

# Bend it Like Byron: The Sartorial Sublime in Byron, Bonaparte, and Brummell, with Glances at Their Modern Progeny

John Clubbe

Special Issue, 2005

Des actes sélectionnés du 30<sup>e</sup> Congrès international sur Byron  
« Byron and The Romantic Sublime »

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/014349ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/014349ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Revue de l'Université de Moncton

ISSN

0316-6368 (print)

1712-2139 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Clubbe, J. (2005). Bend it Like Byron: The Sartorial Sublime in Byron, Bonaparte, and Brummell, with Glances at Their Modern Progeny. *Revue de l'Université de Moncton*, 75–91. <https://doi.org/10.7202/014349ar>

Article abstract

Cet article prend pour point de départ une déclaration surprenante de Byron selon laquelle les trois plus grandes figures de son époque étaient lui-même, Napoléon Bonaparte et George Brummell — le plus grand des trois étant le dandy Brummell du Regency. Aujourd'hui, on dit de Byron qu'il est l'un des grands poètes de la littérature mondiale, et les gens s'intéressent encore beaucoup à ses écrits (on trouve à l'heure actuelle des sociétés byroniennes dans plus de trente pays). On dit de Napoléon qu'il est l'un des plus grands génies politiques et militaires de tous les temps; et Brummell — il semblerait n'être qu'une figure historique connue de ses contemporains pour sa mine grave et dédaignante puis son style vestimentaire impeccable. Pourtant, Byron avait raison : l'impact de Brummell sur la société d'aujourd'hui perdure beaucoup plus que celui du poète ou de l'empereur. On n'a qu'à regarder les publicités que referment nos magazines et nos journaux. Le style, c'est tout; tout relève du style. Les mannequins nous font la moue, imitant Brummell sans le savoir, nous regardent d'un air hautain. L'obsession de notre société pour les marques de commerce tire son origine de la fascination que stimulait un dandy du Regency à l'endroit du style personnel et des parures particulières il y a de cela près de deux cent ans. Cet article, un exercice en relativisme culturel entre l'époque de Byron et la nôtre, explore pourquoi Byron aurait proposé une telle juxtaposition — et pourquoi son assertion sur la primauté de Brummell s'est avérée être d'une étonnante précision.

BEND IT LIKE BYRON: THE SARTORIAL SUBLIME IN BYRON,  
BONAPARTE, AND BRUMMELL, WITH GLANCES AT THEIR  
MODERN PROGENY

John Clubbe  
University of Kentucky  
United States

Style is the dress of thought.  
Lord Chesterfield

Si l'héroïsme exige des héros, il n'en sera qu'un: le dandy,  
dont l'attitude, éthique et esthétique, face au monde  
moderne, est la seule imaginable . . .  
Baudelaire<sup>1</sup>

**Résumé**

Cet article prend pour point de départ une déclaration surprenante de Byron selon laquelle les trois plus grandes figures de son époque étaient lui-même, Napoléon Bonaparte et George Brummell — le plus grand des trois étant le dandy Brummell du Regency. Aujourd'hui, on dit de Byron qu'il est l'un des grands poètes de la littérature mondiale, et les gens s'intéressent encore beaucoup à ses écrits (on trouve à l'heure actuelle des sociétés byroniennes dans plus de trente pays). On dit de Napoléon qu'il est l'un des plus grands génies politiques et militaires de tous les temps; et Brummell — il semblerait n'être qu'une figure historique connue de ses contemporains pour sa mine grave et dédaignante puis son style vestimentaire impeccable. Pourtant, Byron avait raison : l'impact de Brummell sur la société d'aujourd'hui perdure beaucoup plus que celui du poète ou de l'empereur. On n'a qu'à regarder les publicités que referment nos magazines et nos journaux. Le style, c'est tout; tout relève du style. Les mannequins nous font la moue, imitant Brummell sans le

savoir, nous regardent d'un air hautain. L'obsession de notre société pour les marques de commerce tire son origine de la fascination que stimulait un dandy du Regency à l'endroit du style personnel et des parures particulières il y a de cela près de deux cent ans. Cet article, un exercice en relativisme culturel entre l'époque de Byron et la nôtre, explore pourquoi Byron aurait proposé une telle juxtaposition — et pourquoi son assertion sur la primauté de Brummell s'est avérée être d'une étonnante précision.

Hazlitt, looking back in 1828 upon the exile of three famous contemporaries, linked Byron, Bonaparte, and Brummell (20: 154). He was among the first to do so; he was not the last. Two decades later, Thackeray in *Vanity Fair* evoked Regency England as the era of Napoleon, Brummell, and Byron. All three figures, as Ellen Moers has well observed, had become before they died “figures of legend, almost of myth” (22). Few would deny a connection between Europe's conqueror and the age's most popular poet. Byron's life-long obsession with Napoleon is increasingly well-documented, but placing Brummell on a basis of equality with him and Napoleon seems a stretch. How can a mere dandy, however notorious in his day, rank with Byron, the era's most famous poet, or with Napoleon, military genius and world-shaker?

Byron liked being linked with Brummell and Napoleon. In fact, along with Hazlitt and Thackeray he made the association himself. He told Brummell he regarded him “as one of the great men of the nineteenth century.” Evaluating his contemporaries, he placed “himself third, Napoleon second, and Brummell first.”<sup>2</sup> The ranking would have pleased Brummell, but so generous an estimate by Byron of Brummell's greatness — what can he mean? I have come to think Byron astonishingly prescient. He and Napoleon play leading roles in the Romantic Sublime, but if we ponder what I delight in calling the Sartorial Sublime we discover that Byron gauged well the contemporary fame — and even presaged the future significance — of George Bryan (“Beau”) Brummell.

I

“Brummell — at Calais — Scrope at Bruges — Buonaparte at St. Helena — you in — your new apartments,” Byron wrote teasingly to Hobhouse in March 1820, “and I at Ravenna — only think so many great men! There has been nothing like it since Themistocles at Magnesia, and Marius at Carthage” (BLJ 7: 50). Of the individuals named, Byron places the Regency dandy first and underscores “Brummell at Calais.” Scrope Davies, another dandy, Byron’s close friend now in exile at Bruges, follows; then “Buonaparte,” in exile on St. Helena, the place on earth more distant from any other; finally John Cam Hobhouse, the letter’s recipient, who, having published a mischievous political pamphlet *A Trifling Question*, currently languishes in his “new apartments” in Newgate prison (Broughton 2: 1).<sup>3</sup>

Amidst the general obsession with dress characteristic of Regency society, dandyism occupies a special and subtly nuanced niche. “In its indifference to serious matters and its intense focus upon trivia, Regency dandyism,” J. B. Priestley has well observed, “was a half-defiant, half-humorous way of life. There was in it a good deal of poker-faced impudence” (47). But besides being provoking and impenetrable there was something else too. Ellen Moers points out that Albert Camus, like several other French writers, likened “the dandy to the revolutionary” (38), *l’homme revolté*.<sup>4</sup> Dandyism offered to the sometimes revolutionary Byron (and others) an alternate, an unconventional, way of behaving and looking at life.

Byron found in Brummell’s being a “certain exquisite propriety” (qtd. in Piper 134). A bachelor, living off a modest but soon-insufficient inheritance, Brummell did not concern himself with vulgar politics or economic matters. Public affairs bored him. Choosing dandyism separated him from the ordinary herd of men. He had a tall spare figure, nicely proportioned, with measurements to delight any tailor.<sup>5</sup> In dressing he “used only two colours: blue for the coat, buff for the waistcoat and buckskins.” These he set off by “the whitest white of his linen and the blackest black of his boots” (Moers 34). “His clothes seemed to melt into each other,” commented Virginia Woolf, “with the perfection of their cut and the quiet harmony of their colour” (189). Some however criticized his artistry in attire as drab, dull, monotonous. Charles Lamb “lamented the

reduction from extravagant dress to flat dirty black as ‘one instance of the Decay of Symbols among us’ ” (qtd. in Woodring 113), but others — Byron and Hobhouse included — admired the Beau’s understated elegance. Brummell’s watchword was “you must not be noticed,” which meant that he was never overlooked. The Prince Regent, entranced by Brummell’s sartorial perfection, became his devoted student. Subsequent excesses in dandyistic attire in nineteenth-century Britain and France should not, however, be laid at Brummell’s door. Within narrow self-imposed limits, he was, maintained Max Beerbohm, an artist. Beerbohm called him, rightly, “the Father of Modern Costume” (qtd. in Roberts 7).

Even more than by specific articles of clothing, Brummell appealed by the total sense of style he projected. Language was part of it. Though not a literary man and perhaps not even particularly well-read, he used words carefully and worked hard to perfect *bons mots* often initially borrowed from others. By his calculated oddities, his impeccable manners, and his daring witticisms he enthralled the ladies. Wit implies detachment and distance, and matching wit with sartorial perfection Brummell mesmerized London’s literary lions. Staging his appearance through practiced discipline, he developed presence of mind, absolute poise, a near-perfect sense of what to do and when. He thought rapidly, expressed himself instantly, and dazzled in repartee.<sup>6</sup> Byron, who quickly recognized Brummell’s sartorial distinction, valued equally his command of language, the magnetism of his being. Like Beerbohm, he accorded Brummell the homage due a fellow artist.

Thackeray in *Pendennis* observed that “every man had something of the dandy in him” (qtd. in Moers 211). If true, Byron had a lot. A “curled darling” as a young man, he early admitted to “a tinge of Dandyism.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps more than a tinge? Most of his life Byron showed himself intensely conscious of clothes. He dressed carefully and with calculation to the effect achieved. Acquiring his Albanian costume, having his portrait painted in it — his idea probably — tells us that he believed that dress, no less than rank and status, defined one’s being.<sup>8</sup> In the Dedication to *Don Juan* Byron gives acute consideration to right poetic styles, a lifelong concern. Equally important for him was right style in dress and deportment.

How the dandies presented themselves and lived their lives fascinated Byron. Brummell he knew and liked. He valued the deceptive simplicity of his attire no less than the utter cleanliness that went with it. Although he did not dress as carefully or as formally as Brummell did, he was in his own sartorial choices something of a trendsetter himself. By 1813 or so he had rejected Brummell's stiff, high-cravated look for the poetically open-shirted style we see in the portraits. Whereas Brummell made the time-honored neckcloth into a thing of beauty — white, starched, spotless, exquisitely folded — the impatient Byron gave the impression, at least in his portraits, that he had jettisoned forever this all-but-sacred accouterment of male dress.<sup>9</sup> Brummell's neckcloths were works of art, but Byron, with his wondrous neck, admired by many, perhaps felt less need to cover it up. His open-necked shirt in portraits by Phillips, Westall, Sully, and others, even in versions where he sports a Greek helmet, became virtually a trademark. Byron's style of attire appealed to young men with artistic leanings, a sense of freedom, even a penchant for the *triste*.

Several of the portraits indicate that dandyism never altogether lost its appeal for Byron. George Henry Harlow, talented at Romantic portraiture like his sometime teacher Lawrence, depicted Byron as a Regency man of the world, alternatively aloof and disdainful. The American William Edward West, who painted him in 1822, observed — years after Byron claimed he had abandoned his dandiical inclinations — that he retained “a considerable deal of the dandy in his appearance” (Moore 12). Encountering Count D'Orsay the next year Byron was mightily impressed with how splendid a young dandy might look — he likened D'Orsay to a “*Cupidon déchainé*.” Oddly by this time, while drawn to the spectacularly-attired count and having just a few years earlier compared himself to Brummell, Byron's own appearance had become slovenly.

## II

Along with Brummell, the other “B” in our triangle of contemporary greatness is Napoleon Bonaparte. In formulating a distinctive sartorial and personal style Napoleon was as shrewd and calculating in his manipulative aestheticism as Brummell. Through deceptively modest attire hardly more elaborate than the Beau's, Napoleon similarly achieved

a compellingly brilliant effect. His private secretary Bourrienne, as Nigel Spivey has pointed out, “tells us that even on the march his master was always impeccably turned out — quite the dandy, or *gentilhomme* no less” (196). In public Napoleon usually wore the relatively simple blue uniform of a *Chasseur à cheval*; on winter campaigns or in inclement weather he wore the olive green / gray coat of a *colonel des Chasseurs*. Amidst his gaudily-attired marshals overflowing with ribbons and medals — Murat especially was addicted to outlandish dress and used a lion skin as saddle — Napoleon in person or image was instantly recognizable by the apparent simplicity of his attire.

And who can forget, in an era of unforgettable hats, the Emperor’s *bicorne*. To separate himself from his marshals, who wore theirs frontally, Napoleon always wore his *bicorne* sideways, *en bataille*. His sartorial craft operated on more levels than Brummell’s. Although on the battlefield and in administrative mode, Napoleon adhered to plain dress, for ceremonial affairs of state his garments could rival in opulent grandeur those of the Sun King himself. After Napoleon gained early successes in the Campaign of France of 1814, Byron had framed his engraving by Raphael Morghen of Gérard’s portrait of Napoleon in robes of refulgent coronation splendour. “The Emperor,” enthused Byron, “becomes his robes as if he been hatched in them” (BLJ 4: 248).

Such dandiacal aplomb also characterized Napoleon’s defence of his career during his last years on St. Helena. Going out on deck aboard the *Northumberland* transporting him to that island he wore “*la fameuse redingote grise que les Anglais ne considéraient pas sans un vif intérêt*” (Las Cases 1: 112). In exilic retrospection he positioned himself as the heir of the Revolution, the man of ’89 who supported liberal ideals and dismantled feudal institutions, even as an instrument of fate. His grandeur in exile “came from the fact that, in what seemed to be an act of supreme defiance, he had made History itself the setting for his downfall” (Lebris 130). Napoleon’s conquest of the European imagination extended far into the nineteenth century. Ellen Moers, in tracing the dandy-esque mode in France after the Bourbon Restoration, focused on Musset and Baudelaire, but may not Napoleon have been the ultimate model? In his conscious determination to produce an effect through attire and attitude, does he not

come across as a dandy of sorts, the Brummell of generals? One French commentator even terms him “the supreme Dandy!” (130).

### III

The years of Brummell’s ascendancy, 1800 to 1816, are virtually coeval with Napoleon’s. Like Napoleon, Brummell maintained his dandyesque ethos through the stages of his fall. Both liked to tempt fate. In 1811 Brummell provoked the Prince Regent into withdrawing his favor, but, as Moers points out, this rejection “made Brummell a greater, not a lesser dandy.”<sup>10</sup> Although he continued to rule fashionable London, the handwriting was on the wall. The next stage occurred in May 1816 when, overwhelmed by debt, Brummell left England — three weeks after Byron — for exile abroad.

In July 1816, coming out with Scrope Davies to join Byron in Switzerland, Hobhouse spotted the Beau at Calais. “I could hardly believe my eyes,” he confided to his journal, “seeing Brummell in a greatcoat drinking punch in a little room with us.” Though not quite a dandy himself, Hobhouse was as impressed as Byron with Brummell whom he found “very agreeable,” seemingly “a well-read man” (Broughton 1: 214-215). Hobhouse, who the year before had spent the One hundred Days in Paris straining to catch a glimpse of the Emperor whom he venerated, considered Brummell’s “as great a fall as Napoleon’s.” Contemplating the exiled Beau at Calais, Hobhouse thought Brummell accepted his changed condition as philosophically as rumor had the Emperor accepting his on St. Helena. “He is as tranquil” (2: 1).

Both Brummell and Napoleon tried to meet with dignity the challenge of exile. In Calais Brummell resisted compromising his former way of life. Misfortune did not subdue his regnant personality: he became known as the “King of Calais.” Likewise, Napoleon on St. Helena insisted his tiny entourage maintain imperial prerogatives. He defied his English captors to the end. Brummell’s exile, like Napoleon’s and Byron’s, virtually precluded return. For Byron, Brummell was like himself a free spirit whom England had rejected and expelled. Long after he had left England, Byron kept a favorable impression of Brummell and his companions. “I liked the Dandies — ,” he recalled, “they were always very civil to me — though in general they disliked literary people” (BLJ

9: 22). Still, for Byron Brummell was, like Napoleon, something of a problematic figure. He spoke “with almost envy of Brummell,” noted Medwin in 1822, “and prided himself much on his intimacy with him” (183).<sup>11</sup> As an admirer of Brummell’s sartorial style and *bons mots*, Byron may occasionally have yearned for a life *à la Brummell*. But he had, by 1816, chosen a life of words.

Byron became aware that exile had exacted a toll on Brummell. In *Beppo* (1818) he linked him, wittily and yet sadly, to Mark Anthony and Napoleon:

how  
 Irreparably soon decline, alas!  
 The demagogues of fashion: all below  
 Is frail; how easily the world is lost  
 By love, or war, and now and then by frost!  
 (60)

Anthony had succumbed to love; Napoleon, or rather the *Grande Armée* in its retreat across Russia in 1812, to frost. But no less “frail” and subject to temporal failure were the “demagogues of fashion.” By the time Byron wrote these lines the great Brummell at Calais had begun to decline (BLJ 9: 21-2).

Brummell’s fate may have preyed upon Byron’s mind in *Don Juan*. When in canto 11 “poor Tom,” gambler and would-be-dandy, gets shot by Juan, his end illumines a danger facing Byron’s young protagonist.<sup>12</sup> Barbey d’Aurevilly thought *Don Juan* dandyesque in tone “from one end to the other” (120).<sup>13</sup> As the dandy (in Moers’ words) “finds himself by far the most interesting subject of observation” (75), so the Byronic narrator in *Don Juan* finds in his own being by far the most fertile field for affectionate satire. Moers deems “the world of the dandies . . . founded on the fear of boredom which afflicts stay-at-homes in a time of great events” (39). Byron, who frequently — and sometimes genuinely — professed ennui, must have relished the notion that boredom had led Brummell to dandyism.<sup>14</sup> The times did not call for traditional heroism. The poem’s narrator had earlier professed that he had no need for Napoleon or other like heroic worthies. If Brummell’s greatest creation is

his sublime self, Byron's greatest work of art is his sublimely disillusioned and sometimes dandyesque epic.

#### IV

Are people like Brummell important? Philip Ziegler, the biographer of innumerable royalty, in reviewing Hubert Cole's 1977 life of Brummell opined that the dandy was "not worth a biography." Neither Cole nor previous Brummell biographers need have troubled themselves since, for Ziegler, Brummell is a figure of "patent worthlessness." How valid is this perspective?

Virginia Woolf appears to concur more with Byron than with Ziegler. Brummell, "without a single noble, important, or valuable action to his credit . . . cuts a figure; he stands for a symbol; his ghost walks among us still" (188).<sup>15</sup> Byron for a major contemporary poet, we remember, "cut a figure;" many contemporaries viewed him as "a symbol." Along with Hazlitt and Thackeray and unlike Philip Ziegler, Byron believed that lasting renown can emerge from criteria other than noble deeds or memorable achievement. Rachel M. Brownstein, the biographer of the famous nineteenth-century actress Rachel, observes that during the Napoleonic empire meritocracy became both aristocratic and democratic. People admired the remarkable individual — whether Napoleon, Talma, Byron or Brummell — "as an embodiment of extraordinary selfhood that transcended traditional class boundaries" (126). If stage figures like Kean, Maria Malibran (Rachel's equally sensational predecessor on the Parisian opera stage), and Rachel herself can become transcendent figures, can still walk among us, why not Brummell?

Attitudes toward fashion and selfhood have undergone immense and rapid change in recent decades. Philippe Perrot's *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century* (1981) was among the earliest studies to make us aware that seemingly inconsequential objects like undergarments, shawls, neckties, socks are worthy of serious historical consideration (Bienvenu xi). What used to be known as costume history has become, when properly conducted, social and cultural history. Major shows on Versace and Chanel at New York's Metropolitan Museum indicate its new stature. Fashion is also increasingly recognized as significant, in ways hitherto not well-

understood or explored, in fields long thought unrelated. *The Ancestor's Tale. A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Life* (2004) by the anthropologist Richard Dawkins insists (as the *TLS* reviewer Tim Flannery explains) upon “the significance of fashion in evolution.” Far from being, well, a modern phenomenon, Dawkins sees self-presentation playing “a crucial role in the formation of new species.” One trait instanced by Dawkins is the evolution of man’s upright posture. In his version of evolution, he writes, “an admired or dominant ape . . . gained sexual attractiveness and social status through his unusual virtuosity in maintaining the bipedal posture.” Flannery believes that Dawkins’ argument makes sound anthropological sense. It possesses “considerable explanatory power, particularly in cases where evolution has been rapid.” Who can deny that Brummell, and Byron also, gave their posture much thought?

## V

Obsessed with fashion and style, more people today than ever before can indulge their taste for becoming whomever they wish to be. In-between the named individuals of her excellent *The Dandy: From Brummell to Beerbohm* Moers discusses D’Orsay, Bulwer, Thackeray, Dickens, D’Aureville, Baudelaire, and Wilde. Beerbohm died as late as 1956, but his years of dandiacal glory date back half-a-century or more. No more now than then is the phenomenon of fashion capable “of being brought under aesthetic, or even logical categories,” but the curlicue line of what is considered fashionable seems never to exclude the dandy (Friedell 33). From the dandy as discreet Beautiful Person to the dandy as a revived Count D’Orsay examining his butterfly on the *New Yorker’s* anniversary cover, dandyism in its various strands continues alive and well in modern Western society. Were Moers writing today, she would encounter dandyism in full bloom.

The Sunday *New York Times Magazine* publishes each week page-upon-page of color advertisements displaying the latest styles from major fashion houses, mostly Italian and French. As if that were not enough, the *Times* added not long ago a Sunday “*Styles*” section that chronicles modern trends in appearance, behaviour, and activities. In both sections well-attired, ultra-slim young men and women glare or scowl at the photographer. Fashion magazines for every taste proliferate. *Ennui à la*

Brummell radiates from omnipresent blank modelic countenances. None dares a smile. As the protagonist in Saul Bellow's recent *Ravelstein* puts it, clothing in the fashion flicks is "modeled by unshaven toughs with the look of rough trade or of downright rapists who have nothing — but nothing — to do, other than being seen in all the glory of their dirty narcissism" (34). The brooding stares and scowls etched on these handsome faces — are they not updatings of Brummell's contempt for those less stylish than he? Such disgruntled personae — modern reincarnations of the Beau — certify that his triumph has been lasting. May we not consider these rattle-brained young men and women Brummell's sartorial children? Presumably their performances charm the gawping glitterati into purchasing the items displayed. Brummell's posthumous influence upon our label-obsessed era has never been stronger.

A cottage industry has developed in recent decades that interprets Byron via comparisons to modern pop icons, rock stars like Presley and Jagger and Lennon, artists like Warhol and Basquiat, fashion gurus like Versace and Lauren, movie stars like David Bowie and (dropping back a bit) James Dean and Marilyn. Recent biographies revel in Byron's sometimes flamboyant lifestyle, essentially reducing him to sex symbol, hetero- or homosexual upon request.<sup>16</sup> Major poems of the English language and some of the most scintillating letters ever written barely warrant mention. The 2002-2003 Byron exhibit at London's National Portrait Gallery — "Mad Bad and Dangerous. The Cult of Lord Byron" — documents visually the extent of the poet's entrance into the Valhalla of popular mythology. Like the biographies, the National Gallery exhibit tells us where we have arrived. That it devoted only one of four sections to "the image of the poet" can have surprised few. Other sections focused on "the cult of Byron," "the Byronic Englishman," and "20th century Byronic icons." Included among the last, besides James Dean and Mick Jagger mentioned above, were portraits of Rudolph Valentino and Che Guevara as well as the seemingly innumerable Byrons of film.

One who may serve as a fit representative of Brummell's (and Byron's) modern progeny is David Beckham, fashion icon as well as renowned athlete. Like Byron and Brummell, Beckham is an individual of achievement. He handles a football ("soccer ball" in American parlance)

as deftly as Byron wielded his pen or Brummell adjusted his neckcloth. Like Byron and Brummell, he has had his career ups-and-downs. In the 1998 World Cup he missed the chance to make a key penalty-kick shot against Argentina. With endless changes of attire and hair styles, Beckham flaunts his attractiveness both as hetero sex symbol (he is apparently happily-married) and gay pin-up. "Becks" (as he is called) seems comfortable with his sex symbol status among Britain's gay community. One Indonesian fan (female), a twenty-five year-old lawyer, gushed, "He's drop-dead gorgeous."<sup>17</sup> Becks "loves to shop, looks good in a sarong, and spends almost as much time at the hairdresser's as he does on the playing field. Occasionally, he wears women's lingerie."<sup>18</sup> His varied, ever-changing coiffures may even improve on Byron's, whose curls (depending on the artist portraying him) went every which way. Becks frequently adopts new hairstyles. Currently (1 June, 2003) his perhaps blonde locks are in braided cornrows, similar to what we in the United States call dreadlocks.<sup>19</sup>

Overall, Beckham takes after Brummell more than Byron. Brummell, whose writing has been described as "insipid and verbose," did not much affect the literary (Zeigler). Terry Eagleton observed of Beckham's recent autobiography that "a lot of people will read this book as one might read something scribbled by a badger."<sup>20</sup> In other ways Beckham improves considerably upon Brummell's performance, perhaps because he attempts more and works harder. As a fashion icon, Beckham reminds many that "men's fashion can be flamboyant, teasing, coy, shocking, sexy, and [yet] remain masculine."<sup>21</sup> Becks is described as a Dolce & Gabbana man,<sup>22</sup> which initially I took to mean he liked an intriguing new flavor of Italian ice cream. I have since been set straight. With a fortune estimated by the *Sunday Times* at 78 million pounds, Becks is better off than Brummell at any stage of his life.<sup>23</sup> And with a brand mark worth an estimated 334.5 million pounds he is one of the biggest sports names in marketing.<sup>24</sup> Besides writing or talking lacklustre prose, where does the great man fall down? For one commentator, the only wrinkle in Beckham's style is that he hasn't yet "perfected the appearance of effortlessness." Ah! Beckham may also fall down in endurance. No modern attempt at male stylistic dominance has to date outlasted Brummell's triumph two centuries ago.<sup>25</sup>

Comparing Beckham to Brummell or to himself probably would not have offended Byron. In his juxtapositions of Brummell, Napoleon, and his own estimable self, it is Brummell who most often trumps the other two. For Byron, Brummell, not Napoleon or himself, is the great, the sublime figure of the age. If scholarship has not yet accorded Brummell the plaudits granted him by Byron (or accorded Byron or Napoleon), it is because, unlike Byron, it has been slow to grasp the basis for the lasting nature of Brummell's greatness. Barbey D'Aurevilly wrote presciently of dandies in 1844: "Humanity has as much need of their attractions as of its most imposing heroes" (17). That dismisses Byron and Napoleon nicely. Brummell's personality has had a far greater effect upon posterity than any summary of individual traits can have. The proper hero for our own narcissistic age may well be a man whose principal occupation was the study of his own appearance. Brummell's Regency scowl has become our own.

In 2003 the social scientist Charles Murray published a book entitled *Human Accomplishment. The Pursuit of Excellence in the Arts and Sciences 800 B.C. to 1950*. In it Murray evaluated, and ranked in lists, individuals who had exerted lasting impact in various fields and disciplines.<sup>26</sup> Among European literary masters, Byron comes in a perhaps surprising ninth, behind Voltaire and Molière. Trailing our poet are such lesser lights as Tolstoy and Dostoevski. Whatever one thinks of Murray and his sometimes controversial research, his high evaluation of Byron surprised many, including a *New Yorker* columnist. It should not surprise us, however. Although advanced academic study of Byron has all but ceased in America, Byron, though less well-known to Americans than Napoleon, is in himself or as an influence still very much a presence.<sup>27</sup>

To come full circle: for Byron, it is Brummell, not Napoleon or even his own good self, who stands foremost in the pantheon of sublimity. Byron's placing of Brummell at the summit of contemporary greatness foretold a future reality more than we may realize or care to acknowledge. Western society today owes far more to the Dandy Incarnate than to the conqueror or the poet. The Sartorial Sublime has trumped the Heroic and the Poetic. Byron indeed bent it like Beckham.

### Works Cited

- Baudelaire, Charles. *Écrits sur l'art*. Ed. Michel Simonin. Paris: Livre de Poche, 1992.
- Bellow, Saul. *Ravelstein*. New York: Viking, 2002.
- Bienvenu, Richard. Preface. *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century*. By Philippe Perrot. Rev. English ed. Trans. Philippe Perrot and Richard Bienvenu. Princeton: Princeton UP: 1994.
- Broughton, Lord [John Cam Hobhouse]. *Recollections of a Long Life*. Ed. Lady Dorchester. 6 vols. New York: Scribner's, 1909-11.
- Brownstein, Rachel M. *Tragic Muse. Rachel of the Comédie-Française*. New York: Knopf, 1993.
- Byron, Lord George Gordon. *Byron's Letters and Journals*. Ed. Leslie A. Marchand. 13 vols. London: John Murray, 1973-94.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*. Ed. Jerome J. McGann. 7 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-93.
- D'Aurevilly, Jules Barbey. *Who is a Dandy, by George Walden / On Dandyism and George Brummell*. Trans. George Walden. London: Gibson Square Books, 2002.
- Flannery, Tim. Rev. of *The Ancestor's Tale. A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Life*, by Richard Dawkins. *Times Literary Supplement* 19 Nov. 2004: 3-4.
- Friedell, Egon. *A Cultural History of the Modern Age*. Vol. 3. New York: Knopf, 1954.
- Hazlitt, William. *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*. Ed. P. P. Howe. Vol. 20. London and Toronto: J. M. Dent, 1934.
- Jesse, Captain [William]. *The Life of Beau Brummell, Esq., commonly called Beau Brummell*. London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1893.
- Las Cases, Le comte de. *Le Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène*. Ed. Gérard Walter. 2 vols. Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1956.
- Lebris, Michel. *Romantics and Romanticism*. New York: Rizzoli, 1981.

- Lovell, Ernest J. Jr., ed. *Medwin's Conversations of Lord Byron*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1966.
- Moers, Ellen. *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm*. New York: Viking Press, 1960.
- Moore, Doris Langley. "Byronic Dress," *Costume* 5 (1971): 1-13.
- Piper, David. *The Image of the Poet. British Poets and Their Portraits*. London: Clarendon, 1982.
- Priestley, Joseph. *The Prince of Pleasure and his Regency 1811-1820*. New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1969.
- Roberts, S.C., ed. *The Incomparable Max*. London: Heinemann, 1962.
- Spivey, Nigel. *Enduring Creation. Art, Pain, and Fortitude*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 2001.
- Woodring, Carl. *Nature into Art. Cultural Transformations in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 1989.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Collected Essays*. Vol. 3. 1967. London: Chatto & Windus, 1969.
- Zeigler, Philip. Rev. of *Beau Brummel* by Hubert Cole. *Times Literary Supplement* 21 Sept. 1977: 1228.

---

<sup>1</sup> Note to Baudelaire's "Salon de 1846," in *Écrits sur l'art*, ed. Michel Simonin (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1992) 236. Baudelaire, who often commented on dandyism, offers a full exposition only in his famous essay *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (1859), perhaps most easily accessible in English in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. by Jonathan Mayne, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London and New York: Phaidon, 1995) 1-41.

<sup>2</sup> Jesse 11. Among others who linked Byron and Napoleon with Brummell was Brummell himself. At Calais, having put together a screen, he placed on the sixth and last panel Byron and Napoleon opposite each other (270).

<sup>3</sup> Byron, "at Ravenna," mocks himself no less. An acute student of history, he expected Hobhouse to remember that though Ravenna's mosaics glisten as brightly as ever, its harbor, like that of Bruges, had silted up. By 1820 the city's great days had long passed and it had become a provincial backwater. But the Holy Roman Empire of the West had for a time its capital at Ravenna. Aware of the city's earlier aura of greatness, Byron in exile could imagine himself a great man — an emperor even! Poor Hobhouse! — while Byron exercised his wit on his imprisoned friend in letters and "My Friend Hobby-O," Brummell in Calais compared the solemnity displayed by his pet green-and-yellow parrot with the beak, tail, splendid plumage, and solemnity of expression to . . . Hobhouse. He even called his parrot "Hobhouse" (Jesse, 272).

<sup>4</sup> She refers to Camus' *L'Homme révolté* (1954).

- <sup>5</sup> Willard Connelly (*The Reign of Beau Brummell* [New York: Greystone P, 1940]) has him tall (43), Moers short (17). I follow Connelly. The single known portrait, Robert Dighton's pencil and watercolor sketch of 1800, gives the illusion of height. It is reproduced in, among other venues, Moers 32; Priestley 85; Aileen Ribeiro, *The Art of Dress. Fashion in England and France 1750-1820* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1995) 100, and elsewhere. Whatever one thinks of the figure and the attire, the face cannot be called prepossessing.
- <sup>6</sup> Byron considered alacrity of response a key element of wit. Contrasting Hobhouse with Scrope Davies, he found him "as witty — but not always so ready" (BLJ 9: 21).
- <sup>7</sup> BLJ 8: 250; 9: 22; *Othello* 1.2. Scrope Davies reportedly came upon Byron in 1811 with his hair *en papillote*, that is, in curlers. See *His Very Self and Voice: Collected Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. (New York: Macmillan, 1954) 42.
- <sup>8</sup> For an excellent overview of Byron's taste in attire, see Doris Langley Moore's "Byronic Dress," *Costume* 5 (1971): 1-13. Moore explores the subject in more detail (particularly in regard to tailors' bills) in the text and appendices of her *Lord Byron. Accounts Rendered* (London: John Murray, 1974), especially Appendix 8, "A Young Gentleman's Linen."
- <sup>9</sup> Internet businesses offer a modern parallel. "One thing universal in the dress-down uniform movement," Paul Fussell has pointed out, "is the repudiation of the time-honored, all-but-sacred-necktie" — termed by some radicals "the business noose" (*Uniforms. What We Are. What We Wear* [Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002] 178).
- <sup>10</sup> The exact cause of the break remains uncertain, though like Prince Hal in his rejection of Falstaff (*Henry IV, Part II*), the Prince Regent upon assuming his new responsibilities may have wished to jettison awkward baggage. For other explanations, see Moers, 26-7.
- <sup>11</sup> Byron, for Virginia Woolf, "always pronounced the name of Brummell with a mingled emotion of respect and jealousy" (193).
- <sup>12</sup> See 11. 17: "a real swell / Full flash [an ostentatious show-off], all fancy [boxing]" (CPW 5: 470).
- <sup>13</sup> On Byron as a poet of surfaces, see Jean Hall "Byron. The Surface Self," in *A Mind that Feeds upon Infinity. The Deep Self in English Romantic Poetry*, (Rutherford, etc.: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1991) 110-31. Byron thought surfaces a good thing — Brummell for him was the dazzling epitome of surface. He doubted people would ever make sense of the Wordsworthian monsters prowling the depths of the human psyche. On the philosophical implications of dandyism, see Laura J. George, "Byron, Brummell, and the Fashionable Figure," *Byron Journal* 24 (1996): 33-41.
- <sup>14</sup> For dandyism as "a product of ennui," see Donald A. Low, *That Sunny Dome: A Portrait of Regency Britain* (London: Dent, 1977) 81.
- <sup>15</sup> Woolf's "cuts a figure" echoes Keats on Byron in an 1819 letter to his brother George (*The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1958] 2: 67).
- <sup>16</sup> See John Clubbe, "Byron in Our Time," *Byron Journal* 31 (2003): 11-15.
- <sup>17</sup> *The New York Times* 15 June 2003.
- <sup>18</sup> Michael McDonough, "Be like Beckham," *The New Mexican*, 1 June 2003: C-10.
- <sup>19</sup> If I don't always have Mr. Beckham up-to-date, keep in mind that in the United States soccer / football and its stars don't get the publicity they receive elsewhere. Beckham's popularity in the U.S. by no means equals that in Britain, Europe, Asia, and no doubt Canada. Because of Beckham's poor name recognition among Americans, the American distributors of *Bend it Like Beckham* considered changing the film's name in the U. S. Joan Blythe discovered on the Internet (August 2004) that Becks now sports a crew-cut of sorts. A web page invited her to download the latest "desk top wallpaper" (whatever that is) which displays our hero spreadeagled in all his tattooed majesty.
- <sup>20</sup> *TLS*, 3 October 2003: 30. I gave it a try, and do not disagree. Eagleton is cited from his *Figures of Dissent. Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Zizek and Others* (London: Verso, 2003).
- <sup>21</sup> *The New Mexican* 18 June 2003.

---

<sup>22</sup> *The New Mexican*, 18 June 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Cited from *The New Mexican* 3 March 2003.

<sup>24</sup> *The New York Times* 15 June 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Among past failed attempts, we might mention the zoot suits of the 20s and 30s, the “leisure” suits of the 1980s, and the skirts on the male dummies at the 2003-2004 Metropolitan Museum exhibit “Bravehearts: Men in Skirts.”

<sup>26</sup> Even more controversial was Murray’s previous book, *The Bell-Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (1994). The only other Romantic writer to make Murray’s top twenty — a lowly but still impressive nineteenth — is Walter Scott.

<sup>27</sup> The number of books that appear annually about Napoleon suggests that his powerful being continues to resonate in modern Western culture. Worldwide, interest in his career and person is a going concern. In the United States he remains the most recognized European. Though not much in favor with highbrows and academics, the upstart Corsican’s rise from nowhere to dominant European potentate entrances political and military buffs. Generals from McClellan to MacArthur study his battle tactics; big-time corporate types from F. W. Woolworth to Bill Gates, also avid collectors of Napoleana, adopt him as a model.

Napoleon occupies an especially lively place in American pop culture. One can multiply instances, but I shall focus on one. A kind of pastry, flaky and delicious, named “Napoleon,” the French *millefeuilles*, often appears on American dessert menus. Innumerable other desserts made up of quite different ingredients capitalize on its renown and, perhaps in culinary recognition of the Emperor’s many beings and skills, also call themselves “Napoleon.” And not just desserts. Appetizers and entrées, vegetables and viands, attach to themselves the adjective “Napoleon” as a mark of culinary distinction. In short, “Napoleon” on the menus of America’s tonier restaurants signals some delicacy elegant and chic. Santa Fe’s trendy O’Keeffe Café currently boasts a “Smoked Salmon Napoleon” (with Dill Whipped Neufchâtel Mousse & Paprika Cream) among its appetizers. One of the entrées is “Smoked Portobello & Roasted Vegetable Napoleon” (with Wilted Spinach & Boursin Cheese, Chive Potato Cake, Smoked Tomato Rémoulade & Pistachio Pesto). Though Byron in today’s world is renowned more for his sackcraft than for his culinary enthusiasms, the O’Keeffe’s wine list (I am happy to report) includes a Santa Maria Pinot Noir 2003 “Byron.”

If you think the above odd, it is. How many dishes, for example, carry the name Franklin or Washington? Have you heard of Steak Lincoln? I silence those who wish to establish a link between Napoleon and Hitler by asking, “What dishes have been named after *der Führer*?” Napoleon would not feature so regularly in *New Yorker* cartoons if he were not an easily identifiable pop icon. In his case, unlike Byron’s, it is his achievement, his “power,” even his sartorially recognizable being — much less so his sex life — that makes him fun to think about. In reality, food bored Napoleon and he raced through meals in minutes.