



John Crowley

Lord Byron's Novel
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What were the challenges — and pleasures — of writing a novel within a novel?

Chinese boxes go into one another in only one way; the fun of writing a novel composed of interrelated parts is that they don't need to "nest" — one can be on the outside, but so can another. There's an outside-most box in time, but not as the reader reads. I hope readers enjoy discovering the multiple connections that obtain between the parts — I hope that some are unexpected and revealing — they were certainly enjoyable for *me* to discover as I wrote.

To what extent did you try to imitate Byron's prose style in writing *The Evening Land*?

I tried very hard. I love reading Byron's prose, in his letters and journals, and in the witty and informative notes to his longer poems; I tried to capture the rapid, ironic way he wrote, the sense of giving with one hand and taking back with the other. On the other hand I didn't think Byron would write a novel the way he writes a letter, so I tried to imagine the more dramatic or literary way he might have written prose narrative. Of course everyone has his or her own Byron: one reviewer felt that not a paragraph sounded a bit like Byron (which is odd, since there are lines and paragraphs lifted from his writings on almost every page).

The epistolary novel has a long and storied tradition in English literature. What do you think are the literary possibilities for email to modify and extend this tradition?

I don't know — an email novel has to almost combine the qualities of talk and writing, since they are usually written so quickly and thoughtlessly, and replied to so instantly. Writing the letters in an epistolary novel always meant distinguishing among a number of correspondents by their style — an email novel has to be thought of almost as creating character through dialogue. On the other hand I think it might be boring to read a whole novel made of email only — all those abbreviations and slovenly shortcuts — it would take a master to make it come alive. How about a novel all in Text Messaging? But one advantage would be immediacy — older epistolary novels could only proceed when a character had space and leisure to write a letter; now you can write instantly.

In what ways do you feel Byron's life and work are relevant to readers today?

One thing I think can interest and fascinate readers today even if they haven't read a lot of Byron's work is his status as a celebrity. There really is no one like him previously in English literature. He not only earned fame by his writings, he earned it by what his time would never (but we always) call his life-style — the trouble he got in, the rumors of bad behavior, his marriage falling apart, money wasted, early death. And he was very conscious of being famous: he had the modern way of both holding his fans and fame in contempt, and building his own persona on them. What's of further interest to me is how Byron enjoyed and employed what we would call pop culture: Before his time there was high culture, erudite writers conscious of a literary and artistic tradition, and there was low culture, folk-tales, folk-songs and ballads, festivals, etc. With Byron's time comes in a middle-class culture that's not high: popular plays, horror and sensation novels, sentimental dramas and narrative poems for ordinary readers. Byron loved all that stuff and refers to it constantly in his writing, as a modern writer would refer to rock songs or movies or ads. And he was part of that pop culture himself, and knew it.

As far as his works go, anyone who conceives of Byron as a "romantic" writer — which he was for a while — should read some of *Don Juan*. It will be a delightful surprise.

Your previous novel, *The Translator*, was about an exiled Soviet poet. What draws you to write about literary texts and poets in particular?

It came as a surprise to me when — some time after I'd begun on *The Evening Land* — I realized I was now writing a second novel about a poet. That's how different the two enterprises seemed to me. Not only that — another novel about a poet and his nearly-lost and retrieved works. Still they seem to me to be entirely different. I think it may be an occupational hazard for a writer to write about writers (once upon a time the *New Yorker* refused to run such stories). But I think that any writer would be interested in the fragility of written things, how easily they can be lost, and yet how tenacious and powerful they are — how they seem to fight to survive, and do so by touching hearts, one at a time.