Byron Society, MLA 2015

*George Gordon, Lord Network*

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Byron has always been as famous for his life and personality as for his poetry -- a conflation he himself was often keen to promote.[[1]](#endnote-1) As a result, his legacy has all too frequently been to be considered (as Anthony Howe summarizes) “the definitive non-intellectual Romantic . . . a poet of passion but not of thought.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Goethe, Arnold, and T.S. Eliot all contributed to this underestimation of Byron’s philosophical aptitude, with the latter going as far as condemning Byron from a literally superficial perspective by claiming that it would be impossible to spend time near even a bust of the Romantic poet – much less take his poetry seriously – due to “that weakly sensual mouth, that restless triviality of expression, and worst of all that blind look of the self-conscious beauty.”[[3]](#endnote-3) It is hard to imagine a more thorough dismissal – or a more thorough misreading. In fact, despite what Emily Bernhard Jackson calls his “spotty” formal education,[[4]](#endnote-4) Byron was at least as well versed in the major philosophical ideas of his time as any of the other Romantics: in a letter to a friend written during his last term at Trinity College, Cambridge, for example, Byron records having read “Paley, Locke, Bacon, Hume, Berkeley, Drummond, Beattie, and Bolingbroke . . . [and] Hobbes,” and catalogue sales of Byron’s library show he owned additional volumes by Voltaire, Dugald Stewart, and Adam Smith among others.[[5]](#endnote-5)

If Byron’s philosophical bona fides should no longer be doubted, however, then they nevertheless remain under the surface of most of his poetry; with the notable exceptions of proto-existentialist verse dramas like *Manfred* and *Cain*, Byron generally abjures direct or abstract philosophizing. Even as he shows little interest in the critical and idealist German philosophy that so fascinated some of his fellow Romantics (especially Coleridge), however, his familiarity with leading Enlightenment authors reading can be detected in the regular presence of a concept that Byron insistently and repeatedly interrogates: “society.” As a noun, “society” shows up regularly in his personal letters, usually designating interesting human company or its absence, as for example when Byron complains to his half-sister Augusta that in the village of Southwell, Nottinghamshire (where Byron’s mother resided from 1803 to 1809), “There are very few books of any kind that are either instructive or amusing, no society but old parsons and old Maids. . . .[[6]](#endnote-6) According to the Oxford English Dictionary, such usage is very much in line with the most common definition of “society” in Byron’s era as an “association or friendly interaction with other people; the company of others.” In addition to this traditional sense of the word, however, a new usage was also gaining currency; thanks at least in part to the Enlightenment’s increasingly empirical approach to natural philosophy it had recently become possible to use the term “society” to designate the “social organization of a group of animals of the same species; the state or condition of living in a social group.” (The OED quotes Erasmus Darwin, Charles Darwin’s grandfather, writing about “societies” of rabbits in 1794.)

As the OED’s wording involuntarily suggests, however, definitions of “society” are frequently so self-referential as to be nearly useless: designating society as “social organization” simply begs the question of what qualities of shared existence count as “social” in the first place. Today, we are used to attributing all kinds of effects to “society” – but what if society itself is an effect and not a cause? This is a question currently being asked by many contemporary theorists, especially those interested in systems and networks. It is also, I want to argue, a question that quietly informs much of Byron’s poetic oeuvre. In what follows, I will restrict myself to pursuing this argument by looking at his first major poem – Canto One of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* -- in tandem with concepts generated by one of today’s most important theorists of “the social,” Bruno Latour. If Latour is our contemporary “Prince of Networks,” as the title of a recent study only half-jokingly suggests,[[7]](#endnote-7) then Byron deserves to be recognized as their Romantic-era Lord.

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Two-thirds of the way through Canto One of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Byron’s eponymous hero finds himself in Cadiz, a port city in southwest Spain, on a Sunday. We know it’s Sunday because the previous stanza describes the Christian day of rest as it is observed in London, Harold’s native capital:

The seventh day this; the jubilee of man.

London! right well thou know’st the day of prayer:

Then thy spruce citizen, wash’d artisan,

And smug apprentice gulp their weekly air:

The coach of Hackney, whiskey, one-horse chair,

And humblest gig through sundry suburbs whirl,

To Hampstead, Brentford, Harrow make repair;

Till the tir’d jade the wheel forgets to hurl,

Provoking envious gibe from each pedestrian Churl.[[8]](#endnote-8)

This is an unorthodox description of Sabbath-day observations, to be sure, but it maintains the world-weary, rueful attitude of bemused observation that Byron, via his eponymous mouthpiece, has already deployed in his previous descriptions of southern and western Europe during the Peninsular War. Harold has already left Britain for the Continent, for reasons that remain murky; Byron himself would follow Harold’s lead in April 1816. When Harold calls to mind the Sabbatarian rituals of Londoners, then, he does so from a position of geographical distance but cultural proximity. He knows, that is, what all of this seemingly arbitrary hustle and bustle portends:

Ask ye, Boetian shades! the reason why?

‘Tis to the worship of the solemn Horn,

Grasp’d in the holy hand of Mystery,

In whose dread name both men and maids are sworn,

And consecrate the oath with draught, and dance till morn. (I.70.706-10)

Far from enjoying their Sabbath rest in an appropriately pious fashion, Londoners rush after church to prepare themselves for “The worship of the solemn Horn”: *not* another religious ceremony, despite Byron’s ironic use of sacred vocabulary, but rather a Highgate pub tradition in which the initiate promises to devote himself to merriment and debauchery.

Readers of the *Pilgrimage* will not be surprised by this turn of events; it is merely the latest twist in what Harold earlier describes as “Sin’s long labyrinth” (1.6.37) which he has been navigating. At issue is British hypocrisy: a local but palpable manifestation of what Jerome J. McGann identifies as Byron’s consistent displeasure with the cant and duplicity that he felt characterized British politics, both at home and abroad, during the Napoleonic Wars.[[9]](#endnote-9) Moreover, by making explicit the link between these two apparently discrete British practices – a Sunday morning’s religious observations, so common as to need little description, followed by a Sunday afternoon’s frenzied rush to drink and dissolution – Byron foregrounds the latter’s dual function, which may not even be apparent to the practitioners themselves: their hasty retreat to Highgate presumably serves to wash away not only the unpleasant memories of the morning’s church service, but also the guilt that likely accompanies merely perfunctory attendances at those services. As we learn at the start of stanza 71, moreover, the habit of going more-or-less directly from Sunday morning prayers to Sunday afternoon partying is not restricted to Britons: “*All* have their fooleries” (1. 71.711; emphasis added).

But the Sabbath rituals of western Spain turn out to be rather more difficult for Harold to make sense of than those of his native land. Of course, even at the start of Canto One when he is still in Britain, Harold does not really feel at home: “Apart he stalk’d in joyless reverie” (1.6.50). Dissolute to the point of ennui, Childe Harold has long been recognized as the prototype of Byron’s gloomy, charismatic, peripatetic protagonists. His perennially estranged attitude, moreover, allows him to function as an observer of the arrangements and practices of early nineteenth-century Europe. Spending most of Byron’s poem as the proverbial stranger in a series of strange lands, Harold – whether by design or by accident matters little – is perfectly positioned to perform what Bruno Latour has recently called “an anthropology of the moderns.”[[10]](#endnote-10)

A philosopher by schooling, an anthropologist by training, and a sociologist by profession, Latour rose to prominence with a series of studies on the methods of knowledge production in various laboratory settings and scientific communities. But as he frequently asserts, he is best understood neither as a postmodernist nor as a social constructionist, but rather as a diagnostician of modernity’s central contradictions. In his best-known text, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour lays out the conceptual framework distilled from his earlier texts. Modern western society is characterized by two related but antithetical drives: the drive to create hybrids of natural and cultural phenomena, which Latour calls “translation,” and the drive to (attempt to) separate nature and culture, which he calls “purification.” Ironically, although we have been obsessed with the latter, we have been constitutively unwilling to recognize the extent to which our knowledge production consistently depends on the former. Latour’s goal in *We Have Never Been Modern* is thus not to reconcile translation with purification, but to make explicit their inevitable imbrication:

So long as we consider these two practices of translation and purification separately, we are truly modern – that is, we willingly subscribe to the critical project, even though that project is developed only through the proliferation of hybrids down below. As soon as we direct our attention simultaneously to the work of purification and the work of hybridization, we immediately stop being wholly modern, and our future begins to change. At the same time we stop *having been* modern [my italics], because we become retrospectively aware that the two sets of practices have always already been at work in the historical period that is ending.[[11]](#endnote-11)

If we have never been modern, in other words, it hasn’t been for lack of trying -- but the results of our efforts have been, for the most part, to make matters worse rather than better, muddier rather than more clear. Accordingly, as Latour puts it near the end of *We Have Never Been Modern*, recognizing that “Nature and Society are not two distinct poles, but one and the same production of successive states of societies-natures, of collectives” is the only viable way forward out of the mess we have inherited from modernity (and without becoming stuck in the dead-end of a cynical, endlessly self-reflexive postmodernism that, for Latour, is “a symptom, not a solution”).[[12]](#endnote-12) In this vision, the role of humanity is best understood as a kind of “morphism”: the endless, but also endlessly creative “work of mediation.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

Seen in this light, Canto One of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* can be read as an early attempt to practice the kind of work that the Scottish literati arguably anticipate and Latour promotes. If the English seek solace in Highgate taverns immediately following Sunday morning services, and if this practice indcates above all their hypocrisy, then what form of entertainment do Spaniards seek on a Sunday afternoon, and what function does it serve? Byron strategically declines to tell readers immediately what Harold is describing in stanzas 71-81 of Canto 1, opting instead mostly for euphemisms and periphrastic phraseology: Although readers quickly understand that some kind of public spectacle is about to unfold --“Then to the crowded circus forth they fare/ Young, old, high, low, at once the same diversion share” (1.71.718-19) -- Byron makes us deduce the nature of the event in question from the evidence presented. Even once the central participants themselves begin to enter the scene, colorfully mounted on horseback with lances, for yet another stanza Byron coyly withholds the exact nature of what they have come to do. Only once one of the figures has been named “the light limb’d Matadore” (1.74.738) can we be sure, along with Harold, that we are witnessing a bullfight.

Ritualistic slayings of bulls have featured in various world traditions for millennia; in its modern form, the Spanish bullfight dates from the 1720s and the style of close fighting pioneered by Fransisco Romero.[[14]](#endnote-14) But Byron gives us neither this genealogical information nor any “insider” information of the sort that Spaniards themselves would likely have used to explain the fight’s stages and meanings to themselves (e.g. the precise style of bullfighting being employed, comparisons between this fight and previous ones). Instead, the poet sticks primarily to an “outsider” account that conveys only what Harold himself presumably sees and understands of the event.[[15]](#endnote-15) Byron himself had attended a bullfight on July 30, 1809*,* just across the bay from Cadiz at Puerto Santa Maria.[[16]](#endnote-16) Yet his description of it in *Childe Harold* remains notably generic. Packed to capacity, the arena is described in purposefully general terms, such that it comes to represent *every* Spanish bullring. The audience quiets expectantly just before the first “Four cavaliers” on “gallant steeds” appear, with the matador himself on foot amongst them, “eager to invade/ The lord of lowing herds” (I.73.728-30; I.74.740-41). The ensuing spectacle unfolds with a combination of realism (for example, in the descriptions of the blood pouring out of the bull’s flanks as it is repeatedly pricked, and of the mangled carcasses of the toreadors’ horses, one of which is “unseamed” by the bulls’ horns) and attention to the sorts of ritualistic details that would strike a keen observer: trumpets sound precisely three times when it is time for the matador to take charge, for example, and later the characteristic red cloak of the bullfighter is particularly noted (I.75.746; I.78.779). As each of these details is noted, a clearer picture is created: a picture, to put it in Latourian terms, of the multitude of actants, human and non-human alike, that make up the event called a bullfight. (In the non-human category we must include not just the most obvious feature, the bull, but also the combatants’ costumes, their weapons, the spectators, the bullring itself, etc.) Furthermore, some of these actants can also productively described (with the help of Latour’s vocabulary) as active *mediators*. An actant like the bull is not simply an intermediary between the matador and the spectators, for it clearly “exceeds its conditions”: although presumably raised in a field and brought to the city to be killed for entertainment, the bull – as we will see in a moment – produces effects that go far beyond its prosaic, even humble conditions of existence.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Byron’s “actor-network-esque” representation continues as the bullfight moves toward its bloody conclusion. To the extent that the tone does not remain entirely objective, the poet’s sympathies clearly lie with the animals rather than the human participants; both the horses and the bull are celebrated with adjectives like “gallant” and “furious,” whereas the human fighters are described as “conynge” (i.e. cunning) and implicitly callous as they “play” around the dying bull (see I.73-78.). Furthermore, when the bull is finally dead, Byron’s famed irony appears to resurface in his description of its corpse loaded atop a specially “decorated car” as a “sweet sight for vulgar eyes” (I.79.789). I say “*appears* to resurface,” however, because in some sense he is also being entirely accurate. Although critics generally have read this bullfighting scene as a critique either of chivalry in general or of this bloodsport in particular, viewing it via Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory makes a different effect visible.

For Latour, after all, the important question to ask of any event is not “Is it natural or constructed?” – the question with which the Moderns haunted themselves – but rather “Is it well constructed or poorly constructed?”[[18]](#endnote-18) In this case, that means asking, not “Does Byron see the bullfight as good or bad?” but rather “In what ways does Byron see the bullfight function for the Spaniards who take part in it, mostly as spectators?” Superficially, Byron appears to condemn the bullfight for seeming to lead to/ encourage bloodthirstiness and high passions, which in turn (he suggests) lead to internecine fighting among Spanish villagers:

Such the ungentle sport that oft invites

The Spanish maid, and cheers the Spanish swain.

Nurtur’d in blood betimes, his heart delights

In vengeance, gloating on another’s pain.

What private feuds the troubled village stain! (1.80.792-96)

This sounds disapproving, to be sure. But – and here we must simply take Byron at his word with regard to such effects -- it turns out that producing and maintaining a high level of bloodthirstiness in the Spaniards has definite advantages too. For after several more passages, Byron spends the remaining 9 stanzas celebrating Spain’s national vigor: the martial spirit, which Ferguson worried inevitably diminishes in overly sophisticated societies, and which was precisely what was needed, at the time, to resist Napoleon’s forces during the brutal Peninsular War.

Indeed, after noting the “strange” fact that the Spaniards have continued to put up an impassioned resistance to Napoleon even after their king and prince have both abdicated (I.86.882-85), Byron explains this state of affairs with reference, once again, to the Spaniards’ supposedly inherent love of fighting and thirst for revenge:

Ye, who would more of Spain and Spaniards know,

Go, read whate’er is writ of bloodiest strife:

Whate’er keen Vengeance urg’d on foreign foe

Can act, is acting there against man’s life. . . . (1.87.891-94)

Significantly, the terms with which Byron celebrates Spain’s ability to resist the French occupiers precisely echo those he earlier asserted were produced, encouraged, and inculcated at the bullfight. The Spaniards’ previously noted nonchalance with regard to dying animals transforms into admirable resolution in the face of “bloodiest strife”; the “delight in vengeance” nurtured by the brutal spectacle of the bullring finds its proper outlet in the Spaniards’ ongoing, increasingly vicious guerilla war. Furthermore, what previously sounded like a hint of disapproval concerning the very mixed crowd in the arena now is also turned around, as it is precisely Spain’s commoners who continue to resist the French long after their sovereigns’ abdications. The bullfight, as Byron shows through Harold’s eyes, is a typically Spanish event – not because it *is* Spanish in some kind of essential way, however, but rather because it *produces Spanishness* – the blend of bloodthirstiness, vengeance, and passion that Byron correctly sees is necessary to roll back the Napoleonic tide.

We may no longer be fighting the Napoleonic Wars, as Britain was when Byron wrote *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. But as we enter the Anthropocene Era, we may have a much greater battle on our hands, one in which humans and the planet together occupy all sides of the battlefield simultaneously. Then it will no longer be a matter of seeing how national characters are produced, but seeing how humanity as a whole has produced a situation that may well alter the course of human history even more substantially than did Napoleon when he tried to occupy the Iberian peninsula and was resisted by those bloodthirsty, bullfight attending Spaniards – with Childe Harold looking on and taking notes.

1. Notes

   See, e.g., Tom Mole, *Byron’s Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutics of Intimacy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Anthony Howe, *Byron and the Forms of Thought* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 1. As his title makes clear, Howe is paraphrasing this perspective, not condoning it. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Eliot, quoted in Anne Barton, “Byron Lives!,” *The New York Review of Books* 40.11 (10 June 1993): [pg?]; [www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1993/jun/10/byron-lives/?insrc=toc](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1993/jun/10/byron-lives/?insrc=toc). Accessed 5/ 2/ 2014.

   [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Emily A. Bernhard Jackson, *The Development of Byron’s Philosophy of Knowledge: Certainty in Uncertainty* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Bernhard Jackson, *Byron’s Philosophy of Knowledge*, 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron: Letters and Journals* Vol. 1., ed. Rowland E. Prothero (1898). <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8901/pg8901.html>. Accessed 7/15/2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Graham Haman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Byron, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, in *The Major Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 44, I.69.692-692-701. Subsequent citations will appear parenthetically. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See McGann, “Introduction” to *The Major Works* by Byron, ed. McGann, esp. xv-xvi. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 139, 74.

    [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 137, 139. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See the entry “Bullfighting” on Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bullfighting>. Accessed 6/20/2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Harold is a consummate observer, as Stanza 84 makes clear (the context here is no longer the bullfight specifically, but the description is accurate nonetheless): “Still he beheld, nor mingled with the throng; But view’d them not with misanthropic hate” (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* 1.84.828-29). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), who writes that “the bullfight . . . aroused mixed emotions in Byron: excitement at the drama, horror at the torments of the torreador’s dying horse” (96). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. For Latour’s definition of “mediation” (as opposed to a mere “intermediary”), see its definition on p. 307 in the very useful glossary near the end of *Pandora’s Hope*. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See Latour, “An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto’,” *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 474. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)