CHAPTER 1

# *Byron's Life and His Biographers*

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After the mid-nineteenth century, it became a stereotype for asylum inmates to imagine themselves as the omnipotent Napoleon – but also the brilliant Byron.[1] The desire to translate one's life into the idealisation of another is common enough that Albert Camus defined biography itself as 'nostalgia for other people's lives'.[2] Camus thought that our fascination with famous people stems from our belief that their lives have strong plots, while our own lives seem fragmentary and directionless. However, since even the careers of celebrities are not as neatly plotted as we imagine, the production of that nostalgia requires an unholy alliance between fiction and biography. Lord Byron knew this as well as perhaps anyone in history, writing his own story and seeming to live what he wrote:

> 'Tis to create, and in creating live
> A being more intense, that we endow
> With form our fancy, gaining as we give
> The life we image, even as I do now. (*CHP*, III.6.46–50)

The vignettes and anecdotes he relished and promulgated produced a tale of sex, violence, genius, and adventure, or – as some see it – sex, violence, cruelty, and hypocrisy. However you choose to perceive Byron, the conflation of the life and the work explains much of the delight and frustration to be found in the immense canon of Byron biography, from laurel wreaths to slash-and-burn character assassination, from dry factual accounts to encounters beyond the grave, such as Quevedo Redivivus's *A Spiritual Interview with Lord Byron* (1840) and Amanda Prantera's *Conversations with Lord Byron on Perversion, 163 Years After His Lordship's Death* (1987).

The deepest vein in Byronic portraits is undoubtedly the Gothic. Transgressors such as Childe Harold, Selim, Lara, Conrad, Manfred, and Cain have inspired scores of writers. Even before he died, Byron had appeared in at least a dozen novels, most notably as the eponymous heroes

of Lady Caroline Lamb's *Glenarvon* (1816) and *Ada Reis* (1823), and as the self-dramatising Mr Cypress in Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* (1818) – but also in hilariously serious works like *The Baron of Falconberg; or, Childe Harolde in Prose* (1815).[3] Byron biography sometimes reads like Gothic melodrama. That is no accident, for Byron encouraged readers to imagine him as a Gothic hero.[4] As he wrote in a letter to Francis Hodgson in 1821, 'the *hero* of tragedy and (I add meo periculo) a *tragic* poem must be *guilty*, to excite "*terror and pity*"'. And, he asked blithely, 'Who is the hero of 'Paradise Lost'? Why Satan' (*BLJ*, XIII, 115). Byron's biographers have been so often drawn to Gothic elements in his life because Byron helped them along, portraying himself as a fallen angel haunted by a secret past.[5]

That 'fallen angel' image was born in 1812 when, at the age of twenty-four, Byron published what everyone took to be a thinly disguised autobiography titled *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. His own hero had been Napoleon, whose bust he kept upon his desk at Harrow, and his goal was to establish himself as a conquering force as well – in letters rather than the battlefield. *Harold* was his first victory. It made Byron the inventor of what Claire Tuite has called a new kind of notoriety: 'scandalous celebrity'.[6] Harold/Byron's Gothic aspects mesmerised readers immediately, and the fascination persisted throughout his life and after, with his injured foot, imperious (and painfully crass) mother, prodigious swimming ability, sexual ambivalence, incestuous attraction to his half-sister, illegitimate children, vituperous separation from his wife, exile from England, effortless writing talent, friendships with the famous, and death as a hero of the Greek independence movement in 1824. This irresistible material has proven fodder for a mountain of biographical writing, including more than 200 biographies, dozens of memoirs, countless pamphlets and biographical essays, and innumerable fictional treatments in novels, poems, plays, movies, and operas.

Prodigious as it is, and prompt as it was to pursue Byron after his death in 1824, biography still arrived late. Byron had already been telling his own story for years, engaging others in a creative process of living through him and his fictional personae. At thirty-three, less than two and a half years before his death in Greece, Byron ruminated on his own growing legend:

> I have seen myself compared personally or poetically . . . to Rousseau – Goethe – Young – Aretine – Timon of Athens – 'An Alabaster Vase lighted up within', Satan – Shakespeare – Buonaparte – Tiberius – Aeschylus – Sophocles – Euripides – Harlequin – The Clown – Sternhold and Hopkins – to the Phantasmagoria – to Henry the 8th . . . The object of so many contradictory comparisons must probably be like something different

> from them all, – but what *that* is, is more than *I* know, or any body else. ('Detached Thoughts', 15 October 1821; *BLJ*, IX, 11)

He liked most such comparisons – for example, to Alexander Pope, whose wit and physical infirmity had stirred Byron's imagination when he was merely a boy with a bad foot. Better to 'err with Pope' than to shine with another (*English Bards*, 102). Aware of becoming a legend, Byron yet conveys a bemused sense of joining the spectators of his own life. Indeed, he left a record of dispassionate self-evaluation that has been corroborated in his letters. Though Byron used the tools of fiction to create illusions about himself as an author and a man, he also carefully recorded his experiences.

## The Life

Byron's childhood was not easy. He was born in London, on 22 January 1788, to a first-time mother and a profligate father who shortly abandoned child and wife. Captain John Byron, nicknamed 'Mad Jack', was a widower with a daughter named Augusta when he looked for an heiress to snare, and he found her in Catherine Gordon of Gight. A sincere, impetuous woman, her most attractive trait to Captain Byron was her estate, which rapidly disappeared after they married. Pursued by creditors and wounded emotionally by her little boy's deformed foot, she retreated with her child to her ancestral Scotland. There Byron received a grammar school education and possibly a sexual initiation at the hands of his nurse, May Gray. His father died in 1791 – perhaps by his own hand – bequeathing nothing but debt.

In 1794 Byron became the heir to the barony held by his profligate great-uncle ('The Wicked Lord'), to which he acceded in 1798. Though the family seat, Newstead Abbey, still had to be rented out, Byron's prospects had soared, and his sense of entitlement increased commensurately. He moved to England and attended school at Dulwich and Harrow. During his Harrow years, he formed the first of his many attachments to females, including Elizabeth Pigot, Margaret Parker (his cousin), and Mary Chaworth, the latter of whom inspired both pain and poetry. Harrow did not appeal to him at first, but in time he found his stride. He played cricket avidly (other boys ran for him) and met the Earl of Clare, a friend for life. He also began corresponding with his half-sister, Augusta. At this time, he had a shocking encounter with Lord Grey de Ruthyn, the lease-holder for Newstead Abbey. Perhaps, as some have guessed, de Ruthyn tried to seduce Byron. Possibly for that reason, the ruins at Newstead seemed to lose their

attraction for him and came to symbolise 'the wreck of the [family] line' (*Newstead Abbey*, l. 24; *CPW*, I, p. 342). At Cambridge, by virtue of his peerage, Byron endured no examinations. He kept a pet bear, drank, and bet on the horses and the prizefighters. It was a wild life, memorialised in *Hints from Horace* (1811):

> Fines, tutors, tasks, conventions threat in vain,
> Before hounds, hunters, and Newmarket plain.
> Rough with his elders, with his equals rash,
> Civil to sharpers, prodigal of cash,
> Constant to nought – save hazard[7] and a whore,
> Yet cursing both, for both have made him sore.
> (*Hints from Horace*, ll. 229–34; *CPW*, I, pp. 297–8)

But in addition to excess there was abstemiousness. At one point, Byron appears to have dieted off fifty-one pounds over a period of five months. He formed several close relationships at Cambridge as well, including those with John Cam Hobhouse, Charles Matthews, and a young chorister named John Edleston, to whom Byron dedicated several poems under the sexually ambiguous name of 'Thyrza'. He wrote more earnestly than he studied, and published by private means four books of poetry: *Fugitive Pieces* (1806), *Poems on Various Occasions* (1807), *Hours of Idleness* (1807), and *Poems Original and Translated* (1808). *Hours of Idleness* received a stinging dismissal in the *Edinburgh Review*, a Whig quarterly of literary and political critique.

Two years later, Byron turned twenty-one and entered the House of Lords. He also finished at Cambridge and retorted to his critics with *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809). He looked forward now to crossing Europe with his friend Hobhouse, cavalierly ignoring the Napoleonic Wars. Travelling through Portugal and Spain to Greece, Albania, and Turkey, Byron had many adventures. He swam the Hellespont, an achievement of which he was rightly proud. He experimented with everything, including homo- and heterosexual partners, and visited the tyrannical ruler of Albania, Ali Pasha. He began to write *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, composing it in Spenserian stanzas. Soon after his return to England, he learned that his mother had died. He had not been in any haste to see her, and the news staggered him. Immediately thereafter, he received news of the deaths of his Cambridge friends Matthews and Edleston.

After the publication of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in March 1812, Byron found himself famous, as he described it to Thomas Moore.[8] In *Childe Harold*, Byron had invented a special kind of hero, behind whose mask he

slipped. A growing public perceived him as having an infectious charisma that produced what we might today call a 'fan base' of female readers.[9] Lady Caroline Lamb is the most famous of those women who wrote to 'Harold' offering him respite from the murky sorrows and shadowy demons haunting his pallid features. Unlike her competitors, she got to meet him, and they carried on an intense and very public affair over that summer, until finally her husband and mother were forced to send her to Ireland. She returned in the autumn of 1812, gaunt and distressed, and never entirely got over the experience. But it wasn't just Byron's sexual charisma that had made such an impression; it was also his writing. Lady Caroline was inspired to write three novels and numerous songs and poems as she tried to work out what had happened to her. She was not atypical of Byron's female readership, who fantasised about *becoming* Byron as well as possessing – or being possessed by – him.

Childe Harold was an amalgam of the Aristotelian tragic hero and other heroic elements, as Peter Thorslev shows in *The Byronic Hero* (1962). Yet Harold was also a character Byron would outgrow. Like modern celebrities, Byron confronted the paradox that his audience loved him not for himself but for what they imagined him to be.

> with women he was what
> They pleased to make or take him for; and their
> Imagination's quite enough for that:
> So that the outline's tolerably fair,
> They fill the canvas up – and 'verbum sat.'
> If once their phantasies be brought to bear
> Upon an object, whether sad or playful,
> They can transfigure brighter than a Raphael.
>
> (*DJ*, xv.16; *CPW*, v, p. 593)

Byron knew his readers were meeting him half way – and more.[10] He became anxious to present himself – in person, in portraits, and in print – as a man of action, not a foppish poet. He had himself painted in various military get-ups and sporting a rugged, open-shirted look. Like celebrities of all ages, he obsessed about his weight and carefully prepared for public appearances. He practised a special gloomy, smouldering glance that he called his 'under-look'. It was a type of Ossianic 'cool' that devastated his admirers.[11]

A student of stagecraft, he created characters who paralleled his personality and circumstances so closely that it is still impossible to avoid asking, in the words of Peter Cochran, 'Is this then verse, or documentation? Poetry, or journalism? Art, or life?'[12] In these confusions, Byron speaks to our time, with

its bloggers, vloggers, and self-promoting social media influencers. Again and again, biography returns to the cold truth that almost anything it may say of Byron he has already said of himself – in his jottings, poetry, and letters. He found himself protean; so do we. He found himself mad (and maddening), brilliant and perverse, magnanimous and jealous, egotistic and idealistic, homosexual and heterosexual, domineering and acquiescent, and a host of other contradictory things – and so do we. Byron described himself in language so memorable that all one can do is quote it: 'My muse admires digression' (*To the Earl of Clare*, l. 72; *CPW*, I, p. 97).

Among poets published and read in England, Byron is also one of the most antagonistic to England herself. The decisive period of his life may have been the two years that intervened between his marriage in 1814 and his departure in 1816. Having disentangled himself from Lady Caroline Lamb, more or less, and having had a lengthy affair with Lady Oxford, he pursued and eventually won the hand of Annabella Milbanke, who happened to be the niece of Lady Caroline's mother-in-law, Lady Melbourne. Byron had at least two motives for marrying. First, his financial problems had become more pressing and he needed the income of a wealthy wife while the sale of Newstead Abbey was concluded. The second motive, harder to fathom, was to be rescued from his own demons – to be made, in some sense, good and moral. This would turn out to be an impossible role for a spouse, as anyone could have imagined. The marriage started off badly, and Byron's attachment to his half-sister Augusta became obtrusive. By the time he separated from Annabella, they had a daughter; he also probably had a daughter by Augusta. His money problems exacerbated his tendency to outbursts of temper and violent alterations of mood. His behaviour during his wife's pregnancy was apparently so terrifying that she longed to believe he was mad.

When Annabella made it clear that there would have to be a separation, Byron decided to leave England in order to avoid pursuit by creditors and those who might get him charged with sodomy. He and his country now rejected and vilified each other. He had invented himself as a brooding and restless figure of sexual allure, haunted by transgressions of the past. Now he seemed to have become the Corsair he wrote about in the poem of that name: Conrad whose name was 'link'd with one virtue, and a thousand crimes' (*The Corsair* 3, l. 696; *CPW*, III, p. 214). When he left, stories circulated that he had abused his pregnant wife, that he had fathered a child by his half-sister, and that he had committed sodomy with boys. The last was an offence punishable by execution or the public pillory. As Louis Crompton has argued, the public revulsion that inundated such

transgressors was so heinous that many would have chosen the gallows over the pillory.[13] Byron's permanent exile from England, and the stories and denials it occasioned, continues to dominate his biographical legacy.

It is therefore especially sad that we do not have Byron's own account of his life, contained in a special journal that he had entrusted to his friend, Thomas Moore. Moore did not want to destroy the memoir but, under extreme pressure from Byron's publisher John Murray and others, he allowed the manuscript to be burnt, in an infamous act of loyalty committed just days after news of Byron's death reached London in May 1824. Doris Langley Moore has given us a compelling account of the loss of this important document in *The Late Lord Byron: Posthumous Dramas* (1961). Though we cannot absolve those who did the burning, neither should we fail to note Byron's ambivalence. He left his manuscript to an uncertain fate, just as he had put his illegitimate daughter Allegra (born to Claire Clairmont, Mary Shelley's stepsister) in a convent where she would die of cold and neglect.

When John Cam Hobhouse learned from Byron that he had entrusted the manuscript to Moore, he jealously impugned Moore's motives. Byron dismissed Hobhouse's objections:

> Do you really mean to say that I have not as good a right to leave such a M.S. after my death – as the thousands before me who have done the same? – – Is there no *reason* that I should? Will not my life (it is egotism but you know this is true of all men who have *had* a name even if they survive it) be given in a false and unfair point of view by others? – I mean *false* as to *praise* as well as *censure*?' (*BLJ*, IX, 68)

Unsatisfied, Hobhouse accused Byron of 'purchasing a biographer under pretext of doing a generous action'.[14] Byron retorted,

> I am willing to bear that imputation rather than have Moore or anyone else suppose that He is at all obliged to me. – – I suppose however that like most men who have been talked about – I might have had – (if I did not outlive my reputation which however is not unlikely) a biographer without purchase – since most other scribblers have two or three – gratis. – Besides – I thought I had written my *own*. (*BLJ*, IX, 88)

Byron died believing the manuscript would survive. One of his acquaintances later reported that he had said 'Literary lives are compiled for the bibliopolists, as puffs to sell their wares; they are nothing. When I die you will see mine, written by myself.'[15] Not that he necessarily thought the facts would make him revered – quite the opposite, for he knew that while transgressions are 'essential to [the] hero's story, / They do not much contribute to his glory' (*DJ*, III.93).

Byron had underestimated the determination of his friends to protect him, and possibly themselves, from revelations of his bad behaviour. Those memoirs are almost certainly gone for good, though some still nurse the hope that the manuscript was copied, or that it was never really burnt. The burning of the memoirs is emblematic of the problems Byron's biographers have faced in gathering the literary and social remains of their subject. The record is always damaged. The surviving allies always 'spin' the story by silence if not publication. There will always be proprietary interests that influence the writing of any famous author's biography.

Readers will also always prefer Gothic drama to facts. Byron harnessed the power of his readers' imaginations, and what happened then, as he himself acknowledged, no one could predict or control. Many of the episodes of his life subsequent to the collapse of his marriage became raw material for poems, novels, plays and operas, and (later) movies. His friendship with the Shelleys, for example, though it was fleeting, has been frequently recounted. Byron, however, did not continue to cooperate with the creation of this myth of the doomed poets and their fatal passions. Indeed, in the years before he conceived the desire to aid in the Greek independence movement, he adopted a very different incarnation: the character of Don Juan, the sex-obsessed figure who, in Byron's retelling, seems more victim than victimiser. Though the poem is now considered a work of genius, to Byron's contemporaries it appeared he had settled for 'the literary *lower* Empire' (*DJ*, 11.62; *CPW*, v, p. 484). What had happened to the grandiosity of *Manfred* and *Cain*? When Byron died in Greece, it appeared he had abandoned them for the chatty, catty, risqué narrator of *Don Juan* – a model that influenced Oscar Wilde's campy voice. Must one sacrifice Don Juan to sanctify Manfred? Many have done so in order to preserve what they believed to be the Faustian quintessence of Byron, essentially ignoring the seriousness of Byron's commitment to *Don Juan*.

As Byron's life neared its sudden end in Greece, he had already become the object of covetous minds. Some cared not at all to preserve his 'original' character; they only cared that his name brought in money. As a result, after 1813, many works were falsely attributed to him. Some were satirical send-ups, some straight forgeries. One famous example is *The Vampyre*, a short story penned by his unstable and pretentious doctor-assistant John Polidori, who wrote it during the 'Frankenstein' summer of 1816. Polidori's publishers fudged the distinction between its being *influenced* by Byron and its being *written* by him in order to increase sales. Byron's protestations failed to squelch the canard of his authorship, and the rumour still occasionally returns from the grave.

He was not merely the victim of such hoaxes, however. He chose to circulate some of his own works anonymously at first, just to see how they were received. For example, *The Waltz*, a condemnation of the dance fad, was published under the pen name 'Horace Hornem' in 1813 because Byron feared to attack the German influence upon England through the Hanoverian kings (that is, the Georges, the fourth of whom adored waltzing). At the same time, he would also be able to take credit for the poem in liberal Whig circles. Thus, he took advantage of the pirated and forged work that appeared under his name to say things he would otherwise have been forced to keep private. Such are the complications the biographer faces in seeking the truth of Byron's relatively short life, which ended, so we are now persuaded, because his ignorant doctors bled him promiscuously, despite his protests.[16]

## The Biographers

What *was* biography in Byron's era? Its roots lay in hagiography, a term originating in the third division of the Jewish Scripture, referring to the stories of saints and venerated persons. The lives of the saints were intended to inspire readers, and, with few exceptions, hagiography was the principal mode of biography down through the reign of Elizabeth the First and beyond, as Byron knew: 'Sermons he read, and lectures he endured, / And homilies, and lives of all the Saints' (*DJ*, 1:47). Seventeenth-century biography had focused primarily upon the lives of religious men, most of whom were writers of sermons and tracts, and this had led to a greater interest in literary figures – Milton, for example. Byron was just three years old when Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson* was published in 1791. It was a harbinger of the modern biographical mode, with its meticulous research and psychological sophistication. Unfortunately, it was too far ahead of its time. While it showed that literary men made excellent subjects, its example was honoured relentlessly in the breach. More importantly, perhaps, the artist had yet to emerge as an independent object of interest, another change in which Byron played a crucial role. The handful of English 'lives' of literary men published in the 1700s had afforded the reading public only 'curiosity and amusement'.[17] Byron's life was a different matter.

Before any full-scale biography could be produced, the memoirists weighed in. Thomas Medwin's *Conversations of Lord Byron* was rushed into print in October 1824, just six months after Byron's death. It was followed immediately by Robert Dallas's *Recollections of the Life of Lord*

*Byron, from the Year 1808 to the End of 1814* (1824), Pietro Gamba's *A Narrative of Lord Byron's Last Journey to Greece* (1825), and William Parry's *The Last Days of Lord Byron* (1825). Each of these depictions incorporates conversation supposedly quoted from the author's notes. In 1828, Leigh Hunt produced *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries*, an account of the ill-fated plans of Byron, Hunt, and Shelley in 1822 to found a journal to be called *The Liberal*. Shelley had drowned, the whole project went to hell, and so did Hunt's relations with Byron, on whom he vented his frustration in this act of character assassination that did serious damage to Byron's reputation. After the death of Lady Caroline Lamb in 1828, her friend and collaborator Isaac Nathan published *Fugitive Pieces and Reminiscences of Lord Byron: Containing an Entire New Edition of the Hebrew Melodies . . . Also Some Original Poetry, Letters, and Recollections of Lady Caroline Lamb* (1829). Nathan's praise of Byron and Lady Caroline (who was godmother to his children) was viewed sceptically by critics who preferred not to believe a Jew had standing with either the Lady or the Lord.

After this revelation of Byron's private conversations, Thomas Moore finished his *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron: With Notices of His Life* (1830), sold by Byron's publisher, John Murray. Moore's work has stood up well, considering its closeness in time to Byron's death and the intense pressures placed upon him by Byron's many powerful friends and enemies. Moore is also one of the few who had read Byron's memoirs before they were burned, and this has prompted careful rereading of the 1830 biography for clues to lost material. *Letters and Journals* is an edition of Byron's correspondence and other writings, with commentary and anecdotes contributed by Moore. Often candid, Moore still drew the curtain over many aspects of Byron's life. Faced with the impossible task of describing (much less explaining) Byron's abominable behaviour towards his wife, Moore offered the bromide that great persons are ill-equipped to pursue domestic happiness. Yet Moore knew that readers wished to be told that famous people are as flawed as anyone, and he gave his audience what it wanted.[18] Though he defended Byron stoutly and gave ample evidence of the poet's genial character in the letters, he also recounted such anecdotes, and quoted such letters, as will leave the reader in no doubt about Byron's volatile temperament. Moore's was the party line: Byron's difficult nature must be acknowledged, but it was all part of his genius – and ultimately a strength of his remarkable character. If there were rumours of incest and homosexuality, these were to be ignored.

While Moore was Byron's biographer, it must be noted he was also Byron's competitor. Out of deference to those with whom he and John