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THE PROBLEM OF BYRON

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General R. Rosetti
with kind regards and best wishes.
John Burbank
Bucureşti. July. 1940

THE PROBLEM OF BYRON

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THE PROBLEM OF BYRON

In a recent public lecture given in Bucharest by a distinguished English parliamentarian, Mr. Wedgewood Benn, the speaker reminded us of the importance of tradition and formalism in English life. The King of England still addresses his parliament in the language used by the Norman king who conquered England in 1066 ; he does not merely use French but old French ; instead of saying „Le Roi le veut" he says „Le Roi le veult". The ritual, the sense of dignity, of law and order which governs the House of Commons is reflected in the ordinary life of the people. This is perhaps the first impression which strikes the foreign traveller in England. He notices the respect shown to the policeman — a very humble employee of the government, but a representative of the law —; he remarks the little courtesies which pass between people of all classes as they go about their affairs. When he gives a penny to the bus conductor for his ticket he receives a „Thank you, Sir".

So that, if he has travelled widely, the traveller may come to the conclusion that there is no country, with the exception of Japan, which is so conventional in morals, manners and in its respect for the established order and tradition.

Yet, surprisingly from this background, built upon conventions and a strong sense of social responsibility, which one would expect to act as a brake upon all individual initiative, has arisen a strong attachment to personal liberty. England may claim to have been the pioneer in freedom of speech and action. In making the second main point in his lecture by which he attempted to explain the British constitution, Mr. Wedgewood Benn quoted the eighteenth century writer and statesman Edmund Burke. „As long as you have the wisdom to keep the sovereign authority of this country as the sanc-

tuary of liberty...", said Burke in his speech *On Conciliation with America,* „they will turn their faces towards you.... Slavery they can have anywhere... freedom they can have from none but you".

I shall not go into the very complicated question of attempting to define Romanticism in English literature. It is sufficient for our purpose to note — all authorities will agree upon this — it is that attitude of mind which demands freedom of expression in form and subject matter. In literature it thus corresponds with the movement towards liberty in political life. The point I would have you recognise is that in spite of — or, as I would rather maintain, helped, by — this rigidly conventional background of customs, morals and respect for traditional values, English literature can compare with any other European literature in variety, independence, and therefore interest. Paradoxically, all of our very greatest classic writers with one notable exception are romantic. Yet even in Milton — in the choruses of *Samson Agonistes* — you will find free verse, which was just as advanced for his age as his views upon divorce.

From this wealth of romantic material, if we except from the Elizabethan age the giant figure of Shakespeare — which would upset any balance —, the richest period in English literature in quantity, quality, and variety of production is the Nineteenth Century, and particularly the first half of that century.

In this period we must distinguish two main groups or „schools": the so-called Lake Poets (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott and Southey) and the Satanic School. The Lake Poets were innovators in form and subject matter but extremely conventional in morals. The second group led by Byron and Shelley (we exclude Keats, who really forms a school of his own) went much further in a romantic direction, as their nickname implies, by also rebelling against the conventional morality of their time. Of these two by far the more powerful in influence and personality was Byron, and it is he who will receive the greater part of our attention.

The public reaction to the first part of his Childe Harold in 1812 was immediate and overwhelming. He tells us, „I awoke one morning and found myself famous". More than

this, he stifled with one publication almost all competition; people stopped reading the Lake Poets, whom they now found flat and uninteresting, and even the stories in verse of Sir Walter Scott *(Lady of the Lake, Marmion, The Lay of the Last Minstrel)*, which had previously enjoyed great popularity, now, by comparison, seemed lifeless and dull.

The reasons for Byron's sudden popularity are not difficult to discover. People were tired of abstractions, of the attempt to reproduce the atmosphere of the Middle Ages, of ghosts and dreams — in fact of literature far removed from actual life — and Coleridge, Scott and Southey gave their readers what may not be too unfairly described as fairy tales. Wordsworth, when he was not difficult to understand, was often childish. Byron had written in his earlier work, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers :*

> Let simple Wordsworth chime his childish verse
> And brother Coleridge lull the babe at nurse :

The key to Byron's popularity is his choice of subject matter. He wrote as a commentator in verse on people, places and events which were in the public eye, and which were matter for excited discussions. His hero — his mouthpiece — was a witty, masculine, realistic, sophisticated European, whose utterances acted like a douche of cold water — or rather iced champagne — after the opium dreams of Coleridge, the impulses „from a vernal wood" of Wordsworth, the „quaintness and mouthiness" (Byron's own epithets) of Southey, and the conventional medieval atmosphere of Scott. Moreover, he was his own best publicist; he showed people what to admire in his works by holding up for sharp and scathing ridicule the works of his rivals.

The first Canto of *Childe Harold* is set in the Spanish Peninsula, where at that time England was fighting against the French. Byron had just visited Spain and he describes in one of his letters the battle of Talavera as : „A pretty victory; Two hundred officers and five thousand men killed, all English, and the French in as great force as ever." There was hardly a family in England who did not have sons, relatives or friends in the war. It was therefore exactly what everyone

wanted to hear about, and this was in the days before popular newspapers.

The second Canto took people even farther afield at a time when travel was so expensive as to be prohibitive except to the very few. All were now able to share vicariously the luxury of the „Grand Tour" through exotic countries in the company of a young, ultra-modern aristocrat. But there is another interest and appeal in this Canto. Byron raises the stirring cry of freedom, which was even then meeting the terrible menace of Napoleon (Waterloo was fought three years after the publication of the poem), and for this he becomes the mouthpiece of his generation. He invokes the spirit of freedom, particularly on behalf of Greece —

Fair Greece ! sad relic of departed Worth !
Immortal, though no more ; though fallen, great !
Who now shall lead thy scattered children forth.
And long accustomed bondage uncreate ?

. . . .

. . . .

Spirit of Freedom ! when on Phyle's brow
Thou sat'st with Thrasybulus and his train,
Couldst thou forebode the dismal hour which now
Dims the green beauties of thine Attic plain ?

(I shall find occasion later in this lecture to give you another notable passage on freedom.) Whereas many English poets have been inspired by the ancient glories of Greece, Byron took as his subject contemporary Greece in bondage.

During the next three years his fame increased with *the Giaour, the Bride of Abydos, the Corsair, Lara and the Siege of Corinth.* Of the Corsair alone 14.000 copies were sold in one day.

Then came the tragic turn in his life with his marriage in 1815, which broke up in 1816, when his wife left him never to return. His English period now ends ; he is no more to be the Literary and Social Lion among his own people ; henceforth he is the refugee abroad from outraged English society. His time is spent in Switzerland, Venice, Ravenna, Pisa, and Genoa, part of the time in the company of young Shelley.

He carried with him the consciousness of failure in his personal affairs, but he was too proud to be anything but a rebel. Most of his heroes from now on are also rebels — Manfred, Cain, Lucifer, Sardanapalus, Beppo, and, of course, Don Juan — and through them he reveals his own personal tragedy : that of a man misunderstood and derided, buffeted by fate, but meeting the world and his sorrows with indomitable courage and pride, always with a mocking smile on his lips.

With haughty scorn which mocked the smart,
From Europe to the Aetolian shore
The pageant of his bleeding heart,
And thousands counted every groan,
And Europe made his woe her own.

His death, in the grand manner as he had lived, appeared as a final, noble act of atonement ; for he gave up his life at Missonghli in 1824 in the cause of Greek freedom.

No other English poet at the peak of his fame ever had such popularity, not only in England, but all over Europe. His was the main influence in forming the French Romantic Movement. „Le sombre génie de Byron", wrote George Sand, „est l'esprit romantique du XIX-e siècle". Lamartine, Victor Hugo, Alfred de Musset, Dumas in the French drama and George Sand in the novel are only a few of the names of those who were influenced by him and who joined in the general chorus of praise. In Germany so great a poet as Heine came under his influence and the great Goethe, whose influence in Europe for a time was even less than Byron's, declared him to be „a European phenomenon, such as might not be seen again for hundreds of years". In Spanish, Italian, Russian and Polish literature we find similar tributes. His name figures largely in Rumanian translations of English writers. The first present given to me after arrival in this country was an old translation in Rumanian of *Don Juan.*

These are facts of history whatever personally we may think of Byron's poetry. Some have gone even further and say that the three most influential names in European literature are Shakespeare, Goethe and Byron.

However, in order to keep our sense of proportion, we

should here interpose a *caveat.* Literary influence and popularity should not be confused with literary merit. There have been many whose influence was very great in their own times whose names we seldom hear mentioned to-day. The most influential man of letters in the second part of the eighteenth century in England has left behind him not much more than a great dictionary — notable chiefly because it is one of the first in our language — and some biassed literary criticism. It is doubtful whether the ordinary reader to-day would

Lord Byron

have been aware of his existence had not a modest, insignificant man (as he appeared to his contemporaries) preserved his personality for us by making him the subject of what is perhaps the best biography in our language.

In England Byron's influence soon started to wane, and has been on the decline ever since, although there have always been, as there still are to-day, some who have upheld his claims to the highest rank of English poets. The great Victorian critic, Matthew Arnold, in a famous Preface to a new edition in 1881 of Byron's poems, had classed Byron with Wordsworth as the two greatest poets of the century: „First and pre-eminent in actual performance, a glorious pair". This started a violent controversy and an equally violent reaction against Byron led by the Swinburne-Morris-Rosetti group —

the so-called Pre-Raphaelites. All the writers of this school represent a "precious" type of literature. They seek their material from the past in old books and libraries and try to reconstruct old moods and old manners of thought in the atmosphere of ancient Greece or the Middle Ages. This calls for art rather than inspiration, as technique must to some extent serve as substitute for direct and genuine feeling. There is no wonder that these virtuosos were jealous of Byron ; for if he wrote nothing that can be compared with the *Blessed Damozel* or "the Prologue" to *Tristram of Lyonesse,* neither could they produce anything comparable to *Don Juan ;* and they were seldom capable of the direct passion which appears intermittently in all of Byron's poems, and in some of the shorter ones — for example, in *And Thou Art Dead, As Young and Fair* — is sustained throughout.

In making the attack Swinburne claimed, among other things, that Byron's popularity on the Continent is explained by the fact that he is only readable in translation ; that his best writings are in prose ; that Goethe's praise merely meant that Germany's greatest poet was the world's worst critic.

Some have gone even further than this. That great scholar, Professor Saintsbury, who died only a short time ago, was a strong supporter of the Swinburne group and almost denied Byron the title of poet. "All attempts to rehabilitate Byron", wrote Saintsbury in 1896, "have certainly never succeeded either with the majority of competent critics or with the majority of readers of poetry". Yet *Don Juan* has been called „after *Paradise Lost,* the greatest long poem in our language" and „The prose epic of modern Europe". Professor Garrod, then Professor of Poetry in the University of Oxford, in a public lecture he gave on Byron as recently as 1924, declared *Don Juan* to be „the most irresponsible poem in our language". On the other hand, Professor Grierson, in a lecture delivered before the British Academy only a few years earlier, gives a reasoned appreciation of Byron which does not fall far short, if at all, of any praise that I shall give in this lecture.

This, then, is the problem of Byron. What are we to make of these contradictory statements ? How is it that a poet who once held an almost unchallenged position, not only

in England but also all over Europe, should now have sunk so low in the hierarchy of English literature as to be denied the title of poet by a responsible critic ? In trying to answer this question wo may answer another : For what values is Byron likely to live in literature ? And, if our judgement is correct, we may anticipate the final reckoning.

However, we should not approach the problem of Byron's status as a poet without knowing something of another problem, that of his life and the tragedy of it.

Although Byron, according to ordinary standards, was extraordinarily fortunate in his birth, he also inherited certain disadvantages. Born in 1788 into a noble family and heir to a fortune, he yet came from a stock which on the male side had degenerated. His father for his libertinism and general irresponsibility was called „Mad Jack Byron"; the nobleman from whom he inherited his estate was known to all his neighbours and tenants as „the Wicked Lord". His mother, who could trace her descent from the poet-king of Scotland, James Ist, was almost as unbalanced as his father, and her vindictiveness and jealousy were intensified by the treatment she received from Mad Jack Byron. Often she acted like an insane woman, and is said to have behaved so foolishly at the time of her son's birth that she caused him to be born with a deformed foot. In other respects Byron, as is well known, was one of the handsomest men of his time in Europe — a fact which does not simplify the life of a man born with strong passions

Certain main traits in Byron's character are shown by an anecdote from his early school days. When he was 13 he threw a missile at the head of another schoolboy, young Lord Portsmouth, but missed his target and broke the window. Attempts were made to excuse his action as being less vindictive than it was, but he would have none of this. „I did mean it", he screamed, „I will teach a fool of an earl to pinch another noble's ear". In this story may be detected some of the characteristics which remained with Byron through life : his passionate desire to tell the truth, at whatever cost to himself ; his apparent lack of concern for the persons and feelings of others ; and, of course, his pride. Unlike Shelley he enjoyed the rough and tumble life in an English public school, which

is also a boarding school. He enjoyed „rowing", he tells us (not rowing in a boat, but fighting with other boys), and this love of a fight may have had a lot to do with his subsequent unhappiness.

It would have been strange if one with such inherited tendencies, and such a home environment, should have lived a normal, happy life. He lacked above all a strong guiding hand in his home life, and a wise mother might have saved him. But the central tragic fact in his life is his quarrel with his wife of which no one knows, nor ever will, the true history. She appears to have been the epitome of all that was conventional and hypocritical in her age, and thus was the exact opposite of Byron. When she deserted him one year after their marriage, declaring him to be a monster, all English society turned against him, and henceforth, like his friend, young Shelley, he was compelled to live abroad. There is no doubt that being a moral outcast from his own people embittered his existence, drove him to extremes of loose living, (which should not be glossed over), and gave him a number of what we to-day call complexes, particularly with regard to women. At times he was even cruel and callous, as though he were trying to revenge himself upon women in general for the difficulties brought into his life by his wife and mother. Many men have been ruined by women, but it was left to Byron to be exceptional even in this, to be ruined by his mother as well as by his wife.

This is one side of Byron — the libertine, the scoffer at all human virtues. We may maintain this if we judge him by certain events in his life, and if we take the surface cynicism of *Don Juan* at its face value. But is this the real Byron ? At eight years old, he tells us, he conceived an affection for a girl of his own age, which remained with him throughout life. At sixteen he was thrown into a convulsive fit of violent emotion when he heard of her marriage ; at 25 he recalled „every word, every caress" which had passed between them. „My misery, my love for that girl", he writes, „were so violent that I sometimes doubt whether I have ever been attached since". He was still a youth when he fell in love with another Mary, Mary Chaworth. The reality of this affection is expressed in what is perhaps his most self-revealing poem,

The Dream. He tells of his sense of frustration at her marriage, of his agony at her subsequent insanity, and of how, at his own marriage, „the one beloved face on earth“ rose like a spectre of past but not wholly extinguished passion between him and his bride. It is strange to pass from this Byron, the idealist who thought of love as a single, an unchangeable passion, to the hard cynic in Don Juan who sometimes speaks with the same voice, but in very different accents.

In *Don Juan* Byron helps to build up the case against himself, but I would suggest that this is part of his pose, which was also a defence, for it would have been against all we know of his character to have laid the secrets of his soul bare to the vulgar gaze of the world which had hurt him so much. This is how he writes in *Don Juan :*

When we know what all are, we must bewail us,
But nevertheless I hope it is no crime
To laugh at *all* things — for I wish to know
What, after *all,* are *all* things — but a *show ?*

(The italics are the poet's)

They accuse me — *Me* — the present writer of
The present poem — of — I know not what —
A tendency to under-rate and scoff
At human power and virtue, and all that :
And this they say in language rather rough.
Good God ! I wonder what they would be at !
I say no more than hath been said in Dante's
Verse and by Solomon and by Cervantes :

By Swift, by Machiavel, by Rochefoucault.
By Fénélon, by Luther and by Plato ;
By Tillotson and Wesley, and Rousseau.
Who knew this life was not worth a potato.
'Tis not their fault, nor mine, if this be so. —
For my part, I pretend not to be Cato,
Nor even Diogenes. — We live and die.
But which is best, you know no more than I.

This is quoted in at least one anthology, stamped with the distinguished mark of the Oxford University Press, as

„Byron's Philosophy", and headed as such. It amounts, of course, to the fatuous assertion, if we take it seriously, that life is „not worth a potato" ; in consequence any discussion of human values is futile.

Shakespeare says much the same thing, and is, in fact, in a number of passages quite as ironical as Byron, although it is the fashion to quote him — conveniently forgetting these passages — in church pulpits :

> As flies to wanton boys are we to the Gods,
> They kill us for their sport.

Against this he will sometimes give us good Calvinstic theology :

> There's a divinity that shapes our ends
> Rough hew them how we will....

What are we to believe ? We find ourselves in the same dilemma as Plato, who found poets so irresponsible that he would have cast them out of his ideal Commonwealth. And in one sense he is quite right, for the poets are the world's worst philosophers (they are often for a similar reason very bad critics), as they disdain the method, and will not consult the moral purpose, of philosophy, which is to tell people how to do and how to enjoy the right things, — that is those things which convention says is good for them.

> Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight.
> And custom lie upon thee with a weight,
> Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life !

could write even so conventionally moral a poet as Wordsworth. The fact is that when a poet professes to have a philosophy, even though it may be a philosophy of his own art, we are likely to find the gap between theory and execution so disconcertingly great that the philosophy becomes confusion. So it is with Wordsworth in his theorising on poetic diction and poetic character, as another poet, Coleridge, pointed out, after he had ceased to be a poet and graduated as a literary critic. The only possible answer to the question which

has haunted critics from Plato downwards, and harasses many to this day (the problem is obviously still alive when we find one of our most distinguished contemporary critics arguing from the „irresponsibility" of Don Juan) is that the poet's way of expressing man's sense of values is through poetic example and illustration. We are asked to recognise facts in poetry, not to give intellectual credence to theories. Whether Byron does, or does not, think life to be of less value than a potato is clearly indicated by the fact that he spent a great deal, of his time and energy, not surely entirely without enthusiasm, writing about it. A man does not voluntarily sacrifice so much of his time for something that means nothing to him. The whole of his work, therefore — and he was a prolific writer — is a refutation of the general charge. If we want to know what love (whether frivolous or profound and, by implication, the comparative merits of either), freedom, pleasure, hate, slavery, and ugliness meant to Byron, we have only to go to his works. I have already quoted some of his lines on freedom and shall quote others. It would be difficult to find any one in his age who felt more passionately than he on this question, and the world of his time acknowledged him as its spokesman, a „trumpet-voice" summoning men to cast off the shackles and to live generously and well.

It is more proper — it is indeed an essential enquiry — to ask of a poet what beauty meant to him. We can only gauge this by the degree of his success in realising beauty in his works. Could he have written, without a true and deep sense of beauty, the poem beginning:

> She walks in beauty like the night
> Of cloudless climes and starry skies

or this ?

> There be none of beauty's daughters
> With a magic like to thee ;
> And like music on the waters
> Is thy sweet voice to me :
> When, as if its sound were causing
> The charmed ocean's pausing,
> The waves lie still and gleaming.
> And the lull'd winds seem dreaming :

And the midnight moon is weaving
Her bright chain o'er the deep ;
Whose breast is gently heaving,
As an infant's asleep :
So the spirit bows before thee,
To listen and adore thee ;
With a full but soft emotion,
Like the swell of Summer's ocean.

There were, in fact, two Byron's, both in actual life and in poetry. The second Byron — the man who gave his life for Greek freedom at Missonghli — is still alive in his works. It is a criticism of ourselves, not of him, if we can only recognise the scoffer — the man who acted as a sort of compère in *Don Juan.* The men of his own time were not so blind as, I regret to say, certain contemporary English critics are to-day. Professor Grierson quotes a passage from a novel of the time — *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane* by William Hale White — to show the influence of Byron on the best minds of his own generation. „Zachariah", says the author, speaking of his hero, „found in the *Corsair* exactly what answered to his own inmost self, down to its very depths. The lofty style, the scorn of what is mean and base, the courage — root of all virtue — that dares and evermore dares in the very last extremity, the love of the illimitable, of freedom, and the cadences like the fall of waves on a sea-shore, were attractive to him beyond measure. More than this, there was love. His own love was a failure, and yet it was impossible for him to indulge for a moment his imagination elsewhere... But when he came to Medora's song —

Deep in my soul that tender secret dwells,
Lonely and lost to light for evermore,
Save when to thine my heart responsive swells,
Then trembles into silence as before.

and more particularly the second verse —

There, in its centre, a sepulchral lamp
Burns the slow flame, eternal — but unseen ;
Which not the darkness of despair can damp,
Though vain its ray as it had never been.

Love again asserted itself. It was not love for a person; perhaps it was hardly love so much as the capacity for love. Whatever it may be, henceforth this is what love will be in him, and it will be fully maintained, though it knows no actual object. It will manifest itself in suppressed force, seeking for exit in a thousand directions; sometimes grotesque perhaps, but always force. It will give energy to expression, vitality to his admiration of the beautiful, devotion to his worship, enthusiasm to his zeal for freedom".

This is the real, the quintessential Byron to whom Goethe, Alfred de Musset, Lamartine and many others sympathetically responded. There is not only a sense of values in this Byron, but a sense of great values, and if we cannot appreciate them to-day in an over-mechanised age we are so much the poorer.

There had been no genuine supermen — if we except Milton's Satan — in English literature since Marlowe's Tamburlaine and Dr. Faustus, Shakespeare's Macbeth and Coriolanus. Incidentally, I can call to mind none in English literature since the World War. But Byron did not merely give his readers someone to admire greatly — his Titanism —; he also showed them how to admire greatly, in fact to love.

It is this authentic note of genuine passion, which creates its own sincerity and force, which revitalised English literature and referred it back to the primal source of all art — life. Genuine students of Byron will probably agree that this is his greatest contribution, a gift which it would be ungenerous not to recognise.

Compared to Byron Wordsworth is a mystic rapt in a „wise passiveness"; Shelley, a „beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain", or if you prefer his own images rather than Arnold's an „unbodied" joy, „a poet hidden in the light of thought"; Scott, Morris and Swinburne were reconstructors of the comparatively tame glories of past ages, even if these are represented, as they often are, with consummate art and genuine feeling. „No verse narrative", says Professor Elton speaking of Byron's, „has the same pace, and energy and flame". This is because of the directness of his inspiration, but also because of the very haste and impatience with which he expresses it

in verse. He has the virtues of his defects. Time is on the wing, he is interested in the here and now, and he is caught up in the rapid sequence of events in his own life and in the „Byronic" Europe of his time. It is only the past or the relatively static which will wait for the exquisite workmanship of a Shelley, a Keats, or a Swinburne. Byron was something more than a poetic craftsman, he was the spokesman of his age. Only he could keep pace with its speed, only he could reflect in verse adequately, even if imperfectly, the greatness of events and the greatness of personality of the times — the drama of the Napoleonic wars and the overtowering figure of Napoleon. (Incidentally, his lines on the battle of Waterloo have been described by a competent critic as „the finest poem on war ever written"). When he wrote the spirit of freedom was fighting what appeared to be a losing battle after the failure of the French revolution and against the menace of Napoleon. Nations were striving for emancipation from the bondage newly imposed upon them. Yes, freedom was being mightily challenged, and it is to the honour of Byron that he heard the cry for help and responded. The Europe of 1918 to the present time bears much resemblance to Byronic Europe in rapidity of change and in successive checks to liberty. It is the great tragedy of contemporary poetry that no poet has arisen anywhere in the world who can catch the tempo of the time and interpret the significance of events.

The Swinburne School based their official objection to Byron upon what they considered to be his want of art — the obtrusiveness of his rhetoric, his commonness of diction, the slipshod versification in which he often indulges. It is probable that their antagonism had deeper roots than this and was of a more human kind. With all their art, or rather because of it, they could not attain the force and sincerity which actuates all Byron's greatest poetry. Being a poet of actual experience, he spoke to men of the universal passions and of the great facts which dominate their lives — the love of justice and liberty, the passion for power which was threatening Europe in the person of Napoleon, the hatred of slavery and cruelty. He also spoke of the smaller individual passions, pleasures and annoyances, personal loves and hates, flirtations and jealousies.

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It is therefore not inappropriate that he should use two tones of voice which may be clearly distinguished, that of the orator in talking of great issues (for the art of oratory still flourished in his day, although it has almost disappeared in ours), and that of the conversationalist in discussing frivolous themes. The first style is often condemned for its „taint of rhetoric" and the second for its commonness of diction, although the movement of modern verse and prose style has been consistently towards the colloquial. As to the former style, Professor Grierson suggests an interesting comparison between Byron's and Swinburne's treatment of the same theme. Here is Swinburne, addressing liberty as though she were his mistress :

Ask nothing more of me, sweet ;
All I can give you I give.
Heart of my heart, were it more,
More would be laid at your feet :
Love that should help you to live
Song that should spur you to soar,

and this is how Byron writes on the same theme :

Yet Freedom ! yet thy banner, torn, but flying,
Streams like the thunderstorm *against* the wind ;
Thy trumpet-voice, though broken now and dying,
The loudest still the Tempest leaves behind ;
Thy tree hath lost its blossoms, and the rind,
Chopped by the axe, looks rough and little worth,
But the sap lasts, — and still the seed we find
Sown deep even in the bossom of the North ;
So shall a better spring less bitter fruit bring forth.

You will probably agree that of the two styles Byron's is the more appropriate and the more successful.

In his familiar style he will annoy the virtuosos by writing with as little regard for euphony as Browning in such a poem as *Popularity,* and with a „meanness" of diction which many consider below the level of good verse. Yet when he is greatly moved his language will rise with his thought and emotion onto a higher level, and, because there is unity of thought

and feeling, and because the art is born unconsciously from direct and genuine experience, the language and versification will often come exactly right :

I will not ask where thou liest low,
Nor gaze upon the spot ;
There flowers or weeds at will may grow,
So I behold them not :
It is enough for me to prove
That what I loved, and long must love,
Like common earth can rot ;
To me there needs no stone to tell,
'Tis Nothing that I loved so well.

Yet did I love thee to the last
As fervently as thou,
Who didst not change through all the past,
And canst not alter now.
The love where Death has set his seal,
Nor age can chill, nor rival steal,
Nor falsehood disavow :
And, what were worse, thou canst not see
Or wrong, or change, or fault in me.

This is the kind of rationalistic lyric which Byron, at his best, can write as well as, or better than, any other nineteenth century poet. It has the full force of genuine passion, but it is passion which has passed through the transmuting process of „emotion recollected in tranquillity". Yet, just because it is passion close to the earth, it is far from the vague mysticism of Wordsworth and the nympholepsy of Shelley in writing on love, although the process of poetic evolution is similar. The lyric songs of Shelley will hardly stand logical analysis, nor will they bear the apposition of a prose „argument" like that which Milton gives us for *Paradise Lost* or *Samson Agonistes*, or Dante for the sonnets of the *Vita Nuova*. The best of Byron's lyrics are of this analytic, expository kind. In talking, therefore, of his lyric gifts, or taking the more popular line of decrying their absence, it should be borne in mind that he is not writing pure lyrics. He should be judged by his own peculiar objectives and his success in achieving them. The ver-

ses *To Thyrza ;* the poem from which I have just quoted, *And Thou Art Dead, As Young And Fair ; On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year* may be compared favourably with any of their genre. Occasionally the rhythms achieve a musical perfection which even Swinburne could hardly better. The cadences of *When We Two Parted* fall upon the ear with the natural rhythm of ordinary speech, but there is perfection in their apparent artlessness. This is the last stanza :

> In secret we met —
> In silence I grieve,
> That thy heart could forget,
> Thy spirit deceive.
> If I should meet thee
> After long years,
> How should I greet thee ? —
> With silence and tears.

Matthew Arnold thought that Byron 's great influence abroad is accounted for by his force and sincerity, but although these qualities are important they are probably not sufficient to explain his universal appeal. We cannot understand the reasons for the decline of his influence, unless we recognise the basic reasons for his popularity. In the first place, I would suggest that it is Byron the commentator on current events, the raconteur in verse ,the satirist, who caught the popular and universal fancy. A man who could feel as deeply as Byron had to have some outlet, some safety valve, to save him from the madness which often takes possession of sensitive minds. He kept his balance through a sense of humour, of satire, which, besides his capacity for rationalization, is his chief literary inheritance from the eighteenth century. His social, political and literary satire and his recording of current events gave him the same appeal as a newspaper before the days of cheap newspapers. And the tone in which comments are made is not too far removed from that of a witty conversationalist holding forth in the café or in the club.

Secondly, there is Byron the liberator, the man who appealed to one of man's most basic instincts, the man who not only acted as the trumpet-voice calling to action, but who led the charge and died with battle honours at Missolonghi.

Thirdly, there is the Byron who was the most forceful and colourful personality in the English and European Romantic movement. To many Englishmen Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats and Swinburne appear to have greater claims to fame, but one suspects that un-English readers, unless they are trained in the criticism of English literature, will find their qualities too rare and too English for pleasurable apreciation. This is natural enough, for the appreciation of these poets, even more particularly of Swinburne, calls for a keen sense of the rhythm of the English language. But those who are unable to appreciate other English poets find in Byron those universal literary values that they are accustomed to appreciate and admire. Here are sophistication and a generous liberalism, and a complete freedom from the „weight" of custom and conventional standards to which Wordsworth, for all his protestation to the contrary, could never attain — a sort of glorious abandon and defiance on the grand scale and in the grand manner.

It is worthy of note as showing the modern trend of taste in Byron that of all his longer poems, so far as my knowledge goes, *Cain* was the only one to be retranslated on the centenary of his death in 1924. It is a proof of his still vital appeal that this was retranslated into no less than four different languages — French, German, Italian and Roumanian. The very excellent Roumanian translation was made by Professor Petre Grimm of the University of Cluj.

Finally, there is the Byron who was himself the inventor and the most important representative of Byronism. All of Byron 's heroes — Childe Harold ; the Giaour ; Alp, the renegade leader in the *Siege of Corinth ; Lara,* mysteriously loved and mysteriously wronged ; Mazeppa ; Cain and Lucifer ; Manfred; Sardanapalus, and, of course, Don Juan — are facets of the same personality, and this personality is Byron's own. If the epithet „Titanic" may be applied to these characters there is also something of the same quality and stature in their creator. Byron, like most of his heroes, is a man standing alone, proud, unchangeable and absolute in his personality. Since Milton's Satan and the great figures of Marlowe and Shakespeare there had been no such characters in English literature. Byron himself is a character of European significance ; there is not, perhaps, too much exaggeration in a contemporary

statement that on the European stage which Napoleon had just left Byron was „the least contemptible figure".

In conclusion, we are now able to indicate more directly answers to the main questions with which we started. Some of these have been already stated or implied. Byron's reputation has been injured by his carelessness real and apparent, but even more by the fact that his manner of writing and his values were not appreciated in the age which followed his.

It is true that he seldom writes more than twenty lines without faults — if we accept conventional standards — of grammar, and of versification, or without descending into commonplace. It is clear that those whose native tongue is English will be more alert to perceive these lapses, and to condemn them as faults, than his admirers on the continent, who often read him in translation. Hence one main reason why his reputation remains generally higher on the continent than in England. It may be argued, however, that certain of these alleged defects are an integral part of his style. It is these colloquialisms, these frequent descents into common diction and apparently trivial comment, which make his style perfectly natural. He was more successful than Wordsworth in realising certain ideals which that poet defined. He composes verse as he speaks and as he writes in his later letters. In this respect, he should be judged by the standards of the „improvisatore", of whom he is the last great representative. These poets, particularly in Italy, practised the special art of composing stories în verse as rapidly as one normally speaks or writes în prose.

In our own days colloquialism in poetry is often the refuge of small minds that know no other language. In Byron it is the foil to the more extravagant aspects of Byronism, the perfect medium for the humour which gives balance and sanity to the whole.

The issue becomes clearer if we compare him with the great virtuosos who came after him—Keats, Shelley, Tennyson and especially Swinburne. Swinburne has been called „The greatest of all our poets", but it is only possible to substantiate this claim if we put technique and art before inspiration and life. Byron would never have had the patience to produce the „sugared sonnets" of Shakespeare, the perfect sensuous imagery of Keats, or the happy combination of melody and verbal felicities which we find throughout Swinburne; although the

relatively high level of Byron's finest lyrics should not be forgotten. In Swinburne's poetry we too often find „a tale of little meaning though the words be strong". In returning to it, as Professor Grierson says: „A sense of echoing emptiness haunts the student who turns back on much of the exquisite, exotic craftsmanship of these last of the Romantics".

Byron's faults lie in exactly the opposite direction, and it is still a matter of controversy which fault is the least pardonable. We should, however, turn to Byron with the old idea of the poet as a „maker" in our minds, and with the other old conception of the poet as a „seer", a prophet of his age. It is the primary purpose of such a maker to realise imaginative experience in words; and rime, metre, and imagery are only important in so far as they serve this purpose. If it be thought that this is too exaggerated a claim for Byron, as it is at total variance with much that is written about him to-day, it should be remembered that he has exerted more influence upon the spirit of modern European literature than any other with the exception of Shakespeare and Goethe. It may even be argued that he was the first to make English literature European, for the eighteenth century was generally out of tune with Shakespeare.

Byron had plenty to say, and even the most adverse critics must admit that he said it in a manner which is comprehensible. He is perhaps the easiest English poet for a foreigner to understand, and therefore the most translatable. That what he had to say is worth while saying is proved by the fact, of which we were recently reminded by one of the leading English journals, that his repute is still one of our national assets.

While we must admit that he does not show the highest qualities of imagination, that he was not an inventor of new literary forms, that he lacks the patience to file and polish his work like a good craftsman, we should still recognise that he accomplished certain things which no other of his age even attempted. He reintroduced into English literature, after a flat period of overmuch speculation, human character and the stimulus of great personality. We find once again in literature the old theme of the struggle of the superman, proud, lonely, but magnificent in his courage, contending with the forces of fate and opposing the will of God and his fellow men. Byron re-

presented not only the force of, great personality, but also passion, action and the interest of great topical events ; and the whole is given perspective and explanatory clarity by humour and satire.

The decline of human energy and the shrinkage of personality owing to the mechanization and commercialization of life are largely responsible for contemporary failure to appreciate Byron. He will come into his own, and perhaps receive his final just reckoning, when there is once again more general recognition of essential human values. There are many signs that the materialism which has held Europe and the world in thrall for the last fifty years is on the decline. Out of our present unrest and discontents may well come a renaissance of humanism.

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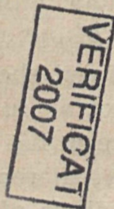
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