

## BYRON

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The history of literature has taught us how uncertain and fluctuating a thing is the reputation of a poet. The verdict of one generation is always subject to revision by the next, and in the nature of things, it is the poet who has been most confidently and fervorously acclaimed in the first instance who is most liable to suffer at the hands of subsequent generations. Except as regards the very greatest names, how rarely has it happened that a poet's contemporaries have been able to assign to him definitely and without bequeathing a suit-at-law to posterity, his place on Parnassus. The poet (or his shade) is always liable to the receipt of a writ at the hands of new generations with varying tasks and new standards, calling on him to show reason why he should not appear before a fresh court, to be tried by new judges, and perhaps even under quite new statutes. It seems as if centenaries had been invented to facilitate this process of revision of judgment, to provide at definite intervals, an opportunity and excuse for bringing the examination of 'the case' up to date; or shall we say, for the institution of a sort of secular stock-taking, the overhauling, individual by individual of our Pantheon, and the examination of the haloes of our Immortals, - so much off for wear and tear and the tarnish of Time.

I can't presume to the least competence for this role of Inquisitor in dealing with Byron (and doubtless there will be many others, on this occasion of his first Centenary, to undertake this Inquisitorial or Heraldic task, excellently qualified to assign to our poet the exact place our age allows him), but I should like to suggest that whilst I can't pretend to any more serious intention than that of gossiping a little about my very interesting subject, I do not - I could not with any sincerity - approach it in the attitude of the Byron enthusiast, the special - pleader;

I must be content to regard myself, in my tasks, my prejudices, as perhaps fairly representative of my generation, and try to divine from my own impressions, (*reactions*, I believe, is the ultra - modern jargon) of Byron's work and legend, the common opinion of my generation in regard to it.

What is the common feeling of our generation in relation to Byron's work? - Childe Harold, or parts of it, we read perhaps at school. Don Juan we read, and I think we may 'pass' Don Juan without question, and say that of all Byron's work it is the surest of immortality. A few of the shorter poems we read. But —. There are many 'buts'. In the first place even the best of the work, especially of the lyrics comes to us smeared, as it were, with the enthusiasm of our Early - Victorian grandparents, and we have learned to suspect that enthusiasm and its objects. And than the mood of the age is little sympathetic to 'Byronism'; we see too clearly the tinsel of all these Romantic trappings, and the moody Villain-Hero however eloquent his soliloquy may be, is likelier to move us to boredom or to smiles than to the scandalised admiration of our early - Nineteenth Century ancestors. Our 'wickedness' is of quite a different sort, - much older and less innocent, I fear. All these dark and dreadful moods, these Corsairs and these Cains, seem to us - puerile. There I think, in the word 'puerile', is the keynote of our impression. We take our Romanticism, if we take it at all, young, say from fifteen to eighteen, as one takes the measles or the scarlet - fever; and we look back on it afterwards with the amused indulgence one has for boyish follies. I doubt however if even our young are much subject to the disease nowadays: there are too many counter - influences, - the Realist and Naturalist novelists; the modern dramatists, such as Ibsen and my countryman Shaw, who have satirised, and Shaw delightfully, the Romantic malady. And the humourists; for one might say that Mark Twain's immortal Tom Sawyer has helped to do for melodramatic Roman-

ticism what Don Quixote did for the novels of Chivalry.

But one might argue and with justice that it is quite unfair to identify Byronism with Byron. Here is a poet with a sustained and passionate personal utterance; one must set aside the Romantic trappings, the Byronic stage-properties and judge simply of the poetic quality of that utterance.

Let me quote, as of interest from this point of view, the verdict of professor Saintsbury - an authority who will hardly be suspected of wishing to dazzle by cheap paradox. - Byron seems to Mr. Saintsbury 'Nineteenth Century Literature' a poet distinctly of the second class, and not even of the best kind of second, inasmuch as his greatness is chiefly derived from a sort of imitation of the qualities of the first. His verse is to the greatest poetry what melodrama is to tragedy, what plaster is to marble, what pinchbeck is to gold. He is not indeed an imposter; for his sense of the beauty of nature and of the unsatisfactoriness of life is real, and his power of conveying this to others is real also. He has great though uncertain, and never very *fine* command of poetic sound, and a considerable though less command of poetic vision. But in all this there is a singular touch of illusion, of what his contemporaries had learned from Scott to call *grame-rye*.

The really great poets do not injure each other in the very least by comparison, different as they are. Milton does not 'kill' Wordsworth; Spenser does not injure Shelley; there is no danger in reading Keats immediately after Coleridge. But read Byron in close juxtaposition with any of these, or with not a few others, and the effect, to any good poetic taste must surely be disastrous, to my own, whether good or bad, it is perfectly fatal. The light is not that, which never was on land or sea, it is that which is habitually just in front of the stage, the roses are rouged, the cries of passion even sometimes (not always) *ring* false.

The judgment seems harsh. But I think we may take it as, in the main, a re-

presentative specimen of contemporary literary opinion. If I reproduce it here (and perhaps it may seem a little ungracious to do so on the occasion of a centenary) it is because it raises some very interesting questions as to the criteria by which the work of a poet must be judged. Accepting Mr. Saintsbury's criteria, I am compelled to admire the sureness of his perception and in the main the fairness of his verdict. But called upon to accept that verdict, I should find myself acquiescing with reluctance and even wondering whether the advocate of another point of view and other criteria might not be able to work Mr. Saintsbury's conclusions into a *Reductio ad Absurdum* argument. 'A poet of the second-class whose greatness is chiefly derived from a sort of imitation of the qualities of the first. His Romanticism, 'a bastard and second hand Romanticism' owing much to our novelists of the School of Terror, Mrs. Radcliffe and so on, and a great deal more to Scott. Essentially a derivative poet, then, but this description needs I think to be modified. He was derivative in the sense that he took, without greatly caring, whatever lay nearest to his hands, as moulds into which to pour his passionate utterance. The Romantic moulds were the newest and the most successful, therefore he took them. But he didn't greatly care about what was essential in the Romantic theory and spirit, he hadn't 'the root of the matter' in him. Accident made him leader, for a time, of the Romantic movement, but he was a leader without conviction. 'We are all on the wrong tack' he cries to Moore; and in the dispute between Romantics and Classicists, between the new poetry and the older, he defends passionately Pope and Dryden. His first success, 'English Bards and Scotch Reviewers' is a satire in the style of Pope; and on his return from the East, Dallas finds him resting his aspirations to Fame on another Popian satire, the mediocre 'Hints from Horace'. Has he nothing else in the way of literary baggage? enquires his disappointed friend, and Dallas is at last shown some essays in the

Spenserian measure, of which the noble author is inclined to speak disparagingly. Dallas takes them, and discovers with delight 'Childe Harold'. No one is more surprised at the success of the poem than the author: he 'wakes up one morning to find himself famous'. He is committed to 'the wrong tack', but to the end of his life he talks of making amends for his literary errors by the production of some great work which shall conform to Neo-Classical canons.

And yet it is perhaps doubtful whether we should read into this professed adherence to the Classical standards so much a sincere zeal for those standards as a coldness for the Romantic doctrine, - as well as that strange perversity which seems continually to have urged Byron to fly in the face of the opinion of his day. A young patrician, he stood coldly apart, caring for none of these things that the coleries debated so eagerly. But there was in him an unquiet genius urging him to distinguish himself, and the passionate need when certain springs in him were touched, for expression. Had he been colder and stronger he would probably have found a field for the play of his genius in the senate, of which he was a member by right of title; his weakness made him a poet. His tour in the Mediterranean and the East determined the bent of his genius, gave to his poetry that exotic tinge which was for his contemporaries so new and so attractive.

Of the Romantic group, then, not so

much from intimate conviction as from the compulsion of the shaping tendencies of his generation - influences which however much he might cry out against them, he was powerless to resist - he stands apart. Test his verse by the touchstones of the true Romantics, search it for the supreme expression, for those lines that seem to open to us the gates of fairyland, and I grant you

will be disappointed. His muse is fluent, vigorous, spirited, maintaining a fair average in the matter of expression, but rarely or never attaining the loftiest heights. Yet this, after all, is negative criticism and helps in no wise to explain what was really great, what was really remarkable in him. For theman, when all is said, was great, was a tremendous force, and the greatest of his time hailed him as such and watched his career as one observes and marvels at the erratic course of a comet. Mr. Saintsbury, at a loss to explain his extraordinary vogue, can only suggest that just as it has been

suggested that whole nations may go mad like individuals, so it may not be impossible that continents may go mad like nations. One may impeach the popular judgment; but how explain the fact that the choice spirits of his time, Goethe, Shelley hailed him as amongst the greatest?

Whatever may be the faults, even the banality, of its expression, his genius was *felt* as a force. After all what need to rate him as of the first or second class; what need to apply to his poetry tests to which it can not re-



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Lord Byron (in his room at St. Lazarus)

spond? There is room for more than one sort of poetic greatness. His verse is not the ecstatic communings of the solitary with his own soul; it is the passionate protest of a man of the world who is also a man of genius. Certain springs in him were touched, springs of pain, and there upwelled this passionate, headstrong torrent of poetry. And however careless this verse may be in expression yet a whole continent felt its force and was moved by it. Arnold, in some Memorial Verses on the death of Wordsworth, written in the middle of the last century, sings:

'When Byron's eyes were shut in death,  
We bow'd our head and held our breath.  
He taught us little; but our soul  
Had felt him like the thunder's roll.  
With shivering heart the strife we saw  
Of passion with Eternal law.  
And yet with reverential awe  
We watch'd the fount of fiery life  
Which served for that Titanic strife'.

What part of this immense poetic output is likely to endure? What has endured? Chiefly doubtless the work done in Italy, when Byron had left England for good. The fiery torrent begins to purify itself of its earlier dross and scoriæ. And in *Don Juan*, it seems to me we have the crowning work, the masterpiece. What is there in English literature of its sort to compare to it? I think of *Hudibras*, but how cramped seem the couplets of *Hudibras* compared with the magnificent ease, the inexhaustible power, of *Don Juan*; stanza succeeding stanza as the tireless ocean sends wave after wave to break on the shore. Faults of licentiousness it has inseparable from its subject; yet how often have we pardoned worse faults in works less excellent. Byron at least is never simply nasty like Sterne, Sterne who sniggers, nor gross like Swift or Rabelais. Perhaps the worst that we can say of his heroes and heroines is that they are human, all too-human:

'Cheerful creatures, whose most sinful deeds  
Were but the overbeating of the heart,  
And flow of too much happiness'.

And in *Don Juan* there is at last a sort of reconciliation, though it disguise itself under the cloak of an easy cynicism; and the attainment of a sort of serenity.

A word about the man himself, and his legend. Up till the publication of Moore's life of Byron the legend had the field to itself. The wildest, the most bizarre stories were circulated of him, stories that would have done credit to the invention of any novelist of the school of Mrs. Radcliffe. Even Goethe gravely repeats the most fantastic rigmurle (in his criticism of Manfred): Byron is for even haunted by the phantoms of two women. With reason, it seems; for of the poet's relations with one of these women the following story is told. When a bold and enterprising young man, he won the affections of a Florentine lady. Her husband discovered the amour, and murdered his wife; but the murderer was the same night found dead in the street, and there was no one on whom any suspicion could be attached. Lord Byron removed from Florence, and these spirits haunted him all his life afterwards! This romantic incident, concludes Goethe, is rendered highly probable by innumerable allusions to it in his poems.

A sort of mushroom crop of these absurdities sprang up about him and helped to form the legendary Byron, the Byron that existed in the popular imagination. 'So utterly out of truth and nature', says Tom Moore, in the 'Life', 'are the representations of his life and character long current upon the continent, that it may be questioned whether the real 'flesh and blood' hero of these pages, the social, practical-minded, and with all his faults and eccentricities, *English* Lord Byron, may not, to the overexalted imagination of most of his foreign admirers, appear but an ordinary, unromantic, and prosaic personage'.

The dear, but long-eared, public may always be trusted to credit any invention so that it be highly spiced, rather than the prosaic truth. For myself I build up a theory somewhat in this fashion. Byron's misanthropy was

originally, rather than a fierce self-sufficiency, the concealment of a hurt, a weakness. It was due indeed to pride, but to a wounded pride, or to pride fearing a wound. There was indeed the physical blemish, the club-foot about which he was so sensitive; but there was also an inner morbidity, an inner dissatisfaction - the weakness of the poet. He, with the quivering nerves of the poet, had to play the part of the lord, the man of the world, therefore he wore a mask. The dear artists are all actors, a certain poet-philosopher had said, and certainly Byron was an actor. The men he most ardently admired were the men of action, and to console himself perhaps for his inability to actually be, rather than act, the man of action, he created his Corsairs and Giaours. The world in its turn identified him with his creations, and up to a certain point the world was right, for he projected himself into the figures he created; but it was wrong of course when it interpreted too literally these creations of his fancy. The poet's work is a record of his moods, not an autobiography. Here, however, was the beginning of the legend, the creation of a false image of the poet in the public imagination; and doubtless the legend reacted on Byron and forced him into false postures and these in turn helped to feed the legend. Doubtless too the legend rather flattered his vanity, for a time; with the storm of reprobation that followed his separation from his wife it began to assume forms too horrible:

'He fed on poisons, and they had no power,  
But were a kind of nutriment; he lived [men].  
Through that which had been death to many

The medicine, bitter as it was, was perhaps wholesome; when the end comes at Misolonghi we see him free of any theatrical vapours; a sober, practical, plucky Englishman.

His letters, as given in Moore's biography, are delightful reading; in the extracts from the Journal, I find too often something forced and strained, as if in spite of all the pretence of privacy he were conscious of an au-

dience. But the letters to his friend Moore or his publisher Murray, written to speak in dressing - gown and slippers show a vigorous and wholesome side of him. One likes to remember that the Byron of certain of the letters from the Mediterranean and the East, and the Byron describing the Monastery of San Lazzaro and speaking with enthusiasm of the Fathers, is the true, the unspoilt Byron.

What shall be our final verdict on the man? That whatever his weaknesses may have been, he redeemed them by his pluck, his courage? That in spite of all that leagued itself against him, in spite of the bray of the populace, the poisonous calumnies, he kept his pride and put up a good fight? I have already quoted from Matthew Arnold, Byron's most distinguished apologist of the last century. Let me finish with some verses from another poem of his, entitled 'Courage'. True, says the poet, that we must tame our rebel will and how to Nature's law; must bear many an ill in silence and learn the lesson of renunciation. Yet now, when the boldest wills give way, and in the rush of Fate and Circumstance, the human race are swept along like huddling sheep, now:

'Those sterner spirits let me prize,  
Who, though the tendence of the whole  
They less than us might recognize,  
Kept, more than us, their strength of soul.

'And, Byron! let us dare admire  
If not thy fierce and turbid song,  
Yet that, in anguish, doubt, desire,  
Thy fiery courage still was strong.

'The sun that on thy tossing pain  
Did with such cold derision shine,  
He crush'd thee not with his disdain  
He had his glow, and thou hadst thine.

'Our bane, disguise it as we may  
To weakness, is a faltering course;  
Oh that past times would give one day  
Joined to its clearness, of their force!'

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