

LORD BYRON'S GEORGIAN ATTACHMENT

Thyrza is Lord Byron's lyrical character which has caused so much controversy upon its archetype. A poem composed on 11 October, 1811 and entitled "Thyrza" became an object of discussion and research alongside a series of poems also dedicated to Thyrza and composed later than October 1811: "Away, Away, ye Notes of Woe!", "One Struggle More, and I am Free", "Euthanasia", "And thou art Dead, as Young and Fair", "If Sometimes in the Haunts of Men".

Lord Byron

To Thyrza

Without a stone to mark the spot,
And say, what Truth might well have said,
By all, save one, perchance forgot,
Ah! wherefore art thou lowly laid?

By many a shore and many a sea
Divided, yet beloved in vain;
The past, the future fled to thee,
To bid us meet – no – ne'er again!

Could this have been – a word, a look,
That softly said, "We part in peace",
Had taught my bosom how to brook,
With fainter sighs, thy soul's release.

And didst thou not, since Death for thee
Prepared a light and pangless dart,
Once long for him thou ne'er shalt see,
Who held, and holds thee in his heart?

Oh! who like him had watch'd thee here?
Or sadly mark'd thy glazing eye,
In that dread hour ere death appear,
When silent sorrow fears to sigh,

Till all was past? But when no more
'T was thine to reckon of human woe,
Affection's heart-drops, gushing o'er,
Had flow'd as fast – as now they flow.

Shall they not flow, when many a day
In these, to me, deserted towers,
Ere call'd but for a time away,
Affection's mingling tears were ours?

Ours too the glance none saw beside;
'The smile none else might understand;
The whisper'd thought of hearts allied,
The pressure of the thrilling hand.

The kiss, so guiltless and refined,
That Love each warmer wish forbore;
Those eyes proclaim'd so pure a mind,
Even Passion blush'd to plead for more.

The tone, that taught me to rejoice,
When prone, unlike thee, to repine;
The song, celestial from thy voice,
But sweet to me from none but thine;

The pledge we wore – I wear it still,
But where is thine? – Ah! where art thou?
Oft have I borne the weight of ill,
But never bent beneath till now!

Well hast thou left in life's best bloom
 The cup of woe for me to drain.
 If rest alone be in the tomb,
 I would not wish thee here again.

But if in worlds more blest than this
 Thy virtues seek a fitter sphere,
 Impart some portion of thy bliss,
 To wean me from mine anguish here.

Teach me – too early taught by thee!
 To bear, forgiving and forgiven:
 On earth thy love was such to me;
 It fain would form my hope in heaven!

11 October, 1811

Ambiguity is characteristic of poetry but entropy is to be removed through correct interpretation to avoid misunderstandings.

Thyrza became a matter of concern not only due to the nature of this mystical poetic image, but mainly due to the identity of a real prototype. English or oriental? – this was the question that puzzled Byron's biographers and scholars of the XIX century.

There can be no doubt that Lord Byron referred to Thyrza in conversation with his wife, Lady Byron, and probably also with his half-sister, Mrs. Leigh, as a young girl who had existed, and the date of whose death almost coincided with Lord Byron's landing in England in 1811. On one occasion he showed Lady Byron a beautiful tress of hair, which she understood to be Thyrza's. He said he had never mentioned her name, and that now she was gone his breast was the sole depository of that secret. "I took the name of Thyrza from Gesner. She was Abel's wife."

Later, in the twentieth century, the same literary phenomenon became a target of an absolutely new and unusual approach. The question of "eastern or western?", "English or oriental?" was

substituted by a dilemma “male or female?” The latter has been established mainly due to the opinion expressed by Professor L. A. Marchand who identified the prototype of the poem and the whole series as appertaining to John Edleston, the Cambridge choirboy¹.

This opinion has been acknowledged by many Byron scholars and authors and has been widely reflected in various books on Lord Byron or his circle².

In the beginning of the XXI century Thyrsa as a female person is again a scholarly version broadly inviting deeper study³.

The present work argues that **Byron’s poems to Thyrsa are addressed to a female person** and are likely to be inspired by the tragic fate of a Georgian slave girl, the poet could have bought in Alexandria of Troas during his first travels in Asia Minor and whom he unsuccessfully attempted to save from disgrace.

The story of a Georgian slave girl is described in the third volume of “The Life, Writings, Opinions and Times of the Right Hon. George Gordon, Lord Byron”⁴, anonymously published by Matthew Iley in London in 1825, as a copious recollection of the poet’s destroyed manuscripts originally intended for posthumous publication.

In literary sources the three volumes of “The Life, Writings and Opinions of Lord Byron” were not always considered truly authentic, especially when compared to the unrivalled power and impression, created by Thomas Moore’s version of Lord Byron’s biography

¹ Leslie Marchand, *Byron, A Portrait*, p. 107; *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, volume 2, p. 116.

² Martin Garrett, *George Gordon Lord Byron*, The British Library, London, 2000; See e. g. Susan Normington, *Byron and his Children*, Allan Sutton, 1995; Paul Douglas, *Lady Caroline Lamb, A Biography*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

³ Bernard Beatty, “Accomplished verse” and “awakened hearts”: Byron’s “Thyrsa” Poems, *The Byron Journal*, Volume 33, No.2, London, 2005, pages 79-91.

⁴ *The Life, Writings, Opinions and Times of the Right Hon. George Gordon, Lord Byron*, in three volumes, Mathew Iley, London, 1825.

“Letters and Journals”¹, first published by John Murray in the years 1830-31.

The publication of “Letters and Journals” by Thomas Moore, with its tremendous success and convincing way of presenting the poet’s life through correspondence, actually meant oblivion to other biographies for a long period. In spite of the fact that the latter resonates to this day, we have enough grounds to doubt its superiority. We are aware of the fact that “the originals of the hundred and fifty-eight letters which Byron wrote to Moore himself, and which Moore published in his biography of Lord Byron, have never been found. After Moore’s death his papers passed to Lord John Russell, but Bertrand Russell, who inherited from him, found nothing.”²

This statement confirms the opinion expressed by Rowland E. Prothero in the Preface to the second volume of Byron’s works edited by him.³

As it seems evident today, Moore did not reproduce Byron’s letters exactly as written but considerably altered them in order to emphasize his role and not to show Byron in a particularly favourable light. As William St. Clair notes, “He may have deliberately destroyed the original letters to cover his traces and avoid being found out... Byron’s letters to Moore imply that Moore saw him as a rival”⁴.

Thomas Moore considered “Thyrza” to be “a mere creature of the poet’s brain”, though in many editions this comment of Thomas Moore is followed by the letter of Byron to Dallas composed on 11th

¹ Thomas Moore, *Letters and Journals of the Lord Byron: With Notices of his Life*, 2 vols. London, John Murray, 1830-31.

² William St. Clair. *The Temptation of a Biographer: Thomas Moore and Byron*, *Byron Journal*, 1989, London, p.51.

³ *The Works of Lord Byron, Letters and Journals*, 6 vols. Edited by Rowland E. Prothero, London, 1898-1901.

⁴ William St. Clair. *The Temptation of a Biographer: Thomas Moore and Byron*, p.55.

October, 1811¹, the very day he composed "To Thyrsa". This letter speaks of a different source of inspiration for Byron and we will refer to it later.

Thus Byron's letters to Moore shared the same fate of being destroyed as were the Memoirs presented and entrusted to him. The absence of the latter deepens not only interest but also the importance of its copious recollections.

The new light shed upon the authenticity of Moore's publications attracts attention to other sources among which we note the above-mentioned volumes by Matthew Iley. According to the Iley book, Byron bought a girl with the intention of restoring her to her parents in Tifflis, but in vain. "His Lordship deeply deplored that all his efforts...should have been so fruitless."

The story and its link with Thyrsa truly confirm what mental, spiritual and bodily toil and sufferings Byron experienced when on his travels.

It is universally acknowledged that in the case of Lord Byron most of the poetic pieces refer to real episodes of his life. Therefore we had the belief that, if true, this tragic story would certainly cause emotive lines. Before analyzing the story of the Georgian girl in connection with the poems dedicated to Thyrsa or Byron's works in general, we had to refer to the historical accuracy of the supposed episode.

We also have to note that the three volumes of Matthew Iley were published as early as in 1825, a year after Lord Byron's death. This creates the possibility of mistakes of haste as well. In spite of this there are many facts in the story that agree with historically acknowledged events.

According to the story in Matthew Iley's book, Byron when in Asia Minor bought the Georgian girl at a slave market in Alexandria.

¹ See, e. g. *The Complete Works of Lord Byron*, Galignani, Paris, 1837, comments for p. 175; *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron*, Complete in one volume, New York, 1869, comment for p. 559.

Sources confirm that Byron visited Alexandria of Troas, the day after embarking at Smyrna on the 11th April 1810.¹

Thus, we conclude that Byron could have met the girl on 12th April, 1810, or several days later as the salsette remained nearby for “about a fortnight”.²

I. The situation described in connection with Tifflis or Georgia, or the interest shown mainly through the mention of silk and shawls, slow caravans and couriers, precise distances, etc., confirm the authenticity of the story.

II. According to the story, the Georgian girl died at Candia and was buried “in the Eastern Greek burying-ground, about a mile from the city of Candia”. Byron “ordered a monument of stone to be placed over her remains, with the inscription describing her name and sufferings”.

We asked Professor Marios Byron Raizis, President of the Hellenic Byron Society, to help us in our research. In his letter of 12th June, 2000 he wrote the following: “There were several small cemeteries around Candia (now Iraklion) at that time, one for the Orthodox, one for the Jews, one for the Muslims and one for the Catholics that had remained in Crete after the evacuation by the Venetians in 1769. Today the buildings of Iraklion, the capital, extend much further than one mile in every direction from the city centre. The old cemeteries were transferred elsewhere, and their tombstones were used for new burials or as building materials for houses and other buildings, as it usually happens. As for the tombstone of the Georgian protégée of Byron, it does not exist today. Today’s municipal authority that is in charge of cemeteries gave this information.”

¹ “The life of Lord Byron” in “The Complete Works of Lord Byron”, Galignani, Paris, 1837, chapter 21, p.37.

² Ibid.; See also Leslie Marchand, Byron, A Portrait, p. 82.

According to the Iley story, it took Byron more than a year to find the girl. It means that Byron could have discovered the girl after her disappearance, approximately in the spring of 1811. Byron sailed from Malta to England on 2nd June, 1811. We conclude that the girl must have died either shortly before Lord Byron's departure from Malta and Byron did not learn about her death then, or soon after he had left. As for the tombstone, it is not indicated in the story that Byron caused it to be erected during his stay in the East. He could have ordered it later from England.

Taking into consideration that when on his travels, Byron used to get letters either in Malta or in Patras, in the Morea, the news of the girl's death could reach him in England not earlier than in late August or September. The news of Byron's death at Missolonghi reached Douglas Kinnaird almost a month later, on 14th May 1824.

We believe Byron composed his poem "To Thyrza" on the spot when accepting the news of her death. Therefore here stands the first line: "Without a stone to mark the spot."

Now we apply to Byron's letters and his poetry, as the most trustworthy source for further investigation, especially when his writings are echoes of his actions and emotions rather than products of an imaginary life.

Byron lost his mother on the return from his first journey. Before Mrs. Byron was buried, news had come of his Cambridge friend, Charles Skinner Matthews' death. This was followed by a third shock – the death of his Harrow friend, John Wingfield. Soon after this Byron heard again about the death of one more Harrow friend, Hargreaves Hanson, who died at the age of 23.

Near the end of September 1811 Byron left Newstead, his ancestral home, for Lancashire and came back on October 9. News had come in his absence of the death of John Edleston, the choirboy of Trinity Chapel at Cambridge, his "adopted brother", as Thomas Moore would say. The choirboy had died the previous May while Byron was abroad. With his thoughts so closely upon death, Byron composed the draft of a will.

On 10th October, 1811 Byron wrote to Francis Hodgson, his Cambridge friend: "I heard of a death the other day that shocked me more than any of the preceding, of one whom I once loved more than ever loved a living thing, & one who I believe loved me to the last, yet I had not a tear left for an event which five years ago would have bowed me to the dust; still it sits heavy on my heart & calls back what I wish to forget, in many a feverish dream."¹

Byron's letter to Dallas dated October 11, 1811 comprises the famous lines: "I have been again shocked with a death, and have lost one very dear to me in happier times; but I have almost forgot the taste of grief and supped full of horrors, till I have become callous; nor have I a tear left for an event which, five years ago, would have bowed down my head to the earth. It seems as though I were to experience in my youth, the great misery of age. My friends fall around me, and I shall be left a lonely tree before I am withered."²

It was really a period of disaster for Byron.

The aforementioned letter to Dallas dated 11th October 1811 is written in that very context. Though Byron mentioned a new shock, he did not reveal the name of the loss.

On 28 October, 1811 Byron wrote to Mrs. Pigot of Southwell:

"Dear Madam, – I am about to write to you on a silly subject & yet I cannot well do otherwise. – You may remember a cornelian which some years ago I consigned to Miss Pigot, indeed gave to her, & now I am going to make the most selfish & rude of requests. – – The person who gave it to me, when I was very young, is dead, & though a long time has elapsed since we ever met, as it was the only memorial <almost>³ I possessed of that person (in whom I was once much interested) it has acquired a value by this event, I could have wished it never to have borne in my eyes. – If therefore Miss P[igot] should have preserved it, I must under these circumstances beg her to

¹ Byron's Letters and Journals, volume 2, p. 110.

² Byron's Letters and Journals, volume 2, p. 110.

³ According to the editor "the crossed out words of any significance to the meaning or emphasis are enclosed in angled brackets <>" (see Byron's Letters and Journals, volume 1, p. 27).

excuse my requesting it to be transmitted to me at No. 8 St. James's Street London & I will replace it by something she may remember me by equally well. -- As she was always so kind as to feel interested in the fate of [those?] that formed the subject of our conversations, you may tell her, that the Giver of that Cornelian died in May last of a consumption at the age of twenty one, making the sixth within four months of friends & relatives that I have lost between May & the end of August!"

In his notes for *Thyrza*, Ernest Hartley Coleridge refers to a line from the poem "To *Thyrza*": "The pledge we wore – I wear it still."

If *Thyrza* is Edleston, why does Byron say in the poem composed on 11 October, 1811 that the pledge is with him when we know the contents of the letter sent to Mrs. Pigot on 28 October, 1811 where Byron refers to the cornelian from Edleston as "the only memorial" he possessed of that person? The word "almost" as taken by the editor in the angled brackets had been crossed out by Byron but it could mean Edleston's lock of hair that is in John Murray's collection.

We also have to note that Byron's "Letters and Journals" do not comprise a single letter ever sent by Byron to John Edleston. If Edleston's death caused exceptional emotions to be compared with all other losses of that period and produced the most mystical character Byron so deeply deplored, the question arises: why did he never send a single line to him to express his anxiety and care?

The cornelian heart was returned accordingly; and indeed, Miss Pigot reminded Lord Byron, that he had left it with her as a deposit, not a gift.

Byron's early poem, "The Cornelian" in *Fugitive Pieces*, was composed after John Edleston had given Byron the Cornelian, and later, on March 16, 1812 Byron composed a poem "On a Cornelian Heart which was Broken".

On 14 of October, 1811, Byron sent off to Dallas a stanza to be added to "Childe Harold":

There! Thou! – what love and life together fled,

Have left me here to love and live in vain –
 Twined with my heart, and can I deem thee dead
 When busy memory flashes on my brain?
 Well – I will dream that we may meet again,
 And woo the vision to my vacant breast:
 If aught of young Remembrance then remain,
 Be as it may Futurity's behest,
 For me 'twere bliss enough to know thy spirit
 blest!

(Stanza IX, Canto II)

Here is what Byron wrote to Dallas concerning these lines in the same letter: "I think it proper to state to you, that this stanza alludes to an event which has taken place since my arrival here, and not the death of any male friends"¹, to which Dallas replied: "I thank you for your confidential communication. How truly do I wish that being had lived, and lived yours: What your obligation to her would have been in that case is inconceivable".²

In our opinion, Byron wrote to Dallas to assure him that the lines really belonged to a lady and that they were caused by the death of a female creature "and not the death of any male friends". Most probably he needed it, due to the fact that the new loss was preceded by a number of losses of his male friends and he would never want to be misinterpreted.

Here is what we find as a comment to this in "Byron's Letters and Journals" edited by Leslie A. Marchand and published by John Murray: "Five of these were his mother, Matthews, Wingfield, Hargreaves Hanson, and Edleston. Byron did not elsewhere mention a sixth."³

Of course, he did! The sixth was **the female person** on whose death he informed Dallas on 14th of October 1811. Actually she was **the fifth in** as far as he wrote to Mrs. Pigot about Edleston as the

¹ Byron's Letters and Journals, volume 2, p.116.

² The Complete Works of Lord Byron, Paris, Galignani, 1837, p. 175.

³ Byron's Letters and Journals, volume 2, p.120.

sixth. Now the number is correct and we have no doubt that Byron wrote whatever he meant.

Dallas's letter to Byron makes it absolutely clear that his friend believed him. Besides the aforementioned lines from "Childe Harold", on 11 October Byron composes his famous poem "To Thyrza" – mournful lines caused by the death of a young lady.

In Galignani's edition of Byron's Works (1837), the aforementioned letter to Dallas serves as one of the comments to a poem "To Thyrza" – a poem written on 11 October 1811.

In 1998 among the papers of the Bankes family at Kingston Lacy House in Dorset, Byron's letter to R. C. Dallas, dated 31 October, 1811 was discovered.

This letter of three pages is printed by Leslie A. Marchand in Byron's Letters and Journals, Volume Two¹. Marchand appears not to have had access to the manuscript original and the printed text differs in small ways from the text of Byron's letter in the manuscript that was published in the Byron Journal in 2000, where we read:

"I have already taken up so much of your time that there needs no excuse on your part (but a great many on mine) for the present interruption. – I have altered the passages according to your wish. – With this note I send a few stanzas on a subject, which has lately occupied much of my thoughts. – They refer to the death of one to whose name you are a stranger & consequently cannot be interested. – I mean them to complete the present volume. – They relate to the same whom I have mentioned in Canto 2nd & ye conclusion."²

In this letter to Dallas, composed on 31st October, Byron referred to the same loss, as in previous letters to him: "They refer to the death of one to whose name you are a stranger & consequently cannot be interested."

¹ Byron's Letters and Journals, volume 2, p. 121-122.

² Michael Warren, Two Byron Documents at Kingston Lacy, The Byron Journal, London, 2000, p. 89.

What did Byron mean under the word “stranger” when he referred to the death of one to whose name Dallas was a stranger and consequently could not be interested?

In Byron’s times besides “the person one does not know” this word meant a “foreigner”.

It obviously also adds to our side of the argument.

In spite of this, it happened that Leslie Marchand associated the mysterious lady with John Edleston¹. The same methods were applied to Stanza IX from “Childe Harold”, II Canto, also Stanzas 95-96, as the concluding lines of the same canto and all six poems of the series of “To Thyrza”.

As for Byron’s letter of 14th October where he shared his sorrow with Dallas on the loss of **a female person** to whom he dedicated the 9th stanza of the second Canto, Professor Leslie Marchand commented as follows: “This of course was not true. Having already told Dallas of the death of Edleston, Byron was trying to cover his tracks. This stanza and 95 and 96 of the second canto of Childe Harold were addressed to the Cambridge choirboy. In other poems to him, he gave the name of Thyrza, to encourage the public to think they were addressed to a girl.”²

Shall we trust Lord Byron when discussing his own writings or the well-known Byron biographer Professor Leslie Marchand?

Dallas trusted Byron! I myself would also rather trust Byron!

It is very important for a scholar not to invent his own hypothesis by ignoring existing sources – in Byron’s case his poetic lines and letters. It would be more appropriate to leave the way open and the task unsolved rather than to invent inadequate explanations.

What is the point of collecting and publishing Byron’s letters, if we misinterpret his writings on such a plain and important scale as a matter of numbers or sexes? I think that Byron was good enough at sums especially within the limit of six, and of course at distinguishing females from males.

¹ Leslie A. Marchand, *Byron, A Portrait*, p.107.

² *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, volume 2, p. 116.

If we follow the comments of Professor Leslie Marchand on this point, we may come to the conclusion that Byron was constantly lying. But this is so far from the image of a man who stood so bravely on the side of truth in general as well as in the case of his writings: "But I hate things all fiction... and pure invention is but the talent of a liar"¹, wrote Byron.

But when writing his Memoirs, Byron could feel the inner demand to describe the tragic story which was the main cause of the mournful lines for the series of poems composed in October 1811 and later.

The Memoirs were unfairly destroyed but "Don Juan" escaped as a treasure of poetic genius and emotive experience. As Professor John Clubbe observed, Byron started both his Memoirs and "Don Juan" together and "if the Memoirs represented his literal biography, "Don Juan" was his imaginative one."² As Jerome J. McGann points out, "Don Juan" "might better be compared to the lost Memoirs, which were also anecdotal, digressive and full of personal discursiveness."³

Can we really find any echoes of Iley's story concerning the Georgian slave girl in the imaginary reflection of the Memoirs, i.e. in "Don Juan"?

The answer is positive. Cantos 8-12 of "Don Juan" reflect those emotions through a moving story of how Don Juan saved a ten-year-old Turkish girl named Leila and whom he finally brought to England and committed her to the charge of an English lady. The purity of feelings Don Juan has towards Leila absolutely corresponds to the purity of attitude with which Lord Byron treated the Georgian girl as an object of his care.

In Matthew Iley's story we read: "The girl was very pretty, and only thirteen years old. But in the East they are marriageable at

¹ Byron's Letters and Journals, volume 1, p. 13.

² John Clubbe, Napoleon's Last Campaign and the Origins of "Don Juan", Byron Journal, 1997, p. 12.

³ Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works, edited by Jerome J. McGann, in 7 volumes, volume 5, Oxford, Clarendon, 1980-1993, p. 668.

twelve, and frequently become mothers before that age. Lord Byron, however, looked upon her as a mere child, and anxiously made every inquiry for some person going to Georgia to whom he might safely confide her”.¹

Here are the lines from “Don Juan” with which we may compare Iley’s account:

Just now there was no peril for temptation.
He loved the orphan he had saved,
As patriots (now and then) may love a nation;
His pride, too, felt that she was not enslaved
Owing to him; also her salvation.

And Thyrza remained as mysterious and fashionable for all periods as was the description of Leila in “Don Juan”:

Her charming figure and romantic history
Became a kind of fashionable mystery.

But Lord Byron’s words also from “Don Juan” could better express our attitude to the problem we have touched upon:

By those who love to say that white is black,
So much the better! I may stand alone,
But would not change my free thoughts for a
throne.

Innes Merabishvili

¹ The Life, Writings, Opinions and Times of the Right Hon. George Gordon, Lord Byron, in three volumes, Matthew Iley, London, 1825, volume III, p. 124.