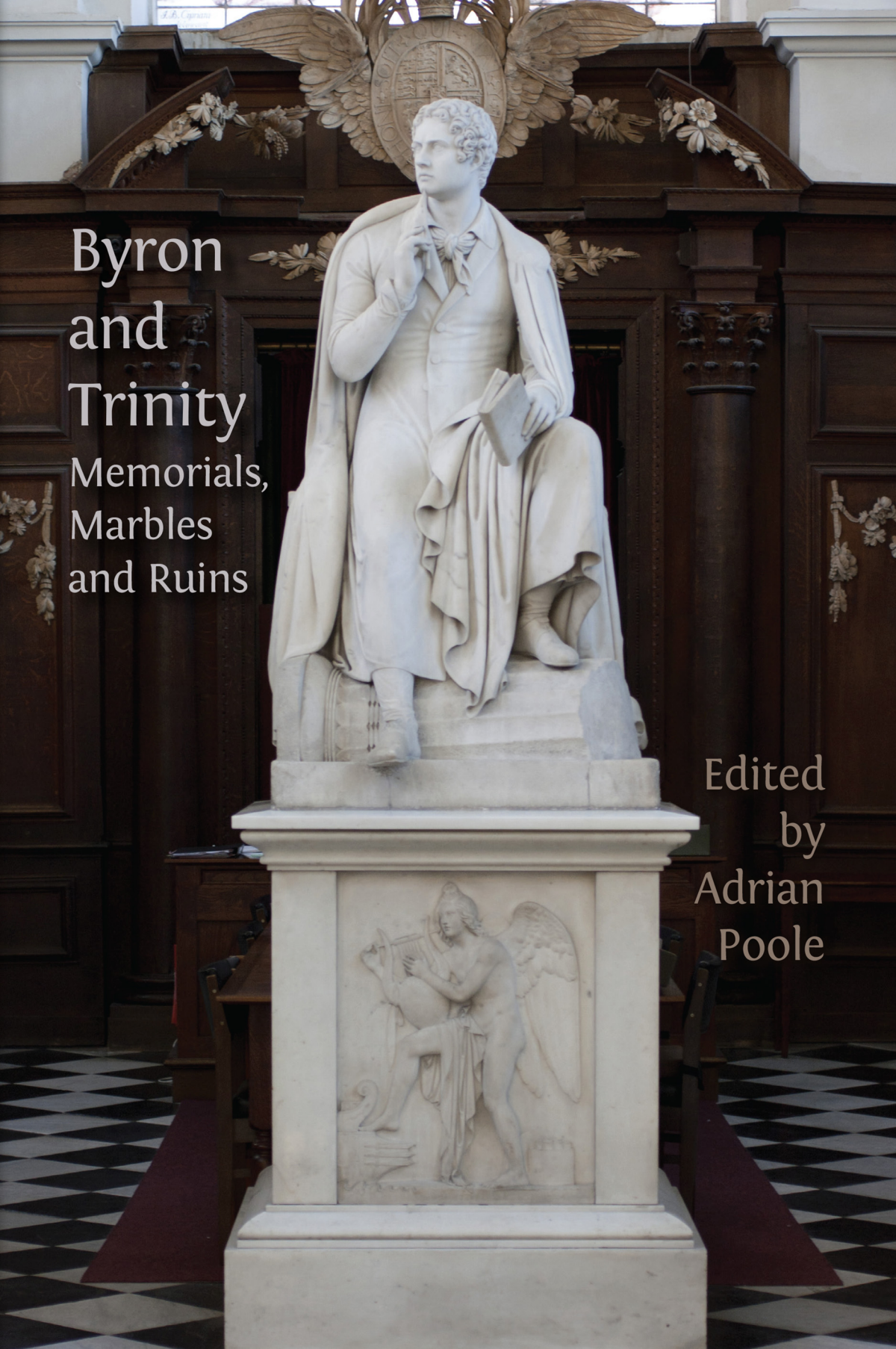

Byron and Trinity

Memorials, Marbles and Ruins

Edited by Adrian Poole

https://www.openbookpublishers.com

Adrian Poole (ed.), *Byron and Trinity: Memorials, Marbles and Ruins*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2024, https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0399

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-278-5
ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-279-2
ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80064-280-8
ISBN Digital eBook (EPUB): 978-1-80511-281-5
ISBN Digital (HTML): 978-1-80511-283-9

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0399

Cover photo: Statue of Lord Byron by the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen. Photograph by James Kirwan, courtesy of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge.
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1. Lord Byron and Trinity

A Bicentenary Portrait[1]

Anne Barton

When this year's Clark Lecturer,[2] Jerome McCann, slyly called Lord Byron 'Trinity's most adorable pet', a frisson of uncertainty rippled through the audience at Mill Lane. Suddenly, two possible meanings of the adjective 'adorable' were in collision: 'worthy of reverence and honour', the original sense, forced up against the more modern signification 'charming, personally lovable and attractive'. For a moment, everyone in the room appeared to be trying to decide in which sense Byron might be adorable—or was it neither, or both? With no other Trinity poet, whether Marvell, Cowley, Dryden, Tennyson, or any of the rest, could such a dilemma arise. Assessments of Byron, on the other hand, in this bicentenary year of his birth, remain both contradictory and oddly personal and intense, as though this man had died only recently, rather than one hundred and sixty-four years ago. Nor has it proved possible to divorce the life and personality from the work.

For the young Byron's long-suffering tutors at Trinity, the case was rather different. What they had on their hands for three scattered University terms, beginning in Michaelmas 1805, must have seemed in no sense 'adorable': a moody, extravagant, high-handed young man bitterly disappointed to be at Cambridge rather than Oxford with most

1 Published in *The Trinity Review* (1988) for the bicentenary of Byron's birth. Reprinted by permission of the Executors of Anne Barton's Estate.

2 These lectures, normally annual, were established in 1878 from a bequest of William George Clark; they are typically, though not exclusively, addressed to topics in English literature.

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0399.01

of his Harrow friends. He was temporarily consoled by finding himself the possessor of '*super*excellent rooms'[3] (probably, as Robert Robson has suggested, I1 Nevile's Court),[4] where freed from the surveillance of a devoted but exasperating mother, he could begin to run himself seriously into debt. He also fell in love ('a violent, though *pure* love and passion')[5] with one of the choirboys in the chapel. The Christmas vacation took Byron to London and there, despite remonstrances from Trinity, not to mention the threat of disciplinary action from the Court of the Chancery, of which he was a ward, he lingered for months, returning to Cambridge only in the summer term. He brought back with him an enlarged acquaintance with London bawds, and also with professional boxers, jockeys and fencing masters, low tastes for which his tutor Thomas Jones unavailingly reproached him. He would be engaged, before long, in an altercation with the Mayor of Cambridge, who took a dim view of Byron's proposal to establish his fencing-master permanently in the town.

At the end of term, Byron vanished again, this time for a year. His fine rooms, re-allocated to Charles Skinner Matthews, another undergraduate, were still overflowing with Byron's belongings and the Senior Tutor felt obliged to issue a nervous caution to the new occupant, 'for Lord Byron, Sir, is a young man of *tumultuous passions*'.[6] When the ogre re-appeared, however, late in June 1807, to remove them, having announced his intention of abandoning Trinity for good, he made no complaint but after renewing acquaintance with old friends, and making several new ones—including Matthews himself—decided abruptly to give Cambridge another try. Byron was now nineteen. During his year of truancy, the

3 Letter to Augusta Byron, 6 November 1805, in *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. by Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols (London: John Murray, 1973–94), I, 79. All subsequent references to Byron's *Letters and Journals* are to this edition, hereafter *BLJ*.

4 Robert Robson, 'Byron's rooms revisited', *The Trinity Review* (Easter 1975), 22–24. Robson supports the probable veracity of J. W. Clark's statement in *Cambridge, Historical and Descriptive Notes* (1890), p. 138, about the location of Byron's room in I1 Nevile's Court, Trinity College, Cambridge, and the high improbability of the legend, derived from M. F. Wright's *Alma Mater, or Seven Years at the University of Cambridge, by a Trinity-Man* (1827), that Byron and his bear were lodged in the south-east corner of the Great Court, K staircase. About the situation of the bear, Robson cites Clark's statement that it was kept 'in a stable in the Ram Yard', noting that 'it is highly improbable to say the least that the College authorities would then have tolerated a bear in the College', and even more drily that 'it is unlikely even now, when discipline is a good deal less stringent than it was' (22).

5 *Ravenna Journal*, 12 January 1821; *BLJ* VIII, 22.

6 Letter to John Murray, 18 November 1820; *BLJ* VII, 232.

fat, idle, relatively unsophisticated youth the college remembered had been transformed. He had been in and out of a great many beds, had just published a collection of poems and, although there was nothing he could do about his congenital lameness, the purposeful shedding of several stone in weight had released from captivity a slim young man of arresting physical beauty. Just in case he might fail, nonetheless, to attract attention, Byron came back into residence for the Michaelmas term 1807 accompanied by a tame bear. Trinity's statutes had long prohibited undergraduates from bringing their dogs into college, but the imagination of the authorities had not encompassed the need to fend off bears.

Byron's reply to urgent tutorial enquiries about what he meant to do with the beast was that 'he should *sit* for *a Fellowship*'.[7] (He was later to pretend, in the postscript to the second edition of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, that only 'the jealousy of his Trinity contemporaries prevented him from success'.)[8] It was a joke with a cutting edge. Although Byron's tutor Jones had successfully pressed, some years before, for fellowship elections to be conducted openly rather than in private, they were still susceptible to charges of favouritism and abuse. As a nobleman, moreover, Byron regularly dined in Hall with the fellows of Trinity. His impression of them as a group he had communicated earlier in letters written from Cambridge: 'Study is the last pursuit of the society; the Master eats, drinks, and sleeps, the fellows *drink, dispute*, and *pun*'. Their pursuits, he claimed, were 'limited to the Church,—not of Christ, but of the nearest benefice'.[9] In 'Thoughts Suggested by a College Examination', a satirical poem published in his collection of 1807, *Hours of Idleness*, he made his contempt more public:

> The sons of science, these, who thus repaid,
> Linger in ease, in Granta's sluggish shade;
> Where on Cam's sedgy banks supine they lie,
> Unknown, unhonour'd live,—unwept for, die;
> Dull as the pictures, which adorn their halls,
> They think all learning fix'd within their walls;
> In manners rude, in foolish forms precise,

7 Letter to Elizabeth Bridget Pigot, 26 October 1807; *BLJ* I, 135–36.

8 *English Bards, and Scotch Reviewers: A Satire*, 2nd edn (London, 1809). Reprinted in https://petercochran.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/english-bards-and-scotch-reviewers1.pdf

9 Letters to John Hanson, 23 November 1805, and Robert Charles Dallas, 21 January 1808; *BLJ* I, 81, 147.

> All modern arts, affecting to despise;
> Yet prizing Bentley's, Brunck's, or Porson's note,
> More than the verses, on which the critic wrote;
> Vain as their honours, heavy as their Ale,
> Sad as their wit, and tedious as their tale,
> To friendship dead, though not untaught to feel,
> When Self and Church demand a Bigot zeal. [...]
> Such are the men, who learning's treasures guard,
> Such is their practice, such is their reward;
> This much, at least, we may presume to say;
> The premium can't exceed the price they pay.[10]

If, as Hobhouse later asserted,[11] Byron was indeed the undergraduate that the great classical scholar Porson, Regius Professor of Greek at Trinity, once tried to assault with a poker, the attack was not entirely unprovoked.

When Byron included 'Thoughts Suggested' in the first edition of *Hours of Idleness*, he believed he had finished with Cambridge forever. He was a little nervous about the poem, all the same, especially after his own unexpected return to 'Granta's sluggish shade'. On the 20 November 1807, he wrote from Trinity instructing his publisher Ridge to omit it from the second edition. But, by 14 December, as term drew to a close, he had changed his mind, not only countermanding the November deletion, but adding four new lines, those beginning 'Vain are their honours...' to the original. It was one of the first examples of what was to become Byron's characteristic reluctance to let go of a poem even after it had been published, the urgent need to carry forward with his own life what he had written months, or even years, before. In this instance, the accretion signalled another decision, this time irrevocable, to abandon Cambridge. Between Christmas 1807 and the spring of 1816, when he was (or felt himself) driven from England by the scandal surrounding the break-up of his marriage, Byron would return several times to visit or offer support to friends. His official connection with the University came to an end, however, in July 1808, when he finally took that MA which Cambridge, in his case, was most reluctant to award.

10 *Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980–93), I, 94. All subsequent references to Byron's poetry are to this edition, hereafter *CPW*.

11 Peter Cochran, *Byron and Hobby-O: Lord Byron's Relationship with John Cam Hobhouse* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), p. 313.

'The university still chew the Cud of my degree', he informed his friend Hobhouse (who was still at Trinity) in March of that year: 'please God they shall swallow it, though Inflammation be the Consequence.'[12]

Ironically Byron owed his MA to precisely that academic venality and corruption about which he was so scathing both in letters of the period and in his satirical Cambridge poems. It was his bare three terms of residence which made the degree problematic, not the fact that he had never taken an examination nor, so far as is known, bothered to attend lectures. In 1787, Byron's tutor Thomas Jones had made the radical proposal that noblemen and wealthy fellow-commoners should be obliged to take examinations just like financially dependent undergraduates, the pensioners and sizars. The Grace was defeated in the Senate House. Like other peers, Byron received his degree in exchange for going through a few minutes of whispered 'disputation' with his tutor in the Senate House, and handing the latter, (no longer, at least, Jones) a fat fee.

That Jones, before his death in July 1807, had occasionally remonstrated with his noble pupil on academic grounds, not simply because of his absences and animals, is clear from the defensive letter Byron addressed to him early in 1807. 'I have adopted a distinct line of Reading', Byron asserted, in the course of explaining why he had declined to avail himself of the formal instruction offered in mathematics, theology and philosophy: 'this you will probably *smile* at, & imagine (as you *very* naturally may) that because I have not pursued my College Studies, I have pursued *none*.—I have certainly no right to be offended at such a Conjecture, nor indeed am I, that it is erroneous, Time will perhaps discover'.[13] Time has not, in fact, revealed any coherent programme of study equivalent to the one Wordsworth (another defector from the Cambridge syllabus) had devised for himself in Modern Languages during his time at St John's. It seems clear, however, that the Byron who had complained in his first term of residence that 'nobody here seems to look into an author ancient or modern if they can avoid it',[14] did in fact continue to read avidly, if without system, at Cambridge, as indeed throughout his life. The grounds of his classical education had been laid before he came up to Trinity. Most of the translations from Greek and

12 Letter to John Cam Hobhouse, 26 March 1808; *BLJ* I, 161.
13 Letter to Rev. Thomas Jones, 14 February 1807; *BLJ* I, 108.
14 Letter to Hargreaves Hanson, 12 November 1805; *BLJ* I, 80.

Latin published in his first volume of poems were products of the Harrow years. History he had always loved. It seems, however, to have been at Cambridge that English literature and, in particular, contemporary poetry, began to engage him seriously. They played, of course, no part in his official studies. Indeed, one of Byron's chief complaints in 'Thoughts Suggested' was the ignorance of English history, law and literature fostered by the University syllabus:

> Happy the youth! in Euclid's axioms tried,
> Though little vers'd in any art beside;
> Who, scarcely skill'd an English line to pen,
> Scans Attic metres with a critic's ken.
> What ! though he knows not how his fathers bled,
> When civil discord pil'd the fields with dead;
> When Edward bade his conquering bands advance,
> Or Henry trampled on the crests of France;
> Though, marv'lling at the name of Magna Carta,
> Yet, well he recollects the laws of Sparta;
> Can tell what edicts sage Lycurgus made,
> Whilst Blackstone's on the shelf, neglected, laid;
> Of Grecian dramas vaunts the deathless fame,
> Of Avon's bard, rememb'ring scarce the name.[15]

During his last term at Trinity, Byron completed 'above four hundred lines' of verse anatomizing 'the poetry of the present Day'.[16] 'British Bards: A Satire', its initial title, was a youthful polemic which, in lengthening versions, was to go through five editions. Byron came to wish he had never published it at all. Although his faith in Milton, Dryden and Pope as standards of excellence remained fixed, he was later embarrassed by many of the judgements passed on his contemporaries. This poem written in part at Trinity is important, however, because without amounting to the kind of self-dedication Wordsworth had vowed in the summer vacation of his first year at Cambridge, it nonetheless signalled a commitment to poetry, his own and that of other people, about which Byron would often become impatient in the future, even somewhat ashamed, but which was to remain with him for the rest of his life. The Cambridge he knew may have seemed 'a villainous Chaos of Dice and Drunkenness, nothing but Hazard and Burgundy, Hunting,

15 *CPW* I, 92–93.
16 Letter to Ben Crosby, 22 December 1807; *BLJ* I, 141.

Mathematics and Newmarket, Riot and Racing' as he described it in a letter written during that final term.[17] Byron's life there had not been spent in simple acquiescence to its fashionable '*Monotony* of *endless variety*'.[18]

The Byron who, several years later,[19] was given a spontaneous ovation by the undergraduates, and honoured by the dons when he entered the Senate House to vote in a University election had become, doubtless to the astonishment of most of the members of Trinity's High Table, a famous man: the author of *Childe Harold*, *The Giaour*, *The Bride of Abydos*, *Lara* and *The Corsair*. The impact of these romantic poems on the reading public, compounded as it was by the personal magnetism of their author, had been virtually without precedent. Works immediately inspired by the travels in Turkey, Greece and Albania on which Byron embarked after taking his MA, and by his perennial need to find objectifying fictional forms for his own emotional entanglements (which by now included a dangerous liaison with Augusta Leigh, his married half-sister), there was little in their conscious exoticism that seemed to link them to his University days. Yet like Wordsworth, Byron had been influenced to a greater and more permanent extent than he recognised by attitudes and ideas which he encountered in the Cambridge of his time.

On 21 January 1808, a month after his final departure from the University, Byron wrote a letter to Robert Charles Dallas, shortly to become his literary agent, in which he provided 'a brief compendium of the Sentiments of the *wicked* George Ld. B'. They included the belief that virtue was '*a feeling* not a principle', the conviction that human actions were governed by the privileging of pleasure over pain (the last, he joked, borne in upon him after getting the worst of an argument, tellingly conjoined with a fall from his horse), that 'Truth was the prime attribute of the Deity,' and death 'an eternal Sleep'. He also claimed to prefer Confucius to the ten commandments, and Socrates to St Paul, to be sceptical about Holy Communion, and, while disallowing any acknowledgment of the Pope, to favour Catholic emancipation in

17 Letter to Elizabeth Bridget Pigot, 26 October 1807; *BLJ* I, 135.

18 Letter to Elizabeth Bridget Pigot, 5 July 1807; *BLJ* I, 125.

19 Late October 1814. *Memoir of the Rev. Francis Hodgson, B.D., scholar, poet, and divine: with numerous letters from Lord Byron and others, by his son, James T. Hodgson*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1878), I, 292, https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/view/bsb11370276?page=346,347

England.[20] As a collection of issues and opinions, it was a distinctively Cambridge blend.

Unlike Oxford at the equivalent moment of time, Byron's Cambridge had been profoundly marked by the presence and work of Isaac Newton. The legacy of Newton was visible not only in the emphasis on mathematics in the Tripos, but in tendencies towards free-thinking and scepticism which impelled many members of the university into deism and a few others (like Byron's friend Charles Matthews) into openly confessed atheism. In the realm of moral philosophy, the mechanistic implications of Newton's thought encouraged a belief in the pleasure principle as the foundation of human action, and in materialist, utilitarian goals. In this climate, the ancient statute debarring anyone who refused to subscribe to the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England from taking a degree began to seem oppressive: there was pressure to withdraw it, allowing Unitarians and members of dissenting religions, including Catholics, the same rights as Anglicans. Politically, too, as well as in matters of religion, Cambridge in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century harboured a good deal of radicalism. The effort by Byron's tutor Jones to subject all undergraduates, regardless of wealth or rank, to the same academic requirements, although defeated at the time, was symptomatic of a democratizing impulse which extended to far wider, non-university issues of political and social reform. Nowhere in Cambridge were these liberal tendencies more pronounced than at Trinity, Newton's own former college.

At Harrow, Byron's close friends had almost all been noblemen like himself. At Cambridge they were not. In his final term he became a member of the Cambridge Whig Club and for the rest of his life remained fiercely anti-Tory. Of Byron's three speeches in Parliament, delivered shortly after he had left Cambridge, one was a plea for Catholic emancipation, another a protest against the use of the death penalty to quell industrial unrest among the Nottingham cloth workers, while the third defended a parliamentary informer. Later on, he was to become deeply involved in the abortive Italian revolution and finally, when social ferment in England disappointingly failed to result in action, to die in the Greek War of Independence. Before then, he had written sixteen Cantos of *Don Juan*, his unfinished masterpiece, in which

20 Letter to Robert Charles Dallas, 21 January 1808; *BLJ* I, 148.

the radicalism and scepticism to which he had first been attracted at Cambridge found their mature poetic expression.

Unlike the early Cantos of *Childe Harold*, *Don Juan* was not a success with the reading public. Indeed, it came in for increasing moral castigation and abuse, even John Murray, Byron's publisher for many years, finally declining to handle material so dangerously brilliant.

> They accuse me—*Me*—the present writer of
> The present poem of—I know not what,—
> A tendency to under-rate and scoff
> At human power and virtue and all that;
> And this they say in language rather rough.
> Good God! I wonder what they would be at![21]

Caught in his last years, artistically as well as personally by one of England's fiercest relapses into puritanism and orthodoxy, Byron nevertheless pressed on, in his Italian exile, with a 'shocking' poem that no one (except Shelley) prized. In Ravenna, from a distance of some fourteen years, his time at Cambridge—the days of swimming in 'Cam's [...] not [...] very "translucent" wave', the reading, the conviviality and good talk—suddenly came back to him as 'the happiest, perhaps, days of my life'.[22] John Cam Hobhouse, Byron's Trinity contemporary, had remained a close if misguidedly loyal friend. After Byron's death, he nervously burnt the poet's manuscript *Memoirs*, in order to safeguard his 'reputation'. He would have liked to 'lose' *Don Juan* too.

That poem has effectively had to wait until the twentieth century to find its public, to be seen for what Byron, as he went on writing it, gradually realised that it was: in its unorthodox way, a genuinely moral work. Infinitely inventive, both funny and sad, it interweaves Byron's idiosyncratic version of the Don Juan story with the record of an individual life—his own—lived so expansively and on so many different levels that an entire epoch of European history seems contained within it. Significantly, it is a poem haunted by the figure of Newton, the man whose discoveries had dominated the Cambridge of Byron's youth. For Blake and for Keats, Newton figured as imagination's enemy. Wordsworth, although influenced like Byron by Newtonian ideas, put the man himself into his autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, only as an

21 *Don Juan*, Canto VII, 3; *CPW* V, 337
22 *Ravenna Journal*, 12 January 1821; *BLJ* VIII, 24, 23.

afterthought: a memory of the statue in Trinity chapel, with its 'prism and silent face, / The marble index of a mind forever / Voyaging through strange seas of Thought, alone'.[23] Byron, more complexly, saw Newton as a kind of Janus figure, embodying on the one hand the immeasurable capabilities of the human mind:

> When Newton saw an apple fall, he found
> In that slight startle from his contemplation—
> 'Tis *said* (for I'll not answer above ground
> For any sage's creed or calculation)—
> A mode of proving that the earth turned round
> In a most natural whirl called 'Gravitation,'
> And this is the sole mortal who could grapple,
> Since Adam, with a fall, or with an apple.
>
> Man fell with apples, and with apples rose,
> If this be true, for we must deem the mode
> In which Sir Isaac Newton could disclose
> Through the then unpaved stars the turnpike road,
> A thing to counterbalance human woes;[24]

But he was also obsessed by Newton's own wry description, shortly before his death, of himself as merely 'a boy playing on the sea-shore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay undiscovered before me'.[25]

Between these two views of man's potentialities and achievement, one optimistic, the other despairing, Byron's epic vacillates and swings. When the narrator writes of his recoil from 'the abyss of thought', in favour of 'a calm and shallow station / Well nigh the shore, where one stoops down and gathers / Some pretty shell',[26] the aged Newton, through some strange act of ventriloquism, authorises Byron's own characteristic distrust of metaphysical and religious systems. But Byron is also invoking Newton when, immediately after the stanzas about the apple's fall, he defiantly characterises *Don Juan* itself—that unsparing investigation of human social, sexual and political relationships—as a voyage into the

23 William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (London: Moxon, 1850), Book III, lines 60–63.
24 *Don Juan*, Canto X, 1, 2; *CPW* V, 437.
25 Words supposedly uttered by Newton shortly before his death in 1727, reported by Joseph Spence in *Anecdotes, Observations and Characters, of Books and Men* (1820), I, 158; referred to in *Don Juan*, Canto VII, 5; *CPW* V, 338.
26 *Don Juan*, Canto IX, 18; *CPW* V, 414.

unknown equivalent to those undertaken by scientists, men 'who by the dint of glass and vapour / Discover stars and sail in the wind's eye'.[27]

After Byron's death in Greece, at the age of thirty-six, his friend Hobhouse's request that he be buried in 'Poet's Corner' of Westminster Abbey was firmly refused.[28] The Abbey also declined a few years later to accept the life-size statue of Byron by the Danish sculptor Thorvaldsen. Trinity, to whom the piece was finally offered, after it had languished for nine years in the Customs House, proved more courageous. The figure of Byron, seated on a broken Greek column, dominates the long sweep of the Wren Library much as the image of Newton dominates Trinity's Ante-Chapel (see Fig. 1.1). And the man it represents still arouses passionate reactions of love and hate. Only last year [1987], at a conference in Venice, the former Labour leader Michael Foot came close to assaulting an opponent who maintained that Byron was not, after all, a hero of the socialist movement. T. S. Eliot visited upon the face sculpted by Thorvaldsen an intensely personal dislike: 'that weakly sensual mouth, that restless triviality of expression, and worst of all that blind look of the self-conscious beauty'.[29] Those, on the other hand, for whom Byron's elusive but compelling personality continues to speak by way of the richest and most brilliant collection of letters in the language, and also in one of its greatest long poems, read that face rather differently. It seems, in any case, wholly appropriate that the author of *Don Juan* should be commemorated by a statue in the Wren Library rather than in the Abbey. That poem was, in a sense, begun in Cambridge, the place where Byron became confirmed in his adherence to two principles which, as he later said, were the only constant features of his mercurial life and work: the 'strong love of liberty, and a detestation of cant'.[30]

27 *Don Juan*, Canto X, 3; *CPW* V, 437.

28 [ed.: Geoffrey Bond and Christine Kenyon Jones recall Thomas Babington Macaulay's observation that 'we know no spectacle so ridiculous as the British public in one of its periodical fits of morality', quoted in *Dangerous to Show: Byron and His Portraits* (London: Unicorn, 2020), p. 81. Unlike Byron, Macaulay does enjoy a memorial statue in Trinity's Ante-chapel. There is also a memorial bust of Byron's tutor, Rev. Thomas Jones (see Fig. 1.2), 'per viginti annos Tutor eximius' ('for twenty years an outstanding Tutor').]

29 *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition, Volume 5: Tradition and Orthodoxy, 1934–1939*, ed. by Iman Javadi and Ronald Schuchard and Jayme Stayer (Baltimore, MA, and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press and Faber & Faber Ltd., 2017), p. 431.

30 *Conversations of Lord Byron with the Countess of Blessington* (London: H. Colburn, 1834), p. 390, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=dul1.ark:/13960/t2795c725&seq=13

Fig. 1.1. The statue of Sir Isaac Newton in the Trinity College Ante-Chapel, by Louis-François Roubiliac (1755). Photograph by Adrian Poole.

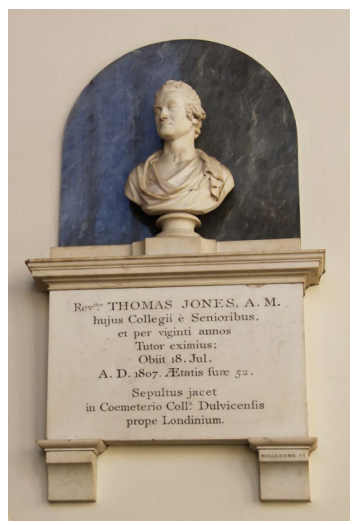

Fig. 1.2 The memorial bust of Thomas Jones, Byron's tutor, in the Trinity College Ante-Chapel, by Joseph Nollekens (n.d.). Photograph by Joanna Harries, courtesy of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge.