

"Thus bound in nature's nakedness":

Ambivalent Freedom in Byron's *Mazeppa*

*We must leave this trim, finite room and go to confront the infinite.*

—Kenneth Clark<sup>1</sup>

Byron's verse-romance *Mazeppa* occupies an uncertain position in the poet's body of work. Though composed contemporaneously with the first Canto of his acknowledged satiric masterpiece, *Don Juan*, *Mazeppa* appears, on the surface, at least, to have more in common with older, more recognizably Byronic romances, such as *The Giaour* and *The Corsair*. Indeed, many critics seem uncertain in their evaluations of the poem's significance, often dismissing or leaving it off altogether. William H. Marshall crystallizes this scholarly ambivalence when he notes, in "A Reading of Byron's *Mazeppa*," that "Byron's *Mazeppa* is at once a more serious and more humorous poem than has been suggested" (120). In *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise*, Robert F. Gleckner dismisses *Mazeppa* as a throwback, attributing his own disdain for the work to Byron's example: "Byron himself, quite rightly, thought rather little of [*Mazeppa*]. [It] was a return to what was a mode that he had grown far beyond" (307). Perhaps the most jarring anecdotal evidence of the collective critical shrug induced by *Mazeppa* is the poem's omission from the Norton Critical Edition of *Byron's Poetry and Prose*, edited by Alice Levine and published in 2010. Critical neglect aside, a close examination of *Mazeppa* reveals that it is an important development in the Byronic conception of autonomy and that, in many ways, it is more directly anticipatory of *Don Juan* than its more formally *Don Juan*-esque predecessor, *Beppo*. In his retelling of the story of Mazeppa's violently constrained rocketing into the infinite, Byron enacts a dialectic of ambivalence, positing a

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Clark. *Civilisation*, Episode 12 "The Fallacies of Hope." BBC, 1969.

paradoxical notion of freedom that is made possible only through acknowledgment and submission to the radical bondage of a deterministic existence.

The constraints of fate and chance and the underlying lack of freedom these suggest are a predominant motif from *Mazeppa's* opening lines. Byron describes the scene of the wounded and defeated Charles XII's ignoble retreat from the triumphant Russian army in expressly fatalistic terms: "When fortune left the royal Swede [. . .] Such was the hazard of the die" (ll. 2, 15). Gieta, who gave his horse to Charles when the latter's was killed, is similarly described in terms emphasizing fatalistic bondage: "[he] died the Russians' slave" (l. 24). When Charles asks Mazeppa to tell him how he learned to ride horses so adeptly, Mazeppa initially demurs, but Charles's response, "But I request, / . . . thou wilt tell / This tale of thine," implies the prerogative of his rank and thus, even in recounting his story, Mazeppa is under the constraints of obligation (ll. 119-121). Even the pleasant aspects of Mazeppa's journey, such as the circumstances of his meeting with Teresa, are described in terms which emphasize the role of chance or fortune, implying a lack of freedom or self-determination: "some glances / At Warsaw's youth, some songs, and dances, Awaited but the usual chances, / Those happy accidents . . ." (ll. 172-175). In fact "happy" turns up frequently in *Mazeppa*, most startlingly as Mazeppa is describing to Charles the phenomenon of falling in love: "In sooth, it was a happy doom, / But yet where happiest ends in pain" (ll. 296-297).

The ideas of chance and fate and, indeed, doom are inextricably linked to a fundamental notion of unfreedom in the poem. Of course this is only most obvious in the physical constraints under which Mazeppa is placed on the horse. But even Count Palatine's response to the knowledge that he had been cuckolded by Mazeppa is framed in terms emphasizing a lack of control: "But he was most enraged lest such / An accident should

chance to touch / Upon his future pedigree" (354). Of course, closely tied to the notion of fate as limiting is the idea of will, especially thwarted will. One of the more intense moments of Mazeppa's night ride comes as he becomes aware that he and the horse to which he is bound fast are being pursued by a pack of wolves. His response, here as elsewhere, is framed in terms of will, thwarted and otherwise:

Oh! how I wish'd for spear or sword,  
 At least to die amidst the horde,  
 And perish—if it must be so—  
 At bay, destroying many a foe.  
 When first my courser's race begun,  
 I wish'd the goal already won;  
 But now I doubted strength and speed.  
 Vain doubt! his swift and savage breed  
 Had nerved him like the mountain-roe;  
 Nor faster falls the blinding snow  
 Which whelms the peasant near the door  
 Whose threshold he shall cross no more, [. . .]  
 All furious as a favour'd child  
 Balk'd of its wish; or fiercer still—  
 A woman piqued—who has her will. (ll. 504-514, 518-520)

The interrelated ideas of will and wish and even favor, which has some of the connotation of fortune, are complexly played throughout this passage. First, Mazeppa's response to the new existential threat of the wolf pack is simply to wish that he could die opposing them, rather than bound inextricably to the back of this tremendous beast. Further, when it becomes

clear that his concerns over the stamina of the steed are unfounded, he describes the horse's furious galloping in precisely willful terms. But the dynamic of bondage in *Mazeppa* reaches its most complex statement just a few lines later. The wolves have seemingly been left behind and still the charger races on. Mazeppa's sensations in this moment become a profound statement of the deterministic undercurrent of the poem:

And what with fury, fear, and wrath,  
 The tortures which beset my path,  
 Cold, hunger, sorrow, shame, distress,  
 Thus bound in nature's nakedness;  
 Sprung from a race whose rising blood  
 When stirr'd beyond its calmer mood,  
 And trodden hard upon, is like  
 The rattle-snake's, in act to strike,  
 What marvel if this worn-out trunk,  
 Beneath its woes a moment sunk? (ll.529-538)

Thus, Mazeppa here is making a clear association between nature and his bondage; in other words, it is nature that makes us un-free. This idea reaches its ultimate expression a few lines later, when, after passing out for some time due to the exhaustion and torture of his ordeal, Mazeppa awakens, observing, "Life reassumed its lingering hold" (571). Here then, Mazeppa is contradicting the typical association of death with bondage by expressing that it is life itself that is responsible for our lack of freedom.

This sort of ambivalent contradiction is one of the poem's primary dialectical modes, and is introduced with our first introduction to Mazeppa himself: "The Ukraine's hetman,

calm and bold" (l. 56). In fact, Mazeppa is characterized almost exclusively in terms of oppositions, both internal and external. One of the most obvious and important of these is the opposition between the lusty, youthful Mazeppa of the story and the mature, grizzled Mazeppa telling the tale. One of the most profound differences between these two versions of Mazeppa is the presence or absence of romantic love as a prime motivating drive. What is especially telling about this is that, though Mazeppa clearly recognizes the instigating role that his passions played in his terrible and violent ordeal, he would clearly do it all over again, if given the chance:

My days and nights were nothing—all  
 Except that hour, which doth recall  
 In the long lapse from youth to age  
 No other like itself—I'd give  
 The Ukraine back again to live  
 It o'er once more—and be a page,  
 The happy page, who was the lord  
 Of one soft heart, and his own sword,  
 And had no other gem nor wealth  
 Save nature's gift of youth and health. (ll. 301-310)

This passage is especially instructive, because here he is not focusing on the ultimate happy outcome of his Ukrainian adventure—indeed, he claims he'd give up all he controls—but instead on the sensual pleasure of being in love. Moreover, that "happy page," so proud of his sword, of which it seems almost superfluous to point out its phallic association, possesses no wealth at all, save the *natural* gifts of youth and health.

Here it is germane to point out the oppositions between Mazeppa and Charles XII. In *Fiery Dust*, Jerome McGann usefully draws our attention to the obvious parallels between Charles XII and Napoleon: "Like Napoleon, who has a 'fever at the core' (*CHP* III, 42), Charles is driven along by a 'fever in the blood' (*Mazeppa*, 37). The parallel with Napoleon is directly conveyed in the opening stanza" (177). While there is little doubt that Byron was fully cognizant of the similarities between his era's great-man-brought-low and the figure of the Swedish king, as drawn in Voltaire's account, McGann's emphasis on Charles's "[embodying] the characteristic traits of the Byronic hero" is perhaps placing too much importance on a figure who seems placed in the poem at once to provide the impetus for Mazeppa's tale, as well as to draw a specific contrast against the eponymous hero's characteristics. And of course the strongest contrast between Charles and Mazeppa is that the former is ambitious for the sake of ambition, while Mazeppa gives sway to his sensuous desires. It is here that some of the poem's more expressly humorous moments come out. Mazeppa makes repeated references to Charles's alleged innocence in amorous matters, first in his description of his former master Casimir:

A learned monarch, faith! was he,  
 And most unlike your majesty:  
 He made no wars, and did not gain  
 New realms to lose them back again;  
 And (save debates in Warsaw's diet)  
 He reign'd in most unseemly quiet;  
 Not that he had no cares to vex,  
 He loved the muses and the sex; (ll. 131-138)

Mazeppa will again raise this issue of Charles's apparent frigidity in response to his own sexual desires. In this again, the tone is decidedly tongue-in-cheek:

I loved, and was beloved again—  
 They tell me, sire, you never knew  
 Those gentle frailties; if 'tis true,  
 I shorten all my joy or pain;  
 to you 'twould seem absurd as vain;  
 But all men are not born to reign,  
 Or o'er their passions, or as you  
 Thus o'er themselves and nations too. (ll. 282-289)

There is a distinct note of irony here, especially in Mazeppa's assertion that, unlike himself, Charles has reign over his passions. While it is certainly true that Charles is not subject to Mazeppa's amorous whims, it is implicit in his defeat, as well as Mazeppa's earlier comments, that Charles is ungovernably aggressive in his imperialistic aims. McGann points out that Voltaire's *Histoire de Charles XII* argues the personal and political futility of Charles's career, and concludes that the program of a beneficent and peaceful monarchy is much preferable to any policy of conquest, no matter how adventurous or daring (177). But McGann then argues, noting the irony in the passage excerpted above, that "the poem's ultimate point is that Charles does not really know how to reign over himself or his kingdom, but Mazeppa does" (179). It seems inarguable that the poem implies Charles's inability to reign—indeed, he just lost his kingdom—but this hardly seems the point of the poem, nor is it at all clear from where McGann is reading that Mazeppa would be better equipped. This, I would argue, is one of the supreme ambivalences of *Mazeppa*. Byron is no doubt implicating Charles in his ungovernable imperialism, which highlights a similar disappointment, which

the poet must have felt over Napoleon's naked ambition. But what seems more central to the poem as a whole is Mazeppa's candid and unrepentant admission of his own former ungovernable passions, of the amorous variety. There are two Mazeppas in the poem, one who is young and subject to amorous passions beyond his control, and one who is the old man telling the story, no doubt long past the age when such matters were of any concern to him. Yet, I hasten to point out again, he is explicitly unrepentant. In a letter addressed to Thomas Moore from February 1817, a matter of weeks before he began composing *Mazeppa*, Byron makes it clear that this was a primary concern of his, though he has "but just turned the corner of twenty-nine" (725). This particular letter includes the entire text of Byron's short poem, "So we'll go no more a roving," in which Byron laments, "For the sword outwears its sheath, / And the soul wears out the breast, / And the heart must pause to breathe, / And Love itself have rest" (725). But if this ambivalence about passions governed and ungoverned seems irreconcilable, then Byron appears to state the matter more fully, toward the end of *Mazeppa*:

And, strange to say, the sons of pleasure,  
 They who have revell'd beyond measure  
 In beauty, wassail, wine, and treasure,  
 Die calm, or calmer, oft than he  
 Whose heritage was misery:  
 For he who hath in turn run through  
 All that was beautiful and new,  
 Hath nought to hope, and nought to leave;  
 And, save the future, (which is view'd  
 Not quite as men are base or good,



But as their nerves may be endured),  
 With nought perhaps to grieve:— (ll. 736-747)

Thus Byron here makes a clear distinction between those who submit to passions of a sensuous nature and those who would "run through / All that was beautiful and new." The former can at least look forward to a calm demise, while the latter, aside from destroying beautiful things, lose hope.

And of course, giving in to one's sensuous desires is a form of submission, and submission is an important element in the version of ambivalent autonomy conceived in *Mazeppa*. Indeed, submission to sensuous desire becomes Mazeppa's first mode of access to resignation, letting go of his resistance of the bondage in which he finds himself. And this dynamic of resignation and submission is further linked with the notion of truth espoused by Mazeppa. The importance of truth and the dynamic between truth and power is expressed early in the poem, as Byron sets the scene of Charles and his defeated soldiers: "And not a voice was heard t' upbraid / Ambition in his humbled hour, / When truth had nought to dread from power" (ll. 20-22). Mazeppa, when describing the court poets of Casimir, even makes a nominally jocular allusion to the truth-telling function of the satirist: "So sung his poets, all but one, / Who, being unpension'd, made a satire, / And boasted that he could not flatter" (ll. 148-150). Mazeppa's mocking tone aside, this is a poet who began his career writing satire in an expressly Pope-ian mode and who, as he is composing *Mazeppa*, was beginning the satire that would be his great masterpiece. But of course, a major aspect of the condition of truth expressed in *Mazeppa* is the notion of resignation, and, for Mazeppa, that resignation comes in the recognition that it is fruitless to struggle against his un-freedom. The related motifs of resignation and resistance are woven throughout the poem,

which is a function of the story's being recounted some years after the event. Thus, in the thick of his nightmarish ride, Mazeppa recounts:

But no—my bound and slender frame  
 Was nothing to his angry might,  
 And merely like a spur became:  
 Each motion which I made to free  
 My swoln limbs from their agony  
 Increased his fury and affright . . . (ll. 450-455)

Thus here we see that not only are his strivings to free himself fruitless, but they also actually compound the direness of his terrible bondage. Mazeppa does not learn his lesson fully right away and thus later:

With feeble effort still I tried  
 To rend the bonds so starkly tied—  
 but still it was in vain;  
 My limbs were only wrung the more,  
 And soon the idle strife gave o'er,  
 Which but prolong'd the pain:  
 The dizzy race seem'd almost done,  
 Although no goal was nearly won . . . (ll. 635-642)

This last couplet is especially instructive as to the view of the pointlessness of struggle against the forces that curtail our freedom, as outlined in *Mazeppa*. But again, Mazeppa is recounting his story, and thus has the benefit of hindsight in knowing that it was resignation that finally freed him. Thus, as early as when he tells of the Count's first learning of his

wife's infidelity, he stresses his attitude of resignation: "My moments seem'd reduced to few;  
/ And with one prayer to Mary Mother, / And, it may be, a saint or two, / As I resign'd me  
to my fate" (ll. 335-338). A particularly complexly ambivalent moment comes just as the  
Count's men bind him to the horse:

They bound me to his foaming flank:  
At length I play'd them one as frank—  
For time at last sets all things even—  
And if we do but watch the hour,  
There never yet was human power  
Which could evade, if unforgiven,  
The patient search and vigil long  
Of him who treasures up a wrong. (ll. 415-422)

Of course, Mazeppa is speaking directly here of the issue of vengeance, which, as we know, he eventually attained. But it seems perhaps just as pertinent to read these lines in the broader sense that, indeed, time does set "all things even," but in a more final sense. This reading takes on particular poignancy when, a few lines later, Mazeppa describes riding over the vast and open battlefield, with "frost o'er every tombless head" (l. 479). Mazeppa will repeatedly interject moments like this, reminding us of that moment when we will all "turn to dust" (l. 566). The freedom inherent in resignation becomes more explicit as Mazeppa recounts the moment when he lay bound to the now-dead horse:

And there from morn till twilight bound,  
I felt the heavy hours toil round,  
With just enough of life to see

My last of suns go down on me,  
 In hopeless certainty of mind,  
 That makes us feel at length resign'd  
 To that which our foreboding years  
 Presents the worst and last of fears  
 Inevitable—even a boon,  
 Nor more unkind for coming soon . . . (ll. 718-727)

McGann also recognizes the importance of this moment in Mazeppa's journey, arguing that "Mazeppa is saved from death when he ceases to struggle against it, when he gives himself up to the governance of the unearthly power he participates in" (182). But then, I think *Mazeppa* is more than a poem about resigning ourselves to the inevitable, and that it presents a mode of access to autonomy through resignation. In one sense, Mazeppa expresses it in the context of his ultimate accession to a position of power in Ukraine: "Bound, naked, bleeding, and alone, / To pass the desert to a throne,— / What mortal his own doom may guess?— / Let none despond, let none despair!" (ll. 851-854).

But while Mazeppa's avowals against despair may ring a little hollow in the context of Charles's cadre's dire circumstances, I think that Byron is offering something that may be somewhat occluded from Mazeppa's vision: access to the infinite by virtue of a compromise made with the facts of unfreedom, facilitated by the fire of imagination. The infinite is expressed variously throughout the poem, but most directly through the recurring, and, indeed, redeeming image of water, and of course, in the boundless open wilderness itself. This is an idea that finds expression in later literature. For example, in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Ishmael sits in a chapel in an early chapter, contemplating the cenotaphs memorializing whalers lost at sea:

It needs scarcely be told, with what feelings, on the eve of a Nantucket voyage, I regarded those marble tablets, and by the murky light of that darkened, doleful day read the fate of the whalemens who had gone before me. Yes, Ishmael, the same fate may be thine. But somehow I grew merry. (45)

Thus here, in the contemplation of the likelihood of his death and the utter meaninglessness of the world in which he lives, Ishmael finds reason to be merry. In "Winckelmann," Walter Pater, attempting to find some access to comfort in the face of evidence of a radically determined existence, asks, "Who, if he saw through all, would fret against the chain of circumstance which endows one at the end with those great experiences" (185). As unrelated as these two texts might seem to Mazeppa's circumstances, there is a common thread connecting them all: imagination. In *Mazeppa*, the imagination is most directly associated with images of spark and fire and is often tightly bound with expressions of the infinite. Indeed, Mazeppa invokes his imagination even as he begins his tale: "Theresa's form— / Methinks it glides before me now" (202-203). Then, as he recalls his first meeting with the Count's wife, it invokes powerful forces in his imagination:

We met—we gazed—I saw, and sigh'd,  
 She did not speak, and yet replied;  
 There are ten thousand tones and signs  
 We hear and see, but none defines—  
 Involuntary sparks of thought,  
 Which strike from out the heart o'erwrought,  
 And form a strange intelligence,  
 Alike mysterious and intense,  
 Which link the burning chain that binds,

Without their will, young hearts and minds;  
 Conveying, as the electric wire,  
 We know not how, the absorbing fire.— (ll. 232-243)

This moment is especially prescient, because it highlights the involuntariness, the lack of will involved in amorous passion, as well as highlighting the type of passion that differentiates Mazeppa from Charles. Meanwhile, as Mazeppa begins the description of his ride, his expression of the horse's incomprehensible speed highlights the fiery otherworldliness of the imaginative encounter with the infinite: "We sped like meteors through the sky" (l. 426). The entire course of Mazeppa's journey is riddled with allusions to the boundlessness of his surroundings, highlighting the paradoxical linkage between his bondage and his access to the infinite. Finally, the association of the fire of the imagination with access to autonomy in the limitless is stated most explicitly in the person of the girl who finally looses Mazeppa from his bonds:

A slender girl, long-hair'd, and tall,  
 Sate watching by the cottage wall;  
 The sparkle of her eye I caught,  
 Even with my first return of thought;  
 For ever and anon she threw  
 A prying, pitying glance on me  
 With her black eyes so wild and free:  
 I gazed, and gazed, until I knew  
 No vision it could be,—  
 But that I lived, and was released . . . (ll. 806-815)

The question of *Mazeppa's* relation to *Don Juan* often turns on the smattering of humor and digression which appear in the former work and which would become such integral parts of the latter. The ending in particular, with its revelation that the story had fulfilled its purpose and that Charles had fallen asleep, has been a source for particular consternation amongst critics. McGann bases his conclusion that "The irony does undercut the integrity of the work" on the assumption that the story was being told in order to teach Charles some kind of lesson (184). While this reading can ostensibly be justified, it seems to miss the broader point of *Mazeppa's* journey. Peter W. Graham, as well, asserts that "the tale's relevance . . . is undercut by the poem's last line" (92). While the moments of irony and digression are present in the work, they seem so minor to me as to be hardly worth consideration, in the sense that they are only ancillary to the expressions of ambivalent autonomy that I have outlined here. I think it best to conclude, with Leslie Marchand, that "in the picture of the young wife of the old count whose decoration with horns led to *Mazeppa's* involuntary ride on a wild horse, Byron ran full tilt into the accents and attitudes of *Don Juan*" (71).

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