

BYRON'S DIS-ORIENTATIONS: *THE GIAOUR*, FOR EXAMPLE

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[ABSTRACT]

This article examines the representation of 'the Orient' and the dichotomy between 'East' and 'West' in Byron's first 'Turkish Tale', *The Giaour* (1813). It argues that Byron's poem offers a more complex understanding of these relationships than has often been recognised by readings rooted to a greater extent in theoretical constructions of orientalism than in close attention to the narrative of *The Giaour*, its paratexts, and its engagement with contemporary historical events. Conversely, through a reading of the poem focused on these aspects, the article hopes to make clear that Byron stages not a simplistic dichotomy between 'East' and 'West', but rather the inevitable instability of borders and cultural identities.

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KEYWORDS *Byron, British Romanticism, Orientalism, Cultural Identities, Hybridity*

Introduction

It is safe to say that in Lord Byron's oeuvre we find a radical dissolution of the dichotomy of identity and alterity, as well as of the dichotomies of authenticity and role-playing, of fiction and non-fiction, of fact and fake, since his epic and lyric poetry were read, in their own time, as revealingly autobiographical, while, curiously enough, at the same time the persona of Lord Byron can be shown to be a largely fictional construct that conforms to or follows the textual blueprint – all this in a drama that is supremely audience-related, because it is played out with the public (and not only with the reading public) as Lord Byron's sparring partner: it is a conspicuously public self-fabrication, or self-fashioning, to use Stephen Greenblatt's phrase.¹

My theme in this essay is how that strategy to radically dismantle binary oppositions is also true, I would even say particularly true of Byron's *Oriental Tales*. They are a most pertinent example of how Byron generally processes alterity – and not surprisingly so, since, throughout the nineteenth century, the Orient is Europe's quintessential Other, the Other *per se*: 'we' define 'ourselves' against 'them' (no matter whether we denigrate or glorify the Orient, which is basically the same instrumentalization for purposes of self-constitution, only with the

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values reversed).² For reasons of space, I will here restrict myself to one *Oriental Tale* only, to *The Giaour*.

A Matter of Perspectives

In his seminal study *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire* Nigel Leask writes that Byron, in his *Eastern* or *Oriental* or *Turkish Tales*, reduces ‘the imperialist Self to a level with its oriental Other; but in so doing he in effect perpetuates the prejudice of the ‘East’/‘West’ binary opposition whilst attacking the ideology of empire which it empowers’: ‘he failed to break free of the sort of binary opposition constitutive of orientalism’.³

It seems to me that this surprising assessment is based on a curiously superficial reading of, for example, *The Giaour* (the first of Byron’s *Turkish Tales*), a reading that is curiously content-oriented and does not really take into account the epic poem’s perspectival structure, that is, its narratological mediation – which is all the more surprising since Leask himself says that *The Giaour* is ‘the most structurally complex of all *Eastern Tales*’.⁴ If that is so, and I believe it is, how can you talk about the What without having analyzed the How? How can you talk about the story without having analyzed the discourse?

I would like to show – taking *The Giaour* as but one example – that Leask’s assessment, according to which Byron perpetuates simple binary oppositions, is deplorably mistaken, based as it is on a conspicuous under-reading of the text – an under-reading which may well be telling and symptomatic, because it is itself bound to a special agenda and a special perspective. By way of contrast, my take on Byron is that, from the very beginning – and that is why *The Giaour* as his first *Oriental Tale* is such a good example – he means to deconstruct and dis-assemble binary oppositions in a way that is both most skilful and most dis-orienting to the reader.

Presumably Byron wrote *The Giaour* between September 1812 and March 1813 – a first draft was circulated privately in that month. The first edition came out in June 1813. Meanwhile, his epic had grown from 453 to 684 lines, and that growth would continue until the 7th edition, published at the end of the same year. That final version sports the 1,334 lines we know today. In other words: the poem had grown threefold.⁵

Not only for Karl Kroeber was the result of all these additions ‘confusion’.⁶ After careful analysis, William Marshall opines ‘that all the “fragments” in the poem . . . do not constitute a whole that we can piece together’: ‘he [Byron] badly weakened the poem’.⁷

But curiously enough – and this is even admitted by Byron’s detractors – all these additions do not really affect the paraphrasable story of *The Giaour*, which is given away in the ‘Advertisement’ and then re-confirmed in Byron’s longish note to the final line of the poem. Yet this very circumstance – that in a kind of framing, before the plot even begins, and then again, after it is over, we are told what the story will be, or what it was, retrospectively – is by no means accidental: *The*

Giaour itself (if by that title we only understand the verse) doesn't yield that story so easily. That is the reason why it is revealed before it begins and summarized when it is over. Between that beginning and that end we have Kroeber's 'confusion'. My contention is that even through that manoeuvre *The Giaour* cannot be closed and sealed and that its very openness is perfectly consistent.

Let us go into the text. At first, the 'Advertisement' as far as it summarizes the story:

The tale which these disjointed fragments present, is founded upon circumstances now less common in the East than formerly; either because the ladies are more circumspect than in the 'olden time'; or because the Christians have better fortune or less enterprise. The story, when entire, contained the adventures of a female slave, who was thrown, in the Mussulman manner, into the sea for infidelity, and avenged by a young Venetian, her lover[.]⁸

The closing note for line 1334 reaffirms this with greater detail:

The circumstance to which the above story relates was not very uncommon in Turkey. A few years ago the wife of Muchtar Pacha complained to his father of his son's supposed infidelity; he asked with whom, and she had the barbarity to give in a list of the twelve handsomest women in Yanina. They were seized, fastened up in sacks, and drowned in the lake the same night! One of the guards who was present informed me, that not one of the victims uttered a cry, or shewed a symptom of terror at so sudden a 'wrench from all we know, from all we love'. The fate of Phrosine, the fairest of this sacrifice, is the subject of many a Romaic and Arnaout ditty. The story in the text is one told of a young Venetian many years ago, and now nearly forgotten. I heard it by accident recited by one of the coffee-house story-tellers who abound in the Levant, and sing or recite their narratives. The additions and interpolations by the translator will be easily distinguished from the rest by the want of Eastern imagery; and I regret that my memory has retained so few fragments of the original.⁹

Consequently, critics who are primarily interested in 'content' are prone to say that *The Giaour* is about how Leila, the most attractive slave in Hassan's harem, betrays him with an infidel. Upon finding out, Hassan kills her by drowning, but is in turn killed by her lover, who then flees.

But this very simple story – Kroeber says 'a silly story'¹⁰ – is a constructed abstraction, like every *histoire* is bound to be, which, however, in this particular case, is incredibly complicated by two circumstances on the discourse level, which are mentioned in the 'Advertisement' and in the final note, namely: first, what we are given is said to be a heavily fragmented text, whose few surviving parts are 'disjointed', and, second, the text has more than one narrator – in fact, far more than one narrator: for I count two extradiegetic narrators (to wit, the 'coffee-house story-teller' and the 'translator' with all his 'additions and interpolations') and no fewer than three intradiegetic narrators (viz., the Muslim fisherman, the

Christian monk, and the Giaour himself), to which we may add (or not) two directly presented voices (Hassan's and his mother's; Plato's mimesis, as opposed to *haplé diégésis*),¹¹ voices that, it is true, are used dramatically without having a full blown story to tell, but that imply a perspective of their own nevertheless. That makes seven different narrators, seven different points of view, seven different perspectives, seven different takes on the story.

When I say 'I count', that is not an inappropriate personal intrusion, for others count differently and the assignment of certain passages to any of these narrators differs, for example: does the Muslim fisherman tell the greatest part of the story up until the Giaour flees or only those scenes that he witnessed himself? Is the dreadful curse against the Giaour hurled by the fisherman or by the extradiegetic 'coffee-house story-teller'? Our secondary literature is full of surprises, but this confusion is caused by the text itself: exactly because it consists of 'disjointed fragments', which are not always marked in an unequivocal way and analytically discrete (Kroeber complains 'all of [these changes], which occur with unnerving abruptness'),¹² and because we have to deal with up to seven narrators on different discursive levels, this assignment of individual fragments to distinct voices and perspectives is a *task* of interpretation – and it is a job at which a simple plot summary, not even Lord Byron's own, is of no great help. Like in a prism, the fragments of a purportedly 'original story' are displayed, which seem to reflect 'one and the same', which, however, since it is only given in this fragmentary and subjectively refracted way, is not 'one and the same'. Fragmentation and multiple narrations disperse what 'really' happened – because in the foreground, in this discourse, we have points of view, perspectives, evaluations. It is *between* these separate views that the space of possibilities of *The Giaour* unfolds, a multi-dimensional space that cannot be paraphrased in a uni-linear way, but that can only be disclosed and traced in its narrative technique and in its dynamism.

As Robert Gleckner once remarked (only to veer off into a completely different direction): 'Byron's main interest . . . was not in the plot . . . but rather in the conflicting points of view from which that plot could be viewed'.¹³ *The Giaour* works with rapid cuts and radical changes of perspective. If you cannot follow swiftly or prefer to ignore that narrative *mediation* altogether, as if it did not matter, then you easily become an under-reader and you drown the text – death by drowning (and, of course, *this* reference is not to *The Waste Land*, but to Hassan's drowning of Leila).

The first change of perspective that the Christian, European reader must register is in the title: *Giaour* is, as we are told by the footnote, another expression for 'infidel', which means that from a Muslim point of view one of us is called an infidel, a pagan. This ascription remains. The Giaour will never acquire a proper name. He will remain (at first only from a Muslim perspective) an unbeliever. 'We' are 'they'. The title signals: this story will be told from the POV of the Other. This requires re-thinking: the true believers, that's the pagans; and the unbelievers, that's us.

But when the poem proper begins, we unmistakably read the discourse of a *European*, who complains that Greece has fallen victim to Oriental tyranny and despotism, though not without her fault:

'T were long to tell, and sad to trace,
Each step from splendour to disgrace,
Enough—no foreign foe could quell
Thy soul, till from itself it fell,
Yes! Self-abasement pav'd the way
To villain-bonds and despot-sway.¹⁴

This continues to line 167. With line 168, the tale proper sets in, but 168 to 179 could be ascribed either to the 'coffee-house story-teller' or, with higher probability, to the 'translator', whose interpolation the passage could be. One still waits for the true, undeniable voice of the Orient. That begins with line 180, though we can only tell so from 190 onwards, retrospectively:

And though to-morrow's tempest lower,
'T is calmer than thy heart, young Giaour!
I know thee not, I loathe thy race,
But in thy lineaments I trace
What time shall strengthen, not efface;
Though young and pale, that sallow front
Is scathed by fiery passion's brunt,
Though bent on earth thine evil eye
As meteor-like thou glidest by,
Right well I view and deem thee one
Whom Othman's sons should slay or shun.¹⁵

The Giaour, fleeing at night, is called a member of a loathsome race, 'Whom Othman's sons should slay or shun'. But who's talking? Is it the fisherman, who, in a glimpse, sees the Giaour, whose life he had possibly crossed once before, and fatefully so, when he – the fisherman – lent his boat to an Emir to sink or drown 'some precious freight'.¹⁶ (What exactly this might have been, we are never told, but is it possible, after the hint in the 'Advertisement' to take in that information in a neutral way?). Or is this, for the first time, the second extradiegetic narrator, the Muslim 'coffee-house story-teller', who, unrestrainedly, gives vent to his hatred of Christians? Much in the same way that before the European extradiegetic narrator had expressed his hatred of Oriental despotism?

Now, no matter how you read it and no matter how you identify the narrative levels here (extradiegetic narrator or intradiegetic narrator?):¹⁷ here, just like in the speech of the Christian monk at the end, what is primarily displayed and accentuated is that these narrators are so imprisoned in their own belief systems that they cannot help but seeing the Other in such a way, as opposite in a di-

chotomy.¹⁸ But ‘multiple narration’¹⁹ in Byron’s *The Giaour* places these partial, but self-privileging views *against each other* in such a way that their deficits and their differences become obvious and manifest,²⁰ no less – and maybe more importantly so – than their deep affinities and similarities.

An ideology that cannot bear any ambiguities is exquisitely displayed in Hassan, when he recognizes *who* it is that ambushes him with a band of robbers:

In fuller sight, more near and near,
The lately ambush’d foes appear,
And issuing from the grove advance
Some who on battle charger prance. —
Who leads them on with foreign brand,
Far flashing in his red right hand?
“ ’T is he!—’t is he!—I know him now;
I know him by his pallid brow;
I know him by the evil eye
That aids his envious treachery;
I know him by his jet-black barb,
Though now array’d in Arnaut garb,
Apostate from his own vile faith,
It shall not save him from the death;
’T is he! well met in any hour,
Lost Leila’s love—accursed Giaour!”²¹

Repeating his identification in a kind of staccato, Hassan insists that he can see through appearances and that he knows reality, the core of evil. Although ‘array’d in Arnaut’s garb’, that is, in the clothes of a Muslim Albanian, it’s *him*, the Christian! In a typical confusion that you find often in racists and fundamentalists alike, the stranger is charged both with adhering to his original faith and with having rejected his faith. The assimilated foreigner is only the most cunning of all strangers.

But if the Giaour once rejected his Christian faith – be it seriously or simply to conform – or if he now rejects his Christian faith (in order to deceive – though on his flight his ‘Christian crest’ can be seen again), his return to the bosom of the church is no less problematic, it is dubious and fishy.²² For this is the way in which the friar, to whose monastery the Giaour fled some six years ago sees him:

“ ’T is twice three years at summer tide
Since first among our freres he came;
And here it soothes him to abide
For some dark deed he will not name.
But never at our vesper prayer,
Nor e’er before confession chair
Kneels he, nor recks he when arise

Incense or anthem to the skies,
 But broods within his cell alone,
 His faith and race alike unknown.
 The sea from Paynim land he crost,
 And here ascended from the coast,
 Yet seems he not of Othman race,
 But only Christian in his face:
 I'd judge him some stray renegade,
 Repentant of the change he made,
 Save that he shuns our holy shrine,
 Nor tastes the sacred bread and wine.
 . . .
 Saint Francis! keep him from the shrine!
 Else may we dread the wrath divine
 Made manifest by awful sign.—
 If ever evil angel bore
 The form of mortal, such he wore—
 By all my hope of sins forgiven
 Such looks are not of earth nor heaven!"²³

Twice the Giaour has crossed the line that separates binary oppositions – that makes him a kind of hybrid, a doubtful candidate, he is unclassifiable: ‘his faith and race alike unknown’ – like any Own that returns as Other, he is uncanny. If he stands identified in a definite way (four times ‘I know him’), he is subject to the logic of mutual assured destruction (‘It shall not save him’); as religiously and ethnically un-identifiable, he lives in the isolation of him that never belongs anywhere (‘For he declines the convent oath, / And leaves those locks’ unhallowed growth, / But wears our garb in all beside[.]’²⁴): ‘The Giaour’s status as between cultures, neither Christian nor Muslim, should complicate any reading that casts him and Hassan as binary opposites representing two perennially antagonistic civilizations’.²⁵

But the Giaour is not the only character in *The Giaour* that can be read as a hybrid figure that questions easy dichotomy. Leila, the Giaour’s great love and ideal woman – ‘The bird that sings within the brake, / The swan that swims upon the lake, / One mate, and one alone, will take’ – is sometimes read as a personified ideal or, allegorically, as Greece, as for example, McGann does in his early *Fiery Dust*:

She is deliberately associated with the natural paradise of the landscape (473-518) and represents that perfection toward which both Hassan and the Giaour are impelled. At the level of the political allegory she represents the land over which the Turks and the Venetians have been fighting for centuries, . . . [t]hus, if Leila’s love for the Giaour seems horrifying to a Turkish sensibility . . . , her conduct is perfectly understandable at the level of the political allegory.²⁶

Her attempt to be no longer the sex object of an Oriental tyrant ('A soulless toy for tyrant's lust') would then be the allegory of the Greek fight for independence. But such readings rob Leila of all ambiguity: after all, she is a Cherkessian, that is, a fair-skinned Caucasian of Muslim creed.²⁷ In the love triad of the Giaour, Hassan and Leila, she is the Third that is not 'naturally' assignable, because one aspect of hers points to one partner, another to the other. The fair-skinned Muslima, married to one, but having a love relationship with the other, cannot be related in an un-ambiguous, unequivocal way – she is no personification of purity or perfection, but an embodiment of blending and hybridity, as Alan Richardson spells out: 'In Orientalist discourse, Circassia is associated not only with luxuriousness (because of the fabled beauty of its women) but with hybridity as well, as a region of fair-skinned, blue-eyed Muslims'.²⁸

The text plays around this undecidability with a mirror-like reflection of the binary concepts of 'true/untrue' and 'faithful/faithless', and 'fidelity/infidelity': if Leila is the Giaour's true love, then she was not untrue to him but true; and he would have sanctioned her fidelity as a wife – infidelity to him – in basically the same way that Hassan punished her for her unfaithfulness towards him. In the words of the Giaour:

Still, ere thou dost condemn me—pause—
 Not mine the act, though I the cause;
 Yet did he but what I had done
 Had she been false to more than one;
 Faithless to him—he gave the blow,
 But true to me—I laid him low;
 Howe'er deserv'd her doom might be,
 Her treachery was truth to me;
 To me she gave her heart, that all
 Which tyranny can ne'er enthrall;
 And I, alas! too late to save!
 Yet all I then could give, I gave,—
 'T was some relief,—our foe a grave.²⁹

'Faithful' and 'faithless', 'fidelity' and 'infidelity' – that these are reciprocal ascriptions, mutual ascriptions we know since the very title of poem, *The Giaour*, points us to it. *Infidel* means Christian, believer. *Faithful* means pagan, Muslim. And then religious orthodoxy and marital fidelity, just like their opposites, are firmly associated with each other: 'The faithless slave that broke her bower, / And, worse than faithless, for a Giaour!—'.³⁰ But the logic of unfaithfulness and fidelity is only a sub-case of the clash of civilizations: 'Her treachery was truth to me'. True fidelity shows in being untrue to the Other.

There is, however, with regard to the triangle of gender relations, one basic, decisive difference to the pure reciprocity of semiotic ascriptions: primarily, Leila's assignation is undecidable because, in this sea of voices, *she* is not given a

voice of her own. Leila, hybrid object, is only the silent signifier that rules the relationship of the Giaour and Hassan. And this silence even translates to the undecidable pronunciation of her name: it *could* be Li:la, it *could* be Leila. Since, unlike ‘Giaour’, ‘Leila’ is never in the end position of one of *The Giaour’s* couplets, its pronunciation is perfectly undecided; what is more: lines 1118–1119 suggest Leila, whereas 1210–1211 suggest Li:la.

But this relationship between the Giaour and Hassan is not strictly symmetrical: although the Giaour himself is hybrid, he can only perceive his Other in a strictly dichotomous way, exactly like Hassan sees him. The Giaour is hybrid, but this does not necessarily inform the way he looks at the world. In their unbridled hatred of the Other and in their will to totally annihilate the Other, they are uncannily similar to each other, if not identical.

Their deadly embrace is so graphically described as a sexual union of lovers that to identify a homosexual subtext doesn’t seem far-fetched,³¹ a sub-text whose covert message would read: the men can have intercourse in death as soon as the woman (only the *seeming* object of desire, which superficially acts as a go-between for the two of them) has been discarded – she was not really the object of desire, she was the obstacle of desire’s fulfilment:

Ah! fondly youthful hearts can press,
To seize and share the dear caress;
But Love itself could never pant
For all that Beauty sighs to grant,
With half the fervour Hate bestows
Upon the last embrace of foes,
When grappling in the fight they fold
Those arms that ne’er shall lose their hold;
Friends meet to part—Love laughs at faith;
True foes, once met, are joined till death!³²

In the description of their fight, it is truly difficult to keep their identities apart, as disjointed pronouns and severed hands fly around:

With sabre shiver’d to the hilt,
Yet dripping with the blood he spilt;
Yet strain’d within the sever’d hand
Which quivers round that faithless brand;
His turban far behind him roll’d
And cleft in twain its firmest fold[.]³³

This resembles the deadly fight between Humbert Humbert and Clare Quilty at the end of Nabokov’s *Lolita*.³⁴ As the two *doppelgänger* are rolling on the floor, the atmosphere heats up, gets steamy, and who is who is by no means clear – after all, both of them are in Oriental dress. (As John Lennon sang in ‘I Am the Walrus’: ‘I

am he as you are he and you are me and we are all together'.) It is only in line 669 that we learn: Hassan is in the inferior position, he has lost.

But what on earth has happened to the Giaour? He, who could invariably be identified by the colour of his face ('I know him by that pallid brow' or 'young and pale, . . . sallow front'), now looks like Hassan: 'And O'er him bends that foe with brow / *As dark as his that bled below*—'.³⁵ There is an uncanny similarity between him and his deadly foe, in the hour of his triumph, he has turned into the spitting image of his Other.

'Yes, Leila sleeps beneath the wave,
But his shall be a redder grave;
Her spirit pointed well the steel
Which taught that felon heart to feel.
He call'd the Prophet, but his power
Was vain against the vengeful Giaour:
He call'd on Alla—but the word
Arose unheeded or unheard.
Thou Paynim fool!—could Leila's prayer
Be pass'd, and thine accorded there?
I watch'd my time, I leagu'd with these,
The traitor in his turn to seize;
My wrath is wreak'd, the deed is done,
And now I go—but go alone.'³⁶

The two have become interchangeable. When the Giaour says at the end, 'Yet did he but what I had done', he recognizes this reciprocity which includes functional interchangeability. Facing the dying Hassan, he encounters his own countenance:

One cry to Mahomet for aid,
One prayer to Alla—all he made:
He knew and crossed me in the fray—
I gazed upon him where he lay,
And watched his spirit ebb away;
Though pierced like Pard by hunters' steel,
He felt not half that now I feel.
I search'd, but vainly search'd to find,
The workings of a wounded mind;
Each feature of that sullen corse
Betrayed his rage, but no remorse.'³⁷

As a character, the Giaour is definitely *not* an all-understanding, all-relativizing multi-cultural hero, quite the contrary: he is a rigidly categorizing automaton, which even denies himself any freedom of the will to repeat a quote:

Still, ere thou dost condemn me—pause—
 Not mine the act, though I the cause;
 Yet did he but what I had done
 Had she been false to more than one;
 Faithless to him—he gave the blow,
 But true to me—I laid him low[.]³⁸

It is not his reflection, but his *deeds* that make him cross borderlines and turn him into an outlaw. In this narrative, he will be forever united with his most beloved and with his most hated: ‘This broken tale was all we knew / Of her he lov’d, or him he slew’.³⁹ In the end, he is buried in a nameless grave: forever an infidel, *whichever way you look at it/him*: the *Giaour*. That is an acquired, an earned name. If it is true to say that the *Giaour* is an early Byronic hero (remember that this first *Turkish Tale* was published immediately after *Childe Harold I and II*), then it is also true to say: the Byronic hero is always the stranger,⁴⁰ because he was where he did not belong and, having returned, does not belong anywhere any more.

The *Giaour*, as a character, insists on the power of unconditional love, on fate, destiny and determination, he insists on how one thing led to another, inevitably. But that is nothing but a means of characterization, a way to show what makes him tick. The discourse of *The Giaour* itself tells a different story. It does *not* show how one thing led to another, how every effect became in turn the cause of another effect, and so on and so forth. Rather, it shows in momentary glimpses a totally broken and dispersed chronology: first a flight, then a mother bewailing her dead son, then the sinking or drowning of something in the sea, Hassan pursuing somebody, an ambush and the killing of Hassan . . . – it is evident (is it not?) that in order to make a story out of that, one would have to *tell* it first. It has to be constructed. And *The Giaour* shows that different narrators construct *different* stories. *That* is the story that is told in *The Giaour*. And that to dichotomize the world is self-defeating, because dichotomies (and less so binary oppositions) aim at the destruction and annihilation of what is identified as the Other, which, once this is achieved, makes you realize that the Other you killed was your spitting image, your uncanny *doppelgänger*. Thus, far from re-affirming well established binary oppositions and far from perpetuating dichotomies, Byron’s is an entirely different ball game: ‘Byron sets up dichotomies only to undermine them throughout the poem’.⁴¹ He uses the Orient only to dis-orient his readers.

The Paratexts

But that is not only true for the *poem*, it is also true for the *paratexts*, viz. for the ‘Advertisement’ and the final note, which seemingly serve the function to close *The Giaour*, exactly because the fragments themselves do not form a coherent whole. In the final note it says about the drowning of 12 women who were accused of infidelity: ‘The fate of Phrosine, the fairest of this sacrifice, is the subject of many a Romaic and Arnaout ditty’.⁴² ‘Many a Romaic and Arnaout ditty’? – as

Barbara Ravelhofer notes that is written ‘with wicked imprecision’, for Arnaouts are Muslim Albanians, especially such as would fight as legionaries in the Ottoman army.⁴³ But ‘Romaic’ means ‘modern Greek’ and, by implication, ‘Greek-Orthodox’. That is not a blatant contradiction (as Ravelhofer thinks) if this is meant to say: one and the same *donnée*, or subject matter, is handed down *both* in Albanian *and* Greek songs, in *both* an Albanian *and* a Greek tradition, with *both* Muslim *and* Christian perspectives.

Taking into account the perspectival structure of Byron’s *The Giaour*, his narrative long poem would be the dramatization of a polyphony, which, with regard to the *general* story had been there all along, but which is now presented in *one* narrative. The two extradiegetic narrators – the Muslim ‘coffee-house story-teller’ and the European ‘translator’ with all his ‘additions and interpolations’ – lend a bi-vocality to the text, which is then blown up by various intradiegetic narrators and dramatized voices to a fully-fledged polyphony. *The Giaour* is a heterogeneous text, a hybrid, ‘Romaic *and* Arnaout’. Whoever expects full disclosure about (and *closure of!*) this discourse from the final note – this *or* that – will be informed: *both and*. As much as the final note tries to close the tale, it also signals in these three words ‘Romaic *and* Arnaout’ that this pure given can only ever be the starting point for all the different discourses that derive from that *donnée*. *The Giaour* is a dramatization of multi-perspectivity and of polyphony. And since this plurality of voices and perspectives is not terminally integrated, they perpetually relativize and undercut each other: perspectivism is the *theme* and the undercutting of binary oppositions is the *main operating mode* in this de-frosting of signs signifying Identity and Alterity, Own and Other. It is only if, like Nigel Leask, you underestimate or even totally ignore the importance of *narrative mediation* that you are bound to miss this point. Then, and only then, will you be satisfied with a summary or a paraphrase of the supposed ‘content’ of the poem. Any such summary, however, will miss the point of the text – the purpose for which it was written – to the degree that it ignores the How of the What. The meaning of *The Giaour* is definitely not that a woman is killed by drowning and that it shows Oriental despotism from a European perspective. The meaning of *The Giaour* is what you can do with this, for example, that this woman would have suffered the same fate if untrue to her Christian lover, which takes the question of despotism out of the confrontation of Orient vs. Occident and transposes it to the level of gender relations; or that over the silent dead, there reigns the patriarchal hegemony of Hassan *and* the Giaour, which, in turn, is set to relativize the Other it produces and to eventually dissolve it.

Therefore, I believe, it is not a frivolous analogy to say: if you think that *The Giaour* reaffirms Orientalist dichotomies, then you sink the meaning of the poem, like Leila, ‘into the sea for infidelity’.⁴⁴ Fortunately, we now know what to make of such totalizing readings that ignore or negate Byron’s disorientations.

Byron’s ‘Advertisement’ is no less fertile, semiotically speaking, than the end-note. For after the rough summary it says about the point in time at which this story is supposed to have ‘really’ happened:

[A]t the time the Seven Islands were possessed by the Republic of Venice, and soon after the Arnauts were beaten back from the Morea, which they had ravaged for some time subsequent to the Russian invasion. The desertion of the Mainotes, on being refused the plunder of Misitra, led to the abandonment of that enterprise, and to the desolation of the Morea; during which the cruelty exercised on all sides was unparalleled even in the annals of the faithful.⁴⁵

Not only the modern reader would benefit from having this explanation, as it were, ‘explained’ (which even the perfect editor Jerome McGann does not provide entirely): the ‘Seven Islands’ are the Ioanian Islands, also called *Eptannissa*; Arnaouts, we have heard, are Muslim Albanian serving the Ottomans; the Morea is the Peloponnes; Maina or Mani the ‘middle finger’, the peninsula of the peninsula, inhabited by the Mainotes. It helps to know that in 1770 a relatively small Russian expeditionary force had tried to occupy the Peloponnes. But why the insurgent Greek Mainotes should have had an interest to loot the Greek city of Misitra (Mistrás, near Sparta) and why, once they were denied this, they withdrew and did not want to rebel against Turkish repression remains a mystery, just like McGann’s assessment that the story is set ‘shortly after 1779, when Hassan Ghazi broke the forces of the Albanians (i.e. the Arnaouts) in the Morea’ is only puzzling.⁴⁶ So, Greeks want to plunder Greek cities and they withdraw, in a huff, once they are denied this, and then the Ottoman army commander Hassan Ghazi drives the Muslim Albanians who fight for the Ottoman Empire out of the Turkish occupied Peloponnes. Is this madness?

It *is* confusing, but Byron doesn’t create this confusion, he only makes use of it to dis-orient the reader once more. It is true that in 1770 the Russians, playing their power game, had sent 500 men to the Peloponnes to incite the Mainotes to rebellion, who, however, were disappointed by the smallness of the Russian contingent – as well as suspicious, since they were expected to swear an oath of allegiance to Catherine the Great. Small initial successes of the insurgents were quickly annihilated as the Sublime Porte sent in thousands of Albanians to repress the rebellion. Russians and Greeks were beaten:

The successes of the Albanians were marked by the greatest cruelty: the country was ravaged, the people massacred without mercy, often merely to find a pretext for carrying off the young women and children to be sold as slaves. The pasha of the Morea endeavoured in vain to arrest these atrocities. He proclaimed an amnesty; and, as far as his power extended, his humanity restored order and confidence; but over the greater part of the peninsula the Albanian irregular bands remained for some years masters and tyrants of the province.⁴⁷

But although the Russians after that returned with a bigger fleet and won the battle of Tchesmé so that Constantinople now lay before them unprotected, they soon lost interest in the Greek theatre of war and in 1774, in the peace of Kainardji, abandoned the Greeks to their fate: ‘The Greeks, who had been cajoled and

bribed to rebel, were abandoned to their fate as soon as their services were useless to Russian interest . . . [I]n this treaty the Greeks of the Morea and the islands were sacrificed by Russia'.⁴⁸ What remained, were the Albanians: 'The Albanians who had entered the Morea established themselves permanently in companies throughout the peninsula, and collected the taxes on their own account, besides extorting large sums by cruel exactions, under the pretence of obtaining arrears of pay due to them by the Porte'.⁴⁹ This terror was at first tolerated by the Turks, maybe because the cruelty of the Russians and the Mainotes against the Muslims living in the Peloponnes was not yet forgotten:

The peace with Russia could not make the Turks forget the cruelty with which their countrymen had been massacred in the Morea; and for several years the Greeks were everywhere subjected to constant supervision and increased oppression. The cruelties of the Albanians were tolerated even after their rapacity became so great that many Turks as well as Greeks were ruined by their exactions, and compelled to abandon their property, and escape to other parts of the empire.⁵⁰

Only when the complaints of both Christians and Muslims alike could no longer be ignored did Constantinople send in Hassan Ghazi (in 1779) to evict the Albanians:

The reiterated complaints of the disorders perpetrated by the Albanians in the Morea, both by Mussulmans and Christians, at length determined him to restore tranquillity to that valuable province. Hassan, whose victory over the Russians at Lemnos had gained him the title of Ghazi (the Victorious), had been raised to the rank of capitan-pasha. In the year 1779 he was ordered to reduce the Albanians to obedience and re-establish order in the Morea. With his usual promptitude in action, he landed a considerable force at Nauplia, and marched with a body of four thousand chosen infantry, and the cavalry collected by the neighbouring pashas, to attack the Albanians, who had concentrated a large part of their troops at Tripolitza. The Albanians, confident in their numbers and valour, marched out to engage the little army of the capitan-pasha in the plain, and were completely defeated by the steady valour of the infantry, and by the fire of the artillery. After this victory Hassan hunted down the dispersed bands of the Albanians over the whole peninsula, and exterminated them without mercy. The heads of the chieftains were sent to Constantinople, and exposed before the gate of the Serai, while a pyramid was formed of those of the soldiers under the walls of Tripolitza, the remains of which were seen by travellers at the end of the last century.⁵¹

So it is true that the Ottomans fought the Muslims without mercy '[and] the Maniates [sic], who feared the Albanians more than the Turks, had deputed Zanet Koutouphari, one of their chiefs, to wait on Hassan at Rhodes in 1777 to solicit an amnesty for the part they had taken in the Russian war, to assure the capitan-pasha of their devotion to the sultan's government, and to claim his protection'.⁵²

This, then, is the gist of this history: the Christian Mainotes eventually found

relative peace under the Ottoman Muslims after the terror regime of other Muslims and after they themselves had barbarously waged terror against infidels. That was only 34 years ago, when Byron wrote *The Giaour*. As confusing as it may have sounded, it is all true what Byron writes in his 'Advertisement'. *In real history*, these simple dichotomies are dissolved and Byron merely reminds his readers of these facts, or, if they did not know, he dis-orientates them by dissolving their simplistic ideas of the Orient, of 'East' vs. 'West', of Christianity vs. Islam, and so on and so forth.

To quote once more from the 'Advertisement': '[T]he desolation of the Morea, during which the cruelty exercised *on all sides*', that is clear enough, but here comes the true stroke of genius: 'was unparalleled even in the annals of *the faithful*' (emphases added). Now who is that, after all that's been said? 'They' or 'us'? *Whose* annals, when it is conceded that cruelty was exercised on *all sides*, whose annals record unparalleled cruelty?

The Giaour knows an answer of Delphic wisdom: We – that is, the others. Ours – that is, theirs.

This has less of Arthur Rimbaud's 'Je est un autre', and more of Julia Kristeva's 'Nous sommes étrangers à nous-mêmes': We are strangers to ourselves.

Notes

- 1 This argument is made at greater length in Christoph Bode, *Selbst-Begründungen: Diskursive Konstruktion von Identität in der britischen Romantik, I: Subjektive Identität* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2008), 117–43, and in Christoph Bode, *Fremd-Erfahrungen: Diskursive Konstruktion von Identität in der britischen Romantik, II: Identität auf Reisen* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2009), 265–86.
- 2 The controversy over how well Byron knew the Orient is by no means over: in the pro camp we find Oueijan (Naji Oueijan, *A Compendium of Eastern Elements in Byron's Oriental Tales* [Frankfurt/Washington, D.C.: Peter Lang, 1999]) and Sharafuddin (Mohammed Sharafuddin, *Islam and Romantic Orientalism: Literary Encounters with the Orient* [London/New York: Tauris, 1994]), but, particularly with regard to *The Giaour*, we see Marandi take up the opposite position (Seyed Mohammed Marandi, 'Byron's Infidel and the Muslim Fisherman', *Keats-Shelley Review* 20 [2006]: 133–55). Edward Said, in his *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), by the way, seems to have totally ignored Byron's *Oriental Tales* – in *Orientalism*, the name of Byron appears only in enumerative lists; the only passage that mentions a work of Byron's – *The Giaour*, interestingly enough – reads like this: 'the Orient is a form of release, a place of original opportunity' (Said, *Orientalism*, 167). I find it difficult to relate this to anything in *The Giaour*.
- 3 Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 4 and 24.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 29.

- 5 Not only with regard to dating and the variants, Jerome McGann's 7-volume edition of Byron's *Complete Poetical Works* sets the benchmark (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980–1993); cf. here vol. 3, 406ff. In this essay, quotes refer to Jerome McGann, *Lord Byron: The Major Works*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), which is based on *The Complete Poetical Works*.
- 6 Karl Kroeber, *Romantic Narrative Art* (Madison/Milwaukee/London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), 140.
- 7 William H. Marshall, 'The Accretive Structure of Byron's *The Giaour*', *Modern Language Notes* 76 (1961): 502–9.
- 8 McGann, *Byron: The Major Works*, 207.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 246.
- 10 Kroeber, *Romantic Narrative Art*, 139.
- 11 Cf. Christoph Bode, *The Novel: An Introduction* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 105.
- 12 Kroeber, *Romantic Narrative Art*, 140.
- 13 Robert F. Gleckner, *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 1967), 97; cf. also David Seed, '“Disjointed Fragments”: Concealment and Revelation in *The Giaour*', *The Byron Journal* 18 (1990): 13–27, here 17 and 25.
- 14 McGann, *Byron: The Major Works*, 207ff., ll. 136–41.
- 15 *Ibid.*, ll. 189–99.
- 16 *Ibid.*, l. 362.
- 17 For example, Marilyn Butler, 'The Orientalism of Byron's *Giaour*', in *Byron and the Limits of Fiction*, eds. Bernard Beatty and Vincent Newey (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1988), 87, and Karl Kroeber, *Romantic Narrative Art* (p. 140), attribute this to the *fisherman*, but Jerome McGann to the extradiegetic narrator. Cf. Jerome McGann, *Fiery Dust: Byron's Poetic Development* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 144–6.
- 18 On selective cognition in *The Giaour*, cf. Frederick W. Shilstone, 'Byron's *The Giaour*: Narrative Tradition and Romantic Cognitive Theory', *Research Studies of Washington State University* 48 (1980): 94–104; and, in a conspicuously negative assessment, Kroeber, *Romantic Narrative Art*, 140: 'Byron tries to charge the relatively simple sequence of incidents in *The Giaour* with fearful emotions by recounting it through different narrators, whose observation is limited or whose understanding of events is partial. The result, however, is bewilderment rather than suspense'.
- 19 McGann, *Fiery Dust*, 144.
- 20 Cf. Bernard Beatty, 'Calvin in Islam: A Reading of *Lara* and *The Giaour*', *Romanticism: The Journal of Romantic Culture and Criticism* 5 (1999): 70–86, here 73.
- 21 McGann, *Byron: The Major Works*, 207ff., ll. 604–19.
- 22 *Ibid.*, l. 256.
- 23 *Ibid.*, ll. 798–815 and 909–15.
- 24 *Ibid.*, ll. 899–901.
- 25 Alan Richardson, 'Byron's *The Giaour*: Teaching Orientalism in the Wake of September 11', in *Interrogating Orientalism: Contextual Approaches and Pedagogical Practices*, eds. Diane Long Hoeveler and Jeffrey Cass (Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP, 2006), 213–23, here 220; see also Gleckner, *Byron*, 111: 'to the Muslim and Christian world, in neither of which the *Giaour* has a place, his end is fitting and proper'. Cf. Beatty, 'Calvin', 277).

- 26 McGann, *Fiery Dust*, 156. For the line ‘The bird that sings . . .’, cf. McGann, *Byron: The Major Works*, 207ff., ll. 1169–71.
- 27 The quoted line is from McGann, *Byron: The Major Works*, 207ff., l. 490.
- 28 Richardson, ‘Byron’s *The Giaour*’, 221.
- 29 McGann, *Byron: The Major Works*, 207ff., ll. 1060–72.
- 30 *Ibid.*, ll. 535–6.
- 31 Cf. Abigail F. Keegan, *Byron’s Othered Self and Voice: Contextualizing the Homographic Signature* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003); Jeffrey L. Schneider, ‘Secret Sins of the Orient: Creating a (homo)textual Context for Reading Byron’s *The Giaour*’, *College English* 65 (2002): 81–96; and Richardson, ‘Byron’s *The Giaour*’, 220.
- 32 McGann, *Byron: The Major Works*, 207ff., ll. 645–54.
- 33 *Ibid.*, ll. 655–60.
- 34 ‘We fell to wrestling again. We rolled all over the floor, in each other’s arms, like two huge helpless children. He was naked and goatish under his robe, and I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us’. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), 297.
- 35 McGann, *Byron: The Major Works*, 207ff., ll. 194 and 673–4; emphasis added.
- 36 McGann, *Byron: The Major Works*, 207ff., ll. 675–88.
- 37 *Ibid.*, ll. 1082–92.
- 38 *Ibid.*, ll. 1060–5.
- 39 *Ibid.*, ll. 1333–4.
- 40 Cf. Sharafuddin, *Islam*, 214.
- 41 Richardson, ‘Byron’s *The Giaour*’, 219.
- 42 McGann, *Byron: The Major Works*, 246.
- 43 Barbara Ravelhofer, ‘Oral Poetry and the Printing Press in Byron’s *The Giaour* (1813)’, *Romanticism* 11 (2005): 23–40, here 23.
- 44 McGann, *Byron: The Major Works*, 207.
- 45 *Ibid.*
- 46 *Ibid.*, 1034.
- 47 George Finlay, *The History of Greece under Othoman and Venetian Domination* (Edinburgh/London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1856), 313–4.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 321 and 322.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 321–2.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 323.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 323–4.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 324.