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You Have Never Written Better

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- *The Letters of John Murray to Lord Byron* edited by Andrew Nicholson
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The relationship between Byron and his editor John Murray lasted a little over ten years. It began in March 1812 with the publication of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, which made Byron's name. ('I awoke one morning and found myself famous,' he famously wrote, or is said to have written.) It ended twice: first, in the winter of 1822, when, after a number of disagreements and misunderstandings, Byron transferred his business to the publisher John Hunt; and finally in the spring of 1824, when Murray presided over the destruction of Byron's memoirs, which he had not read, in his rooms at 50 Albemarle Street.[*]

Byron was 23 when he wrote his first letter to Murray, in the summer after his return from Greece. He was 36 when he wrote his last, shortly after his return to Greece and just two months before he died. In the years between, he had written a number of bestselling poems, conducted a string of affairs, including one with his half-sister Augusta, married, fathered at least two children, and separated again. He had exiled himself, more or less wilfully, from his 'native shore', fallen out of favour with his public, embarked on his greatest work, and begun his final liaison with an Italian countess.

Murray was 33 when he accepted *Childe Harold* for publication. That poem, and the flurry of Eastern tales that succeeded it, made him a lot of money and established him as an influential bookseller. He subsequently moved his offices from Fleet Street to Albemarle Street. He recognised early in their relationship that his connection to Lord Byron was likely to offer his best chance at figuring in literary history. His son eventually took over the publishing house, which still survives. If his father had not accepted for publication a world-weary travelogue written in deliberately old-fashioned Spenserian stanzas, the chances that it would have done so are very slim.

It still isn't clear how Murray came to be offered it. Byron had published two volumes before setting off on a Grand Tour: *Hours of Idleness*, occasional verses which had a mixed reception from the literary world; and the much more vigorous *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, which satirised, in brisk colloquial couplets, that world and many of its leading lights, both writers and critics. ('A man must serve his time to every trade/Save censure; critics all are ready made.') He lived to regret its vigour and spent the next ten years firefighting the publication of pirated editions. (The poem mocks, among others, Thomas Moore, who became his friend, and the critic Francis Jeffrey, who became his champion.) He came back to London with two manuscripts in his luggage: *Hints from Horace*, a gentler sequel to *English Bards*, in which he leavens the satire with some literary advice, and *Childe Harold*. The first, which includes a dark and vivid sketch of the sort of career an aristocrat like Byron might expect to have, was never published in his lifetime; the second made him (it's hard to avoid the word) famous. But the difference between them, in manner and matter, turned out to be more significant to his development than either of them on its own. Not till *Beppo* (1818) did he reconcile the humorous and the heartbroken strains in his writing; and *Beppo* paved the way for *Don Juan*, his masterpiece.

If *Hints from Horace* had been published before *Childe Harold*, if Byron had not awoken one morning etc, we might not have had *The Corsair* (which sold ten thousand copies on the day of publication), *The Bride of Abydos*, *Lara*, and the rest of the Eastern tales that followed. The lionisation, the affair with Lady Caroline Lamb that succeeded it, and the affair with his half-sister which succeeded that, the marriage, the separation, the exile: all depend to an incalculable extent on the success of *Childe Harold*. Most of what we do know about the way the manuscript reached Murray, we owe to the man Byron handed it to on his return, his friend R.C. Dallas.

'Friend' is perhaps too strong a word. Dallas had sent Byron a flattering letter after the publication of *Hours of Idleness*, claiming a distant kinship. Byron had tolerated the flattery, allowing Dallas, who had his own literary pretensions, to ingratiate himself and make himself useful. Byron saw through him; he once mocked Dallas for approaching the manager of the Drury Lane Theatre, after it had burned down, in the hope of retrieving the manuscript of a play he had written:

> Now was not this characteristic? – the ruling passions of Pope are nothing to it. – Whilst the poor distracted manager was bewailing the loss of a building only worth 300 000 £, together with some twenty thousand pounds worth of rags and tinsel in the tiring rooms, Bluebeard's elephants and all *that*; – in comes a note from a scorching author requiring at his hands two acts and odd scenes of a farce!!

Such commitment perhaps explains why Byron was willing to leave a manuscript in his care. This is the story as told by Dallas. He asked Byron if he had written anything on his travels. Byron gave him *Hints from Horace*, which he read and found disappointing. He asked if there was anything else. Byron then 'gave' him *Childe Harold*. Recognising its quality, Dallas persuaded him to offer it for publication, and Byron told him to approach the bookseller William Miller, who declined it. John Murray's father, also a bookseller, had published Dallas in the past, and it was to Murray that Dallas turned next.

Dallas turned out to be unreliable both as a witness and as an agent. The story has 'scarcely a word of truth' in it, Andrew Nicholson says in his appendix to *The Letters of John Murray to Lord Byron*. Letters from Dallas to Byron in the Murray archive make clear that he had not read *Hints from Horace* when he offered *Childe Harold* to Murray. Byron 'gave' *Childe Harold* to Dallas only because he asked for it as a 'present', taking advantage of Byron's youthful ambivalence about making money by his pen (he considered it ungentlemanly and refused at first to accept the large sums Murray began to offer him for his work). The truth is, we still don't know why *Childe Harold* thrived and *Hints from Horace* remained unpublished. At the time, the answer might have seemed simple enough: it was thought to be better, or at least, more what the public wanted. Byron himself continued to take an interest in *Hints from Horace* and tried to publish it later, when his writing was poised between the Romantic earnestness of his 'unactable' plays and the blasphemous ironies of *Don Juan*. Murray's sloppiness where *Hints* was concerned (he mislaid part of the manuscript, and was slow to respond to inquiries about it) was one of the reasons Byron decided to part company with him.

Murray was not a great letter-writer. This collection reminds us that the hurried, casual, ungrammatical, occasionally unintelligible style of business communication substantially predated the email. It has been said of Byron's letters that he 'could not stop' – the dash for him did the work of some grammar and much punctuation. Murray's style depended on the same device, but in his hands it is a clumsy instrument. Byron's collected letters can be read cover to cover without any gloss. Murray's letters are usually shorter than Nicholson's excellent annotations to them.

Even so, Murray had his moments. In his first letter to Byron (whom he addressed as 'My Lord'), written in September 1811, Murray tries to flatter him into taking care over the proofs of his 'Lordships Poem – which is so good as to be entitled to all your care to render perfect'. He then strikes the note that all writers want to hear, and all editors must sound: 'Besides its general merits, there are parts, which I am tempted to believe, far excel anything that your Lordship has hitherto published.' Up to that point, Byron had published only *Hours of Idleness* and *English Bards* – neither with Murray. There wasn't much competition, but writers, Murray knew, move in a cloud of their own vanity.

A few years later, writing about the fifth edition of *The Giaour* (which, as Byron put it, had 'been lengthening its rattles every month'), Murray gives the line this variation:

> I called to day upon Mr G[ifford] and as soon as a Gentleman was gone & he was to begin upon business he fell back in his largest Arm Chair and exclaimed – upon my honour Murray Lord Byron is – a most extraordinary Man – the new Edition of his Poem contains passages of exquisite – extraordinary beauty equal to any thing that I have ever read.

But the real point of such praise is to set him up for a little gentle urging to do better. Gifford was part of an informal team of writers and critics that Murray used to advise him on Byron's work. He had edited the *Anti-Jacobin*, published a few satires, and wrote for the *Quarterly Review*. Slyly, Murray lets Gifford go on: 'What is he about will he not collect all his force for one immortal Work.' Then, another dash of praise: 'Speaking of Scott he said you did not interfere with each other but that he had completely settled in his mind your certain superiority – a Genius of a higher order.' And then a final application of the whip:

> He again deplored your wandering from some great object & regretted that you would not follow his recommendation of producing something worthy of you for highly as he thinks of your Lordships talents in both poems & I believe most particularly in the last, still he thinks you have by no means stretched your pinions to the full & taken the Flight to which they are equal.

It almost makes you pity Byron.

Again and again we find Murray playing this tune, though he usually gives the credit to his orchestra of house critics. *The Bride of Abydos* delighted 'Mr Frere', who thought it 'equal to any thing your Lordship has produced'. (John Hookham Frere was an acquaintance of Byron's and a contributor to the *Anti-Jacobin*; Byron later borrowed the stanza and tone of *Beppo* and *Don Juan* from his 'Whistlecraft'.) After *The Siege of Corinth*: 'Mr Gifford … says you have never written better.' *Lara* is 'thought by poets to be your *best poem*'. Even

Byron's bitter 'sketch' of the governess Mrs Clermont, after his separation from Annabella, is treated in the superlative: 'It is tremendously exquisite – the most astringent dose that was ever presented to female Character'; he quotes the consensus view of Frere, Samuel Rogers (another poet, and occasional friend of Byron's) and Stratford Canning (an English diplomat whom Byron had met on his travels, one of the many suitors he beat to the hand of Miss Milbanke) that 'you have produced nothing better – that Satire is your fort.' (Byron got into trouble for this little piece of satire, and Canning, at least, changed his mind about it.) Of *Manfred*: 'All the higher critics such as Frere are in extacy with it averring that it places you far above all your former efforts.' How much further they could expect him to go isn't clear. But he keeps going, and they keep praising, until he reaches the heights for which he is now remembered. *Beppo* inspires Frere to claim that Byron possesses 'the protean talent of Shakespeare', and the beginning of *Don Juan* 'probably surpasses in talent anything that you ever wrote'. And again, in still stronger terms, and with what looks like a considered judgment: 'There appears to me no doubt that you have infinitely surpassed all your former efforts and that this poem isolates you compleatly from any thing that the age has produced.'

What should we make of these opinions? Our estimation of *The Bride of Abydos*, *The Corsair*, *Lara*, *The Siege of Corinth* and *The Giaour* does not support Murray's assertion that 'there is not any volume, the production of one man, to be picked out that will be so interesting and universally popular as that which your six tales would make. Formed upon human passions, they can never pass away.' One of the puzzles of Byron's career is that his reputation was built on the 'popular' work that would now place him firmly among the second-rate, yet lost on the strength of the masterpiece that entitles him to his rank among the first. 'Is it not life? Is it not the thing?' Byron said in defence of *Don Juan*. I wonder if he intended to suggest that his earlier work was not quite either. To be fair to Murray, he seems to have understood the clear distinction between *Don Juan* and what came before, even if, as the poem grew and grew, he succumbed to the objections, both prudish and prudent, of his circle of Byron admirers.

It's even possible that Murray had a hand in the genesis of *Don Juan*. When Byron was living in Venice, he fell into an affair with a draper's wife called Marianna Segati, and used their relationship as the basis for a series of letters on Venetian life. 'There is no convincing a woman here – that she is in the smallest degree deviating from the rule of right or the fitness of things – in having an "Amoroso",' Byron wrote to Murray on the second anniversary of his wedding day. His letters from Venice were so rich in material that Murray begged him to turn them into something more commercial. 'Pray keep an exact Journal of all you see and write me faithful accounts of sights, curiosities, Shows and Manners &c,' Murray replied, promising: 'I will use nothing without your positive permission.' It was a long letter, and the thought had time to develop quietly at the back of his mind, until at the end he brought it to the fore again. 'Give me a poem a good Venetian tale describing Manners formerly – from the Story itself – & now from your own observations & call it – Marianna.' Ten months later Byron gave him *Beppo*, which was subtitled 'A Venetian Story'. It is a small masterpiece in itself, and gave him the manner, the matter and the stanza form for *Don Juan*.

Don Juan is the poem on which their relationship eventually foundered. Byron entrusted the manuscript to John Cam Hobhouse, a college friend and the companion of his first Continental tour. Byron told Hobhouse (who was about to be elected MP for Westminster) to offer it around, since he suspected that 'the damned Cant and Toryism of the day' might 'make Murray pause'. In fact Murray was ecstatic about the first two cantos he received, but various friends of Byron, prompted by Hobhouse, worked on Murray until they convinced him that the poem's offensive elements would damage Byron's reputation. Byron agreed to a private circulation; later, he changed his mind and insisted on publishing it anonymously. *Don Juan* came out in July 1819. Within months someone had brought out a pirated edition, in the belief that the lord chancellor was unlikely, because of its blasphemies, to grant a copyright. Even if the courts sided with Murray, a trial would force him to reveal the identity of the author. Murray asked Byron for a little new material to lend his own edition a 'certain degree of Copyright' and began to press him to 'make some few alterations'. Decent women couldn't be seen to read it. The circulation had suffered, and the poem's irreverence was costing him money on two fronts.

Murray's enthusiasm for the work itself began to wane. 'If the poem has poetry – it would stand – if not – fall … Dullness is the only annihilator in such cases,' Byron had written. Murray pronounced the third canto 'dull' (five times underlined) and cited 'Kinnaird, Hobhouse, Gifford' as his authorities. They wanted to 'cut it up'. Byron

refused, in terms that veer charmingly between self-deprecation and a strong sense of poetical purpose: 'Confess – confess – you dog – and be candid – that it is the sublime of *that there* sort of writing …' Byron had finally learned to bring together *Childe Harold* and *Hints from Horace*. The marriage, Francis Cohen complained (he was a barrister and historian, a friend of Jeffrey's, and another of Murray's coterie of Byron readers), was too intimate: 'Lord B. should have been grave & gay by turns; grave in one page & gay in the next … we are never drenched & scorched at the same instant.' To which Byron offered this memorable response:

> Blessings on his experience! … Did he never play at Cricket or walk a mile in hot weather? – did he never spill a dish of tea over his testicles in handing the cup to his charmer to the great shame of his nankeen breeches? – did he never swim in the sea at Noonday with the Sun in his eyes and on his head – which all the foam of ocean could not cool? Did he never draw his foot out of a tub of too hot water damning his eyes & his valet's? did he never inject for a Gonorrhea? – or make water through an ulcerated Urethra?

And so on.

I wonder whether the stakes were quite as high as either side feared. The virtues of *Don Juan* would have survived the cuts that Murray wanted Byron to make, just as the virtues of Englishwomen survived the publication of *Don Juan*. (As Byron pointed out, 'the reading or non-reading a book – will never keep down a single petticoat.') To our eyes, the stanzas objected to seem unexceptional, in both senses: harmless, but also unmemorable. Lines on the suicide of the lawyer Samuel Romilly, who presided over Byron's separation, were omitted without Byron's consent and restored only after his death. Byron agreed to alter a couplet about schoolgirl education: 'Their manners mending, and their morals curing,/She taught them to suppress their vice and urine.' The replacement is worse, but has little effect on the general impression. The third canto has stood the test of time better than Murray supposed: it contains, among other things, the wonderfully gentle portrait of Southey as the apostate singer, and the famous lyric 'The Isles of Greece'. In any case, the relationship with Murray had begun to sour.

Money was part of the problem. Byron may have begun his career refusing to take any when Murray repeatedly pressed him, but that didn't last. Their first real fight occurred when Byron offered to pass along to the meddlesome Dallas the value of one of his copyrights, and Murray balked at paying a third party a sum he had intended for Byron himself. As he grew older, however, Byron took more and more pride in his 'Brain-money', as he called it, the money he had earned professionally: 'I have imbibed such a love for money that I keep some Sequins in a drawer to count, & cry over them once a week.' Writer and editor began to argue over Brain-money. The outcry over *Don Juan* had had an effect on sales; then there was the problem of the pirated edition. Byron continued to send Murray other work. It is odd that in the midst of writing *Don Juan*, he also composed a series of indifferent pieces: tragic and humourless poems, gloomy and unactable plays. Murray, understandably enough, didn't want to pay the old prices for pieces of diminishing market value. Byron, understandably, resented having to plead his worth. One gets the sense, not of any particular quarrel, but of the effect, over many years, of negotiating between the self-interest of the publisher and the vanity of his writer.

Murray was running out of praise. At one point, he holds up his own customary response to Byron's work as a standard to be aimed at: 'Let us wait until you send me something – better than any thing you have yet written, for this however arduous to effect and impertinent to ask, is indispensable in order to produce that sensation which has hitherto attended the publication of your works.' The 'arduous' is particularly endearing – as if it were only a question of hard work. Various dramas follow, and Murray's reaction to them is sometimes careful and warm, sometimes careful and cool. He lets Gifford voice a first response: 'Gifford thinks the whole "fine writing but evidently intended for Study & not the Stage – the author will, however, lose no credit by it."' Later, Gifford praises the 'inconceivable purity of the Style' of one of the tragedies, which is extraordinary, 'breathing as you have done for so many years nothing but Italian'. Not quite faint praise, but not quite enthusiasm either. 'The Doge is admirably portrayed & his Wife perfectly original & beautiful,' Murray offers, finally, in his own voice. 'I account for a little disappointment in my first & second reading from the peculiar expectations which I had previously conceived of it as a Tragedy.'

Distance was another problem. Murray could be a lazy correspondent – at least by comparison to Byron – and Byron moved, from Venice, to Ravenna, to Pisa, often without warning. Letters and manuscripts failed to arrive, crossed in the post, produced confusions and printing errors. Hobhouse played his part, clumsily, in setting them against each other. First he coloured Murray's response to *Don Juan* and then he tried to caution Byron against Murray: 'Do not write any thing to Albemarle Street you do not wish to be seen by all the public offices – The man does not mean to do you a mischief – but he is vain, Sir damn'd vain – and for the sake of a paragraph with "my dear M" would betray Christ himself.' Byron, characteristically, saw through both Hobhouse's caution and Murray's vanities. His picture of Murray does not differ substantially from Hobhouse's, except in its warmth, colour and vividness (this from a letter of 1819):

> I have a great respect for your good & gentlemanly qualities – & return your personal friendship towards me – and although I think you a little spoilt by "villainous company" – Wits – persons of honour about town – authors – and fashionables – together with your "I am just going to call at Carlton House: are you walking that way?" I say notwithstanding your "pictures – taste – Shakespeare – and the musical glasses" – you deserve and possess the esteem of those whose esteem is worth having.

The mild drama of these letters derives from the picture they present of two well-intentioned, reasonable men bound by the difficult relation of editor and writer, and caught in its inevitable decline. Money and vanity, as commodities to be traded, make for awkward dealing, and in this case the deals eventually collapsed.

Byron's contribution to the *Liberal* was the last straw. To please Shelley, and help out his friend Leigh Hunt, he offered to submit some of his work to a new magazine, being printed by Leigh's brother John. (The Hunts had one advantage over Murray: they were willing to go to jail for their convictions.) Then Shelley died. Byron may have come to regret his offer, but the Hunts depended on it and he was too honourable to back out, as he explained in a letter to Murray: 'The death of Shelley left them totally aground – and I could not see them in such a state without using the common feelings of humanity – & what means were in my power to set them afloat again.' But Murray refused to deal with John Hunt. 'I pledge my honour to the truth of what I tell you,' he wrote to Byron about the launch of the *Liberal*, 'that never since I have been a publisher did I ever observe such a universal outcry as this work has occasioned & it is deemed to be no less dull than wickedly intended.' Hobhouse was right: it isn't only writers who have their vanities.

Murray began to show around the letter Byron had sent him. Hunt got angry, and Byron got angry on his behalf. Ill-will was compounded by bad luck. The two publishers had failed to communicate, and some of Byron's manuscripts had been mislaid. Byron vented his annoyance in a letter that he sent to Douglas Kinnaird, a college friend who had become his business and literary agent, along with three more cantos of *Don Juan*. He instructed Kinnaird to pass the letter on to Murray only if he didn't think it 'harsh'. Kinnaird did give it to Murray, who was enraged and refused to look at the cantos. He had heard enough, he believed, in the extracts read out to him to form an opinion, and for the last time we hear his characteristic refrain: 'They are equal in talent to any thing you have written, & it is therefore well worth while to extract what would shock the feeling of every man in the Country – & do your name everlasting injury.'

Byron's letter is now lost, and with it the 'key', as Nicholson writes, to the breakdown in the relationship. Murray believed that it contained a condition to his publishing the cantos which he considered 'degrading' to his 'feeling & character'. Neither Byron nor Kinnaird could remember any condition. Byron thought Murray was trying to wriggle out and decided to let him, though he consoled himself for one last time with Murray's dose of praise. 'Even Murray,' he wrote to Kinnaird, 'in the letter I sent to you – allows that "in talent they have not been heretofore exceeded by me."' In the end, Hunt published the cantos, and the rest of *Don Juan*, and Murray had nothing more to do with Byron's work until Byron died.

In the course of their friendship, Murray repeatedly assured Byron that his own reputation depended entirely on Byron's: 'I rise & fall with it – my interest in your soaring above the other Stars – & continuing to create wonder even in your aberrations – is past calculation.' He's most famous now for presiding over the destruction of Byron's memoirs, which were burned in his rooms at Albemarle Street, shortly after Byron's death. A strange act for a poet's editor to be remembered for, it was really just the continuation of their argument. He burned the

memoirs for the same reason that he refused to publish those three cantos of *Don Juan*: to protect Byron's name from 'everlasting injury'. It's safe to say that Murray got it wrong. It's hard to imagine anything they might have revealed that isn't now generally known – the incest, the homosexuality – but the battle over Byron's reputation, which lasted well over a century after his death, would have looked very different if the memoirs had come out.

The Byron Murray loved, whose reputation he tried to defend, with time gave ground to the scandalous self-portrait, for which he is now admired. But it's also true that the judgment of the day was not blind. Byron's early work was prized for reasons that point up an interesting difference between the way poetry was read then and the way it is read now. 'He has passages equal to anything,' Byron once wrote of Southey, whom he came to despise. And this, more or less, was what Gifford and Frere and the rest of Murray's house critics believed about the young Byron. For a long time after his death, Byron remained famous for his passages: for the description of Greece in *The Giaour* ('He who hath bent him o'er the dead'), for the moonlight on the Coliseum in *Manfred*; for the eve of war in the third canto of *Childe Harold* ('There was a sound of revelry by night …'). The idea that a poem should present a perfect face to the reader, that it should express its intentions in its sum as well as its parts, had not yet established itself. Poems provided occasions for the display of 'poetic' talent. As Byron himself remarked, you couldn't expect any verse to be *all* good. Murray and Hobhouse failed to understand that Byron, in *Don Juan*, had found a form that made an issue, and a virtue, of his irregularities.

[*] The poet Thomas Moore had read them, and passionately protested their burning. To his reading, and self-serving recollection, we owe much of what we know about the memoirs.