

“Strange Sight this Congress!” Byron’s *The Age of Bronze* (1823) and the Congress of Verona

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Abstract Byron’s satirical poem *The Age of Bronze*, a ‘hit’ at the Congress of Verona, targets the sycophancy of artists who celebrated the Congress and other manifestations of political power. *The Age of Bronze* asserts a different, more active and critical task for the artist, than the decorativeness expected within the European Congress system. “I am Diogenes”, states the poet, speaking truth to power in an age of obfuscation. Byron’s biting allusions to prominent public poetry and sculpture are selectively compared with other contemporary satire. The antisemitic terms of Byron’s critique of global financialisation are analysed, as is Byron’s self-conscious undermining of his chosen poetic form.

Keywords Byron. British Romanticism. European Romanticism. Satire. Cultural Patriotism. Congress of Verona.



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Byron's satirical poem *The Age of Bronze* (composed late 1822, published 1823) was, in his own words, a "temporary hit at Congress", namely the 1822 Congress of Verona (Byron 1980, 94).¹ It comments on history in the making, Byron describing it as "all on politics [...] and a review of the day in general" (Byron 1980, 81). Byron considered this a singularly inglorious moment in history. He repudiated the tendencies of the age, which in his view were tyranny among rulers and sycophancy among artists. *The Age of Bronze* marks Byron's turn away from the comic mode of *Don Juan*. It was by no means a total break from *Don Juan*, however. Not only did Byron continue the use of ludicrous rhymes, but the following words from the recent Canto IX could readily have served as a manifesto for *The Age of Bronze*:

And I will war, at least in words (and - should
 My chance so happen - deeds) with all who war
 With Thought; - and of Thought's foes by far most rude,
 Tyrants and sycophants have been and are.
 (*Don Juan*, Canto IX, 24, 185-8)

Byron's renewed war of words against the "despotism" of "[t]yrants and sycophants" now took a broadly Juvenalian form. Among the previous poems that his (mock)-heroic couplets call to mind is Samuel Johnson's *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749), an imitation of Juvenal's tenth satire on delusive ambitions such as wealth and power. *The Age of Bronze* confirms Byron's statement that the "tenth satire has always been my favourite" (qtd. Gregory 2015, 1). He linked it to his earlier poem *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809), which had drawn on William Gifford's heavily annotated, politicized Juvenal translation (Byron 1980, 81; Jones 1993). Yet, times had changed, and *The Age of Bronze*, in Carl Woodring's words, "ends the lineage of heroic satire" (Woodring 1970, 214). Byron himself told Leigh Hunt that the poem was "a little more stilted" than *English Bards*, "and somewhat too full of 'epithets of war' and classical allusions", an admission that suggests he may not have intended to adopt this form again (Byron 1980, 81). This reflects the fact that by the 1820s, the sense of an ending beset British Romantic poetry itself: the demise of John Keats in 1821 was only the first in a series of early deaths among poets, while the notion of a poetic revolution had grown tired, too. Such

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¹ Unless otherwise stated, quotations from *The Age of Bronze* are from cited parenthetically from Byron 2009 by line number ("1."). Quotations from other Byron poems are cited by title and line number from Byron 2010.

poetic closure evinces a certain symmetry with the political landscape, since the reputation of the Congress system declined terminally after the impasse at Verona. The Congress of Verona resulted in an agreement to intervene against the Spanish uprising, the principle of 'legitimate intervention' having been previously agreed at the Congress of Troppau in 1820. Byron was dismayed by this turn of events: his Venetian lover, Teresa Guiccioli, recorded in her substantial account of the poem that "[o]n a day of great *sadness* and *indignation*, when he had heard about the *definitive* and *probable* results of the Congress, and after deploring the failure of his friend [George] Canning's efforts to prevent the war in Spain, he put *Don Juan* aside and intoned his Song" (Guiccioli 2005, 518). Beyond the Spanish question, and partly due to the British reluctance to endorse military action against other states, relatively little was achieved at Verona. This was one of the causes of the feeling of belated weariness that Byron finds in "outworn Europe" (l. 380), as will be seen below.

Through analysis of selected episodes in the satire, I wish to discuss a feature of the poem that has not been sufficiently emphasized before. My theme is indicated by the above quotation from *Don Juan*. I argue that *The Age of Bronze* claims a different, more active and critical task for the poet than the purely supportive, commemorative, monumentalizing role that artists were expected to play within the milieu of the European Congress system. The central statement in the poem is the proclamation of identity by Byron's persona: "I am Diogenes" (l. 476). Rather than cheer on the politicians as they argued for and against propping up the various European monarchies, Byron, taking on the mantle of Diogenes the Cynic, maintains a fundamentally contrarian voice. His mission is to speak truth to power in an age of obfuscation. The cultivation of his own perspective as - like Diogenes - an embittered exile, "born for opposition" (*Don Juan* Canto XV, 22, 176), is the foremost purpose of the poem. This is not in itself a new insight: in his editorial notes, Jerome McGann points out the importance of "I am Diogenes" (Byron 1993). However, I use this perspective, first, to shed fresh light on Byron's main satirical portraits; and second, to show how *The Age of Bronze* confronts its own termination as a poem inextricably linked to the transient Congress. Where possible, I measure Byron's approach against those of other contemporary satirists.

Byron's critical acumen in satirising post-Vienna Europe is impressive. He uses but also goes beyond 'newspaper erudition' (P.B. Shelley's phrase in the preface to his 1822 *Hellas, a Lyrical Drama*). While demonstrating this, I will also address an ethically problematic aspect of the poem. In section 15, Byron embarks on an antisemitic discourse rife with stereotypes familiar from *The Merchant of Venice* in order to condemn the Jews' role in the new financial dispensation. Commentators on *The Age of Bronze* tend to skirt around this topic,

preferring to focus on questions either of European politics and economics, or of aesthetics, or (as I do here) combining the two. Thus, Woodring argued that "[w]ithout achieving the unique cadence of *Don Juan*, *The Age of Bronze* solves better than any of Byron's earlier satires the problem of uttering jacobinical opinions from an aristocratic elevation in a true voice" (Woodring 1970, 222). The authenticity of Byron's utterance receives implicit approbation from critics concerned with Spanish history, too: Estaban Pujals regards the poem as a "courageous and energetic satire" that offered practical sustenance of the Spanish rebels' "defence of a constitutional and representative government" (Pujals 1981, 178). In a similar vein, Frederick L. Beaty sees an "impassioned exhortation to all peoples to free themselves from tyranny" (Beaty 1985, 177). In contrast, Bernard Beatty considers the satire overly crude because of its dependence on the binary of the heroic Napoleonic period versus the pusillanimous present, calling it "limited in the way that cartoons are limited", and asserting further that the poem did not "accomplish anything" (Beatty 2017, 96). Regardless of whether the latter argument is correct on its own terms, it begs the question of what achievements, in a causal sense, may be expected of poetry at all. This debate about the poem's utility or political purposiveness perhaps chiefly reflects the respective critics' general views of Byron's personality and politics: the two approximate critical camps echo the better-known controversy over the poet's motivation and effectiveness in the Greek independence campaign on which he was to embark in 1823. A parallel disparity persists in views of Byron's poetic form and its success. For example, Nina Diakonova finds a poem adorned with "devices of classicist brilliance" (Diakonova 1992, 53), whereas Peter Cochran deplores its heaviness in contrast to *Don Juan* (in his introduction to Byron 2009, 1). I propose to bypass these critical antinomies through a shift of emphasis. It is crucial to recognise that *The Age of Bronze* is preoccupied with the place and function of poetry itself in the new dispensation. What Byron-Diogenes seems to discover is that genuine, independent-minded poetry has no place at all in 1822. This realisation renders the poem conscious of its own finality.

Invective and declamation dominate the poem's tone, generally unlike the lighter humour of *Don Juan* (Beaty 1985, 176). Nevertheless, in order to grasp the poet's preoccupation with the role of (his) art in a degenerate era we must unravel the layered humour of the allusions in the title and subtitle. The main title, *The Age of Bronze*, borrowed from Ovid, stakes the claim that things are no longer what they were: the present day is inferior to the past, even to the time within living memory when Pitt and Fox dominated English politics, which was by implication a silver age. This, indeed, sets up the whole method of the poem, which is to lambast the deficiencies of the present pygmy age through devastating contrast with the Napoleonic

era as well as the more distant medieval and ancient past. "Carmen Seculare" is an ironic borrowing from Horace: whereas the Roman poet was fulfilling Augustus's commission to celebrate the glorious present, Byron – who would always have disdained such servile work even if it were available to him – is contemplating in 1822 an "Annus haud Mirabilis" (a year that is not wonderful). "[H]aud" is inserted in the title used by John Dryden in his poem about the achievements of 1666, following the restoration not of the Bourbons but of Charles II. Byron's subtitle, "Impar *Congressus* Achilli", which translates as "ill-matched to struggle with Achilles", is a quotation from Virgil's *Aeneid* and refers in the original context to Troilus. It will emerge in the poem that Byron sees the Duke of Wellington – and possibly also other protagonists of the Congress of Verona – as filling the feeble Troilus's shoes, in contrast to Napoleon, whose spirit matches that of the heroic Achilles (Beatty 2017, 93-4).²

All this is not merely gratuitous classicizing on Byron's part, although he does flaunt the classics in his arraignment of the emptiness of the present day. He alludes to the prevalence of texts and monuments marking allied achievements in the defeat of Napoleon, artworks which themselves frequently invoked a classical, Augustan sense of power. Six months prior to the poem's composition, a nude statue of Achilles had been erected in Hyde Park in honour of Wellington, supposedly sponsored by "the women of England". It was inaugurated on 18 June 1822. The Hyde Park statue was made of bronze because it had been assembled from cannon used in battle by Wellington (Beatty 2017, 94) – and this points to another motivation for Byron's title. Wellington, the victor at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 ("bloody and most bootless Waterloo", in Byron's bitter view at line 223, "bootless" meaning useless but probably also punning on the soldiers' loss of their boots in the mud), now had a diplomatic role as the British representative at the Congress of Verona. Wellington thus replaced the Viscount Castlereagh, who, as Byron notes with sardonic lightness, had recently committed suicide (ll. 538-9). London's first ever public nude statue, the Hyde Park Achilles had provoked both amusement and outrage. Although it continued an iconographic trend set by John Flaxman's dignified Shield of Achilles for George IV, the statue failed to evoke the desired aura of hellenistic heroism, instead presenting an easy target for sexual jokes. For instance, a caricature of it by George Cruikshank displays an "Object: Backside & front view of the ladies fancy-man" (Woodring 1970, 218).

This context indicates the third meaning of the italicised word *Congressus* in Byron's subtitle: it refers not only to martial valour

² The information in this paragraph draws on the editorial notes by McGann (Byron 1993) and Cochran (Byron 2009).

(or its lack) and to the Congress of Verona, but also to sexual intercourse. This will become relevant when Byron ridicules the activities of the Congress delegates. Adopting the voice of Diogenes, Byron professes to despise vulgar lusts, whether sexual or focused on posterity. Diogenes the Cynic was famous for living austerely in a tub, where Alexander the Great found him and asked him what he wished for: the answer, that Alexander should stop blocking the sunlight, expressed his disdain for temporal power. Diogenes Laertius's life of Diogenes records a further relevant episode: 'Asked by a tyrant what kind of bronze is good for a statue, he said, "The kind from which Harmodius and Aristogeiton were forged"' (Diogenes Laertius 2018, 207). Naming these Athenian heroes who struggled to liberate Athens from tyranny, Diogenes this time expressed his anti-authoritarianism in the form of resistance to a certain type of bronze monument. Thus, in 1822, Diogenes the Cynic re-emerges as a prototype of Byron's poetic persona.

The Wellington monument exemplifies the way in which art in (post-)wartime Britain and Europe tended to assume a decorative or commemorative role, patriotically reinforcing symbols of national power. Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square and eventually the Marble Arch were only two of the most striking victory monuments in England. More immediately, at the Congress of Verona, which featured "a continuous social whirl of balls, operas, concerts, banquets, little suppers and *soirées*" (Nichols 1971, 78), art played an important, yet strictly secondary part in the proceedings. Thus, when the composer Gioacchino Rossini, invited by the Austrian Chancellor Klemens von Metternich to provide the music for the Congress, commissioned a local poet (Gaetano Rossi) to compose lyrics, the Austrian censors required three revisions in accordance with a policy of secrecy and censorship. Still not satisfied, the Podesta of Verona forbade printing the lyrics so that "nobody would be able to understand anything, anyhow" (qtd. Nichols 1971, 78). François-René de Chateaubriand, the author who supplies the latter information about the music at Verona, did not protest against the subordination of art to politics: on the contrary, he wrote his book (translated into English in 1838 as *The Congress of Verona*) no longer as a literary author but as an 'ultra-royalist' participant in the Congress's negotiations. Byron sarcastically slaps the French writer down in a prose note (to section 16): "Monsieur Chateaubriand, who has not forgotten the author in the minister, received a handsome compliment at Verona from a literary sovereign: 'Ah! Monsieur C—, are you related to that Chateaubriand who - who - has written *something?*' (ecrit *quelche chose!*) [sic] It is said that the author of *Atala* repented him for a moment of his legitimacy" (Byron 2009, 23). Readers in England, meanwhile, knew the monumental poets Walter Scott, who published "The Field of Waterloo: A Poem" in 1815; William Wordsworth, whose "Thanksgiving

Ode" appeared in 1816; and Robert Southey, who made his debut as poet laureate with the poem *Carmen Triumphale*, to open the year 1814 and to glorify Wellington. It was not least for his commemorative verse on Wellington and Waterloo that Byron had recently lampooned Southey in *The Vision of Judgment* (1822). Southey and Wordsworth are no longer the targets in *The Age of Bronze*, but Byron does pursue other manifestations of their brand of sycophancy, of the "cultural patriotism" (Hooock 2010, 52) invested in this period's military and poetic monuments.

The key point is that Byron's approach is resolutely opposed to all the efforts of the artists just discussed. Like Diogenes in his tub, he stands at a distance from the events and personalities he surveys rather than mingling with them or serving them. Early in the poem he suggests that monuments have replaced reality in the post-Vienna dispensation. Reflecting on the ultimate futility of great power, Byron (mistakenly believing, on the authority of E.D. Clarke, that Alexander the Great's tomb was in the British Museum) writes that "Alexander's Urn a show be grown | On shores he wept to conquer, though unknown" (ll. 31-2): nowadays, that is to say, people are reduced to gawping at monuments of departed grandeur instead of witnessing the real thing. Byron himself refuses the spirit of cultural patriotism with which such artefacts were supposed to be regarded in a country that was officially grateful for the conquest of Napoleon and its own expanding empire.

Another case in point may have been Antonio Canova's marble bust of Napoleon, which had been brought to Wellington's Apsley House in 1817, and so stood just a stone's throw from the Hyde Park Achilles (Beatty 2017, 94). Byron, possibly countering this appropriation of Napoleon, pays tribute to the deceased emperor in section three; yet, in so doing, he remains an outsider, honouring a defeated, disgraced, deceased man whom English verse would never normally celebrate in this way. We may infer that Byron's memorial to Napoleon outdoes some inferior competition, namely a certain "bust delayed" (l. 65). Byron records this as one of the petty irritations to which Napoleon, not long ago "the Queller of the Nations" (l. 57), became subject in captivity on the remote, Atlantic island of St Helena. Byron would have read in Barry O'Meara's new book *Napoleon in Exile; or, A Voice from St Helena* (1822) that "a sculptor at Leghorn had made a bad bust of young Napoleon [...] Napoleon then asked me if I knew any thing about the statue", which was then brought to him, but only after a delay that reflected Napoleon's total loss of status (2: 98-9, qtd. Byron 2009 n. 24). Further, Byron's celebration of Napoleon differs from the above-mentioned commemorations of Wellington and Waterloo in its ambivalence. More the representative of a tarnished silver than of a pristine golden age, Napoleon took "[a] single step into the wrong" (l. 235) thanks to his overweening vanity,

so that having started as a warrior for "man's awakened rights" he became a tyrant, "The King of Kings, and yet of Slaves the Slave" (l. 255). In this way, not even Napoleon escapes the satirist's lash. The passage on Napoleon has a further function in setting up an antithesis that will be completed later in the poem: some of the characters surfeit on food and drink, while others suffer restrictions. Formerly a hunter "[w]hose Game was Empire", Napoleon was eventually confined to unhealthy St Helena (ll. 77-8) where he was "Reduced to nibble" – metaphorically "at his narrow cage" (l. 56), and literally to struggle for food "rations" (l. 58). The poet instructs the reader's imagination: "Weep to perceive him mourning, as he dines, | O'er curtailed dishes, and o'er stinted wines" (ll. 59-60). Again, "His food and wine were doled out" (l. 76) meanly – whereas, by contrast, the protagonists of Verona and their masters endure no such limitations upon their consumption.

Following the Napoleon section, the poem does not take us to Verona immediately. Sections 6-7 present Byron's endorsement of the Spanish revolutionary cause, figured as a kind of Napoleonic spark. This theme is then interrupted by the abrupt, mock-wondering start of section 8: "But lo! a Congress!" (l. 378). Byron now insists that the aura of the latter word, too, has declined. In diametric contrast to the noble participants of the Continental Congress of the American founding fathers that had established independence, such as George Washington "the Tyrant-tamer" (l. 388) or the "Stoic" Benjamin Franklin (l. 386), who worked for liberty, the leaders of the Holy Alliance (Russia, Prussia, and Austria) are agents of oppression. Despite the Christian credentials they flaunt, Byron condemns them as more irrational than Egyptian deities, whether "Dogs" or "Oxen" (l. 401): for "these, more hungry, must have something more, | The power to bark and bite to toss and gore" (ll. 404-5). Byron implies that these leaders would do less harm if they were no more than the self-aggrandising monuments they like to erect. The purpose of the comparison just quoted is to prepare Byron's next ironic assault in section 9, the message of which is that Verona has housed far greater people than these greedy, shallow-minded rulers. Byron recalls the time of Dante and specifically Dante's Veronese patron, an apt topic of contemplation for the exiled Byron-Diogenes. He asks ironically:

for what was 'Dog the Great,'
 'Can Grande' (which I venture to translate)
 To these sublimer Pugs?
 (ll. 416-18)

"Pugs" conjures an entirely unheroic image of a small, stocky pet, an inbred and wheezing animal. That the word 'pug' could also be used as a term of endearment enables an extra touch of irony. With this de-

flationary monosyllable Byron snipes at all the potentates at the Congress of Verona at once.

Byron exempts the absent King Louis XVIII of France from this arraignment – or rather Louis exempted himself by not travelling to the Congress at all: "But where's the Monarch?" is the question that opens section 12. Here, Byron plays on the King's legendary obesity while addressing him semi-affectionately as "Good Classic Louis!" (l. 512). Punning in passing on the name of a chef named Louis Eustache Ude, this apostrophe introduces a mention of Louis XVIII's love of Horace's poetry and, in a grotesque paradox for a monarch during such a turbulent period, of a life of 'Epicurean' retirement. This seems an unexceptional treatment of the gouty Louis XVIII, who only had couple more years to live, and whose unhealthiness reflects that of "outworn Europe" itself (l. 380). For example, the anonymous author of a recent article titled "The Fat Easy Man" portrays Louis as a famous example of this theme: "on the restoration of his family to their hereditary honours, he seemed to enter his long lost capital, and pass on to the palace of his ancestors, with all that *sang froid* and apathy, that torpidity of feeling, which is the constitutional concomitant of exuberant obesity". In a similar vein to Byron, this author exclaims: "Peace to you! Ye fat easy men! May ye enjoy, here and hereafter, the tranquillity you love" ("The Fat Easy Man" 1821, 271). For his part, while judging him mildly relative to the conspiratorial "Pugs" at Verona, Byron pronounces the *desirée* king unfit to rule.

This portrait stands in calculated contrast to that of Tsar Alexander I in section 10, which forms the satirical centrepiece of the poem. Here, references to excessive consumption of food are notably absent – for Byron underlines Alexander I's vanity regarding "His goodly person" (l. 451). The immediate reason for Byron's loathing of Alexander relates to the Tsar's desire to subdue the Spanish uprising through military force – a goal in which Alexander was ultimately successful, by helping to induce the French to attack. Byron now recalls his earlier references to Alexander the Great by apostrophizing the Tsar as "thou namesake of Great Philip's Son!" (l. 454). This ushers in a further parallel: just as Alexander the Great was tutored by Aristotle, so Tsar Alexander I had a philosophical tutor (of admittedly lesser status, as befits the modern age), Frédéric César La Harpe, a Swiss follower of Rousseau who influenced the relative liberalism of the early part of the Russian's reign. La Harpe had recently (in 1815) reappeared on the scene, but by the end of 1822 had broken off relations with the Tsar, repelled by the latter's increasingly repressive absolutism (Schubert, Pyta 2018, 22, 31). This may be what Byron alludes to when he tells Alexander to listen to his teacher: "La Harpe, thine Aristotle, beckons on" (l. 455). Byron opens this section with a series of antitheses that capture the Tsar's vanity and untrustworthiness, together with the gap between his irenic rheto-

ric and the bellicose opposition to “true Liberty” (l. 442) that he displayed in practice:

Resplendent sight! behold the Coxcomb Czar,
 The Autocrat of Waltzes and of War!
 As eager for a plaudit as a realm,
 And just as fit for flirting as the helm;
 [...]

 How well th’Imperial Dandy prates of peace,
 How fain, if Greeks would be his Slaves, free Greece!
 (ll. 434-7, 444-5)

The mention of flirtation returns us to the pun *Congressus* in the poem’s subtitle. Like most of Byron’s slurs, it was founded in fact: the Tsar was indeed flirting with the young, flamboyant Frances Anne, Marchioness of Londonderry (wife of Lord Stewart, Castlereagh’s brother), despite a hiatus when they realised that they were under surveillance from the Austrian secret police (Urquhart 2007, 23).³ Frances Anne kept Alexander’s passionate love letters and had them ornately bound (Urquhart 2007, 20). In turn, Alexander openly approved of the renewal of the Russian Countess Lieven’s affair with Metternich, in the belief that this would promote good relations between Russia and Austria. As a twentieth-century historian expressed it – seeing and liking what Byron saw and hated – this “new race of sublime potentates was delightfully amoral” (Nichols 1971, 79).

In building up to his proclamation ‘I am Diogenes’ (l. 476), Byron invokes elaborate historical precedents to warn Alexander I against pursuing war in Spain. He suggests that whereas Tsar Peter the Great was (at least according to legend) saved by the intervention of his wife Catherine from the Turks at Pruth in 1711, Alexander would receive no such assistance were he to become comparably entangled in western Europe. Further, Byron asks Alexander rhetorically, “Think’st thou to thee Napoleon’s victor yields?” (l. 465). The argument is that if the Spaniards could get the better of Napoleon, an incomparably greater military leader than Tsar Alexander, then they would surely beat off the latter, too. A Russian satirist took a similar view of Alexander’s character and conduct to that of Byron. Pushkin wrote in “Noël” (1818), ironically ventriloquizing Alexander:

O rejoice, people: I am full, healthy and fat;
 Celebrated by the paperboy
 I drank and ate and made a promise.

³ Urquhart (2007: 25) calls this the affair that ‘never was’.

Everything that I did - I liked it and I'm not tired of it. (Pushkin 1959; transl. Margit Dirscherl)

The spirit of this epigram closely resembles that of Byron's section on Alexander, albeit in a more concise form. The satirists respond to tendencies in Alexander that had become increasingly pronounced. Not least among these was he had often promised a constitution, yet never acted upon it (Schubert, Pyta 2018, 86).

Byron introduces the comparison with Peter the Great with another ironic apostrophe to Alexander: "Yet think upon, thou somewhat aged Youth! | Thy Predecessor on the banks of Pruth" (458-9). Having become Tsar very young, Alexander was in his mid-40s at the time of the Congress; he was to die prematurely in 1825, a year after Louis XVIII, a fact that in hindsight once again supports Byron's references to the exhausted state of continental politics. The immediate point is this: Diogenes-Byron implies that the youthful pleasures Alexander indulges in are no longer appropriate, if indeed they ever were. This is surely one of Byron's "hits" in *The Age of Bronze*. The motive for this part of the satire may be deduced from the passage of Frances Anne's memoir in which she enthuses about Alexander's charm at the Congress of Verona. She expressed her enchantment as follows: "for the first time [I] saw the Emperor alone. He sat with me above 2 hours. He certainly is a very fine looking man. If not positively handsome, his countenance remarkably pleasing, his manners...affable and agreeable become when he addresses a woman captivating. His conversation is perfectly beautiful....He is like a beneficent Genius" (Frances Anne, Marchioness of Londonderry, manuscript 'Memoir' of 1848, qtd. Urquart 2007, 21). This bears out Byron's description of Alexander as "just as fit for flirting as the helm" (l. 437). There is a further twist of the satirist's knife here: since Byron portrays Alexander as utterly *unfit* for "the helm" (crown, also connoting military leadership), the latter line deals another passing blow to the Tsar.

The topic of food returns in section 17 with the second satirical highlight of the poem: Byron's treatment of Marie-Louise of Austria, Napoleon's widow and the lover of Adam, Duke Neipperg of Parma, whose children she bore even before Napoleon's demise. Rossini had recently honoured her, in what Byron might have viewed as a typically sycophantic Congress-era artwork, with the opera *La riconoscenza* (1820). Unsurprisingly, Byron's approach could hardly differ more from that of Rossini. In Byron's view, her ceremonial appearance at Verona is a travesty, for she should instead be mourning her great husband: "Her only throne is in Napoleon's grave" (l. 740). He objects to her lack of perturbation, even when Wellington, Napoleon's vanquisher, took her arm: "Her eye, her cheek, betray no inward Strife" (l. 763). Byron even implies that Napoleon's mere ashes (whose "embers soon will burst the mould", presumably in the form of revolu-

tionary uprisings in Spain or Greece, l. 756) are more lively than the "trappings of her mimic Court" (l. 750). Having previously participated in "[a] Sway surpassing that of Charlemagne, | Which swept from Moscow to the Southern Seas" (ll. 746-7), she is now, as the Duchess of Parma, reduced to ruling merely "the pastoral realm of Cheese" (l. 748). Once again, allowing for satirical exaggeration, Byron is not merely well informed, as in the detail about her walking arm-in-arm with Wellington, but provides an assessment that concurs with other sources. A modern biographer of Marie-Louise notes that while she improved Parma's cultural life, she never grasped Napoleon's world-historical significance (Schiel 1990). There is an inherent thematic connection between the two satirical culmination-points of *The Age of Bronze*, for it was none other than Alexander I who had successfully insisted that Marie Louise be given the Duchy of Parma for the rest of her life (Lobanov-Rostovsky 1954, 351-2).

In my discussion I have treated the passages on Alexander and Marie Louis side-by-side. In the poem, however, the problematic "anti-semitic section" (Scrivener 1993, 78) comes between them. Section 14 begins with a critique of the profiteering in which English farmers had engaged during the Napoleonic wars. Byron suggests that for precisely this reason the landowners should never have complained about Napoleon and the destruction he caused: "Such, landlords! was *your* appetite for war, | And, gorged with blood, you grumble at a scar!" (638-9). Although Byron was himself an aristocratic landowner who profited from the rise in rents (Pregnotato 2015, 238-40), using his iconoclastic Diogenes-voice he aptly critiques a national and global financial system that thrived on war profits as an unproductive rentier class constantly racked up the rents paid by the poor. He underlines this by using "Rent!" as the concluding rhyme in couplet after couplet: concluding this "Rent" passage he writes of the rentiers (sarcastically adapting Alexander Pope's famous words about human happiness), "Their good, ill, health, wealth, joy, or discontent, | Being, end, aim, religion - Rent, Rent, Rent!" (ll. 632-3).⁴ Then, however, in section 15, Byron lays the blame for this repressive economy squarely on the Jews, asking rhetorically about England: "Was ever Christian land so rich in Jews?" (l. 675) That 'Christian' is hardly intended as a

⁴ Woodring (1970: 217) explains that "The method of exaggeration in [section 9] inflates the agrarian "patriot bill" of April 1822, which erected a sliding scale of import duty on grain, into the most awesome event of the decade. Its ninety lines berate English landlords who fattened when they farmed out the war against Napoleon—'farmers of the war, dictators of the farm'—but now grumble when asked to share the cost: 'gorged with blood,' these 'high-market patriots' would not have their earthquake engulf the price of land. The poet meets their outlandish claims to patriotism with ironic exaggeration of metaphor". Almeida (2016) praises Byron's economic acumen, drawing parallels with the economist Thomas Piketty, but seems to overlook Byron's lack of interest in the poor or ordinary workers. On Byron's lack of affinity with socialism, see below.

more favourable label than "Jews" cannot rescue the sentiment, and though it is true that *The Age of Bronze* had already featured "racist jokes about Scythians, Calmucks, Cossacks, and Bashkirs", Alexander I's non-European subjects (Cochran in Byron 2009, 16), the anti-semitic part is more extreme.

Byron's mention of Jews in England is only a prelude to his main theme, which is the notion that a few specific Jews acted as financial puppet masters of the politicians at Verona:

Two Jews - but not Samaritans - direct
The world, with all the Spirit of their sect.
What is the happiness of earth to them?
A Congress forms their "New Jerusalem" (ll. 692-5)

This pair of Jews were two of the Rothschild brothers, Byron probably meaning Nathan Meyer and Salomon Rothschild (Scrivener 84). As far as their importance within the international political scene was concerned, Byron again shows himself to be well informed. The substance of Byron's criticism of Nathan Rothschild's role in financing the "pugs" of Verona is expanded from *Don Juan* Canto XII, where he snipes at two of the most famous bankers, Nathan Rothschild and Alexander Baring:

Who hold the balance of the world? Who reign
O'er Congress, whether royalist or liberal?
Who rouse the shirtless patriots of Spain
(That make old Europe's journals squeak and gibber all)?
Who keep the world, both old and new, in pain—
Or pleasure? Who make politics run gibber all?
The shade of Buonaparte's noble daring? —
Jew Rothschild and his fellow Christian Baring.
(*Don Juan* Canto XII, 5, 1-8)

In his family biography of the House of Rothschild, Niall Ferguson quotes from the *Don Juan* passage as an authentic reflection of the decisive financial contribution that the Rothschilds made as "bankers to the Holy Alliance". That status dated, according to Ferguson, to the end of 1822, the year in which the Rothschilds made a massive, £6.6million loan to Russia: in monetary terms, it was indeed "the Rothschilds who gave the alliance substance" (Ferguson 1998, 136). When the Congress of Verona assembled, just as at the preceding Congresses of Troppau (1820) and Laibach (1821), the central question was to what extent the coalition should intervene against national insurgencies, most pressingly the rebellion in Spain. This was a financial as much as it was a military matter. That Byron should resume his focus on the Rothschilds in *The Age of Bronze* is

therefore perfectly fitting. Yet, as noted, he undermines the ethical stance of his own poem by resorting to stereotypes as indefensible as they were fashionable: "Two Jews keep down the Romans, and uphold | The accursed Hun, more brutal than of old" (ll. 690-1). These two Jews are explicitly cast in the role of Shylock, and the "spirit of their sect" treated as a timeless obsession with gaining profit from the interest charge on loans.

Why does Byron resort to this derogatory rhetoric? In the fullest study of this aspect of the poem to date, Michael Scrivener finds in it a certain laziness: borrowing the antisemitism of his main source for current affairs, William Cobbett's *Annual Register*, Byron takes a short-cut via a racist explanation of the European financial hegemony. This is a reasonable explanation but not a sufficient one. Without wishing to make the exaggerated claim that antisemitism was central to Byron's mentality, I would suggest that Bertrand Russell rightly locates it within a nexus of the poet's abiding concerns: Byron's passionate, aristocratic contempt for finance led him "to proclaim an opposition to capitalism which is quite different from that of the socialist who represents the interest of the proletariat, since it is an opposition based on dislike of economic preoccupations, and strengthened by the suggestion that the capitalist world is governed by Jews" (Russell 1940, 36). First, then, the antisemitic stereotypes must at that moment have appeared grist to the mill of a 'non-socialist' critique of the rapidly evolving system of global capitalism. Second, at a time of fervid nationalist rhetoric, Byron may have struggled to do other than replace one form of exclusionary rhetoric with another. Third, the antisemitic part also fitted (albeit grotesquely) with Byron's contrast of the present age of bronze with silver and golden ages of the past. Section 15 betrays a fear of financialization replacing more traditional values, such as valour and heroism, for which *The Age of Bronze* expresses nostalgia.

I have already compared some of Byron's 'hits' with cognate work by other satirists. In the case of the antisemitic 'miss', it is revealing to draw a contrast with Heinrich Heine's satirical references to the Rothschilds. Heine, like Byron, recognised how essential their financial empire was to nineteenth-century Europe, noting that "money is the god of our era, and Rothschild is his prophet". Heine, too, links the prevailing taste for political monuments to the dispensation supported by the Rothschilds' wealth:

M. de Rothschild's offices are extremely large: they're a labyrinth of rooms, a barracks of wealth. The room were the baron works from morning to night - he has nothing to do but work - was recently prettied up. At present there can be found on the mantelpiece a marble bust of Emperor Franz of Austria... But out of friendship the baron also intends to have busts made of all the

princes of Europe who have contracted their loans through their house, and this collection of marble busts will form a more grandiose Valhalla than the Valhalla dedicated to illustrious Germans that king Ludwig of Bavaria built in Ratisbonne.’ (Heine 2012, entry dated 31 March 1841)

In this and his other satirical treatments of the Rothschilds, however, Heine focuses his wit on the family’s single-minded accumulation of wealth rather than, like Byron, resorting to antisemitic stereotypes.

Byron opens section 16 of *The Age of Bronze* with a summary complaint that, through its reference to the ‘incongruous’ puppeteers among the delegates at the Congress of Verona, seeks to vindicate the poet’s own antithetical vision:

Strange sight this Congress! destined to unite
 All that's incongruous, all that's opposite.
 I speak not of the Sovereigns—they're alike,
 A common coin as ever mint could strike:
 But those who sway the puppets, pull the strings,
 Have more of Motley than their heavy kings. (ll. 706-11)

“Jews”, meaning the Rothschilds as financiers, significantly head the list of these motley powermongers, immediately followed by “authors”, the latter being the group at which Byron most effectively ‘hits’ in this poem:

Jews, authors, generals, charlatans, combine,
 While Europe wonders at the vast design:
 There Metternich, power's foremost parasite,
 Cajoles; there Wellington forgets to fight;
 There Chateaubriand forms new books of Martyrs;
 And subtle Greeks intrigue for stupid Tartars;
 There Montmorency, the sworn foe to Charters,
 Turns a diplomatist of grand Eclât,
 To furnish articles for the 'Debâts;'
 Of War so certain—yet not quite so sure
 As his dismissal in the 'Moniteur.'
 (ll. 712-22)

Authors again receive the most damaging treatment from Byron’s pen in this passage, and specifically two authors-turned politicians: he sneers at Chateaubriand’s monumental, historical work *Les Martyrs* (1809), then alludes to the apostasy of the former revolutionary Matthieu Jean Félicité Montmorency, now a royalist diplomat, who sought to stir up support for his pro-war stance through his articles in the French press. Only with the claim that at Verona “subtle Greeks

intrigue" did Byron's information perhaps falter, since Greek delegates were not invited to the Congress.

Such was Byron's view of the pygmy state of things in 1822. *The Age of Bronze* does not merely express a general state of 'Byronic' disillusionment, but rather springs from a disappointed practical hope: not long before, in *The Vision of Judgment*, Byron had referred to the year 1820 as "the first year of freedom's second dawn" (line 57), placing his hopes for political radicalism in recent revolutionary activities, primarily in Italy. Now, instead, as Guiccioli noted, "The Congress of Verona, by its consequences for Italy above all, weighed upon his great soul; and the victims' gaiety, the welcome they gave to their oppressor, annoyed him" (Guiccioli 2005, 517-18). Thus, Byron writes as a poet in the position of Juvenal in the latter's first satire, wondering how he can merely sing of Hercules when there is so much blatant vice and folly to target in the present day; yet with so little hope of improvement that the result is a one-off, ostensibly improvised cameo. The brief final section (18) underlines the ideological homelessness of the poet as "tired of foreign follies, I turn home" (l. 767). Unlike, say, the dignified homeward turn that concludes John Milton's *Lycidas* (1637), Byron's weeping muse bursts out in a fit of harsh laughter as he observes the ridiculous activities of British politicians (George IV's friend "Sir William Curtis in a kilt!", l. 770). The apparent promise of another, similar poem in the final couplet similarly dissolves into a sense of ultimate ridiculousness: "Here, reader, will we pause; if there's no harm in | This first - you'll have, perhaps, a second 'Carmen'" (ll. 779-80). For this seems more a device to include the word "Carmen" a second time via an absurd rhyme than a real declaration of intent to continue writing. In this way, the final joke of *The Age of Bronze* is that it shows its own form, the heroic satire of Johnson or Juvenal, to be played out, exhausted. On this occasion at least, Byron might have taken T.S. Eliot's view that he writes "a dead or dying language" as a compliment.

The Age of Bronze has often been judged as under-nuanced, in that it reflects the antithetical extremes into which Byron's appropriations of history led him. The racist terms in which Byron couches his otherwise shrewd assessment of the economic spirit of the age remain a severe stumbling-block to a sympathetic interpretation. Nevertheless, in resolutely looking in at the Congress from the outsider-perspective of Diogenes, refusing to take up the position of a sycophantic memorial like the Hyde Park monument, or an interested insider's account like that of Chateaubriand, the poem resists selling out to the new (yet "somewhat aged") order of the Congress system. It refuses to accept the instrumental role that had arguably become the fate of mainstream art in the European dispensation following the 1815 Congress of Vienna. It insists on being corrective, not decorative, even as it thereby confronts the sense of an ending.

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