Why (Not) Read George Borrow?

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It is not easy to say why one should, or should not, read any writer. But maybe it is harder to answer such a question in the case of a writer who has been dropped from publishers' lists and from university syllabuses so completely as Borrow has. The time has long gone when it made some kind of sense to publish his collected works in sixteen volumes,[1] for the enthusiasts and the specialists, or to compile little readers for ordinary folk full of his wit and wisdom,[2] or edifying books for school children containing "Gypsy Stories" (but only the "exotic" ones from *The Bible in Spain*, not the more problematic ones from closer to home in *Lavengro* and *The Romany Rye*).[3] The up side of this neglect is that there has never been an academic Borrow industry to wall him up in specialist discourse or play the academic game of deciding which Borrow critic is "in" and which is "out," or worrying about whether to "invest" in him, and in what way, with your next promotion or Chair in view. Borrow stands almost naked in the world today a free man, as he would have liked to be, indeed always was in his life time. Those who come to him come of their own free will. The work of the George Borrow Society keeps pushing the frontiers of knowledge forward, but no hungry generations tread him down, as they do bigger names in the world of letters.

Yet this does not detract from the legitimacy of my question, it only makes it in a way more pointed and urgent. Do we read him as a travel

writer? His early reputation was undeniably founded on a best-selling travel book, although to its first readers it was obviously much more than that, since its graphic anti-Catholicism came very aptly in 1851, at the time of the popular Ecclesiastical Titles Bill, which prohibited the institution of Roman Catholic bishops in England.[4] In 1829, when Borrow was 26 and engrossed in Celtic cultures, and the Irish situation was critical, Roman Catholics were admitted to most public offices, but in theory, if not in practice, in Ireland, Roman Catholic religious services were banned, and marriage before a Roman Catholic priest was invalid, so Borrow's anti-Catholicism could easily strike a resonant public chord.

Do we read him for his fictionalized autobiography, as we read de Quincey or Hogg?[5] Obviously not, since "life writing," as it is now called in University departments, has a high status, yet no publisher, not even a minor one, has chosen to bring out a new edition of his two autobiographical volumes in recent times. Yet these two books are living embodiments of what the phrase "life writing" must surely mean, if anything. Even in not-so-recent times there are precious few editions of his works that have any kind of serious editorial apparatus (which is lamentably true of Shorter's collected edition, too.). Do we read him for his voluminous translations?[6] Again, obviously not, even in the age of a massively increased interest in the theory and practice of literary translation. Undoubtedly he was a remarkable linguist, but what does that add up to, for a modern reader?[7] How about his ethnographic and cultural researches? This might lead us somewhere, since for his time he had a good grasp of some important aspects of Romani ways, and the Romani language, and his view of Celticism (especially the Welsh) was finer and better informed than that of some self-appointed English authorities of his time.[8] He also had a remarkable ear for dialogue, which often takes on

the intricate crosscultural functions later studied by such linguists as Gumpertz and Hymes.[9] But critics have not yet followed him down those paths, and perhaps never will.

Needless to say, lists of attributes and attitudes and proclivities do not add up to a man, or a writer, and with Borrow the constant, intricate, combined, unfolding presence of the man and the writer is, as D. H. Lawrence noted, at a time when Borrow was still widely read, the essence of his works. It is the ever-changing relationship between the two, the man and the writer, that repays study, and not whether or not this or that volume of his is the last word on whatever, be it the Gypsies, or philology, the Welsh, or whatever else. If he still keeps slipping through our critical fingers, it may be because we are looking at the wrong things, and will retire defeated, saying (as many have said) that you just have to know about too many unrelated areas of knowledge to read him critically, or that it is a pity that he dissipated his talents. He did not, in my view, and the kind of lateral thinker who is the Borrovian "ideal reader" perceives this instinctively, because (like Borrow himself) he is more interested in setting off cross-country at tangents than in pursuing a topic to its bitter end, and takes greater pleasure in concatenated episodes unified by personal knowledge than in beginnings, middles, and ends. The scholar will probably say at this point that Borrow, being an admirer of Lesage's Gil Blas and Cervantes and Defoe,[10] is working with a variant of the eighteenth century picaresque, and this would not be altogether wrong. Yet Borrow's writing contains, and requires from the reader, considerably more in the way of complex maps of subjectivity than such a classification would suggest, and the peculiar hesitations and tail-chasing reduplications and shifts of emphasis which seem to wind deeper into some unspoken personal mystery make entirely non-picaresque demands of us.

In a sense, Borrow's entire writing life was a sort of extended series of digressions or variations on an enigmatic theme which never quite got played, by his own sonorous orchestra or by anybody else's.

With this in mind I would like to look at a few crucial critical moments which may help to answer the question of why I feel the need to ask why we should bother with him at all. The first of these I take from a book on Borrow which I have only recently discovered. Martin Armstrong published his critical study in 1950, in a rather obscure series on English Novelists, so he is willing to think of Borrow as a novelist, though he knows he isn't one really.[11] Armstrong takes it for granted (as he tells us) that any reader will have heard of *Lavengro* and *The Romany Rye*, even if they haven't read them, which tells us at any rate that Borrow's reputation, if not his readership, was still alive in 1950. There are echoes in Armstrong of "Practical Criticism" from the English departments of the twenties and thirties, and some very diffuse Freudianism, but happily none of the neopastoralism which Leslie Stephen, regrettably, foisted upon Borrow studies, in his essay in *Hours in a Library*, which was reprinted from the *Cornhill Magazine* of Dec. 1889, and became altogether too influential.[12] "Rural" Borrow was much better served by Edward Thomas's always intelligent critical biography.[13]

Armstrong turns out to be making extensive use of earlier Borrow critics, especially George Saintsbury's essay of 1886;[14] but it is interesting that Saintsbury begins by telling us that most of his readers will not even have heard of Borrow, because Borrow took so little interest in "current events, literary or other" that he has sort of been dropped from the annals of writing. Nevertheless, it is from this date, more or less, until around 1930, that Borrow had his heyday. Saintsbury starts something new by telling us that in Borrow, we get (I quote) a kind of dream-writing:

> Without any apparent art, certainly without the elaborate apparatus which most prose writers of fantastic tales use, and generally fail in using, Borrow spirits his reader at once away from mere reality. If his events are frequently as odd as a dream, they are always as perfectly commonplace and real for the moment as the events of a dream are."[15]

That is very well said, and there is more to come. *Lavengro*, says Saintsbury, is

> a succession of dissolving views which grow clear and distinct for a time and then fade off into vagueness before once more appearing distinctly.[16]

Saintsbury, writing at the beginning of the Modernist period, sees a special charm in Borrow's peculiar kind of impressionism. But he also sees what Jacques Rivière praised so highly just a couple of decades later in the work of Dostoevsky and Gide, which was a modern extension of the contingencies of the "*Roman d'Aventures*," towards a new kind of existential openness, supplanting and updating the over-determined social and ethical imperatives and strong "sense of an ending" that drove so much of nineteenth century realism[17] as well as the tight controls of "art for art's sake" writing that came after it. Curiously enough, the very first critics of Borrow forty years before Saintsbury had said something similar, when Richard Ford, in his review of *The Bible in Spain*, in the *Edinburgh Review* of 1843, noted how

> the slight and single threads by which each particular is tied, are drawn up one after another, until, thickening into a rope, they raise a whole existence from the deep wells of memory.[18]

Ford's phrase is so amazingly apposite (and he has others as good) that

it may serve to unlock a number of doors to Borrow's idiosyncratic, incremental sense of form, which suggests Byron or Berlioz, but not George Eliot or Tennyson.

All of these locked or half-open doors in Borrow bear some inscription on them in a language which no-one has yet fully deciphered, a kind of Linear A of early Victorian narrative. Armstrong, following Saintsbury, condemns Borrow's linguistic slippages, or "instability" as he calls it, between "clumsy and verbose" writing and what he describes as "vivid," "lively," and "incisive."[19] He even borrows observations from Saintsbury, including the latter's objection to Borrow's use of the word "individual" when he means "man, woman, or person."[20] In Saintsbury's words,

> with Borrow, "individual" means simply "person"; a piece of literary gentility of which he, or all others, ought to have been ashamed.[21]

One might reply that with Borrow, there is nothing simple about a person: other people are as mysterious to him as he is to himself, and there is nothing necessarily genteel about the word "individual" if one appreciates "individualism" in all the complexity of its true Protestant worth. That is why it is wrong to call him an "eccentric," as some of his critics have done. An extract from Defoe, the author of the great epic of the modern solitary "individual," *Robinson Crusoe*, quoted by Armstrong, and Borrow's comments on it, run as follows:

> The first object on which my eyes rested was a picture; it was exceedingly well executed, at least the scene which it represented made a vivid impression on me, which would hardly have been the case had the artist not been faithful to nature. A wild scene it was, a heavy sea and rocky shore, with mountains in the background above which the moon was

> peering. Not far from the shore, upon the water, was a boat with two figures in it, one of which stood at the bow, pointing with what I knew to be a gun at a dreadful shape in the water; fire was flashing from the muzzle of the gun and the monster appeared to be transfixed. I almost thought I heard its cry. I remained motionless, gazing upon the picture, scarcely daring to draw my breath, lest the new and wondrous world should vanish of which I had now obtained a glimpse.[22]

Armstrong's objection to redundancies here seem to me unfounded. Let us not forget that Defoe's classic was, for un-bookish Borrow, the first literary text he had thrilled to, and the one that changed his life more than any other except the Bible and Bunyan. "I had seen no object calculated to call them forth" is not the same as Armstrong's simplified version "no object to call them forth," because it omits the mysterious intermediate element of agency which resides in the verb "to calculate," a cognitive process which makes perception possible, but also colours the thing seen, drawn up from what Ford called "the deep wells of memory," by analogy with Freud's theory of the "screen memory" which may itself be split between conscious and unconscious processes.

What Armstrong (again following Saintsbury) calls "mannerisms" could certainly be accounted for simply in terms of the survival of some eighteenth century idioms in Borrow's style, which has rightly been called pre-Victorian. But even on that level, the mannerisms mark not just a hangover from the past, but also a significant reluctance to settle down into respectable Victorianism, either as a way of writing or as a way of life, which is one of the most important facts about Borrow both as a man and as a writer. Such expressions as "quadruped" or "the equine race" for "horse," "the beverage" for "beer," "the vital fluid" for "blood," "the finny brood" for "fish," and "the feathered tribe" for "birds," recall

Wordsworth's censure, in his famous Preface,[23] of Gray and others for the sort of diction which promotes art above nature. It is certainly tempting to dismiss such turns of phrase as archaic mannerism that just clutter the page and impede communication.

But as Donald Davie pointed out in his *Purity of Diction in English Verse*,[24] the circumlocutions of such poets as Cowper and Gray, and their predilection for what Davie calls "the lofty tone," is linked to an insistence on very ordinary, domestic things, objects duller than Wordsworth's "beautiful and permanent forms of Nature," being made meaningful as topics of civilized literary discourse. Moreover, as in Cowper, who suffered like Borrow, from his own depressive anxieties, Borrow's euphemisms and apostrophes have a talismanic power if not to redeem a fallen world then at least to put it out of the reach of his demons. Davie speaks of Cowper's morbid horror of personal damnation, and although Borrow is not such an extreme case, his fits of what he called "the horrors" are analogous.[25] There is a real connection between "mannerism" and the obsessive act of touching which was one symptom of Borrow's mental disturbance and his preoccupation with the fallenness of the world, a preoccupation which Bunyan and Defoe shared in their respective ways, based on Christian fundamentalism. Also, let us not forget Borrow's love of linguistic variants and jargons, which passed down to posterity some valuable observations on the state of the English language at the time Borrow was writing.

That sense of the interplay of the rhythms of living speech and the periodicity of writing which makes Borrow's ear always so acute marks this prose too, though Armstrong does not mention it. A sentence like "I almost thought I heard its cry" is as natural as may be, yet if we are listening we will hear the vowel harmony of "almost" and "thought," and

of "I" and "cry," composing an inner music. The assonance in "I remained motionless" has a similar arresting function, an uncanny echo from another world, and "remained" bonds with "gaze" in a hypnotic fashion as well. Armstrong did not, in fact, complete his practical critical job, so preoccupied was he with wielding the pruning shears. "Scarcely daring" does it again: nothing but the natural words in the natural order, yet with a power to command the attention and enact a mysterious rhythmic musicality appropriate to one listening to a harmony coming from within. "Daring / draw / wondrous / world" are not complex effects, perhaps, but neither are they the work of a man indifferent to the fine tuning of his prose, and they convey exactly the required effect with an art that conceals art. I do not believe any critic has noticed such things before, so well are they integrated into the whole buoyant effect of ongoing facticity.

If we start from the idea that reality for Borrow, as for Bunyan, or Defoe, was a fallen condition, but one in which God may grace us unexpectedly with insights and encounters which function like glimpses of redemption, we may find many doors swinging open.[26] Borrow's compulsive need to study one language after another is a noteworthy component of this. He probably knew, to some degree, as many as forty languages. The remarkable thing is that some of these which were incidental to his main interests —— like Polish, for instance —— he actually knew, on the evidence of his translations at least, rather well, unless he used native speaker informants, which he categorically denied.[27] It was the "otherness" of languages, and of language, that fascinated him, as we see clearly in so many contexts where language learning and teaching come up in his work. The language-learning process is always steeped in some kind of strange light of revelation or disclosure, sometimes with intriguing erotic

overtones.[28] It was as if he was straining to hear the strange, nearly unintelligible language of his own unconscious, rather as philologists strove to hear the sounds of the *Ursprache* behind the fallen world and words of "modern languages."

In Borrow's Faustian dream of knowledge, where languages play a big part, "the real" often plays second fiddle to the imaginary. Time after time in his writing we find strange encounters with "individuals" who speak "other" languages, bizarre conversations with strangers where a sharp and precise ear, registering a great deal of detail, is overlaid (or deafened) by a poetic music emitted by some intrusive symbolic configuration. Maybe an actual poem in the alien tongue, perhaps translated by Borrow himself from the Welsh, is cited,[29] maybe a cloudy theory of what another culture "means," or how its participants behave within its alien frame of reference, is advanced a mental construct which we might call (with Lacan) the "symbolic" but which, for Borrow, resolves no contradictions, since he is always alien to it, standing outside the "other" tongue, lost in the Lacanian "imaginary," forever on the threshold of "the symbolic," but presenting it as "real."

The past, moreover, is another country, as L. P. Hartley so beautifully remarked, they do things differently there.[30] If "I is another," "je est un autre," to quote the French poet Rimbaud, then "past-I" is yet another other. Writing about Borrow we need to keep the play of "individuality" within and between George and Borrow (*nomen omen*, he feared he was a lifelong "borrower") in mind. The Crusoe passage quoted by Armstrong is a case in point, and he has the good grace to say at the end of his demolition of it that to do thus (i.e. pruning Borrow's redundancies) is to "eliminate much of the strange, irritating, fascinating personality of its author."[31] An adult called George as reported by an

author called Borrow looks back on the experience of a child called George looking, for the first time, into a famous book which was to influence him almost as much as the Bible. Borrow is actually remembering the future. Armstrong is wrong to say that the purpose of the passage is "to show us a child enthralled by a picture." That might have been one kind of realism; one can imagine Wordsworth or George Eliot or Dickens doing it. But here, in Borrow's writing, the formal movement of the prose splits the adult awareness from the child's state of mind. "Exceedingly well executed" is not a child's phrase, nor one evocative of childhood as such, but it is one of those "mannerisms" of lofty tone which are very useful in the service of the art of what Freud called "the uncanny." Edgar Allan Poe writes like this, magniloquent and subfusc, to create an effect of mystery, because such writing veils events as if they were all more than half unconscious, even as they advance to meet us.

We may suspect that we are present at the unfolding of some strange allegory, as in the movies of Peter Greenaway, where the devices are laid bare but the content and purpose remain obscure. Long before we encounter any details we are drawn into a mood of recollection in which repossessing and representing facts is by no means a straightforward process. "Nature" comes in only at the end of a long sentence as a bit of a surprise, since the sentence has really been about something different, which we might define as the "slippage" between the imaginary and the real, as in psychoanalytical discourse, or to be very Lacanian, an imaginary outwitting of the authority of the Father, who has stamped his name on the world of "real" objects, disempowering the son. The contemplation of the past is as much a recognition of dispossession as it is a celebration of the consoling powers of human memory, for each and every "individual," who in this way renegotiates the boundaries between "real,"

"imaginary," and "symbolic" in the attempt to compose a truthful narrative which still has the power to console and fortify.

"A wild scene it was," with its conversational inversion of noun and deictic pronoun, as of an oral narrator, produces another strange dislocation of register, introducing a kind of authenticating gesture into a distanced vision. The assonantal progression of "scene," "sea," "shore," as I have suggested, introduces another element which one might properly call "poetic," again suggesting a systematic vision far removed from the naive response of the child. And the moon "peering" uses the device of personification with an effect of the Wordsworthian uncanny, the strange "presence" in the mountainous landscape, very much as in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, a poem for which Borrow expressed an exaggerated and rather suspect dislike which surely masked envy.[32] Borrow had such mixed feelings about Wordsworth generally, yet (or because) his writing speaks everywhere of a massive and unacknowledged, because very diffuse, debt to the Romantic poet. At which point one has to say that this strange fusion of personal and impersonal, if we need to compare it with anyone else in literature, is remarkably like the Russian writer of fictionalized autobiography Mikhail Lermontov in his *Hero of Our Time*,[33] which must surely be the most Borrovian text not to have been written by Borrow.

The same applies to "Not far from the shore, upon the water." Of course in terms of the economy of realism Armstrong is right: surely we know that the boat must be on the water, we don't need to be told. But still Armstrong's objections are misplaced: "upon" is not the same as "on," there is a deliberate dramatic gesture enacted by the word, appropriate to the dreamlike reconstruction of a message from the unconscious. The same symbolic blurring attaches to the two figures (why not "individ-

uals"?) Surely we all know it is Crusoe and Friday, since there wasn't anyone else it could have been. But Borrow is again groping for what things meant to "him," the past self utterly at a loss before this vision of strange wild nature and the wild "individuals" battling for survival in it, fearful images of futurity, maybe resembling George and his older brother, John, who would certainly have been the one with the gun, while George watched.[34] "What I knew to be a gun" is masterly, of course. It takes us to the heart of the mystery of the child's very personal "knowledge" and its limits, without in any way trespassing upon it.

A psychoanalyst would surely be delighted with the "transparency" of this narrative which can deal with an obscure trauma (violence and mortal danger) so lucidly and can "place" George's childish past so beautifully in the context of Borrow's present. Equally masterly is the dream-like state of arrest in the use of the past continuous, "fire was flashing." Armstrong should not blame himself thus for wanting to look so closely at Borrow's prose. The trouble is that he does this on the basis of such a self-denying ordinance of critical practicality or functionalism that he sees very little of what is going on in it. And his anal-sadistic impulse to castrate Borrow's writing surely reproduces the way Borrow has been "abolished" by academic orthodoxy —— as Armstrong seems almost to recognize (he compares himself to a "schoolmaster" and Borrow to a pupil with an exercise for correction).[35] Armstrong was echoed by Kenneth Allott, who in his valuable Penguin anthology of prose on historical lines decided that Borrow was the most overrated author of his generation. To do this job of editing does not increase Borrow's pungency, actually, it diminishes it as surely as if that had been the envious critic's "real" intention. It is reminiscent of Sturge Moore's rewriting of Hopkins to remove the redundancies. The poetry dis-

appears as well.

My conclusion ought to be Lacanian I think, if only because I have made use of his ideas as a kind of subtext to my own text. Lacan uses the word "individual" too, quite a lot, not with Borrovian tentativeness but as a marker of the cramped one-dimensionality of modern man. Yet it is interesting to see the convergence of these two perspectives at some critical narrative juncture. "The individual" is a double-edged sword, the concept cuts both ways. When the dream work is done, and all the displaced fragments of one's experience, reproduced by various "individuals," have flown the nest, we still come back in Borrow as in Lacan (not to mention Wordsworth) to the unequal battle with "the name of the father" haunting not only this or that individual but whole nations, their cultures, and their languages. Borrow's life and work, fraught with creative anxiety as it was, reenacted this process of returning the paternal gaze over and over again. Why read Borrow? asks father, the father-in-the-mind. Is he significant? Does he "matter"? Will he get you promoted? Or to reiterate a question from my childhood (and not only): "Do you really need all those books?" "Why read Borrow?"

Why not?

Notes

1 Clement Shorter (ed.), *The Works of George Borrow*. London: Constable, 1923.
2 Edward Thomas (ed.), *The Pocket George Borrow*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1912.
3 George Borrow, *Gypsy Stories from the Bible in Spain*. Ed. with an introduction W. H. D. Rouse. London and Glasgow: Blackie, n. d.
4 Cf. H. S. Milford (ed.), *Borrow: Selections*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1924.
5 Thomas de Quincey. *The English Opium Eater* (1822), and James Hogg, *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824).

6 Cf. Michael Collie and Angus Fraser, *George Borrow: A Bibliographical Study*. London: St Paul's Bibliographies, 1964, pp. 85–127.
7 The standard book on Borrow as a linguist is Ann M. Ridler, *George Borrow as a Linguist: Images and Contexts*. Warborough: printed for private circulation, 1983.
8 I am thinking of Matthew Arnold in particular. See my article on Borrow's *Wild Wales*, in *Review of English Studies*, 47 (Kyoto Women's University, Japan, 2004), 15–36.
9 Cf. *Wild Wales*, n. 8 above.
10 The tradition of the novel of the "picaro," the wandering hero whose random adventures form the "plot" of the narrative.
11 Martin Armstrong, *George Borrow* (The English Novelists Series). London: Arthur Barker, 1950.
12 Reprinted in Milford, op. cit., pp. 19–26.
13 Edward Thomas, *George Borrow: The Man and His Books*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1912.
14 Reprinted in Milford, op. cit.
15 Saintsbury, op. cit.
16 ibid.
17 Different versions of the "totalizing" vision that Lukacs and others saw as a central feature of the workings of the bourgeois imagination.
18 Reprinted in Milford, op. cit.
19 Armstrong, op. cit.
20 ibid.
21 Saintsbury, op. cit.
22 George Borrow, *Lavengro*. Quoted by Armstrong, op. cit., p. 58.
23 William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, edition of 1800.
24 Donald Davie, *Purity of Diction in English Verse*. Lonodn: Chatto and Windus, 1952.
25 These seem to have begun with a breakdown, or depressive illness, which Borrow underwent at the Norwich School.
26 Like Bunyan's "grace abounding," the true source is scripture, especially the writings of St. Paul.
27 Cf. the "Appendices" to *The Romany Rye*.
28 One may cite the use of Armenian as a language of courtship, in *Lavengro* (Ch. 95), or the seductive fish-discourse in Welsh, in *Wild Wales* (Ch. 15).
29 Throughout *Wild Wales* Borrow uses Welsh poems he knows as "touchstones" of the authenticity of a place or a set of experiences.
30 L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*.
31 Martin Armstrong, op. cit., p. 59.
32 The reference, in *Lavengro*, is strangely veiled, but still recognizable.

33 Mikhail Lermontov, *The Hero of Our Time* (1840).
34 George tells us in *Lavnegro* that John was his parents' favourite, being much more manly and active than the introverted George (Ch. 27 and passim).
35 Armstrong, op. cit., p. 59.