

BYRON'S OCCASIONAL VERSES IN ITALY

edited by Peter Cochran

[The poems here complement those in *Poems Written ... to Teresa Guccioli.*]

The Lament of Tasso

from a letter to John Murray, November 25th 1816

(on Canova's Helen)

from a letter to Thomas Moore, February 28th 1817

(So, we'll go no more a-roving)

On the birth of John William Rizzo Hoppner

Venice. An Ode

Two Sonnets: Translation from Vittorelli. On a Nun and Sonnet on the nuptials of the Marquis Antonio Cavalli with the Countess Clelia Rasponi of Ravenna

enclosed with a letter to Thomas Moore, December 12th 1821

(Oh, talk not to me of a name great in story)

Stanzas to a Hindoo Air

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The Lament of Tasso



Tasso, and Tasso by Delacroix.

Torquato Tasso (1544-95), is one of the great poets of Italy. His most important work is the epic *Gerusalemme Liberata* (first published in mutilated form 1580), about the capture of Jerusalem in the First Crusade, by the Christians under Godfrey of Boulogne. Byron knew it well: one line from it serves as epigraph to *The Corsair*. He sold four copies in 1816 (see *Byron's Library*, on this website), and parts of *Don Juan* can be read as inversions of Tasso's solemn material.

There are no jokes in Tasso, and very little sex: in this he contrasts with Ariosto, whom Byron also studied. A very devout Catholic, he was shocked on a visit to France to find that protestant worship was tolerated there. He was also scrupulous and sensitive to an excessive degree, paranoid, even, and had, from 1579 to 1586, to be placed in the madhouse of St Anna at Ferrara. Legend grew that he had been falsely declared insane and imprisoned by Alfonso II d'Este, the local potentate, because of a passion he harboured for Leonora d'Este (seven years his senior), Alfonso's sister. There seems no truth in the tale, but Byron is pleased to adopt it as more fitting to his self-referential theme of genius persecuted.

The problem brings into focus Byron's flexible scrupulosity over factual evidence. "But I hate things *all fiction*;" he writes to Murray on April 2nd 1817; "and therefore the *Merchant* and *Othello* have no great associations for me: but *Pierre* has. There should always be some foundation of fact for the most airy fabric, and pure invention is but the talent of a liar".¹

Montaigne, whom Byron also read often, once visited Tasso in his cell in Ferrara, and found him stupefied, bestial with madness. This is what he writes in the *Apologie de Raymond Sebonde* (in the Cotton translation, which Byron read):

What a condition, through his own agitation, and promptness of Fancy, is one of the most judicious, ingenious, and the best form'd Souls, to the antient and true Poesie of any other *Italian* Poet, that has been these very many years [*that is, Tasso*], lately fall'n into? Has he not great obligation to this Vivacity that has destroy'd him? To this Light that has blinded him? To this exact and subtle apprehension of Reason, that has put him besides his? To his curious and laborious Scrutiny after Sciences, that has reduced him to a Brute? And to this rare aptitude to the Exercises of the Soul, that has rendred him without Exercise, and without Soul? I was more angry, if possible, than compassionate, to see him at *Ferrara* in so pitiful a condition survive himself; forgetting both himself and his Works; which without his knowledge, though before his Face, have been publish'd, deform'd and incorrect. Would you have a Man sound, would you have him

1: BLJ V 203.

regular, and in a steady and secure posture? Muffle him up in the shades of Stupidity and Sloth. We must be made Beasts to be made wise, and Hoodwinked before we are fit to be led.²

Byron had by the time he visited Ferrara himself, on April 19th 1817 – the day on which he wrote this poem – sold two sets of Montaigne: a three-volume edition of 1802 and another of 1811 both went in the 1816 sale of his library (see *Byron's Library*). He may have forgotten this uncomfortable passage, though given his memory I doubt it. The poem he wrote certainly ignores Montaigne's witness, and gives us instead an eloquent, sentimental Tasso, as sane as the next man, and imprisoned at a tyrant's whim – like the Prisoner of Chillon.

Byron would have had, as part of his excuse, two moving poems by Tasso which had been printed as Appendix XXIV of the second volume of John Black's *Life of Torquato Tasso* (Murray, 1810): one (*O magnanimo figlio*), addressed to Alfonso, and the other (*O figlie di Renata*), to Leonora and her sister. Black, however, shows great scepticism about the theory that Alfonso imprisoned Tasso because of his love for Leonora,³ and the poems show neither reproach to Alfonso nor love for Leonora. Byron borrowed from the earlier legend, which was believed, for example, by Milton. Pierre-Louis Ginguené, whose *Histoire Littéraire d'Italie* Byron also read (the relevant volume is the fifth, published in 1812), points out⁴ that there are in fact three Leonoras to whom Tasso addressed passionate poems – one of them fictitious.

Byron selected those “foundation(s) of fact” which best suited his creative bent.

Imprisonment had always been a favourite theme of his (see the essay *Byron and the Essence of Imprisonment*, on this website); he had, in 1816, written his greatest poem on the subject, *The Prisoner of Chillon*. Now, less than a year later, his visit to Ferrara – he stopped off there on his way to Rome from Venice – gave him a chance to return to it. Whereas his version of Bonnivard had been imprisoned in Chillon for his beliefs, his version of Tasso is imprisoned at Ferrara because of his impermissible love. This Tasso is a disguised Byron.

2: *Essays of Michael Seigneur de Montaigne in Three Books* (1693), Vol.II, pp.258-9. A modern translation runs, *There is an Italian poet, fashioned in the atmosphere of the pure poetry of Antiquity, who showed more judgement and genius than any other Italian for many a long year; yet his agile and lively mind has overthrown him; the light has made him blind; his reason's grasp was so precise and so intense that it has left him quite irrational; his quest for knowledge, eager and exacting, has led to his becoming like a dumb beast; his rare aptitude for the activities of the soul have left him with no activity ... and with no soul. Ought he to be grateful to so murderous a mental agility? It was not so much compassion that I felt as anger when I saw him in so wretched a state, surviving himself, neglecting himself (and his works, which were published, unlicked and uncorrected; he had sight of this but no understanding). Do you want a man who is sane, moderate, firmly based and reliable? Then array him in darkness, sluggishness and heaviness. To teach us to be wise, make us stupid like beasts; to guide us you must blind us.* (Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, tr. M.A.Creech, Penguin 1987, p.548)

3: John Black, *Life of Torquato Tasso* (1810), II pp.78-92.

4: P.L.Ginguené, *Histoire Littéraire d'Italie*, Vol.V (1812), p.199.

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At Ferrara, in the Library, are preserved the original MSS. of Tasso's Gierusalemme and of Guarini's Pastor Fido, with letters of Tasso, one from Titian to Ariosto, and the inkstand and chair, the tomb and the house, of the latter. But, as misfortune has a greater interest for posterity, and little or none for the cotemporary, the cell where Tasso was confined in the hospital of St. Anna attracts a more fixed attention than the residence or the monument of Ariosto – at least it had this effect on me. There are two inscriptions, one on the outer gate, the second over the cell itself, inviting unnecessarily, the wonder and the indignation of the spectator. Ferrara is much decayed and depopulated: the castle still exists entire; and I saw the court where Parisina and Hugo were beheaded, according to the annal of Gibbon.

Bologna April 19th 1817. Mem. This day I visited the cell where he was confined seven years at the Hospital of St. Anne Ferrara.

1.

Long years! – It tries the thrilling frame to bear And eagle-spirit of a Child of Song – Long years of outrage, calumny, and wrong; Imputed madness, prisoned solitude, And the Mind's canker in its savage mood,	5
When the impatient thirst of light and air Parches the heart; and the abhorred grate, Marring the sunbeams with its hideous shade Works through the throbbing eyeball to the brain, With a hot sense of heaviness and pain;	10
And bare, at once, Captivity displayed Stands scoffing through the never-opened gate, Which nothing through its bars admits, save day, And tasteless food, which I have eat alone Till its unsocial bitterness is gone;	15
And I can banquet like a beast of prey, Sullen and lonely, couching in the cave Which is my lair, and – it may be – my grave. All this hath somewhat worn me, and may wear, But must be borne. I stoop not to despair;	20
For 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; ⁵ And revelled among men and things divine,	25
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 has strengthened me in heart and limb. That through this sufferance I might be forgiven,	30
I have employed my penance to record How Salem's shrine was won, and how adored.	

⁵: Refers to *Gerusalemme Liberata*.

2.

But this is o'er – my pleasant task is done –
 My long-sustaining Friend of many years!
 If I do blot thy final page with tears, 35
 Know, that my sorrows have wrung from me none.
 But Thou, my young creation! My soul's child!
 Which ever playing round me came and smiled,
 And wooed me from myself with thy sweet sight,
 Thou too art gone – and so is my delight; 40
 And therefore do I weep and inly bleed
 With this last bruise upon a broken reed.
 Thou too art ended – what is left me now?
 I know not that – but in the innate force 45
 Of my own spirit shall be found resource.
 I have not sunk, for I had no remorse,
 Nor cause for such: they called me mad – and why?
 Oh Leonora! Wilt not *thou* reply?
 I was indeed delirious in my heart 50
 To lift my love so lofty as thou art;
 But still my frenzy was not of the mind:
 I knew my fault, and feel my punishment
 Not less because I suffer it unbent.
 That thou wert beautiful, and I not blind, 55
 Hath been the sin which shuts me from mankind;
 But let them go, or torture as they will,
 My heart can multiply thine image still;
 Successful Love may sate itself away;
 The wretched are the faithful; 'tis their fate 60
 To have all feeling, save the one, decay,
 And every passion into one dilate,
 As rapid rivers into Ocean pour;
 But ours is fathomless, and hath no shore.

3.

Above me hark! The long and maniac cry 65
 Of minds and bodies in captivity.
 And hark! The lash and the increasing howl,
 And the half-inarticulate blasphemy!
 There be some here with worse than frenzy foul,
 Some who do still goad on the o'er-laboured mind, 70
 And dim the little light that's left behind
 With needless torture, as their tyrant Will
 Is wound up to the lust of doing ill;
 With these and with their victims am I classed,
 'Mid sounds and sights like these long years have passed; 75
 'Mid sights and sounds like these my life may close:
 So let it be – for then I shall repose.

4.

I have been patient, let me be so yet;⁶
 I had forgotten half I would forget,
 But it revives – Oh! would it were my lot 80
 To be forgetful as I am forgot!⁷

6: Contrast Manfred at II i 35-8.

Feel I not wroth with those who bade me dwell
 In this vast Lazar-house of many woes?
 Where laughter is not mirth, nor thought the mind,
 Nor words a language, nor ev'n men mankind; 85
 Where cries reply to curses, shrieks to blows,
 And each is tortured in his separate hell –
 For we are crowded in our solitudes –
 Many, but each divided by the wall,
 Which echoes Madness in her babbling moods; 90
 While all can hear, none heed his neighbour's call –
 None! save that One, the veriest wretch of all,
 Who was not made to be the mate of these,
 Nor bound between Distraction, and Disease.
 Feel I not wroth with those who placed me here? 95
 Who have debased me in the minds of men,
 Debarring me the usage of my own,
 Blighting my life in best of its career,
 Branding my thoughts as things to shun and fear?
 Would I not pay them back these pangs again, 100
 And teach them inward Sorrow's stifled groan?
 The struggle to be calm, and cold distress,
 Which undermines our Stoical success?
 No! – still too proud to be vindictive – I
 Have pardoned princes' insults, and would die. 105
 Yes, Sister of my Sovereign!⁸ For thy sake
 I weed all bitterness from out my breast,
 It hath no business where *thou* art a guest;
 Thy brother hates – but I cannot detest;
 Thou pitiest not – but I cannot forsake. 110

5.

Look on a love which knows not to despair,
 But all unquenched is still my better part,
 Dwelling deep in my shut and silent heart,
 As dwells the gathered lightning in its cloud,
 Encompassed with its dark and rolling shroud, 115
 Till struck – forth flies the all-ethereal dart!
 And thus at the collision of thy name,
 The vivid thought still flashes through my frame,
 And for a moment all things as they were
 Flit by me; they are gone – I am the same. 120
 And yet my love without ambition grew;
 I knew thy state – my station – and I knew
 A Princess was no love-mate for a bard;
 I told it not – I breathed it not – it was
 Sufficient to itself, its own reward; 125
 And if my eyes revealed it, they, alas!
 Were punished by the silentness⁹ of thine,
 And yet I did not venture to repine.
 Thou wert to me a crystal-girded shrine,
 Worshipped at holy distance, and around 130

7: Compare Manfred's longing for oblivion (I i 144).

8: He addresses Leonora d'Este.

9: B. does not hesitate to invent a new word to replace "silence", which has too few syllables.

Hallowed and meekly kissed the saintly ground;
 Not for thou wert a Princess, but that Love
 Had robed thee with a glory, and arrayed
 Thy lineaments in beauty that dismayed –
 Oh! not dismayed – but awed, like One above! 135
 And in that sweet severity there was
 A something which all softness did surpass;
 I know not how – thy Genius mastered mine;
 My star stood still before thee: if it were
 Presumptuous thus to love without design, 140
 That sad fatality hath cost me dear;
 But thou art dearest still, and I should be
 Fit for this cell, which wrongs me – but for *thee*.
 The very love which locked me to my chain
 Hath lightened half its weight; and for the rest, 145
 Though heavy, lent me vigour to sustain,
 And look to thee with undivided breast,
 And foil the ingenuity of Pain.

6.

It is no marvel – from my very birth
 My soul was drunk with Love, which did pervade 150
 And mingle with whate'er I saw on earth:
 Of objects all inanimate I made
 Idols, and out of wild and lonely flowers,
 And rocks, whereby they grew, a Paradise,
 Where I did lay me down within the shade 155
 Of waving trees, and dreamed uncounted hours,
 Though I was chid for wandering; and the Wise
 Shook their white aged heads o'er me and said,
 Of such materials wretched men were made,
 And such a truant boy would end in woe, 160
 And that the only lesson was a blow;¹⁰
 And then they smote me, and I did not weep,
 But cursed them in my heart, and to my haunt
 Returned and wept alone, and dreamed again
 The visions which arise without a sleep, 165
 And with my years my soul began to pant
 With feelings of strange tumult and soft pain;¹¹
 And the whole heart exhaled into One Want,
 But undefined and wandering, till the day
 I found the thing I sought – and that was thee; 170
 And then I lost my being, all to be
 Absorbed in thine; the world was past away;
Thou didst annihilate the earth to me!

7.

I loved all Solitude, but little thought
 To spend I know not what of life, remote 175
 From all communion with existence, save
 The maniac and his tyrant; had I been
 Their fellow, many years ere this had seen

10: Tasso was a studious and well-behaved child: B. here describes himself.

11: Compare Don Juan's adolescence (*Don Juan* I, sts.91-6).

My mine like theirs corrupted to its grave.
 But who hath seen me writhe, or heard me rave? 180
 Perchance in such a cell we suffer more
 Than the wrecked sailor on his desert shore;
 The world is all before him¹² – *mine is here*,
 Scarce twice the space they must accord my bier.
 What though *he* perish, he may lift his eye. 185
 And with a dying glance upbraid the sky;
 I will not raise my own in such reproof,
 Although 'tis clouded by my dungeon roof.

8.

Yet do I feel at times my mind decline,
 But with a sense of its decay: I see 190
 Unwonted lights along my prison shine,
 And a strange Dæmon, who is vexing me
 With pilfering pranks and petty pains, below
 The feeling of the healthful and the free;
 But much to One, who long hath suffered so, 195
 Sickness of heart, and narrowness of place,
 And all that may be borne, or can debase.
 I thought mine enemies had been but Man,
 But Spirits may be leagued with them; all Earth
 Abandons, Heaven forgets me; in the dearth 200
 Of such defence the Powers of Evil can,
 It may be, tempt me further – and prevail
 Against the outworn creature they assail.
 Why in this furnace is my spirit proved,
 Like steel in tempering fire? Because I loved? 205
 Because I loved what not to love, and see,
 Was more or less than mortal, and than me.¹³

9.

I once was quick in feeling – that is o'er;
 My scars are callous, or I should have dashed
 My brain against these bars, as the sun flashed 210
 In mockery through them: If I bear and bore
 The much I have recounted, and the more
 Which hath no words – 'tis that I would not die,
 And sanction with self-slaughter the dull lie
 Which snared me here, and with the brand of shame 215
 Stamp Madness deep into my memory,
 And woo Compassion to a blighted name,
 Sealing the sentence which my foes proclaim.
 No – it shall be immortal! And I make
 A future temple of my present cell, 220
 Which nations yet shall visit for my sake.
 While thou, Ferrara! when no longer dwell
 The ducal chiefs within thee, shalt fall down,
 And crumbling piecemeal view thy heartless halls,
 A Poet's wreath shall be thine only crown – 225
 A Poet's dungeon thy most far renown,

12: Echoes Milton, *Paradise Lost*, XII 646.

13: A distant allusion to B.'s love for his half-sister Augusta.

While strangers wonder o'er thy unpeopled walls!
 And thou, Leonora! thou – who were ashamed
 That such as I could love – who blushed to hear
 To less than monarchs that thou couldst be dear, 230
 Go! tell thy brother, that my heart, untamed
 By grief, years, weariness – and it may be
 A taint of that he would impute to me –
 From long infection of a den like this,
 Where the mind rots congenial with the abyss – 235
 Adores thee still; and add – that when the towers
 And battlements which guard his joyous hours
 Of banquet, dance, and revel, are forgot,
 Or left untended in a dull repose –
 This, this shall be a consecrated spot! 240
 But *Thou* – when all that Birth and Beauty throws
 Of magic round thee is extinct – shalt have
 One half the laurel which o'ershades my grave.
 No power in death can tear our names apart,
 As none in life could rend thee from my heart. 245
 Yes, Leonora! It shall be our fate
 To be entwined for ever – but too late!

from a letter to John Murray, November 25th 1816



Antonio Canova (1757-1822), is one of the greatest of Italian sculptors. Byron threw off this poem about his *Helen* (pictured) in a letter to his publisher. The poem gains from being placed in its epistolary context.

The *Helen* of Canova – (a bust which is in the house of M[adam]e the Countess d’Albrizzi whom I know) is without exception to my mind the most perfectly beautiful of human conceptions – and far beyond my ideas of human execution. –

In this beloved marble view,
 Above the works and thoughts of Man,
 What Nature *could*, but *would not*, do,
 And Beauty and Canova *can*!
 Beyond Imagination’s power,
 Beyond the Bard’s defeated art,
 With immortality her dower,
 Behold the *Helen* of the *heart*!

Talking of the “heart” reminds me that I have fallen in love – which except falling into the Canal – (and that would be useless as I swim) is the best (or worst) thing I could do. – I am therefore in love – fathomless love – but lest you should make some splendid mistake – & envy me the possession of some of those Princesses or Countesses with whose affections your English voyagers are apt to invest themselves – I beg leave to tell you – that my Goddess is only the wife of a “Merchant of Venice” – but then she is pretty as an Antelope, – is but two & twenty years old – has the large black Oriental eyes – with the Italian countenance – and dark glossy hair of the curl & colour of Lady Jersey’s – then she has the voice of a lute – and the song of a Seraph (though not quite so sacred) besides a long postscript of graces – virtues and accomplishments – enough to furnish out a new Chapter for Solomon’s song. – But her great merit is finding out mine – there is nothing so amiable as discernment. –¹⁴

from a letter to Thomas Moore, February 28th 1817

Byron's own account of his sex-life in Venice is well-known:

So Lauderdale has been telling a story! – I suppose this is my reward for presenting him at Countess Benzzone's – & shewing him – what attention I could. – – Which "piece" does he mean? – since last year I have run the Gauntlet; – is it the Tarruscelli – the Da Mosti – the Spineda – the Lotti – the Rizzato – the Eleanora – the Carlotta – the Giulietta – the Alvisi – the Zambieri – The Eleanora da Bezzi – (who was the King of Naples' Gioacchino's mistress – at least one of them) the Theresina of Mazzurati – the Glettenheimer – & her Sister – the Luigia & her mother – the Fornaretta – the Santa – the Caligari – the Portiera [Vedova?] – the Bolognese figurante – the Tentora and her sister – cum multis aliis? – some of them are Countesses – & some of them Cobblers wives – some noble – some middling – some low – & all whores – which does the damned old "Ladro – & porco fottuto" mean? – I have had them all & thrice as many to boot since 1817...¹⁵

In this light it's hardly surprising that he should have succumbed to post-coital indolence now and then. His most famous lyric is a hymn to that psycho-physical state. The letter to Moore in which the poem is written (without apparent premeditation) provides it, again, with an eloquent context:

The mumming closed with a masked ball at the Fenice, where I went, as also to most of the ridottos, etc., etc.; and, though I did not dissipate much upon the whole, yet I find "the sword wearing out the scabbard," though I have but just turned the corner of twenty-nine.

So, we'll go no more a-roving
So late into the night,
Though the heart be still as loving,
And the moon be still as bright.

For the sword outwears its sheath,
And the soul wears out the breast,
And the heart must pause to breathe,
And Love itself have rest.

Though the night was made for loving,
And the day returns too soon,
Yet we'll go no more a-roving
By the light of the moon.

. . . If I live ten years longer, you will see, however, that it is not over with me – I don't mean in literature, for that is nothing; and it may seem odd enough to say, I do not think it my vocation. But you will see that I shall do something or other – the times and fortune permitting – that, "like the cosmogony, or creation of the world, will puzzle the philosophers of all ages." But I doubt whether my constitution will hold out. I have, at intervals, *exorcised* it most devilishly.¹⁶

The poem is derived from the refrain of a 1730s Scots ballad, *The Jolly Beggar*:

It's of a jolly beggar-man came tripping o'er the plain,
He came unto a farmer's door a lodging for to gain;

15: BLJ VI, 92; letter of January 19th 1819. Byron caught gonorrhoea from Elena Da Mosti: see BLJ VI, 14 (where her name is spelled "da Mosta").

16: BLJ V 176-7.

The farmer's daughter she came down and viewed him cheek and chin –
She says, "He is a handsome man. I pray you take him in".

We'll go no more a roving, a roving in the night,
We'll go no more a roving, let the moon shine so bright –
We'll go no more a roving ... &c.

Richard Belgrave Hoppner (1786-1872), English Consul in Venice, was son to the portrait-painter John Hoppner, who once painted Byron's lover Elizabeth, Countess of Oxford. He was also godson to Byron's "Literary Father" William Gifford – so it was natural that upon Byron's reaching Venice in 1816 the two men should get together. Hoppner had artistic and literary interests, and was by political inclination more Whiggish than not, so he and Byron got on well.

Hoppner's Swiss wife bore a son in January 1818. Moore takes up the story:

On the birth of this child, who was christened John William Rizzo, Lord Byron wrote the four following lines, which are in no other respect remarkable than that they were thought worthy of being metrically translated into no less than ten different languages; namely, Greek, Latin, Italian (also in the Venetian dialect), German, French, Spanish, Illyrian, Hebrew, Armenian, and Samaritan:—

His father's sense, his mother's grace
In him, I hope, will always fit so;
With (still to keep him in good case)
The health and appetite of Rizzo.

The original lines, with the different versions just mentioned, were printed, in a small neat volume (which now lies before me), in the seminary of Padua.¹⁷

17: Moore's *Life*, II 164n.

Venice: an Ode

The once-all-powerful maritime republic of Venice was, by the time Byron moved there in late 1816, a shadow of its former imperialist self. Its days as a force in the Mediterranean were over, and it had the status of a minor Italian republic. As such it had been ceded to the Austrians by Napoleon at the 1797 treaty of Campo Formio, snatched back from them by him at Pressburg in 1805, and then re-ceded to them by the Allies in 1815 after Waterloo at the Congress of Vienna.

Byron found the classless social life of Venice a challenge to his sense of English aristocratic self, and its sexual freedom a challenge to his libidinous energies. Evidence of his ability to meet both challenges is to be found in *Beppo*, and in his correspondence. But he was throughout his time there dismayed by the contrast between the evidence of the city's past greatness and its present, squalid humiliation.

He announced *Venice: an Ode* to Murray on July 10th 1818;¹⁸ on November 11th 1818 he wrote of it to Hobhouse "it is not very intelligible – and you may omit it if you like",¹⁹ and it was published with *Mazeppa* on June 28th 1819. The rhetorical generality of its politics, and the way it strains for rhyme, reminds one constantly of *Childe Harold IV*. Its theme is how, along with most of Europe, Venice has become the slave of tyrants, as opposed to America, which celebrates its freedom.



Byron's Venetian residence, the Palazzo Mocenigo, Grand Canal (2005: photo Abi Cochran)

1.

Oh Venice! Venice! when thy marble walls
 Are level with the waters, there shall be
 A cry of Nations o'er thy sunken halls,
 A loud lament along the sweeping Sea!
 If I, a northern wanderer, weep for thee,
 What should thy Sons do? – anything but weep;
 And yet they only murmur in their sleep.
 In contrast with their fathers – as the slime,
 The dull green ooze of the receding deep,

5

18: BLJ VI 58.

19: BLJ VI 76.

Is with the dashing of the spring-tide foam 10
 That drives the sailor shipless to his home,
 Are they to those that were; and thus they creep,
 Crouching and crab-like, through their sapping streets.²⁰
 Oh Agony! that centuries should reap
 No mellow harvest! Thirteen hundred years 15
 Of Wealth and Glory turned to dust and tears;
 And every Monument the Stranger meets,
 Church, palace, pillar, as a Mourner greets;
 And even the Lion all subdued appears,²¹
 And the harsh sound of the Barbarian drum²² 20
 With dull and daily dissonance, repeats
 The echo of thy tyrant's voice along
 The soft waves, once all musical to Song,²³
 That heaved beneath the Moonlight with the throng
 Of Gondolas – and to the busy hum 25
 Of cheerful Creatures, whose most sinful deeds
 Were but the overbeating of the heart,²⁴
 And flow of too much happiness, which needs
 The aid of age, to turn its course apart
 From the luxuriant and voluptuous flood 30
 Of sweet sensations, battling with the blood.
 But these are better than the gloomy errors,
 The weeds of Nations in their last decay,
 When Vice walks forth with her unsoftened terrors,
 And Mirth is Madness, and but smiles to slay; 35
 And Hope is nothing but a false delay,
 The Sick man's lightning half an hour ere death,
 When Faintness, the last mortal birth of Pain,
 And Apathy of limb, the dull beginning
 Of the cold staggering race which Death is winning, 40
 Steals vein by vein and pulse by pulse away;
 Yet so relieving the o'er-tortured clay,
 To him appears renewal of his breath,
 And freedom the mere numbness of his chain;²⁵
 And then he talks of life, and how again 45
 He feels his spirit soaring – albeit weak,
 And of the fresher air, which he would seek:
 And as he whispers knows not that he gasps,
 That his thin finger feels not what it clasps,
 And so the film comes o'er him, and the dizzy 50
 Chamber swims round and round, and shadows busy,

20: Yet compare *Marino Faliero*, Appendix VI: *FROM the present decay and degeneration of Venice under the Barbarians, there are some honourable individual exceptions ...*

21: The Lion is the Lion of St Mark, Venice's traditional emblem.

22: Hobhouse to Murray, December 17th 1817: There is only one public walk, a garden, made by the French, here – Well, they chose this single promenade for the young drummers' academy, and from one until five in the afternoon the walks were inaccessible – The Commander in chief here was quite surprised <that> when Mr Hoppner, our consul, hinted that the Venetians did not like drumming as well as anything else – the Venetians who by one of their old institutions never saw a soldier in Venice!! “There are only three drummers there” said the Marquis Chatelier – there by the way *he lied* – there were nine counted by Mr H[oppner] himself – Not that these people mean mischief – it is mere stupidity – the drumming is removed, and, I have no doubt what <is a> are nuisances with others are habits with them – (John Murray Archive / National Library of Scotland).

23: Echoes *CHP IV*, 3, 1-2: *In Venice Tasso's echoes are no more, / And silent rows the songless Gondolier ...*

24: B. refers to the extreme sexual promiscuity he found among the Venetians

25: Echoes *The Prisoner of Chillon*, last line.

At which he vainly catches, flit and gleam,
 Till the last rattle chokes the strangled scream,
 And all is ice and blackness; and the Earth
 That which it was the moment ere our birth. 55

2.

There is no hope for Nations! – search the page
 Of many thousand years! – the daily scene,
 The flow and ebb of each recurring age,
 The everlasting to be which hath been
 Hath taught us nought, or little: still we lean 60
 On things that rot beneath our weight, and wear
 Our strength away in wrestling with the air:
 For 'tis our Nature strikes us down: the beasts
 Slaughtered in hourly hecatombs for feasts
 Are of as high an order – they must go 65
 Even where their driver goads them – though to Slaughter.
 Ye! Men! who pour your blood for kings as water,²⁶
 What have they given your children in return?
 A heritage of servitude and woes,
 A blindfold bondage, where your hire is blows. 70
 What! do not yet the red-hot ploughshares burn,
 O'er which you stumble in a false ordeal?
 And deem this proof of loyalty the real?
 Kissing the hand that guides you to your scars,
 And glorying as you tread the glowing bars. 75
 All that your Sires have left you, all that Time
 Bequeaths of Free, and History of Sublime,
 Spring from a different theme! Ye see and read,
 Admire and sigh, and then succumb and bleed!
 Save the few Spirits who, despite of all, 80
 And worse than all, the sudden crimes engendered
 By the down-thundering of the prison-wall,
 And thirst to swallow the sweet waters tendered,
 Gushing from Freedom's fountains, when the crowd,
 Maddened with centuries of drowth, are loud, 85
 And trample on each other to obtain
 The cup which brings oblivion of a chain
 Heavy and sore, in which long yoked they ploughed
 The sand; or if there sprung the yellow grain,
 'Twas not for them, their necks were too much bowed, 90
 And their dead palates chewed the cud of pain:
 Yes! the few Spirits,²⁷ who, despite of deeds
 Which they abhor, confound not with the cause
 Those momentary starts from Nature's laws,
 Which, like the pestilence and earthquake, smite 95
 But for a term, then pass, and leave the earth
 With all her seasons to repair the blight
 With a few summers, and again put forth
 Cities and generations – fair, when free –

26: Refers to the Congress of Vienna (1815), which restored the tyrannies Napoleon had defeated.

27: After a long digression on the destruction wrought by liberated mobs, B. resumes his theme of "the few Spirits" (line 80). He is trying without much success to balance his distaste for revolutionary mob-rule with his sense that some great men see and nourish the civilised potential in revolutions.

For, Tyranny, there blooms no bud for thee! 100

3.

Glory and Empire! once upon these towers
 With Freedom – Godlike Triad! how ye sate!
 The league of mightiest Nations, in those hours
 When Venice was an envy, might abate,
 But did not quench her Spirit, in her fate 105
 All were enwrapped; the feasted Monarchs knew
 And loved their Hostess, nor could learn to hate,
 Although they humbled – with the kingly few
 The many felt, for from all days and climes
 She was the Voyager’s worship; even her Crimes 110
 Were of the softer order – born of Love,
 She drank no blood, nor fattened on the dead,
 But gladdened where her harmless Conquests spread;
 For these restored the Cross, that from above
 Hallowed her sheltering banners, which incessant 115
 Flew between earth and the unholy Crescent,
 Which, if it waned and dwindled, Earth may thank
 The City it has clothed in chains,²⁸ which clank
 Now, creaking in the ears of those who owe
 The name of Freedom to her glorious struggles; 120
 Yet She but shares with them a common woe,
 And called the “Kingdom” of a conquering foe,²⁹
 But knows what all – and, most of all, *we* know –
 With what set gilded terms a tyrant juggles!

4.

The name of Commonwealth is past and gone 125
 O’er the three fractions of the groaning Globe;
 Venice is crushed, and Holland deigns to own
 A sceptre, and endures the purple robe;³⁰
 If the free Switzer yet bestrides alone
 His chainless mountains, ’tis but for a time, 130
 For Tyranny of late is cunning grown,
 And in its own good Season tramples down
 The sparkles of our ashes.³¹ One great Clime,³²
 Whose vigorous Offspring by dividing Ocean
 Are kept apart and nursed in the devotion 135
 Of Freedom, which their fathers fought for, and
 Bequeathed – a heritage of heart and hand,
 And proud distinction from each other land,
 Whose Sons must bow them at a Monarch’s motion,
 As if his senseless Sceptre were a wand 140
 Full of the magic of exploded Science;

28: B., oversimplifying, claims that Venice saved Europe from the Turk and Saracen: “Europe’s bulwark ’gainst the Ottomite” (CHP IV, 14, 6).

29: Upon the Austrian takeover in 1815, Venice was incorporated into “the Kingdom of Lombardy Venetia”. It was to this “Kingdom” that R.B.Hoppner (see above) was English Consul.

30: The Dutch republic (including Belgium and Luxemburg), had had a king forced upon it at Vienna. But Napoleon’s brother Louis had been made its first king, in 1806.

31: The freedom and unity of the Swiss republic were threatened by the 1815 Vienna settlement, but not supplanted.

32: B. refers to the United States, which he always held in awe as a bastion of liberty.

Still one great Clime, in full and free defiance,
 Yet rears her crest, unconquered and sublime,
 Above the far Atlantic! – She has taught
 Her Esau-brethren³³ that the haughty flag, 145
 The floating fence of Albion's feeble Crag,³⁴
 May strike to those whose red-right hands have bought
 Rights cheaply earned with blood. Still – still – for ever,
 Better, though each man's life-blood were a river,
 That it should flow, and overflow, than creep 150
 Through thousand lazy channels in our veins
 Dammed like the dull Canal with locks and chains,
 And moving, as a sick man in his sleep,
 Three paces, and then faltering; better be
 Where the extinguished Spartans still are free, 155
 In their proud Charnel of Thermopylæ,³⁵
 Than stagnate in our marsh – or o'er the deep
 Fly, and one current to the Ocean add,
 One Spirit to the Souls our Fathers had,
 One freeman more, America! – to thee! 160

33: Esau and Jacob are rival twin brothers in Genesis 25-8. Esau sells his birthright to Jacob for “a mess of pottage”. B. implies that although Europe has sold its freedom, America still possesses hers (the analogy doesn't work, since it is not to America that Europe has sold its freedom).

34: ... “the haughty flag” is the Union Jack. War between the USA and England had resulted in a number of U.S. naval victories.

35: Compare CHP II 73-7.

Two Sonnets

Jacopo Vittorelli (1749-1835), was an old-fashioned, sentimental poet, uninfluenced by the new “romanticism”. Byron’s motive in translating the sonnet is not known; it appears printed opposite the original on the last pages of *Childe Harold IV*.

Translation from Vittorelli. On a Nun.

Sonnet composed in the name of a father whose daughter had recently died shortly after her marriage; and addressed to the father of her who had lately taken the veil.

Of two fair virgins, modest, though admired,
 Heaven made us happy; and now, wretched sires,
 Heaven for a nobler doom their worth desires,
 And gazing upon *either, both* required.
 Mine, while the torch of Hymen newly fired 5
 Becomes extinguished, soon – too soon – expires:
 But thine, within the closing grate retired,
 Eternal captive, to her God aspires.
 But *thou* at least from out the jealous door,
 Which shuts between your never-meeting eyes, 10
 May’st hear her sweet and pious voice once more:
I to the marble, where *my daughter* lies,
 Rush – the swoln flood of bitterness I pour,
 And knock, and knock, and knock – but none replies.

Byron wrote, “I wrote this sonnet (after tearing the first) on being repeatedly urged to do so by the Countess Guiccioli”. Antonio Cavalli was Teresa’s uncle.

Sonnet on the nuptials of the Marquis Antonio Cavalli with the Countess Clelia Rasponi of Ravenna

A noble Lady of the Italian shore
 Lovely and young, herself a happy bride,
 Commands a verse, and will not be denied,
 From me a wandering Englishman; I tore
 One sonnet, but invoke the Muse once more 5
 To hail these gentle hearts which Love has tied,
 In Youth, Birth, Beauty, genially allied
 And blest with Virtue’s Soul, and Fortune’s store.
 A sweeter language, and a luckier bard,
 Were worthier of your hopes, Auspicious Pair! 10
 And of the sanctity of Hymen’s shrine,
 But, – since I cannot but obey the Fair,
 To render your new state your true reward,
 May your Fate be like *Hers*, and unlike *mine*.

Byron. Ravenna. July 31st 1819

enclosed with a letter to Thomas Moore, December 12th 1821³⁶

The poem's enclosure is signalled in a postscript dated December 13th:

P.S. December 13th. / I enclose you some lines written not long ago, which you may do what you like with, as they are very harmless. Only, if copied, or printed, or set, I could wish it more correctly than in the usual way, in which one's "nothings are monstered," as Coriolanus says.

The lines appear also as *Detached Thought* 118, where they are dated November 6th 1821. (BLJ IX 51-2), with after, "I composed these stanzas (except the fourth one added now) a few days ago – on the road from Florence to Pisa –".

1.

Oh, talk not to me of a name great in story;
The days of our Youth are the days of our Glory;
And the myrtle and ivy of sweet two and twenty
Are worth all your laurels, though ever so plenty.

2.

What are garlands and crowns to the brow that is wrinkled? 5
'Tis but as a dead flower with May-dew besprinkled,
Then away with all such from the head that is hoary!
What care I for the wreaths that can *only* give glory?

3.

Oh! Fame! – if I e'er took delight in thy praises,
'Twas less for the sake of thy high-sounding phrases, 10
Than to see the bright eyes of the dear One discover,³⁷
She thought that I was not unworthy to love her.

4.

There chiefly I sought thee, *there* only I found thee;
Her Glance was the best of the rays that surround thee;
When it sparkled o'er aught that was bright in my story, 15
I knew it was Love, and I felt it was Glory.

Lady Blessington offered a parody:

Oh! talk not to me of the charms of youth's dimples,
There's surely more sentiment centred in wrinkles.
They're the triumphs of time that mark beauty's decay,
Telling tales of years past, and the few left to stay.³⁸

³⁶: BLJ IX 80 (the poem, being an enclosure, is not printed).

³⁷: It seems unlikely that "the dear One" is anyone other than Augusta.

³⁸: *Lady Blessington's Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Lovell (Princeton 1969), p.149.

Stanzas to a Hindoo Air

Iris Origo, a hostile narrator of Byron's affair with Teresa Guiccioli, tells this story about the poem:



It was, according to Trelawny, at about this time that a modest request from a tenor called Sinclair, of the Pisa opera-house, that Byron and Shelley should each write a song for him, set both poets good-naturedly to work, putting words to an Indian air which Jane Williams had often played to them. The Hindustani words of the air, Trelawny affirms, which begin "Allah Malla punca" [sic] "are as hackneyed in Bengal as Malbrouk or Cherryripe in Covent Garden". The result of these poetic efforts were, he states, Shelley's exquisite lyric, "I arise from dreams of thee", and perhaps one of the worst, as well as the most absurd, of Byron's many bad poems, a lyric of which it is perhaps sufficient to quote the first verse:

Oh my lonely – lonely – lonely pillow!
Where is my lover, where is my lover?
Is it his bark which my dreary dreams discover?
Far far away! and alone among the billow.

Trelawny adds that poor Teresa, when she attempted

"to marry the long verses of the English song to the allegro air – found it was impossible – notwithstanding which Byron maintained that the words corresponded excellently. The Contessa, when her patience and ingenuity (which were great) became exhausted, declared it was she who spoiled both the beautiful words (from not understanding them) and the music. The songs were not given to Sinclair – and Byron confessed his songs in general were not good and that he had great difficulty in composing them – yet, he added, you must all allow, the one I wrote to the Indian air is very good!"

Poor Teresa! [*continues Origo*] She tried very hard to play up to the mysterious new standards of the company in which she now found herself! Mary, she discovered, was having Greek lessons every day – and this appeared to constitute a further bond between her and Shelley. Perhaps, she thought, Byron would be pleased if she, too, showed an equal studiousness.³⁹

Readers must decide for themselves how accurately Origo judges Byron's poem. Reading the lyric Shelley wrote for Sinclair may help. It is printed below.

1.

Oh! my lonely, lonely, lonely Pillow!
Where is my Lover? where is my Lover?
Is it his Bark which my dreary dreams discover?
Far, far away! and alone along the Billow?

2.

Oh! my lonely, lonely, lonely Pillow! 5
Why must my Heart ache where his gentle brow lay?
How the long Night flags lovelessly and slowly!
And my head droops over thee like the Willow!

³⁹: Iris Origo, *The Last Attachment* (1949), pp.298-9; she quotes Trelawny from an "Unpublished note belonging to Sir John Murray".

3.

Oh! thou, my sad and solitary Pillow!
 Send me kind dreams to keep my heart from breaking, 10
 In return for the tears I shed upon thee waking;
 Let me not die till he comes back o'er the billow.

4.

Then if thou wilt – no more my *lonely* Pillow?
 In one embrace let these arms again enfold him,
 And then expire of the joy – but to behold him! 15
 Oh! my lone bosom! – oh! my lonely Pillow!

5.

Oh! thou my sad and solitary Pillow!
 Send me kind dreams to keep my heart from breaking
 In return for the tears which I shed upon thee waking
 Let me not die till he comes back o'er the billow. 20

6.

Then if thou wilt, no more, my lonely Pillow,
 In one embrace let these arms but enfold him,
 And then expire of the Joy – but to behold him!
 Oh! my lone bosom – oh! my lonely pillow!

– Pisa January 1st 1822.

The Indian Girl's Song

Percy Bysshe Shelley

I arise from dreams of thee	The wandering airs they faint	O lift me from the grass!
In the first sleep of night –	On the dark silent stream –	I die, I faint, I fail!
The winds are breathing low	The champak odours fail	Let thy love in kisses rain
And the stars are burning bright.	Like sweet thoughts in a dream;	On my lips and eyelids pale.
I arise from dreams of thee –	The nightingale's complaint –	My cheek is cold and white, alas!
And a spirit in my feet	It dies upon her heart –	My heart beats loud and fast
Has borne me – Who knows how?	As I must die on thine	Oh press it close to thine again
To thy chamber window, sweet!	O beloved as thou art!	Where it will break at last.

Three poems for Lady Blessington



Blessington, by Lawrence.

Born in 1789 near Clonmel, Ireland, Margaret Power was forced into a loveless marriage at fourteen, left her husband three months later, lived with a Captain Jenkins, and in 1818, three months after her first husband's death, married the Earl of Blessington, whose mistress she had been (he had bought her from Jenkins for ten thousand pounds). The Blessingtons arrived in Genoa on March 31st, 1823, and left on June 2nd. Teresa Guiccioli was furiously jealous of her, since Byron so obviously enjoyed the Britishness she, her husband, and their strange friend Alfred, Count d'Orsay, brought with them. Blessington served as part-model for Lady Adeline Amundeville in the later cantos of *Don Juan*, and she left a valuable set of Byron's *Conversations*, in which, however, she may have passed off some of her opinions as his. She died in Paris in 1849.

It seems clear from these three poems that Byron found Blessington attractive; but the proximity of the already-compromised Teresa, and Byronic ennui (he was already planning to go to Greece, where he anticipated death), precluded an affair.

Impromptu

Beneath Blessington's eyes
 The reclaimed Paradise
 Should be free as the former from evil;
 But if the new Eve
 For an Apple should grieve, 5
 What mortal would not play the Devil? – 1823.

To the Countess of Blessington

1.
 You have asked for a verse – the request
 In a rhymer 'twere strange to deny;
 But my Hippocrene was but my breast,
 And my feelings (its fountain) are dry.

2.

Were I now as I was, I had sung 5
 What Lawrence has painted so well;⁴⁰
 But the strain would expire on my tongue,
 And the theme is too soft for my shell.

3.

I am ashes where once I was fire,
 And the bard in my bosom is dead; 10
 What I loved I now merely admire,
 And my heart is as grey as my head.

4.

My life is not dated by years –
 There are *moments* which act as plough;
 And there is not a furrow appears 15
 But is deep in my soul as my brow.

5.

Let the young and the brilliant aspire
 To sing what I gaze on in vain;
 For Sorrow has torn from my lyre
 The string which was worthy the strain. – 1823. 20

To ———

But once I dared to lift my eyes,
 To lift my eyes on thee,
 But since that hour, beneath the Skies
 No other thing they see. 5

In vain Sleep shuts them in the Night –
 The Night grows day to me –
 Presenting idly to my sight
 What still a dream must be.

A fatal dream – for many a bar
 Divides thy fate from mine, 10
 And all my Passions wake and war;
 But – Peace be still with thine! – 1823.

40: See illustration. B. must have seen an engraving, if indeed he saw any version.