THE ROMANTIC POETS
Graham Hough

(London: Hutchinson 1953 & eds.; Routledge 2017)

Chapter III: Byron

Within the lifetime of Wordsworth and Coleridge a new generation of poets, linked by their fortunes, and to some extent by their poetic ideals, was to grow up, to write and to die. Yet Byron, Shelley and Keats do form a distinct generation, and mark a new phase of the English poetic tradition, for their work did not begin to appear until the great period of their predecessors was past. Byron was the eldest of them, and his juvenile poems came out in 1807, the year which we usually take to mark the beginning of Wordsworth's poetic decline. Only ten years after the Wordsworthian dawn, indeed; but already the historical picture was looking very different. Byron and his contemporaries were too young ever to have seen the revolution in its pristine glory; they had never seen France standing on the top of golden hours and human nature seeming born again; they grew up into a world in which England seemed to be permanently at war with France, in which the reaction against revolutionary ideals was in full swing; and their early maturity saw political reaction victorious all over Europe. All were liberals, Byron and Shelley by conviction, Keats mainly by association; and they lived in a world where liberals were generally on the defensive and not infrequently in prison. Wordsworth and Coleridge had taken part in a great movement of the spirit at a time when all the forces of nature seemed to be on its side. The possibility that their way of life might coincide with the way the world was going was, therefore, perfectly real to them. Their long search for balance and order seemed a possible quest; indeed, in the end it succeeded, though in a region far removed from that of their original expectations. To the poets who grew up to the Europe of Castlereagh and Metter- nich opposition seemed the inevitable attitude; revolt, both social and personal, for Byron and Shelley; mere non-co-operation for Keats. Thus, curiously enough, it is the older men, [98] Wordsworth and Coleridge, whose work leads naturally into the next age—*The Excursion* and *Aids to Reflection* are footpaths to the cultivated Victorian countryside—while their juniors die unreconciled in the romantic solitudes of their choice.

Byron is the most difficult of all the nineteenth-century poets to write about in purely critical terms. As an influence and a portent he is, if we take the European scene as a whole, by far the most powerful. Yet much of the power is exercised in action and in self-dramatization rather than in art; the poetry seems to provide an insufficient foundation for the tremendous Byronic legend. In common opinion on the continent, he is still probably the greatest English poet after Shakespeare: personality is a more easily exportable product than poetry, perhaps more readily disposable even than ideas. "As soon as he reflects, he is a child", Goethe said of Byron: yet he is the one poet to whom Bertrand Russell devotes a chapter in the *History of Western Philosophy*. Thus if we are to do anything like justice to Byron as a historical phenomenon we can hardly treat him with the aesthetic detachment that modern criticism prefers. Modern criticism has, of course, been conscious of the dilemma; and it has found a way out by treating only that part of Byron's poetry that appeals to contemporary taste. Yet that will hardly do either—for it was not by that part of his work that Byron's reputation was chiefly made. Here we shall compromise, and try to do what justice we can to both the "historic" and the "real" estimate of Byron. With the Byron legend we can hardly deal: it has been fed not only by his own work, but by a mass of gossip, memoir and biography; and we can only refer the reader, to a brief list of sources. Historical scholarship and romantic j evocation have both had their way with Byron; and an; abbreviated sketch of his life would have no chance of revealing; the lasting fascination of his personality. j

The outline of the story is well enough known: his ancestry —his father a disreputable rake who married a Scottish heiress for her money, and died, leaving her poor to bring up a lame boy

in Aberdeen: his childhood, passed in narrow circumstances, with a vulgar [99] master of Newstead. He embraced his new dignities with an un-English and unaristocratic passion. Harrow introduced him to the world of young men of his class, and he threw himself into it with fiery energy; but remained always moody, aloof, dangerously handsome, and unassimilated to ordinary society. His passion went into boyish friendships, and later into boyish loves. His first volume of poems appeared when he was still at Cambridge—appropriately named *Hours of Idleness*; neither better nor worse than many another young man's poetry. Why it should have been selected for attack by the Edinburgh Review is hard to see, except that its author was a lord. Perhaps the eagle eye of the Scottish critic detected within this modest volume the embrj,o of the daemonic figure that was to come. At all events, Byron was deeply outraged by the Edinburgh critique, and after some meditation, produced his first good poem in reply.

English Bards and Scotch Reviewers is a satire, going back ultimately to the Dunciad for inspiration, but mediated by William Gifford's crude and hard-hitting Baviad and Maeviad, Morally and critically there is not much to be said for a poem whose inspiration was little more than bad temper, and Byron was later ashamed of it. It lashes out indiscriminately at the whole literary world of the time, and has none of the finesse of Popian satire. The worst of writing a satire in heroic couplets is that the genre has been carried as far as it can go by Pope: and Byron adds nothing to the tradition except the impress of a new personality—a certain careless arrogance that was to be the note of so much of his best work. The pretence of lofty concern for intellectual standards sits ill on him, but characteristically he gives an impish denial of the claims of criticism in almost the same breath.

> A man must serve his time to every trade
> Save censure—critics all are ready made.
> Take hackneyed jokes from Miller, learned by rote,
> With just enough of learning to misquote ...
> ... Care not for feeling, pass your proper jest,
> And stand a Critic, hated yet caressed. (68)

[100]

Byron adopts the rôle of a defender of eighteenth-century intelligence and propriety against romantic extravagance. Scott, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey all come in for castigation, often amusing though rarely at all penetrating.

> Next comes the dull disciple of thy school,
> That mild apostate from poetic rule,
> The simple Wordsworth, framer of a lay
> As soft as evening in his favourite May,
> Who warns his friend to "shake off toil and trouble.
> And quit his books, for fear of growing double;"
> Who both by precept and example shows
> That prose is verse and verse is merely prose.
> (235)

It is significant, however, of the difference between Byron and his contemporaries that his first success should be in the use of the negative emotions of irritation and contempt.

The opportunity for constructing the more positive Byronic *persona* arose through travel. In 1809 Byron and his friend Hobhouse set out on a journey, at first through Spain and Portugal, and ultimately to Albania and Greece. The result of this was the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, The conception of this poem is extremely mixed. In part it is a sort of verse- Baedeker, with historical and geographical reflections on the places visited. Spain and Portugal were of course familiar to Englishmen from the recent Peninsular campaign; and this provides a good deal of the background of the first canto. Greece was much less known, though Oriental travel books were popular; and here Byron was able to draw both on memories of the heroic past and on the

attractions of the contemporary exotic. Both cantos are tinctured with a rather superficial liberalism, with the exhortations of which Englishmen used to be fond (the taste has now passed to America) to the degenerate Greeks and Spaniards to arise and remember their former virtue. All this is more objective and outward looking than Romantic poetry has been hitherto. But the poem has two legs to stand on—the historical and topographical material being [101] one, the other being the character of the hero. Childe Harold is the first appearance of the Byronic hero. In the MS. the name was first written Childe Burun (an old form of Byron), so that an identification between hero and author was obvious. Byron later obscured it by altering the names and uttering denials. But it is clear enough that Childe Harold is simply the first of many fancy portraits of himself. All the features that are soon to become so familiar—the fatal ancestry, the excesses, the satiety—are celebrated in the first few stanzas; and most characteristic of all, the collocation of gloomy debauchery with an ideal of purity once glimpsed but now unattainable and abandoned.

> For he through sin's long labyrinth had run,
> Nor made atonement when he did amiss,
> Had sighed to many though he loved but one,
> And that loved one, alas! could ne'er be his.
> Ah, happy she! to 'scape from him whose kiss
> Had been pollution unto aught so chaste;
> Who soon had left her charms for vulgar bliss
> And spoiled her goodly lands to gild his waste.
> Nor cdm domestic peace had ever deigned to taste.
>
> (I,v)

This kind of hero has, of course, his literary ancestors., The pride and evil go back to Milton's Satan, the gloom and the peculiar relation to women to some of the heroes of the novel of terror. But the specially Byronic contribution is the interweaving into the fictitious image of a number of more or less personal details, so that a shifting, but ever-present relationship between self-portraiture and fantasy is set up. It was this romantic self-portraiture that was to have such an extensive effect on the romanticism of the continent. By its means Byron is enabled to exploit his personality to the full, without being tied within the limits of the authentic confession.

It must be confessed that the verse is not very distinguished. The Spenserian stanza requires some approach to the Spenserian richness and dreamy music. Byron's convention, [102] vocabulary and on the whole commonplace rhythm seem to vulgarize it—just as the slapdash methods of English Bards vulgarize the heroic couplet. Byron has not yet found the medium that was to suit him best. But as usual with him, the total effect is better than analysis of the details would suggest. A halfhearted attempt at Spenserian archaism is soon forgotten after the opening stanzas; and the topographical descriptions are vigorous and interesting. It is, after all, a merit in poetry not to be boring, and Byron is extremely skilful at varying his scenes and subject-matter. The squalor of Lisbon is quickly followed by a Salvatoresque picture of Cintra; Beckford is recalled, who once lived there—with perhaps a side-glance at the parallel between his temperament and Byron's own; we pass to contemporary politics—to a bitter denunciation of the Convention of Cintra; and return to the melancholy and restlessness of the Childe's state of mind. And all this in the space of twelve stanzas (I, XVI-XXVII). Unlike some other exploiters of a temperament, Byron does not make the mistake of giving it insufficient food. Scenery, politics, history and manners, with a little love-making, give Childe Harold plenty to occupy his mind. Even at this unformed stage of his career Byron has a more observant eye for the general spectacle of the world than any of his contemporaries; and it is the world as seen through a distinctly realized temperament—not a mere guide-book catalogue. Questions of the "sincerity" of Byron's portrayal of his hero are irrelevant—he is a persona, a mask from which the poet can effectively speak.

The second canto, about Greece and Albania, has the advantage of novel scenes and manners; but more important is Byron's passionate feeling for Greece. Greece was to see the beginning, as it was to see the end, of his active life. His love for the country and its people was compounded of im,ny elements; the love for the classical past—which has been felt as strongly by idle as by industrious schoolboys; the love that men who travel much often experience for the first place in which they sojourn, the place that compounds itself with their own undimmed sense of youth and adventure; the real strangeness and adventurousness of Greek and Moslem life; and the [103] excitement of political liberalism, which was already beginning to stir on behalf of the Greeks against their Turkish overlords. More even than Spain, Greece arouses the pathos of the past, of fallen grandeur (II. I-IX); this fuses naturally with one of Byron's favourite topics of speculation—mortality, and even immortality, if there is any:

> Yet if, as holiest men have deemed, there be
> A land of souls beyond that sable shore,
> To shame the doctrine of the Sadducee
> And sophist, madly vain of dubious lore;
> How sweet it were in concert to adore
> With those who made our mortal labours light!
>
> (II, viii)

> And these thoughts in turn recall a mysterious
> Thou —whose Love and Life together fled,
> Have left me here to love and live in vain. (II, ix)

Thus Byron succeeds in mingling the ruins of the Parthenon with his own being: and meanwhile *Childe Harold* is forgotten, to be picked up again, after an excursus on the iniquitous removal of the Elgin marbles, in stanza XVI, to continue his topographical and amatory adventures. The last half of the canto is a vivid description of Greek, Albanian and Turkish manners: the journey ends at Marathon, which leads to a lament for the decay of Greece (re-echoed in the famous 'Isles of Greece' stanzas in Don Juan); then to a lament for mortality in general, and at last a lament for the lost loved one of stanza IX. So Europe and Hellas and history are spread out like a panorama for the romantic temperament to brood over, and *weltschmerz* that real enough but somewhat vacuous emotion, takes on a new fullness and variety.

Byron returned to England in 1811, and published these two cantos of *Childe Harold* in 1812. By that time he was frequenting the brilliant fashionable society of Whig London; and the immediate success of the poem was partly due to the rank and beauty and panache of its author. Byron was not the [104] man to lose such an opportunity. He rapidly followed up his success with a series of metrical romances —*The Giaour, The Bride of Abydos, The Corsair* and *Lara* —all appearing between 1812 and 1814. He always wrote rapidly, and was, besides, full of the affectation of "the gentleman who writes with ease". Much in the romances is little more than fashionable versification; but the fashion is one that Byron is setting himself. The first three are tales of love, crime and adventure in the near eastern lands which he had by now made his especial province; *Lara* is Gothic. There are a few memorable passages, notably the description of sunset at Athens in Canto III of *The Corsair*; but this was written on the spot and transferred to its present place as an afterthought. For the most part in the tales Byron is employing the Scott formula for tales in verse, but adding a sombre element of mystery and evil which makes it a far more potent brew. He is also developing the character of the Byronic hero—the dark, beautiful, blighted being who was inevitably to become more and more closely identified with himself, till his own actual career seems forced by some inner compulsion to follow the lines sketched out for it in fiction. Many men exploit their fantasies, but those who carry the process as far as Byron did are apt to find that the fantasies exact their revenge, and either enforce a growing isolation from the real world, or, as in Byron's case, force their way into the world and begin to enact themselves in reality.

Byron's fashionable career was attended with a number of picturesque love-affairs, on various emotional levels, the most femous being with Lady Caroline Lamb, whose egotism, vanity and theatrical sense were quite a match for his own. He tries hard to adopt the attitude of the Regency buck, sowing a tough crop of wild oats: but his case is really different. He is not playing the game for the fun of it; he is satisfying some obscurer ; impulse. The affectation of mysterious wickedness had begun when he was little more than a boy; and now he is doing his , best to make it true. He wants to feel guilty; and the contrast between debauchery and an ideal purity, so frequent in the poetry, becomes a necessity to him. The ideal and sentimental side of his love-experiences (it is sentimental because it is pure [105] fantasy, having no effects in action or in the discipline of the heart) appears in his lyrics; rather trivially in the famous Maid of Athens, more significantly in the sonnets to Genevra (Lady Frances Wedderbum Webster, a fragile and ethereal beauty for whom he cherished a passing tenderness), and in the group of poems to an unknown Thyrza, which seem to enshrine an idealized friendship with a Cambridge choir-boy. Conventionality of vocabulary and rhythm suggest something false and unrealized in these accessions of tenderness. Byron's verse was generally too slipshod and his emotions too large and untidy for the concentration that lyric requires; he never achieved either the loving absorption in the artistic process itself which produced Keats's *Odes*; or the complete identification of himself with the lyric mood that gave birth to some of Shelley's wisps of song. Byron stands aside, watching himself having feelings, and the lyrics become stucco garlands or paper rosettes, in curious contrast with the masculine straightforwardness he always shows in his letters. The letters show that he early acquired a sort of social assurance, and an ease and genuineness in equal friendships with men; but at this time at least, the poetry sprang from a less controllable part of his nature.

In 1815 he married a lady of rigid and uncompromising propriety. Byron seems to have treated her with consistent brutality, and the match broke up in the next year. It was rumoured that he had an incestuous love-affair with his half- sister (a report that later evidence has fully confirmed).[2] The whole thing blew up into one of the scandals in high-life so beloved of British society: Byron was ostracized by the people who had idolized him: and he left England in 1816, never to return.

He travelled through the Low Countries and up the Rhine, eventually to Geneva where he was soon joined by the Shelleys who had left England under a similar necessity. These German and Italian travels produced the third canto of *Childe Harold*. The formula seems at first sight the same as before—musings on the field of Waterloo, Alpine and Rhineland scenery, reminiscences of Rousseau, Gibbon and Voltaire; but there is actually a change of spirit. The distinction between the Childe and his [106] creater [sic] is now virtually abandoned; and the author-hero has no need of factitious sorrows: he has enough real ones. The opening stanzas give an idea of Byron's state of mind on leaving England, and give, too, a statement of the system of objectified egotism on which his poetic practice is based.

> 'Tis to create, and in creating, live
> A being more intense that we endow
> With form our fancy, gaining as we give
> The life we image, even as I do now—
> What am I? Nothing: but not so art thou.
> Soul of my thought! With whom I traverse earth
> Invisible but gazing, as I glow
> Mixed with thy spirit, blended with thy birth,
> And feeling still with thee in my crushed feelings' dearth.
>
> (III, VI)

Art is to subserve the ends of life and experience. Byron could never have understood Mr. Eliot's distinction between the man who suffers and the poet who creates. He writes as an expansion of his personal being: and where man and society have failed him, he now projects his feelings into the natural world.

Where rose the mountains, there to him were friends;
Where rolled the Ocean, thereon was his home;
Where a blue sky, and glowing clime, extends,
He had the passion and the power to roam;
The desert, forest, cavern, breaker's foam.
Were unto him companionship; they spake
A mutual language, clearer than the tone
Of his land's tongue, which he would oft forsake
For Nature's pages glassed by sunbeams on the lake.

(III, xiii)

Byron does not look to Nature to find in it some spiritual essence that is actually there; he looks to it to echo and include his own passions. Occasionally these are idyllic, as in the stanzas [107] on *Clarens* (XCIX-CIV), a landscape dedicated to love, because Rousseau made it the scene of the *Nouvelle Heloise*, More often they are tumultuous, as in the description of an Alpine thunderstorm that immediately precedes.

Sky—Mountains—River—Winds—Lake—Lightnings! ye!
With night, and clouds, and thunder—and a Soul
To make these felt and feeling, well may be
Things that have made me watchful; the far roll
Of your departing voices, is the knoll
Of what in me is sleepless—if I rest.
But where of ye, O Tempests! is the goal?
Are ye like those within the human breast?
Or do ye find, at length, like eagles, some high nest?

Could I embody and unbosom now
That which is most within me—could I wreak
My thoughts upon expression, and thus throw
Soul—heart—mind—passions—feelings—strong or weak
All that I would have sought, and all I seek.
Bear, know, feel—and yet breathe—into one word.
And that one word were Lightning, I would speak;
But as it is, I live and die unheard,
With a most voiceless thought, sheathing it as a sword.

(III, xcvi, xcvii)

The verse hardly repays examination in details; there is crudity and incoherence, and little distinction in individual images: yet the energy of self-assertion in such lines was to alter the emotional scenery of Europe; to the sorrows and the sentiment of Werther, the lubricities and tenderness of Rousseau's *Confessions*, has been added a stormy vigour without which the Romantic picture of the heart's landscape would be incomplete. In the closing stanzas of this canto Byron finds a new assurance, the tone of "a man speaking to men", which he was to use to still better purpose, mockingly or seriously, inverses yet to come. [108]

I have not loved the World, nor the World me,
But let us part fair foes; I do believe.
Though I have found them not, that there may be
Words which are things—hopes which will not deceive
And Virtues which are merciful, nor weave
Snares for the failing: I would also deem

O'er others' griefs that some sincerely grieve—
That two, or one, are almost what they seem.
That Goodness is no name—and Happiness no dream.

(III, cxiv)

The fourth canto is more historical in purport; Dante, Petrarch, Tasso, Venice and the ruins of Rome are its themes; but its central subject is Italy, the longest of Byron's loves among the

nations, as Greece was the first and the last: and Italy seen as a symbol of all human achievement in arts and arms, its splendour and decay. For all his egoism, Byron is more conscious of Europe, of history, of the march of human destiny, than any of his contemporaries. For this reason he must be read in extenso. His large subjects and his loose style do not fit into snippets, and the present fashion for minute analysis of short passages, and for divorcing poetry from its historic context can hardly do it justice. A more leisured and less meticulous view of poetry would do much to restore *Childe Harold*'s former lustre; and the poem is, in any case, the indispensable prologue to the later satires,

Manfred belongs to the same period as Canto III of *Childe Harold*. The hero is the familiar Satanic figure; and the sense of guilt and the hint of an incestuous love embody the moods of Byron's first months after leaving England, Its dramatic but untheatrical form and its visionary nature are the result of a reading of Goethe's Faust \ but the impression of Faust on such an unmetaphysical nature as Byron's was not likely to be very profound. The best comment on *Manfred* is Byron's own:

> "I forgot to mention to you that a kind of Poem in dialogue (in blank verse) or drama ... is finished; it is in three acts; but of a very wild, metaphysical, and inexplicable kind.

[109]

Almost all the persons—but two or three—are spirits of the earth and air, or the waters; the scene is in the Alps; the hero is a kind of magician, who is tormented by a species of remorse, the cause of which is left half unexplained. He wanders about invoking these spirits, which appear to him, and are of no use; he at last goes to the very abode of the Evil principle in propria persona, to evocate a ghost, which appears, and gives him an ambiguous and disagreeable answer; and in the 3rd act he is found by his attendants dying in a tower where he studies his art. You may perceive by this outline that I have no great opinion of this piece of fantasy.",

Except as a document in Byronic psychology we may perhaps be excused from having any great opinion of it either.

After the completion of Canto III of *Childe Harold*, Byron went to Venice. He was in a savage and desperate mood, and solaced himself with a kind of bitter debauchery brilliantly described in letters to Moore and Murray. The contrast already remarked between the intimate and half-unconscious selfrevelation of the poetry and the more critical and worldy tone of the letters is curiously brought out by his comment on this canto:

> I tremble for the magnificence which you attribute to the new *Childe Harold*, I am glad you like it; it is a fine indistinct piece of poetical desolation, and my favourite. I was half-mad during the time of its composition, between metaphysics, mountains, lakes, love unextinguishable, thoughts unutterable, and the nightmare of my own delinquencies. I should, many a good day, have blown my brains out, but for the recollection that it would have given pleasure to my mother-in-law.[2]

The man who suffers and the poet who creates had been the same; here we have another man standing aside and mocking at both. The tone of these two extracts suggests a more or less deliberate denial of the mood in which *Manfred* and the new [110] *Childe Harold* were written. The best of Byron's short lyrics also belongs to this time.

> So we'll go no more a-roving
> So late into the night
> Though the heart be still as loving
> And the moon be still as bright.

Written in a Lenten interval between excesses,[3] it is also a sad little farewell to the lyric and idyllic hopes that had thrown an intermittent light on Byron's youth. From now on, the Byron of the letters begins to extend his operations into poetry. His savage mood passed; he moderated his debaucheries, and began a more temperate course of social pleasure. And he began to find that he

was enjoying himself. He was sick of ardours and despairs, the easy-going tolerance of Venetian life delighted him; the man of the world began to gain upon the arrogant and feverish youth. The poetical result was *Beppo,* written in the autumn of 1817.

Byron had studied, among other Italian poetry, the mock- heroic versions of the Orlando cycle by Berni and Pulci, and wished to reproduce the gay impertinence of the style. There was an English model for this sort of thing in the *Whistlecraft*, poem of John Hookham Frere. In fact, the main thing that Byron takes from his models is the metre—the Italian *ottava rima*. For the first time he finds a medium that really suits him, and he is always far more at home in this stanza than in either couplets or the Spenserians of *Childe Harold*, The story of *Beppo* is of the slightest—a married woman's love affair, which instead of ending in the English fashion with a duel, divorce and ostracism, settles down on the return of the husband into a comfortable *ménage à trois*. The leading theme is the contrast between English and Italian manners: but Byron is discovering something more than a metre and a social mode that suit him: he is discovering his own maturity—tolerant *mariage de convenance* between his temperament and the world as it is. The stanza, with its concluding couplet, often used for an impertinent or epigrammatic final twist or a sudden unexpected bathos, [111]is suited to the casual, digressive manner. The looseness and slackness of his verse is now turned into a merit, a positive ingredient of his style, not an accidental defect. The apparent flippancy is often more serious than earlier rhetorical transports, just as the familiar letters are often more serious than the soulful lyrics. Similarly the liaison with the Countess Guiccioli, begun in 1819 in the most frivolous Venetian spirit, proved to be indeed "the last attachment", and for all its vicissitudes, its periods of tedium, its occasional baseness, to be more like a marriage than anything else that Byron ever knew.

Beppo, of course, is not the whole story. It represents the formation, the settlement of a part of Byron's personality: but the turbid aspirations of *Childe Harold* were not so easily quenched. Part of these found their way into the unliterary activities of his last years, part into the tragedies and "mysteries", part into *Don Juan, Don Juan* was begun in the autumn of 1818, shortly after the composition of *Beppo,* and in much the same spirit. Indeed *Beppo* could well have formed an episode in the longer poem. But *Don Juan* was to prove a very long poem— the first five cantos were written at intervals between 1818 and 1820, the remaining eleven between 1822 and 1823; and a fragment of a seventeenth turned up among Byron's papers in Greece at the time of his death. It thus occupied him for the last five years of his life, though not exclusively; for apart from the demands of politics and the Countess Guiccioli he had a period of astonishing productivity in 1820-2. But the best of his experience went into *Don Juan*, He wrote to Moore in September 1818, "I have finished the first canto ... of a poem in the style and manner of *Beppo* ... It is called *Don Juan,* and is meant to be a little quietly facetious upon everything. But I doubt whether it is not—at least as far as it has yet gone—too free for these very modest days." The initial intention, then, is a poem of a light, social-satiric kind; but there is the possibility of its developing in other directions. In the end, the poem turns out to he most remarkable for its extent and its variety. By abandoning the Satanic-Promethean pose of the early poems, Byron has given himself the advantages of humour and ease and worldly wisdom: and from this relatively firm standpoint he can [112] survey with safety other aspects of experience, which hitherto he has never been secure enough to deal with adequately.

An imposing array of literary sources can be made out for Don Juan. Apart from his Italian originals, from which he derived the metre, the free digressive manner, the indescribable tone of mockery that does not exclude gravity and tenderness, he owed much to the tradition of the picaresque novel. The escapade which sends Juan on his travels, as well as some of his later adventures, have their parallels in *Tom Jones*; the turn for fantasy, digression and bawdiness remind us of Sterne. For a story with such an immense variety of incident, told with such picturesque detail, a great deal of concrete factual material was required. Dalzell's *Shipwrecks and Disasters at Sea* provided details of the shipwreck in Canto II; Castelnau's *Essai sur l'histoire*

ancienne et moderne de la Nouvelle Russie gave the background of the siege of Ismail; various stray fragments of romantic plot may have come from Dunlop's *History of Fiction*; the atmosphere of the Haidee idyll seems to take some of its colour from *Daphnis and Chloe*. The outward-looking and objective side of Byron's mind needed and was able to absorb a good deal of matter, and his large desultory reading supplied it. However, this does not explain the poem, any more than Coleridge's reading of travel books explains the *Ancient Mariner*. What gives it its direction is Byron's determination to put into it as much as possible of his own experience of men, of manners, of the way of the world, of his own heart, of the hearts of women, undeterred by prudery or social restraints, inspired by the kind of gay, disillusioned honesty that he had ultimately achieved, after all his torments and affectations. Almost everything in the poem can be related to his own experience, though it does not copy it. The recording of biographical parallels is often trivial, and though, like any good poem, *Don Juan* can be read without autobiographical reference, we can hardly understand its genesis without seeing, beside its panorama of European society, its fundamental subjective basis.

The scapegrace Juan of the first escapade is not Byron at sixteen: but perhaps he is Byron as he would have liked to be— Byron without the shyness, the lameness and the morbid pride. [113] Juan's straitlaced and mathematical mother preserves reminiscences, relatively unmalicious, of Lady Byron; and Donna Julia represents the sort of amiably passionate and otherwise unexacting woman that Byron, of all the varieties of amatory experience, had on the whole come to prefer. The tolerant, mocking air is partly the fruit of his Venetian life, partly pour epater the English and their commercial morality.

> Happy the nations of the moral North!
> Where all is virtue, and the winter season
> Sends sin without a rag on, shivering forth,
> ('Twas snow that brought St. Anthony to reason);
> Where juries cast up what a wife is worth
> By laying whatever sum, in mulct, they please on
> The lover, who must pay a handsome price,
> Because it is a marketable vice. (I, lxiv)

The gruesome realism of the shipwreck in Canto II, and the vivid and horrible realism of the scenes at the siege of Ismail (Cantos VII and VIII) are outside Byron's direct experience, and rely heavily on literary sources; but he had after all seen something of land travel and seafaring, something of adventure, in his early journeyings in the Near East; there was much of the man of action in him, and a physical adventurousness and athleticism in which he is alone among his contemporaries. No stay-at-home poet or merely ideal traveller could ever have written these passages; nor could Byron's picture of the world be complete without the recognition of violence, cruelty and horror. Like any sane man, Byron hates them: but unlike many nineteenth-century writers, he knows that they exist.

The exquisite Haidee episode (Cantos II, III and IV) is the quintessence of all Byron's ideal longings, and of all his actual experiences of idyllic love: the sentiment that has appeared so fitfully in his earlier verse, so often submerged by Satanism or sentimentalism, so totally irreconcilable in Byron's eyes with the prudential realities of organized society. Yet for him it remained real; and he makes it real, within the context of the poem, by isolating it from all common ties. Juan appears from [114] the sea, unencumbered and anonymous, Haidee is alone and responsible to none but her own heart; and their love is a transitory idyll, without prelude and without sequel:

> —for they were children still
> And children still they should have ever been;
> They were not made in the real world to fill
> A busy character in the dull scene. (IV, xv.)

It is Byron's simultaneous awareness of flat earthy reality that makes the idyll possible. As soon as the real world, in the shape of Haidee's father, returns—all is at an end; and so is Haidee's life. If Byron had had the sense of an omnipresent metaphysical background, he would have had to place the love of Juan and Haidee somewhere in the scheme of things—sublimate it to a Platonic heaven, or consign it to a Dantean hell. If he had continued it, and woven it into the texture of the rest of life he would have had to show it changed and debased, according to his view of woman's actual lot:

> Alas, the love of Women! it is known
> To be a lovely and a fearful thing;
> For all of theirs upon that die is thrown,
> And if 'tis lost. Life hath no more to bring
> To them but mockeries of the past alone.
> And their revenge is as the tiger's spring
> Deadly, and quick, and crushing; yet as real
> Torture is theirs—what they inflict they feel.
>
> They are right, for Man, to man so oft unjust
> Is always so to women: one sole bond
> Awaits them—treachery is all their trust;
> Taught to conceal their bursting hearts despond
> Over their idol, till some wealtluer lust
> Buys them in marriage—and what rests beyond?
> A thankless husband—next, a faithless lover—
> Then dressing, nursing, praying—and all's over.
>
> (II, cxcix,cc)

[115]

So Haidee dies: and Juan continues a career in which that kind of love does not return: though there is a sexless attenuated echo of it in his attachment to the waif Leila rescued from the siege of Ismail.

In the English scenes the poem becomes even looser and more digressive; and for its source turns again to personal experience. The social life, the characters and the scenery are those of the years of fame. Norman Abbey is modelled on Newstead. The tone is satirical, the incidental reflections often pungent, but the savagery of some of his earlier reflections on England are gone. Byron retains his own scheme of values, and it includes a pretty vigorous contempt for English society; but there is a tolerance, even a half-affectionate reminiscence in this backward look on a forsaken landscape. Just as the intrigue seems to be under way the poem breaks off abruptly. The demands of life—and death—superseded those of poetry.

Much ink has been spilt, both by contemporaries and later critics, on the ethics of *Don Juan*, Byron meant to be shocking, and he duly shocked: perhaps he did not realize how much the social tone was changing in the twenties: Lady Blessington remarked that he retained to the last the manners of the Regency dandy, outmoded in England since he left it. But the poem would not be what it is if it had been written merely pour epater. However, the attempt to analyse its more serious intentions is not likely to be very successful: and it can safely be said that whoever after reading it needs an exposition of its motives is never likely to understand them. A few possible misconceptions can be removed. The poem owes nothing to the traditional Don Juan legend: it is not the story of a fatal and heartless libertine. It is not, in the first place, Juan's story at all; it is rather a picture of society—and Juan is there to show the way the natural man might live in it. A natural man who was luckier and simpler than Byron, who lived in action and in the senses, untroubled by imagination or intelligence. For the character of his hero Byron has cut out from his own character, and consigned to oblivion, most of what went into the third canto of *Childe Harold*, and left the social and amatory butterfly that he sometimes aspired to be. But the hero is in the picaresque [116] tradition, a peg on which to hang the incidents: as a character he is less important than the narrator, whose asides, comments, descriptions and digressions give the story

its indescribable flavour. It is a commonplace to remark on the hatred of sham and convention, the glorification of impulse and the natural feelings in the poem; it should be noticed, too, how protean, even contradictory, these natural feelings are; mockery of prudishness and the calculating virtues, set against the purity and candour of Haidee's love, the unanalysable alfection between Juan and Leila, even the queer, placid innocence of Dudu in the harem; hatred of militarism and carnage set against an admiration for courage and action; scepticism and irreverence set against the lovely lines on the Angelus.

> Ave Maria! blessed be the hour!
> The time, the clime, the spot, where I so oft
> Have felt that moment in its fullest power
> Sink o'er the earth—so beautiful and soft—
> While swung the deep bell in the distant tower,
> Or the faint dying day-hymn stole aloft,
> And not a breath crept through the rosy air.
>
> And yet the forest leaves seemed stirred with prayer.
> Ave Maria! 'tis the hour of prayer!
> Ave Maria! 'tis the hour of love!
> Ave Maria! may our spirits dare
> Look up to thine and to thy Son's above!
> Ave Maria! oh that face so fair!
> Those downcast eyes beneath the Almighty Dove—
> What though 'tis but a pictured image?—strike—
> That painting is no idol—'tis too like. (Ill, cii, ciii)

None of these moods can stand alone: their meaning is in their variety—even in their incongruity. The love of freedom is built into the capricious structure of the poem; and Don Juan justifies the romantic moral scheme, which is to reject all formal schemes, in the only way that it can be justified—by building up, out of impulses followed as they come, a personal [117] identity, an organic unity, that is possible in art, but that such a method could hardly achieve in life. If romantic art is, as some say, inherently more imperfect than classical, it is because it is less self-contained. Byron is using his art exactly as he says he uses it, to expand and complete his sense of his own being.

In 1820 Byron left Venice to follow the Countess Guiccioli to Ravenna. Her family were ardent Liberals, and Byron formed close relations with them, particularly with her younger brother, Count Pietro Gamba, an amiable and devoted figure who followed him to the last. There is little space here for a discussion of Byron's political convictions. Liberty was an essential part of the Byronic creed: but for him that ambiguous word often meant only the liberty for an anarchic and anti-social expression of the individual personality. By an easy extension, this passion for personal freedom comes to cover national freedom as well; and of course the chief political form of the struggle for freedom in that age was the struggle for national self-determination. Italy and Greece were the principal battle grounds for the post-Napoleonic age, and Byron identified himself with both of these emergent nationalisms. In Ravenna he became closely involved with that romantic and ineffectual secret society, the Carbonari. His diary of 1821 gives us an idea of their activities and his own part in them.

> I wonder what figure these Italians will make in a regular row. I sometimes think that, like the Irishman's gun (somebody had sold him a crooked one), they will only do for 'shooting round a corner'; at least that sort of shooting has been the late tenor of their exploits. And yet there are materials in these people, and a noble energy, if well-directed. But who is to direct them? No matter. Out of such times heroes spring. Difficulties are the hotbeds of high spirits, and Freedom the mother of the few virtues incident to human nature.[6]
>
> They mean to *insurrect* here, and are to honour me with a call thereupon. I shall not fall back; though I don't think them in force or heart sufficient to make much of it. But, *onward*!—it is now the time to act, and what signifies *self*, [118] if a single spark of that which would be

worthy of the past can be bequeathed unquenchably to the future? It is not one man, nor a million, but the *spirit* of liberty which must be spread.'

These are not the utterances of a facile or disengaged sympathy, and all the evidence seems to show that Byron was ready to assume the responsibilities of leadership; though he was actually to take them up in a different war and a different country. There is much splendid verse in praise of liberty scattered about *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan,* and much denunciation of its destroyers, especially "the intellectual eunuch Castlereagh", whom Byron and Shelley saw (unjustly) as the symbol of all that was cold, cruel and oppressive in the post-war regime.

Cold-blooded, smooth-faced, placid miscreant!
Dabbling his sleek young hands in Erin's gore,
And then for wider carnage taught to pant,
Transferred to gorge upon a sister shore,
The vulgarest tool that tyranny could want,
With just enough of talent and no more
To lengthen fetters by another fixed,
And offer poison long already mixed.[8]

Southey, as the laureate of reaction (and worse, a renegade, since he had once been a Jacobin), was the object of Byron's special literary detestation; and the major fruit of this was his most savagely comic satire, *The Vision of Judgment*. Southey had written an absurd panegyric of the same name on the death of George III. Byron's satire envelops both the monarch and his celebrant in inextinguishable ridicule. The satiric method is strikingly different from that of the eighteenth century. Pope's highly finished portraits, by their very finish and the labour expended on them, confer a certain importance on their subjects. Byron's slapdash manner, by its very carelessness, conveys contempt; and a certain tough good humour implies that his victims are not even worth losing one's temper about. And, [119] like *Don Juan,* the poem is greatly enriched by the variety of mood. A savage sense of the folly and vanity of the funeral pomps is conveyed in the final couplet of the stanza on George III's funeral:

It seemed the mockery of hell to fold
The rottenness of eighty years in gold:

and the stately courtesy of the meeting between St. Peter and Satan is curiously moving, in contrast to the flippant treatment of the celestial personages before it.

In all the astonishing productivity of the Ravenna period, 1820-1, nothing is really central except this poem. With strange pertinacity Byron composed four tragedies, though he had obviously very little instinct for the stage or for the truly dramatic. *Marino Faliero* and *The Two Foscari* are on Venetian themes; *Sardanapalus* is ancient Assyrian; and *Werner* German, of the time of the Thirty Years' War. The two Venetian tragedies are correct but cold compositions: indeed none of the tragedies seems to have any real organic principle—they quicken into temporary life when some facet of Byron's own temperament is touched. *Marino Faliero* revives his sense of being rejected by his own caste, and attempts not very successfully to include private resentment in a passion for public liberty. *Sardanapalus* is more consistently alive in style and more original in conception, though Sardanapalus himself is an impossible figure as a tragic hero. He seems to embody the soft, effeminate and indulgent side of Byron's nature, and to offer an explanation, even an apology for it. In this he achieves a certain touching dignity.

In other places Byron's obsessions are less successfully objectified. *The Deformed Transformed* is a dramatic fragment too-obviously, it would seem, inspired by his own lameness, in which the deformed hero becomes a Faustian, daemonic figure. The verse is poor and the conception incomplete. Cainy described as a "mystery", is perhaps his most unhappy attempt at dealing with the struggle of good and evil. His defi,t resentment of authority found an appropriate object in the political [120] sphere; but he has a very earthly mind, and the attempt to transfer his

defiance to the heavens only shows that his ardours, hot and brilliant as they are in the world of men, become ineffectual fires when they reach the flammantia tnoenia mundi. This is not a universal opinion; Scott said, "He has certainly matched Milton on his own ground". But Scott was a better friend than critic. In fact, ultimate impiety is not in Byron's nature. There were qualities and powers before which he felt humble: but what their status in the universe might be he was not able to determine: as long as that uncertainty persists, he must revolt against a world in which his values seem so neglected and insecure: yet as long as those values persist, there must be limits to his cosmic revolt. Cain does not attempt to go beyond them: and the drama ends, not in defiance, but in that most unhappy and undramatic of conclusions, a hopeless and ineffectual repentance.

Byron's last journey and his death in the cause of Greek independence cannot be recounted here. That moving combination of nobility, futility and romantic panache does not lend itself to summary. But for once Byron was on the winning side; he died, but his cause triumphed, and he remains one of its heroes. For the whole of the nineteenth century he remained a portent and a symbol, whom it was possible to worship or to condemn, but never to neglect. Matthew Arnold, writing in 1852, when Byron's reputation was at its lowest, contrasts two types of humanity; the one who give their lives to some unmeaning taskwork; the other, surely drawn from Byron and intended in part to represent him, who escape their prison and set out again on the ocean of life:

> There the freed prisoner, where'er his heart
> Listeth, will sail;
> Nor does he know how there prevail,
> Despotic on life's sea,
> Trade-winds that cross it from eternity.
> Awhile he holds some false way, undebarred
> By thwarting signs, and braves
> The freshening wind and blackening waves.

[121]

> And then the tempest strikes him, and between
> The lightning bursts is seen
> Only a driving wreck,
> And the pale master on his spar-strewn deck
> With anguished face and flying hair
> Grasping the rudder hard,
> Still bent to make some port he knows not where
> Still standing for some false impossible shore.[9]

NOTES

1. On the Byronic hero v, Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, 1933, and edn. 1951.
2. But V. G. Wilson Knight, *Lord Byron's Marriage*, 1957-
3. *Letters and Journals*, IV, 54.
4. ibid. IV, 49.
5. ibid. IV, 59.
6. *Prospectus and Specimen of an Intended National Work*, by William and Robert Whistlecraft; 1817. This was a mock-Arthurian poem by Frere, later expanded into The Monks and the Giants.
7. On this question of sources, see E. F. Boyd, Byron,s *'Don Juan': A Critical Study* (1945)-
8. *Letters and Journals*, V, 161.
9. ibid. 163.
10. *Don Juan*, Dedication, XII.

i. *A Summer Night*.