to have been publicly punished. The big sinners – detected but unpunished – are the ones running the country. Byron’s self-appointed task in *Don Juan* – as “a male M^s Fry” – is to bring this fact to public notice, and to warn the great, secure and comfortable in their self-constructed earthly prisons, that a greater and much less accommodating prison awaits them. This he implies clearly by his juxtaposition at Stanza 29 of Canto XI:

Over the Stones still rattling! – up Pall Mall,
Through Crowds and Carriages – but waxing thinner
As thundered knockers broke the long-sealed spell
Of doors ’gainst duns, and to an early dinner
Admitted a small party as Night fell;
Don Juan, our young diplomatic sinner,
Pursued his path, and drove past some hotels,
St. James’s Palace, and St. James’s “Hells.” –

“Thundered knockers broke the long-sealed spell / Of doors ’gainst duns” is a deliberate reminder to us of Byron himself in late 1815 and early 1816, imprisoned in his own house with bailiffs for company, imprisoned in his own debt cycle with money-lenders for turnkeys, imprisoned in his own marriage with his wife for jailor (he called Annabella his “moral Clyemnestra” – don’t forget that Clytemnestra, before stabbing Agamemnon, imprisoned him in a net). “... to an early dinner / Admitted a small party as night fell” is another reminder of the oppressive round of social engagements (Society’s treadmill) which was his lot during the 1812-1816 Years of Fame.

He escaped the treadmill; but had within two months of leaving England written his most enduring poem about literal imprisonment, after his trip around Chillon Castle with Shelley in June 1816, and after listening to the jail-humour of the Swiss gendarme who showed them over the place. Hobhouse records what they saw and heard on a later trip:

Wednesday September 18th: ... came to Chillon castle – formidable walls, – but small in comparison with welsh castles – went to it over wooden bridge – shewn it by deaf drunken soldier one of two or three guarding the garrison – saw the colonaded dungeons. the column to which Bonevard was attached for six years – the iron ring still there – the black beam in the next dungeon on which the wretches were hung by torch light without the parade which administers courage to

dying malefactors – saw in another part – dungeons three deep to which the entry by ladders one above another – our drunkard observed – happy was he who had the upper dungeon ...

The Prisoner of Chillon (the only Byron poem, by the way, of which I have found a Turkish translation: I'd like to show Byron a video of *Midnight Express*) is so powerful, not merely because of the universality of its theme – the loss of family, and then the endurance of solitary confinement, in a political cause – but because of the uncompromising psychological realism with which Byron depicts (who knows with what mixture of imagination and identification?) the way in which a prisoner gets used to his prison – the way in which imprisonment becomes, not a metaphor for his life, but that very life itself. Here are the eleventh and fourteenth sections of the poem:

A kind of change came in my fate –
 My keepers grew compassionate;
 I know not what had made them so –
 They were inured to sights of woe,
 But so it was – my broken chain
 With links unfastened did remain,
 And it was liberty to stride
 Along my cell from side to side,
 And up and down – and then athwart,
 And tread it over every part,
 And round the pillars one by one,
 Returning where my walk begun;
 Avoiding only as I trod
 My brothers' graves without a sod,
 For if I thought with heedless tread
 My step profaned their lowly bed,
 My breath came gaspingly and thick,
 And my crushed heart fell blind, and sick ...

... It might be months, or years, or days –
 I kept no count – I took no note,
 I had no hope my eyes to raise
 And clear them of their dreary mote.
 At last Men came to set me free –
 I asked not why, and recked not where –
 It was at length the same to me
 Fettered, or fetterless to be –
 I learned to love Despair.
 And thus when they appeared at last,
 And all my bonds aside were cast,
 These heavy walls to me had grown
 A hermitage – and all my own!
 And half I felt as they were come
 To tear me from a second home;
 With Spiders I had friendship made,
 And watched them in their sullen trade;
 Had seen the Mice by moonlight play –
 And why should I feel less than they?
 We were all inmates of one place,
 And I, the Monarch of each race,
 Had power to kill – yet, strange to tell!
 In quiet we had learned to dwell;
 Nor slew I of my subjects one –
 What Sovereign hath so little done?

My very chains and I grew friends,
 So much a long Communion tends
 To make us what we are: even I
 Regained my freedom with a sigh. –

Within his cell, Bonivard has, we notice, become a King – his prison is his palace and his palace is his prison – just like George IV in Carlton House.

Such consolation seems not to be available to Byron's next prisoner, the great sixteenth-century Italian poet Torquato Tasso, even though he, unlike Bonivard, is a poet-prisoner. Byron saw his cell in April 1817, when he passed through Ferrara *en route* from Venice to Rome:

I loved all solitude – but little thought
 To spend I know not what of life, remote
 From all communion with existence, save
 The maniac and his tyrant; had I been
 Their fellow, many years ere this had seen
 My mind like theirs corrupted to its grave,
 But who hath seen me writhe, or heard me rave?
 Perchance in such a cell we suffer more
 Than the wrecked sailor on his deart shore;
 The world is all before him – *mine is here*;
 Scarce twice the space they must accord my bier.
 What though *he* perish, he may lift his eye
 And with a dying glance upbraid the sky –
 I will not raise my own in such reproof,
 Although 'tis clouded by my dungeon roof.

Tasso's consolation is that his genius has not been stifled by imprisonment. He has finished his epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*:

... I have battled with mine agony,
 And made me wings wherewith to overfly
 The narrow circus of my dungeon wall,
 And freed the Holy Sepulchre from thrall;
 And revelled among men and things divine,
 And poured my spirit over Palestine,
 In honour of the sacred war for him,
 The God who was on earth and is in heaven,
 For he hath strengthened me in heart and limb.

It is a consolation given to no other prisoner in Byron's works.

Thinking back to George IV brings us to another poetic use to which Byron put the idea of imprisonment. At *Don Juan VIII*, stanza 126, he “reassures” the Irish of the insignificance of their problems:

Gaunt Famine never shall approach the throne –
 Though Ireland starve, great George weighs twenty stone.

It is a development of the previous idea – George, the greatest English malefactor, in the most comfortable English prison, is one of the “greatest” of Englishmen physically, like Goodman Puff o'Barson in *Henry IV ii*. One reason why George was unhappy showing himself to his subjects was the mockery to which they subjected him on account of his obesity – the fear of which condition Byron himself understood very well, as he did the whole idea of being imprisoned in an imperfect and ugly body. George the man is imprisoned corporeally, just as George the King is imprisoned palatially. He is not the only Byronic protagonist so “cabined,

cribbed, and confined” (Shakespeare’s claustrophobic phrase for imprisonment, appears in both *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan*). Manfred describes his soul as being “cooped in clay” and his body as his own “Soul’s Sepulchre”: the Giaour “... broods within his cell unknown, / His faith and race alike unknown”: soul – race – faith – a person’s very identity – are forever unknowable in the prison which someone or something – either nature, God, or the Devil – has devised for it. Childe Harold himself, in Canto I, finds his native land, which should confer an identity of sorts upon him, to be a cell in which he is confined:

Then loathed he in his native land to dwell,
Which seem’d to him more lone than Eremite’s sad cell.

Childe Harold IV has the most famous apostrophe to freedom which Byron ever penned:

Yes, Freedom! yet thy banner, torn, but flying,
Streams like the thunder-storm *against* the wind;
Thy trumpet-voice, though broken now and dying,
The loudest still the tempest leaves behind;
Thy tree hath lost its blossoms, and the rind,
Chopp’d by the axe, looks rough and little worth,
But the sap lasts, – and still the seed we find
Sown deep, even in the bosom of the North;
So shall a better spring less bitter fruit bring forth.

Yet we cannot forget as we read such an optimistic statement that, at the start of *Childe Harold IV*, Byron stands “... in Venice, on the Bridge of Sighs, / A prison and a palace on each hand”. The lines are often read as ungrammatical, as though what Byron really means is “a prison on one hand and a palace on the other”: but this is not so – he really does intend two buildings on each hand. Each palace is a prison, and each prison a palace – the buildings are one and the same – as we have already seen in Byron’s comparison of Carlton House to Newgate, and of St. James’s Palace to the hells of Pall Mall, and to the eschatological hell which awaits the denizens of all four.

One reason for Byron’s predilection for imprisonment as a recurrent image (I have not mentioned Mazeppa, imprisoned in a much more imaginative and painful manner than any of Byron’s “normal” prisoner-protagonists) was the fact that the greatest man of his time was, for most of Byron’s mature creative life, in prison:

But where is he, the modern, mightier far,
Who, born no king, made monarchs draw his car;
The new Sesostris, whose unharnessed kings,
Freed from the bit, believe themselves with wings,
And spurn the dust o’er which they crawled of late,
Chained to the chariot of the chieftain’s state?
Yes! where is he, the Champion and the Child
Of all that’s great or little, wise or wild?
Whose game was empires and whose stakes were thrones?
Whose table, earth – whose dice were human bones?
Behold the grand result in yon lone isle,
And, as thy nature urges, weep or smile.
Sigh to behold the eagle’s lofty rage
Reduced to nibble at his narrow cage;
Smile to survey the Queller of the Nations
Now daily squabbling o’er disputed rations;
Weep to perceive him mourning, as he dines,
O’er curtailed dishes and o’er stinted wines;
O’er petty quarrels upon petty things –

Is this the man who scourged or feasted kings?
 Behold the scales in which his fortune hangs,
 A surgeon's statement and an earl's harangues!
 A bust delayed, a book refused, can shake
 The sleep of him who kept the world awake.
 Is this indeed the Tamer of the Great,
 Now slave of all could tease or irritate –
 The paltry jailer and the prying spy,
 The staring stranger with his note–book nigh?
 Plunged in a dungeon, he had still been great;
 How low, how little was this middle state,
 Between a prison and a palace, where
 How few could feel for what he had to bear!

As with Napoleon, so with Byron, who, in his exile, had been well-tortured by staring strangers with notebooks, and with surgeon's statements, and whose Venetian palazzo must often have seemed prison-like. Near the start of his stay in Venice he told Moore that it was "the greenest island of my imagination", but this did not prevent it becoming his version, first of Elba, then of St. Helena. What was a gondola, after all? "Just like a coffin clapped in a canoe" – a small prison, surrounded by death, disease, and water. It was in Venice that he became aware, on an intimate, day-to-day basis, of what it was for one country to suffer under the oppression of another. Venice was herself a prisoner of Austria, immured within herself, and thus her "own Soul's Sepulchre", far more stiflingly and self-consciously than Greece had been a prisoner of the Ottomans. It was in Venice, whose past greatness was architecturally overwhelming wherever one looked, in a way that the past greatness of Greece was not, that people were forced to eat grass, and endure the drumming practice of the occupying army's regiments daily in public places ("... the harsh sound of the barbarian drum / With dull and daily dissonance" are Byron's words). It was also in Venice that Byron explored what Hobhouse called "the hideous pozzi" – the cells of the Ducal Palace. Writing of them years later, Hobhouse recorded:

If you are in want of consolation for the extinction of patrician power, perhaps you may find it there; scarcely a ray of light glimmers into the narrow gallery which leads to the cells, and the places of confinement themselves are totally dark. A small hole in the wall admitted the damp air of the passages, and served for the introduction of the prisoner's food ...

One of these cells is the setting for one of Byron's most dramatic depictions of imprisonment – Act III scene i of *The Two Foscari*. Here is Jacopo Foscari, who prefers torture and death in his native Venice to mere imprisonment in distant Crete:

Jacopo: My doom is common, many are in dungeons,
 But none like mine, so near their father's palace;
 But then my heart is sometimes high, and hope
 Will stream along those moted rays of light
 Peopled with dusty atoms, which afford
 Our only day; for, save the jailor's torch,
 And a strange firefly, which was quickly caught
 Last night in yon enormous spider's net,
 I ne'er saw aught here like a ray. Alas!
 I know if mind may bear us up, or no,
 For I have such, and shown it before men;
 It sinks in solitude: my soul is social.

Marina: I will be with thee.

Jacopo: Ah! if it were so!

But *that* they never granted – nor will grant,
 And I shall be alone: no men – no books –
 Those lying likenesses of lying men.
 I ask'd for even those outlines of their kind,
 Which they term annals, history, or what you will,
 Which men bequeath as portraits, and they were
 Refused me, so these walls have been my study,
 More faithful pictures of Venetian story,
 With all their blank, or dismal stains, than is
 The hall not far from hence, which bears on high
 Hundreds of doges, and their deeds and dates.

To an embittered patriot like Jacopo (and for Jacopo, again, read Byron) his prison cell is a book: the history of Venice legible in the “dismal stains” on its walls is much more eloquent and trustworthy than that recorded in lying chronicles (for which he nevertheless yearns) or than the pictures in the Doge’s Palace itself.

The most extreme statement about imprisonment which Byron makes is the one in which one person contains another who is imprisoned within them, and both host and incubus suffer. Here is a little-known Byron poem, which did not see the light of day until 1991:

With you I’ve nought in common, nor would have –
 Nor fame, nor feelings, nor the very earth;
 So let us be divided by the grave,
 As we have been by thought, and life, and birth –
 And when the hungry worms their carrion crave,
 When they alone can calculate your worth,
 When all your bones are rotten as your heart,
 May both our tombs and names be kept apart!

The poem is entitled *On Southey – Detached Thought*, and the more Byron protests in it that he and Southey are distinct, the more obvious is it that they are one. The anger at the end of the verse is not anger – it is panic at the thought that even after death Byron will still be imprisoned inside Southey, and Southey will still be imprisoned inside Byron. In a stanza of *Don Juan* written the following year (it is XI, 56) Byron, feeling temporarily more relaxed and expansive, enlarges the idea, except that where his Southey is now his jailer, not his incubus, one greater than Southey seems now his intimate alter ego, his alternative self, his cell-mate in the imprisoning downward-spiral of defeat and disaster which both their lives, as he now perceives them, have always been:

But Juan was my Moscow, and Faliero
 My Leipsic, and my Mont Saint Jean seems Cain;
 “La Belle Alliance” of dunces down at zero,
 Now that the Lion’s fall’n, may rise again;
 But I will fall at once as fell my Hero,
 Nor reign at all, or as a *Monarch* reign,
 Or to some lonely Isle of Jailors go,
 With turncoat Southey as my turnkey Lowe.

Byron is imprisoned within Napoleon, and Napoleon is imprisoned within Byron: the “poetic disasters” of the one parallel the military disasters of the other. But we are by now so well-tuned to Byron’s antithesis of jail and palace, palace and jail, that we know that the alternatives of either reigning “as a *Monarch*” or of going to “some lonely Isle of Jailors”, are

false ones – Jails are exactly the places where Monarchs *do* reign, and Palaces *are* kept by Turnkeys.