

Contours of Conflict: "The Giaour" in Byron and Delacroix

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In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries many artists drew their subjects from Near Eastern culture in the trend known as Orientalism. During this period, one of the most prominent discourses of European narration and illustration focused on the Near East as a realm characterized by inherent violence. The Near East at that time extended from Morocco to Greece and Turkey. Both the Scottish poet Lord George Gordon Byron and the French painter Eugène Delacroix were no exception when it came to portraying intense conflict within an Oriental context. Delacroix's 1826 and 1835 versions of *The Combat of the Giaour and Hassan* are inspired by Byron's tale of violence, *The Giaour*, published in 1813. The focus of this examination will lead beyond the Orientalist matrix. In his temporal medium of literature Byron manipulated the plot and locale of *The Giaour* to focus the reader on the violent interaction of his characters. Correspondingly, Delacroix manipulated the formal and chromatic qualities of his paintings to focus the viewer on the central encounter. In any exhaustive discussion of an artist, there will be, inevitably, a consideration of artistic sources. Scholars have recognized elsewhere Rubens' influence on Delacroix and Milton's influence on Byron: this study instead seeks to investigate methodology, the interdisciplinary correlation of the depiction of intense conflict. To reveal the analogous methods that Byron and Delacroix used to focus the viewer, and to shape and intensify the antagonistic encounters of their compositions is the objective.

Although there are Orientalist themes in the first two cantos of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, published in 1812, *The Giaour* is the first of what are known as his Eastern tales. It was published in its final form with 1334 lines on December 27, 1813! The story is about the beautiful Leila, who deceived Hassan, her Muslim lover and master by falling in love with another man, who is called a Giaour, which was both a derogatory term for a non-Muslim and a word meaning stranger. Hassan discovers her unfaithfulness and, although deeply in love with Leila, punishes her by sending her to be drowned, as custom demanded. Her lover, the Giaour, kills Hassan in revenge and then spends the rest of his life at a monastery, unrepentant and unhappy, haunted by the vision of the lost Leila. The character of the Giaour is an example of the fate-stricken, defiant Byronic hero.

Byron manipulates plot and locale to focus the reader's attention on the main characters and on their

interaction with one another; he encapsulates the simple plot in his preface to the poem. The plot, as revealed in the poem itself, is composed of what Byron called "dis-jointed fragments." As a composition of fragments told by four different narrators, *The Giaour* text disregards linear time progression.² Byron's goal in using this technique of fragmentation is to focus the reader's attention towards the main characters, the Giaour and Hassan, and towards their relationship to one another as antagonists. The poet presents the reader with a vague locale and subtle descriptive references that allude to the East. Though he often expressed concern for accuracy in these contextual details, he did not want to emphasize the Oriental surroundings. These manipulations reduced the poem's flexibility.³ The reader has neither a clear story line to follow nor a lush Oriental setting to get lost in; the reader must focus on the main characters. Peter Thorslev was one of the first scholars to demonstrate that all of Byron's Eastern tales depend primarily on their protagonists, or heroes, rather than plot or verse, for their effect.⁴

The prototypical Byronic hero, not just those in his Eastern tales, presents a forceful ego; he shows the destructive capacity of the powerful self. While Byron's poetry is about conflicts between powerful egos, it is also about the creation of those powerful personalities. He allows the character of the Giaour to develop a self-awareness that is dependent upon a system of resemblances and contrasts, in this case, the resemblances and contrasts between himself and his enemy Hassan. The cohesion of the poem relies on the intensity created by the textual symmetries between the enemies.

Byron shapes the Giaour and Hassan into characters whose essences are strikingly reflective of one another, despite the fact that they are enemies. He molds the Giaour and Hassan into psychologically and physically congruent characters. Hassan possesses Leila physically; the Giaour possesses her affections. Their relationship is encircled by their love of Leila and their hatred of each other. Hassan does not find solace in having Leila drowned; the Giaour does not find solace in killing Hassan. The contour of their antagonism is intensified by what they share. The reflective psychological disposition of the Giaour and Hassan is manifested in several passages. In the following excerpt, the Giaour expresses the intensity of his love and hate in lines that could also have been spoken by Hassan.

But place again before my eyes
Aught that I deem a worthy prize—
The maid I love—the man I hate—

*Ms. Smith's paper was awarded the 1990 Gunther Stamm Prize for Excellence.

And I will hunt the steps of fate,
To save or slay—as these require
Through rending steel, and rolling fire:
Nor needst thou doubt this speech from one
Who would but do—what he hath done. (1016-1021)

Even in his rage, the Giaour admits that, betrayed by his paramour, he would have done what Hassan had done. Again the Giaour speaks,

Yet did he but what I had done
Had she been false to more than one.
Faithless to him—he gave the blow;
But true to me—I laid him low;
Howe'er deserved her doom might be
Her treachery was truth to me. (1062-1067)

The Giaour despairs as he develops an awareness of his link to Hassan. He expresses his realization that Leila's death is as much his own doing as Hassan's.

She died—I dare not tell thee how,
But look—'tis written on my brow!
There read of Cain the curse and crime,
In characters unworn by time;
Still, ere thou dost condemn me—pause—
Not mine the act, though I the cause. (1056-1061)

The Giaour's reference to Cain is a reference to himself, not as the murderer of Leila, but as the murderer of Hassan, with whom he shares, as a "brother," the intensity of a powerful and consuming personality. Byron develops not only a psychological symmetry between the antagonists, but also, in his descriptions of them, a physical symmetry referring at times to their dress or faces in similar terms. The following couplet describes the Giaour as he stands over the dying Hassan.

And o'er him bends that foe with brow
As dark as his that bled below. (673-674)

It is Byron's opposition of characters, equally powerful, that intensifies the conflict the outcome of which will be the destruction of both selves; for Hassan it is a physical destruction, for the Giaour it is a psychological destruction. Thus, Byron focused the reader's attention towards the Giaour and Hassan, and created a fierce encounter by shaping the characters' contours into a self-consuming whole. Delacroix used a method analogous to Byron's to structure his scenes of conflict.

Delacroix drew many of his scenes from Byron's poetry. Delacroix's borrowings reflect an interest in powerful personalities whether it be Marino Faliero, Don Juan, Sardanapalus or the Giaour. Delacroix read *The Giaour* in May of 1824. Two of Delacroix's paintings inspired by *The Giaour* depict the battle between the Giaour and Hassan. In the 1826 painting *The Combat of the Giaour and Hassan* (Figure 1), the riders and their horses are contained within a nearly rectangular space in the center of the painting, the Giaour on the left and Hassan on the right. They are in a space representing a sandy ravine surrounded by dark rocky hills and the glow of the setting sun. The space of their conflict is about to be invaded by the figure at the lower right, but the riders are oblivious to the potential interloper.

Delacroix feathered the borders of color areas and used scumbling because he advocated simplifying and blurring the peripheral areas of paintings so the viewer would focus on the central group of figures. In contrast, the borders of late eighteenth-century French paintings, with their clearly delineated vegetation or their heavy, rigid, and strongly vertical architectural borders, presented a distinct context that often resembled stage flats. Delacroix also increased dramatic focus by using concentrated colours to accentuate the conflict. The glowing white raiment of the Giaour opposes the bright red of Hassan's skirting. The brilliant reds and the range of golden yellows that accentuate the Giaour and Hassan create chromatic links that focus the viewer and that contribute to the unity of the whole central encounter. As Byron denied the reader a clear plot and locale on which to focus, Delacroix denied the viewer the chance to get lost in sharply delineated details peripheral to the main encounter.

After focusing the viewer, Delacroix—as Byron—used a system of resemblances, or symmetries, and contrasts to shape and to intensify the violent encounter. The riders, seemingly at one with their horses, are connected by rhythms both symmetrical and contrary. Though they do not touch, each horse and its rider form half of a horizontal vortex; the figure of Hassan and his horse extend back into the space of the picture, the Giaour and his horse swing out toward the viewer. These figures also form nearly identical, yet opposing, dynamic contours which begin with the head of each rider, curving out and down each horse's mane, then turning inward along each horse's body, and curving again out, following the slope of each horse's hooves. There is a reflective quality of selves in the painting not unlike the reflectiveness of selves in Byron's poem. It is one powerful self against another. The tension, created by the rhythms between the enemies, reaches out and links the antagonists together; both take part in a harmonious union, without losing antagonism towards each other.

Eight years later, in 1835 Delacroix painted a second scene also entitled *The Combat of the Giaour and Hassan* (Figure 2). Delacroix filled the picture plane with his antagonists; the viewer is immediately focused on the battle; the interloper no longer threatens as he lies dead beneath the conflict. The murky, hazy brown of the clouds parallels the dusty brown ground. It is the violent encounter at its ultimate moment. The tense visible space between the Giaour and Hassan in Delacroix's 1827 version is gone. The men and their horses enfold one another, and embrace each other in the moment of destruction just as they fold, embrace, and fuse in Byron's poem,

Though few the numbers—theirs the strife,
That neither spares nor speaks for life!
Ah! fondly youthful hearts can press,
To seize and share the dear caress;
But love itself could never pant
For all that beauty sighs to grant
With half the fervour Hate bestows

Upon the last embrace of foes,
 When grappling in the fight they fold
 Those arms that ne'er shall lose their hold:
 Friends meet to part; Love laughs at faith;
 True foes, once met, are joined till death! (643-654)

The Giaour and Hassan's forms, once separate, give way to their lethal fusing. Two compositional features contribute significantly to the contour of the unified energy. A spiralling ellipse is formed, the lower arc by the overlapping horses' heads and the upper half by the lunging forms of the Giaour and Hassan whose heads converge and arms unite above their horses. Overlaying this vortex, chromatic lines of force curve through the antagonists linking them inextricably. The white skirting of the Giaour curves over his own horse and connects with Hassan's white steed and is carried along its body. A potent red follows the same curve from the Giaour's shoe, through his saddle, his red vest, over to Hassan's turban and Hassan's skirting. The figures are locked in a violent encounter that will leave neither unscathed. At this point, both Delacroix and Byron go beyond enticements of narrative and exotic locale toward a portrayal of the contours of conflict.

I want to return now to the discourse that initiated this study, the discourse of Orientalists, and European

society as a whole, who regarded the Near East as a realm characterized by inherent violence. This concept of violence, of a way of being that is inextricable from the self offers the reader of *The Giaour* and the viewer of Delacroix's *Combats* a poignant understanding of the destructive capacity of those similar selves. The Giaour and Hassan are developed by Byron and Delacroix into characters who mirror one another's antagonism. To destroy the mirror is to destroy oneself. The battle will not have a winner and a loser: the structure created by Byron and Delacroix mandates destruction.

Delacroix successively narrowed the focus of his paintings *The Combat of the Giaour and Hassan* as Byron eliminated extraneous detail to focus his poem *The Giaour*. Both artists manipulated their compositions toward conflict. This intensifies the expressive energy of the whole. The clash of the characters becomes the most important element. Byron and Delacroix were concerned with the energy of conflict at its highest intensity, forcing together antagonists of a similar, yet contrary, essence. The antagonists share a bond, yet they must, tragically, destroy each other.

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- 1 The first edition with 635 lines was published June 5, 1813. Seven subsequent editions with additions and minor revisions were published in the same year.
- 2 Frederick W. Shilstone, "Byron's *The Giaour*: Narrative Tradition and Romantic Cognitive Theory," *Research Studies of Washington State University* 48 (June 1980): 96.
- 3 Daniel P. Watkins, *Social Relations in Byron's Eastern Tales* (London: Associated University Presses, 1987) 35.
- 4 Peter L. Thorslev, Jr., *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962) 147.

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Figure 1. Eugène Delacroix, French, 1798-1863, *Combat Between the Giaour and the Pasha*, oil on canvas, 1826, 59.6 x 73.4cm, Gift of Mrs. Bertha Palmer Thorne, Mrs. Rose Movius Palmer, and Mr. and Mrs. Arthur M. Wood, 1962.966 © 1990. Courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago, All Rights Reserved.



Figure 2. Eugène Delacroix, *Combat Between the Giaour and Hassan*, 1826.
(Reproduced in Escholier, Raymond. *Eugène Delacroix*. Paris: Editions Cercle
d'Art, 1963, p.111.)