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Excerpt
More information

I

THE COLLABORATION

Byron and Foscolo were not really alike either as poets or men. Yet there were curious similarities in their circumstances. Greece, Italy and England were written in their fates; one left England to live in Italy and die in Greece; the other, born in a Greek island, lived in Italy and came to stay and die in England. Their tracks crossed in Switzerland in 1816, but they did not meet then or at any other time. There was respect and a kind of fear on both sides; they knew of one another; they corresponded indirectly through others. They seem like two beasts of prey passing in a jungle, careful and polite, avoiding an unnecessary and probably hazardous proximity. Sometimes there is a growl and a flash of teeth. 'That Charlatan Foscolo' wrote Byron in a letter—but how delighted he was when he learnt that the charlatan had spoken well of *The Two Foscari*. 'He has more of the antient Greek than of the modern Italian...tis a wonderful man; and my friends Hobhouse and Rose both swear by him....'[1] He contributed—but probably did not compose—a verse translation of some fifty lines of Petrarch's Latin epic *Africa* as an illustration to Foscolo's *Essays on Petrarch*.* The Italian saw him as the poet-hero maligned by lesser

* Thomas Medwin claimed to have made this translation; see his *Conversations of Lord Byron*, 1824, pp. 139–141.

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men but towering above all rivals like a youthful Achilles.[2] After Byron's death Foscolo attempted to write a vindication of the English poet who had taken on himself the cause of Greece, but he did not complete the study, and the article intended for *The European Review* never appeared.

To contemporaries who knew the two poets it seemed natural enough to recognise their apparent similarities despite the difference in their works. A writer (probably Thomas Campbell) wrote of Foscolo as follows in *The New Monthly Magazine* (1821): 'After Lord Byron, we are at a loss to mention any living author, who has so far identified himself with the beings of his own imagination, and who justifies, by his manners and appearance, the suspicions of a strange relationship between his intellectual and imaginary, and his real existence.' To modern English readers, however, it may seem curious to place Ugo Foscolo on a level with Byron, for the Italian poet is comparatively little known out of his own country. Translation does not do him justice. His appeal is to an informed classical taste and the romantic vehemence of *Childe Harold* was, in his case, guided and refined by a profound artistic sense that discarded the inessential bravura which helped to make Byron popular. As poets and craftsmen it is hardly possible, and certainly not useful, to attempt a comparison. They are nearer to one another in their powers of satire and invective. It is for this reason that a meeting between them would almost certainly have been a terrible, and for the onlookers a magnificent, spectacle of strife. It

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More information

is indeed a curious twist of coincidence that brought about any sort of collaboration, however indirect, between these two men of genius. An active intermediary was necessary and was found in the person of John Hobhouse.

John Cam Hobhouse (later Lord Broughton de Gyfford), son of a wealthy West-country baronet, was not a genius and was therefore able to lead a long, useful and happy life. But though he was not one of the creators he had very considerable gifts—a sound intelligence, great powers of sustained application and an inquisitive point of view towards all that came to his notice. Really a conventional man, his friendships and inclinations led him into Radical politics and 'emancipated' literature. When a Cambridge undergraduate at Trinity College he produced, together with the young Byron and others, a volume of miscellaneous poems in which his chief contribution was a witty version of one of the more scandalous stories of Boccaccio. Before gaining a seat in the House of Commons at a hard-hitting Westminster election he was imprisoned in Newgate for writing a pamphlet voted by the House to be a libel and a breach of privilege. Later he presented petition after petition expressing the complaints of the masses against the prevailing conditions. He was always on the side of the under-dog, whether a falsely accused labourer or the defeated Napoleon. After his imprisonment, short and comfortable as it was, he attained a kind of symbolic popularity. Yet despite all this he was always a man of his class, enjoying by natural right a privileged position that he conceived in no way incompatible with justice and

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More information

reform. Beneath the Radical Reformer was the polished Whig. He was, by inclination, one of those men who love to attach themselves to genius, and whose friendship is proof against all the kicks that genius bestows on those who approach too near. His affection for the living Byron and his loyalty to his memory are well known. Not so well known is his political discipleship under the Radical leader Sir Francis Burdett. Hardly known at all is his association with Ugo Foscolo. This was a friendship based, on Hobhouse's side, rather on his appreciation of the Italian's great gifts than on any real affection.*

It became obvious to Byron as the composition of the Fourth Canto of *Childe Harold* proceeded that the rich Italian subject-matter needed fuller exposition than he could suitably develop in the poem itself. It was inevitable that this task should fall to his faithful friend Hobhouse. It is symbolic of their relationship—the lyrical flights to the one, the expository notes to the other. Although at the time they must often have discussed the *Illustrations* Byron took cruel pleasure later in informing others that he had never read them. Of greater interest than the annotations themselves are the indications of what Byron considered should have found a place in the poem. He felt he had neglected Italian literature, for although he had touched on some of the great names—Dante, Petrarch, Ariosto, Tasso, and some others—except for a passing reference to Alfieri, he had failed to

* For an interesting account of Hobhouse see *My Friend H.* by Michael Joyce, John Murray, 1948.

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mention more modern poets. 'In the course of the following Canto', wrote Byron in his letter dedicating Canto IV to Hobhouse, 'it was my intention in the text or in the notes, to have touched upon the present state of Italian literature, and perhaps of manners. But the text within the limits I proposed, I soon found hardly sufficient for the labyrinth of external objects, and the consequent reflections, and for the whole of the notes, excepting a few of the shortest, I am indebted to yourself, and these were necessarily limited to the elucidation of the text. It is also a delicate, and no very grateful task, to dissert upon the literature and manners of a nation so dissimilar; and requires an attention and impartiality which would induce us—though perhaps no inattentive observers, nor ignorant of the language or customs of the people amongst whom we have recently abode—to distrust, or at least defer, our judgment, and more narrowly examine our information. The state of literary as well as political party appears to run, or to *have* run, so high, that for a stranger to steer impartially between them is next to impossible.'

Most of Hobhouse's notes were written in the summer of 1817 which he spent with Byron on the banks of the Brenta. He frequently visited Venice to consult books in the library there. On his return to England at the beginning of February 1818, however, the treatise on Italian literature and manners was still unwritten; the truth being that neither Byron nor himself felt qualified to treat such a subject. Byron, indeed, in a letter[3] to John Murray of July 1817, had spoken airily of his

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More information

knowledge of Italian literary men and their works, but in point of fact the task of writing literary history grows harder as it grows nearer. It was at this juncture—to be precise on Monday, 23 March 1818—that Roger Wilbraham, the old Whig politician and man of letters, the one-time associate and friend of Fox, invited Hobhouse to one of his famous literary dinner-parties at his house in Stratton Street, Piccadilly. There were present Sir Humphrey Davy, Richard Heber the bibliophile, Dr Henry Holland, Payne Knight of Homer fame, Combe, Secretary of the Royal Society, Mr Cohen (better known after his change of fortune, name and style as Sir Francis Palgrave) and sitting on Hobhouse's right hand at table a voluble red-haired Italian—Ugo Foscolo.[4] There was a great deal of Italian talked and Hobhouse was immensely taken by his eloquent neighbour. They walked home together afterwards and, so little did Hobhouse then appreciate the help Foscolo could give him for his *Illustrations*, that on learning he was about to publish a treatise on Dante, he offered him a 'puff'. Such an approach to Foscolo was not a wise one, but Hobhouse had not dined wisely; he had dined so well indeed that he passed a most painful night. At 3 a.m. he woke with what he described as 'vertigo in the head', rose from his bed and swallowed rhubarb pills. This treatment failing to restore his composure, he took calomel and sat for a long time brooding with his feet in hot water. At five o'clock he thought he was dying and wrote a memorandum on the disposition of his papers; but feeling somewhat

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Excerpt
More information

better after this precautionary act, he concluded that he was to live, and spent the rest of the night reading Livy's account of the battle of Cannae. The heroism of 1818 was still essentially classical.

Ugo Foscolo had arrived in London in the autumn of 1816 with a reputation as a man of letters and champion of liberty already established amongst the English Liberals. He was a man who had come up from nothing. Born in 1778 in the Greek island of Zante of a Greek mother and an Italian father, a poor doctor, he followed his family to Spalato and, after his father's death, to Venice. When Bonaparte invaded Italy in 1796 the young Niccolò Ugone Foscolo (Ugo was a romantic variant of his own adoption) was a passionate, precocious youth, already known as a poet. He was, of course, all for the new-comers with their fascinating promises of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. The venerable Republic in which he lived was merely an organisation for defending privilege and keeping the young men down. He welcomed Bonaparte as a liberator. When the liberator handed Venice to the Austrians, a mere pawn in his political gambit, the young man left the city in a mood of passionate disillusion. It was then he conceived the novel that was to make his name, or at least his pen-name of Jacopo Ortis, known throughout Italy. Although the book owed its form, main plot, and something of its mood to the *Werther* of Goethe, *Le Ultime Lettere di Jacopo Ortis* was the genuine expression of the suffering of a poor ambitious youth disappointed in his patriotic aspirations

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Excerpt
More information

and particularly in his hopes of love. Foscolo had had, and continued to have, many experiences of many kinds of love, but this is not the occasion to discuss his love-affairs, or indeed this book; it is sufficient to say that the rhetoric of an unduly protracted catastrophe—the hero's suicide is foreshadowed early but occurs late in the story—does not much appeal to us now, though it is easy to understand how at the beginning of the last century it captivated the romantic readers of the day. Foscolo was later somewhat ashamed of the book.

Circumstances drove him to take a commission in the French army. He saw service, was wounded, fought duels, made friends, made enemies. He studied and wrote. His poems are not numerous—some sonnets, two perfect classical odes, three tragedies, and one remarkable blank-verse poem that clearly stands out as a masterpiece —*Dei Sepolcri*.* He made a brilliant translation of Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*. In 1809 he was appointed to the Chair of Eloquence at the University of Pavia and the course of lectures he delivered there first revealed the highly original critic he proved himself to be in his English period. At Pavia, and at all times, he refused to pay lip-service to Napoleon who richly rewarded the *letterati* who praised him. He was proud, always poor, extravagant, foolish, but consistent in the heroic conception of Italian patriotism. When the French debacle came, the Italians failed to snatch the opportunity of a

* See E. R. Vincent, *The Commemoration of the Dead, a Study of 'Dei Sepolcri'*, Cambridge University Press, 1936.

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Excerpt
More information

possible independence and the Austrians returned to the predominant position in Italy they considered their proper right. Foscolo did not hesitate for long; taking with him the manuscript of a long hymn to the Graces, a poem in which he aspired to express his artistic ideals, and the beginnings of a great translation of the *Iliad*, he slipped away from Milan and took the path of exile from which he never returned. At this moment in his fortunes Byron's remark about him seems shrewd enough: 'Foscolo has...proved his genius, doubtless, but not fixed its fame, nor done his utmost.' [5]

Much of Foscolo's story was known to a select circle in London when the poet arrived there in September 1816. Holland House opened wide its hospitable doors to welcome him and he was soon something of a spoiled darling in Whig society. Moore, Rogers and Campbell, to name some of the leading men of letters, were delighted with him, but Crabbe was alarmed, Wordsworth horrified and Scott disgusted. He astonished the scholarly gentlemen in whose houses he dined and supped by his easy knowledge of Greek, Latin and Italian authors. He could quote from an enormous range of books in a way most gratifying to an age that loved classical quotation. The ladies were either shocked or charmed, at least on first acquaintance, for he made love to them all on a plane of mild flirtation or ardent passion as seemed appropriate. There was indeed one dark cloud over this scene of success, he had no money and, holding to mistaken principles of gentility that shut off many

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More information

avenues of honest gain, he was getting ever deeper into debt. Such was the man and such his plight when Hobhouse listened with admiration to his flow of eloquence at Roger Wilbraham's dinner party.

After Hobhouse had recovered from the physical effects of that evening he wrote the following letter to his new acquaintance:

HOBHOUSE TO FOSCOLO[6]

My dear Sir,

I am afraid you will think me very importunate: if, however, there be any thing improper in my request I beg you to refuse it with the same frankness as it is made.

It was the wish of Lord Byron as well as of myself to have given in the notes to Childe Harold a *very short view of the present state of Italian literature*: that is to say, a list of the actual writers in the greatest estimation, in Italy, with the judgment formed of them by their cotemporaries. It was, of course, our intention not so much to deliver our own opinion (for that we had no right to form, or, at least, not to pronounce) as to relate shortly the acknowledged & notorious value set upon each writer—This we wished to do with a reference rather to his general character as an author than to his individual works—After some reflexion, however, and consulting a few books and a few men we were both of us deterred from the design by the fear of imputed presumption and of falling into some real error.

If, in addition to the favour which you have promised me, you would condescend to let me know the place which your cotemporaries hold in your esteem I should

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