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“So, We’ll Go No More a Roving”

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In May, 1968, the Very Reverend Eric Abbott, Dean of Westminster, agreed with a plan to place a plaque in memory of George Gordon, Lord Byron, in Poet’s Corner of Westminster Abbey. Byron, of course, had never before received such recognition. At the time of his death in 1824 his body was refused burial in Westminster Abbey because of his flagrant immorality—his numerous affairs with women of the English aristocracy, his scandalous divorce, his period of debauchery in Venice, his association with the Countess Guiccioli, as well as rumors of homosexual relationships and even of an incestuous affair with his half-sister. These known escapades and rumors of worse were enough to condemn Byron in his day and for a long while thereafter. Among these affairs, however, is one which, though judged immoral, ironically helped to make Byron’s life more stable and normal. This was, of course, his affair with the Countess Teresa Guiccioli.

Byron met Theresa in Venice in 1819. He was residing in Venice after leaving England in self-exile because of the scandal resulting from his divorce. One evening in April he attended a conversazione held by the Countess Benzoni; during the course of the evening she, as the hostess, urged Byron to be introduced to the Countess Guiccioli. Byron at first hesitated but at last consented, and Countess Benzoni introduced them.  

Teresa was, according to most accounts, beautiful and well-

educated—certainly better educated than the average Italian girl of the aristocracy. Though she was no more than a teen-age girl at the time, she was in the second year of her marriage to Count Alessandro Guiccioli, a man more than forty years older than she and one who had been married twice before. After the introduction, Teresa told Byron that she was from Ravenna; he expressed a desire to visit the city in order to see the tombs of Dante and Francesca da Rimini. The conversation thus turned to the great Italian poets of the past, and Byron was captivated by her knowledge and intelligent conversation. She, of course, was captivated by Byron. She had noticed him when she first entered the room and felt an immediate attraction to him. The conversation became prolonged, and later, when Count Guiccioli came to remind Teresa that it was time for them to go, she arose and departed as if in a trance. Before leaving the conversazione, however, she agreed to meet Byron privately the next day. Thus Lord Byron met and began pursuit of the one who was to become his last romantic attachment. And for the next four years he allowed this young Italian beauty to inspire him and to influence him as, perhaps, no other woman ever had.

Byron was undoubtedly attracted to Teresa, but it was more than physical attraction—her sheer vitality, her youthful high spirits attracted him. She was, as Iris Origo suggests, a “silly” woman, but certainly not a “stupid” one. In some ways she was like Augusta, Byron's half-sister, but she had more strength and more sense, qualities which Byron admired. She came close, in fact, to being an embodiment of the beau idéal which he had described in a conversation with Lady Blessington: “Now, my beau idéal would be a woman with talent enough to be able to understand mine, but not sufficient to be able to shine herself.” At times Byron tried to resist Teresa, even tried to laugh at her; but she was able to impose her will upon him, and

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2Ibid. pp. 773-776.
usually it was he who did what she wanted. The relationship, therefore, was shaped according to Teresa’s standards and view of life.  

Byron had sunk to a record low in his moral life during his stay in Venice. Teresa saved him from this debauchery and helped him to attain a peak in his emotional and intellectual life, a peak which seems to have had a parallel in the productivity and maturity of his literary career. Teresa, though, led him into a life which was anything but quiet, according to normal standards. Their lives were filled with periods of emotional storm and stress—lovers’ quarrels, political intrigues, fights with Count Guiccioli especially during the period when Teresa was divorcing him—but emotional storms, violent passions, apparently enhanced Byron’s sense of existence and thus increased his intellectual fertility. Teresa did, however, make it possible for Byron to have an affectionate family life (something he had not known before) among the members of her family—the Gambas. Most important of all, perhaps, she helped arrange his life into a routine which gave him leisure to write. Iris Origo in *The Last Attachment* describes Byron’s life under the influence of Teresa:

Since he worked all night at his studies, he seldom went to bed before day, and consequently got up very late—breakfasting on a cup of sugarless tea and the yolk of a raw egg, without bread. He then read or wrote letters until his afternoon ride, which took place regularly two hours before sunset, and almost invariably in the company of Pietro Gamba (Teresa’s brother). . . At sundown Byron went home again and dined frugally . . . while reading, or talking to his dogs; he rested for half an hour, and then went to spend the rest of the evening until 11 o’clock in Teresa’s drawing room, in conversation, with a little music on the piano-forte or the harp.  

5 Origo, *The Last Attachment*, pp. 11-13  
In addition to providing him with leisure time, Teresa encouraged him to write and both directly and indirectly influenced his writing a great deal.

A number of Byron’s works unmistakably bear the direct influence of Teresa. For example, he wrote several short poems which were addressed to her or were specifically concerned with her. One of these poems, “Stanzas to the Po,” was written shortly after their first meeting; some of the background for this poem will indicate the influence of Teresa. Byron continued to see Teresa quite frequently in Venice after the conversazione; soon, however, Count Guiccioli decided that he and Teresa should leave Venice and begin their journey back to Ravenna. Teresa implored Byron to join her later, but he would make no promises. On their way home, the Count and Countess visited some of their other estates, one of which was located at Ca’ Zen on the Po. Byron, left alone in Venice, struggled with the decision of whether to follow Teresa, and, while she was at Ca’ Zen, composed the “Stanzas to the Po,” which shows the emotional conflict he was undergoing. Leslie Marchand in his biography of Byron quotes the following lines from the poem as they appear in Byron’s hand:

My heart is all meridian, were it not
I had not suffered now, nor should I be
Despite old tortures ne’er to be forgot
   The slave again—Oh! Love! at least of thee!
’Tis vain to struggle, I have struggled long
   To love again no more as once I loved,
Oh! Time! why leave this earliest Passion strong?
   To tear a heart which pants to be unmoved?

He, of course, finally gave in to this “worst of Passions” and joined Teresa in Ravenna.

In November, 1819, Byron and Teresa were back in Venice. This time, however, Count Guiccioli became suspicious of them

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8 Byron, as quoted in Marchand, Byron, II, 789; see also pp. 782-784.
and came to take Teresa home. Again Teresa implored Byron to join her later, and again he was thrown into a period of indecision. He probably realized by then that he could not remain in Italy without Teresa; consequently, he planned to return to England. He composed the lines “Could Love For Ever” while he was trying to make up his mind to leave Teresa and Italy for good. These lines were evidently written in an attempt to bolster his courage and to help persuade him to make the break; in the fourth stanza he wrote:

Wait not, fond lover!
Till years are over,
And then recover,
   As from a dream.
While each bewailing
The other’s failing,
With wrath and railing,
   All hideous seem—
While first decreasing,
Yet not quite ceasing,
Wait not till teasing
   All passion blight:
If once diminished
Love’s reign is finished—
Then part in friendship,—and bid good-night.

Apparently, however, he decided that he could not give up Teresa, so he remained in Italy and once more returned to her.

At a later time while he was on his way to join her, Byron again wrote some verses with Teresa in mind. This time she was separated from the Count and was waiting for Byron in Pisa. He was undoubtedly thinking of her when he wrote the following lines in “Stanzas Written on the Road Between Florence and Pisa”:

Oh, Fame!—if e’er took delight in thy praises,
’Twas less for the sake of thy high sounding phrases,

9 Origo, The Last Attachment, p. 137.
"SO, WE'LL GO NO MORE A ROVING"

Than to see the bright eyes of the dear one discover
She thought that I was not unworthy to love her.

There chiefly I sought thee, there only I found thee;
Her glance was the best of the rays that surround thee;
When it sparkled o'er aught that was bright in my story,
I knew it was love, and I felt it was glory.

Much of Byron's work during this period deals with the unification and freedom of Italy. He himself was involved in the Italian political struggle, and Teresa was, at least in part, responsible. He had sided with the Italian nationalists when he first came to the country, but, though his sympathies were obvious enough to bring him under police surveillance, he did not engage in any active participation in the movement until the spring of 1819, when he met Teresa. During his stay in Venice, his allegiance lay dormant; when he followed Teresa out into the provinces where more action was taking place, however, he began to become more involved and to take a more active part. In fact, when he followed Teresa to Ravenna in 1820, he joined the Carbonari and was chosen one of the chieftains of the Societa dei Bersagleri, a branch of the Carbonari. Teresa's family were also involved in the Italian nationalist movement, and Byron, therefore, was encouraged in his efforts from all sides. Soon he came to be regarded as a serious threat to the political regime, although his role in the situation remained actually a minor one. His participation was, however, important to him. Byron had utmost admiration for the man of action and a great love of freedom. It is only natural, furthermore, that he would turn to these themes in his work at a time when he was involved in such a situation.

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One of the works which deals with the political theme is *The Prophecy of Dante*, a work not only inspired by Teresa, but written at her insistence. When Byron first went to Ravenna in 1819, Teresa was ill, and he could visit her only while she was surrounded by family and friends. Later her health improved, and by early June she was able to go for a carriage ride. She and Byron rode in her carriage while Count Guiccioli and some friends rode behind them in a separate carriage. This particular occasion was the first time the lovers had had a chance to be alone since Byron came to Ravenna. As they rode along, Teresa reminded Byron that he had written about Tasso; now she wanted him to write something about Dante. *The Prophecy of Dante* was begun the next day, and Byron gave credit to Teresa in the dedication, which also expresses his devotion to her:

LADY! if for the cold and cloudy clime  
Where I was born, but where I would not die,  
Of the great Poet-Sire of Italy  
I dare to build the imitative rhyme,  
Harsh Runic copy of the South’s sublime,  
THOU art the cause; and howsoever I  
Fall short of his immortal harmony,  
Thy gentle heart will pardon me the crime.  
Thou, in the pride of Beauty and of Youth,  
Spakest; and for thee to speak and be obeyed  
Are one; but only in the sunny South  
Such sounds are uttered, and such charms displayed,  
So sweet a language from so fair a mouth—  
Ah! to what effort would it not persuade?

The poem was, of course, more than the simple eulogy of Dante that Teresa wanted; it was a political appeal to the nationalists. Though sympathetic with their cause, Byron was aware of their shortcomings, especially their lack of unity and strong leadership; and in this poem he has Dante to specify these shortcomings.  

The same criticism of the nationalists also appears in another of Byron's works which Teresa, in one way or another, influenced a great deal—*Marino Faliero*, a historical tragedy with the theme of freedom from tyranny, but written in a mood of high hope for the nationalistic cause. Byron was already a member of the *Carbonari* before he started work on the drama, and in 1820 he was actively engaged in various plots which the *Carbonari* in Ravenna were carrying out. Byron saw himself as a patrician rebel, and Marino Faliero appears to be an imaginative projection of Byron—and the circumstances in which he is involved are the circumstances in which Byron was involved. Furthermore, the character of Angiolina, the wife of Faliero, resembles Teresa in several respects.

Teresa, though, at times inadvertently hindered the work of her poet, especially during the time he was at work on *Marino*. Byron started the play on April 4, 1820, but it was not written with his usual speed and facility of composition; each act took approximately a month for completion. The length of time required for the composition is quite understandable, however, because it was during this same period that Teresa was in the process of suing for a papal decree to separate her from Count Guiccioli. It was naturally a period of great emotional stress for Byron and Teresa and a period when he had to devote a great part of his time to her protection. In a letter to Thomas Moore, dated at Ravenna on June 9, 1820, Byron wrote:

I am in the third act of a Tragedy; but whether it will be finished or not, I know not: I have, at this present, too many passions of my own on hand to do justice to those of the dead.

Byron gave further insight into the hectic conditions under which *Marino* was composed in a letter written after the drama was finished. The letter is to John Murray, dated at Ravenna on October 8, 1820:


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I wish you, too, to recollect one thing which is nothing to the reader. I never wrote nor copied an entire Scene of that play, without being obliged to break off—to break a commandment, to obey a woman’s, and to forget God’s. Remember the drain of this upon a man’s heart and brain, to say nothing of his immortal soul. Fact, I assure you. The Lady always apologized for the interruption; but you know the answer a man must make when and while he can. It happened to be the only hour I had in the four and twenty for composition, or reading, and I was obliged to divide even it.¹⁹

Teresa even more deliberately influenced Sardanapalus, another of Byron’s tragedies. For this play Byron turned to Assyrian history, but again presented the theme of the hatred of tyranny. When Byron outlined the plot of Sardanapalus, he discussed it with Teresa, and she told him that she did not like it because there was no “love-interest” in it. He tried to explain that he did not think that love should be the theme of a tragedy; she, however, maintained her argument until he eventually agreed with her, at least in part.²⁰ Concerning this episode, he wrote in his Journal:

She quarrelled with me, because I said that love was not the loftiest theme for true tragedy; and, having the advantage of her native language, and natural female eloquence, she overcame my fewer arguments. I believe she was right. I must put more love into Sardanapalus than I intended.²¹

And so Myrrha, the woman for whom Sardanapalus left his queen and the woman who perished with him, was added to the drama. Myrrha, like Angiolina in Marino, bears resemblance to Teresa.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 90-91.
²⁰ Origo, The Last Attachment, p. 239.
²¹ Letters and Journals, V, 173.
Byron was at work on *Don Juan*, his masterpiece, during most of the period which he spent with Teresa, and he was purposefully influenced when writing this poem by the society in which he was living and by the people with whom he came in contact. He admitted that *Don Juan* was intended to reflect the real life of the world, and, no doubt, his experiences in Italy gave him a rich background for the many satiric passages on love and marriage and certainly provided a source for the many dangerous escapades of Juan. Juan’s escapades, though, according to Byron, were not as dangerous as those he had undergone because of his involvement with the Countess Guiccioli. He was speaking of his and Teresa’s affair when he wrote the following passage in a letter to John Murray: “I cannot tell how our romance will end, but it hath gone on hitherto most erotically—such perils and escapes—Juan’s are a child’s play in comparison.” Byron was also probably thinking of his and Teresa’s situation when he wrote the following passage in *Don Juan*:  

’Tis melancholy, and a fearful sign  
Of human frailty, folly, also crime,  
That love and marriage rarely can combine,  
Although they both are born in the same clime;  
Marriage from love, like vinegar from wine—  
A sad, sour, sober beverage—by time  
Is sharpened from its high celestial flavour  
Down to a very homely household savour. (Canto III, Stanza V)  

He and Teresa both had undergone the experiences of an unhappy marriage only to find love beyond the pale of matrimony; these sentiments concerning marriage are, therefore, quite understandable. He, furthermore, was perhaps thinking about what might happen to him if he and Teresa were to elope, as they sometimes planned to do. Further in Canto III he emphasized this point:  

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There’s doubtless something to domestic doings
Which forms, in fact, true love’s antithesis....
Think you, if Laura had been Petrarch’s wife,
He would have written sonnets all his life? (Stanza VIII)

Not only his love for Teresa but his very desire for creative work might be destroyed if he and Teresa should marry.

The Countess Guiccioli, however, seems to have influenced the poem more than just in the satiric passages. Byron had insisted at the beginning of Don Juan that it was to be a humorous poem, but at times the cynicism and satire are dispelled by a beauty which steals in almost unawares. Teresa was to a large extent responsible for this beauty which has contributed to the immortality of the poem.

When Byron and Teresa were together in Ravenna in 1819, he was at work on Canto III of the poem. After her health improved to a sufficient degree, Teresa accompanied Byron on daily rides in the pine forest nearby. There they could be alone and away from the suspicions of the Count and Teresa’s family. These rides together were times of happiness for both of the lovers, and Byron has placed a beautiful description of one such occasion in the third canto of Don Juan:

Sweet hour of twilight! —in the solitude
Of the pine forest, and the silent shore
Which bounds Ravenna’s immemorial wood,
Rooted where once the Adrian wave flowed o’er,
To where the last Caesarean fortress stood,
Evergreen forest! which Boccaccio’s lore,
And Dryden’s lay made haunted ground to me,
How have I loved the twilight hour and thee! (Stanza CV)

It is also in Canto III that Byron elaborates the story of the idyllic love affair of Juan and Haidee, which he had introduced in Canto II; this story, of course, is in many ways similar to the
love affair of Byron and Teresa. Finding relief in self-expression, Byron wrote rapidly while working on this part of the poem—even at times with Teresa’s chattering away beside him. Juan and Haideé found true love not in the real world but apart from it; true love, Byron seems to indicate, cannot survive amidst the sham and hypocrisy of the world. In Canto IV Byron described the nature of the love that Juan and Haideé had for each other—a love strong enough to withstand the thing which destroys most love. Here he was certainly thinking of his and Teresa’s love for each other, for theirs was unlike any other—was stronger than any other—he had known. In Stanza XVI he wrote:

Moons changing had rolled on, and changeless found
Those their bright rise had lighted to such joys
As rarely they beheld throughout their round;
And these were not of the vain kind which cloys,
For theirs were buoyant spirits, never bound
By the mere senses; and that which destroys
Most love, possession, unto them appeared
A thing which each endearment more endeared.

Furthermore, he reflected on the importance of such a love to these creatures who themselves were apart from the world:

They were not made in the real world to fill
A busy character in the dull sense.... (Stanza XV)

And they were

Unfit to mix in these thick solitudes
Called social, haunts of Hate, and Vice, and Care...(Stanza XXVIII)

In Childe Harold Byron had pictured himself as one who stood apart from mankind—one who was “among them, but not of them,” and one who had “not loved the world.” Obviously, the love of Juan and Haideé which blossoms apart from the world

26 Ibid., p. 830.
parallels, at least, the love of Byron and Teresa which flourished beyond the sanction of society.

Teresa contributed to the poem in another way as well. She told Byron several stories about her life at Santa Chiara, the convent school which she had attended, and he used some of these stories in the poem, particularly in the sixth canto.\footnote{27 Origo, \textit{The Last Attachment}, p. 300.} The character of Aurora Raby, who appears in the last canto of the poem, furthermore, is perhaps modeled after Teresa.\footnote{28 Austin K. Gray, \textit{Teresa: The Story of Byron’s Last Mistress} (London: George G. Harrap and Co., 1948), p. 156.}

Teresa also hindered her poet’s work on this poem. This time, though, her hindrance was not inadvertent. When Byron began the fifth canto, he evidently was in a devilish mood, for he defied his moral critics and began with the following sarcastic passage:\footnote{29 Marchand, \textit{Byron}, II, 883-884.}

\begin{quote}
When amatory poets sing their loves  
In liquid lines mellifluously bland,  
And pair their rhymes as Venus yokes her doves,  
They little think what mischief is in hand;  
The greater their success the worse it proves,  
As Ovid’s verse may give to understand;  
Even Petrach’s self, if judged with due severity,  
Is the Platonic pimp of all posterity. \footnote{30 \textit{Letters and Journals}, V, 97.} (Stanza 1)
\end{quote}

This passage is much in the tone and spirit of the first two cantos, and the blasphemy to Teresa’s religion of love was too much. After reading the first two cantos, she told Byron, as he reported in a letter to Murray, that she “\textit{would rather have the fame of Childe Harold for THREE YEARS than an IMMORTALITY of Don Juan!”} \footnote{30 \textit{Letters and Journals}, V, 97.} Byron admitted that she was right from a woman’s standpoint, as he continued in the same letter: “The truth is that \textit{it is TOO TRUE}, and the women hate every
thing which strips off the tinsel of Sentiment; and they are right, as it would rob them of their weapons.”

31 Teresa, though, was not content. Aside from her own prejudices against the poem, she was, as she explained, distressed by the attacks on Byron’s morals which the publication of Don Juan had occasioned. Byron tried to reason with her, and he told her that Cantos III, IV, and V, which had been written under her influence, were beyond reproach. Teresa, however, persisted, and Byron finally promised not to write any more of the poem until she permitted it.

32 He evidently intended to abide by his promise to her, for he added in a postscript to another letter written to John Murray, dated July 6, 1821: “At the particular request of the Contessa G. I have promised not to continue Don Juan. You will therefore look upon these 3 cantos as the last of that poem.”

33 So once again Byron tried to argue with Teresa, but again it was she who was victorious.

Fortunately for us, however, Teresa later relented, and Byron was able to persuade her to allow him to continue the poem. Perhaps she saw Shelley’s admiration for the poem, and perhaps she argued with herself that the attacks, indeed, had been on the first two cantos, which were written during Byron’s period of debauchery in Venice.

34 At any rate, Byron was granted permission to resume work. He reported the fact in a letter to Murray, dated July 8, 1822:

It is not impossible that I may have three or four cantos of D. Juan ready by autumn, or a little later, as I obtained a permission from my Dictatress to continue it,—provided always it was to be more guarded and decorous and sentimental in the continuation than in the commencement.

31 Ibid.
32 Origo, The Last Attachment, pp. 238-239.
33 Letters and Journals, V, 320-321.
34 Origo, The Last Attachment, pp. 299-300. T. G. Steffan, however, is of the opinion that Teresa actually had little to do with Byron’s decision either to discontinue or to renew his work on Don Juan. See The Making of a Masterpiece, Vol. I of Byron’s Don Juan by T. G. Steffan and W. W. Pratt (4 vols.; Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1957), pp. 39-47.
35 Letters and Journals, VI, 95.
ROBERT W. WITT

That Teresa did figure rather prominently in the composition of *Don Juan* both directly and indirectly, as she did in most of the writing which Byron did after he met her, is evident. That Bryon loved Teresa is also evident; he expressed his love for her numerous times in his letters and in his poetry. One of the most beautiful expressions of his love is found in a letter which he wrote to Teresa on the index page of her favorite novel, *Corinne*; the letter is dated August 25, 1819:

My dear Teresa,—I have read this book in your garden;—my love, you were absent, or else I could not have read it. It is a favourite book of yours, and the writer was a friend of mine. You will not understand these English words, and *others* will not understand them—which is the reason I have not scrawled them in Italian. But you will recognize the hand-writing of him who passionately loved you, and you will divine that, over a book which was yours, he could only think of love. In that word, beautiful in all languages, but most so in yours—*Amor mio*—is comprised my existence here and hereafter. I feel I exist here, and I fear that I shall exist hereafter,—to *what* purpose you will decide; my destiny rests with you, and you are a woman, seventeen years of age, and two out of a convent. I wish that you had stayed there, with all my heart,—or, at least, that I had never met you in your married state.

But all this is too late. I love you, and you love me,—at least, you *say* so, and *act* as if you *did* so, which last is a great consolation in all events. But *I* more than love you, and cannot cease to love you.

Think of me, sometimes, when the Alps and the ocean divide us,—but they never will, unless you *wish* it.36

A love such as this was certainly composed of as much pain as pleasure, and perhaps it was this fact which made it a lasting love.

Even though Byron’s love for Teresa was lasting, at times his male ego seemed to revolt; consequently, he at times became restless and dispirited. Some of the letters to friends in England give an indication of this restlessness. For instance, he wrote in a letter to John Cam Hobhouse, dated August 23, 1819:

But I feel—and I feel it bitterly—that a man should not consume his life at the side and on the bosom of a woman, and a stranger; that even the recompense, and it is much, is not enough, and that this Cícisbean existence is to be condemned.

It was, no doubt, such a feeling which eventually caused Byron to leave Teresa—not for another woman, not for another love—but for action, action in the cause of Liberty. After four years with Teresa, Byron left her to fight in the Greek war for independence. He was, most likely, planning to return to Teresa after the struggle was finished; that question, though, must remain unanswered, for on April 19, 1824, in Missolonghi, Lord Byron died of a fever.
