

Byron and Cosmopolitanism

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This paper considers to what extent contemporary discourses on cosmopolitanism might contribute to the reading of Byron as an expatriate poet, and, more generally, to a concept of Romantic cosmopolitanism. A close reading of the “Haidee episode” in cantos 2 to 4 of Byron’s Don Juan (1819–1824) focuses on languages-in-contact, foreign-language acquisition, and cultural differences with regard to environment, food, dress, and behaviour. Writing Don Juan as a British expatriate in southern Europe, Byron both thematizes and enacts cosmopolitan identity-construction in the context of multicultural encounters and asymmetrically intersecting communities. Recent cosmopolitan theory, especially that of K. Anthony Appiah, helps to explore themes of (mis)communication and cultural identity in Don Juan, and to relate Romantic cosmopolitanism to present-day globalized identities.

Keywords: Romanticism / cosmopolitanism / cultural identity / English poetry / Byron, George Gordon Noel

This paper is intended as a brief exercise in thinking together the terms cosmopolitanism, language, literature, and Romanticism. Focusing on the close reading of a specific literary example, I would like to address some fundamental questions, beginning with the question: “What are the origins of modern cosmopolitanism as a discourse?” In addition, I will address the questions of where and how cosmopolitanism manifests itself in literary texts, and whether it is possible to talk about a *Romantic cosmopolitanism*. Some nineteenth-century scholars have recently begun to do exactly that, in defiance of the accepted wisdom that Enlightenment cosmopolitanism was supplanted by the Romantic age of nationalism. Simon During, for instance, seeks to recover a positive nationalism in Romantic and post-colonial contexts, starting from the view that Herder, the inventor of the word “nationalism” in German, actually saw it as part of a cosmopolitan enterprise (During 139). Moreover, the re-appropriation and revision of Kant’s writings on cosmopolitanism by contemporary theorists, especially Jürgen Habermas and his followers and critics, create a direct link with late-eighteenth-century thought. Like Habermas, K. Anthony Appiah draws from late-Enlightenment cosmopolitanism and gives it a linguistic turn, redefining Kantian hospitality to strangers as “conversation between peo-

ple with different ways of life" (*Cosmopolitanism* xxi). Unlike Habermasian speech situations, however, cross-cultural conversation for Appiah is not expected to result in consensus; instead, as he writes, "it's enough that it helps people get used to one another" (*Cosmopolitanism* 85). Appiah's practical and anecdotal account of cosmopolitanism lends itself to reading the encounters with cultural otherness in the life and poetry of Lord Byron, characterized as they are by an ironic combination of misunderstanding and openness with respect to the foreign.

Byron is of particular interest in this context because he abandoned his potential political career in England in favour of more covert political involvement in resistance movements in Italy and Greece, then wrote his Mediterranean experience into best-selling and epoch-making literature, especially the long poem *Don Juan* (published in installments between 1819 and 1824). The *Don Juan* legend traditionally plays itself out in Seville, although an international *Don Juan* is at least implied in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (the version of the story that may have inspired Byron), if one recalls Leporello's aria about his master's romantic conquests in Germany, Italy, France, and Turkey, in addition to Spain. But Byron's version puts an unprecedented emphasis on travel, on contact with foreignness, and on the adaptability that border-crossing demands. In his *Don Juan*, the archetypal Spanish seducer migrates throughout Europe while taking on a host of new identities, as an exile, a shipwrecked refugee, a slave traded within a colonial economy, a mercenary, and finally a diplomatic envoy. In other words, Juan becomes a border-crosser of exactly the kind that interests current cosmopolitan theorists.

Byron's *Don Juan* is accordingly a poem about what Homi Bhabha calls "borderline engagements of cultural difference" (2); it is a text that enacts Romantic cosmopolitanism, I will argue, in ways that resonate with contemporary cosmopolitan theory. For Byron, as for Bhabha and Appiah, encounters with otherness in life and in literature habitually take verbal form, including conversation and foreign-language acquisition. Byron wrote *Don Juan* as an expatriate, while living mainly in Venice, coming to terms with life in Italian, and intentionally engaging with linguistic foreignness. Before beginning the poem, he spent several months studying modern and ancient Armenian at the Armenian monastery in Venice, having been attracted to this challenge precisely because of the difficulty and strangeness of the Armenian language (*BLJ* 5: 137). In *Don Juan*, too, the protagonist's first extended encounter with cultural otherness involves a memorable episode of foreign-language acquisition. I propose to focus on the theme of language *in*, and the language *of*, this episode as a way of exploring the possibility of a cosmopolitan poetics for the Romantic period.

The episode in question is the encounter between the Spanish Don Juan and the Greek maiden Haidee, that begins in canto 2 when the shipwrecked Juan washes up on the shores of the island ruled by Haidee's father, the pirate Lambro. The distinctiveness of this scene begins with its setting on an island: a location that is at once utopian and thoroughly conditioned by history, and that has strong resonances in political and cosmopolitan theory. Islands, as Anthony Appiah points out, have long been favoured settings for "normative political theorists," whose experimental utopian scenarios work out more neatly when strangers or outsiders are excluded (*Ethics* 218). Yet cosmopolitan theory, Appiah notes, takes an artificially limited environment of this kind to constitute a "serious omission." The "moral status of political strangers" is an issue that theorists cannot afford to evade, since, in the modern world – as Appiah neatly paraphrases John Donne – "no island . . . is an island" (219). Indeed, in post-colonial contexts, islands do not function as utopian isolation chambers, but rather as contact zones for linguists who study creolization and language change – or for comparatists like Mary Louise Pratt, who defines the "contact zone" as a "space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (Pratt 6).

In Byron's *Don Juan*, islands are sites of isolation from the real world, but, at the same time, they are sites where intensive cross-cultural encounters take place. Haidee's island, for all its idyllic otherworldliness – a quality it inherits from its archaic model, the island of Nausikaa in the *Odyssey* – has a specific geographical location in the Cyclades, and the Haidee episode has a significant temporal location in the midst of the Russo-Turkish War of 1787–1791. This island setting, directly subject to foreign domination and imperialistic power struggles, is a tiny fiefdom whose subaltern status is manifested by its ruler Lambro's method of remaining on good terms with his Turkish overlords, that is, by supplying them with slaves taken in his campaigns of piracy. To add to the political complexity of the Greek-island location, the island empires to which Byron himself was attached through citizenship or residency – that is, Britain and Venice – were actively pursuing their interests in the Eastern Mediterranean at the time of the poem's setting (1790) and, differently again, at the time of its writing (1818).

It is in this overdetermined island setting that the recently shipwrecked, Spanish-speaking Juan awakens in a strange cave to find the beautiful, Romaic-Greek-speaking Haidee leaning over him adoringly. The complete dependence of the naked, half-drowned Juan on the pirate princess

Haidee makes this setting, despite its Edenic overtones, into an asymmetrical contact zone. From the beginning, the encounter between Juan and Haidee is further complicated by the presence of other people, the mediation of other voices, and the intrusion of other cultural codes. The young pair are never alone in their cave, for Haidee's maid Zoe is frying eggs in the background the whole time; and, as so often in *Don Juan*, the details of food and consumption locate the scene within a comic cosmopolitanism. Juan's arrival on the island may be the involuntary result of a shipwreck, but *Byron's* knowledge of the Mediterranean is that of a Classically-educated, aristocratic Grand Tourist, and the space between Byron's experiences and Juan's is mediated by a well-travelled narrator, for whom the contrast between the domestic and the foreign is irrepressible. The complications introduced by this narrative persona begin with his first-person comments on the maid Zoe's cookery:

And so, she cook'd their breakfast to a tittle;
I can't say that she gave them any tea,
But there were eggs, fruit, coffee, bread, fish, honey,
With Scio wine, – and all for love, not money. (canto 2, stanza 145)

What immediately occurs to this narrator is that the breakfast menu would not suit English tastes – there is no tea – and, almost apologetically, he makes haste to recite the local specialties that are available in place of familiar domestic comforts. The tourist's perspective can be glimpsed, too, in the notion that, under normal circumstances, this service might be performed “for . . . money,” and again in the next stanza, when Zoe has to throw out the first breakfast and prepare a second one in order to accommodate the late waking hour of their foreign guest. The ambivalence of the narrator's own cultural orientation is evident in his immediate concern for the tea-drinking preferences of an English public, juxtaposed with his use of the Italian form “Scio” for the name of the Greek island “Chios”: in other words, the British and Italian affiliations of the cosmopolitan Byron himself leave their traces in the narrator's diction.

The motifs of communicative failure and food as a marker of cultural difference predominate in the description of Juan and Haidee's encounter. In stanza 150, Juan awakens to Haidee's first attempts to address him in Romainic:

Her eyes were eloquent, her words would pose,
Although she told him, in good modern Greek,
With an Ionian accent, low and sweet,
That he was faint, and must not talk, but eat.

Now Juan could not understand a word,
 Being no Grecian; but he had an ear,
 And her voice was the warble of a bird,
 So soft, so sweet, so delicately clear,
 That finer, simpler music ne'er was heard ... (2.150–1)

The observation that Juan is “no Grecian” is multi-layered: not only is he ignorant of demotic Greek, but he does not have the advantage of being as “Grecian” as Byron, that is, an Englishman educated in the Classics. The narrator, by contrast, understands – or affects to understand – Haidee’s language, to the point where he can evaluate her competence (“*good* modern Greek”) and identify her dialect (“an Ionian accent”). Juan, on the other hand, registers Haidee’s words as pure sound, as “the warble of a bird.” This is the first of several metaphors likening Haidee’s speech to bird-song, an image that subtly underscores Juan’s failure to understand, as well as his status as an anti-hero. There are mythical heroes, like Siegfried, who are gifted with the ability to understand the language of birds – but Juan is not one of them. Instead, Haidee’s attempts to communicate with him fall into the category of non-human sound: bird-song or, as suggested in the next stanza, organ music. As the relationship progresses and Juan becomes Haidee’s lover, he will begin to attach semantic meaning to these sounds by, in effect, taking a private immersion course in her Romaic dialect. This language-acquisition process is interestingly asymmetrical: Juan will begin to learn the language of the island, but there is no mention of Haidee taking instruction in Spanish. The result, however, is a private idiolect that the narrator will again liken, two cantos later, to the “language . . . of birds” (4.14), this time in the sense that it is intelligible only to Juan and Haidee. Due to their encounter in this isolated border region, the lovebirds develop their own pidgin Romaic.

Before these language lessons get underway, however, Juan’s fascination with the sound of Haidee’s voice is interrupted by the smell of breakfast cooking, at which point the famished youth realizes that he is dying for a “beef-steak” (2.153). This culinary detail picks up the motif of the English tourist who longs for English food while abroad, even if it is incongruous that the Spanish Juan’s instinctive desire should be for typically English fare. Lest there be any doubt about the national associations of the beefsteak breakfast, the narrator launches into a three-stanza digression contrasting the English and the Greeks on the topic of beef and its absence. “Beef is rare,” he proclaims, “Beef is rare within these oxless isles” – repeating the pun twice, and alluding with the mock-Homeric epithet “oxless” to Odysseus’ companions who devoured the oxen of the sun-god on one of the Greek islands they visited. By contrast, the narrator

continues, “we all know that English people are / Fed upon beef” (2.156). Here again, the unstable cultural affiliations of the narrator appear in the contrast between his rhetorical self-alignment with English readers (“*we* all know”) and, on the contrary, the distance from “English people” that is implied by his pseudo-anthropological stance.

These unsettling shifts of perspective, address, and idiolect within Byron’s language evoke and superimpose different types of encounters with other cultures, especially island cultures. Foremost among them, in this episode, are tourism, anthropology, and piracy. These contact-zone activities have played little part in existing commentary on the Haidee episode; on the contrary, it is usually interpreted as the poem’s single representation of an ideal love relationship, while the wordless intimacy of Juan and Haidee is regarded as “the sole example of complete communication in *Don Juan*,” in the words of a seminal article by Peter Manning (122). But I am suggesting that the communication between Don Juan and Haidee is neither wordless nor complete, and that the whole episode performs a critical cosmopolitanism centring on differences in language and differences in food. Even Juan and Haidee’s attempts at gestural communication imply a juxtaposition of dubiously compatible cultural systems:

And then she had recourse to nods, and signs,
 And smiles, and sparkles of the speaking eye,
 And read (the only book she could) the lines
 Of his fair face, and found, by sympathy,
 The answer eloquent, where the soul shines
 And darts in one quick glance a long reply;
 And thus in every look she saw exprest
 A world of words, and things at which she guess’d. (2.162)

While this interaction between the attractive strangers may be quite charming, it cannot forgo or bypass language; rather, bodily signs are substituted for spoken words and operate like a language. The eye still “speaks,” and the lines of the face get “read.” Haidee interprets Juan’s looks by translating them into language – indeed, into a great deal of language, “a world of words.” But what Haidee imagines she reads in Juan’s looks is, in the end, “things at which she *guess’d*.” Besides the implication that the barely awakened Juan is already sending erotic signals, these lines raise a lingering uncertainty about whether Juan and Haidee can do any more than “guess” at one another’s meaning by falling back on interpretations suggested by their own separate cultural spheres. Juan’s and Haidee’s facial expressions and gestures may well be as culture-specific as their different mother tongues, and therefore just as prone to incomprehension.

Meanwhile, the disjunction between linguistic and phonetic systems also appears on the level of narration, for instance in the couplet rhyme at the end of stanza 161: “Till pausing at the last her breath to *take*, / She saw he did not understand *Romaic*” (italics added). The very lines that describe Juan’s failure to understand Haidee’s Romaic also demonstrate that “Romaic” doesn’t fit or sit well in English verse. Elsewhere in the poem, Byron goes much further still in using cosmophonetic play to enact the disharmony of English and other tongues.

On the story level, then, Byron’s *Don Juan* stages encounters with strangers and their cultures, performing these encounters in terms of tourism and imperialism, piracy and rescue, love and language-learning. The conflicting cultural affiliations that accumulate around Don Juan – speaking Spanish, dressed up by the islanders to look “like a Turk, Or Greek” (2.160), and craving an English beefsteak breakfast – are matched on the level of narrative voice by constantly shifting registers of discourse and frames of reference. Just as Juan’s and Haidee’s attempts at communication fail to elide linguistic difference, the cosmopolitan narrator’s discourse fails to digest the components of his international experience, leaving an unintegrated pastiche of allusions and perceptions. In an article on Byron and the heritage of the Enlightenment, Kirsten Daly also remarks on the *Don Juan* narrator’s “allusive cosmopolitanism”; she regards his wide and idiosyncratic range of fleeting references as a narrative strategy that “implies that his familiarity is so extensive that it cannot be comprehensively described” (197). However, I am suggesting that the narrator’s allusiveness indicates not the impossibility of comprehensiveness, but the impossibility of integration and complete communication. The more cosmopolitan language becomes, the less likely it is to be understood, because it constantly assumes different frames of reference, draws on different idiolects, and addresses different individuals or communities.

At the beginning of his earlier poem, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Byron quotes an epigraph from Fougere de Monbron’s *Le Cosmopolite* and, in a later letter, he refers to himself as a “Citizen of the World” (*BLJ* 9: 78). Both of these explicit allusions to cosmopolitanism occur, however, in heavily ironic contexts, and they underscore the self-conscious quality of Byron’s cultural-political experience as a British expatriate in Mediterranean Europe. In *Don Juan*, this experience informs his rewriting of the Western literary heritage – not only the Don Juan myth, but also the *Odyssey* – as a series of “conversation[s] between people with different ways of life,” the activity that Appiah regards as central to a cosmopolitan perspective. On multiple narrative levels, these scenes explore the miscommunications, asymmetries, and interruptions that characterize cosmo-

politan conversations. Byron's literary language thus performs experiences of border-crossing, in the mode that Galin Tihanov also characterized, in his contribution to the colloquium on cosmopolitanism (Ljubljana, June 2008), as "individual openness to the foreign." In this way, Byron's poetry can open up an alternative genealogy for cosmopolitanism – a way of recovering, alongside Romantic nationalism, a Romantically ironic theorization of cultures in contact.

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Byron in svetovljanstvo

Ključne besede: romantika / kozmopolitizem / kulturna identiteta / angleška poezija / Byron, George Gordon Noel

Razprava proučuje, koliko lahko sodobni diskurzi o svetovljanstvu prispevajo k branju Byrona kot izseljenskega pesnika in, splošneje, h konceptu romantičnega svetovljanstva. Sodobne razprave o Byronu so se začele ukvarjati z ironično povezanostjo jezikov in idiomov in tematiko usvajanja jezika v izrazito mednarodni pesnitvi *Don Juan* (1818–1824). Pozorno prebiranje dogajanja v spevih 2, 3 in 4, ki upesnjujejo razmerje španskega Juana z grško deklico Haidee, razkriva Byronovo rabo idiomov, narečij in kod, ki umeščajo govorca, pripovedovalca in pesnika različno, glede na različno občinstvo. Čeprav don Juanova srečavanja s tujimi jeziki, okolji, hrano, obleko in vedenjem postanejo pozneje v pesnitvi komična rutina, pa pomeni epizoda s Haidee njegovo prvo trajnejše srečanje s kulturno drugačnostjo. Pri tem veliko pozornost posveča privzemanju drugega jezika in razvoju improviziranega »kontaktnega jezika«; ti dve temi se nadalje zapleteta z zgodovinsko-kulturnim palimpsestom vzhodnega Sredozemlja, kamor je postavljeno dogajanje. Ko Byron piše *Don Juana* kot angleški izseljenec v južni Evropi, hkrati tematizira in udejanja svetovljanski ustroj identitete v kontekstu multikulturnih srečanj in nesimetrično sekajočih se skupnosti. Razprava se osredotoča na s Haidee povezano dogajanje kot na vozlišče problematike (slabe) komunikacije in kulturne identitete, pri čemer si pomaga tudi z novjšimi teorijami svetovljanstva, še posebno s teorijo K. Anthonyja Appiaha, zato da poveže romantično svetovljanstvo in dandanašnje globalizirane identitete.

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