

Black Byronism

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Abstract

This essay makes a case for Byron's transformative influence on the emergence of African American literature. I begin with a discussion of the widespread citation of some lines from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in canonical works of nineteenth-century African American literature. I then focus on love lyrics and epic poetry from the antebellum decades through the Reconstruction and its aftermath, when Black masculinity came under renewed surveillance and when Byron's reputation was increasingly marred by scandal. Throughout, I argue that nineteenth-century African American writers drew on Byron to mount critiques of slavery as a kinship regime, to displace the moral coordinates of conventional representations of Blackness, to avoid the pressures and pitfalls of the marketplace for slave narratives, and to mark their poetic deviance from within the tradition of revolutionary liberalism.

*Hereditary bondsmen! know ye not
Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow?* (CHP, II, 76)

An extraordinary array of African American writers have cited the above lines from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, in crucial works from the antebellum decades to the beginning of the twentieth century. Henry Highland Garnet quoted the passage in his 'Address to the Slaves of the United States', delivered at the National Negro Convention in Buffalo, New York, in 1843. Martin Delany then attached it as the epigraph to the Pittsburgh newspaper *The Mystery* which ran from 1843–47. Frederick Douglass quoted the lines in 'The Heroic Slave' (1853) and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), where James McCune Smith also included the passage in his preface. Douglass retained the citation in later versions of his narrative, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, 1892). And W.E.B. Du Bois cited the same lines in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). A number of critics have taken passing note of this citational phenomenon, reading it variously as an indication of the importance of poetry in the abolition movement or of the emphasis on masculine self-help in Black political culture.¹ The above lines from *Childe Harold* were not, however, the only passages from Byron that appeared in early African American literature. Virtually every well-known Black writer of the nineteenth century quoted Byron; some worked through his influence in substantial ways.

In what follows, I make the case for an underestimated and transformative Black Byronism. I begin with a discussion of the idea of ‘hereditary’ slavery, which indicates the significance of Black abolitionists’ use of Byronic models beyond iconic scenes of masculine, physical revolt. I then demonstrate Byron’s influence on the love lyrics of George Moses Horton, who translated Byron’s romantic mobility to the experience of chattel slavery. Next I follow Byron’s influence through the earliest examples of epic poetry in the African American tradition, from the antebellum decades to the Reconstruction and its aftermath, when Black masculinity came under renewed surveillance and when Byron’s reputation was increasingly marred by scandal. Black poets continued to explore Byronism as a means to aesthetic experimentation, even as the radical masculinity of the Black abolitionists risked appearing as the hyper-sexualised Black criminal of the Jim Crow era. I conclude with some speculations about the continued cultural relevance of Black Byronism in the form of the stylish Black male genius in the twentieth century. Throughout, I argue that nineteenth-century African American writers drew on Byron to mount critiques of slavery as a kinship regime, to displace the moral coordinates of conventional representations of Blackness, to avoid the pressures and pitfalls of the marketplace for slave narratives, and to mark their poetic deviance from within the tradition of revolutionary liberalism.

Slavery as a Kinship Regime in Byron’s Influence on Black Poetics

Recent anthologies of Anglophone poetry about slavery show that virtually every poet in the Romantic period took at least a conceptual if not political interest in the subject.² Certainly other white poets than Byron are more closely associated with abolition, such as Cowper in England or Whittier in the United States. Yet Byron’s popularity among Black abolitionists was more specific and more expansive than the citation from *Childe Harold* alone would seem to indicate. Byron’s depictions of ‘hereditary’ slavery and its occasional end in liberatory violence resonated throughout early African American literature, in rich and complex ways.

Take for example, the moment from Canto III of *Don Juan*, when Juan and Haidée listen to a poem recited by a local poet connecting freedom, aestheticism, and ‘hereditary’ slavery:

Fill high the bowl with Samian wine!
Our virgins dance beneath the shade—
I see their glorious black eyes shine;
But gazing on each glowing maid,
My own the burning tear-drop laves,
To think such breasts must suckle slaves. (‘The isles of Greece, 15)

The visual pleasure of these bondswomen’s bodies elicits in the poet a political rage about their genealogical enslavement. Byron confounds any idealistic equivalence of eroticism and liberation, and Juan’s later declaration that ‘Love is for the free!’ while enslaved in a harem is the height of irony (*DJ*, V, 127). His heroism emerges less from

his exercise of romantic libertinism than from his handling of what Byron had called, in *Childe Harold*, ‘Circumstance, that unspiritual god / And miscreator’ (IV, 125). Slavery figures in Byron as a circumstance that intervenes between lovers and thus generations. Its opposition to freedom in his more speculative passages emerges from this plotted dialectic. This tendency made a specific and significant appeal to Black abolitionist writers in the U.S.³

In his 1843 ‘Address’ for instance, Henry Highland Garnet makes recourse to the lines from *Childe Harold* in call for violence specifically by enslaved Black men on behalf of Black families and Black women. Garnet sets the genealogy of the enslaved against death: ‘You had far better all die—*die immediately*, than live slaves, and entail your wretchedness upon your posterity’.⁴ In this rhetorical scheme, the citation from Byron signals not just the initiation of retributive violence, but also the erotic and genealogical ramifications of enslavement.⁵ Garnet thus puts his listeners in a Romantic predicament: either die in chains, or commit violence in the service of emancipation, self-ownership, and love. He articulates the masculinity of liberating violence so as to include the fate of women and children.

Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) confronts even more explicitly the dependence of slavery on the domestic reproduction of enslaved people (especially after the abolition of the transatlantic trade in 1809). She too makes reference to Byron in the middle of a reflection on slavery as a threat to Black love:

Why does the slave ever love? Why allow the tendrils of the heart to twine around objects which may at any moment be wrenched away by the hand of violence? When separations come by the hand of death, the pious soul can bow in resignation, and say, ‘Not my will, but thine be done, O Lord!’ But when the ruthless hand of man strikes the blow, regardless of the misery he causes, it is hard to be submissive. I did not reason thus when I was a young girl. Youth will be youth. I loved and I indulged the hope that the dark clouds around me would turn out a bright lining. I forgot that in the land of my birth the shadows are too dense for light to penetrate. A land

Where laughter is not mirth; nor thought the mind;
Nor words a language; nor e’en men mankind.
Where cries reply to curses, shrieks to blows,
And each is tortured in his separate hell.

There was in the neighborhood a young colored carpenter; a free born man.⁶

Jacobs’s reference to Byron, finds the poet framing his own dejection in the persona of the Renaissance poet Torquato Tasso.⁷ Jacobs did not use poetic personae to obscure her role in erotic adventuring, but she did publish her work under the pseudonym Linda Brent to avoid censure for revealing the sexual violence that permeated everyday life in the antebellum South. Jacobs finds in Byron a solution to the major problem in Victorian reform discourse—how to talk about slavery as systematised rape in polite society.⁸ The notion of slavery as a series of ‘separate hell[s]’ frames the problem of autobiographical narrative as a vehicle for abolitionist sympathy: if each individual experience of slavery is an extraordinarily ‘separate hell’, then how to conceive an

encompassing rhetoric with which to oppose it? Byron's work provided not just a prompt for liberatory violence, but also a series of formal devices for the gendered self-presentation of Black subjectivity. I turn now to the way his influence appears in the African American poets of the period to elaborate this premise.⁹

George Moses Horton, Heartbreaker

George Moses Horton was among what Longfellow called the 'little Byrons' of the antebellum period; he spent the majority of his life as a slave on the campus of the University of North Carolina. In this respect, he is exceptional among the Black poets of the mid-nineteenth century, most of whom were born free and committed to writing poetry as an adjunct to their activist practice within the abolition movement. Horton hired out his time from his owner with money he earned by composing love lyrics for students.¹⁰ Local liberals took an interest in Horton's talents, and collected his verse into bound volumes for sale with the intention of buying his freedom and ultimately paying his passage to Liberia. Horton encodes the details of his own life into his verse even more obscurely than did Byron. His poetry survives in the form of his three books, *The Hope of Liberty* (1829), *The Poetical Works of George M. Horton* (1845), and *Naked Genius* (1865), where his vision of Romantic love appears much more cynical than his role as a kind of collegiate Black Cyrano would suggest. Charting an erratically Byronic course through antebellum canons of sincerity and masculinity, Horton's love lyrics mark an extraordinary incursion on white Southern intimacy and a model for writing Black love under duress.

The early twentieth century critic of African American literature Benjamin Brawley wrote that Horton 'was essentially a romantic poet', and that his 'work showed readily the influence of his models'.¹¹ In the case of his borrowings from Byron, Horton could be unabashed. He used the refrain of Byron's 'Fare Thee Well' in poems from his first to his last volume of verse. 'Fare Thee Well' is, in Jerome McGann's words, a 'psychopolitical broadside in verse [...] a manipulation of the mask of Romantic sincerity'.¹² The poem elaborates Byron's sense of the opposition of love and circumstance: 'But by sudden wrench, believe not / Hearts can thus be torn away' (23–24). The 'sudden wrench', in Byron's case, was Lady Byron's decision to leave, and secondarily the judgement of Regency society in the face of which he went into exile. Horton's versions of 'Fare Thee Well' suggest a range of readings of slavery and war as 'sudden wrenches' which disrupt Black love.

In *Hope of Liberty* (1829), Horton includes a poem that begins:

Eliza, tell thy lover why
Or what induced thee to deceive me?
Fare thee well—away I fly—
I shun the lass who thus will grieve me.

Eliza, still thou art my song,
Although by force I may forsake thee;

Fare thee well, for I was wrong
To woo thee while another take thee.¹³

The lyric scene unfolds as a site where dialogue has broken down. What ‘force’ did Horton’s speaker use to ‘forsake’ his lover? Where does he ‘fly’ exactly? What difference can his forsaking make if Eliza has already taken up with someone else? Finally, who might her other suitor be? The question of how slavery might disrupt romantic love animates the poem but remains obscure. Indeed, the poem’s ambiguity extends to the question of whether it addresses the lover of one of his white student-clients or Horton’s own. Horton’s metrical choices here are deftly weird; he inverts the conventional ballad stanza’s alternation of tetrameter and trimeter lines. The hypercatalectic repetition of ‘me’ and ‘thee’ as end rhymes emphasises the lovers’ out-of-step rhythm.

In the *Poetical Works* (1845), Horton uses the phrase again several times, for instance in ‘Farewell to Frances’:

Farewell! is but departure’s tale,
When fond association ends,
And fate expands her lofty sail,
To show the distant flight of friends.

Alas! and if we sure must part,
Far separated long to dwell,
I leave thee with a broken heart,
So friend, forever, fare thee well.¹⁴

The reasons for the end of the relationship here are more vaguely conditional than in the earlier poem. Horton’s speaker even emphasises the immaterial literariness of his own declamations, ‘Farewell! is but departure’s tale’. He also displaces responsibility for romantic sentiment onto the ‘lofty sail’ of ‘fate’, a cliché with implications in the Black Atlantic imagery of the Middle Passage. Even as he registers historical experiences entirely new to lyric tradition, Horton’s language leaves the reader, like Byron’s eager mass audiences, searching for hidden biographical content.

Horton’s last volume, *Naked Genius* (1865), written while living in the ‘contraband’ camps that followed the Union Army through the South, features a number of poems that take a dim view of romantic love, such as ‘Hard is the Sentence of Parting Man and Wife, Though They May Have Much Disagreed’:

Oh! what’s like a husband off starting,
To look on his wife never more,
'Tis the soul and body fast parted,
Is his flight from his own native door.
Art thou hence inclined to leave me ever,
Kiss my cheek and move,
If again I see thee never,
Fare thee well my love.¹⁵

Horton's depiction of divorce is stricken with irony. The poem's conditional rhetoric makes unclear again who is leaving whom; the first quatrain finds the 'husband off starting', while the second addresses the wife, 'Art thou hence inclined to leave me ever'. He moves from third to first person, and from alienation to indifference, suggesting the projections and affective intermittencies of romantic argument. Elsewhere in the poem the speaker insists, 'if thou art bound to leave me', hinting at both the past obligations of enslavement and the conditional present of postbellum erotic freedom. As usual, slavery figures only vaguely in the historical and rhetorical coordinates of the poem. Horton turns to a Christian metaphor, the traditionally enslaving relation between body and soul, to characterise breaking up as a kind of liberating death. Slavery goes unmentioned as a circumstance that might make one's 'native door' a prison. Horton's refrain 'Fare thee well my love' almost always meets with a sight rhyme for movement; in the passage above, Horton uses the sight rhyme 'move/love', in another stanza the Byronic 'rove'. His work thus draws a line between Byronism and the 'easy riders' of the blues who emerged at the turn of the twentieth century. Reacting to both the disruptions wrought by slavery and the rapidly shifting circumstances of the Emancipation, Horton puts the lost Black loves of the nineteenth century into the range of the great Romantic stories of the age.

The Lyric Epic and the American Mediterranean

While Horton was plying his trade in North Carolina, a small group of Black Romantic poets born free in the North began to explore the lyric epic as a form that might represent the struggle against slavery in the New World. In his polemical tract *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (1852), Martin Delany took note of one of the antebellum period's most serious Black Byronists, George Boyer Vashon:

In Syracuse, N.Y., resides George Boyer Vashon, Esq., A.M., a graduate of Oberlin Collegiate Institute, Attorney at Law, Member of the Syracuse Bar. Mr. Vashon, is a ripe scholar, an accomplished Essayist, and a chaste classic Poet; his style running very much in the strain of Byron's best efforts. He probably takes Byron as his model, and Childe Harold, as a sample, as in his youthful days, he was a fond admirer of George Gordon Noel Byron, always calling his whole name, when he named him.¹⁶

Vashon had taken residence in upstate New York after being denied admission to the state bar of Ohio in the late 1840s. He then emigrated to Haiti in early 1848, where he spent the better part of two years. Under the pseudonym 'Harold', explicitly chosen out of his affection for Byron, Vashon wrote a series of dispatches to *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, documenting the early years of President Faustin-Élie Soulouque's reign.¹⁷

While in Haiti, Vashon also wrote a blank verse epic that would ultimately appear under the title 'Vincent Ogé' in Julia W. Griffiths's two-volume anthology of abolitionist literature, *Autographs for Freedom* (1853–54). The poem centres on the life of an *homme de couleur libre* who leads a revolt on the eve of the Haitian Revolution.

Ogé had been in Paris when the French Revolution began in 1789, and he quickly began to organise with the Société des Amis des Noirs in the hopes of gaining suffrage for property-owning free men of colour in the new representative government. He returned to Haiti and commandeered a group of several hundred armed men of colour who were defeated by the colonial government of Philippe François Rouxel, viscounte de Blanchelande.¹⁸

Of Vashon and his poem, Jean Wagner writes: ‘Though his style and his skill in versification are those of a talented poet, his hero remains Byronic rather than black’.¹⁹ This opposition between Byronism and Blackness is specious in general, but in Vashon’s case it is especially inappropriate. Vashon’s attraction to Ogé and his revolt stems from his own sense of solidarity with enslaved people as a free man of colour. He took from Byron a model of encoded semi-autobiographical poetics and a sense of political affiliation across legal and national borders.

Vashon is also the first of several African American poets to draw on Byron’s ironic revision of the epic mode as an apt form for narrating the Black experience in the New World.²⁰ He seeks to establish Ogé in a pantheon of New World Black political leaders, but he also finds in Ogé’s failure an enigmatic prophecy of slavery’s persistence as a feature of the Atlantic world system. Vashon’s epic irony is especially clear in a vehement monologue delivered by Ogé’s mother to his men before they go into battle. This scene inverts the famous moment in the *Iliad* when Achilles visits with his mother Thetis, who worries over her son’s mortality. Ogé’s mother instead warns her son about the ignominy of failure:

But if your hearts should craven prove,
 Forgetful of your zeal—your love
 For rights and franchises of men,
 My heart will break; but even then,
 Whilst bidding life and earth adieu,
 This the prayer I’ll breathe for you:
 ‘Passing from guilt to misery,
 May this for aye your portion be,—
 A life, dragged out beneath the rod—
 An end, abhorred of man and God—
 As monument, the chains you nurse—
 As epitaph, your mother’s curse!’²¹

Riffing on Byron’s heroines, Vashon depicts masculine rebellion prompted by an insurgent Black matriarchal sphere. Here again the threat of ‘hereditary’ enslavement activates a range of political sentiments. Inverting the promise of salvation that undergirds Victorian domestic life, Ogé’s mother threatens her son with the punishment of exile in a kind of Byronic ‘separate hell’. In the years after the Civil War, the premises of the Black family as ravaged by slavery, but also as the support for Black citizenship, would draw the interest of a renewed Black Byronism.²²

Francis Ellen Watkins Harper and the Lawgiver as Bad Man

One might assume that Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Lady Byron Vindicated* (1870) would stoke antipathy towards Byron among African American readers. The controversy around the book had racist undertones that cut against Stowe and Lady Byron's credentials as abolitionists, however. Stowe characterised Lord Byron's charisma as disrupting fixed notions of colour and gender: 'There have been women able to lead their leashes of blinded adorers; to make them swear that black was white, or white black, at their word. Such an enchanter in man's shape was Lord Byron'.²³ The press consistently drew contrasts between Byron and the enslaved people who had been Stowe's subjects. One political cartoon features Uncle Tom pleading: 'Go 'way from me Massa Byron—my Missus saz you're too wicked to 'sociate wid spectable cullud sperrets'.²⁴

The joke about respectability turns on the rise of racist ideas of Black licentiousness that justified lynching terrorism and segregation. In the face of these developments, Black poets continued to turn to Byron for a model of how to deal with the impulse to revolt, the strictures of consolidating racial uplift ideology, and racist stereotypes of Black criminality. Byron's work helped complicate the limited range of choices along the spectrum between 'race man' and 'bad man', so the poets of the period hedged their Byronism against political and social commitments requiring they embody more traditional forms of moral virtue.²⁵

Byron's influence appears even in the work of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, the African American poet most identified with what Darlene Clark Hine has called the 'super moral' public culture of Black women in the late nineteenth century.²⁶ In *Moses: a Story of the Nile* (1869), Harper uses Byron's method to bracket masculine retributive violence in a larger narrative of struggle that encompasses its origins in familial trauma and its limitations as a mode of leadership. To do so, she expands the typology of Biblical slavery as chattel slavery through Byronic touches, darkening her hero's brow to signal his Blackness.

Harper plays up the complexities of Moses's childhood and family life. In her re-telling, Moses's adoptive mother is called Princess Charmian (the name of Cleopatra's maidservant, according to Plutarch). Charmian worries about Moses's rededication to his people in Romantic vocabulary: 'What wild chimera floats across thy mind? / What sudden impulse moves thy soul? [...] the warm blood of youth flushes thy veins' (3–4). This flush of sentiment makes Moses a nineteenth-century character, embodied and sympathetic, rather than stony-faced and ancient. Harper's characterisation resonates with Byron's description of Conrad in *The Corsair*:

Unlike the heroes of each ancient race,
Demons in act, but Gods at least in face,
In Conrad's form seems little to admire,
Though his dark eyebrow shades a glance of fire. (193–96)

Byron goes on to note Conrad's 'sunburnt' (203) cheeks and 'sable curls' (204). The opposition here is subtly ironic: Conrad's indeterminate moral ambivalence, marked

by his swarthy colouring, distinguishes him from ‘the heroes of each ancient race’, whose beauty directly contrasts their evil-doing. These effects of light and shade challenge what James Baldwin referred to as the ‘medieval morality’ which associated goodness with whiteness and badness with blackness.²⁷ Harper’s allegory also dramatises this question of historical recognition. Would the modern Moses appear Byronic, of uncertain and perhaps piratical make-up?

Harper’s biographer, Melba Joyce Boyd, finds echoes of an array of antebellum heroes in Harper’s Moses: John Brown, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman (often referred to as ‘the Moses of her people’). Harper depicts Moses becoming virtuous through his political commitment, born not out of circumstance but out of a sense of affiliation. Moses’s political life thus resembles Byron’s allegiance to Greece and Harper’s abolitionism, which she came to despite having been born free in 1825. According to Frances Smith Foster, the poem is, in this respect, ‘as close to an autobiographical statement as any that Harper ever wrote’.²⁸

In an extraordinary swerve on Romantic individualism, Harper applies the characteristics of the Byronic hero to the race of the Jews, as Moses becomes their revolutionary leader. His solitary fate becomes ‘our wrecked and blighted fortunes’.²⁹ When he surveys the Israelite slaves building the pyramids, Moses finds a kind of Byronic coalition:

There were men whose souls were cast
In firmer moulds, men with dark secretive eyes,
Which seemed to say, to day we bide our time,
And hide our wrath in every nerve, and only
Wait a fitting hour to strike the hands that press
Us down.³⁰

In Harper’s view, the duties associated with collective political action require controlled emotion over long duration and the selective release of masculine retributive violence. She suggests that messianic politics requires a kind of embodied stoicism, in which the Israelites ‘hide our wrath in every nerve’.

Black feminist critics have long worried about Harper’s capitulation to moral didacticism. Tracking the influence of Byron allows us to see more complexly wrought moral, political, and aesthetic sensibilities in Harper’s work. As a freeborn woman of colour, Harper could never imagine herself, as Byron had a generation earlier, the *ne plus ultra* of a nineteenth-century liberal. She could never indulge completely the negativity of his dramatic self-fashioning: ‘I have been cunning in mine overthrow, / The careful pilot of my proper woe’ (‘Epistle to Augusta’, 23–24). Harper takes a different, no less urgent tack, from the absolute alienation of nineteenth-century Black womanhood to activist emancipation via a series of lyric gestures and narrative innovations she borrowed, in part, from Byron.

Albery Allson Whitman and the Ethics of Digression

Albery Allson Whitman worked through Byron's influence even as the Romantic poet's reputation had begun to fall precipitously. Indeed, Whitman made the most thorough use of Byron of all nineteenth-century African American poets. In the early pages of his first surviving book of poems, *Leelah Mised* (1873), Whitman cites 'the loftiness of Byron's well wrought rhyme' in acknowledging his influences.³¹ His Byronism turns from firebrand abolitionist masculinity to the restrictive gender ideology of postbellum racial uplift. At his most iconoclastic, Whitman associated gender conformity with the racial stereotypes derived from Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). He writes in the preface to *The Rape of Florida* (1884): 'The time has come when all "Uncle Toms" and "Topsies" ought to die. Goody goodness is a sort of man worship: ignorance is its inspiration, fear its ministering spirit, and beggary its inheritance'.³²

Ivy Wilson points out that 'none of [Whitman's] major characters embodies the conventional image of the Byronic figure, who while heroic, is also somewhat flawed. Rather, Whitman has all his heroes approach perfection'.³³ By setting these ideal types against the background of the frontier romance, Whitman plays on their impossibility, their need of distance from civilisation, not because of their Byronic complexity, but because of their perfection. The Byronic hero, vexed by his historical circumstances, made an oddly self-destructive model for what Whitman called 'America's coming colored man'.³⁴ Whitman's Black Byronic heroes become prototypes of a Talented Tenth before society can contain them.

Whitman breaks down this problem in digressions, also a technique borrowed from Byron. Rather than indulge Byron's more physical and damning pleasures, Whitman explores the philosophical and rhetorical dimensions of his style.³⁵ Joan Sherman could be referring to Byron when she declares Whitman's poetics 'a potpourri of ideas and sentiments, erratically arranged', but nonetheless committed to 'an ideal of art for art's sake'.³⁶ In *Leelah Mised*, Whitman uses Byron's *Hints from Horace* as an epigraph to justify this approach: 'And must the bard his glowing thoughts confine, / Lest censure hover o'er some faulty line!'³⁷ He borrows from Byron a sense that aesthetic idealism can be indicated through *sprezzatura* gestures.

Leelah Mised tells an antebellum story of the ruination of a wealthy Southern white woman by the rakish planter McLambert. Whitman frames the protagonist in the geopolitical morality of U.S. regionalism, making her a 'mean slave of foul seduction'.³⁸ He interrupts his narratives with digressions about aesthetic theory, such as when he averts his gaze from intimate scenes between Leelah and her seducer:

My muse is mournful, and I turn away,
To leave my reader pond'ring at the scene,
What you will think, is just what I would say.
Then think, while I escape the critic mean,
What e'en I've said, I know that some will think,
'Too this,' 'Too that,' or 'not enough' somehow;
Or 'better keep such thoughts than frame with ink,'

But some will be consid'rate I allow.
 Though be the case with you, or this or that,
 I leave you as you are, and where you are at.³⁹

Whitman turns from the inexpressible sadness and sexual exploitation of Leelah's downfall to this elaborate vamping on the dynamic of readership and authorship. As in Byron's *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809), Whitman takes a stance of masculine indifference towards his critics. In his frontier epics, he narrates the nineteenth-century American landscape as uninhabitable by ideal Black gendered types, in a copious Byronic style that resists interpretation at every turn. Though his work has proven extraordinarily difficult for twentieth-century readers to appreciate, Whitman's intricately wrought lyric epics may well make the perfect response to the end of the Reconstruction, a period Rayford Logan famously called the 'nadir' of African American history.

Conclusion

Black Romantic forays into Byronism worked against increasingly constrained ideals of racial uplift in the age of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Black intellectuals continued to use Byron as a creative resource—though more often than not he played the role of a straw man. The ideology of racial uplift contributed to changing interpretations of the Romantic tradition, so working through Byron's legacy came to seem less urgent during the entrenchment of Jim Crow racism. The most famous African American poet of the turn of the century, Paul Laurence Dunbar would much more often refer to Keats as his forebear among the British Romantics. Likewise, Du Bois was more likely to turn to Wordsworth and the German tradition in constructing his own aesthetic theories. Byron's articulation of embodied freedom had made him both an aspirational exemplar and a cautionary tale for nineteenth-century Black writers but as the century came to a close, those contradictions became too difficult to sustain, especially in the face of demands for more vernacular and less wrought lyric styles.

My purpose here has not been to give a canonical white author his due, but to make the case that Byron's model suited the cultural and political ends of Black liberation. With that in mind, I think it important to close by remarking the possibility that the forgotten tradition of Black Byronism has some explanatory purchase on twentieth- and twenty-first-century African American culture, especially in its resistance to restrictive and moralistic notions of racial and gender identity, its sensitivity to market notions of Black life, and its deviance from inherited performances of liberal selfhood. The growing tradition of queer African American literature, starting for instance with the indubitably post-Romantic work of Claude McKay, might be productively understood as descending from the nineteenth-century examples of Black Byronism I've surveyed here. The traits I have associated with Black Byronism appear in twentieth-century popular music as well. The complex deviltry of the blues and the dandyism of jazz

might both be described as Byronic; even more so, the gender renegades of soul and rhythm and blues, from Nina Simone to Prince and Frank Ocean, play on their celebrity in ways that echo Byron. The most urgent political point here may be to draw a clearer line between contemporary African American culture and nineteenth-century Black abolitionism. The darkness of that line, as I have shown, is in part Byronic.

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- 1 For Robert Levine, the lines from Byron signal an ‘activist perspective on abolition and black self-help’ (*Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997], p. 27). John Stauffer notes that abolitionists worked through ‘the Byronic ideal of the male liberator and freedom fighter who dispensed with fixed markers of social status—particularly heredity’ (*The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race*. [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002], p. 113). Rowan Ricardo Phillips suggests the lines represent the ‘cultural lingua franca’ of antebellum Black intellectuals and a poetic ‘intervention’ on the prosaic procedures of the slave narrative (*When blackness rhymes with blackness* [Champaign: Dalkey Archive, 2010], p. 78). Jared Hickman reads the abolitionists’ interest in Byron in terms of secularism in *Black Prometheus: Race and Radicalism in the Age of Atlantic Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). See also Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 118, 124, 496.
- 2 See James G. Basker, *Amazing Grace: An Anthology of Poems About Slavery, 1660–1810* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) and Marcus Wood’s *The Poetry of Slavery: An Anglo-American Anthology, 1764–1866* (London: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- 3 For Byron and gender, see: Louis Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love: Homophobia in 19th Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Caroline Franklin, *Byron’s Heroines* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Marlon Ross, *The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women’s Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Andrew Elfenbein, *Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); and Susan Wolfson, *Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2006).
- 4 Collected in Garnet’s *A Memorial Discourse* (Philadelphia: J.M. Wilson, 1865), p. 49. For more on Garnet, see Sterling Stuckey’s *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) and Eddie Glaude Jr., *Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early 19th Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
- 5 Black Byronism represents an early form of resistance to the ‘normative masculinity’ Erica Edwards finds acting as a ‘structuring fiction for [Black] liberatory politics’ (*Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012], xv).
- 6 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 37.
- 7 The lines cited here are from *The Lament of Tasso*, 4, 7–10.
- 8 Byron had his detractors among antebellum Black intellectuals. Ann Plato, for instance, sets Byron against salvation in her 1841 collection *Essays: Including Biographies and Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose and Poetry*: ‘The votaries of fame may acquire a sort of insensibility to death and its consequences [...] A cultivated mind, and an unsanctified heart may become one of the most awful scourges of this world’ (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 71. In the 1852 travel memoir *Three Years in Europe, or Places I Have Seen and People I Have Met*, William Wells Brown visits Byron’s ancestral home Newstead Abbey, and takes notice of how its ‘scenes [...] acquire a growing charm as the lapse

of years softens the errors of the man, and confirms the genius of the poet' (London: Charles Gilpin, 1852), p. 153. This premise is echoed at the turn of the century in a poem entitled 'Byron's Oak at Newstead Abbey' by T. Thomas Fortune in his collection *Dreams of a Life* (1905). Albery Allson Whitman also considers Byron in terms of British national morality in 'Ye Bards of England' from *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1877).

- 9 It is worth noting here that another passage concerning gender from Byron's *Don Juan* (l, 194) also appears in a number of works of early African American literature. The extract from Donna Julia's letter beginning 'Man's love is his life a thing apart', appears in: William Wells Brown, *Clotel; or The President's Daughter* ([1853] Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2000), p. 220; the letters of Adah Isaacs Menken, *Infelicia and Other Writings*, ed. by Gregory Eiselein (Toronto: Broadview, 2002), p. 237; and in Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, ed. by Mary Helen Washington ([1892] New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). These citations often use Byron as a straw man. Cooper glosses the lines as belonging to a bygone era of masculine individualism—'The old, subjective, stagnant, indolent and wretched life for woman has gone. She has as many resources as men, as many activities beckon her on. As large possibilities swell and inspire her heart (*A Voice from the South*, p. 70)—setting Byron at odds with progressive-modernist New Womanhood. How much Byron believed Donna Julia's baleful view of women's scope is a relatively scholastic question in the context of Cooper's foundational argument for Black feminism. Like Byron, Cooper disguised the autobiographical stakes of her work—here she seeks to represent African American women as capable of theoretical work.
- 10 For Horton's literary career, see Leon Jackson, *The Business of Letters: Authorial Economies in Antebellum America* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007).
- 11 Brawley, 'Three Negro Poets: Horton, Ms. Harper, and Whitman', *The Journal of Negro History*, 2.4 (Oct., 1917), p. 386.
- 12 Jerome J. McGann, *Byron and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 100.
- 13 Horton, *The Hope of Liberty. Containing a Number of Poetical Pieces* (Raleigh: J. Gales and Son, 1829), p. 9.
- 14 Horton, *The Poetical Works of George M. Horton, The Colored Bard of North-Carolina*. (Hillsborough: D. Heartt, 1845), p. 72.
- 15 Horton, *Naked Genius* (Raleigh: Wm. B. Smith & Co., 1865), p. 109.
- 16 Delany, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (Baltimore: Black Classic, 1993), p. 119.
- 17 For Byron and the Americas, see Rebecca Cole Heinowitz's *Spanish America and British Romanticism, 1777–1826: Rewriting Conquest* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010). For an account of Soulouque's rule, see Laurent DuBois, *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History* (New York: MacMillan, 2012), p. 155. For his significance in the nineteenth-century Atlantic world, see Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 10–16. For more on Vashon and Haiti, see Marlene L. Daut, *Tropics of Haiti: Race and the Literary History of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1789–1865* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).
- 18 For accounts of Ogé's revolt in English, see C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1989), pp. 68–76 and John D. Garrigus, "'Thy coming fame, Ogé! Is sure": New Evidence on Ogé's 1790 Revolt and the Beginnings of the Haitian Revolution', in *Assumed Identities: The Meaning of Race in the Atlantic World*, ed. by John D. Garrigus and Christopher Morris (Arlington: Texas A&M University Press, 2010), pp. 19–46.
- 19 Jean Wagner, *Black Poets of the United States: From Paul Laurence Dunbar to Langston Hughes*, trans. Kenneth Douglas (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1973), p. 22.
- 20 Vashon drew on the rich body of neoclassical epic poetry in French about the Haitian Revolution that he would have encountered during his time in the Caribbean. For examples, see Doris Kadish and Deborah Jenson, *Poetry of Haitian Independence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015). For Byron's use of the epic, see Nicholas Halmi, 'The Very Model of a Modern Epic Poem', *European Romantic Review*, 21 (2010), pp. 589–600. For the epic in American poetry more broadly, see Christopher N. Phillips, *Epic in American Culture: Settlement to Reconstruction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins

- University Press, 2012). For the epic in African American poetry, see Raymond Patterson, 'African American Epic Poetry: The Long Foreshadowing', in *The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry*, ed. by Joanne V. Gabbin (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999).
- 21 'Vincent Ogé', *Autographs for Freedom*, ed. by Julia Griffiths (Auburn, NY: Alden, Beardsley, and Co., 1854), p. 54.
- 22 Delany's eponymous hero in *Blake* joins a slave ship heading to Africa so as to recruit its cargo for a slave revolution. In the middle of this episode, Delany quotes *The Corsair*:
- A sail—a sail! a promised prize to hope!
Her nation—flag—how speaks the telescope?
She walks the water like a thing of life,
And seems to dare the elements to strife.
- James McCune Smith cites the same passage in a travel dispatch for *The Colored American* (2 Dec. 1837), where he writes:
- Would that [...] gathering something of the spirit of liberty from the ocean which she cleaves, and the chainless wind which wafts her along, she might appear in foreign ports a fit representative of a land of the free, instead of a beautiful but baneful object, like the fated box of Pandora, scattering abroad among the nations the malignant prejudice which is a canker and a curse to the soil, whence she sprung (*The Works of James McCune Smith: Black Intellectual and Abolitionist*, ed. by John Stauffer [New York: Oxford University Press, 2006], p. 12).
- Like Delany, Smith reads Byron in the context of the philosophical and political economic language of Atlantic slavery. Thanks to Derrick Spires for bringing this reference to my attention.
- 23 Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Lady Byron Vindicated: A History of the Byron Controversy from its Beginning in 1816 to the Present Time* (Boston: Fields, Osgood, and Co., 1870), p. 84.
- 24 For an account of the Byron affair, see Caroline Franklin, 'Stowe and the Byronic Heroine', in *Transatlantic Stowe: Harriet Beecher Stowe and European Culture*, ed. by Denise Kohn, Sarah Meer and Emily B. Todd (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006). For the political cartoons, see Jennifer Cognard-Black's *Narrative in the Professional Age: Transatlantic Readings of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and George Eliot* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 82.
- 25 For accounts of the bad man trope, see John W. Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) and Cecil Brown, *Stagolee Shot Billy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003). The scholarship on racial uplift has focused on the post-Reconstruction era and the twentieth century. See: Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Marlon Ross, *Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2004). For juxtapositions of the race man and the bad man, see Fred Moten 'Uplift and Criminality', in *Next to the Color Line: Gender, Sexuality, and W.E.B. Du Bois*, ed. by Susan Gillman and Alys Eve Weinbaum (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) and Wilson J. Moses's *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1993).
- 26 Darlene Clark Hine, 'Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West', *Signs*, 14.4 (1989), p. 915 (pp. 912–20).
- 27 Baldwin, 'Everybody's Protest Novel', in *Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Beacon, 1955) p. 13.
- 28 Smith Foster, *A Brighter Day Coming: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1993), p. 136. Hereafter cited as *BCD*.
- 29 *BCD*, p. 10.
- 30 *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.
- 31 Collected in *At the Dusk of Dawn: Selected Poetry and Prose of Albery Allson Whitman*, ed. by Ivy G. Wilson (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2009), p. 20. Hereafter cited as *ADD*. Whitman's debt to Byron's prosody is substantial. In the preface to *The Rape of Florida* (1884), he explains his use of Spenserian stanzas: 'some negro is sure to do everything that any one else has ever done, and

as none of that race has ever executed a poem in the “stately verse,” I simply venture in’ (*ADD*, p. 307). Whitman also used a Byronic verse form in *An Idyll of the South* (1901), in this case *ottava rima*.

32 *ADD*, p. 306.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 308.

35 Jerome McGann writes, ‘The matter of digression is the key to Byron’s method, and its implications are far-reaching’ (*Fiery Dust: Byron’s Poetic Development* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969], p. 278). For digression in modern American poetry, see Srikanth Reddy, *Changing Subjects: Digression in Modern American Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

36 Joan R. Sherman, ‘Albery Allson Whitman: Poet of Beauty and Manliness’, *CLAJ*, 14 (1971), pp. 136, 140 (pp. 126–43).

37 *ADD*, p. 301.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 30.



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