

Lord Byron, “Written after Swimming for Sestos to Abydos” (1812)

If, in the month of dark December,
Leander, who was nightly *wont **custom, habit*
(What maid will not the tale remember?)
To cross thy stream, broad Hellespont!

If, when the wintry tempest roared,
He sped to Hero, *nothing loath, **not unwilling*
And thus of old thy current poured,
Fair Venus! how I pity both!

For me, degenerate modern wretch,
Though in the *genial month of May, **pleasant, good-natured*
My dripping limbs I faintly stretch,
And think I’ve done a *feat today. **an achievement*

But since he crossed the rapid tide,
According to the *doubtful story, **dubious, unreliable*
To woo—and—Lord knows what beside,
And swam for Love, as I for Glory;

‘Twere hard to say who fared the best:
Sad mortals! thus the gods still plague you!
He lost his labour, I my jest;
For he was drowned, and I’ve the *ague. **muscular pains (rheumatism)*

In Greek mythology, Leander—a young warrior—swam the Hellespont nightly to visit his lover Hero on the Asiatic side of the strip of gulf that separates Europe from Asia. According to the ‘doubtful’ story, Hero killed herself by drowning when he finally succumbed to a storm one winter evening. On 3 May 1810 Lord Byron, a keen swimmer, set out to prove the crossing was possible and achieved it in 1 hr and 1 mins, using breast-stroke. The modern record for the swim is 48 mins but it has taken experienced swimmers in wetsuits up to 2 hours and many of those who set out never complete the challenge. Byron’s poem evokes the goddess Venus as we might say “Good Lord!” or “Nossa!” The reader cannot fail to catch the tone of educated levity associated with such phrases as “degenerate modern age” which makes the poet’s dashing outlook perhaps the real subject Is this Romanticism Lite?