

# THE CENTENARY OF BYRON (1788-1824)

PELHAM EDGAR

IT is legitimate to hold the view that Byron was a great personality rather than a great character,—a nature that still compels the world's attention by its irresistible energies, but fails to command its admiration by qualities that are recognizably noble or reputable by even the easiest standards of human propriety:

This should have been a noble creature: he  
Hath all the energy which would have made  
A goodly frame of glorious elements,  
Had they been wisely mingled; as it is,  
It is an awful chaos—light and darkness—  
And mind and dust—and passions and pure thoughts,  
Mix'd and contending without end or order,  
All dormant or destructive.

This description of Manfred was designed as a self-commentary, and we may suspect too the personal bearing of the Byronic estimate of Burns: "tenderness, roughness, delicacy, coarseness, sentiment, sensuality, soaring and grovelling, dirt and deity, all mixed up in that one compound of inspired clay." The epithets suggest a wealth of temperamental values; and should circumstances precipitate such a nature into literature, we might anticipate a richness in the human result, rather than a careful preoccupation with the aesthetic fineness of the expressions.

There is indeed little of the conscientious, or even the competent, artist in Byron. He inclines to speak jauntily of his cavalier carelessness, and was gratified by Scott's appreciation of his *Cain* when that critic commended him for having "certainly matched Milton on his own ground," and because he had done so "while managing his pen with the careless and negligent ease of a man of quality." This careless ease alternated with a kind of savagery, a state of frenzy in which Byron described his imagination as the overflowing lava which prevents the earthquake. In such a mood he would "wreak himself upon expression," leaping like the tiger upon his prey. "If I miss the first spring, I go grumbling back to the jungle again." For delicacy of music and fineness

of phrase we need not then open our Byrons. Resonant rhetoric abounds, but it is an ineffective substitute. The matter can be put to the test by the confirmation of two famous invocations to Nature—Byron's Ocean Apostrophe in the *Childe Harold*, and Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*. The one is eloquence and passion; the other is passion and poetry—a distinction which it is impossible to make the impercipient perceive.

Poetry, we may suspect, was an accidental overflow with Byron, and not the essential expression of his nature. "I by no means rank poetry or poets high in the scale of intellect. This may look like affectation, but it is my real opinion. It is the love of the imagination, whose eruption prevents an earthquake. I prefer the talents of action." It is characteristic of him that anger launched his first memorable verses. Brougham had made the feeble posturing of the *Hours of Idleness* a theme for mild satire in *The Edinburgh Review*:

Weary of love, of life, devoured with spleen  
I rest, a perfect Timon, not nineteen.

The gibe was justified, but so also was the rejoinder, and critics learned that here at last was a young poet who seemed thoroughly capable of taking care of himself. We all know the epic fullness of the life that followed; but rather than rehearse its sometimes fascinating and often sordid details, I prefer to limit my attention to some of the considerations that arise out of Byron's poetical activity.

His reputation as a poet will be the less encumbered if we can relieve him of much of the unnecessary baggage he bears in his train. Can any one register an effective protest if we sacrifice all the shorter poems written in the lyric vein? The poorest have nothing to commend them. The best, like the *Isles of Greece*, are good pieces of sustained rhetoric, but many a third-rate poet has been as happily inspired, and we must remember that we are dealing with a man whose admirers thrust him among the *dei majores* of our English poetry. With the lyrics the Popean satires all may go, nor for that sacrifice will our poetry or Byron's reputation be sensibly the poorer. A remnant of youthful piety pleads for the retention of the early cantos of the *Childe Harold*, and the strong urgency of a more enlightened opinion bids us not to lay impious hands on the later cantos. A strong case can certainly be made out for them. We can still further lighten the baggage-train by the jettison of all the poetic dramas except those heaven-scaling, heaven-defying pieces, *Cain*, *Heaven and Earth* and *Manfred*;

and if we preserve all those versified novelettes of the *Giaour* tribe that he wrote in the feverish interspaces of worldly dissipation, it will be less I judge for their intrinsic virtues than because they are such characteristic survivals of the Byronic romantic temper. The *Beppo*, the *Vision of Judgment* and the *Don Juan* show us the obverse of the shield, and constrain us to believe that Byron's security of fame rests on qualities that are the antithesis of the romantic strain—on his realism, his cynicism, his satire and his wit.

Can a man so essentially humorous and sardonic have ever been the dupe of his own posturing? Chateaubriand it was who taught his age its attitudes; but Byron's posturing heroes, those scowling figures, destiny-blasted from the cradle, at once fascinating and repellent, hating restraint, yet imposing everywhere the coercion of their own tyrannic wills, had a wider repercussion of fame, and have immortalized themselves as the embodiment of the romantic type. It is a type that is momentarily out of fashion, but in the Byronic time it was almost impossible to escape the contagion. It is not therefore wholly fair to Byron to assert that he was merely a magnificent poser, for scarcely have we spoken the word when a critic not too favourably disposed to Byron—the critic is Swinburne—proclaims the passionate sincerity of his work. Can we harmonize then a studied pose before the world with this unmistakable sincerity of utterance? In Byron's case we can, for his pose is not entirely an attitude assumed for effect, but rather the natural gait and gesture of a born actor. A theatrical talent generates a theatrical sincerity. If sometimes the actor overdid his part, set here a false emphasis or a threadbare sentiment, or in the sublimer passages mouthed his lines for effect, let us in our charity remember that the stage upon which Byron acted was raised high in the gaze of a whole world. In the first years of his acting Byron gave without stint of the sentimentality which pleased and the rhetoric which enthralled. Ere the close the footlights grow less garish, the flashing halo of the limelights is withdrawn, and a natural man speaks with his natural voice.

One of the constant sources of Byron's strength was the grasp he had of the world's realities. He was the only poet of the day who had lived in the world; and, when it threw him out, he knew far better than the bewildered Shelley the enemy he had to contend with, where it was weak and where it was strong, and the vulnerable joints of its ill-fitting armour. He was impatient of all important idealisms and—wiser or more daring than Adonais—in his right hand he held the spear of scorn. In voicing his own cause he had the sagacity to associate with him all lovers of liberty and all haters

of authority the world over, and he constituted himself thus the accepted voice of the European protest. His opinions do not victoriously sustain analysis. They are vehement and angry opinions rather than reasoned arguments, but as such they are more fittingly the material of poetry. He was not a particularly good democrat, for he hated the poet no less than he despised the tyrant, and was less concerned with universal freedom than with his own emancipation from restraint. Yet a man is to some extent what he passes for, and continental Europe still insists on regarding Byron as the great liberator. And he died, they always remember, at Missolonghi.

Goethe long ago recognized Byron's insufficiency as a thinker, but he discovered in him "the most daring, the most dashing, and the most grandiose" personality of his day. From this judgment there would seem to be no escape. For at whatever level we appraise his poetic achievement, the fact remains that with all his fopperies and foibles, his affectations and his cynicisms, his querulousness as of a spoiled child, his intellectual flippancy, and the rhetorical emptiness of much of his philosophy, part rhodomontade and part fiery conviction, he is still not only the most glittering but the most potent personality of his age.