**Byron as Others**

Byron, as Keats disdainfully put it, ‘cuts a figure—bur he is not figurative’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Apparently Byron is always centre stage. William Hazlitt, deploring Byron’s egotism, accused Byron of using *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* to write ‘everlasting centos of himself’.[[2]](#footnote-2) Even Byron’s appreciators tend to see his poetic victories through the lens of his capacity to impose his personality onto his poetry. When Byron’s personality seems in abeyance, his critics pounce. For example, W. H. Auden deplored *Manfred* for reading as if it ‘must have been written, as it were, by committee’.[[3]](#footnote-3) For many, Byron is the ultimate example of the poet that forces the self into the limelight. But which self is Byron? Mary Shelley drily noted Byron’s success in making his readers believe that they have encountered the ‘real’ Byron in his work: ‘I have copied your MSS. The “Eternal Scoffer” seems a favourite of yours. The Critics, as they used to make you a Childe Harold, Giaour, & Lara all in one, will now make a compound of Satan & Cæsar to form your prototype’.[[4]](#footnote-4) But Byron’s manifold selves do not have to fix Byron as a theatrical poet.[[5]](#footnote-5) Rather, we might consider his extraordinary capacity for and experimentation with sympathy. Byronic sympathy does not look the same as Keatsian sympathy, to suggest one example. But it exists and underpins Byron’s signature effects. Byron troubles the idea of sympathy, forcing us to rethink what it is to feel with and for others.

In 1814, Francis Jeffrey singled out Byron as the poet of sympathy: ‘[he] alone has been able to command the sympathy, even of reluctant readers, by the natural magic of his moral sublimity’.[[6]](#footnote-6) Despite this, Cassandra Falke rightly notes the lack of attention to Byron as a sympathetic poet.[[7]](#footnote-7) But the nature of Jeffrey’s praise suggests why critics such as Thomas McCarthy, Rae Greiner, and Nancy Yousef have chosen not to focus upon Byron’s poetry in their considerations of sympathy.[[8]](#footnote-8) For Jeffrey writes of Byron as one who aims to ‘command the sympathy’ even against the will of the reader. Perhaps Jeffrey intuits some of Hume’s concerns in *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*: ‘Eloquence, when at its highest pitch, leaves little room for reason or reflection; but addressing itself entirely to the fancy or the affections, captivates the willing hearers, and subdues their understanding. Happily, this pitch it seldom attains’.[[9]](#footnote-9) Byron meant to attain it frequently. Byron’s poetry compels and then scrutinises sympathy to consider the value and purpose of it in poetry and in human life, and such scrutiny is not always kind.

To experiment with sympathy in poetry might have seemed natural to Byron in the wake of eighteenth-century discussions of the contours of fellow-feeling. Following David Hume’s ideas on sympathy in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, in *A Theory of Moral Sentiments,* Adam Smith notes that in stressing how sympathy is dependent upon an act of imagination: ‘[Another man’s emotions] never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations’.[[10]](#footnote-10) Hume had previously emphasised the imagination’s role, defining sympathy as ‘the conversion of an idea into an impression by the force of imagination’.[[11]](#footnote-11) Though Smith is ‘clearly indebted’ to Hume,[[12]](#footnote-12) the two philosophers’ works have important differences, as Elias L. Khalil summarises: ‘for Smith, sympathy is about understanding that leads to judgment, while for Hume, sympathy is about mimicking that leads to the contagion of emotions’,[[13]](#footnote-13) but Hume and Smith both make sympathy dynamic in nature as they focus on ‘the movement of feelings between persons’.[[14]](#footnote-14) Smith’s view of sympathy is more social than Hume’s, and Smith writes: ‘By the imagination we place ourselves in his [the sufferer’s] situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations’.[[15]](#footnote-15) James Chandler observes that, for Smith, ‘To imagine one’s self in another’s case requires both an act of disembodiment and (at the same time) a virtual reembodiment’.[[16]](#footnote-16) Imagination allows the sympathiser to experience to a degree the vividness of a ‘virtual’ bodily reality. But Smith is careful to qualify his claim. We become ‘in *some* measure the same person’ and ‘form *some* idea of his sensations’ [emphases added]. Such a broad spectrum of possibility allows for any number of caveats or shades of identification. Edmund Burke argues that ‘we have a degree of delight […] in the real misfortunes and pains of others’ when their suffering is set at a distance because sympathy causes us to approach such objects rather than shun them.[[17]](#footnote-17) Laura Hinton picks up on this problem, and writes that ‘sympathy is implicated as a particularly perverse, panopticon strategy’,[[18]](#footnote-18) involving the moral authority of a hidden spectator who is moved by images of suffering. Drawing upon Hume’s *Treatise,* Hinton views such morality as undermined by the sympathiser’s desire for pleasure, arguing that ‘sympathy invariably generate[s] sadistic voyeuristic pleasure in the name of identification’.[[19]](#footnote-19) Literature is a vitally important site of such troubling varieties of sympathy. And this is prime territory for Byron to explore as a poet fascinated by cant, mobility, and identity. Byron tests what it means to use the imagination to carry us beyond ourselves.

Writing about the effects of memory, Lord Kames, aka Henry Home, another correspondent of Smith’s to whom Smith sent the first edition of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, writes of how ‘I am imperceptibly converted into a spectator, and perceive every particular passing in my presence, as when I was in reality a spectator’.[[20]](#footnote-20) Helga Schwalm notes that we might easily replace memory with fiction in this description,[[21]](#footnote-21) and these ideas are suggestive in terms of how Byron plays upon and with readerly sympathy. For Kames, like Smith, might be accused of self-satisfaction rather than deep feeling. Joel Faflak observes that by ‘Aestheticizing sympathy as participation in an other’s tragedy, Smith makes us vicarious witnesses who experience self-satisfaction rather than pathos’.[[22]](#footnote-22) Kames writes, ‘I value myself upon sympathy: I hate and despise myself for envy’, viewing the feeling as painful though ‘voluntary’ as it ‘raises me in my own esteem’.[[23]](#footnote-23) Any attendant pain of feeling for another is mitigated by our own sense of our goodness. Sympathy is proof of our elevated humanity. But Byron will not allow that equation to stand with any real certainty. He draws out the possibility, as Thomas Pfau has it in relation to Smith’s work on sympathy, ‘that the inter-subjective phenomenon of “sentiment” constitutes less an expressive act than a behavioral norm designed and displayed so as to maximize prospects of “approval” by others’.[[24]](#footnote-24) Byron sets to work to disrupt such ‘“prospects” of approval’. His poetry and drama make us feel for the ‘wrong’ people, and critic after critic draws attention to the problematic quality of many of Byron’s heroes, from Conrad to the Giaour, from Lara to Manfred. This is no accident. Byron aims to make us rethink our own capacity for, the nature of, and our personal acts of sympathy. As Jeffrey writes, Byron ‘commands our sympathy’. But for what purpose?

In the *Tales*, we confront our susceptibility to feeling with and for characters that Marilyn Butler describes as ‘masterful, moody outlaws’, that she condemns when she claims that in the case of Byron’s outlaws, ‘Nor has his rebellion any hint of a philosophic dimension. It is drained of ideological content, to a degree actually remarkable in the literature of the period’.[[25]](#footnote-25) But reading Byron as philosophically bankrupt seems so ‘remarkable’ as to be a false assumption. Byron tests his reader’s sympathy, extorting it from us, or commanding it to borrow Jeffrey’s term,[[26]](#footnote-26) for morally questionable protagonists. From Lara’s doubtful sins preceding his appearance in the poem, to the Giaour’s murderous wrath, Byron conscripts us into a sympathy that acts against easy ethical choices. Such sympathy might not ‘raise[s] me in my own esteem’.[[27]](#footnote-27) Instead, Byron threatens our moral decision-making. Smith aimed to attenuate sympathy’s ‘seemingly irrational thrust’.[[28]](#footnote-28) Byron chooses to magnify it. For Byron’s heroes seem dictated by his focus and not by their inherent rightness. In *The Giaour*,Hassan and Byron’s protagonist are twinned by their shared values in terms of Leila. The Giaour says:

 Still, ere thou dost condemn me—pause—

 Not mine the act, though I the cause;

 Yet did he but what I had done

 Had she been false to more than one;

 Faithless to him—he gave the blow,

 But true to me—I laid him low;

 Howe’er deserv’d her doom might be,

 Her treachery was truth to me;[[29]](#footnote-29)

Byron refuses to allow the Giaour moral superiority. When Michael G. Sundell argues that Hassan is ‘a weaker reflection of the protagonist’,[[30]](#footnote-30) he ignores that Hassan is not a lesser creation; the poem is simply not about him. The Giaour affirms that he would have behaved the same way as Hassan: Byron will not allow the reader to think of the Giaour as a more sensitive and ‘Christian’ character. Sympathy is not called forth by ethical considerations. Smith tells us that ‘to approve of the passions of another, therefore, as suitable to their objects, is the same thing as to observe that we entirely sympathize with them’.[[31]](#footnote-31) Byron shakes the very roots of this claim by having us sympathise with thoughts, feelings, and actions that ought not to be condoned. Sympathy becomes more dangerous than logical agreement. Byron’s representation of heroism dwells on its subjectivity, along with sympathy, and he compels us to recognise this problem. The speakers’ obsessive interest in the story of the Giaour creates his heroism, and the sympathy we feel has no easy relationship with goodness.

*Manfred* takes this problem still further. This dramatic poem sees Byron ask his audience to scrutinise the problem of Manfred’s will. Michael Cooke defines Manfred’s character as revealing of an ‘impregnable loftiness’,[[32]](#footnote-32) a loftiness that causes him to reject the Abbot’s promise of Christian absolution, the chamois hunter’s human companionship with ‘Ye were not meant for me’ (*BCPW* 4, *Manfred* I. II. 109), and the Witch’s promise of assistance at the expense of his freedom. Despite Manfred’s towering self-regard, there lurks the sense that, as Peter J. Manning has it, that ‘society does not need redemption; Manfred alone, like Milton’s Satan, is cut off from joy’.[[33]](#footnote-33) Manfred’s will, in this context, becomes his tormentor not his salvation. As readers, we are led by the nose, forced by claustrophobic proximity to sympathise with Manfred, despite his being, like Milton’s Satan, ‘cut off from joy’, and more importantly, cut off from any real sympathy. When we are forced into forgiving unknown sins, identifying with protagonists that consider themselves cut off from the mass of humanity, and seeking for answers from determinedly silent sources, sympathy is a spur and a goad. We sympathise with Manfred despite ourselves, and, as Smith suggests, ‘become in some measure the same person.[[34]](#footnote-34) Our sentimental sympathy chimes oddly with our moral sensibilities.

Perhaps worse than misplaced sympathy is the possibility that the feeling is never felt but merely fabricated. The self-proclaimed sympathiser is actually unsympathetic and goes through the performance of feigning to appear fashionable. John Brewer writes that ‘When sensibility became a part of fashion it was appropriated by the very thing it was supposed to stand against; when it was commodified its moral purpose was subordinated to profit’.[[35]](#footnote-35) Sensibility threatened to become ‘an empty performance’ for writers and readers whose ‘false tears […] [might] hide an “unfeeling heart”’.[[36]](#footnote-36) Smith’s theatricality, noted by David Marshall and explored further by Thomas Pfau,[[37]](#footnote-37) becomes more troubling. If Smith has made it so that ‘the inner life has reality and legitimacy solely as a socially constituted and accredited performance, a process for which Smith does not (indeed, cannot) identify any *telos* or *terminus ad quem*’,[[38]](#footnote-38) Byron wanted to explore what this might mean for feeling’s significance in the world. For Byron couldn’t resist experimenting with his lachrymose audience and publicly deplored the emptiness where words do not align with action. In the letter on the Bowles/Pope controversy, Byron wrote: ‘The truth is that in these days the grand “primum mobile” of England is Cant—Cant political—Cant poetical—Cant religious—Cant moral—but always Cant—multiplied through all the varieties of life.’[[39]](#footnote-39) Nor would it affect human feeling. Byron’s arch admonishment: ‘You are *not* a moral people, and you know it / Without the aid of too sincere a poet’ (*BCPW* 5, *Don Juan* XI. 87: 695-6) is no mere joke. Byron uses sympathy to teach his reader, we non-moral people, who we are, and render us able to, even against our wills, learn to sympathise with his creations.

*Don Juan* is the high point of Byron’s experimentation with sympathy. Byron’s epic plays with multiple modes of sympathy, and in the first canto, Julia is one of the most fully realised characters. For Shelley, Julia’s ‘love letter, and the account of its being written, is altogether a masterpiece of portraiture’,[[40]](#footnote-40) as Byron’s tender writing gives her a voice beautifully distinguished from the narrator’s own sardonic insights. Her pained assertion: ‘Men have all these resources, we but one, / To love again, and be again undone’ (*BCPW* 5, *Don Juan* I. 194: 1551-2), with its dry-eyed delineation of the facts of a woman’s life, sees Byron rise to the challenge of creating discrete personalities within his poem. Byron’s characters speak with their own voices, from Juan’s rather stilted account of England: ‘“Here are chaste wives, pure lives’ to Tom the Highwayman’s violent interjection: ‘“Damn your eyes! your money or your life!”’ (*BCPW* 5, *Don Juan* XI. 10: 73, 80). Byron glories in the world around him, revelling in the plurality of what he surveys. For Byron enjoys the morally grey area of sympathy, where identification with another in and of itself need not be an absolute good. As Hume writes, strong disagreement is passion, and ‘this passion can proceed from nothing but sympathy’.[[41]](#footnote-41) Byron plays on this idea of sympathy. His responsiveness borders on cruelty towards his ‘gentle reader! and / Still gentler purchaser’ (*BCPW* 5, *Don Juan* I. 221: 1761-62).

In some parts of *Don Juan*, Byron fashions sympathy into a sword, using it to make his poetic blows land with care and precision. His attacks find their effectiveness as he recognises the patriotic feeling of his countrymen, taking on their identities to find their weak spots. What troubled Hume, that dangerous ‘interaction of pity and malice’,[[42]](#footnote-42) becomes the substance of Byron’s exploration. Byron imagines the feelings of his countrymen, their desires, and their self-definitions where his sympathetic identification allows him to wound with greater accuracy. *Beppo*, the great precursor of *Don Juan*, seesByron shape a snarling and smiling attack on England, where his borrowing from William Cowper, ‘“England! with all thy faults I love thee still!’ (*BCPW* 4, *Beppo* 47: 369) emphasises faults over love. Ripping England’s cherished illusions away one by one, from its chilly women and weather to its taxation and treatment of the poor, Byron uses his sympathetic ability to feel for another, in this case, the patriotic English reader, to let him light upon all that would most wound. ‘Your English heart’,[[43]](#footnote-43) as John Gibson Lockhart put it, taught Byron how to attack fellow English hearts: like Hume in a letter to Smith, we begin to question if ‘all kinds of Sympathy are necessarily Agreeable’. Byron, with Hume, perceives that ‘it wou’d appear that there is a disagreeable Sympathy’.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Sex was a particular taboo for Byron to lampoon. *Beppo* had already teased Britain for its ‘chilly women’, but here, the chilly reader seems equally open to mockery. Byron’s eroticism enjoys its transgressive verve, seducing readers with its descriptive charm before snapping into feigned moral fright. Julia and Juan’s sexual encounter sees Byron enjoy his sympathetic ability:

 And Julia sate with Juan, half embraced

 And half retiring from the glowing arm,

 Which trembled like the bosom where ‘twas placed;

 Yet still she must have thought there was no harm,

 Or else ‘twere easy to withdraw her waist;

 But then the Situation had its charm,

 And then—God knows what next—I can’t go on;

 I’m almost sorry that I e’er begun.

(*BCPW* 5, *Don Juan* 115: 913-920)

Butler sees *Don Juan* as ‘a poem in praise of sexuality, its beauty and its naturalness; it is a poem written against the sexual taboos enjoined by official religion’,[[45]](#footnote-45) but more importantly, Byron shows off the strange division between pleasurable seduction of the heart’s ‘controlless core’ (*BCPW* 5, 1. 116: 924) and the ethical orthodoxy that would police it. Sympathy, so praised by Lord Kames, might lead the reader to support Julia and Juan’s burgeoning love, despite the morality of society’s strictures, or Platonic or Christian injunctions against such indulgence. Byron enacts our sympathetic slide via the first six lines knitting together the seduction through metre and rhyme. The diffidence, with the ‘half embraced’, ‘half retiring’, lets us sense modesty in conflict with desire, before the couplet snaps into censure, as though the narrator were repelled by his own fall away from ethical convention. The narrator performs like a kind of reader; by drawing upon Burke, sympathy has reduced the distance between Julian and Julia and the narrator, and through the tale told, Byron reduces our distance from them. Adam Smith notes that ‘sympathy makes [us] look at [suffering], in some measure, with his eyes, so his sympathy makes him look at it, in some measure, with theirs, especially when in their presence, and acting under their observation’.[[46]](#footnote-46) Remove suffering and add illicit pleasure and you have *Don Juan*’s experiment upon sympathy: transference cannot but occur. We are led to enter into Juan and Julia’s desires and become in some measure them. To sympathise might be to condone, until we stop ourselves, but at such cost. For if, as Kames claims, ‘I value myself upon sympathy’,[[47]](#footnote-47) Byron forces us to acknowledge that sympathy means that we might become complicit with what we might claim to despise.

Beyond hatred, Byron stared down a still more difficult emotion: admiration. Hislater work sees Byron feel his way into sympathy with fellow poets such as Dante and Shelley, but still more daringly, into an interrogation of sympathy itself. Alan Rawes, following Jerome McGann, reads Byron as creating ‘fictional projection[s]’ of himself.[[48]](#footnote-48) But Byron appears to do more than project the self. He learns to feel with others, taking on and notably failing to take on elements of the identity of others. Dante is a key case in point. C. P. Brand refers to the second-generation Romantics’ ‘instinctive sympathy’ with Dante,[[49]](#footnote-49) and the word choice is loaded for our understanding of Byron’s efforts. For Dante, that idol of Byron’s thought, can only be understood as far as Byron is capable of it. Hume’s emphasis on the pleasures of spectatorship reveals how sympathy is dependent on the whims of what the individual desires and finds pleasurable. We are bound to Hume’s model of ‘*relation*, *acquaintance*, and *resemblance*’,[[50]](#footnote-50) and Byron makes us aware of precisely how much the self shades into the other as we apprehend both through our own lens of value. Jane Stabler sensitively writes of how ‘Dante’s art moves us closer to an understanding of his world from the edge of ours’,[[51]](#footnote-51) and Byron forces a recognition of the difference between these worlds even as they almost meet.

Byron uses sympathy to connect with Dante. Byron translated the Paolo and Francesca episode from Canto V of the *Inferno* at the suggestion of Teresa Guiccioli in 1820, and he also cast himself in the part of Paolo in a letter to his lover of 22 April 1819, claiming ‘Rather than Heaven without you, I should prefer the Inferno of that Great Man buried in your city, so long as you were with me, as Francesca was with her lover’.[[52]](#footnote-52) We might view this as Byron finding a means of stamping a claim upon Dante’s power. But Byron seems more fascinated by imagining a means of connecting with Dante even as he acknowledges the gulf between them. Byron’s ‘Francesca of Rimini: Translation from the Inferno of Dante, Canto 5’, though short, reveals his care to ensure his translation is singularly Byronic, not merely an imitative tribute to his Florentine predecessor. Matthew Reynolds traces Byron’s many formal innovations, where with ‘love enchain’d him too’ (*BCPW* 4,‘Francesca of Rimini’, 32), ‘Byron translates so as to increase the rigidity of the compulsion which ricochets from Lancelot to Paolo to Francesca to Dante and then implicitly on to the translator and to reader’.[[53]](#footnote-53) But Byron flags his difference not merely to distinguish his mastery from that of Dante’s. Byron’s translation is intimate, troubled, and almost turns epic to lyric in terms of its intense interest in singular voices. Byron’s Dante begins by telling her of his sympathy, of his feeling for her feeling, his fear of her fate: ‘“Francesca, thy sad destinies / Have made me sorrow till the tears arise”.’ (*BCPW* 4,‘Francesca of Rimini’, 20-21) Feeling becomes a marker of a kind of kinship where the poet asks for explanation, a means to come to an understanding with their interlocutor. James Beattie writes that ‘Sympathy with distress is thought so essential to human nature, that the want of it has been called *inhumanity*’,[[54]](#footnote-54) and Byron’s ‘I’, sorrowing for Francesca’s suffering, makes himself more human through his sympathetic tears.

Francesca obliges Byron’s speaker by describing her experience:

 But if to learn our passion’s first root preys

 Upon thy spirit with such sympathy,

 I will relate as he who weeps, and says.

 We read one day for pastime, seated nigh,

 Of Lancelot, how Love enchain’d him too;

 We were alone, quite unsuspiciously.

 But oft our eyes met, and our cheeks in hue

 All o’er discolour’d by that reading were;

 But one point only wholly us o’erthrew.

 When we read the long-sighed-for smile of her

 To be thus kiss’d by such a fervent lover,

 He, who from me can be divided ne’er,

 Kiss’d my mouth, trembling in the act all over⎯

 Accursed was the book, and he who wrote;

 That day no further leaf we did uncover.’

 While thus one spirit told us of their lot

 The other wept so, that, with pity’s thralls,

 I swoon’d, as if by death I had been smote,

 And fell down even as a dead body falls.’

(*BCPW* 4,‘Francesca of Rimini’, 28-46)

Sympathy between the poet and the sufferer is the key that unlocks Francesca’s speech. Prurient interest or mere scorn would affect nothing; the poet’s tears are more meaningful than any censure would be. Though the poet cannot become Francesca, he might gain Hume’s triangle of ‘*relation*, *acquaintance*’ and thereby the ‘*resemblance*’,[[55]](#footnote-55) to achieve sympathy in its fullest potential. But sympathy is not any simple good, particularly if we suggest that the poet gains too close a resemblance to the damned woman. Smith claims that, when observing the suffering of another, ‘’till I perceive the harmony between his emotions and mine, I cannot be said to approve of the sentiments which influence his behaviour’,[[56]](#footnote-56) but Byron lets us feel rather than reason the problem of this logic through his focus upon Francesca. Reading, that simultaneous experience of shared pleasure, opens the door for sympathetic emotion, ‘oft our eyes met’: one stares into the eyes of one’s lover, but also sees the self reflected back in theirs. Self and other meet even in this moment. But what kind of meeting takes place? The poet’s fascination with Francesca has at least an edge of voyeuristic frisson. Swooning suggests a quasi-erotic excitement as much as it reveals an intense sympathy. Such emotional connection is dangerous. Falling ‘even as a dead body falls’ aligns the poet with Francesca’s posthumous state. However, as so often with Byron and sympathy, what we note is the simile; it is a metaphorical death, not an actual one. Byron makes the same play when it comes to his relationship with Dante in this translation. Byron suspects and evades too direct a form of homage. He chooses to dwell, with sympathetic care, upon the passion and the suffering of Paolo and Francesca. Dante’s Paolo and Francesca remind us of the real spiritual dangers of indulging carnal excitement rather than curbing the appetite. Fettered together in Hell as punishment for their sexual love distinguished from Dante’s more refined spiritual love for Beatrice, Francesca in Byron’s later translation says of Lancelot that ‘love enchain’d him too’ (‘Francesca of Rimini’, 32), and her own fate, chained to Paolo, is anticipated by Byron’s phrase in *Beppo*: ‘two young people in one fetter’ (*BCPW* 4, *Beppo* 16. 126). The nightmare of sympathy comes to the fore. Through Hume’s trinity of ‘*relation*, *acquaintance*, and *resemblance’*,[[57]](#footnote-57) Byron fetters himself to Dante, just as Paulo is chained to Francesca. Self and other are not integrated. They are always apart even as they share in one another’s existence. Sympathy is spur and torment, proximity without integration. If sympathy ‘raises me in my own esteem’,[[58]](#footnote-58) because of the movement out of the self, it also confirms the parameters of that same self. We know that ‘we have no immediate experience of what other men feel’: ‘sympathy’ might never amount to more than being voyeurs or fantasists.[[59]](#footnote-59) Sympathy in Byron’s translation is a version of Smith’s and Lord Kame’s ‘spectatorship’ withal the problems of what it is to look upon the other.

*The Prophecy of Dante* pushes the possibilities of sympathy to the fore. Byron’s relationship with his predecessor seems to offer the key lens through which to read the poetry. Yet in the context of Byron’s repeated intense experiments with sympathy, *The Prophecy of Dante* offers the summative test of sympathy as identification. For Dante might seem one mask of many in Byron’s poetic dressing up box. In this light, Dante functions as a tool for Byron whereby the Romantic poet uses his predecessor to differentiate himself from his British peers. In this vein, Maria Schoina views ‘Byron’s metrical experiments with *ottava rima* (as with *terza rima* in *The Prophecy of Dante*), as well as his translations from the Italian’, ‘as an effort to effect and legitimate his immersion in differentness/Italianness’.[[60]](#footnote-60) But Byron writes in English, to a primarily British audience, as a British celebrity. And his fascination with Italian culture and language marked him as joining in with not railing against the British intellectual herd. C. P. Brand writes of the new ‘Italomania’ that permeated British society of the period,[[61]](#footnote-61) and Michael Scrivener notes the ‘energetic reading and appropriation’ that marked British consumption of Italian literature and culture.[[62]](#footnote-62) Byron’s passion for Italian paradoxically united him with his countrymen. Despite any caveats that Byron tried to live as an Italian, Byron knew that, at best, he would always be a hybrid poet straddling two cultures. He often embraced such ambiguity, and Mary Shelley would later crown Byron ‘the father of the Anglo-Italian literature’,[[63]](#footnote-63) and Byron would have to be content with his hyphenated identity. But hyphenation could also be imposed on Dante. For in *The Prophecy of Dante*,Dante is rendered Byronic even as Byron claims himself as Dantean. Both poets must co-exist in and through Byron’s *The Prophecy of Dante*.

Byron ranked *The Prophecy of Dante* as his ‘best thing’, implying that any objection would come from its potential obscurity with his hedging phrase, ‘if it be not *unintelligible*’ (*BLJ* 7: 59) suggesting that Byron was prepared for others not to share his opinion. Part of the greatness of the poem is Byron’s ability to speak with and through Dante. Byron sought and found in Dante a shadow self, noting to Thomas Medwin that ‘there was somewhat of resemblance in our destinies—he had a wife, and I have the same feelings about leaving my bones in a strange land’.[[64]](#footnote-64) But that guarded phrase, ‘somewhat of resemblance’ admits to Byron’s difference from Dante even as he might seek a closer kinship. Smith teaches that ‘we have no immediate experience of what other men feel’,[[65]](#footnote-65) but imagination is part of the effort to try to gain some purchase on what another might feel. The problem of sympathy looms into view. Translation itself poses a dilemma. For example, Byron claimed that before his own translation of the lines, the Paolo and Francesca episode of *Inferno* was ‘*Non tradotto, ma tradito*’ (not translated but betrayed).[[66]](#footnote-66) Betrayal might be all the crueller if Byron were judged to merely impersonate Dante in *The Prophecy of Dante*, transforming his great predecessor into a puppet mouthing Byron’s own slogans. Rather than skirting the issue, Byron makes sympathy and its potential the dark heart of *The Prophecy of Dante*. Steve Ellis asks ‘how Dantesque a poet Byron was’,[[67]](#footnote-67) but Byron makes us think about the ethical stakes of the question: what does it mean for a poet to resemble, or to manufacture a resemblance, to a dead artist?

Sympathy, through this lens, sees Byron not so much become Dante than mingle with him, as if to create a double voice. Canto II, in particular, sees Byron revel in this blended admixture. Byron and Dante’s different emphases jostle for space as both poets become avatars of fame, exile, and aristocratic otherness:

 —fame;

 And mine at least hath cost me dear: to die

 Is nothing; but to wither thus—to tame

 My mind down from its own infinity—

 To live in narrow ways with little men,

 A common sight to every common eye,

 A wanderer, while even wolves can find a den,

 Ripp’d from all kindred, from all home, all things

 That make communion sweet, and soften pain—

(*BCPW* 4, *The Prophecy of Dante* I. 157-65)

Beverly Taylor notes Byron’s repeated allusions to Dante’s *Commedia*.[[68]](#footnote-68) The Romantic poet ‘adopts Dante’s method of selecting illustrations and comparisons, using a balance of figures from classical literature and the Bible, as well as from more recent history’.[[69]](#footnote-69) In addition, Byron makes use of his own poetry as a body of work to which his speaker alludes. *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* lurks in these lines, with the exile as a wanderer sundered from his society drawing us back to Harold’s travels, his rejection of human contact, and his efforts to transcend the mortal world via his mind’s infinity. Using his work as well as Dante’s is not affectation. Rather, Byron makes us conceive of *The Prophecy of Dante* as working across several modes, voices, and time spans. Bernard Beatty writes that one of the key parallels between *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and the Scriptures lies in ‘the transferability of two types of history: the personal and the public’.[[70]](#footnote-70) In *The Prophecy of Dante*, we note the transferability of Dante’s and Byron’s histories: one is not the other, but the parallels, the resemblances, and the proximity let us see and feel a form of union between the two poets. Dante and Byron, despite their profound separation across history, culture, and identity, could both utter these lines. Unlike Smith, whose version of imaginative spectatorship pivots on distance and impartiality, Byron mingles himself with Dante.[[71]](#footnote-71) He does this not to subsume his predecessor, but to create a sense of shared vocation: both poets become poet-prophets where we recast the nature of Byron’s poetic achievement through a revaluation of Dante’s. Byron knew that his ‘exile’ was not the same as Dante’s. When writing of the various types of exile, Byron makes the claim that ‘he who is outlawed by general opinion without the intervention of hostile politics, illegal judgement, or embarrassed circumstances—whether he be innocent or guilty must undergo all the bitterness of exile without hope—without pride, without alleviation’.[[72]](#footnote-72) It is Byron who lives without hope, not Dante, for it was Dante’s exile that was engineered by just those conditions Byron names. But in the poem, both Dante and Byron can lay claim to being: ‘Ripped from all kindred, from all home, all things / That make communion sweet, and soften pain’. The poets share consequences even if they do not share causes. Byron’s double voice allows us to read the lines twice, in effect, where the lines resonate differently according to the discrete biographical circumstances of each poet. Byron does not become Dante, nor does Dante become Byron. Instead, Dante and Byron become fellow passengers, separate though united, through Byron’s poetic performance. Byron will only become ‘in some measure the same person,[[73]](#footnote-73) gaining via resemblance. His union with but not blurring into Dante strengthens Byron’s position as a poet and as a person. Smith exclaims: ‘How amiable does he appear to be, whose sympathetic heart seems to re-echo all the sentiments of those with whom he converses, who grieves for their calamities, who resents their injuries, and who rejoices at their good fortune!’[[74]](#footnote-74) How much more powerful for Byron to feel with Dante, to create the impression of a bond of sympathy that raises Byron’s poetic stock. But Byron would not always choose a wholly impressive double.

Byron employed a sympathetic form of doubling in *The Prophecy of Dante* with the double voice creating suggestive parallels between the two poets even as they retain their independence. But he creates a deliberately more problematic avatar in *Marino Faliero*. Byron claimed *Marino Faliero* is ‘not a political play’ (*BLJ* 7, p. 184), with his disclaimer seeming more coy than correct.[[75]](#footnote-75) But with this statement, Byron insinuates that there might be another way to understand his ‘experimental’ (*BCPW* 6, p. xiii) play. To some readers, the play is less ‘experimental’ than it is a particular brand of imaginative failure. Shelley’s criticism of Byron’s personality in a letter to Leigh Hunt seems to owe something to his recent reading of *Marino Faliero*:

 Certainly, if ‘Marino Faliero’ is a drama, the ‘Cenci’ is not: but that between ourselves…He [Byron] has many generous and exalted qualities, but the canker of aristocracy wants to be cut out, and something, God knows, wants to be cut out of us all—except perhaps you!

(*Letters: PBS* II, p. 345)

The ‘canker of aristocracy’ cuts to the heart of the problem posed in Byron’s play. For Shelley, *Marino Faliero* appears to be an example of how far the rot of aristocracy has set into Byron’s self and his art. *Marino Faliero*, through such a lens, does no more than reveal the context and circumstances of its author. But Byron is never so ingenuous, nor is *Marino Faliero* without self-consciousness. For Byron embeds this problem into the play: how can an aristocrat deal with aristocracy? *Marino Faliero* is not a product of ‘the canker of aristocracy’, but the means through which Byron displays it. This is not to say the play belongs to the radical tradition in any uncomplicated fashion. But Byron makes us see the impossibility of him creating a drama that leaves behind Byron’s life and status. Though Shelley assumed that he could detect Byron’s aristocracy between the lines, perhaps even against Byron’s will, instead, it seems that Byron chooses to let his aristocracy be seen, felt, and evaluated. Like Faliero, Byron cannot wash off his background or his breeding.

Faliero lives a paradox: though poised to rebel against the social structures that govern Venice, he remains profoundly attached to his title, as Israel Bertuccio suggests through his repeated references to Faliero as ‘My Lord’. Byron has a similarly complicated relationship with his own social ties as a poet:

And I cannot conceive any man of irritable feeling putting himself at the mercies of an audience:—the sneering reader, and the loud critic, and the tart review, are scattered and distant calamities; but the trampling of an intelligent or of an ignorant audience on a production which, be it good or bad, has been a mental labour to the writer, is a palpable and immediate grievance, heightened by a man’s doubt of their competency to judge, and his certainty of his own imprudence in electing them his judges.

(*BCPW* 4, ‘Preface to *Marino Faliero*’, p. 305).

Byron and Faliero resist being judged by those they believe incapable of proper sympathy and understanding. Faliero expresses his ‘doubt of their [the courtroom’s] competency to judge’ just as Byron shares his patrician hauteur when regarding those that would presume to pit their opinions against his play. Byron’s sympathy for Faliero grows out of ‘*relation*, *acquaintance*, and *resemblance’*,[[76]](#footnote-76) and his representation of Faliero’s faults and foibles comes from sympathy enlarged into a form of knowledge. To be in sympathy with another is not necessarily to agree, to forgive, or to love. Sympathy allows for a dangerously broad scope of ethical possibilities.

Sympathy is the radical heart of Byron’s poetry. For sympathy, possible via by the imagination for Hume and Smith, allows Byron to be someone else as far as that is possible, withal Adam Smith’s caveats. By these lights, Byron’s potential doubles are not poor caricatures that see the Romantic poet throwing his voice. Instead, Byron creates performances that explore and exploit the limits of sympathy where we only ever go out of ourselves and to become ‘in *some* measure the same person’ and ‘form *some* idea of his sensations’ [emphases added].[[77]](#footnote-77) Limits co-exist with potential. Nor is sympathy always an unmitigated good. Through it, we might ignore our professed values or extend our sympathy to those for whom we should not feel. By virtue of that sympathetic going out of ourselves, who do we become? Lady Blessington records her judgment 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, according to his or her received opinion; but the truth is, the chameleon-like character or manner of Byron renders it difficult to portray him; and the pleasure he seems to take in misleading his associates in their estimate of him increases the difficulty of the task’.[[78]](#footnote-78) This does not need to mean mobility, theatricality, or egotism. Byron’s sympathy opens him up to becoming other people to some degree, to living other lives, and inhabiting other selves. Terry Eagleton’s important insight that Smith’s version of sympathy requires us to enter ‘into another experience while retaining enough rational capacity of one’s own to assess what one finds there’ seems only to increase in difficulty in Byron’s work.[[79]](#footnote-79) For we might never know another person, or we may lose ourselves. Byron shows us that sympathy, like selfhood, is slippery. Byron makes us rethink sympathy and its value.

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6. [Francis Jeffrey], ‘Review of The Corsair and The Bride of Abydos’, *Edinburgh Review* 23 (1814), p. 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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11. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. By P. H. Nidditch ([1978] Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009) Book 2, Section 3, Part 6: p. 427. Subsequent references to this text will give (in order) book, section, and part, plus page number. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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13. See Elias L. Khalil, ‘The Fellow-Feeling Paradox: Hume, Smith and the Moral Order’, *Philosophy* 90.354 (2015), pp. 653-678 (p. 655). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
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16. James Chandler, ‘Romanticism’ in *An Archaeology of Sympathy* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2013)*,* pp. 265-298 (p. 272). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Edmund Burke, ‘The Effects of Sympathy in the Distresses of Others’ in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) (R. and J. Dodsley: Pall Mall, 1757) pp. 23-25. Burke defines ‘delight’ as ‘the removal or moderation of pain’, as opposed to a positive pleasure (p. 8). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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70. Beatty, p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
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