

An Australian Poet in Italy: A.D. Hope's Byronic View of Latter-day Italy

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Abstract

The article examines the classicism of the poet A.D. Hope, especially in relation to his fascination with the work of Lord Byron, notably *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and its sections set in Italy in Rome. Hope's insistence on the European source of Australian literature in the classical antiquity found expression in several of his poems in direct intertextual references to Byron's work.

Keywords: Australian poetry, lord Byron, A. D. Hope

*In memory of Veronica Brady (1929–2015), a
great Australian scholar and friend, and of our
happy hours on the Ljubljana river in Ljubljana,
tasting the bounties of food and drink and enjoying
the urban landscape while talking of Oz.*

A. D. Hope (1907–2000) is usually described as an Augustan poet, because of his frequent usage of allusions from classical, Graeco-Roman and the later neo-classical English literary traditions, as well as because of his insistence on the explicitly formalist poetic manner. To be sure, Hope in his poems tried to revive the classical poetic ideal, although the unabashed identification with Lord Byron's (anti) hero Childe Harold also shows just one aspect of his admiration of the 'Byronic hero': his mordant satirical wit. The long epistolary poem "A Letter from Rome" (Hope 1972), written upon A. D. Hope's visit to Rome as part of his first European 'Grand Tour' in 1958, is, in fact, based on a pre-text, which therefore serves as an intertextual model as well as a formal impetus, Byron's work *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (Byron 1957 edition). Parallels between the two poetic *œuvres* are to be found especially in the last Canto IV of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. The last two Cantos are usually considered to be more analytical and objective than the first two, which are typically Byronesque, narcissistic and subjective.

In "A Letter from Rome" Hope in *ottava rima* depicts Italy through the 'historical' eyes of Lord Byron and the later Victorians — John Ruskin, Walter Pater, Robert Browning, Henry James and, like the discontented Byron, complains about the obvious "barbarian" behaviour and indifference of the present-day Italians. The poem's epigraph is thus very much to the point:

"Rome, Rome! thou art no more / As thou hast been!"
That Roma *non è più come era prima*
Which Byron heard the Roman workmen sing
Gives scope to write on anything at all
Since Romulus and Remus built their wall.
(*"A Letter from Rome"*)

It is significant to note that the quotation in Italian used by Hope is almost identical with the one in Byron's letter to John Hobhouse (Venice, January 2 1818): "And when we ourselves, in riding round the walls of Rome, heard the simple lament of the labourers' chorus, *Roma! Roma! Roma! Roma non è come prima! ...*"

The author, A. D. Hope, does not comprehend Rome historically, but in a romanticized, partly fictitious, preconceived way, where the past is considered very much part of the present, as was typical of the Victorian admirers of Rome in the

previous century. It may be worth noting that such eclecticism is also typical of Hope's own age, i.e. postmodernity, and literature produced within the postmodern paradigm (Cf. Krevel 2016, 177-180).

Identically, Australian visitors' response was in the 19th century "colonially and provincially predetermined" as regards the pre-formed images of spirit and without a proper connection with reality (Pesman 1983). The 'reality' they saw was the English/classical slanted one. Hope, an Australian, is essentially doing the same thing so brilliantly in poetry some 130 years later, although clad in an ironical stance. The image of Italy was for these visitors clearly ambivalent; they were suddenly confronted with two Italies, the country of Art and Beauty, and on the other hand the "barbarian" country of contemporary Italians, supposedly disinterested in art. A. D. Hope is clear on this point:

And Italy from which the West arose,
Falls prey to new but more barbarian foes ...
Surely no sadder irony than this
Which brings that noble, intellectual voice
To drown in trivial and distracting noise.
("A Letter from Rome")

Hope, a poet and an Australian, on Italian ground for the first time from the Antipodes, attempts to discover his real, "lost ego," although, to his great surprise, he finds that technocratic, industrialized Italy cannot be what he has been looking for. This dichotomy can be observed in the entire Hope's poetic opus, namely the vision of Art that is being endangered by modern, overtechnicized civilization. In the process of the reinterpretation of the classical ideal, ancient Greece and Rome are regarded by him not merely as the source, but also as the cradle of European culture: "Athens perhaps begot, Rome was the womb."

The last Canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* recounts Byron's journey to Rome in 1817 and in an elegiac tone tells of classical antiquity and the fall of civilizations:

The commonwealth of kings, the men of Rome And even since, and now,
fair Italy!
Thou art the garden of the world, the home Of all Art yields, and Nature can
decree; Even in thy desert, what is like to thee?
(Canto IV, 26)

The most pungent lines suggest Byron's scheme of changing generations, with a gradual decline in all kinds of standards. In Byron's case there is a glimpse of the fall of Athens and Rome, with a hint that London may soon follow, as well as

Sydney and Melbourne that agonize in a 'cultural cringe,' as we on the other hand learn from Hope.

The fourth Canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is symmetrical: in form it constitutes a kind of debate between Art and Nature in two almost equal parts, the first being concerned with Venice and the journey to Rome, the second with Rome itself. The two are completed by a coda, Byron's famous apostrophe to the ocean, which also found an expression in Hope's verse.

The ruins of Rome almost inevitably suggest the themes of grandeur and decay, the triumph of time, of the transcendence of human limitations by Art. Art and Nature are contrasted and blended in the landscape of mighty ruins. In this poetic discussion Byron is particularly concerned with literature, sculpture and architecture (Jump 1973). Lord Byron's *Don Juan*, which was humorously introduced by A. D. Hope in Hector Munro's *Don Juan in Australia* (1986), also features Nature's ambivalence and the possible ultimate reconciliation between Art and Nature; the ruin in particular is a significant Romantic object of human contemplation, for it visibly demonstrates the power of time both to conquer and to transform the monuments of human greatness.

Oh Time! the beautifier of the dead,
Adorner of the ruin, comforter
And only healer when the heart hath bled ...
(*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*)

Sea imagery is in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* frequently combined with that of wreckage and destruction. The ocean assumes the metaphorical value of the passage of time and change. Byron towards the end of the work apostrophizes the ocean in a visionary mood ("the type and symbol of eternity") and contrasts the sea's sublime permanence with the inevitable fall of empires and civilizations:

Thy shores are empires, changed in all save thee
Assyria-Greece-Rome-Carthage-what are they?
Thy waters wash'd them power while they were free,
And many a tyrant since, their shores obey
The stranger, slave, or savage; their decay
Has dried up realms to deserts — not so thou;
(*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*)

A. D. Hope maintains that his retelling of the last strophes from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* ("Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean — roll!"), entitled "The

Ocean to Lord Byron” as a proof of his fondness to rely on Byron’s poetic models, sprang out of his ‘ecological’ awareness: “It was after finding that it was impossible to sit on the delightful beaches of the Algarve without getting fouled with pellets of ships’ oil and disgusted by the garbage strewn about by tourists that I meditated the ocean’s reply”.

Byron’s original statement, on the other hand, expressed the typical Romantic communion of Man with the paramount element — Nature (“I love not Man the less, but Nature more”), while in Hope’s ecological answer it is transformed into a modern Man’s physical ‘destruction’ of Nature, “spreading wastes less horrible than Man’s:”

There’s pleasure in those pathless woods no more,
 The woods themselves are cut for pulp or scrap.
 As for the raptures of the lonely shore,
 Pick any place you like upon the map,
 The tourist trade has caught it — view the lap
 Of Ocean ankle-deep in trash and cans.
 Nor can the deep sea music match the crop
 Belched from transistors. Time and circumstance
 Wreak havoc and spread wastes less horrible than Man’s.
 (A.D. Hope, “The Ocean to Lord Byron”)

According to René Wellek until the end of the 19th century the notion of classicism had rarely been used (Wellek 1970; also Žigon) and English neo-classicists did not call themselves that. T. S. Eliot’s contentions in the essay “What is a Classic?” (1944), however, are strongly reminiscent of some of those A. D. Hope expressed in “A Letter from Rome.” In it he describes his return to the ‘source,’ for he sees ancient Italy as a cultural, physical and metaphysical cradle of European civilization from which, by extension, the Australian civilization has gradually also emerged.

Yet here am I returning to the source. That source is Italy, and hers is Rome, The
fons et origo of Western Man;
 Athens perhaps begot, Rome was the womb,
 Here the great venture of the heart began.
 Here simply with a sense of coming home I have returned with no explicit plan
 Beyond a child’s uncertain quest, to find Something once dear, long lost and
 left behind.
 (A. D. Hope, “A Letter from Rome”)

Ancient (pagan) gods and myths are in “A Letter from Rome” aestheticized, used in a playful, allegorical manner. The superscription onto Byron’s model *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* is explicitly stated by Hope. Prior to his departure to Italy he had carefully read Byron’s work (“which is sometimes no more than Baedeker in verse”), whose (anti)hero he identifies with on his journey.

I’ve just re-read Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, Which offers, almost equally
combined,
The shrewd, the silly, the noble and the sage,
The stamp of genius and the touch of sham ...
And one specially is in my mind
The limping man, the legend of his age.
(A. D. Hope, “A Letter from Rome”)

On the pilgrimage Hope just as “the limping man” tries to find the lost “primordial link,” which is why he is instinctively drawn to lake Nemi in central Italy, to the place of the alleged Diana’s grave with the holy oak and its Golden Bough:

It ends with Nemi and the Golden Bough What instinct led him there? I like
to think What drew Byron then
Is what has drawn me now ...

The allusion is, of course, to the bulky anthropological study of ancient myths by Sir James G. Frazer (*The Golden Bough*, 1890), who postulated the principle of the cultural exchanges and the oscillations in fertility and sterility, the rise and fall of civilizations. Hope uses the ‘myth’ in the scenes depicting the legendary priesthood of Diana’s shrine by the lake.

There’s nothing now at Nemi to evoke Sir James G. Frazer’s memorable scene
The sleepless Victim-king, the secret oak; A market garden spreads its tidy
green
Where stood Diana’s grove, no voices spoke ...

However, the evocation of the myth causes some sort of inexplicable tension due to the fact that there is nothing left by the lake that would remind him of the past or Byron’s visit. The “force” and “insistence” is felt by Hope as fate, which is according to him quite different from Byron’s “calm and cherished hate.” A. D. Hope in “A Letter from Rome” refers to his “obsession,” with the ritual “baptism” in lake Nemi, which signifies a symbolic initiation of an Australian (poet) into the system of European ur-myths. They appear to him as more or less inexplicable

entities, but he persuades himself that he has to perform “Europe’s oldest ritual of prayer;” he wades into the water to be baptized.

I seemed constrained, before I came to drink
 To pour some wine upon the water’s face,
 Later, to strip and wade out from the brink ...
 I was possessed, and what possessed me there
 Was Europe’s oldest ritual of prayer.
 (A. D. Hope, “A Letter from Rome”)

Byron’s original description of the lake as an ‘objective correlative’ is this:

Lo, Nemi! ravell’d in the woody hills
 So far, that the uprotting wind which tears
 The oak from his fondation, and which spills
 The ocean o’er is boundary, and bears
 Its foam against the skies, reluctant spares
 The oval mirror of thy glossy lake;
 (Lord Byron, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*)

Throughout his poetic career Hope had been writing poetry which drew upon the resources of European mythology, particularly ancient Greek mythology and literature (Cf. Kramer 1979). He remembers “the beginnings of mythology between the ages of four and five” (Hope 1976). Hope further contends that the most characteristic phenomena of the modern world — high technology, industry, science, entrepreneurialship — do not offer a good possibility to create new myths but rather hasten the development of “the aristocratic art of satire” (Hope 1965), which Hope explicitly cherished (e. g. his brilliant mock-epic *Dunciad Minor*). Still, the poet’s experience at lake Nemi near Rome, though clearly important and visibly effective, is not particularly striking to the reader of “A Letter from Rome” and is in fact less impressive than other parts of the poem which have so far been quoted, for example the *‘fons et origo’* section. It has none of the conviction of Wordsworth’s ‘revelation’ poems and hardly matches the strength of Byron’s meditation inspired by Lake Nemi at the end of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*.

In Australian criticism simple caricatures frequently emerge, portraying Hope in bold apodictic strokes as neo-classical, Parnassian, anti-modernist, and the like. Such categorizations, however, do point to the one indisputable element of Hope’s poetry, namely that it is essentially “strategically restless and subversive”

(Wallace-Crabbe 1990). In quite a few of his poems, (e. g. "Conquistador," "The Kings," "Flower Poem"), however, there are Decadent and *fin-de-siècle* undertones. Critics have for the past twenty years found Hope the architect and the purveyor of neoclassical ideas in Australian poetry, but how to explain, then, the 'romantic agony,' the agony of the divided soul in his poems, particularly the *penchant* towards modelling some of his satirical poetic pieces on Lord Byron's verse: this applies, for example, to "A Letter from Rome" or his satirical Byronesque rhymes in the introductory verses to his friend Hector Munro's mock-epic *Don Juan in Australia* (Hope 1986). The link that seems to be particularly strong between Byron and Hope is not in the Romantic traits, but rather in the scintillating satirical impulse, which is essentially characteristic of both poets.

Lord Byron's early work shows that his self-esteem was shattered when *Hours of Idleness* were savagely attacked by the influential *Edinburgh Review*. Byron's counter-attack on literary critics in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* owed more to the tradition of Aleksander Pope's *The Dunciad* than to that of his Romantic contemporaries, for he greatly admired the 18th century satirist Pope; on the other hand, it is also known just how much A. D. Hope appreciated Pope. Byron is said to have admired "Gifford inordinately, and Pope almost to idolatry, yet his own tastes were really quite different from either" (Yarker 1975). Every satirical description of the world implies an ideal one: every assault on the way things are depends upon the understanding that they can be better. Satire thus somehow springs from the divided self or the Romantic divided soul to be found both in Byron and Hope. The exaggerated, mock-epic, burlesque satiric style which achieves its major effects by exploiting the contrasts between radically different levels, the heroic and the commonplace, is an important element linking the poetry of Lord Byron to that of A. D. Hope.

Byron's *Don Juan* is indeed very much indebted to Augustan poetry, although in some views not so much in the part represented by Alexander Pope but by that of Jonathan Swift (England 1974). One may question with enough reason, why Byron chose satire, on account of which he is today even more highly valued than for his explicitly Romantic pieces, satire as an important mode of expression, especially in the 'English' Cantos of *Don Juan*, which are rich in satirical relevance and resonant with literary allusions? One possible answer may be found in the fact that 18th century satire was rather static, while the overall Romantic feeling and *Zeitgeist* was dynamic: Byron, in using a somewhat 'Romanticized' satire, thus tried to find a *modus vivendi*, a poetic form that should give his well-loved form of satire a sense of flow and clearcut forward movement. In this respect the standards of Popean satire were accommodating and flexible enough to embrace new experiences, those of Byron and, much later, those of an ardent admirer of his, A. D. Hope. The poetic paradox of Byron and

Hope cannot be better exemplified for, even if the subject-matter is Romantic, the (satirical) mode and mood of their verse tend to be Augustan. It is paradoxical that Hope's strong subjectivity and Romantic personal choice be clad in classical values, which is, in fact, his true classicism.

Another possible line of comparison between Byron and Hope could be drawn with respect to the Byronic hero phenomenon. Peter L. Thorslev (1962) classified, on the one hand, 18th century hero types (the child of nature the hero of sensibility, the gothic villain), and Romantic hero types (the noble outlaw, Faust, Cain, Satan and Prometheus) on the other. Hope's heroes, however, do not fit into any of these categories. The complex Byronic hero, a curious mixture of those mentioned, is the direct ancestor of many of the pessimistic or nihilistic heroes and philosophical rebels to be found in French Romantic and Decadent literature, who frequently occur in Hope's verse.

The persona of *Don Juan* does retain many of the characteristics of the Byronic hero which is why it is no coincidence that Hope took him as a model in his introduction to Hector Munro's mock epic *Don Juan in Australia* (Munro 1986). He is sceptical and defiant, but as the poem develops, it takes on specific characteristics, especially because Don Juan becomes strongly tolerant for all his satirical wit. Hope namely finds it impossible to properly introduce Lord Byron's *Don Juan* to "the ocker world," strongly ridiculing Australia as "an arid wasteland of its sporting scene:"

HECTOR, MY FRIEND, you strike me dumb with wonder,
 You who so late and neatly cooked the goose
 Of the philosophers, now turn to plunder Lord Byron's *Don Juan* to introduce
 His hero to the ocker world 'down under,' Where, in vain Hope's of playing fast
 and loose
 You bring within the range of observation
 Love, politics and Woman's Liberation,
 Sunbaking and, contriving not to bore,
 The arid wasteland of its sporting scene,
 Feats that might well have tasked the Burlador
 Of Seville, if like little Wilhelmine,
 He asked "What do they love each other for,
 Since 'having sex' is what they really mean?
 For love below the Line's a thing of snatches
 To make a nice break between cricket matches.
 (A. D. Hope, Introduction to Hector Munro's *Don Juan in Australia*)

A. D. Hope's literary affiliations with Lord Byron's poetry are, thus, at least threefold, as exemplified by his long epistolary poem "A Letter from Rome," Introduction to Munro's *Don Juan in Australia*, and Byron's works *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan*.

First, Hope's 'Romanticism' is comparable to the mood of *Childe Harold* in his palimpsestic superscription of Byron's original texts. Byron's frivolous sensibility does not emanate from Hope's verse, but it is significant to note that both poets possibly felt they were self-imposed 'outcasts' from their respective societies. The second contention is that A. D. Hope relied on an exaggerated, Baroque classicism, typical of the late Victorian period, classicism that remains on the level of sheer decoration, ornament and form, whereas the content may well be Romantic. In the third place it can be maintained, *mutatis mutandis*, that the Popean satirical value of Byron's and Hope's verse is possibly the strongest link between their literary achievements, one that instructs us about their own position in native lands, about Byron's 'physical exile' from the shores of Albion and Hope's deliberate 'spiritual exile' from Australia, which enabled them both to take a critical attitude towards their homelands, respectively.

The central emphasis in A. D. Hope's poem "The Damnation of Byron" is on the man-woman relationship, a theme not entirely absent also from "A Letter from Rome," in which it takes the form of a rather banal contemporary love story between Louise, an American student of art history, and the native Italian Alessandro. Hope's nihilistic experience of eroticism, reduced primarily to its sexual aspect (e. g. the *femme fatale* figure), is in some ways again reminiscent of Byron's stance. In "The Damnation of Byron" Hope as early as 1934 prophetically anticipated his own creativity. Indeed, on the grand Shakespearean stage of life he has daily performed his *Don Juan*, doomed to the searching, lifelong artistic 'pilgrimage' of Childe Harold:

Through the Infernal Fields he makes his way
 Playing again, but on a giant stage,
 His own *Don Juan*; pursuing day by day
 Childe Harold's last astonishing pilgrimage.
 (A. D. Hope, "The Damnation of Byron")

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Avstralski pesnik v Italiji: byronovski pogled na sodobno Italijo A. D. Hopa

Članek intertekstualno raziskuje klasicizem v poeziji avstralskega pesnika A.D. Hopa, še posebej v povezavi z delom lorda Byrona *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in odseki tega dela, ki so postavljeni v Italijo.

Ključne besede: avstralska poezija, lord Byron, A. D. Hope

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