INTRODUCTION

In April, 1824, news spread that Lord Byron, one of the most famous people in the Western world, had died suddenly in an obscure part of Greece. As would become the norm with celebrity deaths, people remembered what they were doing when they heard the news. A young Alfred Tennyson carved "Byron is dead" on a rock, recalling it as "a day when the whole world seemed to be darkened" and "everything was over and finished for every one." Sir Walter Scott wrote, "we feel almost as if the great luminary of Heaven had suddenly disappeared from the sky." Jane Welsh (the future wife of Thomas Carlyle) wrote that she heard the news "in a room full of people" and "if they had said the sun or the moon was gone out of the heavens, it could not have struck me with the idea of a more awful and dreary blank in creation than the words, 'Byron is dead!'" The poet's death seemed to many like a real-life enactment of Byron's apocalyptic poem "Darkness," which imagines a day when, without warning, "the bright sun was extinguished." To his contemporaries, the end of Byron felt something like the end of the world.

In the previous dozen years or so, Byron had become renowned for his poetry and notorious for the events of his personal life. His works and experiences were intertwined in ways that stoked curiosity and propelled him into the upper stratosphere of fame. In a series of narrative poems, lyrics, and verse dramas, he had all but invented the theatrically

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confessional style of modern celebrity, aloof yet mysteriously intimate. He seemed to be always sharing too much, and yet never enough. Rumors of blasphemy, adultery, sodomy, incest, and madness surrounded him, many of them mostly true. And the characters that populated Byron's poetry – the jaded pilgrim Childe Harold, the brooding romantic pirate Conrad, the self-tortured sorcerer Manfred, the heartbroken and vengeful Giaour, and many more – seemed to be projected versions of a man whom audiences grew to admire and condemn as the erotic arch-rebel of their days. And then suddenly, at age 36, he was gone.

A month after Byron's death, six men gathered solemnly around a London fireplace to shred and burn Byron's handwritten personal memoir, having judged the manuscript too scandalous for the public, or even for posterity. As the paper flared in the grate, the flames illuminated their somber faces: Byron's longtime publisher, John Murray; Byron's friend since their university days, John Cam Hobhouse; the Irish poet Thomas Moore, to whom Byron had entrusted the manuscript, and Moore's friend Henry Luttrell; and two other men representing the women in Byron's family, his wife Annabella Milbanke (Lady Byron) and his half-sister Augusta Leigh. Moore had told Byron he planned to leave the memoir as a legacy to his son, "who shall astonish the latter days of the nineteenth century with it." But the will of the others prevailed: the manuscript met the flames and the memoir passed into legend.

What we have instead are Byron's letters: approximately 3,000 of them, written to family members and lovers, to his publishers and bankers, and to the same friends who would one day torch his memoir. They offer the confessions, humor, lordly braggadocio, sordid details, and half-ironic

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self-mythologizing that surely characterized the lost memoir as well. The letters have long been admired as some of the most lively, witty, and readable in the language. Peter Graham nominates Byron as "one of the greatest letter-writers of all time," and Richard Lansdown places Byron's collected correspondence among the "great monuments of English Romantic prose." Leslie Marchand, the distinguished editor and biographer of Byron, praises the letters' "frankness and humanity," saying they provide "a clear mirror of his personality, of its weaknesses as well as its strengths," and "they reflect more accurately than any words left by his contemporaries the brilliance, charm, and wit of his conversation." Or, as Byron's friend Mary Shelley put it simply, "His own letters and journals mirror himself as he was, and are invaluable."

I had been reading and teaching Byron for a number of years before I held one of his letters, written in his hand, in my own. That moment of contact in the Reading Room of the Pforzheimer Collection at the New York Public Library converted me. I became first an editor of Byron's writing, and then a biographer devoted to unfolding the details of the curiously attractive records he left behind. When Byron's friend Thomas Moore produced the first full-length biography in 1830, he relied so heavily on Byron's correspondence that his book's title became *The Letters and Journals of Lord Byron, with Notices of His Life*. In this book, I have followed Moore's example, foregrounding the letters in my attempt to tell Byron's story. I have selected for closest attention ten of the most interesting and characteristic letters written between his teenage years and his last weeks in Messolonghi. Each chapter begins with Byron's voice on the page, as if we have opened a letter from the poet himself, followed by an account of the experiences and emotions it touches and its

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place in the poet's life. Accompanying illustrations of some of the actual letters convey their tactile, material aspects: the slanting scrawl of a paragraph written at sea, a red wax seal cracked upon opening, a tanned paper's edge worn away by time. Such details have a particular appeal now, when the art of handwritten letters is dying out. As Dwight Garner put it recently in the *New York Times*, "The age of proper correspondence has ended, and there's been no pan-ecumenical service to mourn its passing." Paper pages filled with Byron's rapid, mostly legible cursive hand offer windows onto that vanishing world.

A focus on Byron's letters also reveals the variable sides of his mobile personality, as he shifts his style and subject to suit the occasion and the correspondent. His friend Lady Blessington judged that "the chameleon-like character or manner of Byron renders it difficult to portray him," and she gave the opinion that "if ten individuals undertook the task of describing Byron, no two, of the ten, would agree in their verdict respecting him, or convey any portrait that resembled the other, and yet the description of each might be correct." Byron himself was well aware of his contradictions, and particularly of the contingent nature of his opinions and pronouncements. To Lady Blessington, he chuckled at the effect this would likely have on his "future biographers … as I flatter myself I shall have more than one": "Indeed, the more the merrier, say I. One will represent me as a sort of sublime misanthrope, with moments of kind feelings…. Another will portray me as a modern Don Juan; and a third … will … if only for opposition sake, represent me as an *amiable*, ill-used gentleman, 'more sinned against than sinning.'" To his friend Hobhouse, he expressed a similar idea in more worried tones: "Will not my life … be given in a false and

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unfair point of view by others? – I mean *false* as to *praise* as well as *censure*?" Letting Byron speak for himself to a wide variety of correspondents might give us our best chance of getting a composite view of his complex and evolving character.

Two centuries after his death, what aspects of Byron's life and work still resonate? Undergirding everything is his use of words, the seemingly endless capacity for verbal expression, adaptation, and invention evident in his poems, letters, and conversation. Byron himself wrote, "I twine / My hopes of being remembered in my line / With my land's language." Accordingly, this book is designed to amplify Byron's voice, animated by that lively, inventive, funny, disturbing, tortured, brilliant rhetorical force that readers hear in the poetry and letters alike. The stakes remain high. Byron railed against dishonest, hypocritical uses of language, which he called "cant" or "canting," and he aimed his own writing against "the *cant* which is the crying sin of this double-dealing and false-speaking time of selfish spoilers." In this light, the many contradictions and paradoxes of Byron's work can be seen as sallies in an unfinished war against dogma, cant, and false certainties. For Byron, this amounted to a struggle for liberty on both personal and global scales. He wrote in 1822, "it is necessary, in the present clash of philosophy and tyranny, to throw away the scabbard. I know it is against fearful odds; but the battle must be fought." As Jerome McGann has said, Byron's poetry "comes not to balance and reconcile opposite and discordant things and qualities. It comes to magnify their profusion" and thus break through to new possibilities. Byron's uncertainty, inconsistency, irony, and perversity remain useful postures of rebellion against the false, often oppressive, surfaces of the doctrinaire.

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Despite his many privileges as a member of England's hereditary aristocracy, Byron was both insider and outsider. He was born physically disabled (with a deformed foot), suffered childhood sexual abuse, was raised by a volatile single mother in straitened financial circumstances, struggled with bipolar moods and disordered eating throughout his life, and was sexually interested in both men and women in a time when sodomy was still a capital crime in his native country. Accordingly, he produced work that traverses extremes of feeling with irony, energy, and a strong emphasis on individual liberty and resistance. Matt Sandler has demonstrated Byron's importance to generations of Black writers and his extensive influence on African American literature. Richard Cardwell and others have surveyed his pan-European influence, especially visible in adaptations of Byron's rhetoric of liberty and individuality as relevant to revolutions and national identity movements across the globe. His writing still speaks across class and racial lines to anyone who feels like a social exile or an alien to the status quo and embraces the power of that estrangement.

Some of Byron's championing of rebellion coalesces into the flawed masculine figures of his work through 1818. It would not be long before his name mutated into an adjective, Byronic, that signified a darkly charismatic and dangerous mode. As he describes the protagonist of *Lara*:

> There was in him a vital scorn of all:
> As if the worst had fall'n which could befall
> He stood a stranger in this breathing world,
> An erring spirit from another hurled;
> A thing of dark imaginings

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Versions of this Byronic hero gave rise to a now-mythic cultural figure: the brooding, forbidding, charismatic rebel, "mad, bad, and dangerous to know" (as Caroline Lamb wrote of Byron), yet with the capacity for intense love, a gothic villain tempered by romantic sentiment somehow allied to tragic violence. Amplified by the *Frankenstein* summer of 1816 that also gave rise to *The Vampyre*, this character inspired the creation of many others like him, and their names are legion: Heathcliff, Mr. Rochester, Lestat, Edward Cullen, Angel, Dream, and more. Byron's life and candid letters give us an unusually clear view of the figure's origins and darkly seductive appeal.

Byron's other side is comedy, equally strong and particularly visible in his letters and his later poetry, such as *Beppo*, *The Vision of Judgment*, and *Don Juan*. In those works, as in Byron's letters, we hear the music of human experience in happier, funnier tones, even as darker ironies and more savage emotions await on other pages, or even lurk in the interstices of his brilliant, playful lines. Byron's friends and lovers often stressed how different he was in person from the tragic rebels of his early poetry – how convivial and high-spirited, witty and flippant, chatty and almost silly. That version of Byron oscillated with the depressive one, giving rise to Lady Blessington's observation about his chameleon-like nature. In the ten letters you are about to read, you will see examples of the many sides of Byron's temperament and be struck by a prose that is at once its vehicle and its mirror. In his ability to laugh at himself, wittily skewer the foibles of others, stress the comedy in unfortunate events, and, perhaps above all, to have fun with language itself, Byron models the vital pleasures of the comic worldview crucial for our sanity.

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In its enumerative structure, this book resonates with a number of recent biographies of other poets, including Lucasta Miller's *Keats: A Brief Life in Nine Poems and One Epitaph*, Martha Ackman's *These Fevered Days: Ten Pivotal Moments in the Making of Emily Dickinson*, and Greil Marcus's *Folk Music: A Bob Dylan Biography in Seven Songs.* This arrangement prompts what we might call a stadial narrative of a life – a sequence of leaps between stepping stones across the breadth of that flowing river. At the same time, I've attempted to survey the overall territory, without any ambitions of replacing the previous full-length biographies of Byron, of which there have been many. Leslie Marchand's *Byron: A Biography* (1957) stands at the headwaters of all modern comprehensive biographical treatments, succeeded most recently and authoritatively by Fiona MacCarthy's *Byron: Life and Legend* (2002). Particularly valuable partial treatments of his life from a previous era include *Byron: The Years of Fame* and *Byron in Italy* (Peter Quennell), *The Last Attachment* (Iris Origo), and *Byron: The Last Journey* (Harold Nicolson). I have leaned heavily on the work of these biographers in my attempt to convey the complexities of Byron's character and the variety of his experiences.

In addition, since MacCarthy's biography, important new material has been presented in James Bieri's *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Biography* (2004); the Cochran and Rees edition of Teresa Guiccioli's *Lord Byron's Life in Italy* (2005); Andrew Nicholson's *Letters of John Murray to Lord Byron* (2007); Edna O'Brien's *Byron in Love* (2010); David Ellis's *Byron in Geneva* (2011); Roderick Beaton's *Byron's War* (2013); Julia Markus's *Lady Byron and Her Daughters* (2015); Miranda Seymour's *In Byron's Wake* (2018); and Emily Brand's *The Fall of the House of Byron* (2020). Each of these first-rate books has

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informed this one in countless ways. Beaton's distinguished *Byron's War* was particularly crucial for my understanding of Byron's role in the Greek Revolution, and Stephen Minta's *On a Voiceless Shore: Byron in Greece* (1998) was an ongoing source of inspiration. My transcriptions of the letters themselves are taken (with some modifications based on my own examination of the originals) from Leslie Marchand's definitive edition of *Byron's Letters and Journals*, the single most important resource for this book. For those interested in reading more of Byron's letters, I recommend Richard Lansdown's judicious selected edition. I have also relied on the invaluable *Shelley and his Circle* volumes edited by Donald Reiman, Kenneth Neill Cameron, and Doucet Devin Fischer, on Peter Cochran's far-ranging editorial work on Byron, on Norman Page's *Byron Chronology* (my constant companion), and on the texts and information in Jerome McGann's authoritative *Complete Poetical Works*.

As even a partial list such as this suggests, a vast paper trail has followed Byron almost from the beginning. Two centuries on, his poetry and legend persist on the strength of that documentary record. As Auden writes of the posthumous Yeats, "he is scattered among hundred cities" across the world; like Yeats, Byron has become his admirers.

From the upper story of the Byron Research Center and Museum in Messolonghi, you can look out across the lagoon toward the mountains shrouded in mist and see something like Byron's last view of the world. Built as an homage to the Kapsalis house in which Byron lived and died, the Center stands as evidence of his ongoing influence both in Greece and around the world. Students, scholars, readers, and fans come here to make contact with Byron: it is a place, like Newstead Abbey in Nottinghamshire, that vibrates with

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the energy of his presence. And as an avatar of the Kapsalis house, it evokes a dark inflection point in the city's history. In 1826, two years after Byron's death, the long Turkish siege of Messolonghi had reached a crisis: starving and desperate, the surviving citizens determined to rush forth from the city gates. Most were cut down by the Ottoman soldiers or captured and sold as slaves. But there was a final, terrible moment of resistance. Sources say that the Kapsalis house was packed with barrels of gunpowder, and as the Turks entered the city, the depleted remnant of its residents (the sick and wounded, the women and children) fired the barrels and destroyed the house and themselves. The Center vibrates with that energy also.

But if Messolonghi is a city where things ended, it is also a place of beginnings. Byron's untimely death there imparted a sudden high seriousness to his efforts at nation-building. The "satanic" poet who had often been dismissed as a libertine, rake, dilettante, or dandy was in part redeemed. Byron wouldn't have thought himself lucky on that April night in 1824 in Messolonghi, as – feverish, bewildered, and exhausted by his doctors' regimen of purgatives and bloodletting – he felt death approaching. Yet he must have known that, despite the odds, he had managed for himself something like a hero's end. Byron would have been sarcastic about the whole situation, of course: he had already made jokes about dying "marsh-ally" from malarial fever rather than "martially," and he harbored few remaining illusions about himself or the Greeks by 1824. But he knew he had done *something*. And he may have dimly foreseen both the attention that his death would bring to the Greek cause and, relatively soon thereafter, the shift in British policy in the region. Two years after Byron's death, the combined forces of Britain, France,

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and Russia defeated the Ottoman navy at the Battle of Navarino, and modern independent Greece was born.

Up to the present day, the name of Byron still resonates across Greece, where he is grouped alongside the founders of the nation. The troubled little boy from Aberdeen, the overweight and bashful Southwell teen, the louche and scandalous libertine of Cambridge and London, the impassioned wanderer in the Mediterranean world, the Italianate lover in Venice and Ravenna, and above all, the Romantic poet – to this list of Byronic personae was added, finally, the Greek freedom-fighter. Poetical and martial glory, then: Byron would have treated that double legacy with heavy irony, but, ultimately, I think it would not have displeased him.

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