

## BOOK REVIEW

**AGUSTÍN COLETES  
BLANCO, ED. TR.  
*LORD BYRON. CARTAS Y  
POESÍAS  
MEDITERRÁNEAS*  
OVIEDO: KRK, 2010**

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Those of us who work on British Romantic literature in the Spanish Academia are more than grateful when a colleague's work on the subject comes to light. This is the case with Agustín Coletes Blanco's translation of Byron's correspondence, minor poems and *varia*, written during his peculiar Grand Tour through Portugal, Spain, Malta, Albania, Greece, Turkey and the Troad between June 1809 and July 1811. It is certainly a 'Mediterranean' version of the conventional Grand Tour. The Napoleonic invasion of many territories of central Europe forced Byron to turn towards the East across the Mediterranean. This shift allowed the British poet to visit some of the European locations upon which the Romantic imaginary fed widely, i.e., Southern Spain and the Eastern Mediterranean, that resulted seminal for the construct we commonly refer to as 'Orientalism' after Edward Said's insightful work. Of course, there stand out in this voyage too the great sites of Ancient Greece, a subject of no minor importance for the British Romantics as their works attest.

The relevance of this volume lies not only in the popularity of its subject but in its novelty and in the brilliant editorial work carried out by Agustín Coletes. As to the novelty, it must be noted that not only are we presented with the first translation into Spanish of these writings but also with their first joint edition ever issued in any language. Thus, Spanish readers are the first to get access to the personal and imaginary mapping of Byron's Mediterranean experience through the chronological reading of his personal and minor creative outpourings that this volume gathers. All critics have highlighted the significance of Byron's experience in this journey from both a personal and a

literary perspective. It offers significant clues for an understanding of his two great masterpieces of hero travellers, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan*. The former began to be composed during this journey, and its biographical projection is notoriously made conspicuous since numberless details of the author's 'Mediterranean' experience found in the letters can be traced in it. The latter becomes, according to many critics, a mature view of this tour and a literary comment on the earlier work. Besides, as critics have also noted, the content and tone of his occasional poetry foregrounds that of his later works.

Byron's worldwide popularity is partly owed to his own self-created myth as a *poète maudite*. His embodiment of the Romantic outcast has been recreated by a ceaseless flow of academic work approaching the subject from this perspective, and fuelled by a significant production of fictionalised writings – and cinema productions. But Byron was also the British poet that modelled European Romanticism to a large extent. As is well known, Spain was no exception to this. The most successful Spanish poet of the period, José de Espronceda, became a kind of Spanish version of the British poet (Cardwell 2004). Byron's success in Spain since it made its way into the country in the 1830s has no parallel in any other British Romantic author. Proof of it is the continuous publications of translations, of his most famous works. Byron's poetry is widely represented in Spanish, from his Iberian best-seller, *The Corsair*, to his masterpiece, *Don Juan*, including an extensive list of relevant works such as *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *Manfred*, *Lara*, *Mazeppa*, *Cain*, *Sardanapalus*, *The Siege of Corinth*, *The Bride of Abydos*, and some of his lyric poems. However, his prose has not had such a good fortune. It is true that Byron wrote his literary works in verse, prose being found mostly in his personal writings, i.e., letters and diaries. We have translations of the diaries into Spanish; the most recent and comprehensive one, translated by Lorenzo Luengo, appeared in 2008. Although Byron's letters and diaries in the standard collected edition by Leslie A. Marchand amount to 13 volumes (Marchand 1973-1994), the only Spanish version of the correspondence extant so far has been Eduardo Mendoza's translation of the letters written during his residence in Venice (1816-1819), based on Jaime Gil de Biedma's selection (Mendoza and Biedma 1999). Thus, the contribution of Agustín Coletes is of the utmost relevance for a widening of the canon of Byron in Spanish, in a first-rank academic work.

Agustín Coletes has collected and translated a total of 92 letters, 28 poems and 7 minor writings. The criterion for their edition has been a chronological one. All the pieces, independently of their nature, appear according to their dating. Prose and poetry, the personal, the literary, and the occasional interspersed, thus forming a unit of a new nature, in which Byron's diverse

'masques' (Saglia 2009) as traveller, friend, son, libertine, aristocrat, lover, man and poet altogether, are juxtaposed at the same time that each of them sheds light on the others. This ordering has been a very sensible choice that makes of this volume a unique edition for its biographical and literary value for both scholars and non academic readers alike. Besides, the reader is guided by a careful indication of the nature of each piece with the initials in Spanish ('C' [Carta] 'P' [Poema] and 'v' [*Varia*]) and the corresponding consecutive numbering. Furthermore, in one of the final Indexes the information for each text is completed by adding either the name of the correspondents or the title / first lines of the poems, the dating, the English source, and the page in the volume. The author's fine editorial work adds to this Index another four, respectively including names, places, subjects, and illustrations. The sources used have been the standard editions of Byron's correspondence (Marchand 1972-1974), of the poetical works edited by Jerome McGann (Byron 1980-1993), and of the prose works by Andrew Nicholson (Byron 1991), to which Agustín Coletes scrupulously refers in the Introduction. The choice of sources is irreproachable, though perhaps a reference to Peter Cochran's online edition of Byron's works,<sup>133</sup> with its continuous updating might also have been useful to the reader.

The information that Byron's texts thus arranged offers is expanded and explained by a thoroughly informed and informative Introduction that becomes a biography, literary and personal; a rigorous contextualization of the historical and cultural background; and an invaluable bibliographic and documentary guide on all the aforesaid. Notwithstanding all the information provided in this section, as Agustín Coletes asserts in an unnecessary apologetic manner, footnotes are required for an understanding of the vast and diverse number of references appearing in Byron's texts. These range from the personal to the historical, let alone the literary, where the display of the British poet's erudition is carefully annotated. The explanations are frequently accompanied by reference to relevant bibliography wisely selected. This rigorous philological work is enlivened by a total of thirty four illustrations corresponding to portraits of the writer and some of his correspondents, contemporary engravings –some by William Finden– of the places visited, personalities met, and of the most diverse contemporary scenes and figures, illustrations or first pages of Byron's works included. As can be seen, no effort has been spared for a book that a wide scope of readers will enjoy.

No less satisfactory is the translation itself. Agustín Coletes' beautiful prose in the Introduction gives a foretaste of what his rich vocabulary and well balanced syntactical periods can offer in the translation of Byron's letters.

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<sup>133</sup> <http://petercochran.wordpress.com>.

Nevertheless, as a good translation requires, it is Byron's, not Coletes' style that we read here. Byron's great variety of registers in the letters, depending on the correspondent he is addressing, is wonderfully rendered into Spanish. A very risky decision cannot be passed over, i.e., to reproduce Byron's peculiar, apparently chaotic use of case letters and punctuation. Agustín Coletes states in the Introduction that he has intended not to domesticate the British writer in this controversial issue. Byron's editors since John Murray's times have done it. Dashes have been omitted as much as possible, case letters and punctuation have been regularised according to nineteenth-century norms. But recent editors find fault with this practice, particularly in the case of the letters, but also in the poetry, as Peter Cochran convincingly argues in his online edition of Byron's works. Byron's punctuation was wrong quite often but shades of meaning are lost if regularisation is applied. He knew the norm, so deviations from it should be respected. Agustín Coletes deviates from the Spanish norm in his rendering of Byron, as he says, to make us feel as close to Byron as possible; the liveliness of Byron's prose style is thus successfully transmitted to the Spanish reader. The criterion for the poetry has been to make it sound poetic and Byronic in Spanish, that is, to produce the highest degree of acceptability within the highest respect to adequacy, to use Gideon's Toury (1980) well-known distinction. This decision means a superadded effort in the hobby-horse of translation. Agustín Coletes has achieved his target skilfully, even using rhyme in various instances. Thus, the variety of Byron's poetic styles that anticipate the versatility of his masterpieces can be read in Spanish. There is Byron the lyric, the burlesque, the nonchalant, and earnest, appropriating the British eighteenth-century tradition that Agustín Coletes faithfully reproduces.

I can only conclude by congratulating and thanking Agustín Coletes for his sound philological work in which texts and paratexts make of this volume not another translation of Byron into Spanish but a scholarly contribution on the subject and an enjoyable reading where the 'real' Byron comes alive with an unparalleled force.

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