**The Ultimate Romantic**

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**BIOGRAPHY: PORSCHA FERMANIS** reviews Byron in Love by Edna OBrien Weidenfeld Nicholson, 228pp, £12.99

MEETING Lord Byron in Athens in 1810, the 35-year-old Lady Hestor Stanhope, a well-known wit and traveller, was one of the few ladies (or gentlemen for that matter) not to fall under his spell. Byron’s effect on women was, by all accounts, extraordinary. Lady Rosebery almost fainted on meeting him; a demented Lady Caroline Lamb dressed up as a page boy in order to gain admission to his rooms and sent him a cutting of her pubic hair; and even his misused wife of only one year, Annabella Milbanke, was distressed by news of his death in 1824.

Oblivious to the charms that led other ladies to these lengths, Lady Hestor instead describes Byron as an affected poseur motivated by avarice and capriciousness, and prompted in all things by self-aggrandizement and ulterior motive. In her biography, Byron in Love, Edna O’Brien more kindly characterizes him as a paradox: “insider and outsider, beautiful and deformed, serious and facetious”. For O’Brien, Byron is not so much a poseur as “the first and ongoing celebrity”, a genuinely dazzling and ambiguous chameleon of many faces whom the reading public, both then and now, understandably confuse with his seductive literary creations from the melancholic Childe Harold to the rapacious Don Juan.

Unlike Lady Hestor, however, O’Brien seems unwilling to debunk the myth of Byron’s winning “combination of genius and Satanism”, revelling in those lurid and “gothic” aspects of his life and character that have their “literary correlation in the works of Edgar Allen Poe”: Byron, the troubled and deformed heir to Mad Jack and the Wicked Lord; Byron, the “hallucinating bridegroom believing he was in hell, then pacing the long ghostly gallery with his loaded pistols”; Byron, the damned and incestuous lover of his half-sister, Augusta Leigh; Byron, the melancholic “werewolf”; and Byron, the cruel tyrant who neglects his daughter Allegra and that “damned bitch” Claire Clairmont, her mother.

As is perhaps to be expected from a book entitled Byron in Love, we hear little about the “other” Byron: Byron the classicist, Byron the philosopher, Byron the poet, and Byron the intellectual. Nor are we privy to the more cerebral aspects of his friendships with literary figures from Percy Shelley to Tom Moore. O’Brien instead describes a life or, more accurately, a “plot” that is “mad, bad, and dangerous” from its less than propitious beginnings in a rented room above a shop in London to its series of violent love affairs to the failed marriage that led to his permanent exile from England, and his life in Italy and Greece.

The book begins with the narrative of Byron’s difficult childhood, followed by his education at Cambridge, and his travels in Greece and Turkey. The success of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* in 1812 led to affairs with numerous females of note, including Lady Lamb, Lady Oxford, and Lady Wedderburn, but after shocking revelations about his marriage and triangular affair with his half-sister were made public, he was branded a second Caligula and spent the rest of his life in exile, briefly finding contentment with his Italian mistress, Teresa Guiccioli, only to die prematurely of a fever in the cause of Greek independence at the age of 36.

We will never know what secrets his memoirs contained, but its contents were such that his friends, publisher, wife, and sister all colluded in its burning. This material will, no doubt, already be familiar to a reading public inundated with biographies on Byron. Anticipating this, O’Brien presciently asks the relevant question in her introduction: “So why another book on Byron?”

Following the relatively recent publication of lengthy biographies by Fiona MacCarthy and others, one is tempted to ask, why indeed? O’Brien’s own, somewhat mercurial, answer to the question is two-fold. On the one hand, she claims that she was motivated to write the book by reading a remark of Lady Blessington that Byron was “the most extraordinary and terrifying person [she had] ever met”. On the other, she notes that she was fascinated by the idea of one artist writing about another: “Rilke on Rodin, addressing that mysterious mediation between the life and the art.”

The fact that O’Brien says very little about Byron’s art (either as one writer to another or otherwise) and much about his sexual exploits should not obscure the genuine strengths of this book. Not everyone has the time or the inclination to read a 500-page book on Byron; nor is a biography on a literary figure obliged to be literary or to provide a breadth or coverage beyond its intended brief. There is a place on our library shelves for O’Brien’s vividness, immediacy, and command of language. For this is a biography of intensity rather than detail.

Byron’s character is made out not by facts, dates, analysis or explanation but rather by those “quick, deft glimpses” of human nature that O’Brien ascribes to Virginia Woolf. Her style is, moreover, as “swift and uncluttered” as Byron’s own startling observations in his letters, which she uses throughout the book with economy and great effect. Describing Byron’s encounter with the “crumbled pediments” of the Acropolis, for example, she refers to them, in words as moving as his own, as “ruins that mirrored the ruin within himself and the wounds that would magnify and that he sought to repress through love, through poetry and through action.”

One of the most difficult tasks for writers and critics of the Romantic period is to find a way to write about Romanticism without being romantic. If O’Brien has not always succeeded or, rather, wanted to succeed in this, *Byron in Love* is nonetheless a memorable and beautifully written sketch of a man both in and out of love – if not with himself, then at least with those aspects of himself that he recognized in others.

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