

"It (autobiography) may contain lots of phantasms and dreams, but these deviations from reality remain rooted in a single subject whose identity is defined by the uncontested readability of his proper name....." Paul de Man, *Autobiography as Defacement* (1979)

"There are no words in Romani proper for 'to write' or 'to read.' Gypsies borrow from other languages to describe these activities." Isabel Fonseca, *Bury me Standing* (1995)

## Murky Doings in Mumper's Dingle:

George Borrow's *Lavengro* as a portrait of the artist (Part Two)

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(This essay is a continuation of a piece on *Lavengro* which was first published in the *Review of English Literature* at Kyoto Women's University, Japan, and will form part of a full-length critical study of Borrow to be published in the U.S.A. The author is a member of the George Borrow Society of Great Britain and Senior Research Fellow in the University of East Anglia, Norwich, U.K.)

The astonishing acts of dedoublement<sup>1</sup>, or mirror effects, which I have spoken of already in relation to the narratives of *Lavengro*, splitting and reduplicating a succession of "real" and "imaginary" elements as they do, are nowhere more pronounced than in Chapter 66, where George realizes that the amiable and literate stranger who invites him to stay the night is a writer<sup>2</sup>. Sleeping "under the roof of an author" (for "author" read "other"), George has a dream, and this dream, which follows the writer's account of the

vicissitudes of his life, turns the unfamiliar story of the mysterious "author/other" into "his," or Lavengro's, story — that is, into George's borrowed story — and by doing so maps out once more the complex processes of identification which the reader had already felt at work, in a specially uncanny manner, throughout this chapter. Lavengro (George as writer) dreamed he had written a book, "and given (it) to the world, and the world shouted"<sup>3</sup>. He does not say whether people shouted for joy or in scorn or indignation, but whichever it is he "shrinks" from them, as he says, most probably for the reasons given by the host in Chapter 66 for his own authorial anxieties: which is to say that he felt that he had no right to any reception, since what he had offered the world was something "borrowed," not his own, hence an imposture.

As I have said, understanding the motivations underlying Borrow's acute self-consciousness about the truly ominous power of his name to wipe out any sort of "authenticity" in his life or literary work is a complex business. Richard Shephard, in a chapter of a valuable book which has been published since I began this study<sup>4</sup>, considers what his co-author Barry Mencher calls Borrow's studies of "maladies d'esprit" in the light of the dubious kinds of traffickings he got mixed up in during a period of his life which was lived only just within the law<sup>5</sup>. But what is so fascinating about these portraits, and their intimate relationship to their author, is the depth and extensiveness of the spiritual disturbances they engender and reflect by playing a symbolic part as "doubles" of the author/narrator. On the one hand, this persistent identity-crisis is linked to Borrow's fascination with translation, the borrowing game, as the literary mode of the mirror that obsessed him when young<sup>6</sup> and stored his mind with an unusual range of "other" writings which troubled his mature years. Many of these "source" texts have some kind of bardic dimension, which might be seen as intensifying the sense of the translator as a latecomer. Borrow hoped in vain that translation would bring

him fame and fortune; but while his contributions to translated literature in English are indeed significant, on ethnographic and cultural-historical grounds, as much as on literary ones, they by no means form a coherent *oeuvre*<sup>7</sup>. Here I want to test another hypothesis in relation to the same pathological phenomenon ("touching"), and the symptoms which accompany it, especially the habit of self-accusation with regard to the "touching" compulsion which the mysterious author suffered from, and which George now frankly confesses to feeling himself in the same connection (George Borrow, *Lavengro*, Chapter 67, p.352).

It is somehow a question of authentication, or authenticity, and how to validate the "real" existence, and the personal value, of one's own experience, whether of literature or of life. The "other" (or author) is being driven to make sure that all of the splendour that surrounds him (for example, the stranger's luxurious bed, even the fine sunny morning itself) are real and enduring. Since they are the rewards of writing, they could be as "unreal" as writing is. There is a curious affinity here (to my mind) with Matthew Arnold, less neurotically perhaps but with equal obsessiveness, applying to Literature and to Life the "touchstone" method of evaluation to sort out the true from the false. Mencher<sup>8</sup> notes that Borrow's literary world is pre-Arnoldian, and this is a very important insight; yet there are strange congruities of sensibility between the two men as well. Only when George is tempted to touch a flowering shrub, to "authenticate" it, does he draw back in fear — not of the shrub itself but of his own rashness. It is as if to doubt the authenticity of the act of writing, of the *text* (in the practice of translation, for instance, where all writing is re-writing) is legitimate, even intrinsic to the artistic process, while to doubt the "authenticity" of God's created world, which bears his "signature," and is made available to us to be known through the "natural" medium of the senses, which in turn form human intelligence and emotion, is inexcusable and impious<sup>9</sup>.

What, for example, would Wordsworth have said?<sup>10</sup> How can one (after Wordsworth) doubt the moral authenticity and integrity of the natural world, which is our teacher and saves us from error? The “light of things” on this fine sunny morning after the storm must surely be a real illumination given by God. In the course of the previous chapter, George had himself played upon the ambiguity of the word “touching,” speaking of the author’s/other’s life history as a “touching story” (358). How can we remain “untouched” not only by the beauty of the world but by the joys and sufferings of the human condition? Yet for Borrow, meaning drained out of the world totally, at regular but unpredictable intervals, as we shall see. This was the effect of the recurrent clinical depression he refers to as “the horrors”; and the most conspicuous symptom of such clinical states of depression, after the serious loss of affect which it entails, is the sense of guilt that is produced by the condition (as well as, ultimately, producing it). Borrow’s “other” confesses that the large oil painting he got from the landlord, (a portrait of the landlord himself) is a special source of inspiration to him. But even as he does so, he links it with the borrowing theme, by expressing his fear (or is it a guilty sense of pleasure?) that to be inspired to write by a painting is just another sort of plagiarism<sup>11</sup>.

This strange (exciting?) fear of a loss of spiritual or creative autonomy is reinforced in a very odd way when Dr. Platitude appears. This Church of England vicar with a taste for Roman Catholicism and a smug hatred of dissenters<sup>12</sup> serves to strengthen George’s resolve to be on his way, saying he (in his own words) will not “hang upon another man” (i. e. not trouble anyone by his dependency). The aptly named Platitude — a sort of refugee from Smollett, whose works Borrow admired, wheeled on to the scene in a typically Borrowian, *ad hoc* manner — is a gross borrower of inauthentic doctrine, who denounces dissenters because their thoughts are their own. Platitude must be held up to ridicule because he “hangs upon another man,” in this case, the

hated Pope of Rome in person. In this way Borrow's "touching" Calvinist sense of immediate answerability to God is reinforced doctrinally. It is surely no accident that Borrow's earliest translations are from national literatures in which ideas of autonomy and self-determination, both personal and political, take centre-stage. Robust individual accountability pleased him greatly.

Borrow's own fiercely idiosyncratic Protestantism, and the colourful hatred of Catholicism which helped to make *The Bible in Spain*<sup>13</sup> so popular, here combine in the form of an assertion of true Protestant values on account of their iconoclasm and opposition to authority. This surely is the main source of the Borrovian preoccupation with authenticity, which lies somewhere between the twin Christian concepts of faith and grace, and is deeply Calvinist. It is akin, on the one hand, to Bunyan's "true valour" or daring "to be a pilgrim"<sup>14</sup>, carried by George into a variety of strange life-threatening contexts<sup>15</sup>, and on the other to the obscure belief systems of the Roma, or gypsies. The Bible, although from one angle another "borrowed" text because it is translated, and imported into our culture, was at least partially written in an original language which (in the opinion of many nineteenth century philologists) was the "language of paradise," wherein the signified was not split from its signifier<sup>16</sup> but bonded by God into one whole. Moreover, by virtue of that process of transmission and dissemination which Borrow actively assisted in (*The Bible in Spain*)<sup>17</sup>, it belongs at the same time to each and every man and woman, and by virtue of this, in turn, it may constantly be adduced as evidence that translation is not plagiarism, but an indispensable act of mediation which brings true things closer.

There are other instances of the pervasive Borrovian dread of inauthenticity (despite the fact that, as many commentators have noted, he had a proclivity for falsifying his own life events)<sup>18</sup>. George, observing his host closely, suggests to the writer at one point that this author/other has all the gifts to be a politician: to which "the other's" reply is that he could not

possible study the skills of the orator, because he fears that if he did so his teacher might hear one of his speeches and denounce him for borrowing, saying “that gesture is mine – that modulation is mine” (358). So it is not only the literary uses of language that risk inauthenticity. Political discourse is equally at risk, if not more so, which may be why Borrow say so little about his own political sympathies, and moves among political events in a silent and secretive fashion, commenting by allegorical indirection<sup>19</sup>. Perhaps it was Platitude’s sudden expression of ignorant animosity to dissenters (a borrowed attitude is one definition of a platitude) that generated the opening of Chapter 68 (in which Borrow encounters a tinker family in a tavern) by means of a dream-like free association between Dissent, Bunyan, and a very characteristic Borrovian vision of the common people.

The Slingsbys, however, are evidently down on their luck, and seem far removed from the zeal of the great “mechanick preacher” and the powerful Puritan culture from which both Bunyan and Borrow spring. George, from pure Christian charity, offers them beer and cheer, pretending for the nonce to be a blacksmith, and extolling the virtues of ale. Praised for his scholarship, George in response praises the tinker’s life: “a tinker is his own master, a scholar is not,” (362) (i.e. action is somehow more authentic than learning). To speak in this way, if not exactly “nonconformist,” is at least unconventional enough to encourage the tinker to share openly with him the grief he is experiencing at the hands of a rival tinker known as “the flaming tinman,” or Black Jack, identified as one Bosville or Boswell, and in actual fact a Romani of the tribe or clan Herne, by name Anselm<sup>20</sup>, and probably a real-life figure. It was standard practice for Gypsies to “borrow” a gadzio, or gorgio, name which supplied them with an identity for the purpose of communicating with gorgios, but which they themselves could not consider fully “authentic” in relation to their own culture (so that when they used it they were something “other” from what they “really” were). It was the Hernes who, in the episodes

I shall examine, tried to poison George, who had got a bit too close to "authentic" gypsy life and could decode secret messages in Romani. Old Mrs. Herne made murderous use of her grand-daughter, as her agent, and she it was who gave George the delicious and deadly cake, of which more later.

Comprehensively fictionalized as this material may be, we know already that Borrow's gypsy affiliations, despite being very substantially grounded in experience, as well as in solid research on gypsy lore and language, were (to put it tactfully, in the terminology of Aaron Beck), "over-personalized," and carried an exaggerated amount of affect<sup>21</sup>. They were thereby prone to catch up with him, in disturbing or even dangerous ways, like a kind of "return of the repressed," when confrontations with significant gypsy "others" came round again in the erratic cycle of the chance encounters of his narrative. To call the gypsy tinsmith "flying"<sup>22</sup> lends him a demonic strangeness which reflects and reinforces the popular anxiety partly shared by Borrow with those who had everyday dealings with gypsies. They seemed so exotic partly because one did not know where they had come from or where they were going to – "no fixed abode" meant (and still means) no "real" identity, or only one (the adopted gorgio name) that was "borrowed," a great advantage to the traveling people, some said, in practising the arts of thieving, deception, and the casting of spells. This particular gypsy, an intruder, they say, from Yorkshire, which was a bit off the Smiths' patch, had usurped Slingsby's sales pitch, and so forced him out of work.

This encounter may be a recollection of one specific event, passed on in the unwritten lore of the road, but it is just as likely to be a composite reflection of the widespread sense of anxiety among British working and country people that gypsies might take their jobs from them, maybe simply by undercutting local wages. Among the tinsmiths and blacksmiths in particular there was also a justified professional fear of gypsies on account of their highly developed skills in the smithing trades, which made them potential

rivals. This "demonisation" of the Roma was much strengthened by the gypsies' refusal to enter the ranks of God-fearing men, even those who (like themselves) were wayfarers. Gypsies and Christianity did not mix. Because of their traditional resistance to religious conversion, which is well documented<sup>23</sup>, Rommanies aligned themselves with the devil, or with "godless" rogues who could be assigned to the devil's party in the popular imagination. So the particular form taken by Black Jack's outburst of violence against our tinker Slingsby (thrusting the Holy Bible, the "authentic" Word, into his mouth so hard as to hurt him, and then forcing him to swear on it) (365) is nicely poised between Gothic horror and a projection of genuine popular anxiety about what gypsies really "believed," and whether they might ever be counted upon to behave in any way like Christians, and affirm the "true word."

It is at this point that we first encounter the word "mumping," later attached to the solitary spot where Borrow confronts the desolation of his fate, in his (very) borrowed identity as a tinker (or in fact an uncertain cross between a tinker and a blacksmith), the place known locally as "mumpers' dingle." "Mumps," the dictionary tells us, are cognate with "dumps," signifying (in Shakespeare's time already) a fit of melancholy (the recurrent state of mind Borrow was only too familiar with). The medical (viral) condition called "mumps" was named after the facial contortions associated with "mumpers," that is, social outcasts, no-hopers, or wild desperadoes. Even medical practitioners shun mumps sufferers, because the disease is so infectious, and can cause sterility, (which in the popular imagination has always been confused with impotence). It is actually the flaming tinman who introduces the word "mumper," calling the dispossessed tinker a "mumping villain." One might assume the tinker had good reason to be depressed, but of course the adjective functions here primarily as an insult, designating someone miserable, wretched, pathetic and perhaps impotent to boot. The dingle,



where renegade gypsies go, if Petulengro is to be believed, is therefore a mumping place, and it is easy to see how your mumper might be an impotent (or disgraced) traveler who had left the clan settlement, or been expelled, and thereby dropped altogether from social discourse<sup>24</sup>. In this way, precise social observation joins hands with romance, in true Borrovian style.

Mumpers' Dingle was identified by Borrow's biographer W.I. Knapp in a few melancholy phrases, in his still very valuable edition of *Lavengro* from 1900<sup>25</sup>. "Properly," he says, it was called Monmer or Momber Lane (in Staffordshire), and there seemed no doubt in his mind that this was indeed the place Borrow meant. The popular corruption of the name sprang from the miserable aspect of the people who frequented the place. The 1998 New Oxford Dictionary<sup>26</sup> gives the word "mumpish" as still current with the meaning "sullen" or "sulky," from the obsolete verb (early eighteenth century) "to grimace, to have a miserable expression." By way of a bonus, the NOD offers another delightful expression which it indicates as still current now, though I doubt this. A "mumpsimus" (mid sixteenth century origin) is (it says) "a traditional custom or notion adhered to though shown to be unreasonable." By way of example NOD cites a story (provenance unknown) of an illiterate priest who misquoted the Eucharist ("quod in ore sumpsimus," "which we have taken into our mouths"), substituting the word "mumpsimus" for "sumpsimus." When rebuked, he is supposed to have replied "I will not change my old mumpsimus for your sumpsimus." This is a curiously Borrovian kind of instance and sentiment, whatever the truth of the matter may be. Gypsies have frequently been blamed for perversely refusing to change their traditional ways<sup>27</sup> as well as for speaking a "canting" kind of language (more widespread in thieves' slang, even in Cockney, than is generally realized).

Knapp tells us that the original Mumpers' Dingle, near Willenhall, in Staffordshire (which was within the territory of the gypsy clans who

frequented the Chong Gav, or Norwich) has (in 1900, and probably much earlier) disappeared as such. It is now (or was when he was writing) the site of the Monmer Lane Ironworks (so perhaps the demonic or hellfire connotations of the place persisted). But it is characteristic of Knapp to connive in Borrow's myth-making, even when, as here, he is most likely factually mistaken: Mencher and Shephard (*op.cit.*) offer Richard Shephard's altogether more convincing topography of the mumpers, based on very precise research (*q.v.*). In *Lavengro* it is Petulengro, Borrow's gypsy friend and informant from the large East Anglian Smith clan, who directs Borrow on his way. Petulengro is Romani for "horse-shoe master" (as Lavengro is Romani for "word-master"). Petulengro is the significant "other" who is, or has at some time been, a blacksmith. He offers to show George the way when the latter declines his generous offer of hospitality with the Smith clan in Petulengro's own camp. This he could not accept, because the reason why George is looking for a refuge at this point is that his relations with Gypsies (especially the Herne clan, to which Bosville belongs) have turned nasty, and the shelter of the dingle will come in handy. But the Dingle turns into George's Slough of Despond, in which he lives through a dark night of the soul, for the strangest of reasons, as we shall see.

Borrow's interest in gypsies is a large and complex topic which I intend to discuss elsewhere<sup>28</sup>. It partakes of a kind of Romantic "otherness" in some obvious ways, as well as in some less obvious ones, and includes many element of the picturesque. But in his guise of Romany Rye, or gypsy gentleman, Borrow did adopt their way of life, up to a point, and their appearance, to a carefully controlled extent. He also espoused eagerly (but not wholly) their exiled condition and their homelessness. His knowledge of the Romani language and Romani lore should certainly not be underrated<sup>29</sup>. In an informal way, he provided a very valuable source of quite exact knowledge about the Roma, and his work on their language, though certainly not

altogether professional, and not up to modern linguistic standards, was so substantial and useful that if he had not been overtaken by a better-organised American scholar at the last minute<sup>30</sup>, his dictionary of Romani would have been an important first, instead of a fascinating second. But his autobiographical writing also reveals very clearly how much his gypsy affiliations, like other aspects of his life, were a game of split identity, and how dangerous this game sometimes was. Necessity drove the fictional George, and maybe the real Borrow as well, to assume the threatened trade of the unfortunate Tinker Slingsby, as if by carrying the man's cross for him he could face out the devil himself, in the person of the Flying Tinman, and thereby move onwards and upwards in his eccentric Pilgrim's Progress.

If George had been content with Petulengro, or Smith's, amiable doctrine of "the wind on the heath"<sup>31</sup>, a wise acceptance of things, and with practicing the snake-lore with which his narrative begins<sup>32</sup>, which strongly appealed to Borrow's Romantic love of exotic folkways, he might have emerged unscathed even from his over-intimate frequentings of the tribal sites. But gypsydom was to be no nostalgia-trip or Byronic costume-drama for George. Travelling in his tinker's guise through a wood, he is taken for a robber, things get dangerous, and he needs to slip away Rummaging in Slingsby's cart, he is surprised to find blacksmith's (rather than a tinker's) tools<sup>33</sup>, Petulengro's stock-in-trade. In other words, he is drawn by the pressure of contingency into a closer identification with the outcast and the gypsy than he might have chosen of his own free will. Unsurprisingly, he soon (Chapter 70) meets up with Romanis, in the form, first of all, of a girl of about thirteen who is singing a Romani song:

The Rommany chi  
And the Rommany chal  
Shall jaw tasaulor

To drab the bawlor  
 And dook the gry  
 Of the farming rye

— “the gypsy girl and boy will go tomorrow to poison the pig and bewitch the horse of the gentleman farmer” — a delightfully sinister rustic text which George understands, even though he unfortunately fails to understand, at that moment, what bearing the words have on him personally.

The gypsies were said to have an expert knowledge of poisons (“drab the bawlor”), brought with them from their homelands<sup>34</sup>, with which they could stealthily and skillfully take out a farmer’s pig when they chose. Having done which they would then generously offer to dispose of the corpse of the poor brute, which was presumed by the farmer to have died of some disease, knowing of course that the poison they had used could not be detected and did not render the meat inedible. As to the “gry of the farming rye” — Borrow tells us elsewhere in *Lavengro* that the gypsies had such an unequalled knowledge of horses, and skill in handling them, that to the uninitiated onlooker it often seemed like magic, or “bewitchment,” an illusion the gypsies were not eager to dispel, since, although it brought them into great disrepute, on the one hand, it greatly enhanced their charisma on the other. That is one reason why gypsies dominated, or in some cases even controlled, the horse trade. As in the case of their metalworking skills, it was more convenient to invoke the black arts by way of explanation of their special expertise, than to defer to their superior skill. George pretends at first not to understand Romani (because the girl has grown visibly anxious that her song may have told him too much), but then he cannot resist improvising a distinctly abusive, even racist, verse in answer to her own:

The Rommany chi  
 And the Rommany chal

Love Luripen  
 And dukkeripen  
 And hokkeripen  
 And every pen  
 But Lachipen  
 And tatchipen

– “the gypsy boy and girl love black magic and lying and everything but honesty and truth.” The girl, apparently unabashed, promises to reward him for giving her the kettle he has just mended.

But when she catches up with him next day, in Chapter 71, we soon see that he has all but signed his death warrant by showing off his Romani in this offensive way. The girl had obviously reported back to the clan that this gorgio knew too much and should be dealt with accordingly (though the plot against him had actually been hatched earlier). The cake she has brought him is poisoned. It was made by her grandmother, or “bebee,” Mrs. Herne, who shortly afterwards comes with her to crow over the (hopefully) dying George. She tells us herself that her name, “herne,” means “the hairy one,” linking her with the demonic Herne the Hunter, made famous by Shakespeare’s *Merry Wives of Windsor* and Verdi’s opera, though at what stage the gypsy clan name and the devilish phallic god became synonymous I do not know. This pig, however, refuses to die. Not for the first or last time, George reminds us of his physical prowess and powers of endurance.

Perhaps most interesting is the strange way Mrs. Herne’s curse on him turns into a blessing, underlining once more the all-pervasive ambivalence of Borrow’s gypsy allegiances, which are (to him) both life-giving and deadly. His fatalism, a sort of death-wish yoked to an insatiable curiosity, have made him a suitable subject for the gypsies’ warmly ambivalent feelings of love, trust, and murderous hatred:

"He is sick, child, sure enough. Ho, ho! Sir, you have taken drows: what, another throe! Writhe, sir, writhe the hog died by the drow of gypsies; I saw him stretched at evening. That's yourself, sir. There is no hope, sir, no help, you have taken drow; shall I tell your fortune, sir, your dukkerin? God bless you, pretty gentleman, much trouble will you have to suffer, and much water to cross; but never mind, pretty gentleman, you shall be fortunate at the end, and those who hate shall take off their hats to you." (388)

Her grand-daughter, surprised, objects vigorously that this is a blessing, not a curse; and indeed Borrow is saved, almost at once, by a Welsh dissenter who (significantly) carries the right kind of prophylactic oil. There must, surely, be a moral. It seems as if, in the larger scheme of George's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the fact that he took upon himself the cross carried by the derelict tinker, which included an inevitable confrontation with the Rommanies, leads to an ordeal and an equally strange redemption. Peter, the Welsh preacher, is an extraordinarily interesting character in his own right, as well as allowing Borrow to display the remarkable knowledge of Welsh culture he acquired very early in his career, when he was supposed to be studying law. Peter is inserted into the narrative as an example of someone even more comprehensively doomed to depression than Borrow himself, and haunted as well by the gypsies, whose "yellow faces" (*sic*) and "ceaseless clabber" he could not endure<sup>35</sup>.

However, the fact of George's recovery, after his awful ordeal at the hands of what he calls "an Egyptian sorceress and poisonmonger" who hated him because "I had stolen the tongue out of her head" (so much for the Lavengro's art), is the most important outcome of this episode, leading to him saying to Peter (true to Borrovian principle) that he will not be indebted to any man, and making his way onwards in the company of Petulengro, traveling on because, in the strange but apt words he quotes from the Welsh Poet Taliesin, "none can say with positiveness whether I be fish or flesh, least

of all myself." From Petulengro he learns with surprise of Mrs. Hearne's death by suicide, on account (they say) of a gloomy dream consequent upon George's unexpected recovery from the poison, which seems to have proved to her that her dukkerin days were over. By way of *ad hoc* reparation, Petulengro fights with George until the latter is all bloody: "blood has been shed, which is all that can be reasonably expected for an old woman."

This characteristic restoration of masculine certainties via pugilism, closing off a period of feminine danger (pollution and ambivalence), is how George comes to be in Mumpers' Dingle, plying his trade of "kaulomescro" (the Romani word for tinsmith). It is also how, in the Slough of Despond, he comes to experience the extreme state of depression which he calls "the horrors," and which corresponds very closely to the experience which Freud examines in his theory of the "Unheimlich"<sup>36</sup>. He is, after all this, a bundle of contradictions, even more than usual. His trade, is not "really" his trade, as the Welsh preacher had shrewdly observed. Petulengro, whom he refers to as "the lord of the horse-shoe," is his companion yet not really his friend, since George is no Romani, so has no proper place in this, the last refuge of a lawless mumping Romani. He is a whitesmith with blacksmith's tools. His most recent association with the race he has befriended, whose language he has studied assiduously, and whose identity he has tried to adopt, has culminated in him causing the death of an old woman and the grief of her grand-daughter. Looking into the pool he drinks from, he sees, like Narcissus, an apt image of himself: the pool is full of frogs and eftes, not, he says, "golden or silver fish." We know what this pool represents, and where it springs from, because earlier in his tale Lavengro has told us that, unlike his brother, who was comparable to a "rapid river," George was a "dark and silent lake"<sup>37</sup>. The scene is set for a violent psychic splitting or devastation, as the dark pond reveals its murky depths.

It was George's charismatic gypsy father – other, Petulengro, who thought

the dingle might be the safest place for him, though it is not quite clear why. So now, by way of an irrational homage to Petulengro, George, with the blacksmith's tools found by chance in the tinker's cart, starts to make a horse-shoe in honour of his friend, the master of the petulo, the "other/father" who in a real sense is also the "author" of George's gypsy identity and narrative (George is in some respects only his amanuensis). As he does so, he describes the whole process in Romani, or a kind of synthesis of Romani and gorgio-talk. He might be accused of just showing-off, if not for the fact that his commitment to his intense neurotic displacements is so precise and so passionate that he has truly become another person. To say that George wants to be his own other/author, or father, would be an understatement. Obscure acts of reparation, to both the father-figure, and the two women whose lives he has interrupted, in one case fatally, have driven him to give us this lesson in both blacksmithery and in Romani, neither of which could be said to be properly "his," since all the identities he presents here are in fact "borrowed."

George enacts this strange phallic ritual of self-fashioning (or maybe self-abuse?) with the horse-shoe serving as the necessary correlative, in order to feel powerful and "Heimlich," at home, with his trade, in the refuge of the mumpers. But the effect of this complex assertion of masculinity is to split him so radically that when, at the beginning of the next chapter, he describes a great lassitude coming upon him, we know he is actually falling out of his game of (in)authenticity into a kind of "mumpers' gloom," or serious depression (bipolar clinical depression is often preceded by a burst of manic, quasi-theatrical activity like the one described here). The strangely phallic and demonic wish-fulfillment dream discourses of horse-shoe making, (reminding us of the forging of the magic bullets, for instance, in Carl Maria von Weber's opera *Freischütz* and other German Romantic literature, and thereby turning Mumpers' Dingle into some kind of Wolf's Glen,)<sup>38</sup> is very striking:



I have for some time past been plying the peshota, or bellows, endeavouring to raise up the yag, or fire, in my primitive forge. The angar, or coals, are now burning fiercely, casting forth sparks and long vagescoe chips, or tongues of flame; a small bar of sastra, or iron, is lying in the fire, to the length of ten or twelve inches, and so far it is hot, very hot, exceeding hot, brother. And now you see me, prala, snatch the bar of iron, and place the heated end of it upon the covantza, or anvil, and forthwith I commence cooring the sastra as hard as if I had just been engaged by a master. (445)

The next chapter, 84, is short but intense, and it is called "the horrors." The energetic self-splitting/self-forging we have just witnessed inaugurates a classic, intense visitation by what Freud calls "the uncanny." This deeply ambivalent mental state is a condition which may be described as the "being-at-home-in-a-place" which is however inexplicably troubled by a sense of strangeness, rejection, danger, and desire so that it becomes its opposite (just as the phenomenon called familiarly "déjà vu" tells us that we know this place, and have been here before, but imparts at the same time a feeling of strangeness). Like Freud's Sand-Man (cited from Hoffmann's famous tale) the Flying Tinman haunts Borrow's narrative, waiting to make his retributive appearance, in this guise or another, to cheat the protagonist out of what is rightly his, the authenticity of his own experience, acting as the agent (Freud says) of the castration fear, invoking (in the classic version of the tale) the Oedipal punishment of blindness. If forging the shoe is, as I have suggested, a consoling exercise in primary narcissism, its fantasy-power partakes of what Freud calls

"omnipotence of thoughts, the magical practices based upon this belief, the carefully proportioned distribution of magical powers or "mana" among various outside persons and things . . . the animistic stage in primitive men"<sup>39</sup>

This is precisely the tranced state that leads up to George's "horrors," as a

fleeting moment of sunshine gives way to a still more intense gloom. As Homi Babha succinctly puts it, in a post-colonial textual context strangely appropriate to Borrow's multi-cultural Romani imaginings, "the very place of identification is the place of splitting"<sup>40</sup>:

The inscrutable horror which I had felt in my boyhood had once more taken possession of me...in another minute the sun was gone, and a big cloud occupied the place where he had been. In a little time it was almost as dark as it had previously been in the open part of the dingle...I sat down with my back against a thorn bush; the thorns entered my flesh, and when I felt them I pressed harder against the bush...<sup>41</sup>

The echoes here of Bunyan's two masterpieces are somehow reinforced by the thorn bush from folk song and from Wordsworth<sup>42</sup>.

The tinman, of course, catches up with him, accompanied by his wife, and another young woman, apparently his mistress. Borrow's dream-like displacements and condensations produce a set of circumstances in which the lady in question, real or imaginary, is introduced in a purely contingent way, but comes to play a very extraordinary part in George's life: Mencher is quite right to say that George clearly fell in love with her, though such is his reticence, and so airy is all about her, that the rest must be pure speculation<sup>43</sup>. Quite why George greets the odd family group with a Romani rhyme is not clear. Perhaps it has the effect of another magic spell to give himself strength, which he needs, because the tinman has sworn to take his cart and horse from him, and the rhyme seems to serve him well, because in a bout of fisticuffs (again the male resolution of an ambivalent situation, with Isopel apparently switching allegiances), he stuns the dire old flamer (urged on by Isopel) and the couple push off, leaving George alone with the extraordinary young woman. What could he do but fall in love with Isopel Berners?

Isopel deserves to be the subject of a separate enquiry. Anyone who lived through the 1960s and 1970s in the “alternative” worlds of East Anglia and elsewhere will recognize her, and feel a pang. I met her living in a second-hand double-decker bus at Snape, Suffolk, after the Greenham Common demonstrations, in the early eighties. For the moment, standing back from this mumping tale, and trying to see what is “really” going on, we may hazard the following George Borrow, the “scholar, the gypsy, the priest,” as he described himself (though of course he was none of these), demonstrably drew upon Joseph Glanvill’s *The Vanity of Dogmatising* (the seventeenth century text which contains the very same encounter with gypsies which gave Arnold the materials for his famous poem). I discuss Glanvill, a milestone in Protestant and scientific thought, elsewhere. Using Glanvill’s characteristic suspicion of dogma, and his blend of skepticism and awe, as well as borrowing his famous gypsy anecdote, Borrow has mingled autobiography with fiction in a way that fascinated the young D. H. Lawrence<sup>44</sup>, and it is not altogether surprising that the critic James Stephens<sup>45</sup> should have found in its strangely confiding amalgam of chronicle and confession, epic and lyric, something akin to Dostoevsky, but like nothing else in English. Maybe this is why Borrow’s reputation in Russia has always been high.

I would cap Stephens with another kind of claim, not unrelated to his. Borrow has, I think, in this book, begun to explore the precariousness of the culturally constructed identity of the Victorian gentleman. He was (as Mencher says) pre-Arnold, and his eighteenth century affiliations are striking. But he was also (as Arnold’s near contemporary) a kind of anti-Arnold, in his eclecticism, his more radical but still very Pauline Protestantism, and his odd relativism. Lacking the Hellenic sweetness and light which Arnold praises, and dispenses to his age, he was (again as Mencher says) not an intellectual, but his wide-ranging curiosity about the world shows us a restless, inquiring, even insatiable, mind. The only “centrality” of which he was aware was that

of God's will, manifested in Nature, and although he had an almost Calvinist sense of falling short of it, it also took him to far-away places well beyond the margins of the Anglo-Saxon world. Other Victorian literary travelers went to far corners of the Empire. Borrow eschewed Empire altogether. In the course of his travels he improvised, around the multiple personality he devised for himself, an eclectic, populist, critical, visionary, and strangely intelligent critique of the cultures he inhabited. He invented a range of unusual culture – heroes who are often distorting mirrors held up to his own identity, but who also offer striking insights into the worlds they represent.

If the landscape of his books was primarily the landscape of his own trials and tribulations, and the projection of his own Protestant conscience, we should not undervalue the contribution he made to a vision of Victorian Britain that included Celtic culture and history, the Gypsies, and the dispossessed. It is an "alternative" view, one might say, that asks some troubling questions about the validity of the Victorian consensus. It provided us with a two-volume object – lesson in life-writing. He pitted the strength of his will against his deep sense of personal insecurity, in the name of truth. He has been called (more than once) an eccentric, but his marginal vision no longer looks in any way exclusive. It was very sincere, and was matched in intensity by his feeling that his society had rejected him. Embarking on his strange pilgrimages, he improvises an eclectic and totally un-Arnoldian version of the culture he inhabits, and populates his landscape with a variety of exemplary, but also seductive, figures who interpret own sense of failure, and both sustain and betray him.

Mediating between familiar and exotic worlds, he exposes himself to psychological perils and the trials and tribulations of the ordinary traveler. He strides ever onwards across his landscape of pain and deliverance; but his identification with the Rommanies, pathological as it was, in some respects, was also a source of true knowledge. His version of gypsydom displays all

the unrequited love of Melville's South Sea tales or of Forster's *Passage to India*, and other authors whose peculiar emotional entanglements serve to illuminate exotic societies and cultures. Borrow occupies a significant place in the history of the Victorian construction of "otherness." In a very personal way, he reminds us that otherness begins at home. His visible discomfort with the constraints of Victorianism, and especially the cultural domination of the English language and the Anglo-Saxon race within British culture, makes him a precursor of translation studies on the one hand, and post-colonial studies on the other. He was above all, and despite his love of learning, no kind of academician. He was born to experience, explain, and interpret.

## Notes

- 1 "Il serait aussi faux de chercher l'auteur du côté de l'écrivain réel que du côté de ce locuteur fictive, la fonction-auteur s'effectue dans la scission même, — dans ce partage et cette distance." (Michel Foucault, cited in J. Pieters (ed.), *Critical Self-Fashioning* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999).
- 2 Cf. G.M. Hyde., "The Vanity of Dogmatising," in *English Literature Review* 41 (Kyoto: The English Literary Society, Kyoto Women's University, Japan, 1999). I am indebted to Clive Wilkins-Jones of the Norwich Local History Library for inspiring me to pursue this line of enquiry with a paper he gave (unpublished) at the University of East Anglia.
- 3 George Borrow, *Lavengro*, Chapter 67 (ed. W.I. Knapp. London: John Murray, 1914) 351. (The first printing of this edition of the two volumes of the Autobiography was 1900.)
- 4 Richard Shephard and Barrie Mencher, *George Borrow: The Dingle Chapters*. Harleston: The Brynmill Press, 2001.
- 5 Richard Shephard, "Syntax or Scissors," in Shephard and Mencher, *op. cit.* This essay sets new standards in Borrow criticism.
- 6 The standard bibliography of Borrow's works (ed. Collie and Fraser) cites William Taylor to the effect that "though not yet eighteen (he) understands twelve languages — English, Welsh, Erse, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, German, Danish, French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese" (87). Others came later (for example Russian, Polish, Hungarian, Turkish, Rommany) though of course only some of these were reasonably fluent. Borrow translated Welsh, German, and Danish texts shortly after leaving school at 15, and set great store by his translations.
- 7 Borrow defends his claims to serious attention as a philologist in one of the surprisingly virulent addenda to *The Romany Rye* (Appendix Nine of Knapp's edition,

- 1914); but it is clear that what validates his work with languages (as it validates all his work) is the nature of his personal engagement with his authors.
- 8 Shepherd and Mencher 12.
- 9 These sentiments are close to those of Joseph Glanvill, whose influential book *The Vanity of Dogmatising* (1661; revised 1667) Borrow had access to in a Norwich library. Glanvill was a major influence on the philosopher David Hume, one of the thinkers most admired by Borrow's mentor William Taylor.
- 10 "One impulse from a vernal wood  
May Teach you more of Man  
Of moral Evil and of Good  
Than all the Sages can"  
(William Wordsworth, "Expostulation and Reply"/"The Tables Turned" [1798])
- 11 The painting, moreover, came his way in a slightly illicit fashion.
- 12 "'It is not my fault that there are Dissenters,' said the Reverend Mr. Platitude."  
(George Borrow 354).
- 13 George Borrow, *The Bible in Spain* (1843). Borrow represents himself thwarting sinister Catholic plots.
- 14 Borrow's deep suspicion of both servility and arrogance links him to Bunyan.
- 15 Including this one: "Begone!" I exclaimed, "ye sorceries..." (352)
- 16 Cf. Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) The subtitle is "Race, religion, and philology in the nineteenth century."
- 17 "...notwithstanding the misrule of the brutal and sensual Austrian, the doting Bourbon, and, above all, the spiritual tyranny of the court of Rome, Spain can still maintain her own..." (George Borrow, *The Bible in Spain* xx)
- 18 Cf. Shepherd and Meacher, *op. cit.*
- 19 Near the beginning of *Lavengro* there is the much-anthologised encounter with the snake-catcher, compared by Mencher and others to Wordsworth's poem of the leech-gatherer, but moving beyond its moralising dialogue to encompass the wars with France and the impact of these on English civil liberties.
- 20 Quite apart from their more sophisticated skills (e.g. as gunsmiths, especially in Hungary) the gypsies "appeared as purveyors of gossip and news, sellers of cheap wares (often made by themselves), repairers of household goods, seasonal labourers (e.g. for haymaking, pea and fruit picking, hopping); or they could function as itinerant entertainers, enlivening village festivities by their talents in music, song, and dance." (Angus Fraser, *The Gypsies*, [Oxford: Blackwell, 1992]) Gypsies, being so mobile, had lower overheads than others.
- 21 Cf. Aaron Beck, writing on depression, *passim*, and especially "Cognitive Theory: a 30-year retrospective." *American Psychology* 46 (1991): 368-75.
- 22 "A man might be, variously, basket-maker, chair-bottomer, knife-grinder, sieve-mender, umbrella-repairer, tinker, horse-dealer, and maker of clothes-pegs and butchers' skewers..." (Fraser 219)
- 23 Fraser notes that gypsies came to Western Europe in the guise of pilgrims, and

- "tended to accept the religions of countries in which they have lived for some time," but are everywhere "accused of lacking true piety," and tend to cross boundaries between (e.g.) Islam and Christianity in generally unacceptable ways. (Fraser 312-16)
- 24 For some act of defilement, for instance. In this case everything with which a gypsy has contact "is polluted for others. For a people for whom communal life is of major importance... such a sentence is a much feared and very effective punishment." (Fraser)
- 25 My references are all to this edition.
- 26 Judy Pearsall, ed., *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 1217.
- 27 Particularly striking examples of their "ingratitude" (when provided with "decent" places to live, etc.) come from Hungary, in the eighteenth century and in modern times (Fraser 179 and 310). Gypsies themselves decided which places were theirs, and this is why their "sites" have such powerful (mainly negative) connotations for *gadzie* or *gorgios*.
- 28 My forthcoming book *The Romance of the Margins: George Borrow Re-Viewed*.
- 29 "Not until the appearance of George Borrow's works, starting with *The Zincali* (1841), and culminating in *Lavengro* (1851) and *The Romany Rye* (1857), did the literary stereotype receive a clear challenge, at the hands of an author who loved to associate with the Gypsies, had mastered their tongue, and was able to convey something of their real nature in his writings." (Fraser 197)
- 30 Charles Godfrey Leland wanted to dedicate his *The English Gypsies and their Language* to Borrow, who ignored his advances and published *The Romano Lavo-Lil* in 1874. The reviews were less than enthusiastic and the book failed to sell but "it has the merit of being... a collection of material relating to the East Anglian dialect of Anglo-Romani." (Michael Collie and Angus Fraser, *George Borrow: A Bibliographical Study* [London: St. Paul's Bibliographies, 1984] 81)
- 31 This passage of *Lavengro* was included in more than one anthology of wise and comforting thoughts from the works of George Borrow. In much the same spirit, Mencher quotes these lines again in his admirable preface to Shephard and Mencher 14-15.
- 32 The analogies between snake-lore and philology may not be apparent to all, but Borrow seems to have in mind the sort of ethnological "roots" that obsessed so many nineteenth century students of language, who studied the archaic make-up of the language community in a kind of shamanistic spirit. (Cf. Maurice Olender on Max Mueller 82-92)
- 33 374. The point is that Slingsby was a tinsmith, not a blacksmith, so Fate (or could it have been Petulengro?) has intervened.
- 34 Fraser notes cases where "ecclesiastical penalties were imposed on those who had their hands read or resorted to the healing crafts of the Gypsies" (93). Their understanding of herbal medicines was interpreted negatively as a special knowledge of poisons. Moreover, Gypsies were considered as especially prone to disease (e.g. in the Nazi death camps, cf. Isabel Fonseca 267-9).
- 35 Cf. *Lavengro*, 390: "Yellow faces, nor their clibberty clabber." Peter voices the most common and generalized prejudice against the Romani: they looked foreign and spoke an unintelligible language.

- 36 Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, reprinted in Rivkin and Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford; Blackwell, 1998) 154-67.
- 37 *Lavengro* 6. This is not a chance comparison, but an elaborate metaphor drawn from natural description, and applied, Wordsworth-style, to a large moral theme.
- 38 Carl Maria von Weber's Romantic opera *Der Freischütz* (*The Freeshooter*, sometimes translated as *The Magic Bullet*) was premiered with great success in 1821, bringing its oddly Borrovian composer the reputation of the founder of German opera. The tale of how the Faustian hero sells his soul to the devil in exchange for the magic bullets that will win a shooting contest, and thereby his loved one in marriage, climaxes in the forging scene which Borrow echoes here (maybe Isopel is in some sense his "reward").
- 39 Freud, *op. cit.* It is interesting to compare this diagnosis with another essay by Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917).
- 40 Homi Babha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) *passim*.
- 41 The whole of Chapter 84 is relevant.
- 42 William Wordsworth, "The Thorn" (1798)
- 43 Cf. Shepheard and Mencher. She seems to have been the runaway daughter of a well-known family.
- 44 Cf. my earlier essay in the *English Literature Review* two years ago.
- 45 James Stephens, *Foreword* to V.V. Rozanov, *Fallen Leaves* (London: The Mandrake Press, 1929). Borrow's reputation at the time was still high enough for Stephens to invoke his name quite unselfconsciously alongside Dostoevsky's.