

Anthony Howe. *Byron and the Forms of Thought* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2013) and Carla Pomare. *Byron and the Discourse of History* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2013).

Recent years have seen a critical turn towards reassessing the processes of philosophical and historical thought that inform Byron's poetry. In many ways that trend has been an attempt to reclaim Byron from earlier judgments that his writing is not as philosophically nuanced or intellectually crafted – or even as interested in those matters – as the works of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats. Christopher Strathman's *Romantic Poetry and the Fragmentary Imperative: Schlegel, Byron, Joyce, Blanchot* (2005) and Emily Bernhard Jackson's *The Development of Byron's Philosophy of Knowledge* (2010) are key monographs in this welcome movement into deeper investigation of the relationships between epistemology, logic, creative thought, and poetry. Both of those books, along with Terence Hoagwood's *Byron's Dialectic: Skepticism and the Critique of Culture* from early 1993, set the pace for the books reviewed here. Attention to Byron's use of literary form has similarly continued to grow. Susan Wolfson's *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (1997) still contains one of the best selective studies of the structural composition of Byron's poetry, not least because Wolfson so lucidly places a poet often regarded as an off-center Romantic at the heart of Romantic experimentation alongside Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the other usual suspects. Anthony Howe's *Byron and the Forms of Thought* and *Byron and the Discourses of History* by Carla Pomarè both contribute in valuable ways to these debates. In doing so, they ask questions and draw conclusions about the influence of the poet's reading materials, his interest in philosophical skepticism, his response to arguments about literary style, and his part in Romanticism's search for intellectual liberation. Byron's understanding of history or, more pointedly, his skeptical critique of historiographical facts and discourses, along with the systems that act as their vehicles of dissemination, constitutes a point of departure for both Howe and Pomarè. From that point onwards, their approaches and styles differ, with the result that they have provided two important, complementary studies that compel re-readings of Byron's poems and verse dramas.

The layout of Howe's book bears witness to its own concern with structure as a means of thinking. An introductory chapter establishes a conceptual framework, identifying key works by Byron that will be discussed, together with the main critics to whom the book responds (including McGann, Hoagwood, and Bernhard Jackson). Three parts follow, respectively titled "Philosophy," "Poetics," and "Outlines." Each comprises a pair of essays that argue clearly defined points about Byronic thought through an exploration of intellectual context backed by a wealth of evidential support. The essays link together, as pairs and as components impelling the momentum of the whole book. Moreover, this structure operates in ways not entirely dissimilar from Byron's poetry. Enclosed between the introduction and short coda, the book's parts, in which the paired essays reflect each upon the other, work rather like rhyming couplets in their treatment of ideas. This may be a smart, intentional conceit on Howe's part. Even if the synchronicity between book and poetry is coincidental, and the conceit a fanciful interpretation by the present reviewer, it makes for an interesting reading experience. Having said as much, Howe's prose is intense and in places not entirely easy to follow. But a passion for his study makes his close readings of Byron's poetry compelling as well as original. Given the book's

attention to the problem of reconciling formal shapeliness and its negation, there is a nice irony in its middle pages being occupied by an essay about the central importance of poetry to practical thought, and the value of immersive reading, titled “I wish to do as much by Poesy’: Amidst a Byronic Poetics” (104–27). The coda stands in place of the more usual conclusion.

The underlying focus of Howe's study is Byron's skepticism. That disposition is revealed as differing from classical skepticism, and from the Humean scepticism of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, because, as Howe says, Byron's poetry does not show him thinking in such conventionally structured epistemological ways as those two earlier models. Rather, “what for Hume is the space of argument is for Byron crammed full of life and the questionable, participated truths of carnival as an ethically particular form of human activity” (20). Some comment on the relevance of Bakhtin's theory of carnival might have been helpful at this point, especially as a continuous, interactively intertextual dialogic imagination is clearly part of this book's own intellectual structure as well as of its thesis about Byron's poetics. On the matter of literary dialogue Howe makes a persuasive case, showing how Byron devised his own method or system of thought by developing a poetics that blends the “act[s] of form” which characterize skeptic wisdom with “the artefact-mediated (‘pretty shell’) fideism he encountered in Montaigne” (14). Indeed, Montaigne's essays are proposed in part 1 and onwardly through the book as a model of literature-as-thinking that Byron admired and adapted to his own poetic style. Continuing with a literary vein of enquiry in the first essay of part 2, Howe reads Byron's well-documented interest in the poetry of Alexander Pope as a form of self-education in how to cope with the mystery of what it is to be human. As Pope wrote in his *Essay on Man*, Howe notes, we are caught in a “Chaos of Thought and Passion, all confus'd” (30). Byron's response to Pope's counter-Platonic rejection of consciousness-as-system is shown to be an assent made through poetry that “we are not built around a coherent and explicable centre,” such as we might suppose, but rather that our flesh surrounds “a ‘controlless core’ that defies reason” (30). In consequence, Howe interprets Byron's poetry as constantly searching for an alternative to reason-based knowledge and philosophy, and to what is here described as the insistence on system that binds and confines Wordsworth and Coleridge. It is a little surprising that Clifford Siskin's work on system is limited to one footnote, especially in view of his attention to Hazlitt's claim in “The Spirit of the Age” that Wordsworth's main enterprise was to “compound a new system of poetry”; something that Howe argues Byron seeks to avoid doing while yet privileging “method.”

Byron and the Forms of Thought is a sophisticated study that concentrates on teasing out the meaning of the poetry itself, rather than trying to use philosophy or theory as a key or tool through which to explicate Byron's thought. Howe's sensitivity to form, language, and content in Byron's published works is where this is such a valuable book. Case studies in the essays include close attention to the verse-drama *Cain: a Mystery*, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (mainly cantos III and IV), and *Don Juan*. For reasons that are given, *Don Juan* predominates. Howe shows with evidence from these texts how Byron's poetry and verse-dramas respond to earlier eighteenth-century attempts to use literature as a means of thinking, reworking them for a Romantic readership that was increasingly skeptical about the ideologies underpinning reason-based thought. The philosophers identified as those to whom

Byron responded include Isaac Newton, John Locke, David Hume, Bishop Berkeley, Voltaire, and Edmund Burke. A literary history of Byron's reading alongside the works of philosophers, and his often passionate involvement in controversy, takes in Montaigne, Pope, Joseph Wharton, Samuel Johnson, Laurence Sterne, Matthew Prior, William Bowles (there is plenty of focus on the Bowles/Wharton/Pope argument), Percy Shelley, and Wordsworth. While less attention is given to Walter Scott and Thomas Campbell, their significance to Byron is acknowledged. After all, Byron placed those latter two poets at the top of his personal Parnassus.

Following the discussion of Byron's dislike of system's restrictiveness, the other great disparagement to which Howe gives attention is Byron's virulent treatment of the linguistic "delinquency" that he termed "cant." The poet's famous letter to John Murray of 21 February 1821, in which the force of his passion is violently "scored" into the page in the form of long dashes that, perhaps, indicate frustration emanating from where thought prevails but words fail, is cited to underpin the argument of part 2 about "Poetics." Byron's invective took the following form: "The truth is that in these days the grand 'primum mobile' of England is *Cant* — Cant political — Cant poetical — Cant religious — Cant moral — but always *Cant*" (77). Howe articulately interprets Byron's hatred of canting language as a belief that such banality was "a disfiguring, pervasive betrayal of thought . . . pernicious in its effect" (77). He concludes that Byron's "serio-comic writing," with its "descriptive flow punctuated by witty asides" achieves the opposite: instead of suppressing thought, Byron's poetry "insists that we might think in more ways than one and at the same time" (98). Indeed, Howe proposes that thinking in such ways might "be the opening of a meaningful discussion about poetry" (98).

Byron and the Forms of Thought does not argue that Byron was a philosopher. However, it does argue that truth inhabits his poetry in spirit, with literary form as its "host." A provocative study, this book's challenging questions will continue to generate debate and it can be taken as axiomatic that there will be responses to Howe's readings. A last small criticism before moving on to Pomarè's book is that more engagement could have been established with other innovative twenty-first-century studies of Byron: while some major recent works are mentioned in this enquiry, there is a predominance of critical sources from the second half of the twentieth century. One work that could not have featured is Carla Pomarè's *Byron and the Discourses of History*, which is a pity because these two contemporaneously published books have much to say to one another.

While Howe is concerned with abstract thought processes, using specific examples to demonstrate praxis, Pomarè sets out to explore the particular disciplinary area of understanding that is history. She establishes at the start of her monograph her aim "to connect Byron's lifelong interest in history . . . to the developments that took place in the historiographical field over a period of time roughly stretching from the early eighteenth century to Byron's death" (1). A complex contextual matrix is consequently established comprising the British and European writers with whom she identifies Byronic connection and response, ranging from English classical historian Edward Gibbon to Swiss economist and historiographer Simonde de Sismondi, and from the French philosopher and lexicographer Pierre Bayle to Scottish Enlightenment social historian William Robertson. Pomarè's impressive knowledge of pan-European intellectual developments in historiography and

philosophical history in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century make this a particularly informative study, as well as one that contributes valuably to critical understanding in Byron scholarship. The structural layout of an introduction followed by five chapters differs markedly from Howe's book, but again works well with the line of enquiry that is taken. Pomarè divides history into different categories that shape the focus of her chapters. Those categories comprise a history of annals, lexicographic history, myth history, autobiographical and biographical history, and "telescopic" history. Where attention to Byron is concerned, the corresponding focus is on the poet's reading as student and young man, his use of notes and other paratextual apparatus, the Venetian plays *Marino Faliero* and *The Two Foscari*, the semi-autobiographical poem *The Deformed Transformed*, and finally visionary poetics in *The Prophecy of Dante*.

Caroline Franklin, Anne Rigney, Michael Macovski, and Jane Stabler are just four of the many contemporary critics engaged with in this study. Each is important to the overall thesis that Pomarè tests concerning Byron's interest in discursive practices as the agents or enemies of fact and understanding. A brief look at the positions that are interrogated will give a sense of the scholarly dialogue that impels *Byron and the Discourses of History*. Pomarè takes up Franklin's concern about shifts in Byron's methods of historical enquiry between the poet's early interest in Rousseauian historical empathy and "his later, ironic historic thinking, closer to the late-Enlightenment examples of Voltaire and Gibbon" (1–2). She reappraises Franklin's point about how Byron's adaptation of "genres which stage the otherness of the past as some sort of performance" was achieved by a process of fictionalization and mediated, as Franklin shows, through "double entendres and parallels with the present, which include the viewing of writing and performance of the poem as itself of historical significance" (31). Anne Rigney's argument about Romantic historicism, summarized by Pomarè as an investigation of "the osmotic relationship between literary and historical discourses," informs the book's interrogation of the boundaries between texts regarded as literary and those classified as historiographical (19).

Byron and the Discourses of History takes the emergence of a historicist disciplinary consciousness, in which literature and history separated into distinct discursive practices, as the point of departure for Byron's decision to treat historiography through poetry. Stabler's perception of a "radical, almost postmodern breaking of generic boundaries" in Byron's works is presented here as a model of Romantic historicism, based in the merging of formal procedures with a "redefinition" of the "object of historical discourse" (19). There is a concurrence here with the argument of Howe's book. In chapter 3 in particular, the establishment of poetry as a means of thinking about multiple versions of history, notably where myths and counter-myths of Venice are concerned, corresponds in interesting ways with Howe's enquiries. The question asked by Pomarè is: what, for Byron, comprised historical facts, and what form do those facts take? Pomarè responds to Macovski's argument that the agency of cultural as well as linguistic translation establishes a "textual continuum of meaning across time" (qtd. in 1). Indeed, the final chapter of the book, on telescopic history, explores how Byron's poetry establishes a time-meaning continuum in which, Pomarè argues, prophecy "escapes its traditional assimilation to prediction" to become "a performative component of [historical] discourse" (168).

Each chapter of *Byron and the Discourses of History* explores the influence on Byron of what we know him to have read. A wider range of literature and historiography that we might expect him to have known, for reasons that are given, is similarly assessed. That information will be particularly valuable to specialist researchers in Byron studies, but it will also interest general readers because of the interpretation that is supported with reference to Byron's poetry. Sources include the 1816 and 1827 sale catalogues of the poet's library along with other records of books that are known to have been in his possession. The latter is the case with many of the texts mentioned in relation to Venice, which include Sismondi's *Histoire des Républiques Italiennes du Moyen Age* and Pierre Daru's *Histoire de la République de Venise*. Pomarè's claim that Byron had read and assimilated most of the identified texts implies a commitment to fairly assiduous reading. Can we know that he "knew well" (80) all of the books that came his way, except through their mention or reflection in his letters, journals, poetry, and notes? The Italian and other European accounts of Venice that Pomarè identifies as passing through the poet's possession made comprehensible for Byron that mythic city of palaces and prisons, from the years of trade boom in the early Republic, through the social excesses of the eighteenth-century decades of *La Serenissima*, to the fragmentation, decay, and melancholy that came with the Napoleonic period and the years of Habsburg rule. Byron is shown here to be most interested in a "lyric Venice." As he wrote in the Preface to *Marino Faliero*, cited by Pomarè, "Every thing about Venice is, or was, extraordinary . . . her aspect is like a dream, and her history is like a romance" (qtd. in 82). It is tempting to say that in those words Byron shows a debt to Walter Scott, whose poetry and novels had taken a similar view of the history of the Scottish highlands, from his 1810 publication of *The Lady of the Lake* onwards. Byron, however, goes on to assent to what Pomarè calls a historical anti-myth, positing in his poetry a counterpoint to the dying city by suspending it in a condition of controlled decay, where the control is exercised through the work of art. Such a reading locates Byron's poetry, as this book contends, alongside major works of art and literature including Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved*, Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and Schiller's *The Ghost Seer, or the Armenian*.

Byron and the Discourses of History moves forward from an acknowledgment of Byron's concern to know the "truth" and his appreciation of the problems inherent in establishing historical detail. Key questions include, "who is history written by, whose voices are heard or recorded in annals and chronicles, where does historical justice reside?" (87). Pomarè shows through attention to Byron's use of multiple sources including annals, literature, and oral testimony that those questions resist singular, definitive answers. In such a respect, she accords with Howe's proposition, mentioned above, that Byron's poetry encourages reading in multiple ways at the same time. Nowhere is this clearer than in the lines she quotes from *The Siege of Corinth* (137):

You might have heard it, on that day,
O'er Salamis and Megara;
(We have heard the hearers say)
Even unto Piraeus' Bay. (2.718–21)

The layering of voices and listeners here anticipates Shelley's "Ozymandias," written a year later and similarly using an exotic topic to explore how historiography is transmitted.

In summary, Howe's *Byron and the Forms of Thought* and Pomarè's *Byron and the Discourses of History* are illuminating as well as inspiring additions to Byron studies and to Romantic enquiry into the relationship between literature and forms of knowledge. Readers looking for fresh insights into Byron's poetry and verse dramas will not be disappointed. Pomarè covers a wider range of Byron's writing and her prose style is the more accessible. The depth and breadth of her accounts of historical writing are as impressive as her readings of Byron are compelling. Meanwhile, Howe's closely focused explications and fine-grained theory of poetic thought processes will appeal to scholars who are looking for a challenging new way to read poetry that goes on resisting circumscription.

References

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