

Giorgio Gordon Lord Byron e Marguerite, Contessa di Blessington, a Genova e Nervi

I had sung
What Lawrence had painted so well

Le poche notizie che legano Lord Byron a Nervi le dobbiamo soprattutto a Marguerite Power, Contessa di Blessington, dama irlandese di notevole bellezza, protagonista nei salotti letterari alla moda della sua epoca, letterata, scrittrice di viaggi.

L'antefatto

I Blessington viaggiavano in compagnia della sorella più giovane di Marguerite e del Conte d'Orsay, un dandy che poi li accompagnò per tutta la vita. Il più vivo desiderio di Lady Blessington era conoscere Byron di cui aveva letto tutte le opere e visitato i luoghi descritti nei suoi libri.

Questo desiderio finalmente si realizzò a Genova nel 1823.

I Blessington a Genova

Il 31 marzo 1823, appena raggiunto l'Hotel de la Ville a Genova, Marguerite scrisse nel suo diario:

'And am I indeed in the same town with Byron? To-morrow I may perhaps behold him. I never before felt the same impatient longing to see anyone known to me only by his works. I hope he may not be fat as Moore described him; for a fat poet is an anomaly in my opinion. Well well, to-morrow I may know what he is like, and now to bed to sleep away the fatigues of my journey.' (1)

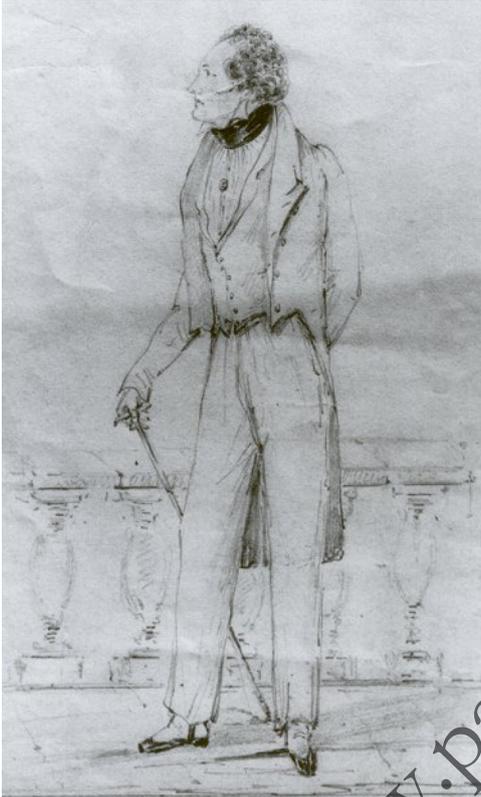
Il giorno dopo, nel sole profumato di primavera, Lady Blessington, suo marito, sua sorella, e il Conte D'Orsay si recarono in carrozza sino al villaggio di Albaro, attraversando Genova, con la sua folla vivace di marinai, soldati e civili, quadri viventi di per se stessi; le sue strade strette e le alte case dipinte rosso; i suoi magnifici palazzi, ampi e ombrosi, i suoi giardini pensili e la vista del mare di un blu lampeggiante colto alla svolta delle strade.

Il Conte aveva già conosciuto Byron, che all'epoca aveva trentasei anni, ed era ansioso di rinnovarne la conoscenza ma soprattutto voleva presentargli la moglie

Arrivati al cancello del cortile Lord Blessington e il Conte D'Orsay trasmisero i loro nomi e furono immediatamente ammessi, ricevendo una cordiale accoglienza da Byron, che si disse lieto di vedere un vecchio amico e che sperava di poter essere presentato a Lady Blessington. Udito ciò Blessington disse che lei e la sorella erano in carrozza al cancello.

'Byron poi' come la contessa scrisse 'subito si affrettò a uscire nel cortile, e io, sentito il suono dei suoi passi, guardai attraverso la porta e vidi che mi si avvicinava rapidamente, senza cappello, e precedendo gli altri due signori.' (1)

"You must have thought me quite as illbred and savage as fame reports" said Byron bowing very low " in having permitted your ladyship to remain a quarter of an hour at my gate; but my old friend Lord Blessington is to blame, for I only heard a minute ago that I was so highly honoured. I shall think you do not pardon this apparent rudeness unless you enter my abode, which I entreat you will do " e mi offrì la mano per aiutarmi a scendere dalla carrozza. (1)



'Lord Byron nella villa di Albaro
in un disegno del Conte D'Orsay

A prima vista Marguerite rimase delusa dall'aspetto del poeta. Si era aspettata un dignitoso, freddo, riservato e arrogante individuo, simile a tanti personaggi dei suoi scritti ma subito si ricredette, conquistata dal fascino della sua personalità e fu costretta ad ammettere che la maggior parte delle persone sarebbe rimasta soddisfatta dal suo aspetto cordiale e attratta dalle sue piacevoli maniere.

"His head 'is peculiarly wellshaped, the forehead high, open, and highly indicative of intellectual power; his eyes are grey and expressive, one is visibly larger than the other ; his nose looks handsome in profile, but in front is somewhat clumsy ; the eyebrows are well defined and flexible ; the mouth is faultless, the upper lip being of Grecian shortness and both as finely chiselled, to use an artist's phrase, as those of an antique statue.

There is a scornful expression in the latter feature that does not deteriorate from its beauty. His chin is large but well-shaped and not at all fleshy, and finishes well his face, which is of an oval form. His hair has already much of silver among its dark brown curls ; its texture is very silky, and although it retreats from his temples leaving his forehead very bare, its growth at the sides and back of his head is abundant.

I have seldom seen finer teeth than Lord Byron's, and never a smoother or more fair skin, for though very pale, his is not the pallor of ill-health. He is so exceedingly thin that his figure has an almost boyish air ; and yet there is something so striking in his whole appearance that could not be mistaken for an ordinary person. I do not think that I should have observed his lameness, had my attention not been called to it by his own visible consciousness of this infirmity — a consciousness that gives a gaiticherie to his movements.'

Nell penombra dei saloni di Villa Saluzzo "Lady Blessington, her expressive face bright with smiles of triumph and gratification, her exquisite toilette radiant with colour, came as a glow of sunshine. Her host showed every sign of enjoying the company of his visitors.

At first the conversation turned on mutual friends, and then on the number of English people who pestered him with visits, though a great number were unknown to and many of them but slightly acquainted with him. He stated that he steadily refused to receive any but those he really wished to see ; as for the others he added ' they avenge themselves by attacking me in every sort of way, and there is no story too improbable for the craving appetites of our slander-loving countrymen.'

....
When she proposed to end her visit he urged her to stay, and time passed pleasantly. When eventually she rose he warmly expressed the gratification the visit had given him, and Lady Blessington states that she did not doubt his sincerity : not that she claimed any merit to account for his satisfaction, but that she saw he liked hearing news of his old haunts and associates and likes also to pass them en revue,

Yet' she adds 'he does not give me the impression that he is ill-natured or malicious, even whilst uttering remarks that imply the presence of these qualities. It appears to me that they proceed from a reckless levity of disposition that renders him incapable of checking the spirihs but sarcastic sallies which the possession of a very uncommon degree of shrewdness, and a still more rare wit, occasion : and seeing how he amuses his hearers, he cannot resist the temptation, although at the expense of many whom he proposes to like.'

On the day succeeding the visit of Lady Blessington and her party to the Casa Saluzzi, Lord Byron presented himself at their hotel, first sending up two cards in an envelope as a preliminary to his entrance. They had just finished dejeuner, but the earliness of his visit did not hinder his welcome. On his part the poet was brighter and more buoyant than before.

Lady Blessington told him that as early as nine that morning she had been to the flower market, and expressed surprise that the poorest classes bought flowers as if they were the necessities of life, when Lord

Byron fell to praising the people and the city, enumerating amongst its other advantages that it contained so few English either as residents or birds of passage.

.....

La visita dura due ore e “ Before leaving he promised to dine with them on the following Thursday ; theirs being, as he assured them, the first invitation to dinner he had accepted for two years.

On returning to his palazzo, Byron sat down and wrote to Moore ' I have just seen some friends of yours who paid me a visit yesterday, which in honour of them and of you, I returned to-day; as I reserve my bearskin and teeth, and paws and claws for our enemies. . . . Your allies, whom I found very agreeable personages, are Milor Blessington and epouse, travelling with a very handsome companion in the shape of a ' French count ' .

..... **Miladi seems highly literary, to which and your honour's acquaintance with the family I attribute the pleasure of having seen them. She is also very pretty, even in a morning, a species of beauty on which the sun of Italy does not shine so frequently as the chandelier.'**

Arrivato a Genova il cavallo favorito di Marguerite, Mameluke, “**the whole party rode to Nervi** a few days later, the poet acting as their cicerone. He was neither a good nor a bold rider, though he had much pretensions to horsemanship and when mounted must have presented an extraordinary figure ; for his horse was covered with trappings, whilst the saddle was a la hussarde, its holsters bristling with pistols.

The rider wore nankeen jacket and trousers a trifle shrunk from washing, the jacket embroidered, the waist short, the back narrow, three rows of buttons in front ; a black satin stock clasping his neck; on his head a dark blue velvet cap with a shade, a rich gold tassel hanging from the crown ; nankeen gaiters, and a pair of blue spectacles.

Knowing Genoa and its surroundings he pointed out sites of surpassing beauty, but a certain indifference he exhibited towards their charm surprised Lady Blessington, on expressing which he said laughingly “I suppose you expected me to explode into some enthusiastic exclamations on the sea, the scenery etc., such as poets indulge in, or rather are supposed to indulge in ; but the truth is I hate cant of every kind, and the cant of the love of nature as much as any other.' So 'she comments' **to avoid the appearance of one affectation he assumes another, that of not admiring.”**

Byron seemed as delighted with the companionship of the Blessingtons as they were with his, and he was continually dining, or riding with them, writing to or calling on them, or sitting for his portrait to D'Orsay in their salon, and this close association enabled the Countess to notice many traits in him before unsuspected. Now he comes to drink tea with her after dinner, and being animated tells stories of his London life, gossips about acquaintances and mimics the people he describes, ridiculing their vanities and telling their secrets. He delighted in hearing what was passing in the world of fashion, and his correspondents in London kept him au courant of its scandals. (3)

Anche se Byron lasciò poche notizie circa Lady Blessington durante le settimane che i Blessington trascorsero a Genova passò forse più tempo con lei che con la sua amante, la contessa Teresa Guiccioli, nell'a villa di Albaro (ora via Albaro 1) che aveva affittato e sulla facciata della quale ancora oggi si può leggere:

**RIPOSANDO LA VITA FORTUNOSA
QUÌ DIMORÒ E SCRISSE
GIORGIO GORDON LORD BYRON
FINCHÈ L'INTENSO GRIDO
DELLA GRECA LIBERTÀ RISORTA
NOL TRAEVA MAGNANIMO
A LACRIMATO FINE
IN MISSOLUNGI
1822-23**

Ecco alcuni versi da lui composti e dedicati a Marguerite:

To the Countess of Blessington

You have asked for a verse:- the request
In a rhymer 'twere strange to deny,

.....

Were I now as I was, I had sung
What Lawrence had painted so well;
But the strain would expire on my tongue,
And the theme is too soft for my shell.
I am ashes where once I was fire,
And the bard in my bosom is dead;
What I loved I now merely admire,
And my heart is as grey as my head.

In questi versi il poeta si riferisce al ritratto che Thomas Lawrence le fece nel 1822.

Lady Blessington viene così descritta in una lettera a Thomas Moore:

"Your other allies, whom I have found very agreeable personages, are Milor Blessington and epouse, travelling with a very handsome companion... Miladi seems highly literary, to which, and your honour's acquaintance with the family, I attribute the pleasure of having seen them. **She is also very pretty even in the morning, - a species of beauty on which the sun of Italy does not shine so frequently as the chandelier.** Certainly English women wear better than their continental neighbours of the same sex." (5)

Ci fu un momento, forse, in cui i Blessington pensarono di soggiornare a lungo a Genova. Infatti:

"In the spring of 1823, Byron persuaded them to occupy the Villa Paradiso, and was accustomed to accompany them frequently **on horseback excursions along the coast to their favourite Nervi.**" (4)

La ragione delle insistenze di Byron era dovuta al fatto che i Blessington erano scesi all'Hotel de Ville, nel centro della città, mentre invece Villa Paradiso era vicinissima a Villa Saluzzo dove lui abitava. A questo proposito Byron scrisse:

Beneath Blessington's eyes
The reclaimed Paradise
Should be as free as the former from Evil;
But if the new Eve
For an apple should grieve
What mortal would not play the devil? (3, pag. 87)

After a stay of about six weeks in Genoa the Blessingtons, having seen all the city and its environs had to show, began to make preparations to resume their journey which they now decided was to end in Naples. The prospect of losing such pleasant neighbours and friends was displeasing to Byron who warmly urged them to remain until he had started for Greece.

Then he took them to see an extremely picturesque but slightly dilapidated villa named II Paradiso, situated near his own palace, which he suggested they should rent.

A Lady Blessington la villa piacque molto tanto che il poeta prendendo una matita scrisse questi versi:

' **In future times people will come to see II Paradiso where Byron wrote an impromptu on his countrywoman ; thus our names will be associated when we have long ceased to exist.**'



In risposta, Lady Blessington scrisse sul suo diario: **“And heaven only knows to how many commentaries so simple an incident may hereafter give rise.”** (3, pag. 88)

Eventualmente the Blessingtons decided not to take the villa, and the day of their departure from Genoa was fixed. Byron, who foresaw how much he should miss their pleasant company, became graver in his manner and continually dwelt on his journey to Greece. (3, pag. 88)

Later he softened once more and gave them all some little present by which they might remember him in years to come ; to one a book, to another a print of his bust by Bartolini, and to Lady Blessington a copy of his Armenian Grammar which contained notes in his own writing. In return he asked for some souvenir, something she had worn that he might keep ; on which she took a ring from her finger and gave it to him. Byron was touched and gratified, and on the impulse of the moment took from his stock and presented to her a pin bearing a small cameo of Napoleon, which the poet said had long been his companion.

When the final words came to be said his lips quivered, his voice became inarticulate, and tears rushed into his eyes. His parting was full of melancholy. That night Lady Blessington, heavy of heart and oppressed by nervous fear, wrote in her diary :

'Should his presentiment be realised, and we indeed meet no more, I shall never cease to remember him with kindness ; the very idea that I shall not see him again, overpowers me with sadness, and makes me forget many defects which had often disenchanted me with him. Poor Byron. I will not allow myself to think that we have met for the last time; although he has infected us all by his superstitious forebodings.'

Sebbene non dovessero più vedersi, i Blessington ebbero ancora sue notizie prima di lasciare Genova per Napoli perchè il mattino successivo ricevettero un biglietto con le seguenti parole:

' My dear Lady Blessington, — I am superstitious and have recollected that memorials with a point are of less fortunate augury : I will therefore request you to accept instead of the pin ^ the enclosed chain which is of slight a value that you need not hesitate.

As you wished for something worn I can only say that it has been worn oftener and longer than any other. It is of Venetian manufacture, and the only peculiarity about it is, that it could only be obtained at or from Venice. At Genoa they have none of the same kind.

.....

You will perhaps have the goodness to acknowledge the receipt of this note, and send back the pin (for good luck's sake) which I shall value much more for having been a night in your custody.' (3, pag. 94-95)

Quando i Blessington furono costretti a partire l'addio fu malinconico e carico di funesti presagi.

Nelle parole di Marguerite:

'I shall never cease to remember him with kindness: the very idea that I shall not see him again overpowers me with sadness and makes me forget many defects which had so often disenchanted me with him.'

Byron morì il 10 aprile del 1824 a Missolongi, combattendo per la libertà della Grecia. Ricevuta la notizia, Marguerite scrisse:

'Alas, alas! His presentiment of dying in Greece has been too well fulfilled, and I used to banter him on his superstitious presentiment. Poor Byron, long, long will you be remembered by us with feelings of deep regret". (3, pag. 128)

Nervi nei ricordi di Lady Blessington

Lady Blessington nella sua opera *'Conversations of Lord Byron'*, scritta sulla base di un diario da lei tenuto nel 1823 quando incontrò Byron a Genova, ricorda Nervi due volte:

“One of our first rides with Lord Byron was to Nervi, a village on the sea-coast, most romantically situated, and each turn of the road presenting various and beautiful prospects. They were all familiar to him, and he failed not to point them out, but in very sober terms, never allowing any thing like enthusiasm in his expressions, thought many of the views might have excited him....” (1)

“The first time I had an opportunity of speaking to him without witnesses was on the road to Nervi, on horseback, when he asked me if I had not observed a great change in him. I allowed that I had...”

Le testimonianze

“A Genova l'ultima volta che visitò madama Blessington che stava in sul partire, pregato da lei a volerle lasciare in ricordo qualche cosa che egli avesse portato, spiccossi dal seno una spilla con cammeo rappresentante Napoleone, e la diede alla dama. Ma l'indomani mattina le scrisse un biglietto.

Dicevale d'essersi risovvenuto che i ricordi con punta sono di mal augurio, e la pregava a rimandargli la spilla a scampo, com'ei diceva, di sventura, e ad accettare una catenella che invece le mandava, assicurandola che la catenella era stata da lui portata più tempo che la spilla: tanto gli premeva di recuperare quel ricordo malauguroso.

.....

“To sono determinato (diceva con madama Blessington) a scuotermi d'addosso i miei difetti e a non aspettare che se ne vadano da se medesimi; ma l'ipocrisia mi è talmente in avversione, ch'io temo tutto ciò che le somiglia, e ciò fa che in cospetto del pubblico io preferisca di farmi peggiore di quel che son realmente”.

....

Una sera recatosi dalla contessa Blessington, che dovea partir l'indomani da Genova con suo marito, per tutto il tempo che vi si trattenne in conversazione non fece che affliggere gli astanti con malinconici discorsi: parlò del suo viaggio con senso di scoraggiamento, si dolse colla contessa e col conte che partissero prima del suo imbarco; qui, disse, eccoci tutti insieme; ma quando, e dove ci rincontreremo? Ho certo presentimento che questa sia l'ultima volta che noi ci vediamo, e qualche cosa mi dice che io non tornerò più dalla Grecia. Dette le quali parole, sedendo sul sofà colla signora, appoggiò la testa alla sponda, e pianse per qualche minuto.”

(2)

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