

Restoring Coherency to Byron

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Anthony Peattie, *The Private Life of Lord Byron*. Unbound, xxi + 586 pp., £35 cloth.

IN HIS SURVEY OF “BYRON’S LIFE and His Biographers,” Paul Douglass observes that the “irresistible material [of Byron’s life] has made a mountain of biographical writing, including over 200 substantial biographies, dozens of memoirs, countless pamphlets and biographical essays, and innumerable fictional treatments in novels, poems, plays, and operas.” Douglass’s essay was published in 2004, and that mountain has only grown higher since. Perhaps contributing to the mountain metaphor is not just the sheer number of biographies of Byron, but that each one tends to be a mountain in itself—perhaps a “mountain range” is a better metaphor. The first full-length biography, Thomas Moore’s *Life of Lord Byron*, was published in two volumes, one in 1830 (six years after Byron’s death), with the second volume arriving in 1832. Leslie Marchand’s 1957 *Byron: A Biography*, aptly characterized

by Douglass as an “exhaustive recounting of the poet’s day-to-day existence,” is three volumes, while Benita Eisler’s outstanding 2000 biography, *Byron: Child of Passion, Fool of Fame*, consists of 880 pages of small font. Some recent biographers, perhaps taking their cue from Marchand’s 1970 *Byron: A Portrait*, an updated and condensed version of his earlier biography (but still weighing in at 518 pages), have even engaged in product differentiation in their titles: thus Edna O’Brien’s 2010 *Byron in Love: A Short, Daring Life*, referring both to Byron’s thirty-six year life and the relatively modest 228 pages of the book itself.

Anthony Peattie is emphatically of the maximalist school of Byron biography—the book is massive, and so is the research that went into it—even though his study is specialized, as the title suggests, and not a comprehensive biography. It would be intellectually tidy if the history of Byron biography were an upside-down pyramid, in which generalized biographies in time gave way to more specialized ones, but this in fact is not the case. Even before Moore’s biography was published, there were

already narrowly focused memoirs of Byron published by friends and colleagues, some of them highly specific, such as Pietro Gamba's 1824 *A Narrative of Lord Byron's Last Journey to Greece*. And while much of the interesting work on Byron's life in recent years has focused on particular issues such as his sexuality, there continue to be compelling generalized biographies as well, as the example of Eisler's biography indicates. It is tempting to claim that we live in a golden age of Byron biography, but it has pretty much always been a golden age of Byron biography since his death.

As Peattie cheerfully admits in his introduction, his study does not cover the entirety of Lord Byron's private life, but rather "his intermittent eating disorder and his obsession with fatherhood," noting that these "may be related to one another." Peattie eschews a straightforward chronological account in the first half of the book, beginning *in medias res* with "Byron's First Diet" in 1807, when he was nearly nineteen. In the second half, which focuses on Byron and fatherhood, he follows a more chronological structure. While Peattie's book can certainly be read straight through with great pleasure, some repetition suggests that Peattie assumes that readers will prefer to dip in and out, sometimes reading only specific sections in encyclopedia style.

Without a doubt the most impressive aspect of Peattie's study is the illustrations, beginning with a gorgeous dust-jacket cover and endpapers by Howard Hodgkin. Peattie notes that Moore's biography included only one visual image, though this scarcity made this image an extremely important one in codifying the "look" of Romanticism. It is not an exaggeration, however, to state all of the beautifully reproduced illustrations in Peattie's book are important. These begin with a funerary urn Byron had commissioned as a gift to fellow writer Walter Scott, and end with Byron's boxing screen, which contained

illustrations of two boxing matches involving pugilist Tom Johnson. Nearly every page contains a visual image that is illuminating or unusual (often from private collections), from portraits of Byron's mother to bits of Byron's clothing, to illustrations that accompanied editions of his poems. The effect of this is to remind us that Byron lived, intensely, in a world of objects. Douglass describes recent Byron biographies as "pay[ing] more attention to Byron's overt behavior than his genius." Moore used the word "genius" ninety-nine times in the first half alone of his biography; Peattie uses it precisely one time in 586 pages. Peattie clearly fits the category of biographers who focus on Byron's "overt behavior," with an emphasis on material phenomena that affected Byron's behavior. This begins with Byron's club-foot, about which he was always intensely self-conscious. Peattie quotes Mary Shelley to persuasive effect: "No action of Lord Byron's life—scarce a line he has written—but was influenced by his personal defect."

Following Mary Shelley, Peattie grounds Byron's creative work in the physical realities he endured, and he views his study as cutting through the thicket of "Byron Studies" in order to restore hard-headed common sense to discussions of the life of Byron (as a freelance writer, "I am not looking for tenure," he notes). For example, Peattie includes a striking image of the boots Byron wore as a young man, noting that the one for the defective foot included a metal plate that weighed over a pound. He observes that there has been considerable debate about what precisely was wrong with Byron's foot: "Recent diagnoses include Little's disease (spastic paraplegia), infantile paralysis, injury associated with post-natal trauma, congenital dysplasia and the neurogenic foot deformities associated with spinal dysraphism." Peattie then drily concludes, "In any case, it often hurt."

As Peattie compellingly demonstrates, Byron himself struggled mightily against the presence of gross material reality in his life. Byron was a thoroughgoing metaphysical dualist, and Peattie offers a list of opposed terms that structured Byron's thinking, such as "body/embodied" versus "soul," "flesh and blood" versus "phantom," and so on. Peattie grants that this list may seem "facile, reductive" but "it corresponds to the way Byron thought and felt about the world." Like many recent biographers, Peattie emphasizes the role that Byron's Scottish Calvinist background played in his loathing of the material realm, though he applies this framework with a light touch (twelve mentions of Calvinism, compared to around twice that many for "foot"), not regarding Calvinism as a means to explain everything about Byron. An interesting manifestation of Byron's attempt to transcend the material was his dislike of the poetry of John Keats: "Byron reacted with ... intense hostility to Keats's indulgently sensual poetry: he assumed that Keats suffered from 'inordinate self-love' and identified his poetry with masturbation." Byron was far more at home with Percy Shelley's more philosophical poetry, though Peattie also re-establishes the importance of Samuel Taylor Coleridge as a kindred soul to Byron through their shared interest in anti-heroic protagonists such as Milton's Satan.

"Anorexia Byronica," the most enthralling section of Peattie's study, focuses on Byron's eating. Byron once told a friend that "he would rather not exist than be large." Byron blamed his mother for his large size, and his incessant dieting was notorious among his contemporaries. Peattie includes a detailed description of a dinner Byron attended on November 4, 1811, at the home of the poet Samuel Rogers in London. Two other poets, Thomas Moore (his future biographer) and Thomas Campbell also were invited. Byron's behavior astonished the other poets. According to

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Moore, "[N]one of us had been apprised of his peculiarities with respect to food . . . there was nothing upon the table which [Rogers's] noble guest could eat or drink. Neither meat, fish, nor wine, would Lord Byron touch. . . ." Byron ultimately dined happily on potatoes and vinegar. Peattie points out that during the Napoleonic Wars, beef-eating was associated with British patriotism, and that while Byron did avoid beef, in his own view, primarily to lose weight, he also believed that beef had negative effects on a person's character, asking Moore, "[D]on't you find that beef-eating makes you ferocious?"

Byron's compulsive dieting, Peattie argues, has often been misunderstood. The Victorians tended to dismiss it as further evidence of Byron's (considerable) personal vanity, and this view continued well into the twentieth century. Peattie provides ample evidence that biographers have neglected Byron's obsession with food, though in the twentieth century, accounts have tended to react against Victorian earnestness by "adopting a tone of jaunty casualness" towards Byron's determination to be slim; Marchand, for example, suggested that Byron dieted in order to be more successful as a seducer of women. While Peattie, as we have seen, is not much interested in debates about the nature of Byron's foot problem, he devotes a chapter to "Interpretations and Diagnoses" of Byron's eating issues. Peattie argues that Byron was in fact anorexic, a diagnosis, he notes, that was first argued for in 1982. The reader might worry that

this approach is a trendy, perhaps anachronistic medicalizing of Byron's behavior (in a similar way to how 19th century literary characters from *Bartleby the Scrivener* to Sherlock Holmes are now regarded as being on the spectrum of autism). Peattie is well aware of this danger, arguing that we must look deeper than "the most banal interpretation of Byron's disorder," which is that he starved himself "in order to assert control—where that was possible—over his own body. Peattie suggests that "[d]ieting for Byron represented a heroic endeavour, to free the spirit from the body, a battle for independence that paralleled (if it did not also reflect) his enthusiasm for other struggles for independence: his own from his mother; Italy's from Austria; and Greece's from Turkey."

"A man of genius makes no mistakes," Stephen Dedalus observes in James Joyce's *Ulysses*: "His errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery." Byron's early biographers tended to view him, in moralistic terms, as a man of genius who had in fact made many mistakes. They separated, in this sense, his life from his art. Peattie has restored coherency to Byron, and even if he avoids the term "genius," he gives us a Byron whose private life influenced his art in deeper ways than we have seen before, evidenced particularly in his careful reading of *Don Juan* in the latter half of the book. Peattie's beautifully written, beautifully illustrated study will no doubt become required reading on Byron for the general public, and yes, for those in Byron Studies, for a long time. ■