

2 The Dutch Byron

Nicolaas Beets (1814-1903)

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In late 2014, a lock of Lord Byron's hair came up for sale on eBay. The asking price was 3500 pounds – a telling sign, if any were needed, that enchantment still surrounds the English poet today, as indeed it did in his own time. A Byronic spirit visited 1820s Europe, and everywhere there arose an interest in George Gordon Byron (1788-1824). His rebellious, revolutionary personality appealed to the imagination, as did his personal history, one marked by scandal and restiveness, culminating in his self-imposed exile and illustrious end at Missolonghi on 19 April 1824, during the Greek War of Independence.

Internationally, it is often suggested that Byron is history's first true literary celebrity.¹ In the words of Fred Inglis: 'Perhaps we can say [...] that it is during Byron's brief lifetime [...] that charm and its distorted and magnified echo, glamour, become public values, and what is more, values looked for as attributes of celebrity'.² Leo Braudy considers Byron to be the first author to fall victim to 'the new machinery of celebrity', and Tom Mole sees in him the emergence of a new type of celebrity.³ Some eighteenth-century authors may have been widely known during their own lifetimes, such as Laurence Sterne, author of *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), but as they lived in the pre-industrial age, they cannot be termed celebrities, according to Mole: 'It required the growth of a modern industry of production, promotion and distribution, and a modern audience – massive, anonymous, socially diverse and geographically distributed – before these elements combined to form a celebrity culture in the modern sense'.⁴

The fact that Byron did become a celebrity is heavily invested in his successful creation of a personal 'branded identity': he developed into a brand that brought all sorts of associations to mind. His influence was undoubtedly far-reaching. Throughout Europe poets began to imitate his style, dress, and attitude toward life. As Fiona MacCarthy put it: 'Almost

1 Mole 2007; McDayter 2009.

2 Inglis 2010, 62-70.

3 Braudy 1986, 408.

4 Mole 2007, 8-10.

immediately after his death the phenomenon of “being Byron” began to manifest itself.⁵ Richard Holmes worded it thus:

Byron’s incarnation of this image [of the romantic genius] – the dark curly locks, the mocking aristocratic eyes, the voluptuous almost feminine mouth, the chin with its famous dimple and the implicit radiation of sexual danger – became famous throughout Britain after the publication of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812). By the time of his death in Greece twelve years later, it had launched an international style. The dark clothes, the white open-necked shirt exposing the masculine throat, the aggressive display of disarray and devilry, these were the visual symbols of one archetype of Romantic genius: the Fallen Angel in rebellion.⁶

For some decades now, scholars have been turning their attention to celebrity culture, both to its theory and history.⁷ Many contemporary secondary sources investigate the birth of the ‘celebrity’ phenomenon. Robert Garland suggests that the culture of fame is a timeless phenomenon that can be traced back into antiquity.⁸ However, against the backdrop of Romanticism in the nineteenth century it attained new heights.⁹ Celebrity culture was not confined to writers, but also, for example, to opera singers, painters, and composers. A well-known example is the Hungarian composer and virtuoso pianist Franz Liszt, who became the vortex of a veritable ‘Lisztomania’.¹⁰ In the nineteenth century, the realization grew that an artist was someone exceptional, a genius; ‘a highly spiritual being who is completely separate from the debased everyday world’.¹¹ This idea was thought to apply to authors as well. The writer became a figure of public consequence within the autonomous literary field.¹²

Research on one specific form of celebrity culture – literary celebrity – is also in the ascendant. In general, the accent here lies with Anglo-Saxon literature (Great Britain and the United States) and the renowned canonical authors from these areas. Two periods in particular have already received much international attention, namely the nineteenth century and the

5 MacCarthy 2003, 558.

6 Holmes 2013, 5-6.

7 Rojek 2001; Turner 2004; Inglis 2010; Van Krieken 2012.

8 Garland 2006.

9 See Mole 2009.

10 Van Krieken 2012, 42.

11 Higgins 2005, 4-5.

12 Brady 1986, 390.

Figure 7 Nicolaas Beets, engraved by J.P. Lange after W. Grebner, without date



Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

period of modernism.¹³ The relationship between celebrity and gender has also been explored in a number of publications.¹⁴ In the Netherlands, literary celebrity has in recent years also received great attention.¹⁵

Two avenues of inquiry are generally pursued in celebrity culture research. One explores the ways in which authors themselves have shaped their public image (self-fashioning), whilst the other investigates the public's view (fan culture). This chapter combines both approaches to examine the life and work of the student-author Nicolaas Beets (1814-1903), best known

13 For the nineteenth century, see Eisner 2009 and Mole 2009. For modernism, see Glass 2004; Galow 2011; Goldman 2011.

14 Easley 2011; Weber 2012.

15 See Franssen 2010; Honings 2014a; Honings 2014b; Honings 2014c; Honings 2015; Franssen & Honings 2014.

today for his *Camera Obscura* (1839), a collection of sketches and stories in prose, published under the pseudonym Hildebrand.

Beets studied theology in Leiden from 1833 to 1839, and those six years he filled with much literary activity. He was one of the driving forces behind the *Rederijkerskamer voor Uiterlijke Welsprekendheid* (Chamber of Rhetoric for External Eloquence), which, due to the preference of its student members for authors like Byron and Victor Hugo, was mockingly dubbed the Romantic Club.¹⁶ It was during this time that he became enthralled with Byron, publishing work himself in a similar vein. Although in later years – once he had become a vicar – Beets distanced himself from what he had by then come to call his ‘black period’, it was during that phase of his life that he managed to attract public attention. When *Camera Obscura* appeared, he was already a celebrity, having made a name for himself as the Dutch Byron.¹⁷

The distinguishing feature of Beets’s rise to celebrity is that he was first and foremost a fan of Byron, who then set about copying Byron’s public image, and in the end had Byron to thank for his own fame: he made use of a pre-existing model for his own self-fashioning.¹⁸ We could even go so far as to call it a type of lookalike syndrome. This chapter looks at how Beets acquired fame as a Byronian, and how he used the model of the Byronic hero to construct his own public persona. It will identify the characteristics he took from Byron, and those he contributed himself. Further, it will seek to discover to what extent there existed a fan culture around Beets.

Taken with Byron

An important source for any investigation of Beets is his personal diary, of which a transcript spanning the period 1833 to 1836 – when he first came to fame – has been preserved. It begins with his move to Leiden in September 1833. We read about his early life as a student, including reports of his literary activities, most of which were related to Byron. For example, on 11 January 1834 we learn that he read aloud his translation of Byron’s poem ‘Fare Thee Well’ (1816). Several days later he writes that he is working on a rendering of *The Prisoner of Chillon* (1816), and in February he completed his translation

¹⁶ Van Zonneveld 1993.

¹⁷ On Beets and Byron, see Popma 1928, chapter 5; D’haen 1992; Mathijssen 2010; Cialona 2009; Schenkeveld in Beets 1979. On Byronism in the Netherlands, see Popma 1928; Schults Jr 1929.

¹⁸ Kemperink 2014.

of *Parisina* (1816). Later, at the end of February, he approached the publisher Westerman with the request to publish a book containing his translations of Byron. Beets asked his father's approval for this step, and was advised to publish the translations anonymously, which he subsequently did. His father was apparently concerned that the Byron poems would have a negative effect on his son's later career.

During this period Beets very much admired Byron, so much so that he even read the English author aloud to his friends on more than one occasion, and took pleasure in speaking English.¹⁹ In his letters he frequently quoted Byron, sending a friend, who in 1835 was to emigrate to the Cape of Good Hope, a poetic parting word that begins with a line from Byron: 'Farewell! – a word that must be, and hath been'. In the same tone he himself adds that he could find no words to express his feelings: 'There is none but that short – cold – grievous – cruel Farewell!'²⁰ When in October 1835 Halley's Comet appeared, he and a friend visited the Leiden planetarium. The spectacle put him in a poetic mood and immediately Byron's lines 'Ye stars! which are the poetry of heaven' sprang to mind. In his diary he noted: 'I can imagine how he [Byron] enjoyed walking each evening, in sublime loneliness, arms crossed, over the deck of his ship between the Sea and the starry heavens, especially in those regions where the stars twinkle so much more brilliantly and in such multitudes'.²¹

In March 1834, Beets was working on *Jose: A Spanish Tale*, his first original Byronic work. In it he specifically aimed to imitate the style and tone of the English poet. Additionally, from this point onwards, he began to behave more and more like a poet to the outside world. He began to play the role of the Netherlands' melancholy, roaming Byronian. In his birthplace, Haarlem, he occasionally wandered through the extensive Haarlemmerhout Park in order to experience loneliness. In his diary he writes: 'A cloudless sunset, red and clear, like a man dying at his peak'.²²

A few months later he had completed *Jose*. When he read it aloud to a friend on 15 June, the friend became enraptured and, according to Beets, 'springing up, he burst into tears, and taking me by the hand, he said: "Beets,

19 Beets 1983, 45.

20 Beets 1983, 162: 'Daar is er geen dan 't kort – koud – smartelijk – wreed Vaarwel!'

21 Beets 1983, 197-198: 'Ik kon mij voorstellen hoe hij er genoeg in had telken avond, in sublieme eenzaamheid, met gekruiste armen over 't dek van zijn schip te wandelen tusschen de Zee en den starrenhemel, vooral in streken waar de starren zoo veel schitterender en in zulke menigvuldigheid zichtbaar zijn'.

22 Beets 1983, 69: 'Zonsondergang zonder wolken, rood en helder, als een man, die in zijn glorie sterft'.

shake my hand; I've never loved you so much as now!" Resuming his seat, he shook and wept'.²³ Beets was thus confronted with his first admirer. The work was published in October 1834. Although the edition was published anonymously, it was not long before the author's identity was discovered.

Famous as a Byronian

The publication of *Jose*, if we may base judgement on Beets's own testimony, made him famous overnight. On 17 November 1834, he confessed to his friend and fellow student-author Johannes Kneppelhout, 'I am now, as Dutchmen say, making *opgang* at Leyden', meaning something to the effect that his star was rising in Leiden.²⁴ People recognized him on the street, Beets writes in his diary, particularly women who – if again we are to take his word for it – were captivated by him:

I am currently all the rage. Tout Leiden talks of me and points me out [...]. Ladies walk out to see me, and want to detect something special in me. One even claimed that my physiognomy is characteristic of a poet! All manner of false rumours circulate about me, fortunately not to my detriment. People hope to see me appear in public places. 'Whether I am a member of The Concert?' informs Miss A. 'Whether I have a melancholy nature', Miss B. 'Whether I have something of Byron's character', Miss C. 'Whether I am suited to ordinary conversation?' Mrs D. 'What colour my eyes are?' the Honourable Miss E. 'Whether I am long or short?' Miss F. And Miss G.: 'Whether I can quite stand so much honour as appears to befall me? Whether I am not a-tro-cious-ly pedantic?' Moi, je ris. [Me, I laugh].²⁵

23 Beets 1983, 80: 'Toen opvliegende borst hij uit in tranen, en mij bij de hand vattende zeide hij: "Beets, geef me de hand; ik heb u nog nooit zoo lief gehad, als nu!" Nederzittende beefde hij en weende, en had het sterk op de zenuwen'.

24 Letter by N. Beets to J. Kneppelhout, 17 November 1834. University Library Leiden, LTK 1663.

25 Beets 1983, 120: 'Dames loopen uit om mij te zien, en willen iets bijzonders aan mij zien. Eene zelfs heeft beweerd dat mijn physionomie den dichter kenteekent! Allerlei valsche geruchten gaan over mij om, gelukkig niet tot mijn schade. Men hoopt mij op publieke plaatsen te zien verschijnen. "Of ik lid van 't Concert ben?" vraagt juffer A. "Of ik melancholiek van aard ben", juffer B. "Of ik iets van Byron's karakter heb", juffer C. "Of ik voor de gewone conversatie geschikt ben?" Mevr. D. "Wat kleur van oogen ik heb?" freule E. "Of ik lang of kort ben?" Juffr. F. En juffr. G.: "Of ik tegen zoo veel eer kan, als mij schijnt te wederwaren? Of ik niet aller-ij-se-lijkst pedant ben?" Moi, je ris'.

From this diary excerpt, a number of things may be deduced. Firstly, that Beets was indeed rather suddenly treated as a celebrity and quite abruptly found himself confronted with admirers. In this sense, his fame developed in much the same way Byron's did. Byron, upon the publication of the first two cantos from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812), observed: 'I awoke *one morning* and found myself *famous*'.²⁶ He was the talk of the town, as a contemporary noted:

This poem is on every table, and [Byron] himself courted, visited, flattered, and praised wherever he appears. He has a pale, sickly, but handsome countenance, a bad figure, animated and amusing conversation, and, in short, he is really the only topic of almost every conversation – the men jealous of him, the women of each other.²⁷

Within three days the 500 copies of the first printing were sold out, 'making Byron instantaneously famous'.²⁸ In the next six years eight reprints would follow, totalling 20,000 copies. Beets's fame, too, can be said to have come all at once, albeit on a more modest scale.

Byron's female readers in particular were completely captivated by him. Many attempted to come into contact with him. The poet received an extraordinary number of love letters from women, both married and unmarried, young and old, and spanning different social classes. Some wanted no more than to let him know how his verse had touched them, others asked him for a signature, a signed book, a lock of hair or even a meeting. With one, the ultimate fan Caroline Lamb, Byron began a tempestuous affair.²⁹

It is improbable that Beets received this kind of fan mail – if he did then none survive as proof. The passage cited above nonetheless shows that the ladies had a more than passing interest in him. That was certainly in keeping with his intention, as he revealed to the literary figure E.J. Potgieter in an 1835 letter: 'I had imagined how great it would be to win the hearts of all the women'.³⁰ We must however be cautious here, for Beets is our only witness. We know that Byron's readers compared him to characters in his work. In Beets's case, admirers compared *him* to Byron – which is not so surprising,

26 MacCarthy 2003, x.

27 MacCarthy 2003, 159.

28 MacCarthy 2003, 159.

29 MacCarthy 2003, 162-163.

30 Instituut voor Neerlandistiek 1980, 13: 'Ik had er my veel van voorgesteld alle vrouwenharten in te pakken'.

knowing that Beets derived his identity from Byron. Readers wanted to know to what extent he resembled Byron in looks and melancholy.

Beets established his name as a poet in a single act with the publication of *Jose*, the first reviews promptly appearing in the journals of the day.³¹ Whereas once he had struggled to publish, he now found publishers knocking at his door. Beets became the subject of hot debate in both literary and other circles across the Netherlands. In Rotterdam an author was convinced that Beets could not have written *Jose*, whilst in The Hague, the poet was rumoured to be sixteen years of age. The machinery of myth-making was swiftly set into motion, fuelled by the fact that Beets had published his work anonymously. During this period his fame continued undiminished, as did his appeal to his readers. This is apparent from a visit he paid to Professor Johannes Henricus van der Palm in March 1835, where he met several ladies, some of whom had even drawn up a list of questions to put to him.³²

The year 1835 saw the appearance of *The Masquerade*, a poetic work written in satirical Byronic style (à la *Don Juan*, 1819-1824) inspired by the Leiden student pageant on 9 February of the same year. This work further served to increase his fame: 'People shake my hand left and right, and applaud me as the Author'. This indicates that readers now knew Beets to be the author, even though this work had also been published anonymously. From his diary, we can conclude that Beets had done this intentionally: 'I had wished more or less to make a mystery of it'.³³ However, by now his reputation had spread too far for this to be possible. He was inundated with compliments and invitations to suppers. By the end of the year Beets declared: 'I am all the fashion in Leiden these days, and as sought-after as a pair of orange gloves'.³⁴

Then for the first time Beets was confronted with the down side of his fame. The growing adulation of the author annoyed Professor Matthijs Siegenbeek, who is said to have claimed: 'That Mr Beets is one of those geniuses doomed to run himself aground and break upon the rocks of conceit and condescension'. Additionally, the Leiden professor and essayist Jacob Geel came out with a vicious review of both *Jose* and *The Masquerade* in which he denounced Byronism and commented that the author would one day

31 See Van Zonneveld 1993, 68-75.

32 Beets 1983, 121-122, 143.

33 Beets 1983, 145: 'Men schudt mij van alle kanten de hand, en juicht mij toe als den Auteur'; 'Ik had half en half gewenscht er een mysterie van te maken'.

34 Beets 1983, 215: 'Ik ben tegenwoordig te Leiden in de mode en gewild als een paar oranje handschoenen'.

look upon his works with remorse. He considered the poet overrated, and was vexed that one could not go anywhere without ‘constantly hearing the praises of Beets being sung’.³⁵

A Visual Cult

It is well known that Byron actively magnified his own fame, not least through an overt exploitation of the visual – he had numerous portraits made of himself.³⁶ In his lifetime alone, more than 40 images of him appeared. In 1816, Madame Tussaud even constructed a wax figure of him. Byron was without a doubt ‘the most frequently painted poet of his generation’.³⁷

Beets, too, was aware of the power of the visual image. On Monday 14 July 1835 he noted: ‘I shall and must bring out a portrait very like me’. The immediate reason was a critical review of *The Masquerade* that had appeared in the journal *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* in which the critic warns readers against the dangerous influence of such Byronic ‘wild fowl’. Beets was indignant – he was, as he put it, presented as a brute, as a Ghengis Khan. Not without irony he wrote to a friend, stating that even though now that he was so very popular with the ladies, he feared the negative review would ruin his success with the fair sex. He maintained that his dedication ‘To Serena’ that opens his *Jose* – a variant of Byron’s ‘To Ianthe’ preceding *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* – had caused many women to fall in love with him, however that image was now at risk of becoming tarnished. To correct this, Beets thought it might be good to bring out a portrait of himself, although ultimately he never did.³⁸

Despite the irony in the passage above, it does make explicit that Beets was the centre of much female attention during these years. Just like Byron, he implicitly appealed to women to comfort him. ‘Yes! Should my sombre tone a female heart enthrall...’, he writes in his epic poem *Kuser* (1835).³⁹ If we once more may count on his own testimony, many women let him turn

35 Beets 1983, 150, 153: ‘Die mijnheer Beets is een van die genieën, die zich op de klippen van eigenwaan en laatdunkendheid te barsten stooten zullen’; ‘of men hoorde de glorie van Beets voor en na’.

36 On Byron’s image, see Kenyon Jones 2008.

37 Holmes 2013, 7.

38 Beets 1983, 169: ‘Ik zal en moet mijn welgelijkend portret in ‘t licht geven’; ‘wildzang’.

39 Beets 1979, 40: ‘Ja! mocht mijn sombre toon een vrouwlijk hart verrukken’.

their heads, and he had admirers as far away as Utrecht.⁴⁰ During suppers women often asked him to recite his poetry.⁴¹ When in 1836 he was to give a reading at the *Hollandsche Maatschappij van Fraaije Kunsten en Wetenschappen* (Dutch Society of Fine Arts and Humanities) in Amsterdam, a hall bursting with spectators awaited him, among whom numbered more than 200 women. Unsurprisingly, Beets took some pains with his appearance. A diary entry from 14 April 1834 allows us a glimpse of his thoughts, and shows how deliberately he dealt with his image:

I had long been uncertain whether I would put on my blue or my black dress coat; in the end I chose the blue one and while I put it on, I couldn't recall ever in my life having given so much thought to a dress coat. [...] I had also taken care that, in the bow of my neck cloth, in the way in which I had the cord of my watch about the neck, there emerged a kind of originality that must be personal and unaffected; in any event I felt that, as far as my dress was concerned, I could pass for a young genius as well as any other.⁴²

Not everyone could stomach this vanity. Some thought Beets's appearance ridiculous. Leiden medical student Jan Bastiaan Molewater was one who observed the young celebrity from a critical distance, and he was not taken with Beets's imitation of Byron. Whereas ladies hoped to discover a self-portrait of Beets in *Jose*, Molewater noted that he was entirely unable to identify with the hero of the poem. As for Beets's attempts to copy the appearance of the English poet he so admired, Molewater described Beets as 'wholly dressed in black, much powdered, with a woefully rumpled-up neck cloth', most akin to a pedantic 'country schoolteacher'.⁴³ An examination of the portraits of Byron circulating at the time shows that Beets did indeed adjust his appearance to resemble that of Byron, who also wore dark clothing with a flamboyant, crumpled cravat.

40 Beets 1983, 230.

41 Beets 1983, 237.

42 Beets 1983, 63: 'Ik had lang in twijfel gestaan of ik mijn blaauwen of mijn zwarten rok aan zou trekken; eindelijk verkoos ik de blaauwen en terwijl ik hem aantrok herinnerde ik mij niet ooit van mijn leven zooveel over een rok gedacht te hebben [...]. Ik had ook zorg gedragen dat er in den strik van mijn das, in de wijze waarop ik het snoer van mijn horologie om den hals had, een soort van originaliteit plaatshad die particulier en ongemeent moest wezen; enfin ik meende wat het costuum aanging zoo goed voor een jong genie te kunnen doorgaan als ieder ander'.

43 Molewater 1999, 74: 'ganschelijk in het zwart gekleed, zeer bestoven, met een bitter verkreukten witten das'; 'dorpsschoolmeester'.

The critic Potgieter joined Molewater in finding Beets's vanity irksome, giving short shrift to Beets's adoration of Byron. In 1835, Potgieter wrote to him (in broken English) about his Byronic character in *The Masquerade*: 'I hope seriously that his nose will grow more like the Yours – that his lips will not ever smile to (sic) much in Mr By[ron's] manner, for people would say, Your dearest looked more on him than on You!⁴⁴ His criticism extended to Beets's own look: he considered the author's habit of carrying a bottle of cologne in his waistcoat pocket a little strange.

Despite such critical notes, there were also those who greatly revered Beets, amongst them the sixteen-year-old Jan Jacob Lodewijk ten Kate from The Hague, who would himself go on to establish his name as a poet years later. He sent Beets a fan letter on 19 April 1836: 'For quite some time now I have looked (albeit fruitlessly) for a favourable opportunity to express to the poet of *Jose*, *Kuser*, and *Ode to the North*, my genuine, heartfelt esteem'. That chance had, in his estimation, now arrived as he had written a poem he wanted to put to Beets. Though the value of his own work was 'inconsiderable', his feelings toward Beets were sincere: 'These are pure and unfeigned, and it is with a warm admiration of your talents, that I presume to draw your attention to the buds of my spring'. The young Ten Kate hoped that he might one time meet Beets: 'I declare to you in all candour that I heartily wish to make your acquaintance, and hope that this may be so ere long'.⁴⁵ This letter shows that Beets had become a celebrity and was now treated as such by his admirers – not only at a local level, but at a national level as well.

The Melancholy Pose

One of the most fundamental characteristics of Byron's image as a poet is melancholy, and melancholy appealed to the imagination: 'Byron's sombreness could imply an awful destiny and a mysterious past behind the public

44 Instituut voor Neerlandistiek 1980, 2.

45 Letter by J.J.L. ten Kate to N. Beets, 19 April 1836. University Library Leiden, LTK Beets A 1: 'Sedert langen tijd zag ik (doch vruchtloos) naar eene gunstige gelegenheid uit, om den dichter van den *Jose*, den *Kuser* en de *Ode aan het Noorden*, mijne ongeveinsde en oprechte hoogachting te betuigen'; 'dezen zijn zuiver en ongehuicheld, en het is met warme bewondering voor uwe talenten, dat ik het waag u mijne lenteknopjens onder 't oog te brengen'; 'Ik verklare U ronduit, dat ik hartelijk wensch, kennis met Uwed. te maken, en hoop dat dit weldra het geval zal mogen zijn'.

self.⁴⁶ His protagonist, the Byronic hero, was based on its creator.⁴⁷ The prototypical Byronic hero is Childe Harold from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. His attitude toward life is characterized by dissatisfaction with the here and now. This prompts him to seek happiness elsewhere; lonely and alone he wanders the earth. He has been disappointed in love, a disappointment that embittered him, so all that rests him now is to scoff at the world and yearn for death.

From the moment *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* came out in 1812, readers interpreted Byron's work autobiographically. This is unsurprising, considering the many parallels that can be drawn between the life of Childe Harold and that of the poet. Indeed, the journeys described, Byron had himself taken. In the manuscript, Byron had initially called the protagonist 'Childe Burun', only later did he change it to Childe Harold.⁴⁸ In his preface he states: 'It has been suggested to me by friends, on whose opinions I set a high value, that in this fictitious character, "Childe Harold," I may incur the suspicion of having intended some real personage: this I beg leave, once for all, to disclaim – Harold is the child of imagination'.⁴⁹ This statement presumably had quite the opposite effect, encouraging readers instead to hunt for similarities between the character and the author.

Later, in the preface to the third canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron once again touched on the possible autobiographical character of his work. This canto he had written after leaving England a second time in 1816 to travel. All manner of rumours – for example, that he had homosexual tendencies and that he maintained an incestuous relationship with his half-sister – circulated about him, giving him the air of a 'fallen angel'. Once a celebrated figure, he had now become persona non grata and would never again set foot in England.⁵⁰ Thus it was no longer necessary to keep up appearances. In the third canto, Childe Harold appears once more: a misanthrope with a proud soul, an exile, a lonely vagabond consumed by rage. In the fourth and last canto, however, Byron definitively takes leave of his protagonist. In a preface in the form of a letter dated 2 January 1818, he writes:

46 Braudy 1986, 406.

47 Thorslev 1962; Stein 2004.

48 MacCarthy 2003, 160.

49 Byron 1847, 1.

50 MacCarthy 2003, 280.

I recur from fiction to truth [...]. With regard to the conduct of the last canto, there will be found less of the pilgrim than in any of the preceding, and that little slightly, if at all, separated from the author speaking in his person. The fact is, that I had become weary of drawing a line which every one seemed determined not to perceive [...]. It was in vain that I asserted, and imagined, that I had drawn a distinction between the author and the pilgrim; and the very anxiety to preserve this difference, and disappointment at finding it unavailing, so far crushed my efforts in the composition, that I determined to abandon it altogether – and have done so.⁵¹

There can be no doubt that Beets drew inspiration from Byron's melancholy. As a student, Beets did not have to keep to the social customs and mores.⁵² This allowed him to unabashedly glorify Byron's melancholy in public, without fear of damaging his own reputation. So Beets let the outside world believe that he, too, suffered from melancholia. Writing in a review he lays out his view that it was incumbent upon a true poet to feel depressed: he is dissatisfied 'with the world in which he has been placed, with the society that encompasses him, with the time in which he lives'. This is not surprising, in Beets's estimation, because a poet feels things differently than the average mortal, belonging as he does to a higher order. It is as though, in the true poet, the memory lives on of mankind's divine state in ages past, before it was lost, hence the true poet's inability to reconcile himself with the world.⁵³ Beets saw reflected in Byron the ideal of the true, melancholic poet.

Beets also incorporated that melancholy in his own Byronic protagonists. Jose, in the work by the same name, is no cheery figure by any stretch of the imagination. Saddened at the death of his parents and disappointed in love (the love of his life, Florinde, has been promised to another man), he wanders the earth, thinking only of revenge. His melancholy inner nature is reflected in his outward appearance: 'His cheek was pale, and glum his features'.⁵⁴

Although Beets did not address his readers directly as Byron did, many still looked for a connection between his work and his own life. It was

51 Byron 1847, 41-42.

52 See Van den Berg 1990, 96.

53 Praamstra 1989, 393-394: 'met de wereld waarop hij is geplaatst, met de maatschappij die hem omringt, met den tijd, waarin hij leeft'.

54 Beets 1834, 17: 'Zijn wang was bleek, en droef zijn trekken'.

previously mentioned that a number of women, after reading his work, asked Beets whether he suffered from melancholia. Further evidence that many readers read Beets's Byronic works autobiographically can be found in his diary. In November 1835, in the middle of his 'black period', Beets fell ill. We do not know what exactly afflicted him, but headaches and fever kept him housebound for fourteen days. His doctor, however, did have an idea what ailed the young poet and, according to Beets, divulged to interested parties 'that he found my nervous system extremely oppressed and suffering'. This the doctor associated 'with a suspected frame of mind, melancholia, contemplation, attractiveness, and poetical sentiment'. Particularly interesting is what Beets then adds: 'This did my reputation no end of good without being all too true'. Thanks to the story spread by the doctor, many readers came to wonder if Beets had sketched an image of himself in his poems.⁵⁵

In his book *Byron's Romantic Celebrity* (2007), Tom Mole discusses the 'hermeneutic of intimacy', and the strategies the English poet employed to achieve intimacy with his readers in his poems: 'It worked by suggesting that his poems could only be understood fully by referring to their author's personality, that reading them was entering a kind of relationship with the author and that that relationship resembled an intimate connection between individuals'.⁵⁶ The reader was given the feeling of being allowed a glimpse into the heart of the poet. This reinforced the idea that the poet and his main character were one and the same person, and that his work was autobiographical. In his poem 'To Ianthe' (1812), for example, Byron invited women readers to read his deepest feelings.⁵⁷

Beets's readers also felt they could get to know him through his work, as is apparent from the anecdote with the doctor. However, Beets never went as far as Byron did and plainly suggested parallels between his protagonist and himself in his prefaces. Beets did nonetheless build up that sense of autobiography and intimacy by exploring melancholy in lyrical verse, which, while epic in nature, managed to suggest that he was pouring out his own feelings. *Jose*, for example, was prefaced by an ode, 'To Serena', in which the 'I' laments his 'sorrow of life'.⁵⁸ In 'The Melancholy One', Beets writes that a sombre shadow had been cast over the cradle of the protagonist, and that

55 Beets 1983, 204: 'dat hij mijn zenuwgestel zeer onderdrukt en lijdende gevonden heeft'; 'met eene door hem vermoede gemoedsstemming, melancholie, diepdenken, aantrekkelijkheid en poetische stemming'.

56 Mole 2007, 23.

57 See Mole 2007, 58.

58 Beets 1876-1900, vol. 2, 12: 'levenssmart'.

his soul was bound to the path of sadness.⁵⁹ Then in 'Autumn Musings', he follows up the lines 'I am no cheerful child of spring', by describing a 'vague feeling' indicative of some unhappiness: 'a general sense of grief'.⁶⁰ He glorified, moreover, the yearning to die young, like Byron: 'Let me lose autumn with my summer / Let me in life's spring expire'.⁶¹

For some readers it was shocking to realize that Beets was not so melancholy in reality as he made it seem in his work. Indeed, in 1834, Molewater sketched a very different Beets – one veritably cheerful and drunken.⁶² Potgieter, too, perceived a contrast between the sombre Byronian of his work and the 'true' Beets, as he informed him in an 1836 letter. Potgieter had heard how people were talking about Beets, putting him in the same category as his sombre characters, but he knew better. He was annoyed by the admiration shown to Beets at the gathering of The Dutch Society of Fine Arts and Humanities, and equally by the way in which the poet took all this praise in his stride. This had prompted him to ponder what Beets's characters would say, were they to see him all bright and cheery. This image was not in keeping with Beets's public image: 'Call it petty of me to feel or think thus, to want to discover you always the same and never otherwise, but grant me that I prefer – if it must be! – the melancholy Beets to the Beets flattered and befuddled by the cheers of the crowd'.⁶³ The response Beets sent Potgieter is intriguing: 'Can I help it that people call me a Kuser, that people tell you that I have chosen myself for a hero, and that Jose has only now been shed light on? I pray you, do not hold me responsible for the remarks and notions of others'. Beets claimed that he only wished to be himself, whether that was cheerful and happy or melancholy: 'If I myself am now letting down my reputation here by taking on an attitude of ease that can ill be rhymed with what I have written [...] and am making myself despicable in your eyes – then so be it!'⁶⁴ Though Beets distances himself

59 Beets 1876-1900, vol. 2, 26-27.

60 Beets 1876-1900, vol. 2, 41: 'Ik ben geen vreugdig lentekind'; '[een] onbestemd gevoelen'; 'een algemeen besef van smart'.

61 Beets 1876-1900, vol. 2, 43: 'Laat mij en herfst en zomer derven, / Laat me in mijns levens lente sterven...'

62 Molewater 1999, 39.

63 Instituut voor Neerlandistiek 1980, 34: 'Zeg nu, dat het bekrompen van mij gevoeld of gedacht is, U altijd dezelfde en nimmer verscheiden te willen vinden, maar vergun mij de voorkeur te geven, aan den – if it must be! – zwaarmoedigen B[eets] boven den B[eets] door de toejuiching der menigte gestreeld en bedwelmd'.

64 Instituut voor Neerlandistiek 1980, 38-39: 'Kan ik het helpen dat men my een Kuser noemt, dat men u vertelt dat ik my zelve ten held heb gekozen, en dat Jose nu eerst duidelijk is geworden? Ik bid u maak my toch niet aansprakelijk voor de uitstrooisels en opvattingen van anderen';

from his characters here, Potgieter's accusation makes it evident that Beets, like Byron, was able to create a 'hermeneutic of intimacy' in his works, which led readers to interpret them as personal divulgements.

A Byronian in a Christian Guise

Though Beets was strongly influenced by Byron, this is not to say that he followed his example in every matter. Beets added his own elements to the Byronic model of the poet, elements typically Dutch in nature. Unlike Byron's protagonists, Beets's do not preach revolution.⁶⁵ That did not fit within prevailing Dutch discourse, which was focused on reconciliation and political peace and order. Another difference is the attitude toward religion. Byron's characters have turned away from their faith. Nowhere is there evidence that Childe Harold acts on Christian principles. Byron made his readers aware that he was an atheist – the reason many rejected his works. One might reasonably question then how this dynamic played out with Beets – as both a Byronian and a theology student.

In *Jose* it is immediately apparent that the protagonist Jose is certainly not an atheist. We read that he likes to retreat into nature to be 'With You-Alone'. His father dies in battle when Jose is still a child, whereupon he is taken from his devout mother, as she is not thought to be capable of raising a knight. This proves immensely difficult for him, but he is too proud to give in to his sorrow. When his mother subsequently dies, Jose turns into a vengeful misanthrope. He roams the earth, and whoever sees him, turns away in fear: 'I became a devil – God left me!'⁶⁶

Yet in the course of the story, it becomes apparent that Jose has not entirely lost his faith. When he passes a cloister on his travels, he is deeply moved by the religious hymns he hears. However, he tells himself that he must not be weak. Then he remembers his devout mother and regrets that he no longer believes in God. Jose, rather than being an unbeliever simply has no way to return to Christianity – as he has sworn revenge on humanity – no matter how dearly he wants to, as revealed when he says: 'I want to be reconciled with God'.⁶⁷ Even Florinde, his unattainable love,

'Doe ik my zelve, mijne reputatie te kort door als dan eene houding van ongedwongenheid aantemen, die weinig met wat ik schreef schijnt te strooken [...] en maak ik my in uwe oogen verachtelijk – het zij zool'

65 See Chantepie de la Saussaye 1906, 13.

66 Beets 1834, 11, 23: 'Met U-alleen'; 'Ik werd een duivel – God verliet my!...'

67 Beets 1834, 31: 'Ik wou met God verzoend zijn'.

is not able to bring him back to his faith, though it remains buried deep down within him.

Kuser relates the story of the nobleman Willem Kuser, also called 'the Sombre One', who can likewise be categorized as a Byronic hero.⁶⁸ He, too, is not in principle unreligious, but has the idea that the world has deceived him. God is present in this work as well, as expressed primarily through nature. The poem opens with a passage in which the narrator exhorts the reader to look for God in nature – a Christian moral. The narrator adds that there are people who take no heed of this, and so are walking in darkness – as is Kuser, who has closed his heart to God, yet is still not an atheist deep down.

Finally, in *Guy de Vlaming* (1837) Beets describes how the protagonist, again a nobleman, is reduced to madness after he has discovered that he has unwittingly married his sister and is therefore damned. Although Guy may think he has turned away from God given his madness, in the work it is clear that he is a Christian. He was raised in virtue and piety from his earliest youth. Every day he rose early for Mass, and he married his wife Machteld because of her virtue and piety. He had tried to be a good Christian his entire life. This is all to no avail in the end, however, as nothing can remedy his madness. This situation, desperate as it may be, can still not prove him to be an atheist.

From the discussion of these three works, it is evident that Beets deviated from his English example regarding his attitude towards religion. As opposed to his idol, he refused to have his characters denounce their faith, even though at times they went astray through the circumstances in which they found themselves. Apparently, Beets thought it would be going too far to make his characters atheists. Considering his intended career as a vicar, this would also not have been prudent. The young poet Beets presented himself as a genuine Byronian, tormented by melancholy. His protagonists, however, are 'desatanized': nowhere do they essentially reject the Christian faith.⁶⁹ Beets added that Christian element, so characteristic of Dutch literature of the time, to his Byron imitation. It is interesting to note that he was not alone in this. Other Dutch authors of works with a Byronic hero, such as Adriaan van der Hoop, Jr and Hendrik Arnold Meijer, also gave their poems a Christian veneer.⁷⁰ For the Netherlands at least it appears that the godlessness of Byron's characters went beyond the pale.

68 Beets 1979, 52: 'den Sombre'.

69 See Van Zonneveld 1987, 201-202; Van Zonneveld 1993, 123; Mathijssen 2013; Jensen 2008, 165. Drop in Van der Hoop (1965, 10) speaks of the 'desatanized Byron-hero'.

70 See Jensen 2008, 164-169.

In Conclusion

This article has analysed how Nicolaas Beets became a literary celebrity in the 1830s. His first steps as a poet were taken during his student years. The poet Byron had created a model of authorship that writers across Europe utilized. In the Netherlands it was Beets who derived his fame from employing it. Beets took inspiration from Byron for his own self-fashioning both with regard to his work and to his image as the melancholy poet. Beets quickly rose to fame just as his idol had and he, too, found himself confronted with fans approaching him as such. As with Byron, they tried to read Beets's poetry autobiographically. Readers were fascinated by the similarities between Beets's characters and the author himself, as Byron's readers were with parallels between Childe Harold and Byron. Whereas Byron himself played a game weaving personal facts with fiction, this was not at all the case with Beets. In analysing the celebrity culture around Beets, use was made of his own observations on the subject from his diary – he is in most cases the only available source. It was nonetheless possible, with the aid of letters from, for example, E.J. Potgieter, to verify that Beets did indeed present himself as the Dutch Byronian and was treated accordingly. In contrast to his role model, however, he did not distance himself from the Christian faith.

That Beets's Byronic melancholy was an act became clear around 1836, when he began to distance himself from it. On 25 January 1836, he noted in his diary that he no longer wished to be known as a Byronian. Although he still had a high regard for him, Beets stated that Byron was no longer his favourite poet.⁷¹ To Potgieter he wrote in March of 1837 that he had left his Byroniana behind him, for they bored him. He wished no longer to be known as 'the professed lackey of Byron', adding: 'I've had enough of it'.⁷² It would not be until 1839 that Beets openly distanced himself from his Byronic image. This he did in his essay 'The Black Period' (1839). There he confesses that he had idolized the 'gloomy, sombre, desperate', and looking back, he now realizes that he had been playing a dangerous game:

The soul likes to take on that melancholy pose; and there are plenty of circumstances to encourage us in it. Women are sympathetic to it; young girls are charmed by it. The imagination loses its light, the heart its health, the artistic sensibility its freshness, nature its beauty. Yes, in

⁷¹ Beets 1983, 231.

⁷² Instituut voor Neerlandistiek 1980, 82: 'slipdrager van Byron'; 'ik heb er genoeg van'.

the end we would succeed in becoming the people we had pretended to be. True poetry is extinguished, and believe me, to the point even one's physical health suffers; I had already progressed to sleepless nights and pale cheeks; who knows where it would have ended!⁷³

More than ever, Nicolaas Beets was aware that his Byronic works were capable of being damaging: not only to himself, but also to his readers. Henceforth he wanted to leave this black period behind him and pursue a new direction. As a 'vicar-poet' he would sing the praises of God, nature, and domestic happiness – in short, the positive – exclusively. It was nevertheless his idolization of Lord Byron that established him as a national celebrity before the age of 30.

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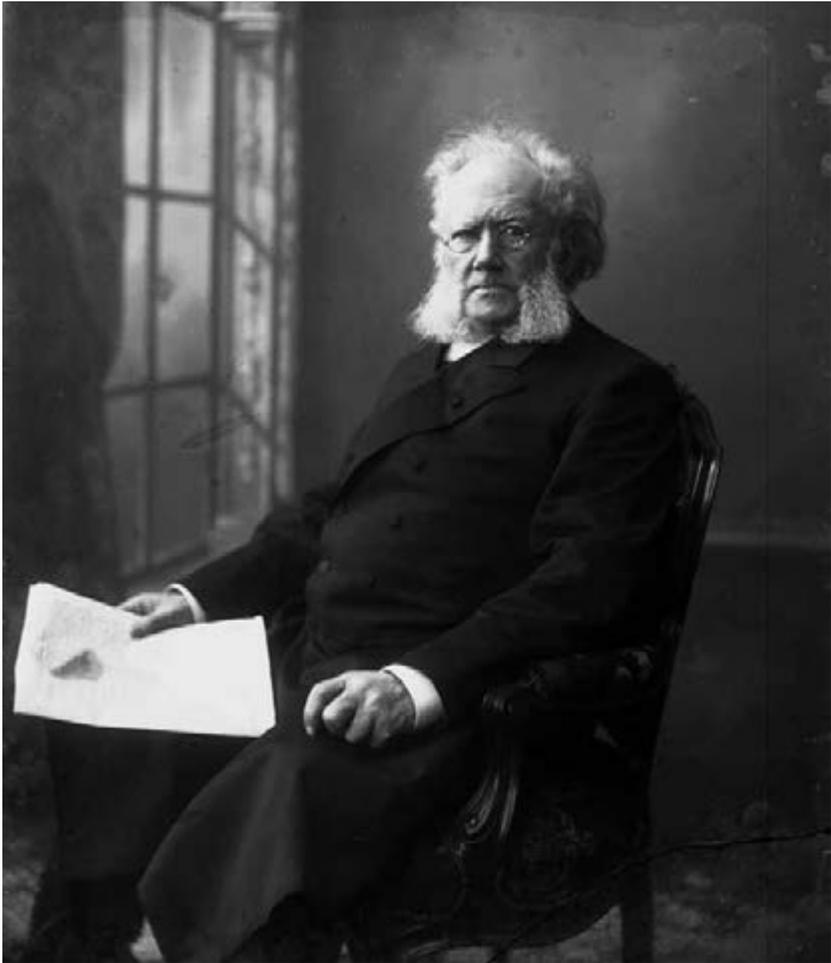
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73 Beets 1876-1900, vol. 2, 185: 'De ziel neemt gaarne dien melankolieken plooi aan; en het ontbreekt niet aan omstandigheden, die er ons in aanmoedigen. Vrouwen hebben er sympathie voor; jonge meisjes worden er door bekoord. De verbeelding verliest haar licht, het hart zijne gezondheid, het kunstgevoel zijne frischheid, de natuur haar schoon. Ja, eindelijk zouden wij er in slagen de menschen te worden, die wij gespeeld hadden te zijn. De waarachtige poëzy wordt uitgedoofd, en geloof mij, tot zelfs de fysieke gezondheid lijdt: ik had het reeds tot slapelooze nachten en bleeke wangen gebracht; wie weet waartoe het gekomen zou zijn!'

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Figure 8 Henrik Ibsen, without year



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