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The Taming of Byron in the Netherlands

MARITA MATHIJSEN

Abstract

The first Byron translation in the Netherlands dates from 1819. A decade later a true Byron-mania breaks out, which yields quite a number of translations. Even so Byron rather upset the Dutch, who regarded him as an exemplar of moral decay. The translations display a far milder, more Christian Byron than he really was. Three distinct perspectives help us find out in what precise manner his Dutch translators managed to temper Byron. An inspection of what was not translated points towards what exceeded the Dutch standards. An analysis of the prefaces to the various translations indicates in what directions translators felt a need for (sometimes remarkably far-reaching) adaptation. Finally, there are the adaptations themselves, which show what passages were softened or even emasculated. Byron translated into Dutch was a Byron tamed.

The first person to translate Byron into Dutch was the British-born wife of one of the Netherlands' best-known early nineteenth-century poets, Willem Bilderdijk. Following her husband, Katharina Wilhelmina Schweickhardt left England for good in 1798, and in 1819 she began to translate some of Byron's poems. The most recent translation in Dutch has likewise been made by a woman. In 2013, Ike Cialona rendered for the first time in Dutch the complete *Don Juan*, in a much-acclaimed translation.¹ Between the most recent and the earliest Byron translation in the Netherlands stand not only 194 years but also a world of difference.

The early Dutch translations, which appeared between 1819 and 1830, evoked relatively little interest. In the Netherlands, English literature was hardly being read in the original since – unlike French and Latin – English was not taught at Dutch grammar schools. As a consequence, some early translations were made from French Byron editions. The first translations of Byron that appear in the Netherlands were adapted to the Dutch situation. Every aspect deemed immoral was left out or obscured. More often than not translators included a preface in which they explained that while Byron may have an immoral reputation, his poetic gifts were so extraordinary as to make it worth the translator's while to acquaint the public at large with his poetry.

Not long after Byron's death in 1824, the attention to his poetry increased greatly in the Netherlands. But the emphasis had shifted to Byron's campaign for liberty. After

Marita Mathijssen

his voyage to Greece he became the revolutionary who put his life at stake for the sake of liberty, just as the Dutch did when in the seventeenth century they fought against Spanish oppression. Various publications began to praise Byron's efforts on behalf of Greece. The most important literary journal of the period, the *Vaderlandsche letteroefeningen*, quotes, in French, a poem that Eugène de Pradel improvised upon hearing the news of Byron's death:

In disdainful tyrants, and fighting a master,
You, Greeks, became intrepid soldiers once again,
And liberty has caused to be reborn
Leonidas' children.²

This struggle for freedom is also the subject of a poem that the Romantic poet A. van der Hoop Jr. wrote in 1826. It is entitled 'Opwekking aan Nederland, ten behoeve der Grieken, die voor hunne onafhankelijkheid strijden' or 'An appeal to the Netherlands on behalf of the Greeks who fight for independence'.³ This was a wake-up call for his countrymen to follow Byron and fight for Greek independence. Another poet, Robidé van der Aa, even published a booklet, entitled *De dood van Lord Byron* or *The Death of Lord Byron*, to collect money for the Greeks (and the booklet's proceeds were sent on there).⁴ In a biography, adorned with a portrait, that appeared within a year of Byron's death, Greece appears as the catalyst to place the world-forsaking Byron on a pedestal.⁵ Perhaps Professor B. Lulofs came closest to representing the view of Byron in these days, in the epigram:

Albion, whatever that is black you may have recorded in your bard's youth,
Before long Hellas has torn those pages from your scrolls.⁶

In the early 1830s, the Romantic youth of the Netherlands were translating, but also to some extent adopting and imitating, Byron. Young authors began to take Byron for an example, and to borrow from him in content as well as in form. The melancholy 'Byronic hero' who brings disaster to the heroine becomes a standard character in the novels and novellas of the 1830s.⁷ Poetic innovations such as those Byron employs in *Don Juan*, with its witty turns and flexibility, are adopted as well. Pictures of Byron were now also much in demand.

The number of translations grew quickly: between 1830 and 1850 we may speak of a veritable Byron mania. Adaptation to Dutch moral standards still takes place in this new array of translations, however. Even in the new, Dutch-Romantic era a need was felt to smoothen some of Byron's sharpest angles. There were also numerous, fierce opponents who regarded him as the Antichrist made flesh, representative of the moral decay already threatening Dutch manners and morality in the form of French Romanticism.

By mid-century the interest in Byron translations, and the Byron fashion itself, had subsided almost as quickly as it had arisen. During the entire remainder of the nineteenth century nothing but three translations of *Manfred* (or rather parts of that drama) saw the light of day. In 1907 *Cain* appeared in translation, and in 1986 a selection

The Taming of Byron in the Netherlands

made from Byron's letters and diary. Finally, at long last we now have *Childe Harold*, complete, unabridged, and indeed free of censorship of any kind.

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Translations of work by Byron have been the subject of two Dutch PhD theses. Both appeared in the 1920s; both are lavishly filled with examples.⁸ More recently, in a contribution to volume two of Richard Cardwell's *The Reception of Byron in Europe* (2004), Theo D'haen has sought to characterise how texts by Byron fared in Dutch translation.⁹ D'haen argues that Byron was adapted to the literary taste and morals predominant in the Netherlands of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ Only lyrical poems or fragments were translated in a literal sense. His satires were never translated fully: 'Obviously, this poetry not only fell far short of the moral and religious seriousness demanded by nineteenth-century Dutch poetry, it also did not lend itself to the kind of manipulation by way of translation that the Tales, *LT* [*Lament of Tasso*], etc., did permit'.¹¹ Only what could be morally incorporated was being translated, according to D'haen, and, even then, the Dutch version was likely to be more Christian and decorous than Byron's original. Means to attain this effect were additional verses, or the use of words with a slightly different meaning. D'haen also indicates that Byron was not admired as a freedom fighter. In his view, nineteenth-century Dutchmen had no need for that version of Byron, as the Netherlands had already attained independence upon its liberation from French oppression in 1814. True, in 1830 the Netherlands faced revolutionaries in its Southern part, who rebelled against the Dutch king and proclaimed Belgium's independence. This fight for liberty was felt in the Northern Netherlands to be illegal: 'The Dutch, then, had little sympathy for an author whose life and work went to justify revolts such as that of the Belgians'.¹² D'haen's third conclusion concerns the nature of Dutch Romanticism. He asserts that Byron's satirical comments on Romanticism could not find an echo in the Netherlands because Romanticism was late there in breaking through, so there was no context in which to place *Don Juan* or *Childe Harold*. There were instead other reasons for translating him, including 'His exoticism and gothicism [which] served to bring out the domestic, the properly Dutch, while at the same time touching it up with a modishly Romantic veneer'.¹³

In the present essay, I join D'haen in his general observation that Byron was tamed and adapted to Dutch morals at the time. I want, however, to deepen our understanding of this area by discussing three quite specific ways in which adaptation of Byron was made morally and aesthetically possible in the Netherlands in the first half of the nineteenth century: firstly through the deliberate avoidance of certain of Byron's works as subjects for translation; secondly by the addition of apologetic prefaces to the translations; and thirdly by the transformation of the source texts in ways that sometimes completely altered the original sense. Paying sustained attention to those prefaces, which served to make the Dutch reader familiar with Byron, is I would argue crucial and, something largely ignored by D'haen, makes it clear that the Dutch translators were sensitive to what was innovative in Byron's poetry and to his aesthetic mastery.

What these habits of translation also demonstrate, contrary to one of D'haen's central assertions, is that translators were sensitive to the idea of Byron as a freedom fighter, which was something highly valued, and placed in the Dutch tradition of the sixteenth-century revolt against Spain and the Netherlands' consequent liberation. D'haen places too much trust in those early dissertations, ignoring the awakening awareness of Byron's appeal as a libertarian that I described immediately following his death.¹⁴ I must further correct D'haen's assertion that in the Netherlands Romanticism did not break through until the 1880s. This view, long standard, has for quite some time been confronted with a still-rising stream of publications that point in the opposite direction.¹⁵ Certainly, the Romantic movement had no Dutch representatives to bring about a European breakthrough (which is true of just about all small nations in Europe), but it was neither later nor less widely-spread than elsewhere.¹⁶ The fact that in the 1820s to 1850s a number of Byron translations appeared, and that many authors wrote in his vein, is incompatible with D'haen's dating of Dutch Romanticism to the early 1880s, when not one Byron translation appeared.

In one other respect – relevant for Byron's reception – the Netherlands did, in the first half of the nineteenth century, deviate from other European countries. The outcome of the sixteenth/seventeenth-century struggle against Spanish oppression had been a Republic with a strong sense of independence. The fall of Napoleon turned the Netherlands into a kingdom for the first time – a United Kingdom of the (both Northern and Southern) Netherlands seemed to the diplomats of the Congress of Vienna a more stable construction than the Northern republic. Significantly, unlike other European countries, there was no need of a revolution to remove a monarchy. On the contrary, what was needed was reconciliation – after a quarter-century of incessant political and social turmoil it was time to build up a solid civil society, with God, the fatherland, and a royal dynasty as the triad to ensure a stable domestic front. This is the social order in which we ought to place the reception of Byron in the Netherlands.

Byron's rebellious and blasphemous verse failed to fit the Dutch literary market, but his spirit of freedom did appeal to the Dutch bourgeoisie. Even so the primary reasons for translating him were that he was the talk of the town and also England's premier poet. In translating him, Dutch authors sought to make both themselves and their audiences acquainted with his work.

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Some examples may now furnish us with an idea of how Byron was introduced to the Netherlands and how he was tamed or, more specifically, how he was made to fit with Christian virtues and morality. If a translator wished to make Byron palatable to Dutch readers, who were used to a variety of poetic genres but not to Byron's provocative, hedonistic poetry, such alterations could not be dispensed with. The public was accustomed to historical poems in which Dutch patrimony was celebrated in patriotic tones. It also valued abstract or even philosophical poems, on subjects like the origin of the world or the powers of poetry. In addition, so-called domestic poetry was quite popular – simple, melodious poems on scenes of everyday life like the birth of a child

or on the conduct of young ladies or on poverty unhindered by discontent. Virtue is at the center of this verse and evil finds itself invariably punished. Byron did not fit any of these well-known categories. His libertarian conjugal ethics and his anti-clericalism, once the first-wave of interest in his republicanism subsided, are not imitated by Dutch authors as the nineteenth century progresses, but are rather obscured and glossed over in translation. The Byron reproduced for the Netherlands becomes a typically Dutch, consensual Byron – just a bit revolutionary, just a bit anti-clerical, just a tiny bit frivolous, yet certainly not a dyed-in-the-wool oppositional fighter at the very margins of society. What we see is a Byron Dutchified through translation, one who obeys the national norms and values pertinent to the Netherlands.

Pragmatically, the less offensive a piece of work by Byron, the larger its chance of being selected for translation and of being read. It is interesting to note that *Don Juan*, that masterly satire upon the double-dealing rampant in English society, has never been translated into Dutch in its entirety and that *Manfred*, with its protagonist suffering from a sickly death agony, was translated but quite late: the first translation appearing in 1848, not in the Netherlands but in Flanders.¹⁷ Byron's sardonic *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* failed to catch attention in the Netherlands. All that was translated from his satires were lyrical fragments.¹⁸ When Byron's poem 'Darkness' was read to a Dutch society dedicated to poetry, a pamphlet appeared with fierce objections to the public reading of a poem in which the afterlife was apparently denied. Its author calls Byron 'a disastrous poet', who robs us of the grounds for consolation that the Bible conveys. Significantly, the pamphlet's subtitle runs 'in which it is being demonstrated in accordance with biblical doctrine that the sentiments expressed in the same ['Darkness'] dishonour God and tarnish the value of human beings'.¹⁹ Byron's uncontentious *Hebrew Melodies* and the melancholic poems for Thyrza were valued in the Netherlands. The most offensive of his works were refused a Dutch entrance ticket.

Prefaces

The first to add a preface to his translation was Isaac da Costa, a Jew who converted to a rigidly Calvinist brand of the Reformed faith.²⁰ In 1822 he published two volumes of poetry which contain, among other works, part of Byron's *Cain*. He explains that he has omitted from his translation a few 'wholly insignificant Verses dealing with a most improperly introduced point of debate between the two protagonists of the piece'. He further announces that he has added a Chorus of angels. In *Cain*, he continues, Byron reveals himself in 'all the strangeness of his personal character'. 'We find back here in all its contradictions the Nordic Nobleman, the ponderous Englishman, the sensitive Poet, the proud but also licentious Doubter, whose unfortunate mentality has known how to make use of the evil Spirit of our ungodly epoch.' Even so, this man's poetry overflows with 'imagination, warmth, and elevation'. Byron's 'ungodliness' provoked in da Costa a need to combat him with his own arms: those of poetry itself. He interposes between Byron's verses a Chorus of his own making, which in the manner of a classical tragedy gives voice to truth and virtue. In this way da Costa seeks to undercut

the sophistry adduced by the devil, which Byron seems to endorse in *Cain*.²¹ Da Costa also opens his collection with a poem of his own on the subject of Cain, in which he adopts a Christian viewpoint regarding Cain's fratricide.

Another apologetic preface soon follows, written by Jacob van Lennep, one of the most important early translators of Byron. Van Lennep's influence upon Dutch literature was vast.²² In following Walter Scott he introduced two genres: the historical epic and the historical novel. But before Scott grabbed him, van Lennep translated Byron. In 1826 he published *De Abydeensche verloofde* – a translation of Byron's *The Bride of Abydos*. But he did not do so without a certain diffidence. In his preface he addresses Byron's lack of proper morality, albeit not by distancing himself from it in the manner of da Costa. Byron is so often being spoken of nowadays, so van Lennep argues, that the time has come to enable Dutch readers to form their own opinion:

To list his works, or to praise them as deliciously poetic, or to advise against them as horrid and immoral, would be superfluous, just a reiteration of what a hundred critics and experts have said already. To expand on the poet's genius would also make little sense, as it has been with a view to giving the Dutch reader an idea thereof that I have carried this poem over into our own language.²³

In his preface, then, he alerts his readers to prepare themselves for another morality, but he does not promise to soften it. (Even so, that is precisely what he does, as we shall see.)

Van Lennep translated a few more plays by Byron, but not until his 1833 translation of *The Lament of Tasso* did another preface appear. This time he did not write it himself. The author was the English librarian B. Nayler, founder of the English Literary Society in Amsterdam, of which van Lennep was a member.²⁴ Byron is an incomparable poet, Nayler grants, yet there is no way to condone his blasphemies and his immoralities. Even so, to doubt of his poetry is the same as to 'call in doubt the *warmth* of the Sun, or question the *radiance* of the Stars'.²⁵ Nayler invites Byron's admirers to concede his many shortcomings, since his poetry transcends objection:

It is worse than useless, it is injurious to attempt defending numerous passages in his writings – for they are wholly indefensible; and his admirers would do well, were they to surrender his immoralities, and scepticisms, and blasphemies, to their fate: let his irreligion and his want of moral feeling be covered with their deserved opprobrium; they cannot be justified, and ought not to be palliated – for they are fixed, unequivocal, irrefragable errors!²⁶

Surely *The Lament of Tasso* is the sole piece of poetry written by Byron that is entirely immune to possible objections, so Nayler assures his readers: 'blasphemy, scepticism, and immorality, nauseousness, bad taste, and negligence, are alike strangers to this highly wrought classic composition.'²⁷

Vrouwe Bilderdijk, Isaac da Costa, and Jacob van Lennep, might be considered as belonging to the first wave of Dutch Byron translators. The second group was active in the 1830s, and its members succeed in popularising Byron.²⁸ Chiefly responsible for

The Taming of Byron in the Netherlands

the feat is Nicolaas Beets. In grammar school he had met an English boy who made him acquainted with English language and letters. As a youth Beets read Ossian, Byron, Sterne, and Scott. In 1831, at the tender age of nineteen, he published in a journal translations of poems by so-called Ossian and a year later a paean to Scott. He spent most of his freshman year translating Byron. His father advised him against publishing his translation under his own name, as appears from Beets's diary: 'I received a letter from home which made it clear to me that my father would much desire me to publish my *Byroniana* without my name being mentioned. I had not yet arrived at a definite decision on this point. Now I conform myself entirely to his wishes.'²⁹ Beets was the leading figure in a circle of young poets with a great interest in Byron, Walter Scott and Victor Hugo. Most were students at Leyden, which houses the oldest university in the country: the circle that gathered around Beets is customarily known as the Leyden Romantic Movement.³⁰

In 1834 Beets's first Byron translation appeared, anonymously, yet accompanied by an apology. Beets emphasises in Byron the drama and disregard for the propriety of others:

No one deserved more to be taken notice of by the world than the unfortunate man who, endowed with rare genius, had to struggle forever with his own heart and with circumstance, and who might be called an enigmatic composite of good and evil qualities [...] His lack of care with feminine reputation gave much offense to the delicate and orderly portion of society, [...] his sense of independence, his indifference toward public opinion, his eccentric mind did not deign to take for his example the bloodless sons of prudence, delicacy, and regularity. Rather than adopting a double-hearted pose of morality he preferred to be known as a declared *libertine*.³¹

To Beets this suffices by way of justifying his publication.

Beets aimed to have his next collection of Byron translations appear with the same publisher, but now he met with nothing but vacillation. In his diary Beets noted: 'He does not dare return my *Byron Translations*, which I have offered him, but he does not dare print them, either. He does not refuse, but prefers to keep things in drag.'³² A few months later the book appears with another publisher. The pieces are preceded by a dedication in the guise of a letter to the English friend, John Ingram Lockart, who first acquainted him with Byron. Together they read the 'sublime and sentimental Stanzas on Thyrsa'. This opened to him 'a new and beautiful world of Literature'. By way of a thank-you Beets offered his translation of some of 'the finest Poems our noble Bard ever wrote'.³³ No longer an apology, but rather an effort to sensitise his audience to Byron by means of a friendly dedication and an emphasis upon the fine, novel aspects of English literature.

In 1837 Beets published his final round of Byron translations, entitled *Parisina*.³⁴ This included a translation of the *Hebrew Melodies*, Byron's accessibly written, biblical poems. Such innocence could appear risk-free under Beets's own name. And it appears from a letter to a friend that at this point he has made a decisive move in distancing himself from the 'composite' Byron 'of good and evil qualities' that he had celebrated

Marita Mathijsen

three years earlier: 'so by the end of the year the *Parisina* etc. will appear, and with these I close the Byronian phase of my life. I do not wish to be known as a Byronian.'³⁵ Indeed, soon afterwards, having taken his final exams for the priesthood, Beets severs his association with Byron and starts his period of 'self-debunking' in 1840 with an essay titled 'Black Times'. Here he formally parts with Byron, and with Romanticism as such. The essay contains a conversation between an elderly gentleman and an 'I' persona who we may safely take for Beets himself. The gentleman warns his companion against certain aspects of Byron:

If I call Byron's works damaging, once again I am not thinking so much of the unbelief and the fornication that run through it; nor of the *Don Juan* and its pleasant immorality; indeed, of nothing of the kind; but only of that element in his works (even in that portion of it that every woman might read without blushing) which has infected both you and me for a while. I mean the gloominess, dejection, despair, that exert such an attraction upon certain years of our lives.³⁶

The elder man understands that in every youngster's life there is a period susceptible to melancholia, and he reads to the youth his own early translations of Byron's verse, the entire collection of which he now disposes of as inauthentic, not properly sensed or experienced. He has overcome the silliness of his early days, which is the lesson impressed upon the young poet: Byron is a poet with an immature brain, who may well ruin adolescent lives with poetry that makes misanthropy attractive.

In 1848 Beets reiterates his position. He revises his Byron translations, and has them preceded by a lengthy prologue in which he seeks to account for Byron's uniqueness by means of an appeal to the times in which he lived – a mixture of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the onset of Romanticism. As a human being and as a poet Byron might have ascended higher if only he had been willing to accept from God what he sought for in himself and in humankind. 'He knew, analyzed, and sensed down to the deepest depths solely "the worm, the canker, and the grief" of all things; but his soul might have known the full richness of all human affect and experience, and the strings of his monotonous harp would have multiplied to infinity'.³⁷ Meantime however the Dutch interest in Byron was already diminishing at a ready pace, and apologies were no longer in demand.

Passages softened in translation

If the dominant trend of Dutch translators in the nineteenth century was towards removing offensive passages from Byron's verse and softening the content then this was not the case with his first translator, Lady Bilderdijk, a native Dutch speaker, who translated the song of Childe Harold on leaving his fatherland (I, 13). In her rendition she emphasises rather than softens Childe Harold's misanthropy.³⁸ In her hands, Childe Harold is even more abandoned, and revels in his *Weltschmerz* even more than in the original.³⁹ But Lady Bilderdijk was the exception which proves the rule. She had made her acquaintance with Byron's work through her husband's friend, the poet Isaac da

The Taming of Byron in the Netherlands

Costa, who lent the couple novels by Walter Scott and poetry by Lord Byron. Even so he did not find the latter suitable reading for Lady Bilderdijk, as his letter of 15 November 1822 to Willem Bilderdijk makes clear:

Enclosed you receive two more novels by Walter Scott, and also the *Don Juan* by Lord Byron. The former are for you both, the latter for you alone. For it is so immoral that I would be ashamed to mail it to you, were it not an important piece for acquainting oneself with the poet's soul and character. In that work he has displayed himself just as he is, in all his brilliancy and also in all his perversion.⁴⁰

In that year, 1822, da Costa translated part of Byron's play *Cain*. Undoubtedly his intentions were to redress Byron's perceived irreligion. Byron's *Cain* opens with Cain refusing to participate in his family's prayer of thanksgiving to God and Cain tells his father that he has nothing to thank God for, because he is fated to die. As Cain explains in an early soliloquy, he regards his mortality as an unjust punishment for Adam and Eve's transgression in Paradise. It is a punishment which, of all people, hits *him* hardest – a man who has nothing to do with the crimes committed by his parents. When Lucifer enters, he seeks to fuel Cain's hatred for God, and also points out to him that the devil is immortal and that Cain may acquire immortality as well by allying himself with the devils.

Da Costa undermines the very conception of the play by interposing between Lucifer's and Cain's exchanges a choir of angels entirely absent from the original, that shows itself upset by Lucifer's and Cain's distortions. Here is an example, taken from the first scene of the first act, where Cain doubts God's goodness. All Cain's questions about why God put his parents to the test in Paradise receive one and only one response:

CAIN [*solus*] [...] They have but
One answer to all questions, 'twas *his* will,
And *he* is good.' How know I that? Because
He is all-powerful must all-good, too, follow?
I judge but by the fruits – and they are bitter –
Which I must feed on for a fault not mine. (I, i, 74–9)

Rendered back from Dutch into English, this is what da Costa makes of the passage:

I receive but one answer: HE WANTED IT! HE IS POWERFUL!
AND GOOD! – Indeed, He does have power! We sense it forcefully!
But Good! That Goodness is as bitter as my blood
And destiny, for guilt not committed do I have to atone for!

The Chorus's interposed comments follow at once, aiming to contain and diminish Cain's blasphemy:

Heavens, do you hear? Earth, do you hear the cosmic vertigo?
Do you hear the cry for rebellion, revenge, damnation,
Of God's image in its fall?⁴¹

Marita Mathijsen

And the Chorus goes on to assert that, even though blasphemy does belong to the world as God has created it, this will not lead to the destruction of the universe. On the contrary, it contributes to God's glory. Evidently, da Costa attributes Cain's bitterness to his character, as opposed to Byron, who makes Cain respond bitterly to an undeserved punishment. The same policing function of the Chorus can be found following Lucifer's words to the effect that he and his ilk seek to be Gods themselves and refuse to kneel before a tyrannical Creator. Here the Chorus's rejoinder is as follows:

Oh senseless Lucifer, be silent! silent! each curse you uttered
Doubles the distance from salvation thus forsaken!
How dare you seek in humanity's or Angeldom's language
A weapon against God? Blasphemer! Subside!⁴²

Da Costa clearly counters the spirit of Byron's play, parrying each offense against the Deity with Christian views and values.

No other Dutch translator went as far as da Costa, yet van Lennep and Beets, too, paint Byron in softer hues than really represent him. If we first take a look at Jacob van Lennep's renditions, we find an interesting realignment of priorities in *The Bride of Abydos*, when Selim conducts his oriental beloved Zuleika to a cave where she has been before. Byron's narrator says of the cave that she reposed there:

Where oft her lute she wont to tune,
And oft her Koran conned apart;
And oft in youthful reverie
She dream'd what Paradise might be –
Where woman's parted soul shall go
Her Prophet had disdain'd to show. (*Bride*, II, 102–7)

Van Lennep avoids referring to the Koran, and turns Byron's rather Arcadian paradise into a specifically Christian, celestial paradise:

't was here that Zulika, from the sun's rays' fire
Oft sought cool shadow, chasing her soul's vexations
With poetry and dance and sweet strings' play.
Many times, entranced in chimeras,
She made ascend her thought to heavenly paradise.
Never has proud Mohamed explained to us
What fate awaits a woman's soul in the hereafter.⁴³

Something else again is going on in van Lennep's translation of *Beppo*. Here Byron sets out to tell us that in all Catholic nations adultery is plainly enjoyed. On Ash Wednesday Catholics confess, and then their sins are forgiven. Van Lennep says the same, only he applies this not to Catholics everywhere, but solely to the 'frisky Italians.'⁴⁴ Although hardly foreign to the habit himself, he apparently prefers not to plant a seed in the soul of his Catholic fellow-Dutchmen. Equally, when the narrator speaks of Venetian gondolas where erotic liaisons are undertaken (*Beppo*, 19–20), Byron's allusions to sexual pleasure are far more powerfully present than in Dutch

The Taming of Byron in the Netherlands

translation.⁴⁵ Byron writes that the gondolas contain ‘a deal of fun’ (20) of a sexual nature. This is a far more sensual image than the ‘playful joking’ that van Lennep uses to neutralise the passage.

From the Venetian carnival, the scene in *Beppo* changes to Turkey, which provides van Lennep with an opportunity to de-eroticise the Turkish harem. Van Lennep makes it appear as if the little women spend their time ‘[...] on nursing, on making toilet, / On doing nothing, be it in bath or bed’.⁴⁶ Here are the actions as Byron’s narrator describes them:

Their days are either past in doing nothing,
Or bathing, nursing, making love, and clothing. (71)

Even so, generally speaking van Lennep’s alterations are not very incisive or damaging to sense. With Nicolaas Beets it is definitely otherwise, mostly so in the revised versions of his early translations, prepared once he had become a vicar. Take for instance the following fragment from *Don Juan*. Julia writes a parting letter, in which she compares superficial masculine love with the profound love of which women are capable. The original has:

“You will proceed in beauty, and in pride,
Beloved and loving many; all is o’er
For me on Earth, except some years to hide
My shame and sorrow deep in my heart’s Core. (*DJ*, I, 196)

In rendering Beets’s Dutch translation back into English, I stick as closely as possible to the original, so as to bring out exactly how the sense is transformed:

You will proceed in pleasure, and in pride,
Beloved and loving many; for me no joy is left;
What remains is just a few years, for me to do penance
With shame for my crimes in the eye of God.⁴⁷

According to Beets, then, Julia’s profligate love has made her ashamed toward God, whereas with Byron’s Julia, shame resides in herself. In such a moment, Beets’s agenda in translating Byron is quite clearly to make him more Christian than he is. Quite the same might be said of his translation of *Parisina*, a story about adulterous love. While Byron describes love without passing moral judgement, Beets speaks of guilty love and of remorse long enduring.⁴⁸ In *Mazzeppa* naughty gaities of the loving couple are described as a sinful giving-in to morbid desires.⁴⁹ In a fragment from *Childe Harold*, Beets presents the ocean as a manifestation of God Himself, whereas Byron refers to it in the more romantically determined, philosophical terms of an impersonal Infinity. The first version here is my rendering in English of Beets:

Sea! Giant mirror!, in which God Almighty
Mirrors Himself, in tempests! in all time,
Calm or convulsed – in breeze, or gale, or storm,
Icing the pole, or in the torrid clime

Marita Mathijsen

Dark-heaving; – boundless, endless, and sublime;
Hiding in your depths the multifarious
Race of fierce monsters;
From the hour that God created you,
The same, unaltered; image of the One,
Eternal and Inscrutable – foam hither!¹⁰

Byron's own verses run as follows:

Thou glorious mirror, where the Almighty's form
Glasses itself in tempests; in all time,
Calm or convuls'd – in breeze, or gale, or storm,
Icing the pole, or in the torrid clime
Dark-heaving – boundless, endless, and sublime –
The image of Eternity – the throne
Of the Invisible; even from out thy slime
The monsters of the deep are made; each zone
Obeys thee; thou goest forth, dread, fathomless, alone. (*CHP*, IV, 183)

In all his translations Beets opts for a moderate, solidly Protestant Byron. It is not the rebellious, stunning Byron he renders, but the plaintive, a little tender-hearted, pensive, sensitive Byron. That is how, for instance, he could translate the *Hebrew Melodies* in their entirety but of *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan* only certain fragments.

Conclusion

The conclusion to my account almost imposes itself. Byron caught on in the Netherlands, notably around 1830–1850; he was translated and emulated, even imitated. His exoticism, his poignant descriptions of nature and his melancholy fitted in seamlessly with a sensibility then present. His experiments with form and his urge for liberty turned him into an example. But what the Dutch reader got to see of all this was a lion in a cage. His translators use prefaces to point out his aesthetic qualities and his innovative forms, but also to apologise for marketing so controversial a poet. In so doing they compare Byron's fight for freedom with the Dutch counterpart in the sixteenth century, when the Netherlands overthrew Spanish oppression. His blasphemies remained untranslated for the largest part, or they were soft-pedaled or even (in da Costa's extreme case) flagrantly undercut. The textual and sexual license that Byron took was reduced to acceptable proportions. All this was rewritten so as 'to fit reigning Dutch literary conventions in matters of morals and religion'.¹¹ The ferocious beast had, for the moment, been tamed.

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The Taming of Byron in the Netherlands

- 1 Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, trans. Ike Cialona (Amsterdam: Athenaeum, 2013).
- 2 ‘Méprisant des tyrans et combattant un maître, / Grecs, vous redevenez d’intrépides soldats, / Et la liberté fait renaître / Les enfans [sic] de Léonidas’. *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen*, 2 vols (1825), vol. 2 Mengelwerk, p. 646 (pp. 646–7). This and the subsequent English translations of prefaces, letters and poems originally in Dutch are, throughout this essay, my own free translations.
- 3 A. van der Hoop Jr., ‘Opwekking aan Nederland, ten behoeve der Grieken, die voor hunne onafhankelijkheid strijden’, *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen*, 2 vols (1826), vol. 2 Mengelwerk, pp. 34–8.
- 4 C. P. E. Robidé van der Aa, *De dood van Lord Byron* (Uitgegeven ten voordeele der Grieken, Leeuwarden: Suringar, 1827).
- 5 Anon., *Karakterschets van Lord Byron als mensch en als dichter* (Delft: Allart, 1825).
- 6 ‘Albion, wat ge ook voor zwarts van de jeugd uws zangers mogt boeken, Lang reeds heeft Hellas die blaân uit uw rollen gescheurd’. (B. H. Lulofs, ‘Lord Byron’, *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen*, 2 vols [1826], vol. 2 Mengelwerk, p. 748.)
- 7 Jan Lokin discusses how Byron was adapted in the Netherlands in this way, especially by Nicolaas Beets. See J. H. A. Lokin, ‘Byron’s Influence on Dutch Literature’, *The Byron Journal*, 11 (1983), pp. 22–9.
- 8 See: Tjeerd Popma, *Byron en het Byronisme in de Nederlandsche letterkunde* (Amsterdam: H. J. Paris, 1928); Ulfert Schults, *Het Byronianisme in Nederland* (Utrecht: J. L. Beijers, 1929).
- 9 Theo D’haen, “‘A Splenetic Englishman’: The Dutch Byron”, in Richard A. Cardwell (ed.), *The Reception of Byron in Europe*, 2 vols (London and New York: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), vol. 2, pp. 269–82. Both the conclusions and the content of that essay correspond almost fully to D’haen’s earlier treatments of the subject. See: D’haen, ‘The Dutch Byron: Byron in Dutch Translation’, in C. C. Barfout and Theo D’haen (eds), *Centennial Hauntings* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990), pp. 233–51; D’haen, ‘De Nederlandse “Byron”’, *Literatuur*, 9 (1992), pp. 88–96. D’haen’s treatment is similar to that of Lokin, who earlier argued that Dutch literature was lacking in sympathy for that which was melancholy and sarcastic in Byron (see ‘Byron’s Influence on Dutch Literature’).
- 10 D’haen does not give examples of translations in the Southern Netherlands, i.e. Flanders or present-day Belgium. As far as we know at present, just one collection has appeared there, which contains a translation of *Manfred* published in 1848. Even so, quite a few poems appeared in literary journals in the second half of the nineteenth century, some of which were translated by K. Ledeganck. These are mentioned by Schults in *Het Byronianisme in Nederland*, pp. 148–53.
- 11 D’haen, “‘A Splenetic Englishman’”, p. 280.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 281.
- 13 D’haen, ‘The Dutch Byron’, p. 24.
- 14 D’haen’s argument in “‘A Splenetic Englishman’” (p. 280), corresponds neatly to what Popma wrote in 1928: ‘Incidentally, Byron as a freedom-loving poet and revolutionary aristocrat never had any influence in our country’ (*Byron en het Byronisme in de Nederlandsche letterkunde*, p. 166).
- 15 See: Marita Mathijssen, *Nederlandse literatuur in de Romantiek* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2004); Petrus van Zonneveld, *De Romantische Club. Leidse student-auteurs 1830–1840* (Leiden: Athenae Batavae, 1993); Lotte Jensen, *De verheerlijking van het verleden. Helden, literatuur en natievorming in de negentiende eeuw* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2008); Rick Honings, *Geleerdheids zetel, Hollands roem! Het literaire leven in Leiden 1760–1860* (Leiden: Primavera Pers, 2011).
- 16 Just like D’haen, Nicholas A. Rupke renders an outdated view of Dutch Romanticism in ‘Romanticism in The Netherlands’, in Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (eds), *Romanticism in National Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 191–216.
- 17 Lord Byron, *Manfred*, trans. J. F. Brouwenaar (Antwerpen: J. E. Buschman, 1848).
- 18 For discussion of these translations see D’haen, ‘The Dutch Byron’, p. 238.
- 19 J. van Eyk, *Aanmerkingen op een, onlangs uit het Engelsch vertaald, dichtstuk getiteld: De Duisternis [...]* (Gravenhage: C. van Greeven, 1825), n. p. This translation is not listed by Schults.
- 20 For more information about da Costa, see Rupke, ‘Romanticism in the Netherlands’, pp. 202–5.
- 21 Isaac da Costa, *Poëzy*, 2 vols (Leyden: L. Herdingh & Zoon, 1822), vol. 2, n. p.
- 22 For a recent survey of Dutch literature in the nineteenth century, see Willem van den Berg and Piet Couttenier, *Alles is taal geworden. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1800–1900* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2009).

Marita Mathijssen

- 23 J. van Lennep, *De Abydeensche verloofde. Uit het Engelsch van Lord Byron* (Amsterdam: P. Meijer Warnars, 1826), n. p.
- 24 For information on Nayler see: C. W. Schoneveld, 'Pioneering in the Propagation of English Letters: B. S. Nayler's Teaching Career in Holland, 1820–1848', in *Miscellanea Anglo-Belgica* (Leiden: Werkgroep Engels-Nederlandse betrekkingen/Sir Thomas Browne Institute, 1987), pp. 40–64; Annemieke Meijer and Diederik van Werven, "'Maar wie, Heeren, leest er Engelsch'", in Gert-Jan Johannes, José de Kruif and Jeroen Salman (eds), *Een groot verleden voor de boeg* (Leiden: Primavera, 2004), pp. 63–84.
- 25 Lord Byron, *The Lament of Tasso; supposed to have been written in the dungeon of the Lunatic Hospital at Ferrara. Tassoos Weeklacht; in den kerker van het krankzinnigen-huis te Ferrara*, trans. J. van Lennep (Amsterdam: Nayler & Co, 1833), pp. 5–6. In this edition the English text and the translation are juxtaposed. Nayler's preface is in English.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 28 See D'haen, "'A Splenetic Englishman'". For the later reception of Byron see Walter Verschuieren, "'A Most Unhappy and Unfortunate Attribute": Conrad Busken Huets leetuur van Byron's *Don Juan*", in Martine de Clercq, Tom Toremans and Walter Verschuieren (eds), *Textual Mobility and Cultural Transmission. Tekstmobiliteit en Culturele Overdracht* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2006), pp. 53–68.
- 29 Nicolaas Beets, *Het dagboek van de student Nicolaas Beets 1833–1836*, ed. Peter van Zonneveld (Gravenhage: Nederlands Letterkundig Museum en Documentatiecentrum, 1983), p. 48.
- 30 See Rick Honings, *Geleerdheids zetel, Hollands roem!*, pp. 342–7.
- 31 Nicolaas Beets, *Verzameling van voortbrengselen van uitheemsche vernuften*, 4 vols (Amsterdam: Westerman & Zoon, 1834), vol. 1.3, pp. 14–15.
- 32 Beets, *Het dagboek van de student Nicolaas Beets 1833–1836*, p. 125.
- 33 Beets, *Gedichten van Lord Byron* (Haarlem: Erven F. Bohn, 1835), pp. v–vi.
- 34 Beets (trans.), *Parisina en andere gedichten van Lord Byron* (Haarlem: Erven F. Bohn, 1837).
- 35 Beets, *Het dagboek van de student Nicolaas Beets 1833–1836*, p. 231.
- 36 Hildebrand [Nicolaas Beets], *Proza en poëzy. Verzameling van verspreide opstellen en verzen* (Haarlem: Erven F. Bohn, 1840), p. 74. Hildebrand was the pseudonym of Beets. He did not use it for his Byron translations.
- 37 Beets, *Navolgingen van Lord Byron* (Haarlem: Erven F. Bohn, 1848), pp. xxiii–xxiv.
- 38 Katharina Wilhelmina Bilderdijk, *De dichtwerken van Vrouwe*, 2 vols (Haarlem: A. C. Kruseman, 1858–1860), vol. 2, p. 162. Beets also translated this poem, without any deviation from the original (Beets, *Gedichten* [Leiden: A. W. Sijthoff, n.d.], vol. 1, p. 147).
- 39 Katharina Wilhelmina Bilderdijk, *De dichtwerken*, vol. 2, pp. 162–6. This was published in 1819 in *Nieuwe Dichtschakering*, a collection of poems by Willem Bilderdijk. Popma mentions as the first translation the one by J. van Lennep, *Marino Faliero*, which dates from 1822, the same year as *Cain* by da Costa.
- 40 Hs E 4–7 Bilderdijk Museum (with thanks to Rinus van Hattum).
- 41 Da Costa, *Poëzy*, pp. 74–5.
- 42 Da Costa, *Poëzy*, p. 85.
- 43 van Lennep, *De Abydeensche verloofde*, pp. 27–8.
- 44 van Lennep, *Vertalingen en navolgingen in poëzy* (Amsterdam: P. Meijer Warnars, 1834), p. 122.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 149.
- 47 Beets, *Gedichten*, vol. 1, pp. 132–3.
- 48 See D'haen, 'The Dutch Byron', p. 240. Popma also points this out, p. 313.
- 49 Schults, p. 164.
- 50 Beets, *Gedichten van Lord Byron*, vol. 1, p. 136.
- 51 D'haen, 'The Dutch Byron', p. 247.