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Special Issue:
Age and Gender: Aging in the Nineteenth Century

Guest Edited by Alice Crossley

Byron and Premature Aging

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I

<1>Lord Byron died on 19 April 1824 at the age of thirty-six in Messolonghi, Greece. By the calculations of the day – informed as much by the ninetieth Psalm’s ‘threescore and ten’ reckoning as by reliable social or medical information – he had just reached middle age. The impression he made upon Lady Blessington, who recorded her conversations with Byron during their time in Genoa the previous year, was often, however, of a much older man: ‘To hear Byron talk of himself, one would suppose that instead of thirty-six he was sixty years old: there is no affectation in this, as he says he feels all the languor and exhaustion of age’ (229). The evidently wearisome topic of his own life accentuates the impression that Byron makes of premature aging, even though that is only partially corroborated by his physical appearance because while he is ‘extremely thin’, ‘peculiarly pale’ and his hair ‘getting rapidly grey’, his ‘figure has an almost boyish air’ (2).

<2>For others who observed Byron during his later years, physical signs of aging were various and striking. Newton Hanson, the son of Byron’s lawyer, who visited him in Venice in 1818, remarked ‘Lord Byron could not have been more than 30, but he looked 40. His face had become pale, bloated, and sallow. He had grown very fat, his shoulders broad and round, and the knuckles of his hands were lost in fat’ (Marchand, *BLJ*, 6, 78[n4]; hereafter *BLJ*). At La Mira in 1819, Thomas Moore found a less boyish Byron than the one he remembered from England, whose features had coarsened, losing their ‘romantic character’ (410). Likewise, on first meeting Byron at Pisa in 1821, Shelley’s cousin Thomas Medwin remarked ‘I saw a man about five feet eight, apparently forty years of age ... His hair thin and fine, had almost become grey, and waved in natural and graceful curls over his head, that was assimilating itself fast to the “bald first Caesar’s”’ (7-8). While Byron is nevertheless ‘eminently handsome’, ‘manly’ and physically ‘prepossessing’, Medwin notes that Bertel Thorvaldsen’s bust of Byron (1817) is ‘too thin-necked and young’ (7).

<3>Images of the poet have preoccupied critics in recent times and it was another one of these, an engraving by Raphael Morghen of the bust by sculptor Lorenzo Bartolini (1822), which discomfited Byron at the same period by apparently giving unwelcome objective confirmation of his own feelings of decline. He wrote to his publisher John Murray in September 1822 ‘The bust does not turn out a very good one – though it may be like for aught I know – as it exactly resembles a superannuated Jesuit ... Bartolini’s [bust] is dreadful – though my mind misgives me that it is hideously like. If it is – I can not be long for this world – for it overlooks seventy’ (*BLJ*, 9, 213).(1) Although Morghen’s engraving, and the original bust, give the impression not of age so much as corpulence – a pronounced fleshy sensuality in the face – Byron’s sensitivity to his weight throughout his life must go some way to explaining his dismay at such a likeness and his equation of weight gain with aging was unmistakable.(2) He had ‘fewer reservations about Thorvaldsen’ (Garrett, 41), in which a more extended chin line elongates the features significantly.(3)

<4>These are not isolated instances. Prompted by the example of Count Guiccioli’s misjudgment that put Byron at thirty-five in 1819 (he was thirty-one), Itsuyo Higashinaka notes that ‘whenever he was taken to be older than he actually was, he was quick to correct the mistake’ (54). Indeed, ‘the ageing of body and mind’, as Christine Kenyon Jones has recently noted, was ‘an aspect of himself of which Byron was preternaturally conscious’ (100). Her phrasing helpfully suggests that aging was not just a condition of the body but of consciousness itself, of an attitude to the self of the kind that Lady Blessington discerned in hearing Byron ‘talk of himself’ in 1823 but that, as we will discover, he expresses just as extensively and for numerous reasons at earlier periods.

<5>To Kenyon Jones’s ‘preternaturally’ I want to add the word prematurely. Byron could treat signs of premature aging with a haughty disregard, as when he wrote with defiance to Murray during the Venetian carnival of 1818 ‘I will work the mine of my youth to the last veins of the ore’ (*BLJ*, 6, 11). Yet this levity alternated with pronounced concern and, after the following year’s carnival, he fretted that his ‘way of life’ was conducting him ‘from the “yellow leaf” to the ground, with all deliberate speed’ (*BLJ*, 6, 106). The Bartolini statue was no doubt distressing because it forced Byron ‘to see himself as others apparently saw him’ (Kenyon Jones, 107), offering cold, physical confirmation of an otherwise more fluid set of impressions and projections that we often find in appreciations of Byron and his verse that blend signifiers of youthfulness with those of aging (*BLJ*, 6, 107). These were the kind of qualities that led Moore to describe *Don Juan* as a mixture of ‘The cool shrewdness of age, with the vivacity and glowing temperament of youth’ (386). Or that strange commingling of youth and age that perplexes the fisherman who first encounters the Giaour ‘young and pale’ (McGann, *CPW*, 3; 194; hereafter *CPW*) though with features that prematurely tell of a sorrow that ‘time shall strengthen, not efface’ (*CPW*, 3; 193). While it has consequently been asserted that Byron fashioned an image of ‘long-suffering romantic love’ in his verse, as William St. Clair puts it – typified by the sentiment ‘I have outlived myself by many a day’ (*CPW*, 4; 107) in his regretful *Epistle to Augusta* (1816) – in the present essay I want to go further, taking my cue from the examples I have cited, to argue that, in both his published work and correspondence, Byron’s self-consciousness about aging before his time, or unnaturally rapidly, generates what might be termed, to adapt Edward Said’s formulation, a premature ‘late style’.

<6>There are a number of ways of modeling late style, although Linda and Michael Hutcheon have cautioned against common tendencies to generalize about creative decline or extraordinary late flowering (3). My focus is not on what we would ordinarily call Byron's 'late' works, but Said's definition of late style as consciousness of detachment from mainstream culture, usually deriving from a moment when 'an artist abandons communication with an established order' resulting in 'a contradictory alien relationship with it' (78) is pertinent. Byron is well-known to have struck a contradictory relationship with the establishment early when he reacted to the *Edinburgh Review*'s negative appraisal of his very first published collection of poems, *Hours of Idleness* (1807) with the satire *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809).⁽⁴⁾ But in an era when poetry was, as Harold Bloom has long attested, often characterized by belatedness, Byron's emphasis on prematurity as a way of accounting for the trials of his life is more distinctive than that. I am not only interested in how he adopts a style as a young man which alternates manly forbearance and protest in the face of temporal decline – familiar to readers of works such as *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812-18) and *Manfred* (1817) and reminiscent of the qualities that Said celebrates in lateness – but also in specific ways in which signs of prematurity or acceleration complicate the biological fact of aging. Premature aging implicates things like morality and lifestyle choices as much as passing time, and on these scores Byron was, particularly following the separation crisis of 1816, often highly sensitive. I follow Bethan Jones in discovering that 'late works can come early, just as early works can be made late by the relentless chronology that hastens an untimely end' (2). Byron exhibited a tendency to make his own works late through parading intimations of untimeliness.

<7>In what follows I will firstly look in detail at accounts of Byron's premature aging by the likes of Moore, Blessington and other commentators alongside his own reflections on prematurity, before considering how these inform a prematurely late style in journals, correspondence and key lyrics that take aging as their subject including 'So we'll go no more a roving' (published 1831) and 'There's not a joy the world can give' (1816). Byron's regular habit of self-identifying as a prematurely old man should be distinguished from merely worrying about encroaching age. It draws attention to questions about masculine self-fashioning and I will argue that premature aging is a distinctly Byronic topic because it is explained in ways that simultaneously implicate events both within and beyond the poet's control: indications of premature aging provided Byron with a striking way to amplify his apparent power over, and powerlessness to resist, the effects of the passing of time. It is an as-yet-unarticulated component – perhaps even the exemplary component – of the kind of contrariness at the core of his self-fashioning that has been identified by Jerome McGann (119), Michael O'Neill (145), Clara Tuite (233) and others.

II

<8>Acute awareness of the effects of passing time was a particular characteristic of the period of the separation crisis of 1816, so this serves as a good starting point from which to view the kind of images of prematurity that frequently cluster around, and were attributed to, Byron. The damaging consequences of parting from Annabella in early 1816 are perhaps epitomized when Byron, only mock humorously, gives his age as 'one hundred' in the register of Dejean's Hotel d'Angleterre near Geneva in May. He was in his twenty-ninth year, yet the weight of ages appeared to oppress the still youthful body and mind of the poet. He describes fainting whilst

sailing on Lake Geneva and perspiring excessively during an alpine ascent. '[T]hough healthy, I have not the strength I possessed but a few years ago' he wrote to Moore (*BLJ*, 5, 125). Even creative productivity had become a sign not of youthful endeavor but of precipitately depleted resources: 'if I proceed in this scribbling, I shall have frittered away my mind before I am thirty' he writes to Murray (*BLJ*, 5, 122).

<9>If Byron was already feeling old in 1816 what kind of repercussions was he storing up for later life? One man who claimed to have an answer was Sir Thomas Bernard who was at that very moment in the process of seeing a second edition of his *On the Comforts of Old Age* through the press (coincidentally published by John Murray). The book takes the form of a dialogue between two bishops, reflecting that the pleasures of aging are the wages of a well-regulated youth: 'When ... I am speaking of the enjoyments of the aged, I presume that the prior life has been such as to merit enjoyment' (3). 'When', according to Bernard, 'infirmity of body or asperity of mind' occur in old age, 'it is the effect of unregulated appetites and passions', while 'seeds of envy, petulance, malice, sensuality, avarice, and revenge, will take root [...] and produce their harvest in the autumn of life' (30). In giving this account of the penalties of a hedonistic youth Bernard could easily have been imagining an old age for Byron, just as Byron seemed to be imagining his own future when the 'scribbling' of the period that he mentions to Murray resulted in Manfred, a figure who imagines himself disqualified from the kind of tranquil dotage which Bernard was celebrating, at least partly by 'unregulated appetites'.

<10>Like the earlier Byronic heroes such as the Giaour and Childe Harold – who feels 'the fullness of satiety ... ere scarce a third' (*CPW*, 2; I, 4) of his life has passed (again we seem to be working roughly to the threescore and ten calculation) – Manfred does not just exhibit a longsuffering demeanor but is prematurely aged. The unseasoned body hosts confusing signs of experience to which his years cannot testify, perhaps the epitome of aging as a product of consciousness rather than passing time. So, while the chamois hunter notes that on his brow 'the seal of middle age / Hath scarce been set' (*CPW*, 4; II, i, 49-50), Manfred represents himself in ways that draw on a discourse of old age. His life requires a computation of age that depends not on chronology, but on a more nebulous subjective intensity fostered by an awareness of prematurity. 'Think'st thou existence doth depend on time?' (II, i, 51) he announces in response to the chamois hunter's misjudgment. Duration finds a theatrical correlative in the alpine scenery, rather than in reciprocal human experience, 'Now furrowed o'er / With wrinkles ploughed by moments – not by years' (I, ii, 71-72). Time is alternately dilated and compressed as Manfred's 'hours' are 'tortured into ages' (I, ii, 73).

<11>The distortion of time impresses a mood of forbearance, but signs of aging prematurely announce this. Manfred imagines himself excluded from a peaceful old age which is instead projected onto the chamois hunter.

Thy humble virtues, hospitable home,
And spirit patient, pious, proud, and free;
Thy self-respect, grafted on innocent thoughts;
Thy days of health, and nights of sleep; thy toils,
By danger dignified, yet guiltless; hopes
Of cheerful old age and a quiet grave,

With cross and garland over its green turf,
And thy grandchildren's love for epitaph ... (II, ii, 64-71)

are dwelt on with unequivocal respect amidst the customary hauteur, which momentarily lapses into something more like pathos at such a homely vision. Puzzled by the possibility of likeness between the two men, Manfred loans the vocabulary of his exceptional isolation – ‘spirit patient’, ‘proud, and free’, ‘By danger dignified’ – to a foreign lexis of ‘humble virtues’, ‘hospitable home’ and ‘innocent thoughts’ that unsettlingly suggest half-remembered aspirations of his own. Noticeably, Byron, like Bernard, focuses on the sedimentary process through which activity produces character rather than embodying the chamois hunter as of any particular age (as the latter attempts – and fails – to do Manfred). Though the hunter informs Manfred ‘I am thy elder far’, Byron’s estimation of subjective experience is, as with the Giaour, unreliably attested to by his manly physique.

<12>Manfred is primarily a figure of defiance, but the play has room to stage regret for the disappointed likelihood of future domestic contentment. This was not unique in Byron at this period and later and in 1823 Blessington reported that he often reflected on the depressing fact that ‘conjugal happiness’ with Teresa Guiccioli was impossible due to the ‘indissoluble ties of marriage’:

It is painful (said Byron) to find oneself growing old without –
That which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends

I feel this keenly, reckless as I appear, though there are few to whom I would avow it
(116-17).

An acceptable model of old age preoccupies, but is denied to, Byron, despite his apparent reckless disregard for the future, and during the separation crisis he makes similar wistful references to an easeful old age – once again invoking Macbeth’s lament – on hearing of Moore’s recent election to the Freemasons:

I rejoice in your promotion as Chairman and Charitable Steward, &c. &c. These be dignities which await only the virtuous. But then, recollect you are *six* and *thirty*, (I speak this enviously – not of your age, but the ‘honour – love – obedience – troops of friends,’ which accompany it) (*BLJ*, 5, 44).

Writing *Manfred* shortly after the separation, Byron seemed to be lamenting precisely the kind of comforts that Bernard was describing and Moore enjoying.

<13>If Manfred’s body failed to adequately yield up his experiences, Byron’s own was, in the popular consciousness, perceived to be doing precisely the opposite (just as the Bartolini statue would in 1822). By 1816 premature aging was unmistakably attributed to Byron’s eccentric mode of life. The public furore whipped up by the press concerning his supposed peccadilloes in wedlock – which included allegations of heavy drinking, gambling and liaisons with actresses at

Drury Lane – is epitomized by a squib published in 1816 on the subject of his exile from a ‘native England’

that endured too long
The ceaseless burden of his impious song;
His mad career of crimes and follies run,
And grey in vice, when life was scarce begun;
He goes, in foreign lands prepared to find
A life more suited to his guilty mind:
Where other climes new pleasures may supply
For that pall’d taste, and that unhallow’d eye (Moore, 297).

There is a type of self-fulfilling prophecy at work: the Byron caricatured here as ‘grey in vice’ and with ‘pall’d taste’ is reminiscent of his own Childe Harold whose ‘early perversion of mind and morals’ led to ‘satiety of past pleasures’ (CPW, 2, 6). Bodily signs of premature aging – going grey – are plainly a natural penance for, and given as physical confirmation of, earlier acts of deviance that would eventually disqualify Byron from the ‘enjoyments of the aged’.

<14>Byron protested at accounts of premature aging that were attributed to his lifestyle; that made aging a moral issue. But if he felt genuine alarm at the signs of encroaching age – the grey hair, loose teeth, rheumatism and crow’s feet that he mentions in correspondence from the period(5) – then his own self-fashioning undoubtedly helped fuel the view that early initiation into vice was the cause. In his ‘Detached Thoughts’, Byron recalled, on arriving at Cambridge, that he was struck by a profound sense of passing from a period of youth to one of age: ‘it was one of the deadliest and heaviest feelings of my life that I was no longer a boy’ (BLJ, 9, 37). The strong sensation of absence he felt during the long vacation was a matter of aging too: ‘I am almost superannuated here’ (BLJ, 1, 123), he wrote to Elizabeth Pigot at about the period he composed the maudlin lyric ‘The Adieu. Written under the impression that the author would soon die’, in which he bids farewell to his cherished scenes of youth before envisaging a future deathbed repentance: ‘My thoughts, my words, my crimes forgive’ (CPW, 1; 118). There was plenty to forgive by his own admission: Cambridge was, he declared, ‘a vortex of dissipation’, and Byron grandstands his sense of liability for his heightened consciousness of aging: ‘From that moment I began to grow old in my own esteem – and in my esteem age is not estimable. – I took my gradations in the vices – with great promptitude’ (BLJ, 9, 37). Early exposure to the heartaches of romantic love fostered what Rolf Lessenich has called a Romantic ‘disillusionment’ (255) in Byron. Love was for the young. Byron’s journals also hinted darkly at the ‘passions’ which were ‘developed very early – so early that few would believe me if I were to state the period and the facts which accompanied it’: allusions to the sexual abuse he suffered at the hands of his nurse May Gray. It was to an overburdened heart that Byron causally linked the sort of melancholy feelings of longsuffering that comprise *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*: ‘My earlier poems are the thoughts of one at least ten years older than the age at which they were written, – I don’t mean for their solidity, but their experience’ (BLJ, 9, 40).

<15>The situation is best summed up in a letter to Moore of 1817 which included the first iteration of the lyric ‘So we’ll go no more a roving’, attesting to the way he felt that the strength of passionate feeling – and sexual experimentation – was exhausting his physical frame:

So, we'll go no more a roving
So late into the night,
Though the heart be still as loving,
And the moon be still as bright.
For the sword outwears its sheath,
And the soul wears out the breast,
And the heart must pause to breathe,
And Love itself have rest (*CPW*, 4; 1-8).

But the poem is notoriously impish – especially given that it was first included in a letter which was otherwise boastful about his Venetian conquests. Despite ostensibly indicating that the poet was settled on reformation, as he had ‘just turned the corner of twenty nine’ (ever ‘meticulous [in his] attitude towards his own age’ [48], as Higashinaka has it) there is some havoring evident. The sentiments cannot be taken at face value when the yearnings of the heart pull as strongly as the precipitate signs of age. Longsuffering is a component part, although the real subject of the poem is *premature* aging. Age-consciousness suggests that ‘the precious hours remaining ought to be life-affirmingly vivid’ (Jones, 1). At best the poet’s attitude to the subject is ambivalent and a ‘rest’ and ‘pause’ offer no sense of genuine transformation.

<16>Stories of his ‘roving’ – and his own representations of that roving – had secured Byron’s reputation as prematurely aged, at least in body, by the time of his continental exile in 1816. Welcoming the infirmities of old age while in the prime of manhood was morally dubious. Moreover, it was plainly unmanly. *The New Monthly Magazine* reflected that ‘The perpetual affectation of effect, the premature and *effeminate* indulgence of nervous sensibility, defeats and wears itself out’ [emphasis added]. To experience feelings deeply we ought, they continued, ‘wait Nature’s time’, but Byron had ‘fairly run himself out’ in the premature cultivation of dangerous levels of emotional excess or ‘debilitating intercourse with the wanton muse’ (‘Old English Writers and Speakers’, 53). Likewise, Byron frequently joked that to grow old early by overtaxing the emotions is to turn womanly – or old-womanly. In a letter to Murray from Ravenna in 1819 he considers himself feminized by erotic overindulgence: ‘I have effeminated and enervated myself with love and the summer in these last two months’ (*BLJ*, 6, 192). The revelation comes immediately prior to an emotional breakdown whilst attending the opera in Bologna with Teresa. Byron informs Murray that he did not experience ‘a woman’s hysterics’ – more a ‘choking shudder’ – and yet the next morning *sal volatile* is a universal remedy for their mutual ‘languid and pathetic’ state (*BLJ*, 6, 206). The episode recalls other tearful breakdowns in which Byron worried sufficiently about his health to feel that he was wearing out his nerves and turning into an hysterical old lady: firstly in a letter to Charles Dallas following the death of his mother in 1811 – ‘I am growing nervous (how you will laugh!) – but it is true – really, wretchedly, ridiculously, fine-ladically *nervous*’ (*BLJ*, 2, 113); secondly in a letter to Moore from Ravenna in 1821 when a ‘growing depression of spirits, without sufficient cause’ prompted him to beg excuse for an ‘old woman’s letter’ (*BLJ*, 8, 236).

<17>‘So we’ll go no more a roving’ – at least in its unpublished context of the letter to Moore – offered erotic surfeit as a form of masculine self-assertion, but the notion that pleasure might be turning Byron womanly as he aged troubled him. In *Sardanapalus* (1821), the tragedy that Byron had recently completed when he penned his ‘old woman’s letter’ to Moore, it is no coincidence

to find that Byron's most extensive study of effeminacy and emasculation also contains his most disturbing image of old age. Echoing Shakespeare's Marc Antony, Sardanapalus's devotion to pleasurable indulgence, feasting and the company of his concubines, rather than to firm rule, enfeebles him, and ultimately brings about the end of the Assyrian empire. Notably, on the brink of defeat, Sardanapalus is haunted by a nightmare of a banquet with his ancestors in which the warrior Queen Semiramis appears as an oversexed, aged hag. She replaces the youthful, sexually attractive, concubine Myrrha at his side:

In thy own chair – thy own place in the banquet –
I sought thy sweet face in the circle – but
Instead – a grey-haired, withered, bloody-eyed,
And bloody-handed, ghastly, ghostly thing,
Female in garb, and crowned upon the brow,
Furrowed with years, yet sneering with the passion
Of vengeance, leering too with that of lust,
Sate – my veins curdled! (CPW, 6; IV, i, 102-109)

The terrifying content of the figure is not attributed to age *per se* so much as the coupling of sensuality and sexuality with aging. Semiramis, 'Furrowed with years', yet passionate, is an embodiment of old age who ravishes the helpless King prematurely, evoking anxieties about the consequences of pursuing a life of self-indulgence rather than attending to the responsibilities of a husband, father and King. '[L]eering too with that of lust', the lascivious old woman was perhaps troubling on more than one score, gesturing towards his current feelings of sexual surfeit and the trauma of 'passions' which 'developed very early'.

<18>Sardanapalus's nightmare lacks any sense of the ironies of 'So we'll go no more a roving'. The recklessness of the latter did, however, provide Moore with a different kind of explanation for Byron's self-identification as prematurely old that also needs factoring in. By way of contrast, it involved attempts to assert, rather than unsettle, gender norms. Invocations of premature age were, for Moore, the product of a boyish desire to give the flavor of manly authority. When, for example, he wrote from university to the impressionable Elizabeth Pigot – at home in provincial Southwell – Byron had a correspondent to whom he could exaggerate his indiscretions. 'We observe', commented Moore,

Here, as in other parts of his early letters, that sort of display and boast of rakishness which is but too common a folly at this period of life, when the young aspirant to manhood persuades himself that to be profligate is to be manly (57).

Reports of drunkenness, gambling and unspecified 'villainous chaos' of the sort which later brought Byron infamy during the separation crisis was, in this account, only a type of boyish bluster designed to impress a young girl. So too was the sense of melancholy prematurity which set the tone of the style of 'long-suffering romantic love' that was an important component of his verse from *Hours of Idleness* to *Manfred*. It was fashionable, Moore asserted, to exaggerate 'the romantic fancy of youth, which courts melancholy as an indulgence, and loves to assume a sadness, it has not had time to earn' (87). Byron was simply aping the graveyard poets such as Thomas Gray and Edward Young and could not have had time to earn such feelings of satiety.

<19>Moore expands on the way that this manly posturing had backfired on Byron:

Unluckily, this boyish desire of being thought worse than he really was, remained with Lord Byron, as did some other feelings and foibles of boyhood, long after the period when, with others, they are past and forgotten (57).

The feelings and foibles here mentioned reference the erotic self-indulgence which others had attributed to Byron. Moore was undoubtedly concerned to defend Byron's reputation in the face of accusations of hedonism and immorality and it is significant that he chooses to depict a Byron whose actions can be explained by his insecurities surrounding manhood. Moore's Byron retains, throughout the biography, that character of vulnerable, boyish charm that as a youth at Harrow sees him boast of 'gallantry' to his first love, Mary Chaworth, and claim that the locket from his cousin was a gift from a lover (Moore, 28).

<20>Most significantly, in Moore's biography a discourse of boyishness, rather than effeminacy, eventually appears to generate precisely the conditions of premature aging that it at first only courts. The wishes of the boy eventually return to haunt the effeminate man. The effect is underlined by other foibles that telescope boyhood including the one in which Byron shared his feelings of aging with invocation to the classical authors of his schooling. When Byron invokes Horace's Ode 2.14, for instance, a kind of temporal revision occurs which is not just about a reflection on the past or on passing time. The lyric goes:

Eheu fugaces, Posthume! Posthume!
Labuntur anni, nec pietas moram
Rugis et instanti senectae
Adferet indomitaeque morti.(6)

It was one of Byron's favourite classical allusions and appears in a notebook entry describing the seating arrangements of his peers in the schoolroom at Harrow – 'Calvert, monitor; Tom Wildman on left hand and Long on my right'. Moore observed that Byron had added another entry five years later that lamented premature misfortune and affliction:

Eheu fugaces, Posthume! Posthume!
Labuntur ami.

B. January 9th, 1809. – Of the four persons whose names are here mentioned, one is dead, another in a distant climate, *all* separated, and not five years have elapsed since they sat together in school, and none are yet twenty-one years of age. (30)

Later still Byron would make the same reference to these lines from Ode 2.14 on the eve of his thirty-third birthday in Ravenna in which he also included a mock epitaph for the previous year 'of an ill-spent life' (Moore, 481). Curiously, in neither case does Byron quote the opening stanza in full. The fact might well be attributed to the familiarity of this Horatian commonplace, but I would suggest that there is something more at work here that takes us closer to the heart of what I am calling Byron's premature late style. The full stanza presents the notion that even a good life might not lead to a good age – *contra* Bernard – and which is gestured towards by

Byron but deliberately excised. In neither example does Byron's emphasis fall on the inevitability of passing time, as in Horace's lyric – of the knowledge that age and death comes to all – but precisely on the impression of the *premature* arrival of age: 'none are yet twenty-one years of age'. If the ill fortune of his boyhood companions suggests the inexplicable workings of providence, the emphasis of 1821 shifts to signal the expression of Byronic potency in the form of his 'ill-spent life': 'I don't regret [the years] so much for what I have done, as for what I *might* have done' (Moore, 481), he adds. It is the kind of inconsistency in his self-fashioning that sustains the contrary impression of Byron being alternately in control, and at the mercy, of his fate.

III

<21>Byron's premature aging was evidently firstly a moral issue. I have so far established that his physical appearance, especially from 1816 onwards, but equally his own habits of self-identifying as precipitately old in verse, journals and correspondence, allied to rumors concerning the reasons for his separation from Annabella, fueled the notion that he had accelerated his biological clock and that his body and mind bore the justifiable brunt of unmanly behavior and experiences that far outstripped his years. I have distinguished these signs of prematurity, particularly in the way they are grounded in the body, from – while arguing that they sometimes seemed to produce – the more nebulous consciousness of longsuffering that typify Byronic heroes such as the Giaour and Manfred. Yet the topic of prematurity cannot be adequately addressed without accounting for the persistent suspicion that Byron's untimely aging was not wholly attributable to his moral failings. Interfolded with the examples from which I have quoted so far was a quite contrary attitude to aging in which Byron appeared to promote a feeling of helplessness in the face of onrushing time and the events of his life.

<22>Moore, for one, was deeply puzzled by an oxymoronic quality that meant Byron's boyish posturing continually seemed to disclose his genuine powerlessness to prevent accelerating age as in his first invocation of Horace above. Reasons for this abound. Byron was, in Moore's account, 'prematurely broken into the pains of life' (86), cruelly 'left destitute ... of all those sanctions and sympathies, by which youth at its first start is usually surrounded' (80): this was exacerbated by the stigma of his lameness, the unfortunate loss of Mary Chaworth, an eccentric mother and the rebuff of his guardian, Lord Carlisle (not to mention the molestation of May Gray). When Alexander Pope complained of feeling prematurely exhausted at twenty-five, Jonathan Swift remarked that he 'had not yet acted or suffered enough in the world to have become weary of it'. Byron, in contrast, 'had drunk deep of reality', wrote Moore, at an age when Pope 'was but looking forth on the sea of life' (87).

<23>A fatalistic attitude to premature experience that couldn't be dismissed as mere boyish exaggeration found repeated expression in Byron's references to untimely superannuation during the particularly taxing period in 1811 when, following his return from the continent, he learned in quick succession of the deaths of several close friends – including Charles Skinner Matthews and the Cambridge choirboy John Edleston – along with his mother. In maudlin tone he wrote to Charles Dallas:

Now Matthews is gone, and Hobhouse in Ireland, I have hardly one [friend] left [in Cambridge] to bid me welcome ... At three-and-twenty I am left alone, and what more can we be at seventy? It is true I am young enough to begin again, but with whom can I retrace the laughing part of life? (*BLJ*, 2, 80)

Despite his relative youth, Byron felt ushered into a premature old age against his will. Friendless, motherless and isolated at Newstead Abbey, events beyond Byron's control evoke emotions that ought properly, he believes, to belong to a much older man. He revisits the topic in a subsequent letter to Dallas: 'It seems as though I were to experience in my youth the greatest misery of age. My friends fall about me, and I shall be left a lonely tree before I am withered'. He is 'callous' with 'not a tear left' (*BLJ*, 2, 110). Anticipating the kind of fatalistic language adopted in *Manfred*, where Manfred is 'A blighted trunk upon a cursed root' (*CPW*, 4; I, ii, 69), Byron locates his suffering in bodily effects that anticipate old age. His notorious aloofness was not due to misplaced pride, so he claimed, but a response to early trauma: 'Past events have unnerved me', he notes in his Journal of 1813, 'and all I can now do is to make life an amusement, and look on while others play' (*BLJ*, 3, 217-18).

<24>The pattern is equally evident during the separation crisis. If Byron was really beginning to show his age following the separation and exile in 1816 then had he not suffered significantly at the hands of others, particularly Annabella, her confidants and supporters? Writing to Augusta on first arriving in Italy, Byron was candid about where the blame ought to lie for his unmerited signs of premature aging:

I have now & then fits of giddiness, & deafness, which make me think like Swift – that I shall be like him & the *withered* tree he saw – which occasioned the reflection and 'die at top' first. My hair is growing grey, & *not* thicker; & my teeth are sometimes *looseish* though still white & sound. Would not one think I was sixty instead of not quite nine & twenty? To talk thus – Never mind – either this must end – or I must end – but I repeat it again & again – *that woman* has destroyed me (*BLJ*, 5, 120).

Byron disowns responsibility for greying hair and decaying teeth, along with the fits and deafness. If, as we have previously seen, aging is partly a matter of consciousness – 'To *talk* thus' – the body provides objective evidence – notably more solid than the fluidly embodied Giaour or Manfred – of the degree of cruelty enacted by Annabella and her supporters during the separation. Byron's indiscretions are not referenced and he fears that, like Swift, he is beginning to suffer from early onset dementia due to the degree of persecution.

<25>As with Moore, Lady Blessington found that the Byron she knew in Genoa could switch at any moment from the subject of dissipation to curate an image of a man made prematurely elderly by the actions of others to which his physical appearance, disordered mind and 'womanly' nerves bore terrible witness. So the deformed foot is given as evidence of a type of curse: 'the deformity that I now began to consider as a signal mark of the injustice of Providence' (128). Byron attributes his peevish outbreaks of temper and nervous troubles as an adult – one of the character traits that he worries is worsening with age – to his mother's reproaches during his childhood for his 'personal deformity', painting a pitiful picture of the need for solitude to 'vent the rage and mortification' (128) he endured during a largely loveless

and friendless youth. In another example, the memories of ill luck and suffering at the hands of others contribute directly to the ‘low and nervous’ (128) moods which leave Byron’s aging body effeminated: the injustices endured during the period of the separation crisis are rehearsed as the primary reasons for premature aging as Byron laments that ‘the old wounds are still unhealed, and bleed afresh on the slightest touch . . . Can I reflect on my present position without bitter feelings?’ (115) Blessington was moved to explain that the traits that led Byron to appear like a man of sixty rather than thirty-six were not entirely of his doing, appealing to her reader for clemency: ‘Let those, who would judge with severity the errors of this wayward child of genius, look back at his days of infancy and youth, and ask themselves whether, under such unfavourable auspices, they could have escaped the defects that tarnish the lustre of his fame’ (235).

<26>Moore and Blessington often tie themselves in knots attempting to explain the ways in which Byron seemed, on repeated occasions, to have grown old due both to ‘unfavourable auspices’ and his own abandon. Moore continually mingles factors such as ‘the disappointment of Byron’s youthful passion’ for Mary Chaworth, his ‘lone friendlessness’ in youth and the ‘ruthless assault upon his first literary efforts’, with the customary accusations of ‘lassitude and remorse of premature excess’ (306). But then he is only elaborating the contrariety of Byron’s own self-fashioned prematurity. Repeatedly invoking Macbeth – he is also referenced in the letter on premature aging to Dallas – Byron notably reaches for a tragic figure caught between an imperfect conception of providence and an insistence on his own agency. The same intimation of doubleness hedges the journal entry of 1811 titled ‘Four or Five Reasons in Favour of a Change’ in which Byron compiles a list of resolutions for the future. ‘At twenty three the best of life is over and its bitters double’, he notes, before shifting the blame for these ‘bitters’ between external circumstances and his improvidence: ‘A man who is lame of one leg is in a state of bodily inferiority which increases with years and must render his old age more peevish & intolerable’, but it is inviting trouble to have already ‘outlived all my appetites’ (*BLJ*, 2, 47-8). The coercion of helplessness and accountability frames the images of preternatural maturity that figure in the *Epistle to Augusta* too: ‘I had the share / Of life which might have filled a century, / Before its fourth in time had passed me by’ (*CPW*, 4; 110-12). The ‘ills’ which ‘habitually recur’ (43) and have been visited on the poet are jointly attributable to those who devoured rumors of the Byrons’ marriage and to a more generalized feeling of ‘strange doom’ (13) that Byron elsewhere called his ‘bitch of a star’ (*BLJ*, 4, 209). In the very same breath Byron can state that premature aging eludes his control and acknowledge his accountability: passive in the face of ‘worldly shocks’ (20), he nevertheless asserts that ‘The fault was mine’ (21).

<27>Such hawering – rather than fretting – about the causes of accelerated aging is at the heart of what I have been calling the premature late style. Longsuffering is a regular component of the Byronic hero and the melancholy of the lyrics, but it is the issue of prematurity which really unlocks the contrariness at the heart of Byron’s self-fashioning. One last glimpse into the separation crisis demonstrates the phenomenon at work.

<28>‘There is not a joy the world can give’ is a poem which Francis Palgrave included in the *Golden Treasury* under the title ‘Youth and Age’. It ought more properly to have been ‘Youth and Premature Age’, as is indicated in the pessimistic sentiments of the opening stanza:

There's not a joy the world can give like that it takes away,
When the glow of early thought declines in feeling's dull decay;
'Tis not on youth's smooth cheek the blush alone, which fades so fast,
But the tender bloom of heart is gone, ere youth itself be past (*CPW*, 3; 1-4).

The subject of aging in the first line becomes the theme of premature aging by the fourth – not only is the cheek's pallor fading but so too the poet's heart. The third stanza develops the subject as premature aging takes the form of a 'mortal coldness of the soul' and – recalling the inexplicable callousness confessed to Dallas – an emotional numbness which 'cannot feel for others' woes'. 'That heavy chill has frozen o'er the fountain of our tears, / And though the eye may sparkle still, 'tis where the ice appears' (11-12): the aged body – the eye still sparkles despite an inability to weep – fails to wholly corroborate the pitch of suffering. This is confirmed in the image of green ivy surrounding a ruined tower in stanza four:

Though wit may flash from fluent lips, and mirth distract the breast,
Through midnight hours that yield no more their former hope of rest;
'Tis but as ivy-leaves around the ruin'd turret wreath,
All green and wildly fresh without, but worn and grey beneath (13-16).

In the process of lamenting the passing of time, Byron evokes the kind of hedonism to which his life was tending as his marriage began to unravel, but this jostles for attention with the speaker's helplessness to resist the acceleration of the effects of time that have, as he puts it in the letter to Dallas, left him 'a lonely tree before I am withered'. The image is reprised in the final stanza where Byron stands 'midst the wither'd waste of life' (20), a youthful figure unable to weep and hardened into age.

<29>The poem was prompted by another untimely death – that of the Duke of Dorset, an old friend from Harrow – and Byron included it in another letter to Moore of 2 March 1815. It becomes, however, the signal example of the premature late style when called to the poet's mind a year later at the height of the separation crisis. Byron was provoked, as so often, to wonder why his mind and body seemed more than usually prey to encroaching age, infirmity and causes which 'disqualified [his] temper for comfort'. 'There's not a joy the world can give' seemed to have uncannily predicted his current lamentable situation:

Do you remember the lines I sent you early last year, which you still have? I don't wish ... to claim the character of 'Vates' in all its translations, but were they not a little prophetic? I mean those beginning, 'There's not a joy the world can,' &c. &c., on which I rather pique myself as being the truest, though the most melancholy, I ever wrote (Moore, 294).

If the content of the poem takes its origin from and tends towards the representation of manly forbearance in the face of unmerited suffering, then the subsequent reflection – rather like the reflection on his Harrow school friends – both adds to and subtracts from that impression hinting mischievously at the self-indulgence popularly supposed to have effeminized Byron. In the letter to Moore, which dwells on indiscretions, the prophecy is recruited to demonstrate the cruel workings of fate and yet its recall makes it seem an uncanny product of Byron's own

orchestration, and liability for, his premature old age. Moore's response to the letter is simple but telling, as he remarks the 'unluckiness of your choice' (294): Byron's marriage and its distressing outcome belong both to his choice and to bad luck. So too, it appeared, did his premature aging and, however much it concerned him, there were times when it suited Byron to sustain both impressions at once.

Endnotes

(1) Byron sat for Bartolini in January 1822. When he made these comments he had not actually seen the original bust, only the engraving. I am indebted to Christine Kenyon Jones for explaining the context surrounding this letter.(^)

(2) See his letter to James Wedderburn Webster of July 1819 in which Byron responds to jokes about his corpulence (*BLJ*, 6, 174).(^)

(3) Thorvaldsen later produced the seated figure of Byron which was installed in the Wren Library at Trinity College, Cambridge in 1845 (Garrett, 41).(^)

(4) The latter was a caustic swipe at the establishment, and Byron's declaration that the gloves were off – 'Laugh when I laugh, I seek no other fame; / The cry is up, and scribblers are my game' (*CPW*, 1; 43-4) – is an impetuous statement of defiance and contrariness that he would later come to regret (attributing it in fact to being 'very young and very angry': the bitterness of youth rather than age).(^)

(5) See, for example, his letter to Augusta Leigh of 28 October 1816 (*BLJ*, 5, 120).(^)

(6) 'Alas, O Postumus, Postumus, the years glide swiftly by, nor will righteousness give pause to wrinkles, to advancing age, or Death invincible'.(^)

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