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BYRONIC ROMANCE AND NATURE'S FRAILTY

Byron wrote his verse romances easily and often negligently. In some the versification is rough, and the rattle of the lines is not that consequent on a scrupulous avoidance of monotony. But there are, here and there, modulated and immediate passages over which he seems to have spent some time or which felicitously explore a *trouvaille*. Yet, good or bad, the versification has to be noticed only in passing; for if you are to read these romances—especially the most contrived ones like *The Giaour* and *The Bride of Abydos*—you have to read at some speed. There are too many digressions: the interpretation of incident and the scrutiny of attitude constantly distract Byron from getting on with the story. If you read quickly, the rhythm or at least the agitation of life makes itself felt. If you linger with the poet in his contemplative digressions, you come nearer the man, certainly, but lose the current of action.

This should not be so: an attentiveness to commentary should not enfeeble our sense of the narrative. But Byron was an involuntary writer, and failed to distinguish between composing speed and reading speed. When he wrote, he had only composing speed in mind. Most writers, of course, try to allow for this time-lag: what is laboriously devised may not cause the reading eye itself to labour, but to skid. The easily written may delay the reader. But Byron, looking too closely, inquiring too curiously, tended to lose perspective. That is, he knew where he was, and why, and where the story went next; but he could not envisage how all this would look to the reader. And, as narrative poems go, those of Byron never really get going like those of Chaucer, Keats, and Tennyson. His couplet stays too far from the spoken language and becomes recitative or sounding declamation. His trucks seem too wide for his rails. He does not infuse enough pace into the action for the establishment of tension during the reflective parts. In consequence, the story seems not so much forced off course as severed. When we accompany the narrative poet into a digression, we should feel a sense of strain; we should feel that the story is being

dammed up, and that its impetus is not to be governed for long. But the narratives of Bryon are (to resume an earlier metaphor) trucks coupled together. Or rather, we are often shown couplings which are never used. The ghost of Childe Harold keeps slowing things up.

It would be idle to pretend that Byron's verse romances are likely to win multitudes of readers. His dramatic poems might, for they at least give us talk and life's exchanges, and they expose the source of action. But the romances lack even the amplitude in meditation, the exhibitory skill, of *Childe Harold*. Of course, *The Island* and *The Corsair* are more readable than the others: they have greater variety of imagery; the origins and issues are not deliberately obfuscated, and there is almost enough action to balance the brooding. But even these two poems lose likeness to life for a present-day taste that has been either brain-washed or repelled by Hollywood. Byron, we might say, was writing for brains comparatively unwashed. But he was doing more: he was fusing the exotic with self-conscious confession. And his themes in these romances give an added insight into the attitudes adopted in the narrative and manner of *Don Juan*.

There is no point in trying to isolate and define too closely these themes, for Byron himself failed to distinguish between exile and mere loneliness, between illicit and incestuous love, between self-obsession and gaol, between even heartbreak and death. These are the themes, certainly, but in turning to them quite naturally, Byron used them loosely. He separated them from their direct bearing on his own life, but at the same time assembled them into a negligent conspectus of his own personality. But the relationships between illicit love and exile, between exile and the sense of guilt, between aloofness and callousness, are not fully worked out.

All we need to know is that Lara, Manfred, Conrad, the Giaour, Alp, Christian, and the Childe are exiles, for one reason or another: crime, hubris, demonic possession, illegality of love or piracy, intrigue, mutiny, scandal. And they are exiled against their will. They constitute the weird charade into which Byron poured so much of the self he had to eliminate. Much of his work is concerned with conscience in alienation, with the trapped man and his longing for exculpation. When Byron was writing, none of this was very new. Byron refers only once to Chateaubriand, in that strange round-the-world-in-778-lines poem, *The Age of Bronze*, but he does acknowledge one debt in the preface to *Werner*:

> When I was young (about fourteen, I think), I first read this tale, which made a deep impression upon me; and may, indeed, be said to contain the germ of much that I have since written.

Certainly the "inherent weakness, half-humanity,/Selfish remorse, and temporizing pity" mentioned at the end of *Werner* seem to come under the stricture passed in *René* by Father Souel: "One is not a superior being merely because one sees this world in an odious light." He goes on to say of René, "Presumptuous young man, he imagines that any individual is sufficient unto himself! Solitude is an evil thing for any creature who does not live in God." The interesting thing is that in his narrative poems, Byron makes so many allusions to Christianity. A constant theme is hubris expiated; but this high drama on the frontiers of salvation seems to be presented for the wrong reasons: it is intensely exotic; utopia, fortunately, means nowhere. Take Lara, for instance:

> There was in him a vital scorn of all:
> As if the worst had fall'n which could befall,
> He stood a stranger in this breathing world,
> An erring spirit from another hurl'd;
> A thing of dark imaginings, that shaped
> By choice the perils he by chance escaped . . . .

That looks clear enough. Lara liked his pose; Byron liked presenting it. Lara was an extremist and an addict of the absolute. He wounds Otho in combat, but not seriously:

> Yet look'd he on him still with eye intent,
> As if he loathed the ineffectual stride
> That left a foe, howe'er o'ercome, with life . . .

Here, I believe, is one of the important influences upon Byron's literary practice. He had to seek an absolute or to make fun of everything: to be serious was to be extremist, and to be anything else entailed heartless farce. He had the choice between over-response or none. Some trick of temperament began it; some vicissitudes in his social leap accentuated it, and perhaps a reading of *René* in his teens made it worse. At any rate, he had only two ways.

When he was serious, Heaven was exotic; when he was farcing, it was the supreme butt. When he was serious, he wrote of extreme predicaments; when he was not, he found no predicament extreme enough to warrant sympathy. He had to switch between the dying Lara who rejects the crucifix and the more arrant rejection of *The Vision of Judgment*. It is strange how many women in his poems die of heartbreak. Kaled in *Lara*, Zuleika in *The Bride of Abydos*, Medora in *The Corsair*, Francesca in *The Seige of Corinth* and, possibly the poet suggests, Parisina, all exchange this world for the next with minimum fuss. Such transits suggest lack

of compromise as a theme. It did not perturb Byron to hold contradictory views; but he could not bear to exchange the two for a compromise between them. He was simply not fitted for the sullen chamfering of appealing, utter attitudes. In a similar way, Hemingway's characters are always having to choose between anguish and apathy. The middle way is the penurious one: it is always easier to think in terms of Hell and Heaven, Good and Evil, Body and Soul, Death and Life, than it is to tack sensitively between them in the course of one's life.

Consider the trapped men of Byron's narratives. The Giaour loves, avenges, and dies, all without moderation. The outline of his action is clear, and there is little in his career save extreme acts or intense states of mind. Selim, in *The Bride of Abydos,* might have wasted time vacillating between caution and loathing. But when the poem begins, he has to save Zuleika from an arranged marriage and is committed to a series of justified acts. Byron picks his men when they have gone beyond half-attitudes. Conrad the pirate has to ambush, has to escape, has to vanish for good on the death of Medora. Hugo, in love with his stepmother Parisina, has alternatives of madness or the axe. Alp and Christian have to do something extreme: one turns traitor, the other mutinies and turns outlaw. Even the Prisoner of Chillon "learn'd to love despair":

> It was at length the same to me,
> Fetter'd or fetterless to be . . .
>
> . . .
>
> And thus when they appear'd at last,
> And all my binds aside were cast,
> These heavy walls to me had grown
> A hermitage—and all my own!

Despair is an extreme enough attitude—one that has had a remarkable career as a literary pose, and one that brings Byron into the company of Hemingway, Pavese the eventual suicide, and Junger with his cult of "the deathly realm". The Byronic sources—Voltaire's *Charles XII,* Turkish legend and history, Gibbon, Bligh's account of the *Bounty* mutiny, Goethe—are varied and, for the most part, exotic. They give Byron a start in the race to objectivity; they put the subject far from home and make it more of a "thing". Hemingway relates all to nature, to his own special idea of "the Territory", but not to responsible individuality. Pavese consigned his perilous matter to his Journal, and Junger made the juggernaut his absolute. With all four, the traffic between the life and the art is out of control: the art recommends and fulfils what in life is impossible. If these men had not encountered the impossible, they would not have started writing. They share the assumption that man can achieve a salvation and a reconciliation without reference to the world at all. This

frightful burden on personal identity annihilates most of Byron's protagonists. Those who survive—Mazeppa the dedicated Polish warrior, The Prisoner of Chillon, halfway to *accidia*—seem to have no idea of where they are going. The implication is that they have not enough sense of sin to need a reconciliation. Bonnivard the prisoner stops short of revenge; so does Mazeppa, although both have grievance enough. Resentment is not guilt or revenge, and their moral identity is intact. They feel nothing of the chorus of execration in that dreary apocalyptic pageant, *Heaven and Earth*:

> We deem our courses vain; we must expire;
> But as we know the worst,
> Why should our hymn be raised, our knees be bent
> Before the implacable Omnipotent,
> Since we must fall the same?
> If he hath made earth, let it be his shame,
> To make a world for torture . . .

There is a pervasive idea in Byron's writings that God regards men as *objects* but failed to create them as such. In consequence, men are compelled into callous attitudes in order to protect their spirits, and even seek to re-define themselves without God. But such a pursuit is vain, as the First Destiny in *Manfred* points out:

> . . . . knowledge is not happiness, and science
> But an exchange of ignorance for that
> Which is another kind of ignorance.

And Manfred, for all his acquired wisdom, can neither pre-empt his afterlife nor evade it. The mind may be its own ministrant but, as Father Sovel said in *René*, cannot be an absolute. The following is therefore an heroic but futile assertion:

> The mind which is immortal makes itself
> Requital for its good or evil thoughts,—
> Is its own origin of ill and end—
> And its own place and time: its innate sense,
> When stripp'd of this mortality, derives
> No colour from the fleeting things without,
> But is absorb'd in sufferance or in joy,
> Born from the knowledge of its own desert.

But just because there can be a mental hell and heaven, that does not mean that the mind controls either. The trouble is that the urge to establish and preserve a moral identity too often brings solipsism. Nearly all Bryon's heroes have had predicaments forced upon them; and they seek, by working for evil or good, to regain control of

themselves and of their own destiny. They cannot forestall the imposition upon them of roles; but they can seek emancipation. Byron chooses constantly an unnerving sense of one's own malleable identity rather than a despairing submission to fraud. That was why he behaved coquettishly about his last mission: he was defining himself by accepting his election to the Greek Committee, and all that the acceptance entailed. (One wonders why M. Sartre has not fixed his attention on Byron's whims for simultaneous *disponibilité* and commitment.)

Consider for a moment those outsiders, the Byronic *hommes traqués*. Childe Harold dissolves into a Baedeker: "I live not in myself, but I become Portion of that around me". He is anxious to efface and eliminate. This is an elementary stage: what he brought upon himself he has to shed. Beyond that he has no need to go, for no one opposes him. But the Giaour, a Christian, feels obliged to avenge the woman he stole. He does kill her murderer, but dies of remorse. In *The Bride of Abydos*, Selim is being passed off as Giaffir's son, whereas he is really the son of Giaffir's brother, whom Giaffir murdered. But when Selim tries to escape with Zuleika, Giaffir murders him too. Conrad the Corsair, "too firm to yield, and far too proud to stoop", is doomed from the start. Forced into piracy, he finds that only his love for Medora keeps life worth living. When she dies, he can neither seek another life nor survive. Lara, always aloof, leads the serfs against Otho—though with some reluctance. But there is no escape: he is killed, as is Alp the exiled Venetian who has to lead a Tartar attack on Corinth. And Hugo, finding himself in an intolerable position—lover of the woman who is compelled to become his stepmother—is beheaded. Cain is of the devil's party to start with. Not one of these rebels without working his own dissolution. The poetry is in the impossibility of their predicaments. Doom is the price of their singularity—or *are* they singular at all? If there is any point in these fatalistic fables, is it one that bears on living? Or are they merely operatic?

Of course, on one level of interpretation, Byron's verse romances illustrate perfectly M. Camus's world—absurd with or without God. And from such a perception of doom as Byron has, it would be no difficult matter to deduce an absolute of hopelessness. The characters are not tested, they are eliminated. Life closes in, and the odds are impossible. Before he goes under, the protagonist may discover some part of the truth: the Giaour the force of his creed; Selim his own courage; Conrad the lie he has been living; Lara the sense of his own gifts as a demagogue; Alp the irrevocableness of his disguise; Hugo the arbitrary nature of law. These men are very much alone in their false roles and unusual predicaments. For a short while, some of them bridge the gulf. The Giaour confesses; Selim comes into an

even deeper affinity with Zuleika; Conrad encounters another woman, Gulnare, one who will murder for him; Lara manages to identify himself with the popular cause; Alp finds Francesca again; Hugo expresses himself fully to his father:

> Begot in sin, to die in shame,
> My life begun and ends the same:
> As err'd the sire, so err'd the son,
> And thou must punish both in one.
> My crime seems worst to human view,
> But God must judge between us too!

This is the oldest mode of tragedy: an accepted condition has been repudiated, the hero suddenly discovers a newly hostile world with which he has to come to terms. Byron's array of estranged souls is similar to that of Joseph Conrad, although some of Byron's situations are a little more *recherché* and illustrious. Compare the Corsair with Heyst in *Victory*. This is the Corsair:

> He knew himself detested, but he knew
> The hearts that loathed him, crouch'd and dreaded too.
> Lone, wild, and strange, he stood alike exempt
> From all affection and from all contempt . . .

This is Heyst:

> Heyst was not conscious of either friends or enemies. It was the very essence of his life to be a solitary achievement, accomplished not by hermit-like withdrawal with its silence and immobility, but by a system of restless wandering, by the detachment of an impermanent dweller amongst changing scenes. In this scheme he *had perceived the* means of passing through life without suffering and almost without a care in the world —invulnerable because elusive.

But there was a soft spot in the Corsair:

> None are all evil—quickening round his heart
> One softer feeling would not yet depart;
> Oft could he sneer at others as beguiled
> By passions worthy of a fool or child;
> Yet 'gainst that passion vainly still he strove,
> And even in him it asks the name of Love!

And this love for Medora both nurtured and undid him. Heyst too had a vulnerable point: he could never belittle a "decent feeling"; that fact both undermines him and brings him through. But Byron, in his verse romances at least, gives only spasmodically that movement of conscience so prominent in Conrad.

Byron, we must not forget, was providing entertainments adapted, rather like those of Graham Greene, to the temper of the age, but also to his own requirements and preferences. And he made little effort to discipline his preferences: that is to say, he gives many passages which appear to exert the same pressure on us as the tragic chorus, but confer none of that device's illumination, none of its healing. Although Byron describes the mental motions of his characters, he constantly subjects them to the presence of mystery. He is always hinting at some frightful secret, some gross blunder. His heroes are either permutations of Cain or men who have been plotted against. The consequence is that they evoke a stereotype and start from melodrama. There is a world of difference between an intensely dramatic situation and one that seems intensified by allusion to a general pattern. The first type of situation always looks—in terms of art, that is—immediate, the second at one remove. The first (*Outcast of the Islands,* a Conrad fiction) is much less melodramatic than Byron's version of the Bounty story in *The Island*. The Conrad is exotic and preposterous, but is so because it contains many elements of the unfamiliar. The Byron is exotic only insofar as it survives the preposterous typing to which Byron subjects his characters:

> For me, my lot is what I sought; to be,
> In life or death, the fearless and the free.

Conrad's handling of a fiction compels us to suspend incredulity; Byron's version of the true suspends credulity. The trouble is that Byron fails to control the tone: the supervising mind that swiftly relates the narrative to familiar melodrama betrays itself in frivolities, or near-frivolities, that foreshadow *Don Juan*. Byron has begun to explore the topsy-turvy farce that can be extracted from the language:

> Jack was embarrass'd,—never hero more,
> And as he knew not what to say, he swore:
> Nor swore in vain; the long congenial sound
> Revived Ben Bunting from his pipe profound;
> He drew it from his mouth, and looked full wise,
> But merely added to the oath his *eyes;*
> Thus rendering the imperfect phrase complete,
> A peroration I need not repeat.

Melodrama is self-conscious; and Byron's self-consciousness in this poem is destructive, quite vitiating Christian's resolve to evacuate the natives and to fight things out. The point is that Byron cannot have it both ways. A theme not seriously presented cannot be included in a congeries of similar but seriously presented themes. In short,

Byron has to express or travesty. In *The Island* his attention is as much to the language as to ethics:

> These, with a bayonet, not so free from rust
> As when the arm-chest held its brighter trust,
> Completed his accoutrements, as Night
> Surveyed him in his garb heteroclite.

That last word is quite gratuitous, and does some exquisite wrecking. It evinces the Byronic instability. After all, if a man cannot take himself seriously, he is hardly likely to present seriously those themes that might seem to implicate his own life.

The Byronic characters would have a splendid reason to do a Pirandello on their author. He is more concerned with displaying his temperament than with resolving any putative problems of his own. The temperament permits anything in the art, and Byron usually ends up as puppeteer. The poetry is in the incongruity. To add flippancy to melodrama is to produce farce of an unnerving kind; for the flippancy *may* be the despairing gesture of a serious sensibility. The Dadaists were melodramatic and flippant, but for the purpose of expressing disgust with a civilization which had let them down. Sometimes only the hysterical, the manic, the crass, afford a satisfactory means of self-expression. In Byron the *grand guignol* and the farcical assist the expression of a tragic mood; only the deliberately abortive has any power to restore.

What, then, of the characters whose agonies take up so many lines? Are they not merely figments, but plaster absurdities like Christian Morgenstern's Herr von Korf, Palmström and the Nasobem? Do they belong in the world of the following?

> Palmstrom constructs an olfactory organ and plays von Korf's sneezewort sonata on it.
>
> It begins with triplets of alpine herbs and produces an enchanting effect with acacia-blossom aria.
>
> But in the scherzo, sudden and unexpected, between tuberoses and eucalyptus, there ensue the three famous sneezewort passages, from which the sonata takes its name. (Leonard Forster's translation)

Byron's escapades with feminine rhyme have the same twisting of the conventional as this; but he was never delicate-handed to the same extent. His touch was more robust, although it could achieve the firm gentleness of the idylls in *The Island*. Everything, in fact, is robust except his guiding hand to the reader. We are left to answer questions not merely academic and of our own invention, but those important to us if we make the attempt to read him entire. One question is especially important: if we are in doubt as to his intention, must we read according to his

temperament, and assume that he intends to be farcical? I think this would be unwise. True, Byron was an inconsistent person, and in his best work made an aesthetic out of irresponsibility. But to devise for him a fixed literary self is to ask for trouble. It would be to assume that he had no control over his contrasts, an absurd assumption. He has, in fact, three main selves, and on occasion makes fun of them all.

First there is the exoticist of the romances; second the polemical author on literary and social themes; and third the intrusive, self-conscious creator. We have a projection, a poet in person, and a very personal impresario; and *Don Juan* is a mixture of all three. Of these, the last is the dominant. The person is too big for the poet, just as the biography has been too much for the poetry. The "polemical working" and restless quality that Arnold complained about were the very signs of sincerity. We art apt, I think, to identify the sincere with the homogeneous: a complex attitude that is sincere is a constant in few minds. There is a general and unenlightened assumption that Edna Millay and Keats, to take usual examples, are more sincere than, say, La Rochefoucauld and Wallace Stevens. Unmixed feelings, unironic attitudes, seem in some people's minds to exhaust the sincere—and this in spite of Mr. Eliot's efforts to rehabilitate the mixed moods of Donne, Marvell, and Johnson. All this, of course, is very bad for the Byrons. Look at the Byronic makeup: no philosopher, he prefers attitudes and moods; highly self-conscious, ashamed of *Hours of Idleness,* he wants to be popular and yet sincere.

Surely he co-ordinated all this as well as anyone could have done? While he was writing his greatest poem, sincerity in the form of acute self-consciousness took over; and he guys the role of impresario only to keep us on the ground: after all, he seems to point out, this is only a poem, you know! What irritates many who have taken the trouble to read Byron entire is his unelevated view of his art. His writing —the act, the long nights, the search for a stanza-form—were all near enough to the *schadenfreude* of his life to preclude absolute poses. His sincerity was that of shyness. *Don Juan* is not only sincere; it is serious, which is to say that the poem is undertaken deliberately and with full accommodation of the means to a clear end. This is more than we can say for *Prometheus Unbound*, *The Prelude*, and *Hyperion*. Byron's poem is the richest in knowledge of experience, however disclaimed, and eloquent in every stanza of the inadequacy he had found among the simple colours of romance. *The Island* marks the change from simple to complex, from deliberate solemnity to deliberate half-seriousness. Humour disturbs this poem; but the humour is an integer, not a mannerism: not this, from the nose-thumbing poem on Elgin, *The Curse of Minerva*:

> 'Daughter of Jove! in Britain's injured name,
> A true-born Briton may the deed disclaim.
> Frown not on England; England owns him not:
> Athena, no! thy plunderer was a Scot.

but this kind of thing, deft and complicating:

> His cutlass droop'd, unconscious of a sheath,
> Or lost or worn away; his pistols were
> Link'd to his belt, a matrimonial pair—
> (Let not this metaphor appear a scoff,
> Though one miss'd fire, the other would go off . . .

But when Byron tired of the simplified, he turned not only to humour but also to the serious and complex verse play. And where we might fault the romances with shallowness, the comedy with complexity, we find in the dramas a patient exploration of substantial themes. The give and take of personal intercourse enables Byron to study feeling from many points of view, to anatomize more fully passion and its reciprocity, to exchange digression for soliloquy—even to demonstrate the futility of any kind of understanding. These plays, none of them intended for the stage, and accommodated to Byron's idea of the unities, were written while Bryon was finishing *Don Juan*. They comprise the feelings and situations which in *Don Juan* were summed up with sophisticated, knowing familiarity. They might thus be said to constitute the overflow or the *matériel* of the long poem, the clinical research behind the brilliant report. But several cantos of *Don Juan* had been completed before *Marino Faliero*, *The Two Foscari*, *Sardanapalus*, *Cain* and *Heaven and Earth* were even begun. The image comes to mind of the gifted anticipator who produces the *chef d'oeuvre* (or at least a third of it) and quickly devises work-books in case the examiners want to look. But overspill, compensation, private empiricism, whatever they are, the plays are of great interest, for they show Byron without wit and without rhyme, and yet do not rank him as low as the Walpole whose tragedy *The Mysterious Mother* he admired so much.