

“Without the Muffle”: Byron, Boxing, and the Authentic Life

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Hi, y'all. This lecture is from Chapter 1 of my book-in-progress called *A Thing of Beauty: Reading the Romantics in a World on Fire*. My main idea tonight is this: the famous Romantic poet George Gordon, Lord Byron, frenemy of Mary Shelley and the Taylor Swift of his time, had a lifelong interest in sports, including boxing. Like his lifelong writing practice, this was a way to live with two things we still fear in our super-online, AI-driven age—mortality and meaninglessness. Boxing and writing are both, I think, ways to feel real. And when I trained at a South London boxing gym, at age 45, I got a taste of the multiple meanings Byron might have found—and we still find—in this complex and fascinating sport. Even a way sports might build our capacities to do hard things, like work for the common good.

The story starts on a sunny morning in March 2019, when I stepped out of Southwark Underground Station in London, bracing myself to climb into a boxing ring for the first time. I was 45 years old, an English professor in yoga

pants, headed to a boxing gym to learn (at least in theory) what it's like to hit someone. Because I was stuck on one odd fact: George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824), the Taylor Swift of the Romantic period, trained with a boxing coach. A womanizer, world traveler, and lover of boys at a time when sex between men could be punished by death, he distilled his own experience into his epic poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812-1818), an overnight bestseller. He married surprisingly, divorced scandalously, then fled England for good to settle eventually in Venice, hometown of the famous lover Casanova (whose life just overlaps with his.) But Italian life, too, got boring, so, in 1823, he sailed for Greece to fight the Turks. With typical sarcasm, he joked about his mistress's fears that he might die. “I hope it may be in action,” he remarked, “for that would be a good finish to a very *triste* existence.”¹ Unfortunately, he didn't get his wish: six months later, he died of fever in a tent at Missolonghi, aged 36. Until the end, he kept writing, seeking something always just out of reach.

In person, I doubt Byron and I would've liked each other much. Now, approaching the 200th anniversary of his death next year, I can't stop circling him, one hand raised to jab—or touch. My world is burning; so was his. Torn between irony and grief, we're both navigating a world of swelling wealth gaps and shrinking resources and an infuriating mix of boredom and anxiety as we struggle up the staircase of midlife, grasping the banister of writing. But Byron had an energy source I didn't: boxing, which in his time meant some things people wouldn't expect him, or me, to care about. What did a brilliant pansexual man with a lame leg find in the shadow world of flash coves and former slaves and bloody unbowed courage that was London's boxing



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Amy Weldon

world? What kinds of life, endurance, freedom did that social ecosystem support? And could I—an American woman going gray and soft, a little too comfortable—find it too?

As a young man, Byron trained with boxing celebrity and part-time model John Jackson, to whom I like to refer as “the Marky Mark Wahlberg of Regency England.” “Now *there* is a man,” Prince George remarked on seeing Jackson. His tomb in Brompton Cemetery still bears the faded letters *-aestus*, which makes me call him “Byron's Hephaestus.” The God of the Forge—not a bad epitaph for a boxing trainer. For young Lord Byron, “Jack” was trainer, factotum, and fixer. He called him “my old friend and corporeal pastor and master, John Jackson, Esq., Professor of Pugilism.” This tweaks the Anglican catechism's phrase urging obedience to “spiritual pastors and masters.” A joke, but there is indeed a “pastoral” feel to the trainer relationship: priest to novitiate, Virgil to Dante, Hephaestus to anvil: you submit yourself, in trust, to be forged. Reforged. Created.



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON

George Gordon, Lord Byron

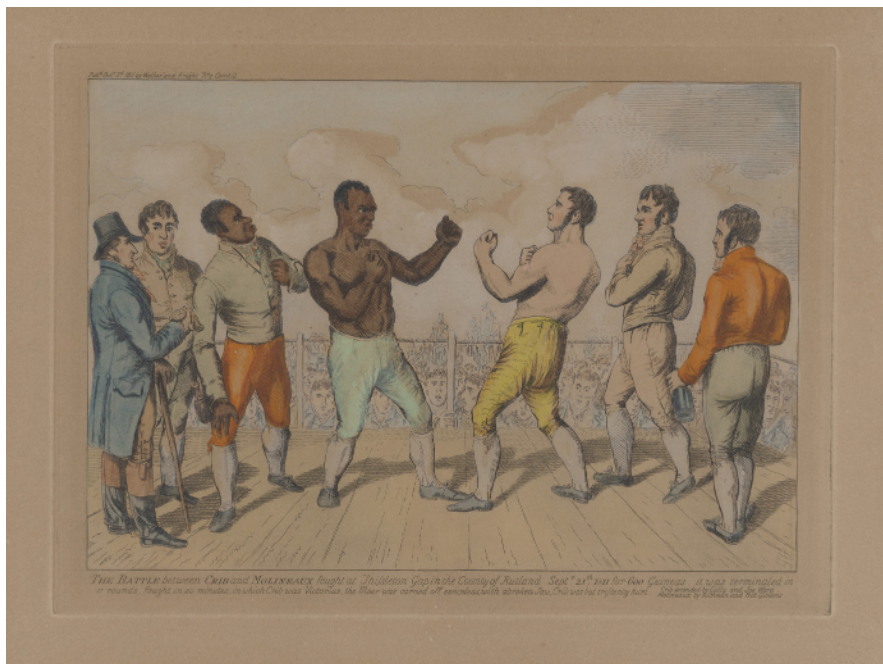


IMAGE COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

The Battle between Crib and Molineaux, *unidentified artist, 1811*

Like the great boxer Muhammed Ali 150 or so years later, Byron was something of a rhyming jokester, as we see in my favorite poem of his: a 750-page rhyming epic called *Don Juan*. (JOO-one is how he makes you pronounce it.) The poem's hero is Don Juan (correctly pronounced *hwAHN*), the dashing playboy of legend. In Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni* (1787), Don Juan is a defiant rake who's dragged screaming to hell. Thirty years later, Byron's Don Juan is a handsome, dopey clown who's bounced from woman to woman (all smarter than he, and often older), shipwrecked, purchased as a slave by a Turkish empress who disguises him as a girl to sneak him into her chambers, and drafted into the Battle of Waterloo before fetching up in Piccadilly (Byron's own world) to become a duchess's boy-toy. Here's the first stanza of the whole thing:

I want a hero: an uncommon want,
When every year and month sends forth a new one,
Till, after cloying the gazettes with cant,²
The age discovers he is not the true one;
Of such as these I should not care to vaunt,
I'll therefore take our ancient friend Don Juan—

We all have seen him, in the pantomime,
Sent to the devil somewhat ere his time.

In a gossipy, hilarious, wicked-uncle voice much like Byron's own, the narrator continues to spin the yarn of Juan's adventures, interrupting his own story to complain about the weather, pretend to be scandalized, and head off moralistic grumbling in advance. Here's where boxing shows up directly, a description of a rainbow as seen by shipwrecked sailors (Canto 2, Stanza 92):

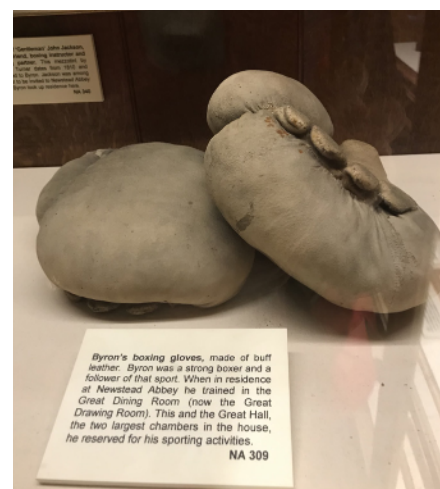
It changed of Course; a heavenly Cameleon,
The Airy Child of Vapour and the Sun,
Brought forth in Purple, cradled in Vermilion,
Baptized in molten Gold, and swathed in Dun,
Glittering like Crescents o'er a Turk's Pavillion,
And blending every Colour into One,
Just like a black eye in a recent Scuffle
(For sometimes we must box without the Muffle.)

"Muffles" are gloves, which were used in training but not, always, in fights. But the lightness and speed of *Don Juan* can

flip to rueful bittersweetness, as in my favorite (Canto 2, stanza 4):

Well – Well, the World must turn upon its Axis,
And all Mankind turn with it, heads or tails,
And live and die, make love and pay our taxes,
And as the veering Wind shifts, shift our sails;
The King commands us, and the Doctor quacks us,
The Priest instructs, and so our Life exhales,
A little breath, love, wine, ambition, fame,
Fighting, devotion, dust – perhaps a Name. –

Here and throughout Byron's life, poetry and athletic discipline keep him moving through a life otherwise threatening to collapse into chaos and absurdity—some of which, of course, was his own fault, but which I think would've made him quite a fan of Albert Camus (more later). Poetry, like boxing, issues a continual challenge that Byron continually accepts, and that I continually issue to myself and my students: *take yourself seriously. Try harder. Make something that lasts.* This is advice for writing and life. Like a boxing ring, that small space on the page reveals inescapably what you can or can't do, how much practice you've put in, and what you are/not willing to confront. *Ottava rima*, the mock-heroic form Boccaccio introduced and Byron perfected, canters (or "cantos") the reader along on a rocking rhythm



Byron's muffles (boxing gloves)

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

that makes the form's discipline look easy. Byron appreciated a good horse. And a good boat. Because he was always on his way somewhere, always worried he was running out of time.

What's behind this race to the edge, this drive for extremes? Perhaps it's a way to reassure yourself that you are real. To feel something you might call authentic amid absurdity and ennui and the encroachments of mortality. "The excellence of every art is its intensity," writes boxing fan John Keats in December 1817. "The great object of life," Byron wrote to his future wife Annabella Milbanke on September 6, 1813, "is Sensation—to feel that we exist—even though in pain—it is this 'craving void' which drives us to Gaming—to Battle—to Travel—to intemperate but keenly felt pursuits of every description whose principal attraction is the agitation inseparable from their accomplishment." Especially if you're Byron, this is how you get from Gaming, to Battle, to Travel, to Boxing.

In Byron's time, boxing was a shadow world of mostly (but not entirely) men, ranging across classes and races, sharing a complex slang and a complex fascination with a technically illegal sport. Americans and women adopted its language too. British boxing of Byron's time was an intricate community, with a variety of scrapping, sparkling life that would've been irresistible to Byron's magpie imagination, always intrigued by odd characters, random detail, and forbidden knowledge. Its fans, a network of slumming lords, working-class blokes, writers, and more, called themselves "the Fancy." Technically illegal, matches were kept secret until shortly before they were due to begin, prompting "the Fancy" to rush to the venue, hitching rides and exchanging tips as they went. The sport's protean quality shapes William Hazlitt's wonderful essay "The Fight" (1822) and what could almost be an early graphic novel, even a proto-silent film: a marvelous panoramic drawing by Robert Cruikshank, "Going to a fight: the sporting world in all its variety of style and costume along the road from Hyde Park Corner to Moulsey Hurst," published in London in 1819. (This is a distance of about 20 miles.) Now in the collection of the Yale Center for

British Art, it's a single strip of paper, fourteen feet long and exactly the width of a sideways-turned iPhone. To view it, you hold its round wooden case in your left hand and unroll it slowly with your right, "reading" the long procession as it literally moves across your field of vision. A man leads his bull for dog-baiting (a sideshow to the human fight). There are scuffles on the road and horses for sale and even a guy on a bike. Finally, we reach the fight itself: Jack Randall ("the Nonpareil," whom Keats saw just after his brother Tom's funeral) vs. Richard West ("West Country Dick") on April 3, 1817. The great sportswriter Pierce Egan, author of the multivolume *Boxiana*, is hunkered by the ring, taking notes.

At the center of this world is American ex-slave Bill Richmond (1763-1829), an anchor and exemplar of its rich diversity. Born on Long Island, New York, Richmond retired from a successful fighting career in England to become a promoter and trainer of other fighters, including several American ex-slaves like Virginia-born Tom Molineaux (1784-1818). Jewish champion Daniel Mendoza (1764-1836) would have heard Byron's "Jew-one" as a familiar slur; nevertheless, like Richmond, he parlayed his success in the ring into ownership of a pub. So did two-time English champion Tom Cribb (1781-1848), who founded a pub bearing his name that still stands on Panton Street in London. As ever in Britain, class was the real divide. After Byron dined at Cribb's house in 1813, he notes: "Tom has been a sailor—a coal-heaver—and some other genteel profession [...] and is now only three-and-thirty. A great man! Has a wife and a mistress, and conversations well—bating some sad omissions and misapplications of the aspirate." (Meaning aitches, which working-class Brits don't pronounce.)

Nevertheless, becoming His Lordship's amusing toy was risky. Richard "Hellgate" Barry, 7th Earl of Barrymore, one of the Regency's most notorious rakes, married the daughter of a boxer (herself a sometime fighter, she later became a prison matron at Bridewell) and died at 24. Caricatured by James Gillray as a skinny, pouting dude in boxing gloves, "Hellgate" liked to start fights,



Bill Richmond

then call in his pet boxer, Bill Hooper, "the Tinman," to bail him out. Originally from Bristol, Hooper turned from making "sausespans" toward the high life, then was abandoned when the fun wore off. "The swell tinman, Hooper," Pierce Egan relates, "was one of those 'playthings' of the great; and, sheltered under the wings of nobility, he became pampered, insolent, and mischievous." When Hellgate tired of Hooper, he turned him out to succumb to drink and disease. Eventually Hooper "was found insensible on the step of a door in St Giles" and "on inquiring who he was, he could only very faintly articulate, 'Hoop – Hoop.'" Luckily Hooper was "recognized as the miserable remnant of that once powerful pugilistic hero" and "humanely taken to the work-house, where he immediately expired." Could Egan have seen "The Wizard of Oz" more than a century later, I'm sure he'd hearken to the pathos of the technicolor Tinman, slumped and rusted in place, longing for a heart.

This colorful, dangerous, inherently multiple and diverse world would've been irresistible to Byron, who would have grown up quite "multiple" himself: a queer, limping boy with the knowledge that "sodomy" between men was a criminal offense. Six hangings for "convicted sodomists" were carried out in 1806 alone, when Byron was an eighteen-year-old Cambridge student. Cruising the Mediterranean in 1811 with his servant Robert Rushton, Byron could work on *Childe Harold's*



COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON

Tom Cribb

Pilgrimage and carry on multiple affairs with boys: his letters to his Cambridge friends were full of joking references to “Plen. and optabil.—Coit,” a coded reference from Petronius’ *Satyricon* to a phrase meaning “as much full intercourse as one could wish for.” Not in England. Definitely not beyond the wink-wink shelter of Harrow, Cambridge, and classical studies. Maybe not anywhere. Interestingly, instead of attending his mother’s funeral, he chose to box with Rushton in this room (see photo at bottom right) at Newstead—before the present renovation.

While training at The Ring in Southwark during the spring of 2019, I experienced boxing’s multiplicity for myself, encountering, from a dozen fresh angles, a city and a life I thought I knew. The first wave of Extinction Rebellion was blocking traffic in Parliament Square, and climate change, housing crunches, Russian billionaires, and Brexit were biting deep into the texture of daily life. Property developers cruised past the gym’s doors. Naively, it hadn’t occurred to me that *this* beloved place, with its foot-scuffed boxing rings and laughter and worn speed bags might be under threat from those forces of *market* and *gentrification* that are abstractions until they come to your front door. The neon-bright stickers of Extinction Rebellion sharpened the point with its razor-edged hourglass: *Because we are so very nearly out of time*. Time is churning at the bedrock and buildings and streets of London, this city I love, and at the Alabama acres I love back home. Yet our gym stayed. So did our community. So

does art. Art can lift what we love above the flood. It can cut through the ennui, the fear, the straight-up bullshit. So can commitment, and practice, and work. I believe this. So do artists, trying to move themselves and their craft ahead against the oncoming flow of time. So do the boxers I met. (Somebody ask me about them in the Q&A!)

Despite his pose of aristocratic ease, Byron believed this too. In Canto XII of *Don Juan*, he mocks writers’ belief that we’re preserving cultural memories “for posterity: “Why, I’m posterity and so are you,” he writes, “/And whom do we remember? Not a hundred” (st. 19, l. 1-2). Mocking his own importance, he nevertheless insists, “I’m serious; so are all men upon paper. / And why should I not form my speculation / And hold up to the sun my little taper?” (st. 21, l. 1-3). But by the time he died, a year and a half later, he’d written five more cantos of *Don Juan*, with no signs of stopping, in addition to other poems and plays. If poetry is *only* a “little taper,” why would he have kept writing? In the profane, but apt, advice of my trainer: *You can’t fuck about*. Take yourself and your one life seriously, even amid the absurdity, the sadness, your fears for the future, all the rest of it. Engage with the world in all its delight and variety. Be curious. And keep on pushing. Otherwise, what are you really doing here?

One hundred twenty-five years later, in the midst of the Second World War, a tubercular, womanizing French soccer goalie picked up this question on the path where Byron dropped it: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.” This is the writer Albert Camus (1913-1960) in the famous opening of his first philosophical treatise, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), began during the German invasion of France and published two years later, in the depth of war. Byron would have loved his main idea: it’s not human desires that are absurd, nor the world itself, but the eternally uncrossable, irreconcilable gap where the two meet, or fail to meet. That gap: now

that is absurd. Literally absurd, since “a gap between appearance and reality” is the definition of *irony*, Byron’s favorite mode. He would have recognized in his own life and work the rueful freedom that comes when you accept this reality, steadily clearing your vision of habit and illusion. Especially as you reach middle age, and reckon with “the whole thing,” *Don Juan’s* phrase for sex and for life—mistakes, self-sabotages, gifts, regrets, desires, ridiculousness, and all. Maybe irony itself is a “muffle,” a glove to shield yourself in the inevitable business of giving, and receiving, blows. When you lift your gloves and face your opponent, there’s freedom in that. And, in a word very important to Camus, there is something *authentic*.

So if life (particularly in the twenty-first century) is struggle and absurdity, how then shall we live? Perhaps counterintuitively, Camus offers a positive role model: the mythical figure of Sisyphus, condemned by the gods to roll a heavy boulder up a hill only to watch it crash back to the bottom, then repeat the process – eternally. But to Camus, Sisyphus is not pitiful, but admirable:

At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock. (...) The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the



Newstead Abbey boxing room

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Amy Weldon in the London boxing gym

same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.

In accepting his fate, that “his rock is his thing,” and tackling it mentally and physically, Sisyphus surmounts what would seem to be tragedy with a dignity Camus regards as quintessentially human, with a nobility of which only humans are capable. He just keeps trying. “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart,” Camus concludes. “One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

And perhaps this is where Byron meets Camus meets me, on the page and in the boxing ring. Maybe this is life: accepting and laboring continually in the gap between ideal and reality to make something where nothing was before, to build a muscle of a mortal body or set down a stanza of a poem that may never be published, to “labor upward toward futurity,” as William Blake says. Maybe this is an answer: to “do your thing,” in the words of Camus and of Isaac Hayes, is to be human and to be happy. Maybe this is how you live in

reality. Maybe this is how you grow up. You find and do your thing. You act (in Hannah Arendt’s sense) to make something rather than nothing. In spite of everything.

Byron’s thing is writing, which keeps him on the path he, and we, need to walk, threading between what we should be and what we are. And the endlessly-onward-cantering form of *Don Juan* is the form, and the practice, Byron makes to contain and examine it all. Writing down “all of this” and shaping it into art visibly matures the mad, bad boy into a rueful, reflective man. Writing from Pisa to his friend Thomas Moore, he warns:

The truth is, my dear Moore, you live near the *stove of society*, where you

are unavoidably influenced by its heat and its vapours. I did so once – and too much – and enough to give a color to my whole future existence. As my success in society was *not* inconsiderable, I am surely not a prejudiced judge upon the subject, unless in its favor; but I think it, as now constituted, *fatal* to all great original undertakings of every kind. I never courted it *then*, when I was young and high in blood, and one of its ‘curled darlings;’ and do you think I would do so *now*, when I am living in a clearer atmosphere? One thing *only* might lead me back to it, and that is, to try once more if I could do any good in *politics*; but *not* in the petty politics I see now preying upon our miserable country.

(Ironically, it’s this Moore, “influenced” by fear of scandal, who puts Byron’s posthumous memoirs in an actual stove—burns them, unpublished.) Substitute “social media” for “society” and you see Byron deciding to do what many middle-aged public intellectuals in the Elon Musk era are doing: quitting Twitter and the “stove” of online

life to turn to action in the world. For Byron, this was political action: lending his money and his celebrity presence to the cause of liberation for Italy, then for Greece. Approaching age 35, which he would have known as Dante’s midlife crisis point in *Inferno*, he wrestles in private writings with what happens after life ends. “Of the Immortality of the Soul—it appears to me that there can be little doubt—if we attend for a moment to the action of Mind. – It is in perpetual activity,” he writes. He can’t quite believe in the Biblical book of Revelation, though: “*when the World is at an end*—what moral or warning purpose *can* eternal tortures answer?.... Man is born *passionate* of body—but with an innate though secret tendency to the love of Good in his Main-spring of Mind. – But God help us all! – It is at present a sad jar of atoms.” Nevertheless, he kept living his life—and writing about it.

So what do sports and writing have to do with each other, and authenticity? “I think all of us are looking for that which does not admit of bullshit,” said the late Southern writer Harry Crews. “If you tell me you can bench press 450, hell, we’ll load up the bar and put you under it. Either you can do it or you can’t do it—you can’t bullshit. Ultimately, sports are just about as close to what one would call the truth as it is possible to get in this world.” Like sports, writing is a practice that helps us keep trying, no matter what. It helps us seek truth, alone and in community. It builds our capacities to do hard things. It helps you make the choice in the moment to keep working, to keep leaning in, because few things worth doing in this world of ours are easy. And it may help you arrive at a vision of how to live your life in relationship with others, a common good worth working for.

Thank you! Now let’s talk.

Notes

1. Fiona McCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), p. 463
2. Yes, he does make you say a Very Bad Word in his very first stanza. (Sort of).