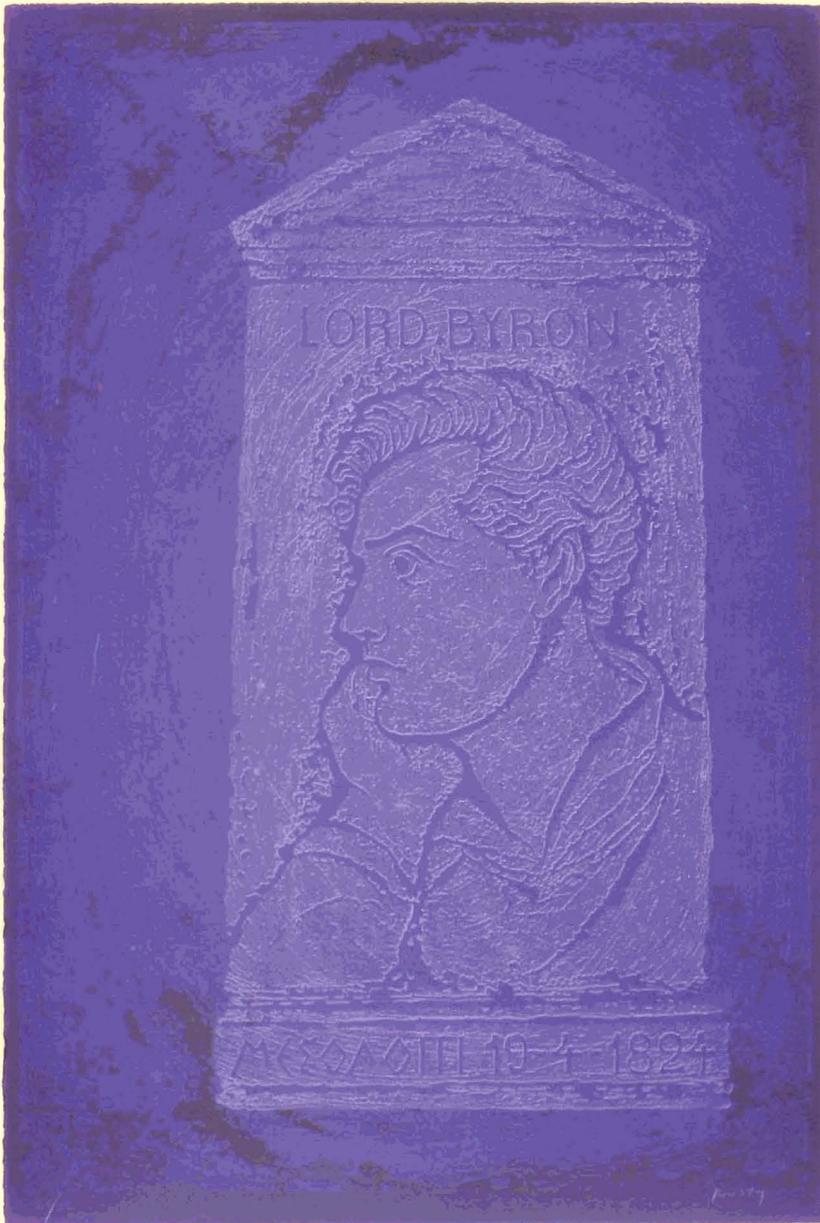


BYRON: A POET FOR ALL SEASONS



25th International Byron Conference and Tour

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Athens - Messolonghi - Jannina - Zitsa

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Edited by M.B. Raizis

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WORLDWIDE

Byron and Sufism: His Concept of Selfless Love

“Don't ask what love can make or do!
Look at the colors of the world.”
Rumi.¹

The Romantic ardent contemplation of the other involves the self's elimination of physical distractions and the fusion of all disagreeables which hinder wholeness. Such a process is only possible through the medium of “Love”, selfless love, which is the only agent capable of detaching the self from egocentric desires and passions. It follows that the Romantics' conception of “Love” concurs with their perception of knowledge and conforms to their understanding of nature. As much as the integrative power of love seems to facilitate the Romantic path to knowledge, the Romantic desire for knowledge seems to be reinforced by the power of their love to Man and to the elements of nature and the universe. The Romantic poets' path towards wisdom begins by reconciling the opposite elements which, without love, act one upon the other to block this path.

M. H. Abrams heeds Romantic poets as “primarily poets of love.”² The Romantics believed that if “essential evil” separates, then “Love” is the force which “pulls the sundered parts together”; this view, Abrams confirms, is shared by Hegel, Schiller, and most of the British Romantics. Abrams quotes Hegel who confirms that “Genuine love excludes all opposition”; “In love the separate does still remain, but as something united and no longer as something separate.”³ Abrams then quotes Blake, who asserts that “Selfhood” is annihilated by the power of pure love: “Man liveth not by Self alone,” but “by Brotherhood & Universal love.”⁴ Shelley considers “Love” as “the bond and sanction which connects not only man with man but with everything which exists.”⁵ Keats contends that selflove vanishes when selfhood disappears as it identifies with sensuous objects outside itself.⁶ And Coleridge believes that love is an essential ingredient to making “the whole one Self!”⁷ Abrams also quotes Wordsworth who affirms:

Love, now a universal birth,
From heart to heart is stealing.
From earth to man, from man to earth.⁸

Abrams then concludes his discussion by referring to Schelling, who relates the Romantic conception of love to the Romantic understanding of nature:

The orbit of love was often enlarged to include the relationship of man to nature as well. The perception that dead nature is really alive. Schelling said, is the result of 'the attraction of inner love and relationship between your own spirit and that which lives in nature'.⁹

Thus Abrams confirms that selfless love is an essential Romantic trait; and he must be commended for skillfully highlighting this feature in Romantic thought. However, he overlooks Byron's congenial perception of selfless love by ignoring him completely, and he fails to find the correlation between this Romantic feature and Sufism.

To speak of selfless love or selflessness in Byron's poetry might seem quite disputable to academicians who consider his works models of the self-centered versus the other. Indeed, the self in Lord Byron is so conspicuous that to speak of selflessness at all seems far-fetched. Byron's poetic expression is packed with confrontations between the self and the other, especially the traditional and formalized other. Without denying the existence of these, I would like to suggest that selfless love is an essential feature of some of Byron's major poetry, and that this feature is greatly influenced and shaped by his personal interest in and knowledge of Sufism.

Recent studies have rendered Byron's Oriental scholarship common knowledge.¹⁰ However, most of these studies have discussed and explained Byron's genuine interest in and authentic references to elements of the Eastern culture without investigating the congenial aspects of this culture, Sufism amongst them, which influenced some of his works. Perhaps the only scholar who suggests rather briefly, but ingeniously, Byron's kinship to Sufism is Bernard Blackstone, who notes in his "Byron and Islam: the Triple Eros." that Byron's Eastern heroines represent the "allegorical mistresses or youths of Sufi poetry, symbolizing noesis, mystical realization."¹¹ Also in his *Byron: A Survey* (1975), Blackstone makes several brief but keen references to Byron's interest in Sufism. He points at the poet's interest in "a time-hallowed Sufi tradition," at his "whole 'doctrine of love', with his Sufic affinities," at his concern in the spiritual death of the Sufi, in "the death to self brought about by unselfish love," at Byron's sense of Dante's "other roots in the Islamic, Sufic civilisation," at his "Sufic world of ascents and descents, of love human and divine intermingling in an iconography of nightingales and roses," at his "Sufic demands of self-forgetfulness in a love beyond love," and, finally, at "Byron's Sufic imagery."¹² However, Blackstone's brief but telling points, geared at stimulating further investigation of the subject, have not found the proper response from Byron's Scholars. I hope this work would be one of the possible responses.

In Sufism, selfless love and selflessness are synonymous; they cannot be treated as independent features, as the first generates the second.

Taken as a mystical order and as a literary movement, Sufism cannot be detached from the organic power of disinterested love, which is its basic path. Indeed, “Love” is a dynamic force enabling the Sufi mystic and poet to free himself from his selfhood, thus approaching the illuminating stage of oneness. It is a prerequisite for repentance, abstinence, renunciation, and reconciliation; it is the “path” and the “way” for elevated wisdom. Also “Love” enables the Sufi to fix his “amorous gaze” upon the other, be it Man, Nature, or the Universe, to reach the state of ecstatic consummation, the realization of the Unity of Being, of all in the Eternal Allah.

Ghazzali, a well-known Sufi philosopher, asserts that all objects outside the self become one with it by the gnostic power of Love, which produces the highest bliss in the realization of the self of its union with Allah.¹³ Indeed, to Ghazzali “Love without gnosis is impossible.”¹⁴ Ibn l’Arabi, a well-known Sufi poet, affirms: “Love is the faith I hold.”¹⁵ Abul ‘Ala claims in his well-known *Luzumiyat*:

Now, mosques and churches—even a
Kabeh stone
Korans and Bibles—even a martyr’s bone,
All these and more my heart can tolerate,
For my religion’s love and love alone.¹⁶

Abul’ Ala’s “Love” has a reconciliatory power which directs the Sufi towards higher states of awareness exceeding the subjective perception of Man, thus acting as an agent capable of diffusing the Christian and/or Muslim otherness of God. That the Sufi “Love” is an agent of wisdom resolving all tensions between dogmas should appeal to Lord Byron, who refused to adhere to one dogmatic or philosophic system.

The Sufi also believes that love and knowledge are coexistent, and that knowledge of the self is incomplete without the self’s immersion in the outer world. Much like Byron, the Sufi poet affirms that the knowledge of personal experience outweighs that of books or of instruction. It is sought via spontaneous or willed participation in and mingling with the outside world, with the unfamiliar other, which is mysterious and inaccessible unless the self transcends itself to fuse with what is beyond it; i.e., to fuse with the other. This process is attainable through love, which enables the union between the beholder and the beheld. At the moment when the Self is blissfully conscious of the knowledge of an element of the outer world it contains the idea of that element and the two are united as one reality; but for the self to contain the idea of that element it must love it first; and to love it, the self must become selfless.

Byron’s passionate fusion with the elements of nature carries his poetry to the level of a private theosophy reflecting his most sublime and

mystical insights, a therapeutics of the self and the intellect. In *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, he echoes the Sufi poets when he says:

I live not in myself, but I become
Portion of that around me; and to me
High mountains are a feeling, but the hum
Of human cities torture; I can see
Nothing to loathe in nature, save to be
A link reluctant in a fleshy chain,
Class'd among creatures, when the soul can flee,
And with the sky, the *peak*, the *heaving plain*
Of ocean, or the stars, mingle and not in vain.
(Canto III, stnz. LXXII)¹⁷

A few stanzas later, Byron reaffirms his private mystical experiences when he says:

Are not the mountains, waves, and skies, a part
Of me and my soul, as I of them?
Is not the love of these deep in my heart
With a pure passion? (Canto III, stnz. LXXV)

Compare these Byronic verses to the following lines by Jelaluddin Rumi, a Sufi poet and founder of the Mevlevi order of dervishes:

I am dust particles in sunlight.
I am the round sun.
...
I am morning mist,
and the breathing of evening.

I am wind in the top of a grove,
and surf on the cliff.
...
I am a tree with a trained parrot in its branches.
Silence, thought, and voice.

The musical air coming through a flute,
a spark of a stone, a flickering
in metal. Both candle,
and the moth crazy around it.

Rose, and the nightingale
lost in the fragrance.

I am all orders of being, the circling galaxy,
the evolutionary intelligence, the lift,

and the falling away. What is,
and what isn't. You who know

Jelaluddin, You the one
in all, say who

I am. Say I
am You.¹⁸

The above lines imply, if anything, that in a state of pure and passionate love, selfhood and otherhood vanish away. This "fleshy chain" which imprisons the universal soul breaks down to reveal the truth of the eternal harmony and beauty of God. Consciously or unconsciously, Byron seems to advance the Sufi ideal of *wuhdat al-wujud*, "the unity of being," which the self cannot approach or perceive unless it is purged by the divine power of selfless love. Like the Sufi poets, Byron found in Nature the very principles of gnosis. To him Nature is a vast panorama of representations which must be loved, comprehended, and interiorized before it can be transcended. Byron here is a contemplative traveler and a lover who sets on a pilgrimage toward perfection and gnosis; he finds forms in nature, which represent Godhead, or Truth. Nature, then, becomes a vast book of Divine Wisdom. Byron's obsession with elements of nature as representations of eternal truth is quite often noted by his scholars; it is tactfully noted by his contemporary, John Galt, who personally experienced the Eastern world and its culture. Galt contends that

In the air and sea, which have been in all times the emblems of change and similitudes of inconstancy, he [Byron] has discovered the very principles of permanency. The ocean in his view, not by its vastness, its unfathomable depths, and its limitless extent, becomes an image of deity, by its unchangeable character!¹⁹

For the Sufi, much as for Byron, Nature is a source of spiritual nourishment and a retreat from materialistic life. Byron's poetic pilgrimages are aimed at reading deep into this vast book and at redeeming man's self-centeredness. And it seems natural for Byron to relate this spiritual nourishment to his mystical fusion with Nature.

Another aspect of Sufi selfless love, that which binds a lover to a beloved in an eternal spiritual bond, is clearly manifested in some of Byron's major works. Such love defies worldly desires, overpowers death, and enables the lovers to enjoy the ecstasy of their union with the Almighty. And perhaps Byron's most obvious Sufi expression of selfless love is made in *The Giaour*:

'Yes, Love indeed is light from heaven;
 A spark of that immortal fire
 With the angels shared, by Alla given,
 To lift from earth our low desire,
 Devotion wafts the mind above,
 But Heaven itself descends in love;
 A feeling from Godhead caught,
 To wean from self each sordid thought;
 A ray of him who form'd the whole;
 A glory circling round the soul! (ll. 1131–1140)

After his separation from Leila, the Giaour, the speaker of the above lines, is turned by Byron into a Sufi philosopher or poet commenting on the divine source of selfless love. Here Byron affirms that love is man's source of divine illumination. Love "lift[s] from earth our low desire" and invigorates elevated moments of cosmic awareness. Indeed, the above quotation represents the cradle of the Sufi conception of love. Rumi writes:

 This is Love: to fly heavenward,
 To read, every instant, a hundred veils.
 The first moment, to renounce life;
 The last step, to fare without feet.
 To regard this world as invisible,
 Not to see what appears to one's self.²⁰

The above lines correspond to Byron's affirmation in *Don Juan*, that the love between Haidèe and Don Juan is that

 ... in which the mind delights
 To lose itself, when the old world grows dull,
 And we are sick of its hack sounds and sights. (Stz. xvii, ll. 2–4)

Selfless love, then, leading to the illuminating ecstasy of the mind, floats beyond the physical elements surrounding it. The spiritual fusion of the lover and the beloved, the mingling of the two selves in one, eliminates all sense of "sounds and sights"; i.e., of time and space. Rumi asserts that when the lover and the beloved are "so dissolved into love, all qualities of doingness disappear."²¹ As such, selfless love generates the mystical experience, which Sufi poets like Jami and Sadi celebrate in their poetry.

Indeed, both Sadi and Jami emphasize that physical beauty may be a means to discover the beauty of Truth but only if accompanied with passionate and selfless love. Whoever has no passionate love, which is ignited by physical separation, punishment and pain, says Jami, has no heart; thus, to set oneself free and enjoy everlasting happiness, one must carry selfless love in his heart.¹ According to Sadi, such an ideal love is the

only way leading towards the awareness of the everlasting Truth; i.e., God. In this sense, and much like the Romantic's circuitous journey, which evolves physical separation, followed by guilt, punishment, redemption and reconciliation, a pure and passionate love represents a journey into the primal Truth of the world: it purifies man's soul, brings it closer to God, and immortalizes it.²³

I have said elsewhere that in his *Bride of Abydos* Byron asserts that Zuleika and Selim's passionate pure feelings break the chains of physical reciprocity and embody the highest form of spiritual love. Their detachment from sensuality and sexuality brings them close to Sufism, which, as we have seen above, embraces the pure spiritual adoration of the beloved as one of the means to reunite with the Almighty. The ideal selfless love between Selim and his cousin, Zuleika, represented by the Sufi symbols of the bulbul and the rose, warrants an eternal spiritual fusion between both lovers and between both lovers and Allah. At the end of the tale, the bulbul, the spirit—"Invisible his airy wings."—of Selim, sings a powerful and sweet song to the rose, the spirit of Zuleika, which "Hath flourish'd; flourisheth this hour," and will flourish forever (*Bride*, II, ll. 690-732). The "Bulbul" and the rose, then, represent the highest state of eternal synthesis between lovers; they also represent the Sufi ideal that selfless love is divine love.²⁴

The fact that Byron indicates, in a note to the *Giaour*, that "the attachment of the nightingale to the rose is a well-known Persian fable," implies his conscious awareness of the Sufi myth relating the eternal love between the bird and the flower.²⁵ The myth, celebrated by most Sufi poets, is referred to by Jami, in *Yusuf and Zulaykha*,²⁶ and by Sadi, in his tale of Mejnoun and Leila. And it so seems that Byron's borrowings of the names of his heroines from popular Eastern tales, celebrated by Sufi poets, coincides with his thematic purposes and assert, if anything, Byron's keen learning and understanding of the Sufi ideals.

There is no doubt that Byron's personal life was fragmented. That Byron's personal love relationships were traumatic to a degree driving him to self-exile is certain; but this must have triggered his interest in some kind of synthesis which he sought in his poetry. His morbid personal affairs drove him to seek ideal selfless love in some of his works. In his letters²⁷ he notes that the Oriental tales were written to divert his mind from his turbulent relationships. To Lady Blessington he writes: "When I attempted to describe Haidée and Zuleika, I endeavoured to forget all that friction with the world had taught me."²⁸ Such a willed detachment from the physical world is a characteristic of the Sufi poets. And it so seems that in the selfless love between the poet and Nature and among the *Giaour* and Leila, Selim and Zuleika, and even Don Juan and Haidée, Byron took love to a level beyond the temporal and spatial, to a level which defies the physical and

sensuous and which fuses the souls in an everlasting eagerness, itself capable of diffusing physical pain and of creating the divinely harmonious “colors of the world.” This, however, is not to suggest that Byron was a Sufi poet, but that, when he desired, he wrote like one and that Bernard Blackstone’s keen hints at Byron’s interest in Sufism deserve closer attention.

NOTES

1. See Coleman Barks, Trans. *The Essential Rumi* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 92.
2. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1973), 294–95. [Henceforth cited as Abrams.]
3. Abrams, 294.
4. Qtd. by Abrams, 294.
5. Ibid.
6. Qtd. by Abrams, 296.
7. Ibid.
8. Qtd. by Abrams, 297.
9. Ibid.
10. Such works include Marilyn Butler, “The Orientalism of Byron’s *Giaour*,” in *Byron and the Limits of Fiction*. Ed. by Bernard Beatty and Vincent Newey (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1988): 78–96; Abdur Raheem Kidawi, *Orientalism in Lord Byron’s ‘Turkish Tales’* (Lewiston: Mellen University Press, 1995); Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalism* (London: Cornell University Press, 1991); John M MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); Anahid Melikian, *Byron and the East* (Beirut: The American University of Beirut, 1977); Naji B. Oueijan, “Byron’s Eastern Literary Portraits,” in *Byron and the Mediterranean World*. Ed. by Marius Byron Raizis (Athens: The Hellenic Byron Society, 1995): 93–103; and *The Progress of an Image: The East in English Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Mohammed Sharafuddin, *Islam and Romantic Orientalism* (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1994); Byron Porter Smith, *Islam in English Literature* (New York: Caravan Books, 1977); and Harold S. L. Wiener, “The Eastern Background of Byron’s Turkish Tales,” Diss. (Yale University, 1938).
11. See “Byron and Islam: The Triple Eros,” *Journal of European Studies*, 4 (1974), 327.

12. See *Byron: A Survey* (London: Longman, 1975), 49, 78, 142, 174, 196, 206, and 348 respectively.
13. See T. J. De Boer's *The History of Philosophy in Islam*. Trans. Edward R. Jones (New York: Dover Publications, INC., 1967), 166.
14. Quoted in Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 130. Schimmel offers a comprehensive discussion of Sufism.
15. Quoted in Reynold A. Nicolson, *A Literary History of the Arabs* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1969), 403.
16. Ameen Rihani, Trans., *The Luzumiyat of Abul 'Ala* (Beirut: Albert Rihani, 1978), 77; this is the best literary translation of the work. Rihani, a well-known Lebanese poet and philosopher, captures the spirit and the prosody of the original text.
17. All quotations of the poetry of Lord Byron are taken from *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 3 vols. (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1980–1981).
18. See Coleman Barks, Trans. *The Essential Rumi*, 275–76.
19. John Galt, *The Life of Lord Byron* (London: Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1911), 361.
20. See James Kritzeck, ed. *Anthology of Islamic Literature*. Trans. R. A. Nicholson (New York: A Mentor Book, 1966), 227.
21. See Coleman Barks, Trans. *The Essential Rumi*, 174.
22. Muhammed Ghounaimy Hilal, *Leila and the Mejnoun in the Arabic and Persian Literature*. (Beirut: Dar Al-Awda, 1980), 260-61.
23. See Hilal, 246.
24. Naji B. Oucijan, "Byron's Eastern *Bride*," Presented at the Seventh International Conference of the Society for English Romanticism, University of Duisburg-Germany, August 1996.
25. See *Complete Works*, III, 416.
26. The poem is skillfully translated by Ralph T. E. Griffith; see a section of his translation in James Kritzeck, ed. *Anthology of Islamic Literature*, 314–18.
27. For instance, in a letter to William Gifford, Byron writes: "– It [*The Bride of Abydos*] was written – I cannot say for amusement nor 'obliged by hunger and request of friends' but in a state of mind from circumstances which occasionally occur to "us youth" that rendered it necessary for me to apply my mind to something – anything but reality"; see *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. by Leslie A. Marchand, 12 vols. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1973–1982), III, 161.

28. See *Lady Blessington's Conversation of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. (Princeton, 1969), 196.