

## Carlyle and Byron: Anxiety, Influence, and the Choice of Inheritance

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IN NOVEMBER 1830, CARLYLE WROTE TO MACVEY NAPIER, since 1829 successor to Francis Jeffrey as editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, proposing to write an essay on Byron that would take as its starting-point Thomas Moore's two-volume life of the poet just then being published. The letter is a puzzling document, almost a primer on how not to ask the editor of a prestigious journal for a literary assignment. True, in an earlier note, Napier had encouraged Carlyle to write something for the *Review*, without specifying a subject. But Carlyle's rhetoric in his application to write takes considerable liberties and seems designed to ensure the failure of his request. Before broaching the possibility of an essay on Byron, Carlyle schools Napier—his elder by twenty years—in the sort of reviewer Carlyle is and intends to be. "I have already written in that *Review*, and should be very happy to write in it again," Carlyle begins promisingly enough, but he then feels obliged to say that "your predecessor [Jeffrey] had some difficulty with me in adjusting the respective prerogatives of Author and Editor: for tho' not, as I hope, insensible to fair reason, I used sometimes to rebel against what I reckoned mere authority." Carlyle then defends his rebellion: "[B]eing wont to write nothing without studying it if possible to the bottom, and writing always with an almost painful feeling of scrupulosity, that light Editorial hacking and hewing to right and left was in general nowise to my mind." Carlyle does allow that "in what degree the like difficulties might occur between you and me I cannot pretend to guess," but certainly his next words can have afforded Napier

little confidence: “if you are willing, then I also am willing, to try” (*CL* 5: 195–96).

With these preliminaries out of the way, Carlyle was ready to make his proposal, which he did with an air of indifference and more than a hint of *amour-propre*:

Occasionally of late I have been meditating an Essay on Byron; which, on appearance of Mr Moore’s Second Volume, now soon expected, I should have no objection to attempt for you. Of Mr Moore himself I should say little; or rather perhaps, as he may be a favourite of yours, Nothing: neither would my opinion of Byron prove very heterodox; my chief aim would be to see him and show him, not, as is too often the way, . . . to write merely “about him and about him.” For the rest, tho’ no Whig in the strict sense, I have no disposition to run *amuck* against any set of men or of opinions; but only to put forth certain Truths that I feel in me, with all sincerity; for some of which this Byron, if you liked it, were a fit enough channel. (*CL* 5: 196)

Having warned Napier that he will write as he sees fit, though in a quiet voice, Carlyle concludes his modest proposal with these words: “So much to cast some faint light for you on my plan of procedure, and what you have to look for in employing me. Let me only farther request that if you . . . do not like this proposal, you will without shadow of scruple tell me so. Frankness is best met with frankness; the practice presupposes the approval” (*CL* 5: 196).

Napier for his part had already assigned the Byron review to Thomas Macaulay, and it is agreeable to think that the editor, still relatively new to his post, was relieved to have this ready excuse for not granting the task to the prickly Carlyle. What may be the most interesting aspect of the letter, however, is Carlyle’s almost palpable reluctance—a long step beyond ambivalence—to engage publicly with Byron and his legacy. Although Carlyle is the one making the proposal, he does not express any enthusiasm for the task he sets for himself. He writes simply that he “would have no objection to attempt” it. Carlyle’s assurance that his opinion of Byron would not prove “very heterodox” could not have allayed the editor’s concern for the journal’s readership. And Carlyle’s promise not to engage in “loud hysterical vehemence, foaming, and hissing” must have occasioned in Napier at least as much

anxiety as it dispelled. In sum, there is more of duty—and pained duty at that—than of intellectual enthusiasm in Carlyle’s proposal to write on Byron. This lack of rhetorical determination calls into question the reason Carlyle chose Byron in the first place.

Carlyle’s ambivalence about engaging with Byron is still evident seventeen months later, in April 1832, in another letter to editor Napier. On this occasion the roles are reversed: Napier has written to Carlyle requesting a short article on Byron, not for the *Edinburgh Review* but rather for the seventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. In his reply of 28 April, Carlyle does his best to decline the assignment, at length and without ever saying so: “If it can gratify any wish of yours, I shall very readily undertake that little piece on Byron; but it will be *tacente Minervâ*, without inward call; nor indeed am I sure that you have fixed on the right man for your object. In my mind, Byron has been sinking at an accelerated rate, for the last ten years, and has now reached a very low level” (*CL* 6: 148). Carlyle either has forgotten his earlier request to write an essay on Byron, or he has implied his sense of relief in Napier turning him down. Regardless, having voiced this preliminary broadside, Carlyle unleashes the full force of his judgment:

No genuine productive Thought was ever revealed by [Byron] to mankind; indeed no clear undistorted vision into anything, or picture of anything; but all had a certain falsehood, a brawling theatrical insincere character. The man’s moral nature too was bad, his demeanour, as a man, was bad. What was he, in short, but a huge *sulky Dandy*; of giant dimensions, to be sure, yet still a Dandy; who sulked, as poor Mrs Hunt expressed it[,] “like a schoolboy that had got a plain bunn given him instead of a plum one.” His Bunn was nevertheless God’s Universe with what Tasks are there; and it had served better men than he. (*CL* 6: 149)

The self-assurance of this verdict brooks no contrary opinion, but still Carlyle does not refuse—or accept—Napier’s assignment. Instead, he leaves the judgment to Napier:

Of course, one could not wilfully propose to astonish or shock the general feeling of the world; least of all, in a quiet Dictionary of Arts and Sciences. Indeed, I suppose nothing is wanted but a clear legible Narrative, with some summing-up, and outline of a Character,

such as a deliberate man may without disgrace in after times be found to have written down in the year 1832. Whether you dare venture to have his spirit traceable in it, I must now leave you to judge; adding only (if that be necessary) that you *are* freely left; that I can in no wise esteem it a slight or a disadvantage, should you see good, as perhaps I might do in your case, to employ some other hand. (*CL* 6: 149)

The vague reference—either to Byron or to Carlyle as the author of the entry—in the phrase “his spirit” creates an interesting glimpse of Carlyle’s praxis as a writer. But as readers of Carlyle undoubtedly know, the essay on Byron was never written, though it is apparent from the annotations to the sixth volume of the *Collected Letters* that Carlyle “‘jotted down some pages’ ‘purely in compliance’ with Napier’s request, but ‘had much rather eschew it’” (*CL* 6: 149n)—and did.

Embedded in the midst of this remarkable letter to Napier is an assertion about Byron that can only be described as astonishing: “I love him not; I owe him nothing; only pity, and forgiveness; he taught me nothing that I had not again to forget” (*CL* 6: 149). On the surface addressed to Napier—the whole letter is of course written to Napier—the stridency and poignancy of these words make full sense only if they are read from the perspective of Carlyle writing to himself as he labors to close his Byron, and to keep it closed. And *labors*, indeed, serves as an apt description. Evident in the rhetoric is the effort it costs Carlyle to put Byron aside. “I love him not,” says Carlyle, apparently assuming that he should, or that such love or its absence would have an important bearing on the writing of an essay. “I owe him nothing,” says Carlyle. To most readers, perhaps especially to those in Byron’s circle or in Byron’s class, the assertion might have seemed an impertinence. “Only pity, and forgiveness.” Pity as opposed to compassion or empathy suggests a similar impertinence as it asserts an asymmetric relationship, with superior Carlyle looking down on inferior Byron. Further, forgiveness implies that Byron has wronged Carlyle in some essential way and that Carlyle will be sufficiently gracious as to forgive the wrong. Finally, “he taught me nothing that I had not again to forget.” This statement, at first glance straightforward, is replete with meanings, especially when read serially. “He taught me nothing.” If so, for Carlyle, then the relationship would be so slight that it would not require pity or

forgiveness. Rather, “he taught me nothing . . . that I had not again to forget.” The language here suggests deep resentment of Byron. Lurking within the assertion is the clear implication that the wrong for which Byron needs forgiveness is the very fact of Carlyle’s having learned so much from him, of having been drawn into the force-field of Byron’s charisma, and of then having to exert the full strength of his will to unlearn that which he had been taught. There is an anger here that makes sense only if placed in the context of the tremendous appeal Byron once had for Carlyle.

Certainly the letter Carlyle wrote to Jane Baillie Welsh in May 1824 on the death of Byron—a letter that wields [Edmund] Burkean rhetoric to express despair and a sense of loss—suggests a depth of sorrow that belies the claim “I love him not”:

Poor Byron! Alas poor Byron! The news of his death came down upon my heart like a mass of lead; and yet, the thought of it sends a painful twinge thro’ all my being, as if I had lost a brother! O God! That so many souls of mud and clay should fill up their base existence to its utmost bound, and this, the noblest spirit in Europe, should sink before half his course was run! Late so full of fire, and generous passion, and proud purposes, and now forever dumb and cold! Poor Byron! And but a young man; still struggling amid the perplexities, and sorrows and aberrations, of a mind not arrived at maturity or settled in its proper place in life. Had he been spared to the age of three score and ten, what might he not have done, what might he not have been! But we shall hear his voice no more: I dreamed of seeing him and knowing him; but the curtain of everlasting night has hid him from our eyes. We shall go to him, he shall not return to us. Adieu my dear Jane! There is a blank in your heart, and a blank in mine, since this man passed away. Let us stand the closer by each other. (*CL* 3: 68)

Inscribed within the letter to Napier of 1832, and illuminated in part by this wrenching lament of 1824 for Byron dead, is evidence of an influence that cuts far deeper than what is generally meant by the word influence—affinities, borrowings, verbal and stylistic echoes, overt imitations, structural similarities. Indeed, Carlyle’s reaction to Byron in 1832—the high passion of his denunciation—

requires a return to the word influence, if for no other reason that much of the historical meaning and force have been stripped from it in our own time. From the thirteenth century until the end of the nineteenth century, the word “influence,” derived from the medieval Latin present participle for “flowing in,” carried with it first as primary and then as secondary or tertiary meaning the supposed flowing or streaming from the stars of an ethereal fluid that acted upon the character and destiny of men. Gradually the word came to mean, by metaphorical transference, the exertion of a power that is unseen or insensible, as well as an exertion of authority or power over another person, especially where that authority is not formally or overtly expressed (see the *OED*). The word influence seems to have gathered these derivative meanings to itself without ever quite losing—at least not in Carlyle’s time—something of the older meaning. Read this way, influence is not a benign or entirely welcome phenomenon, any more than is its cousin influenza, which (as Harold Bloom wittily but enigmatically defines it) is, like influence, “an astral disease” (95).

Understood this way—and Bloom extends a psychological reading of the anxiety of influence perhaps as far as it can go—influence is an ominous force that draws one into another’s orbit and by so doing undermines one’s own authority and autonomy. Influence, then, is something that one must struggle against if a writer is to establish a unique creative space in which to work. A quick glance at how Carlyle uses the word influence in some letters of the 1830s suggests that although he could imagine influence as a benign force related to literary creation, he was more likely to see it as dangerous and potentially destructive in relation to the pursuit of a life well-lived. Mourning the death of Edward Irving in 1834, Carlyle asserts that “this mad City [London] . . . killed him; he might have lived prosperous and strong in Scotland, but there was in him a quality which the influences here took fatal hold of” (*CL* 7: 344). In 1835 Carlyle exhorts his brother John “to give way to no fear, nor other deranging influence, but decide freely” (*CL* 8: 171). In 1836, Carlyle scorns what he terms the “Edinburgh style of mockery,” noting that with its “hard withering influences, its momentary solacement fataller than any pain, it had well-nigh conducted [me] to Hades and Tophet, but I flung it off, and am alive” (*CL* 9: 33). Perhaps most telling, a letter of 1834 cautions brother Alick about striking out in new directions: “New fields of

exertion, it is very true, are possible for you; wider fields, but then also more dangerous ones, with more influences that lead down to utter ruin" (*CL* 7: 278).

Armed with these etymological insights, and cognizant of both Bloom's focus on the anxiety created by influence and Andrew Elfenbein's understanding of the materiality that influence creates in an economy of symbolic capital (1–11), it seems reasonable to claim that in the early 1820s, Carlyle was indeed "under the influence" of Byron. Throughout the decade Carlyle struggled, though not often publicly, with Byron and Byronism, finally freeing himself from what had come to be, for him, a malign influence in the early 1830s, the time when he discussed with Napier an essay he chose never to write, but the time when he did write *Sartor Resartus*. But it was not only Byron against whose influence and authority Carlyle chose to rebel. In varying degrees and with varying intensity, Carlyle grappled with a number of British writers of the generation or two before him. Carlyle's public silences about these predecessors frequently mask deep, contentious intellectual relationships that Carlyle did not choose to explore publicly. Carlyle's German influences—openly avowed, gratefully acknowledged—caused him nowhere near the anxiety—that word again—that his British intellectual forebears did. To re-create the past, Carlyle had to get out from under the long shadow cast by Walter Scott; to address the French Revolution, Carlyle had to dislodge Edmund Burke. To develop a public rhetoric with which to examine the condition of England, Carlyle had to appropriate and supersede the rhetoric of William Cobbett. Perhaps most notoriously, to serve as spiritual guide for a new generation, Carlyle had to discredit the person and teachings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. And of course to open his Goethe, Carlyle had to close his Byron (*Sartor* 143).

Ultimately it is impossible to accept fully either Bloom's agonistic tale of strong poets misreading their predecessors so as to clear psychological and emotional space for their own work or Elfenbein's calculation of symbolic values in which "Byron' and Byronism [become for Carlyle] emblems of a literary system hostile to all that he represented." For Elfenbein, *Sartor Resartus* is reduced to "a polemical appropriation and redirection of the modes of authorship dominating the British literary marketplace in the early 1830s" (125). Neither the deeply personal in Bloom's

case nor the systematically impersonal in Elfenbein's does justice to the way in which Carlyle learns from his British predecessors—and then consciously unlearns, “forgets,” what he has learned in order to do battle with the chaos that surrounds him in the 1830s and beyond. To understand the relationship between Carlyle and his forebears, it is necessary to expand the understanding of influence so as to perceive the ways that Carlyle (to paraphrase Burke) chooses his inheritance. Carlyle did not lack much less ignore an important British inheritance, however he might disavow or hide or even belittle it. In the essay “Sir Walter Scott” (1838), Carlyle asserts that “[n]o man lives without jostling and being jostled; in all ways he has to *elbow* himself through the world, giving and receiving offense. His life is a battle, in so far as it is an entity at all” (*Works* 29: 30). Though Carlyle is here describing Scott, the observation captures the spirit in which Carlyle himself read the work of other British writers.

He elbowed his way through them, unafraid to give offense. Carlyle pays fellow British writers the homage of his attention, either in his published works or in his private letters, but not often the compliment of his approval, and never his unstinting praise. It is not surprising, given this “reactive” intellectual practice, in which Carlyle clarifies his own thinking by engaging with and veering away from the writing of others, that the review essay became in Carlyle's hands an art form and the occasion of some of his best writing—or that *Sartor Resartus* dramatizes the intellectual battle of an English Editor with the strange zodiacal bags of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh and the extravagant gnomic utterances that can never quite be contained within them, let alone ordered and harmonized into a tame narrative.

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