

Byron's *The Lament of Tasso* and the Mannerism of Madness *Mirka Horova*

Byron to Murray, Rome, May 5th, 1817:

... "*The Lament of Tasso*" which I sent from Florence has I trust arrived – I look upon it as a "these be good rhymes" – as Pope's papa said to him – when he was a boy. – – For the *two – it* & the drama – you will disburse to me (via Kinnaird) *Six* hundred guineas – you will perhaps be surprized that I set the same price upon this – as upon the drama – but besides that I look upon it as *good* – I won't take less than three hundred gs for anything. – – – The two together will make *you* a larger publication than the "Siege & Parisina" – so you may think yourself let off very easy – that is to say – if these poems are good for anything, which I hope and believe.¹

Murray to Byron, London, May 13th, 1817:

... I instantly sent the Lines upon Tasso to Mr G – who called with them soon afterwards and assured me that they were exceedingly good & that there was besides a difference in the style which would by being novel prove exceedingly interesting ...²

Torquato Tasso's work was especially admired in the Romantic era for its extraordinary imagery, and the poet himself for his tragic fate. Written following Byron's visit to Ferrara on 19 April 1817, *The Lament of Tasso* is marked by Byron's 'inclination to seek his own image throughout history'.³ The dramatic monologue this inspired can also be read in the context of Mannerist aesthetics, as its expressiveness performs a madness that Byron's Tasso is himself manifestly not suffering from, to produce a writhing, wailing, passionately tortured text full of agony and ecstasy. Byron masters the art of novelty and curiosity, the main principles of Mannerist art, but, acquiring a kind of poetic mimicry of Tasso as well, goes beyond these principles to cut a *figura serpentinata* of a poem, full of pointed verbal straining and extraordinary metaphors, sharp conceits and tortuous diction. The aim of this paper then is to conceive of *The Lament of Tasso* in relation to Mannerist art so as to better describe the subtleties of Byron's *maniera* in one of his favourite poetic exercises, that of inhabiting a historical past self, an activity underpinned by Byron's fascination with visiting memorials and tombs erected over famous figures of history – be it Churchill, Bonnivard, Dante or Tasso – and breathing in the memorial atmosphere, quite literally inspired.

Historical ventriloquising is invariably a special performance for Byron – he conjures up the dead not for traditional elegiac purposes, but to inscribe their contours with his manner of expression and thought, voicing himself through a gallery of great men, and thereby creating and projecting across history his hallmark *maniera*, his style. The result is often troubling and ambiguous, when approached through the everlasting question of authenticity. As in Wilde's 'Truth of Masks', Byron's ventriloquist ventures, including his dramatic soliloquising of Tasso, deal in the 'conversion of fact into effect' and are 'self-revealing to a fault'.⁴ Byron's historical characters are by definition what McGann calls both 'referential' and 'reflexive', but what is distinctive about Byron's imaginative works, including the dramas, is that they make the play of those double-faced relationships their principal field of attention. Thus, we do not read *The Lament of Tasso* as a study of the Italian poet, but as a poetical representation of Byron in a contemporary act of imagining himself as Tasso. The subject of the poem is neither the Renaissance Italian poet nor the Romantic English poet, it is the masquerade of their relations as they get played out in the poem. The poetical subject is personal only in a dramatically indirect way.⁵

This double play of the paradox of disingenuous sincerity is a hallmark of Byron's lyrical style. It places Byron, we might also say, as the *Sprecher* figure on his canvases, very much as a Mannerist painter might place himself in his paintings – that is as the one looking straight at us, while a historical scene is painted dexterously around him, the gaze both familiar and estranged, destabilizing and problematising the picture.

1: BLJ V 210.

2: LJM 228-9.

3: J. J. McGann, *Byron and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 30.

4: *Ibid.*, p. 141.

5: *Ibid.*, pp.142-3.

Let us now turn to the particular Mannerism of *The Lament of Tasso*. The OED provides us with the following definition of the word and concept:

mannerism: the adoption, to a pronounced or excessive degree, of a distinctive style, manner, or method of treatment, especially in art and literature. [...] In specific use (Mannerism): a style of 16th century Italian art characterized by stylistic exaggeration, distorted scale and perspective, and unusual effects of colour and lighting.

Byron's *Tasso* is an exercise in distortion, a text contorted by agony and ecstasy. In it Byron deploys a number of aesthetic strategies that we find in Mannerist art, to produce startling imagery, twisted metaphors and a staccato diction, even while the form draws rather more obviously on one of the oldest Classical traditions in poetry, the lament:

Long years!—It tries the thrilling frame to bear
 And eagle-spirit of a child of Song—
 Long years of outrage, calumny, and wrong;
 Imputed madness, prison'd solitude,
 And the mind's canker in its savage mood,
 When the impatient thirst of light and air
 Parches the heart; and the abhorred grate,
 Marring the sunbeams with its hideous shade,
 Works through the throbbing eyeball to the brain,
 With a hot sense of heaviness and pain;
 And bare, at once, Captivity display'd
 Stands scoffing through the never-open'd gate,
 Which nothing through its bars admits, save day,
 And tasteless food, which I have eat alone
 Till its unsocial bitterness is gone;
 And I can banquet like a beast of prey,
 Sullen and lonely, crouching in the cave
 Which is my lair, and—it may be—my grave.⁶

The vivid, raw, visceral physicality of the opening lines is pregnant with a sense of oppression. The somatic synaesthesia moves through a chiaroscuro of tortured thoughts that only help to reduce the persona of Tasso to an animalistic, beastly state. Or so it seems – the latter part of the first section of the poem in fact bears witness to the force of an unconquered, though heavily tried, mind, a feat of defiance and mental transcendence in a way reminiscent of, though not quite the same as, *Manfred*.⁷ In other words, while on the one hand Tasso's suffering is depicted through acute hyperbole, on the other hand his capacity to overcome that suffering is depicted through idealistic exaggeration:

All this hath somewhat worn me, and may wear,
 But must be borne. I stoop not to despair;
 For I have battled with mine agony,
 And made me wings wherewith to overfly
 The narrow circus of my dungeon wall,
 And freed the Holy Sepulchre from thrall,
 And revell'd among men and things divine,
 And pour'd my spirit over Palestine,
 In honour of the sacred war for Him.⁸

Byron's Manfred *maniera* – his new, or 'novel',⁹ style – has reached the point of saturation in *Tasso* – the piece having been written while Byron was finishing the third act of *Manfred*. And, partly as a result of this saturation, *Tasso*, more than *Manfred*, and in terms of style as well as theme, presents us with a study of a

6: *The Lament of Tasso*, Section I, ll.1-18.

7: The obvious difference between the two works is the avowal of Christian faith here (via an allusion to Tasso's most famous work, *Gerusalemme liberata*, and Manfred's exploration of the metaphysical worlds combined with his rejection of religion of any kind).

8: *The Lament of Tasso*, Section 1, ll.19-27.

9: See Murray's letter to Byron quoted above.

‘wandering outlaw [...] of his own dark mind’¹⁰ that that repeatedly veers towards, and into, the wild, twisting, writhing exaggerations and distortions of perspective characteristic of (literary) incarcerated madness.

Madness is the position of exclusion, of exile from society and all things sane, essentially a mark of Cain, signifying banishment. It is for this reason, among others, that insanity has been a compelling theme to literature in general and Romanticism in particular. But the poet himself, for certain kinds of Romantic sensibility, is also a madman closely related to the ancient mystical *vates* – the vatic poet, a prophetic figure inspired by the divine, wielding the powers of poetic language, touched with fire. Byron has his version of this notion of the poet, a version that aligns the poet with ‘all’ of history’s ‘unquiet things’ and foregrounds the madness of inspiration rather more than, say, Wordsworth might:

This makes the madmen who have made men mad
By their contagion; Conquerors and Kings,
Founders of sects and systems, to whom add
Sophists, Bards, Statesmen, all unquiet things
Which stir too strongly the soul’s secret springs,
And are themselves the fools to those they fool;
Envied, yet how unenviable! What stings
Are theirs! One breast laid open were a school
Which would unteach mankind the lust to shine or rule.¹¹

Madness is a theme that reverberates throughout *The Lament of Tasso*, not least in its very excess of expression and its self-conscious sense of this excess – it is ‘too strongly’ stirring ‘the soul’s secret springs’. And, of course, the notion of madness as the spark of all creative potential lies at the core of Mannerist aesthetics. Giordano Bruno’s treatise entitled ‘Of Heroic Insanities’ (*Degli furori eroici*, 1585), for instance, identifies madness as the crucial motive force in both the visual arts and poetry. Torquato Tasso’s own aesthetic programme is marked by a style that is not exactly ‘mad’ but that certainly embraces the irrational and emotional. The fear inspired by the enchanted wood in *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581), for example, has long been read as a fear of a world out of joint, where monsters reign and nothing is as it should be. Tasso’s poetry famously marks a departure from the Renaissance affiliation to the rigorous rhetorics of antiquity, and so a departure from the ‘pure’ principles of the high Renaissance. We might even suggest that his work points directly towards Romanticism’s rich aesthetic blending of irrationality, fear and the fantastic, its reflections on emotion and ‘emotionalisations’ of reflection.

Sections III and IV of *The Lament* deal with the gruesome, surreal daily reality of the asylum – a world permanently out of joint; a circus featuring frenzy, half inarticulate at best, tortured, manic:

Above me, hark! the long and maniac cry
Of minds and bodies in captivity,
And hark! the lash and the increasing howl,
And the half-inarticulate blasphemy!
There be some here with worse than frenzy foul,
Some who do still goad on the o’erlabour’d mind,
And dim the little light that’s left behind
With needless torture, as their tyrant will
Is wound up to the lust of doing ill:
With these and with their victims am I class’d,
’Mid sounds and sights like these long years have passed;
’Mid sounds and sights like these my life may close:
So let it be—for then I shall repose.

IV.

Where laughter is not mirth, nor thought the mind,
Nor words a language, nor even men mankind;
Where cries reply to curses, shrieks to blows,
And each is tortured in his separate hell—
For we are crowded in our solitudes—
Many, but each divided by the wall,
Which echoes Madness in her babbling moods.

10: *CHP* III, iii.

11: *CHP* III, xliii.

This is the world of dissociation, distortion, disintegration of humanity, marked by utter negation – there is no communication, no solidarity or community: ‘each is tortured in his separate hell’, ‘crowded’ in ‘solitude’, sentenced to an existence without language – the realm of capitalized ‘Madness in her babbling moods’, cruel and inscrutable. We are perilously close to the chaotic world of Bosch, and Byron’s Tasso is our observer, so to speak, but an observer himself swept up in the hellish madness, working at his dramatic vindication, having been ‘debased in the minds of men’, ‘debarr[ed] the usage of his mind’, ‘blight[ed]’ ‘in the best of [his] career’, his ‘thoughts’ ‘brand[ed] as things to shun and fear’. The insistent pounding of the enumerated wrongs – the mid-line ‘debased’ followed in the next three lines by the anaphoric trio of ‘Debarring’, ‘Blighting’ and ‘Branding’ – itself creates a powerful sonic prison.

The ambiguous sense of madness – as both a potentially inspiring creative force and, at the same time, a frequently self-thwarting one – also lies at the core of Mannerist art and aesthetics. The leap from mania to *maniera* is not great. And in Section VIII of Byron’s poem, though the grand theme of Tasso own ‘imputed’ madness is played down, when this issue is finally addressed, we are hurled into a chiaroscuro of monsters, hauntings and tortured imaginings that energise but also jeopardize the speaker’s heroically all-enduring intellect:

Yet do I feel at times my mind decline,
But with a sense of its decay:—I see
Unwonted lights along my prison shine,
And a strange demon, who is vexing me
With pilfering pranks and petty pains, below
The feeling of the healthful and the free;
But much to One, who long hath suffer’d so,
Sickness of heart, and narrowness of place,
And all that must be borne, or can debase.
I thought my enemies had been but Man,
But spirits may be leagued with them—all Earth
Abandons—Heaven forgets me—in the dearth
Of such defence the Powers of Evil can,
It may be, tempt me further—and prevail
Against the outworn creature they assail.
Why in this furnace is my spirit proved
Like steel in tempering fire?—because I loved?¹²

Hallucination and paranoia prey on Tasso’s ‘o’erlabour’d mind’, hunting and haunting him – yet, even then, he still retains ‘the sense of its decay’; he is never fully absorbed by insanity. But neither is he vatically ‘inspired’ by his madness – Byron’s Tasso does not offer, for instance, the kind of grand prophecy that Byron’s Dante does, predicting only that his own cell will be a ‘future temple’, ‘Which nations yet shall visit for [his] sake’ and that his own ‘wreath’ shall eventually be Ferrara’s ‘only crown’, and his ‘dungeon’ the subject of the city’s ‘most far renown’, when its walls are at last ‘unpeopled’.¹³ Much more than offer vatic prophecies, what Tasso does is lament ‘the soul’s haunted cell’, where the mind can do little more than heroically strive not to ‘rot congenial with the abyss’.¹⁴ The autonomy of the mind as its own place has been seriously sequestered here, pushed to an extreme – exaggerated, distorted, warped. Musically speaking, however, *The Lament of Tasso* is not altogether an aria of pure pathos – *a lascia ch’io pianga mia cruda sorte* (let me bewail my cruel fate) – either. The spirit of Byron’s Tasso, much like Manfred, defies his corrupt confinement – he has his wits about him, unlike the Tasso of historical record, described, for instance, in de Montaigne’s account of his visit to the asylum of Santa Anna in Ferrara, which renders Tasso a man utterly consumed by madness. Byron’s theatricality invents a seemingly authentic consciousness here, but it is not a historical consciousness so much as a distinctively Byronic one rooted in and drawing on certain specific, recognisable aesthetic conventions and presenting us with a dialectic of apparitional forces playing against one another and achieving some sort of precarious balance. In this aesthetic balancing act, we can clearly discern Byron dexterously playing with the discourses and practices of Mannerism, the style of his adopted persona. Indeed, the sheer convertibility and whirl of convoluted conceits render *The Lament* a *discordia concors*,¹⁵ a discordant harmony, or harmonized discord, in which contradictory elements mould and contort the persona of Tasso, bringing

¹²: *The Lament of Tasso*, Section VIII, ll.189-205.

¹³: *The Lament of Tasso*, Section IX, ll.12-18.

¹⁴: *The Lament of Tasso*, Section IX, l.25.

¹⁵: The ‘union of the incompatible’, a major trait of Mannerist art in general.

him alive in a truly Mannerist manner. Yet Byron's ultimate achievement in *The Lament of Tasso* is not to achieve a Mannerist union of, and balance between, incompatible elements. It is, rather, his twisting of what he takes from Mannerism, and elsewhere, to create both another Byronic self and what we might call a distinctly Byronic *maniera*.