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The Byronic Temper and Byronism

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Abstract

To narrow down the ultimate contrast in English poetry is to attempt a contrast between Byron and Shakespeare. George Gordon, Lord Byron, the originator of the concept of the Byronic hero. Lord Byron founded what may be called an exoteric Lake school; and all the readers of verse in England, we might say in Europe, hastened to sit at his feet. But Byron and Byronism were something immeasurably greater than anything that is represented by such a view as this: their real value and meaning are indeed little understood. Byronism was a revolt against artificiality; the new pessimism is a revolt in its favor. One of the best tests in the world of what a poet really means is his meter. Byron's poetry is eminently characteristic of the present age. It is essentially undramatic, and altogether repugnant to the social spirit of the age of Shakespeare. The question how much of true poetry lies behind and independent of the scenery and properties of Byronism, that this paper aims to debate.

Keywords: Originator, exoteric Lake school, Byronism, artificiality, revolt, repugnant, true poetry.

To narrow down the ultimate contrast in English poetry is to attempt a contrast between Byron and Shakespeare. Of Byron the passionate man, we know nearly everything, while of Shakespeare's inwardness we know nothing. *Shelley, a superb literary critic, considered Byron's Don Juan to be the great poem of the age, surpassing Goethe and Wordsworth.* It is Byron's masterwork ought to be his monument. It is almost as large-minded and various as its outrageous creator but will go on yielding to his legend.

George Gordon, Lord Byron, the originator of the concept of the Byronic hero—a melancholy, brooding and defiant man, haunted by some secret guilt—his European readership consistently conflated the man with his writing. Byron represented a romantic myth: a member of the aristocracy, he became a deist and a liberal in politics, who championed liberty and gave his money and finally his life for the cause of Greek independence.

Byron is the eternal archetype of the celebrity, the Napoleon of the realms of rhyme. Only Shakespeare, who re-created Plutarch's Cleopatra as the matchless celebrity of the ancient world, would be capable of representing Lord Byron in a tragicomedy worthy of the unique celebrity of the modern world, dwarfing all latecomer rock superstars.

Lord Byron founded what may be called an exoteric Lake school; and all the readers of verse in England, we might say in Europe, hastened to sit at his feet. What Mr. Wordsworth had said like a recluse, Lord Byron said like a man of the world, with less profound feeling, but with more perspicuity, energy, and conciseness.

The question how much of true poetry lies behind and independent of the scenery and properties of Byronism, that this paper aims to debate. Was the author of the poems from *Childe Harold* to *Don Juan* really gifted with the poetical "sincerity and strength" which have been awarded him by a critic of

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leanings so little Byronic in the ordinary sense of Matthew Arnold? Is he a poetic star of the first magnitude, a poetic force of the first power, at all? There may seem to be rashness, there may even seem to be puerile insolence and absurdity, in denying or even doubting this in the face of such a European concert as has been described and admitted above.

But Byron and Byronism were something immeasurably greater than anything that is represented by such a view as this: their real value and meaning are indeed little understood. The first of the mistakes about Byron lies in the fact that he is treated as a pessimist. True, he treated himself as such, but a critic can hardly have even a slight knowledge of Byron without knowing that he had the smallest amount of knowledge of himself that ever fell to the lot of an intelligent man. The real character of what is known as Byron's pessimism is better worth study than any real pessimism could ever be.

It is the standing peculiarity of this curious world of ours that almost everything in it has been extolled enthusiastically and invariably extolled to the disadvantage of everything else. One after another almost every one of the phenomena of the universe has been declared to be alone capable of making life worth living. Books, love, business, religion, alcohol, abstract truth, private emotion, money, simplicity, mysticism, hard work, a life close to nature, a life close to Belgrave Square, one of the grandest and largest 19th-century squares in London, are every one of them passionately maintained by somebody to be so good that they redeem the evil of an otherwise indefensible world. Thus, while the world is almost always condemned in summary, it is always justified, and indeed extolled, in detail after detail.

Byronism was a revolt against artificiality; the new pessimism is a revolt in its favor. The Byronic young man had an affectation of sincerity; the decadent, going a step deeper into the avenues of the unreal, has positively an affectation of affectation. And it is by their fopperies and their frivolities that we know that their sinister philosophy is sincere; in their lights and garlands and ribbons we read their indwelling despair. It was so, indeed, with Byron himself; his really bitter moments were his frivolous moments. He went on year after year calling down fire upon mankind, summoning the deluge and the destructive sea and all the ultimate energies of nature to sweep away the cities of the spawn of man. But through all this his subconscious mind was not that of a despairer; on the contrary, there is something of a kind of lawless faith in thus parleying with such immense and immemorial brutalities. It was not until the time in which he wrote *Don Juan* that he really lost this inward warmth and geniality, and a sudden shout of hilarious laughter announced to the world that Lord Byron had really become a pessimist.

Matters are very different with the more modern school of doubt and lamentation. The last movement of pessimism is perhaps expressed in Mr. Aubrey Beardsley's allegorical designs. Here we have to deal with a pessimism which tends naturally not towards the oldest elements of the cosmos, but towards the last and most fantastic fripperies of artificial life. Byronism tended towards the desert; the new pessimism towards the restaurant. Byronism was a revolt against artificiality; the new pessimism is a revolt in its favor.

One of the best tests in the world of what a poet really means is his meter. He may be a hypocrite in his metaphysics, but he cannot be a hypocrite in his prosody. And all the time that Byron's language is of horror and emptiness, his meter is a bounding pas de quatre. He may arraign existence on the most deadly charges, he may condemn it with the most desolating verdict, but he cannot alter the fact that on some walk in a spring morning when all the limbs are swinging and all the blood alive in the body, the lips may be caught repeating:

Oh, there's not a joy the world can give like that it takes away,
When the glow of early youth declines in beauty's dull decay;
'Tis not upon the cheek of youth the blush that fades so fast,
But the tender bloom of heart is gone ere youth itself be past.

(Stanzas for Music: 'There's not a joy the world can give')

That automatic recitation is the answer to the whole pessimism of Byron. The truth is that Byron was one of a class who may be called the unconscious optimists, who are very often, indeed, the most

uncompromising conscious pessimists, because the exuberance of their nature demands for an adversary a dragon as big as the world. But the whole of his essential and unconscious being was spirited and confident, and that unconscious being, long disguised and buried under emotional artifices, suddenly sprang into prominence in the face of a cold, hard, political necessity. In Greece he heard the cry of reality, and at the time that he was dying, he began to live. He heard suddenly the call of that buried and subconscious happiness which is in all of us, and which may emerge suddenly at the sight of the grass of a meadow or the spears of the enemy.

Surely it is ridiculous to maintain seriously that Byron's love of the desolate and inhuman in nature was the mark of vital skepticism and depression. When a young man can elect deliberately to walk alone in winter by the side of the shattering sea, when he takes pleasure in storms and stricken peaks, and the lawless melancholy of the older earth, we may deduce with the certainty of logic that he is very young and very happy. There is a certain darkness which we see in wine when seen in shadow; we see it again in the night that has just buried a gorgeous sunset. The wine seems black, and yet at the same time powerfully and almost impossibly red; the sky seems black, and yet at the same time to be only too dense a blend of purple and green. Such was the darkness which lay around the Byronic school. Darkness with them was only too dense a purple. They would prefer the sullen hostility of the earth because amid all the cold and darkness their own hearts were flaming like their own firesides.

The Byronic young man had an affectation of sincerity; the decadent, going a step deeper into the avenues of the unreal, has positively an affectation of affectation. And it is by their fopperies and their frivolities that we know that their sinister philosophy is sincere; in their lights and garlands and ribbons we read their indwelling despair. It was so, indeed, with Byron himself; his really bitter moments were his frivolous moments. He went on year after year calling down fire upon mankind, summoning the deluge and the destructive sea and all the ultimate energies of nature to sweep away the cities of the spawn of man. But through all this his subconscious mind was not that of a despairer; on the contrary, there is something of a kind of lawless faith in thus parleying with such immense and immemorial brutalities. It was not until the time in which he wrote *Don Juan* that he really lost this inward warmth and geniality, and a sudden shout of hilarious laughter announced to the world that Lord Byron had really become a pessimist.

Byron was a paradox in everything. He was at once a cold-blooded satirist and a man of sentiment; an aristocrat and a radical; a Platonist and an Epicurean; the most sublime and the most sensual of mortals; 'half dust, half deity,' to borrow his own phrase; but the most barefaced paradox, was his ostentatious defence in prose of Pope's poetical system, which, in his poetry, he had been all his life endeavoring to subvert. The key to Byron's eccentricities is to be found in his total want of principle, and his uncontrollable passions.

To the last is to be referred, moreover, much of what is grand and striking in his poetry. Many were led to charge him with affectation. The history of his life, however, which may be called passion put into action, shows how uniformly he sacrificed to his passions all his worldly interests and better hopes. His poetry gains somewhat in effect by our conviction of this, for sincerity is essential to the full success of the poet as of the orator; and, in this point of view, the exhibition of actual vice is less detrimental to his interest than the affectation of it.

Much stress has been laid on the mischievous tendency of Byron's philosophy. But, in truth, there is little in his writings to deserve that name. He had no principles to build on, and seems to have been incapable of forming any settled system, or even a systematic attack on anything. He levelled his shafts pretty indiscriminately at whatever men prize most in this life, or look forward to with hope in the next. This sort of random aim was little better than shooting in the dark. The following sarcastic lines show the miscellaneous range of his hostilities.

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 other's griefs that some sincerely grieve;
That two, or one, are almost what they seem, —

(Childe Harold's pilgrimage).

Byron's poetry is much more to be dreaded, for the morbid appetite for stimulants which it has a tendency to nourish, especially in young minds, as well as for the light-hearted raillery with which it touches the most serious topics, and the seductive coloring which it too often throws over the grossest pleasures of the senses. He must have sat to himself for his portrait of Rousseau.

Here the self-torturing sophist, wild Rousseau,
The apostle of affliction, he who threw
Enchantment over passion, and from woe
Wrung overwhelming eloquence, first drew
The breath which made him wretched; yet he knew
How to make madness beautiful, and cast
O'er erring deeds and thoughts, a heavenly hue
Of words, like sunbeams, dazzling as they past
The eyes, which o'er them shed tears feelingly and fast.

(Childe Harold's pilgrimage).

Byron's poetry is eminently characteristic of the present age. It is essentially undramatic, and altogether repugnant to the social spirit of the age of Shakespeare. It is no less so to the placid tenor and perspicuity of Queen Anne's. It is purely egotistical, devoted in some form or other to self-analysis, the most melancholy, in its influence on the soul, of all occupations. It deals largely in abstruse speculations on moral or metaphysical theorems. It is written entirely for the closet, and pre-supposes a more deeply thinking and deeply read community, than has existed in any preceding period.

Byron died in Greece, leading a messy rebellion against the Turks (April 19, 1824, aged thirty-six). Only Shakespeare has been translated and read more, first in continental Europe and then worldwide. High Romantic in his life but not in his art, which carried on from Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, and Laurence Sterne, the endlessly digressive Byron incarnated countless contradictions of thought and feeling. He bewildered and fascinated his contemporaries with a vitality overtly erotic, compounded of narcissism, snobbery, sadomasochism, incest, heterosexual sodomy, homosexuality, what you will. Of the two authentic English vices, humbuggery and humbuggery, Byron scourged the first and expanded the horizons of the second.

In March 1823, Byron learned that he had been elected a member of the Greek Committee, a circle of individuals active in the cause of liberating Greece. He immediately offered money and advice and was then, despite problems with his health, determined to go to Greece. Together with Pietro Gamba, Trelawney, Hamilton Browne, and six or seven servants, he sailed to Greece on July 23, 1823, and then spent the next months at Cephalonia, Argostoli, and Metaxata, trying to find out to which leader in the struggle they ought to attach themselves. When Prince Alexander Mavrocordato urged him to come to Missolonghi, Byron felt he had found the right revolutionary and arrived at Missolonghi on January 5, 1824.

Byron supplied money for troops and fortification and served as a link between Odysseus, a local leader of the insurgents, and Mavrocordato. A revolt in Morea prevented him from participating in the capture of Epactos, and a conference of the leaders never came to pass. Byron's health had now deteriorated: he fell

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seriously ill after a horse ride and died on April 19, 1824 at the age of thirty-six, shortly after the publication of the fifteenth and sixteenth cantos of *Don Juan*. His heart was buried in Missolonghi, while the rest of his remains were buried in Hucknell Torkard Church near Newstead, as the deans of both Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's had refused to receive his body. His death, while supporting the push for Greek freedom, increased his popularity and furthered the myth of the Byronic hero for generations of subsequent readers and admirers.

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