

**Bernard Beatty, *Reading Byron: Poems, Life, Politics*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022. Pp. 266. £90. ISBN 9781800854628.**

**Jerome McGann, *Byron and the Poetics of Adversity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. ix + 214. £20. ISBN 9781009232951.**

The genesis of Bernard Beatty's latest study lies in a conversation that Beatty has with colleague and friend David Woodhouse on a layover in 2015 in Kyiv's airport. Woodhouse suggests that Beatty collect his essays in one central location to which Byron scholars – present and future – can have access. Beatty entertains Woodhouse's idea, and the result is this fine collection of 11 new essays, some of which have been rethought from previous research, and an illuminating two-part interview with Beatty by one of his former PhD students, Gavin Hopps.

*Reading Byron* begins with an introduction from Jerome McGann where he pays tribute to Beatty's lifelong devotion to Byron as well as the incredible amount of field-shaping scholarship in Byron studies. From there, the first section, entitled 'Poems', begins with an essay on *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage (CHP)* in which Beatty looks at how we read a poem – be it historical, poetical, structural, or even biographical. Beatty does not espouse any critical literary theories, but advocates for readers to engage in close textual reading. Here Beatty also plays to his strengths by examining the influence of biblical scripture on *CHP* and demonstrating the subtle nuances of Byron's use of scripture to enhance the plight and torment of Harold. In the second essay, Beatty chooses to look at only *Lara* as the token Eastern tale. In *Lara* the character, Beatty believes that Byron gives his readers 'the Byronic hero, most fully developed' and that 'Byron was revealing himself in his heroes' (38). Beginning with a short exposition on Plato's philosophy the chapter moves through a wide array of sources and connections, from Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies to biblical scripture and then forward to Coleridge's ancient mariner.

The third essay of the Poems section is a fascinating piece on the ending of *Manfred*. Beginning with comparisons to Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, the essay moves forward to examine the two versions of Act III; however, instead of focusing on the differences between Byron's treatment of the Abbot of St. Maurice, Beatty looks at the alternate endings from the perspective of Byron's development of Manfred's self-consciousness. This leads straight into the next essay where the focus is on *Cain* and the biblical historicism that would have influenced Byron's thinking and planning of the play. In one of the most entertaining essays in the collection, Beatty not only discusses the theology of *Cain*, but also frames it in such a way that he draws connections back to *Manfred* and the Eastern tales and moves it forward as a way to frame Byron and *Don Juan*. Beatty's discussion of the open space that Byron deliberately chooses for Cain and Lucifer paves the path towards 'Empty Space in *Don Juan: A Reading of the Norman Abbey Cantos*', which is the final essay of the section. Here Beatty argues that 'Space is usually very important in Byron's major poems' and *Don Juan* is no exception. Beatty discusses the literal empty space of the physical structure of the Norman abbey, as well as the figurative spaces inhabited by the friar's ghost and finally the space in which Aurora Raby occupies both the abbey and the reader's mind (116).

Part II marks the shift away from poetics and towards Byron's life. Beatty chooses to look at three major periods in the poet's life: his times at Albany, Seaham and finally in Venice and Ravenna. In the Albany essay, Beatty provides a detailed history of Albany House as well as Byron's time in residence. Next, we find ourselves next to Byron as he courts, becomes engaged to and marries Lady Byron. In what is a thoroughly readable and enjoyable chapter, Beatty's prose

brings his reader directly into what would mark the beginning of the most tumultuous time of Byron's life. Finally, we arrive in Venice, where Byron meets and falls in love with Teresa Guiccioli, following her throughout northern Italy before finally taking up a room in Palazzo Guiccioli in Ravenna. Beatty does a fine job of illustrating the influence of Teresa on Byron whilst painting a brief biographical sketch of their time together.

Part III of Beatty's book looks to the political element in Byron's life. Just as he was back then, Byron is still today seen as a political figure. In 'Liberty and Licence' we find an essay that frames the final two of the collection. Beatty looks at Byron's political leanings as they were influenced and situated by the church and Wordsworth. In 'The Paradoxes of Nationalism' Beatty examines the gladiator stanzas from *CHP IV* in detail, arguing that they are emblematic of Byron's political leanings. The final essay, 'Byron as Political Icon', seeks to situate Byron amidst the causes of European nationalism. Beatty concludes by showing how important Byron was to the champions of individual independence throughout the continent.

The final section is an interview that was held during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Here, the transcription records a fascinating exchange between a (former) sage and his student. Beatty lovingly states in his introduction that Hopps was once his student, and now the roles have reversed. Hopps gives readers a gentle inquiry into Beatty's thoughts on a lifetime of over 60 years of Byronic scholarship. It is a fine way to end these 11 wonderfully delightful essays.

Jerome McGann's *Byron and the Poetics of Adversity* is a lively study on several of Byron's major works: *Don Juan*, *Manfred*, *Cain*, and *The Giaour* among a smattering of others; however, the depth in which McGann approaches these major works affords the reader the opportunity to delve into the mind of McGann, who did so much for the world of Byron studies in the twentieth century. The chapters flow so well – both independently of one another and together – that one gets the feeling that McGann is speaking directly to them, as if in conversation.

Chapter One looks at *Don Juan* and the idea that Wordsworth and Coleridge were far more influential than previously thought, and it is through our understanding of Wordsworth and Coleridge that we can better understand Byron and *Juan* and vice versa. This is a fascinating and radical idea since, traditionally, scholars and students are taught to read *Juan* in light of ottava rima poetics or within the structuralism of the modern epic.

'Byron Agonistes, 1809-1816' moves away from orientalist influence and illustrates the influence of Pope and Scott on the Eastern Tales. Drawing on connections from the Tales, McGann then connects Byron to Keats, but not before looking at the issue of Gifford's meddling in editing the poems. McGann convincingly argues that the slightest changes in punctuation could have fundamentally changed the way we read and understand Byron's poetry, and I would argue that 'Byron Agonistes' will help ignite a renewed interest in the Eastern Tales as often overlooked and neglected texts.

Chapter Three is devoted solely to *Manfred*. Focusing on Goethe and biblical influences (respectively), this short chapter acts like an 'intermission' of sorts for the book, as it helps pave the way for the following two chapters, which discuss Byron's politics and influence. Chapter Four briefly returns to *Don Juan* before looking at *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage IV* and *The Corsair* and the idea of Byron's 'philosophical system'. Here I should note that McGann prepares his reader for the longest chapter in the book: Chapter Five.

Chapter Five closely examines the relationship between Blake and Byron's poetry. In what I believe is the strongest and most fascinating chapter, McGann connects Blake and Byron through their reactions to and interactions with the Enlightenment as well as the influences of the former poet on the latter. Using *CHP IV* and *Don Juan* as the primary texts for the first half of the analysis,

McGann moves into a fantastic and elucidating section comparing Blake's prophetic poetry to *Cain*.

The final chapter, 'The Stubborn Foe: Bad Verse and the Poetry of Action', seeks to dispel the notion among Byron's jealous contemporaries of 'bad' versification. In doing so, McGann holds that Byron's poetry is one that is full of the 'action' of experimentation that separates him from his fellow Romantic poets and one that truly describes Byron's genius as it was seen during his time and now, over 200 years later.

*Reading Byron* and *Byron and the Poetics of Adversity* are two enjoyable and exceptional studies on Byron, and they will positively impact future generations of Byron scholars. They will leave an indelible mark, just as their authors have for over a half century of study dedicated to the poet who was, at one time, 'mad, bad and dangerous to know'. These are two books that I will return to time and time again and will be among the first that I wholeheartedly recommend to anyone remotely interested in Byron studies or Romanticism as a whole.

*Peter Francev*  
*Victor Valley College*