‘Grotta Byron’ or Byron’s Cave: The Emblem of Byron’s Italy

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Introduction

A cave in Italy is famously linked to the British Romantic poet, Lord Byron (1788-1824), namely ‘Grotta Byron’. However, the truth is that Byron neither drew inspiration from the grotto nor even visited the site. The connection is merely the 19th century’s “myth of Byron,” a testament to the poet’s swelling posthumous reputation around the Continent (Eisner 289). Due to its questionable origins, the mythical cave has long been neglected by Byron scholars; nonetheless, it may offer valuable insights, shedding light on an aspect often overlooked in Byron studies: the motif of caves. In *The Bride of Abydos* (1813), *Don Juan* (1819-24), and *The Island; or Christian and His Comrades* (1823), for instance, caves play a central role, providing refuge to protagonists. Through a close analysis of the caves depicted in these three narrative poems−written before, during, and at the end of Byron’s self-imposed exile in Italy−, my research will explore the poet’s complex and ambivalent relationship with his actual place of refuge, Italy.

The Bride of Abydos (1813)

During his Years of Fame, irked by indolence and inactivity, Byron was seized with a desire to go abroad. He found an outlet for his frustration in the poem *The Bride of Abydos*, a work executed “to dispel reflection during *inaction*” (*BLJ*, III 157, sic). In the work, the cave is depicted as a refuge for Selim and Zuleika, which undergoes a dramatic transformation from a celestial feminine space reminiscent of Byron’s London surroundings to a masculine hideout of valor and bravery. Additionally, within this cave, Selim metamorphosizes from an effeminate stripling into an illustrious hero, ultimately meeting his demise in battle−a noble and glorious end. In hindsight, Byron’s Italy and Italianate Byron should have been like Selim’s cave and Selim himself, respectively. However, as Byron himself concedes, “Truth is always strange, / Stranger than Fiction” (*Don Juan*, XIV, 101). The vision Byron fictionalized in *The Bride of Abydos,* would indeed be realized in Italy, but invertedly, as the following analysis of *Don Juan* makes clear.

Don Juan, the Haidee episode (1819)

In *Don Juan*, a masterpiece of Byron’s Italian period, a cave plays a particularly prominent role in the so-called Haidee episode: the moribund Juan is revived by the island girl in the “receptacle” (II, 184)−possibly an allusion to Byron’s own revitalization in Italy. Although Haidee’s cave may seem similar to Selim’s, it is fundamentally different. The cave in *Don Juan* is essentially the domain of womanhood, evoking even a womb, where Juan is ultimately led to sensual pleasure and moral decline. Unlike Selim’s cave, adorned with numerous rugged weapons, Juan’s refuge is thus reduced to a bedchamber of degenerate luxury with his “cast-off dresses” (II, 182) scattered around. This setting naturally conjures up imagery of Venice and Byron’s dissolute life there; his relocation resulted in a reenactment of his familiar effeminate locus in a Mediterranean context. However, his yawning for noble life gradually increased, culminating in a definitive conflict against his habitual carnal indulgence, which will be analyzed in the next section.

The Island; or Christian and His Comrades (1823)

Toward the end of his Italian sojourn, Byron wrote *The Island*. The cave in the story, where Torquil finds shelter with Neuha, resembles neither Selim’s manly nook nor Haidee’s decadent chamber. Instead, it becomes a sanctuary of holy love, arguably echoing the author’s domestic happiness with his Italian mistress, Teresa Guiccioli. While the cave offers a seventh heaven for the couple, another part of the island witnesses a hell on earth−the battle of Christian, the tale’s eponymous hero. Christian aids the couple’s escape to the cave and meets a heroic demise in battle, conceivably recalling Selim in *The Bride of Abydos*. These contrasting portrayals of Byronic heroes may underscore the author’s contemporary “inner conflict” (Marchand, vol. 3, 1029)−a schism between sensual pleasure and noble action, between hedonism and heroism. As Mckusick notes, *The Island* is thus “schizophrenic” (Mckusick 841). This struggle, however, concludes shortly after the composition of the work: ultimately choosing the latter, Byron sets sail

for the Grecian battlefield in 1823.

The Rhyming of 'Cave' and 'Grave'

Byron's Italy, or Byron's caves, thus emerges as sanctuaries of redemption, comfort and sensuality for both the poet and his literary avatars. Yet, a closer examination of the texts' metrics reveals an arresting detail: the function of caves as graves. Intriguingly, Byron often rhymes 'cave' with 'grave', suggesting a certain "similarity" between them (Wimsatt 164). In fact, the word 'grotto', frequently used interchangeably with 'cave', derived from "Latin crypta" (*OED,* grotto), which means *crypt* in English—a term defined as "An underground cell, chamber, or vault; *esp*. one used as a burial place and typically lying beneath a church (*OED*, crypt, 1a, sic)". Thus, a grotto or its synonym cave is etymologically akin to "a burial place" or grave. Furthermore, it is important to note that, in Byron's three featured works, 'cave' and 'grave' also share a tangible semantic connection. The life-giving caves—a locus where the protagonists indeed *narrowly escape death*—are therefore phonetically, etymologically and semantically inseparable from the life-threatening graves.

The Duality of Byron's Caves

The caves in Byron's works are thus Janus-faced, or, to borrow a term from *The Island*, "amphibious" (IV, 375). While serving as places of security, comfort, life, and carnal pleasure, they concurrently represent places of risk, danger, potential death, and celestial bliss. Much like the rhyme between 'cave' and 'grave', the redemptive sanctuaries in Byron's tales are perpetually shadowed by the spectre of death and destined to ultimately convert into graves. Notably, such a "dual" nature is emblematic of Byron's Italy (Rawes 9). The country sheltered, nourished, soothed, gratified, and eventually enlivened the poet; but simultaneously, it also risked and endangered him—as the place of exile—, corrupted and wrecked him—as the Mediterranean Harem—, and eventually furnishes him his potential final resting place. Italy was thus a locus fraught with an irreconcilable dialectic between life and death. However, this ambiguous Italy is ultimately displaced by Greece, Byron's final asylum, which effectively transforms from a lovely home to a glorious tomb. Byron died in Greece in 1824.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this argument brings us back to "Neuha's Cave" in *The Island* (IV, 414). Upon the couple's return home, the cave became a legendary site of a tale of love. This might remind us of a site mentioned earlier in this essay, 'Grotta Byron'—a cave similarly steeped in "the myth of Byron". Could it be a coincidence that these two Byronic caves bear such a striking similarity? One might even speculate that 'Grotta Byron' is the real-life counterpart to the cave in *The Island.* While the topic requires further investigation, it is at least clear the Byron's caves represent his unique and complex relationship with Italy. And if 'Grotta Byron' embodies the caves in Byron's works, then this mysterious grotto in Italy may also become the emblem of Byron's Italy. 'Grotta Byron' and Byron's caves, thus continuously pique our curiosity and eventually expand our literary horizons—much like the caves themselves captivate our imagination and offer a sweeping view of the ocean horizon.

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