

A PRISON ON EACH HAND: PRISON SCENES AND PARADOX IN BYRON'S POETRY

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“Romanticism . . . has endowed the prison symbol with unusual prestige,” as Victor Brombert, in *The Romantic Prison: The French Tradition*, observed:

The motif of the gloomy prison became insistent toward the end of the eighteenth century, in large part for political and ideological reasons . . . . The symbolic value attributed to the Bastille and other state prisons viewed as tyrannical constructs . . . the setting of Gothic novels in dungeons [and] vaults . . . can tell us a great deal about the structures of the Romantic imagination, and the favored dialectical tensions between oppression and the dream of freedom, between fate and revolt, between the awareness of the finite and the longing for infinity. (3-4)

The subject of my paper is Byron's variations on the theme and conventions of the Romantic prison. Given Byron's preoccupation with freedom, we are not surprised to observe the alacrity with which he accessed the vocabulary of imprisonment—for an image, a metaphor, a symbol, or a scene: “. . . chaining / Hearts . . . / Beat 'gainst their prison: (“Stanzas [‘Could Love for ever’]”, 81-83); the exile “has the whole world for a dungeon strong” (*The Prophecy of Dante*, 4.131-32); “delicate waters sleep, / Prison'd in marble” (*Childe Harold*, 4.1042). Just as in these figurative prisons, paradox is pervasive in the aesthetics of Byron's prison scenes. Identifying these paradoxes provides a way of understanding the relation of Byron's prison writing both to a political purpose and to a metaphysics that perhaps overwhelms the political focus.

Without question, the prison scenes in *The Corsair*, *The Prisoner of Chillon*, *The Lament of Tasso*, and *The Two Foscari* make a political statement in exposing and opposing a tyrannical state, ruler, or ruling class. First, the prisoners are all sympathetic and are victims of a despotic or corrupt ruler. (To read Romantic prison literature, one would think no bad or depraved individual was ever sent to prison to protect society from his aggressions: only morally superior, articulate and brooding men victimized by villains.) The bandit-hero Conrad is perhaps the most prison-worthy; however, even he is made a sympathetic victim, first, because his imprisoner is a Turkish despot, and, secondly, because of his commitment to freedom. Outraged by such barbarous tyrannies as the harem, Conrad decrees for his men what must be a unique law in pirate history, the prohibition of rape. Conrad himself, who neither eats nor drinks to excess, is faithful to one woman (sort of). If he isn't "the mildest manner'd man / That ever scuttled ship or cut a throat" (*Don Juan*, 2. 321-22)," he is surely one of the most abstemious and melancholy. The incarcerations of the Swiss patriot Bonivard, the genius poet Tasso, and the fanatically devoted Venetian, Jacopo Foscari, similarly serve to highlight the tyranny and inhumanity of their oppressors.

The political message is furthered by the paradox of the bad/good prison guard, a convention of Romantic prison literature. When not sadistic or dehumanized, the guard is shown sympathizing with the prisoner and as a weak, if not subversive, link in the chain of command. In *The Corsair*, the same guards whose "smiling Hate denies" (322) Conrad's cries for water later fail to prevent Gulnare from entering his cell. These "drowsy guards" are:

Worn out with toil, and tired with changing blows,  
Their eyes had envied Conrad his repose;

And chill and nodding at the turret door,

They stretch their listless limbs, and watch no more . . .” (415-18)

Chillon’s prisoner’s “keepers grew compassionate” (301), and Jacopo Foscari’s reluctant torturer, “dared not disobey” (1.154), while his prison guard pleads with him to confess so that he will be spared further torture, soliloquizing: “What more may be imposed!—I dread to think on’t” (1.132). As Byron expressed it in *Don Juan*, the jailor is “No less a victim to the bolt and bar. / . . . He’s as far / From the enjoyment of the earth and air / Who watches o’er the chain, as they who wear” (10.539-44).

“There is *no* freedom--even for *Masters*--in the midst of slaves,” Byron noted in his journal (*BLJ*, 9.41), and he repeatedly expressed this ironic truism in the recurrent pairing, if not conflation, of the prison and the palace, or court—as in *The Corsair*, where Pacha Seyd’s “fort / Contained at once his captive and his court” (368-69). (For some other examples, see *Age of Bronze*, 73; *Marino Faliero*, 1.512; *Don Juan* 5.1171; *Sardanapalus*, 1.636, 2.419, 5.183; *The Two Foscari*, 3.147.) The grammatical ambiguity of the famous description of the Bridge of Sighs at the beginning of *Childe Harold 4*, “a palace and a prison on each hand,” is a purposeful solecism, as Peter Cochran and others have noted (Hopps, 176). As Byron pointedly explained to Murray, the Bridge of Sighs “divides or rather joins the palace of the Doge to the prison of the state” (*BLJ*, 5.244). The deconstruction of power as another form of enslavement finds additional echoes in *Childe Harold 4*, as when Byron rhetorically inquires of St. Mark’s steeds of brass, “Are they *not bridled?*” (112), and when he offers an auditory image reminiscent of Blake, “chains / Clank over sceptred cities “ (103).” Indeed, who is less free than Doge Foscari, tragically incapable of preventing the imprisonment and torture of his son?

The rhetoric of outrage against injustice and heartless oppression fills Byron's prison poems; however, the prison scenes are developed in a way that is incommensurate with a political purpose. Do any of Byron's imprisoned heroes discourse on a better form of government? Conrad himself acknowledges "Well have I earned . . . the meed / Of Seyd's revenge by many a lawless deed" (3.286), claiming that he would have done to Seyd precisely what Seyd has done in imprisoning him. What politics is that? The specific politics of Bonivard or Tasso, the specific political malfeasance of the Duke of Savoy and the Marquess of Este, are muted in the poems. (Byron in fact ignores bothersome historical specifics that would interfere with the clear delineation of white hats and black hats). As Jerome McGann has pointed out, "The theme of traduced, imprisoned, and persecuted genius dominates Byron's poetry between 1816 and 1819" (*CPW*, 4.479). That theme has autobiographical as much as political underpinnings. *The Two Foscari*, which Byron himself declared was not a political play, in fact portrays hereditary monarchy sympathetically, a sympathy Byron did not usually share. No doubt these works historically served political causes in expressing Byron's "plain, sworn, downright detestation / Of every despotism in every nation" (*Don Juan*, 9.191-92), but their preoccupations are less politically specific, revolutionary, or reformatory than they are general, existential, and metaphysically pessimistic. "I have simplified my politics into an utter detestation of all existing governments" (diary entry, January 16, 1814) is scarcely a politics at all. One need only compare the utopian politics of Shelley's Jupiter/Prometheus dyad to Byron's Prometheus—in a certain respect the prototype for all of Byron's prisoners—to see how the transgression, imprisonment, resistance, and endurance of Byron's Titan form not primarily a political idea, but a symbol "of [Man's] fate and force; . . . / His own funereal destiny"

(“Prometheus,” 47, 50).

Byron’s prison aesthetics, thus, exceed a political function; through pervasive paradox, Byron’s prisons tend to convey the sense of an ultimate negative capability. Beginning with the imagery, the first thing we notice about Byron’s prisons is darkness. Describing the dungeon at Chillon, Bonivard refers to “the dark vault . . . wherein we lay” (115) and “the darkness of my dim abode” (360); in fact, to deepen the darkness, Byron makes a point of locating Bonivard’s room “below the surface of the lake” (116), while in fact, according to McGann, “the room is not and never was” below the water level (though Byron may have assumed the water level to have been higher at one time) (*CPW*, 4.452). However, even the scene of Conrad’s imprisonment, which is in a tower, is set at nighttime to allow for the requisite gloomy ambience. At the same time, Byron can scarcely ever mention darkness without also mentioning light, and rather than absolute darkness, chiaroscuro more accurately characterizes the shading of Byron’s prisons—as in the *Caritas Romana* passage in *Childe Harold 4*: “There is a dungeon in whose dim drear light / . . . Two forms are slowly shadow’d on my sight” (1324, 1326). In *The Two Foscari*, Marina describes “the gloom of this eternal cell, which never / Knew sunbeam, and the sallow sullen glare / Of the familiar’s torch, which seems akin / To darkness more than light . . .” (3.51-54). Like the flames in Byron’s “Darkness” or the light that shows but “canst not dispel” the darkness in “Sun of the Sleepless,” the image of light rarely carries the traditional positive associations. Tasso sees “Unwonted lights along my prison shine” (191).

Occasionally, the light-in-the-darkness image carries the usual positive symbolism, as when feeling is restored to Bonivard: “A light broke in upon my brain” (251). But more often, bright light is accompanied by a dizzying or painful effect. Conrad marks “the glorious sun and