University of Nottingham

Nottingham Byron Lecture 1968

BYRON AND THE MYTHOLOGY OF FACT

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The thirty-eighth Byron Foundation Lecture was delivered on Friday, 1st March, 1968.

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This lecture was founded in 1912 by public subscription. In accordance with the terms of the Foundation, the subject of the Lecture need not be confined to Byron, but must be on some aspect of English Literature.

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Published in 2009 by
The Byron Centre for the Study of Literature and Social Change
School of English Studies, University of Nottingham,
University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD
http://byron.nottingham.ac.uk

This electronic edition digitized and edited by Nicola Bowring

Byron Foundation Lectures Online Series Editor, Matthew J.A. Green

This is a revised version of the Byron Foundation Lecture delivered by Anne Barton in May 1968.

ISBN: 978-0-9555740-3-0

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In 1821, acting against the advice of all his friends, Byron published *Cain: A Mystery.* The uproar which resulted was impressive. By reviewers, the play was described as immoral and blasphemous, a scandal and an offence. Sermons were preached against it from church pulpits, and it was rumoured that at least one reader had been so distressed by Byron's questioning of the goodness of God that he shot himself. John Murray, who printed the play, was threatened with prosecution, and frightened so effectively, that Byron subsequently had to take his work to another publisher. In his Italian exile, Byron himself adopted an attitude of humorous resignation. He was entirely aware that everything he published now diminished his popularity, that his poetic empire of a few years before was vanishing as irrevocably as Napoleon's. To Canto XI of *Don Juan,* a work he had also been begged to suppress, he appended a characteristically wry assessment of the situation:

Even I — albeit I'm sure I did not know it,
Nor sought offoo1scap subjects to be king —
Was reckon'd a considerable time,
The grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme.

But Juan was my Moscow, and Faliero
My Leipsic, and my Mount Saint Yean seems Cain.

Among Byron's readers in 1821 was a man of whom he had almost certainly never heard: William Blake. Blake's reaction to *Cain* was also unfavourable, but not on moral or Christian grounds. In the following year, he expressed his criticism by way of a dramatic poem of his own, *The Ghost of Abel: A Revelation in the Visions of Yehovah Seen by William Blake. The Ghost of Abel* was Blake's last poem, and it is the only one which has a dedication:

To Lord Byron in the Wilderness :

What doest thou here, Elijah?
Can a poet doubt the Visions of Jehovah? Nature has no Outline,
But Imagination has. Nature has no Tune, but Imagination has.
Nature has no Supernatural, and dissolves: Imagination is Eternity.

For Blake, the wilderness in which Byron wandered was not only that of exile, but of error. He was a potential poet-prophet destroyed by his allegiance to false gods of realism and rationality: a man clinging to a world of fact when he should look beyond it. Even in *Cain,* a work apparently concerned with the supernatural, Blake recognized (and quite rightly) Byron's distrust of the visionary, his stubborn insistence that however truth is to be reached, it is not by way of the imagination.

'There is this great difference between us', Keats once wrote of Byron. 'He describes what he sees; I describe what I imagine. You see which is the harder task'. In an age which was rapidly turning Shake-- speare into a kind of Messiah, in which Shelley could claim that poets were 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world', and Coleridge speak of the imagination as 'the living power and prime agent of all human perception ... a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation', Byron stands apart. In 1817, Keats wrote his famous letter to Bailey :

I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination – What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not.

Byron, in the very same year, told his publisher Murray:

I hate things all faction; and therefore the Merchant and Othello have no great associations to me: but Pierre [in Otway's *Venice Preserv'd*] *has. There should always be some foundation of fact for the most airy fabric, and pure invention is but the talent of a liar.*[1]

Byron's statement is not only the polar opposite of Keats's; it reaches back to undermine the assertion of Sir Philip Sidney, advanced against Gosson and his school, that 'of all writers under the sun the poet is the least liar; and, though he would, as a poet can scarcely be a liar'. The fact was that at a time when the value placed on poetry and the imagina-- tion was reaching a height inconceivable in the sixteenth, seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, the most celebrated poet of Europe – the grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme – regarded his art with a suspicion amounting at times to contempt.

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 . . . I prefer the talents of action – of war, of the senate, or even of science – to all the speculations of those mere dreamers of another existence.[2]

This passage comes from a letter to Annabelle Milbanke, dated

November 10, 1813. Similar remarks are scattered liberally throughout Byron's correspondence. 'No one should be a rhymer who could be anything better',[3] he announces at one point. And again: 'Who would write who had anything better to do?' 'As to defining what a poet should be, it is not worth while, for what are they worth? What have they done?'[4]

On the whole, statement of this kind have counted heavily against Byron in the past. Santayana once declared that he was a man who did not respect himself or his art as much as they deserved, and this indictment has figured in more than one recent attack on the verse. It is customary to remember too, in this connection, Byron's singular blindness to the achievement of Wordsworth and Keats, the two poets who seem to us now to dominate the Romantic period in England. Byron's quarrel with *The Excursion* or *Endymion* involved, of course, the rejection of certain poetic techniques displayed in them, techniques at variance with his expressed preference for the Augustan style lingering on with Campbell, Crabbe and Rogers. Even more fundamental, however, was an antipathy based upon his passionate conviction that the value placed in these works upon the imagination, upon poetry itself as a creative act, was falsely high.

Opposite and embattled, personally at odds with each other's work, Byron and Keats look at first sight like the antipodes of the Romantic movement. Nevertheless, underneath this surface antinomy, there lurks an unexpected and deep accord. Part of this (certainly unconscious) rapport hinges upon that aspect of Keats's theory of Negative Capability which deals with the acceptance of contradiction: the simultaneous entertainment of conflicting ideas. I don't want to talk about this here. The other, and more immediately relevant, part is bound up with the fact that Keats too had moments of grave doubt as to the value of poetry. No one ever devoted himself to his art more whole-heartedly than Keats, lived through a poetic apprenticeship that was more like Jacob's struggle with the angel. Yet Keats could talk, even in the great letters of 1818 and 1819 when his abilities were at their height, about action as superior to artistic creation. He could sketch out a future for himself in which he would wring greatness from deeds as opposed to words, from life conceived of as 'a vale of soul-making' in which poetry had little part. It is tempting perhaps to regard statements of this kind as evidence of purely temporary discouragement, a kind of mystic's dark night of the soul, on the part of a man whose more typical conviction was that the imagination was like Adam's dream: he awoke and found it truth. This, I think, would be to simplify. Precisely because of the enormous value which he placed upon poetry, Keats became increasingly troubled by questions of its relation to reality. He tormented himself by weighing words against

things, fiction against fact, dreams against the waking world from which they derive. This anguish lies behind the *Odes* and also behind the cryptic words of the goddess Moneta when she addresses the poet in the second *Hyperion:*

> *'They whom thou spak'st of are no vision'ries,'*
> *Rejoin'd that voice – 'they are no dreamers weak,*
> *They seek no wonder but the human face;*
> *No music but a happy-noted voice*
> *They come not here, they have no thought to come –*
> *And thou art here, for thou art less than they.*
> *What benefit canst thou do, or all thy tribe,*
> *To the great world? Thou art a dreaming thing.*

Here, Keats approaches the point of view of Byron : 'I prefer the talents of action to all the speculations of those mere dreamers of another existence'. Opposites meet.

In this meeting lies one of the central dilemmas of the romantic movement, the dark other side of its exalted view of art. For men of a certain temperament poetic and merely personal, subjective truth can be relatively easy to reconcile. Poetry and objective fact are more difficult to yoke together. 'What benefit can't thou do, or all thy tribe, to the great world?' the goddess asked. Various answers to this question are possible, most of them anticipated at one time or another by Keats himself. None, as he well knew, are altogether satisfactory. The bearing of poetry upon what Wordsworth called 'the still sad music of humanity' sounding outside the artist's private world, the relation of poetic to empirical truth, remains a vexing issue. None of the romantics could quite avoid it; neither were they able to conduct it to a resolution. Keats perhaps came closest of all, in the 'Ode to Autumn', although one may feel that what is recorded there is a kind of inspired surrender, the letting-go of a problem, in which defeat has been transformed, strangely, into a celebration. In his earlier odes, the disparity between reality and the imagination tends to act like the grain of sand in an oyster shell; it is the irritating matter around which, defensively, the precious substance forms. Wordsworth, in his own way, faced the problem too in poems like 'Peele Castle'.

For all his self-obsession, Byron was far more closely connected with Moneta's 'great world' than either Wordsworth or Keats. He was in touch all his life with an objective reality that was wider, more various and also more insistent in its claims than the one normally available to them. The American poet Wallace Stevens once defined the artist's task as that of returning – not evading – the pressure of reality through imaginative

means.[5] He pointed out that this pressure tends to be stronger in some periods than in others. One might add to this the observation that certain individuals in a given moment of historical time may feel the force of fact, of a denotative as opposed to a connotative world, more urgently than others. The range of Byron's experience, social, political, geographical, was enormous. He did not merely wish to be a man of action: a traveller, a lover, an orator, a revolutionary. He was all these things, and more. He participated fully in the world of fact. It was scarcely surprising that he should develop a respect for this world, as opposed to its less substantial, fictional twin, which sets him apart from most of his poetic contemporaries. Byron distrusted art. It was a distrust which not only led him to adopt some singular aesthetic positions. It also meant that he himself tried continually, and sincerely, to renounce the writing of verse.

Declarations that his literary career had come to an end were characteristic of Byron throughout most of his life. He published *Hours of Idleness* in 1807 with the announcement that this juvenile collection was his first and would be his last. *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers,* the poem which represented the breaking of this vow, imprudently promised in its turn never again 'to stun Mankind with Poesy, or Prose'. Just two years later, Byron was to find this second promise as embarrassing as the first. On January 14, 1811 he announced in a letter from Athens that he had 'done with Authourship ... I have a famous Bavarian artist taking some views of Athens for me. This will be better than scribbling, a disease I hope myself cured of'.[6] How imperfect the cure was is revealed by a later paragraph in the same letter; he had already completed Cantos I and II of *Childe Harold.* This, of course, was the poem which virtually overnight made Byron famous. He was firm, however, in his refusal to continue it once he was back in England. In a letter written early in 1813, he claimed that 'the days of Authourship are over with me altogether',[7] but the statement was belied by the fact that he had already embarked on the Oriental Tales. He published *The Corsair* in 1814 with a preface insisting that this would be his last literary work for some years. To his friends, he went even further: it was absolutely the last forever. Like his earlier renunciations, this vow did not survive the year in which he recorded it. Byron was, for all his faults, a man remarkably honest with himself and others and he never recovered from a feeling of shame about the swiftness with which he had violated this published promise in *The Corsair.* He did not abandon the effort to stop writing. Like a lame man who believes that he will surely be able to walk naturally if only he tries hard enough, he was perpetually flinging away the crutch. After 1814, however, the struggle was one that he conducted in private, in his journals and in letters to close friends. There were to be no further public declarations.

In his heart, one suspects, Byron recognized the essential hopelessness of the attempt. During the years that followed, he would in fact succeed in giving up poetry for brief periods. His poetic works may be considerable in volume; they were produced spasmodically. Periods of literary activity coincide with periods of idleness, often of disgust and frustration, in his personal life. When he felt himself to be truly and happily engaged in the events of the world around him, he was able to stop writing. It was when revolutions or passions had failed him that he was drawn back, inevitably, to his 'poeshie' as he mockingly called it. 'And now let us be literary', he wrote to Thomas Moore after the collapse of the Italian uprising in 1821,

A sad falling off, but it is always a consolation. If Othello's occupation be gone, let us take to the next best; and if we cannot contribute to make mankind more free and wise, we may amuse ourselves and those who like it. What are you writing? I have been scribbling at intervals.[8]

Even *Don Juan,* a poem which had become necessary to him in a profound and complex way, was laid aside when he went to Greece. Byron took the unfinished seventeenth canto with him, but he added nothing to it, despite a multitude of opportunities. To one of his companions who reproached him, he declared: 'Poetry should only occupy the idle. In more serious affairs it would be ridiculous'.[9] The remark itself is quite characteristic; that Byron could make it of *Don Juan* at this point in time testifies eloquently to the underlying strength of his conviction about the relative worth of art and life.

* * * *

Why, then, did Byron against his own will and beliefs continue to write poetry? The answers to this question became more complicated and also more interesting as his life unfolded. It is obvious enough why he broke his first resolution and composed *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers.* His pride had been deeply wounded by the attack on *Hours of Idleness* and he wanted revenge. The publication of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold,* on the other hand, had no such justification. In effect, the poem represents Byron's indirect admission that, for all his protestations to the contrary, the efforts of the Bavarian scene-painter were not enough. That objective record of the English nobleman's grand tour which these views were intended to provide sufficed for most travellers of the period. It could not content Byron. The impersonal images of the scene-painter left out, perforce, all that mattered most to him. Only poetry could order the tumult of his experiences in Greece and in the East, relating his own

Complex, half-understood self to the external scenes through which he passed. Reluctantly, shamefacedly, he resorted to creation because in no other way was he able to link those twin intensities, an objective and a private world.

Byron returned to England in July, 1811. The Oriental Tales, which he began to write in 1812, are the products of a situation far more desperate than the one which lay behind Cantos I and II of *Childe Harold*, although their settings and some of their characters are obviously derived from things seen and noted down in the course of the same journey. *Childe Harold* could at least shelter under the pretence that it was a verse guidebook, a useful compendium of information for anyone intending to retrace Byron's steps in the regions described. The poem was much more than this, of course, or Byron would not have had to write it at all, let alone in the form that he chose, but the excuse was convenient in the light of his expressed contempt for fiction. The verse tales, on the other hand, strike a balance between reality and the imagination very different from that of *Childe Harold*. They are much ore obviously works of fiction, invented histories in which the important truth is not literal but psychological. There is something almost pathetic about Byron's reiterated concern with the accuracy of his facts in these poems. Had he presented a faithful picture of Eastern manners? Were his costumes correct down to the last detail? Could he be faulted in the least circumstance by an observer who knew these countries and their people? It is an attempt to justify what Byron felt to be a bad cause, to prop up fiction with a basis of demonstrable fact, more or less as a sop to a bad conscience. The reason for this new dependence upon the imagination in the verse tales is worth exploring.

The Giaour, the first of the tales, stands slightly apart from the others. It is an exorcism, a kind of magic spell. Feverishly, it re-enacts on the level of art a real incident. Byron would never talk openly about the episode; in the 1813 journal he claimed that even to recollect how he had felt at that moment was 'icy'.[10] From the contemporary testimony collected, however, in Professor Marchand's biography, it seems clear that the original of Leila, the heroine of *The Giaour* who is sewn up in a sack and drowned in the Bosphorus because she gave herself to a foreign lover, was in fact a young Turkish girl narrowly rescued by Byron from just this fate in March 1810. He had encountered her, purely by chance, as she was being haled along by her executioners near the sea's edge at Athens. The meeting was particularly fortunate in view of the fact that Byron himself, almost certainly, had been the forbidden lover. Luck, a few threats, and the plentiful administration of bribes freed the prisoner from her fate, and Byron from responsibility for what would have been a

peculiarly reproachful death. It is one of those incidents in which what did not happen, the disaster so miraculously averted, is likely to overshadow in retrospect the actual happy ending. Back in England, the hair's-breadth rescue came to seem for Byron, as well it might, like the false consolation of fiction and the weighted sack swaying with the tide on the sea-bottom like the real conclusion of the story. This is the stuff out of which nightmares are made, the hauntings of a lifetime. Troubled by phantoms, Byron sought assistance from poetry. He wrote *The Giaour,* a poem in which the tragedy is allowed to happen. Fortune does not send the foreigner riding down the beach at the crucial moment, and Leila dies. In visualizing this catastrophe down to the last, grim detail Byron obtained a curious sense of relief. He had forced a ghost to materialize and to identify itself clearly as fiction, a creature of the imagination, not of fact.

'All convulsions', Byron wrote in 1813, 'end with me in rhyme'.[11] Like *Don Juan* later, *The Giaour is* oddly shapeless according to any normal criterion of artistic form. Nervously, Byron kept returning to the poem as it sped through its various editions, adding more and more until, by the time he finally forced himself to desist – with the fifth edition – he had virtually doubled its length. Incorporated in *The Giaour* by this time was another and more recent guilt: his fear that his half-sister Augusta could not possibly have escaped unharmed from a situation for which he again was responsible: their perilous summer affair. In the Journals for 1813 and 1814, Byron recorded on several occasions his conviction that the composition of the Oriental Tales during this period preserved his sanity. 'I believe the composition of [*The Bride of Abydos*] kept me alive – for it was written to drive my thoughts from the recollection of'.[12] The cautious blank, transparently, is a symbol for Augusta and it is no accident that the subject of *The Bride of Abydos is* the ill-fated love of a brother and his half-sister. The conscious purpose of this poem, and of its companions, as he stated in the Journals, was 'to withdraw *myself* from *myself. . .* to wring my thoughts from reality, and take refuge in "imaginings", however "horrible"'.[13] These imaginings were demonstrable shadowings of fact, and not just the neutral, innocent fact of scimitars and Arab horses, Koran-chanters and the Turkish national dress; the stories of Leila and the Giaour, of Selim and Zuleika or the Corsair were incarnations of a much more dangerous personal truth. Byron's fables are far from being identical with the reality which gave them birth, but in their very discrepancies from actual fact there resided now, for him, a peculiar value.

In Athens, Byron had not been able to rest content with the purely circumstantial images offered by the Bavarian scene-painter. Even so, at

the time he was writing the Oriental Tales, he also embarked upon a novel and a prose comedy but burned both of them unfinished because, as he said, they ran too close to the literal truth of his situation. 'In rhyme', he admitted, 'I can keep more away from facts'.[14] The statement may seem oddly contradictory until one remembers that facts, in this particular context, mean Augusta. It would be a mistake, however, to believe that it was only a fear of indiscretion which guided Byron away from his novel towards the heightened, verse world of the Oriental Tales. Poetry had become for him a means of distancing experience in certain significant ways. The formal patternings of verse transformed actuality as the more naturalistic discipline of prose could not. Amid the frightening disorder of his personal life, almost hallucinatory at this time, Byron had been forced to reach out emotionally for something that in a more balanced state of mind he scorned: the vicarious ordering of art. The fact that he needed to write the Oriental Tales did not, of course, mean that once they were completed, and embodied in published form, he respected the accomplishment itself. In fact, he persistently undervalued them. Their merit, for him, resided principally in the liberating act of composition.

At this stage in his life, Byron was using poetry as a means of *catharsis.* Momentarily, he aligns himself with the mainstream of Romantic aesthetic theory. As Professor M. H. Abrams has pointed out, in *The Mirror and the Lamp,* the lectures delivered by John Keble while he was Professor of Poetry at Oxford between 1832 and 1841 represent the most important theoretical development of this idea, a development in many ways prefiguring the work of Freud.[15] Keble had been anticipated, however, by many of the Romantic poets themselves. So, Goethe regarded his *Werther* quite frankly as a confession which had purged his emotional sickness and restored him to health. Burns once declared that his passions 'raged like so many devils, till they got vent in rhyme; and then conning over my verses, like a spell, soothed all into quiet'. Keats, on several occasions in his letters, speaks of his poetry in terms of personal therapy. The Romantics were scarcely the first poets to whom thoughts of this kind had occurred (as witness John Donne in 'The Triple Foole', or several of the Elizabethan sonneteers) but the intense subjectivity of their verse, the closeness of its connection to their own lives, meant that they took the theory to heart as earlier writers had not.

Byron's various statements, then, about poetry as 'the lava of the imagination, whose eruption prevents an earthquake' are far from standing alone in their period. Many of the later and more important works which he produced after his exile from England in 1816, *Manfred* or Cantos III and IV of *Childe Harold,* are shaped in part by this psycho-

logical necessity. By 1816, however, another impulse had joined with it.

'Tis to create, and in creating live
A being more intense, that we endow
With form our fancy, gaining as we give
The life we image, even as I do now.

This extraordinary statement, an artistic credo of a very individual kind, appears at the beginning of *Childe Harold,* Canto III. It is, in effect, an admission that life is inadequate, that it needs to borrow from art an intensity and shapeliness not really its own. Nothing, it would seem, could be further from Byron's normal belief, his conviction that poetry is only reality's poor relation. I have tried to indicate already that what may appear at first like the diametric opposition between Keats and Byron with regard to the issue of poetic truth conceals an underlying affinity. The *Childe Harold* declaration is also, I think, best seen in its relation to contradiction elsewhere as a kind of amphisbaena: Shelley's beloved image of the serpent with a head at either end, moving in one direction and in the reverse with equal ease. It is a question of seeming extremities which, looked at closely, are one.

In his book *Byron: Christian Virtues,* Professor G. Wilson Knight has claimed that Byron was a man continually trying to exact from life itself the qualities of great poetry. This, I think, is true. Byron needed to mythologize fact. Hence the quite extraordinary quality of his pleasure when he came to stand upon what he thought was the site of Troy: when he was shown the grass-grown mounds which must contain the bones of the heroes. He had rescued a fiction for reality. His pride in swimming the Hellespont from Sestos to Abydos belongs here too; it proved the truth of a legend. Both in Italy and in Greece, Byron's revolutionary principles were strongly reinforced by a desire to realize myth, to create in a manner which, as Professor Knight puts it, 'used mankind itself rather than ink and paper for its materials'.[16] He pinned his hopes that the world's great age might begin again, the golden years return, not to any Shelleyan metaphysic but to the possibility of re-incarnating, initially in political terms, the fables of the past. As a very young man, he tried to see Napoleon as a creator in these terms, and admired him as the hero of an epic performed. Disillusion followed, and not simply because Byron began to suspect that his hero, when successful, would be a tyrant as clumsy as the legitimacy he replaced. Napoleon's exile at St. Helena grieved him beyond measure. This was not the way a hero, a man who had gambled for the world and lost, should end: acquiescing in defeat, accommodating himself humbly to the petty, day by day routine of captivity. By declining a fifth act

suicide, a tragedy in the grand manner, Napoleon had failed to live up to the standards of art.

In his own political involvements, in his friendships, even in his love affairs, Byron tried throughout his existence to re-make reality in artistic terms. In this sense, he carried Romanticism to a further extreme than any of his contemporaries, was in fact the arch-Romantic among them. It is a little like Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God. God is a Being predicated as perfect, altogether admirable. Therefore, He must exist, because non-existence would fatally flaw this perfection. The very terms of the description enforce reality upon the thing described. For all his expressed scorn of fiction, Byron in a way took art more seriously than its orthodox worshippers, valued it more highly. The golden world of the imagination mattered so much to him that he was continually trying to impose its qualities upon the brazen world of fact, to make poetry come true. It was quite characteristic of the weary, cynical Byron who set out on the last journey to Greece fully expecting not to return, perfectly aware of the struggle with factions and with greedy, pseudo-patriots which awaited him, that he should nonetheless include in his baggage two ferocious war-helmets in what he imagined to be the Homeric style. A foolishly theatrical gesture on one level, and as such the object of Trelawny's malice, it was on another level something more.

Oddly enough, it was Goethe among Byron's contemporaries who seems to have understood most clearly this insistence upon ploughing art back into reality. He did not approve. Most people, hearing of Byron's death at Missolonghi, thought that nothing in his life became him like the leaving it. Only Goethe was dismayed. The whole Greek enterprise, he declared bitterly,

had something impure about it, and could never have ended well. It is a real mis-fortune when minds so rich in ideas insist on realising their ideal and bringing it to life. That simply will not do. The ideal and ordinary reality must be kept strictly apart.[17]

It was only afterwards, when he had transformed Byron into Euphorion, the child of Faust and Helen – of the medieval and the antique world – and made of his sacrifice in Greece a symbol of the death-wish of the modern artist, not the consequence of a preference for action of a very special kind as opposed to pure poetry, that Goethe was able to accept it.

By dying in Greece, Byron did manage to transform himself into a symbol of peculiar political potency: an almost mythological liberator. His death accomplished what his actual leadership almost certainly could not, in terms of foreign aid and support for the cause. He himself seems to

have suspected, even before leaving Italy, that something drastic of this kind was going to be necessary. After all, by this point in his existence, he had had a good deal of experience with the refractory nature of life, the fact that it does not accommodate itself willingly to the patterns of art. It is true, of course, that sometimes reality co-operated with him. Of the Carnival in Venice, Byron wrote delightedly in 1818: 'Life becomes for the moment a drama without the fiction'.[18] That brilliant sequence of letters which he wrote to Lady Melbourne between the 21st of September and the end of October 1813 presents an extremely interesting aesthetic problem in just this sense. These letters, a kind of blow by blow account of his attempted seduction of Lady Frances Webster, in whose country house he was staying for much of the period, were posted every day as written. Byron never re-shaped them, never tidied up the earlier letters in the light of the somewhat surprising end of the story. Many of them were dashed off secretly, in the unsuspecting presence of other participants in the comedy. They are absolutely truthful. If you ask yourself what differentiates these letters from the ones contrived so carefully by Laclos in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses,* or by Richardson in his epistolary novels, the answer I think must be that we are being presented on the one hand with a factual record and on the other with the constructions of the imagination, but that effectively there is no way of telling them apart. Unplanned, unretouched as they are, the Byron letters confront us like a formal work of art.

Life was not always, however, so obliging. It tended to become less and less co-operative as Byron grew older, with the result that he depended increasingly upon poetry proper. The heightenings of art might be second best, but they were preferable to real banality. The problem at this point became one, essentially, of finding a form, a form which could bestow upon life some of the qualities of art without betraying Byron's basic convictions about the relative value of the two. Cantos III and IV of *Childe Harold,* poetically more accomplished though they are, did not represent much of an advance over his earlier work in this respect. The real break-through came with *Don Juan.* It has become something of a critical fashion to castigate Byron for taking so long to arrive at the solution of *Don Juan,* to recognize that this was the poem he was born to write. The real wonder, I think, is not that the formulation should have been so late in coming, but that he should have been able to work it out at all. When the moment of decision came, Byron put *Don Juan* aside and went to Greece. This was predictable. What was not predictable was the degree to which the poem almost made this action unnecessary by healing (for a little while) the breach between life and art.

* * * *

If in the course of such a life as was
At once adventurous and contemplative,
Men, who partake all passions as they pass,
Acquire the deep and bitter power to give
Their images again as in a glass,
And in such colours that they seem to live;
You may do right forbidding them to show 'em,
But spoil (I think) a very pretty poem.

This is *Don Juan's* equivalent to that statement from the third canto of *Childe Harold (*'Tis to create, and in creating live/A being more intense . . .') which I quoted earlier. The *Don Juan* declaration occurs in Canto IV. In Canto XIV, he added to it a wry confession:

And yet I can't help scribbling once a week,
Tiring old readers, nor discovering new.
In youth I wrote because my mind was full,
And now because I feel it growing dull.

But 'why then publish?' – There are no rewards
Of fame or profit when the world grows weary.
I ask in turn, – Why do you play at cards?
Why drink? Why read? – To make some hour less dreary.
It occupies me to turn back regards
On what I've seen or ponder'd
.

Some new factors have appeared here in Byron's attitude towards his art.

Don Juan is very much a poem of retrospect, the work of an extraordinary, lonely man looking back not only upon his own vanished life, but upon that of an era. It is, in a way, Byron's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu.* 'Almost all *Don Juan is* real life', Byron wrote to his publisher in 1821. 'Either my own or from people I knew'.[19] Within the poem itself, he declared stubbornly that

my Muse by no means deals in fiction:
She gathers a repertory of facts,
Of course with some reserve and slight restriction,
But mostly sings of human things and acts. (Canto XIV)

The characteristic passion for fact as the saving grace of fiction is still in play. Indeed, Byron took great pains over his research for *Don Juan:* the shipwreck scene is accurate down to the last nautical detail; the siege

of Ismail is faithful to historical record; there is an almost pedantic concern for truth in his description of Eastern modes of life. Both personally, and in more general terms, Byron's poetry had always contained a strong documentary element. *Childe Harold* and the Oriental Tales were poems about actual places and occurrences, as well as being vehicles of emotional release, a means of ordering his own passions and guilts. Now, towards the end of his life, poetry served Byron less as *catharsis* than as a device for rescuing the reality of people and events from time. The *ubi sunt* theme in *Don Juan* takes in Egypt, Troy, Greece and Rome. This had been more or less its range in *Childe Harold* as well. *Don Juan,* however, also reflects that impulse which in 1818 made Byron decide to write a prose autobiography, a record of his existence up to that point. Hobhouse, Thomas Moore and John Murray burned Byron's Memoirs, unforgivably, in a panic after his death. Only in *Don Juan* does a shadow image of the autobiography survive. The poem is a lament for Byron's own youth, for friends and enemies, even for casual acquaintances — boxers and actresses — who made up a unique personal world.

'Troy owes to Homer what whist owes to Hoyle'; beneath the surface facetiousness of this comment in the third canto of *Don Juan* lies a reluctant but serious admission. Life may be superior to art. This basic superiority does not prevent reality from being dependent upon its secondhand and artificial cousin for survival in time.

'Tis strange, the shortest letter which man uses
Instead of speech, may form a lasting link
Of ages; to what straits old Time reduces
Frail man, when paper — even a rag like this,
Survives himself, his tomb, and all that's his.
(Canto III)

The position which Shakespeare had taken up with deliberate arrogance in the *Sonnets* — 'So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see/So long lives this, and this gives life to thee' — the whole idea of immortality through verse, was one that Byron adopted against his will and deepest convictions. It seemed monstrous to him that art, the frozen figures on the urn, should outlast the warm and breathing reality from which they derived their parasitic existence. Nonetheless, he had been forced not only to concede the paradox, but actually to hope that in his own case it might prove true.

In Canto III of *Don Juan,* Byron introduces a fictitious poet, that pliable Greek who obligingly shapes his verses to please all parties. The man is a trimmer, in Dante's sense, utterly contemptible, but the song he

sings is not. This lyric, 'The Isles of Greece', is a plea for Greek independence from Turkish rule and, as such, not only true but useful.

His strain display'd some feeling — right or wrong;
And feeling, in a poet, is the source
Of others' feeling; but they are such liars,
And take all colours — like the hands of dyers.

But words are things, and a small drop of ink,
Falling like dew, upon a thought, produces
That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think.

The conflict of attitude in this passage is obvious. The Greek poet is himself despicable, a common liar. Byron uses him as a means of venting his customary spleen against literary men. Yet the verses which this scoundrel produces become a sword in the hands of revolution. They have power to change men's minds, to make them think and so, ultimately, to provoke action. 'But words are things': the equivalence which Byron admits here between imaginative language and fact is new in his work.

Apologue, fable, poesy and parable,
Are false, but may be render'd also true,
By those who sow them in a land that's arable.
'Tis wonderful what fable will not do!
(Canto XV)

Also new, is the resulting sense of moral purpose with which Byron began to invest *Don Juan.* At first, he treated the poem cavalierly, in the old manner: it was a trifle, intended only 'to giggle and make giggle'.[20] Long before the end of those five years during which he worked on his epic, he had come to regard it in quite another light. The popular and critical reception accorded to Cantos I and II was, on the whole, disastrous. After the death of Shelley, there was almost no one to encourage Byron, to assure him that what he was writing mattered. Indeed, there were a great many people, some of them whose opinion he valued, urging him to destroy the cantos he had already published and to abandon the poem. Stubbornly, he went on with it, in what came to be an increasing artistic isolation. It is an interesting reversal of the state of affairs in Byron's earlier life, when the public, his publishers and his friends were all begging for more poetry from him and Byron, sceptical of the value of this activity in any but the most momentary, personal sense, was resisting their demands. He was writing now against the wishes of virtually everyone but himself, but he had come to believe in *Don Juan.* 'I main-

tain', he wrote angrily to John Murray, 'that it is the most moral of poems; but if people won't discover the moral, that is their fault, not mine'.[21]

Professor Helen Gardner once described *Don Juan* as a poem about 'the salutariness of being undeceived'.[22] This seems to me a remarkably just summation, and one with which Byron himself would have agreed. The poem aims to destroy imaginary certainties of all kinds, hollow ideals, hypocrisy and cant. In this sense, it is a celebration of truth against the distortions of fiction and perfectly in accord with Byron's lifelong suspicion of the latter. The extraordinary thing about *Don Juan,* however, is the way in which as a work of art it contrives to honour fact in its very structure, not simply in its material or in the social and moral judgements it makes. Byron's various jokes about the shapelessness of his epic, the fact that he might (or might not) canter gently through one hundred cantos, are not altogether flippant. The poem deliberately rejects a closed, and thereby explicitly literary, form. When he began *Don Juan,* Byron may have thought of it as an enterprise with definite limits: eight cantos, or perhaps twelve. As he went on writing, the other end of the poem began to recede into the infinite distance in a way we do not ordinarily associate with works of art. *Don Juan* is not really, of course, as haphazard as some of Byron's comments would suggest. The claim that 'Note or text, I never know the word which will come next' (Canto IX) constitutes a bit of play-acting on the part of the narrator. The poem does, however, catch up and reflect in its organization something of the random nature of life itself. Its rhythms are the rhythms of reality, not of art in any normal sense. You cannot, as a result, say that it is unfinished, as Keats's *Hyperion* or Shelley's *Triumph of Life* are unfinished. A rainstorm and a pair of murderously incompetent doctors killed Byron and Don Juan together in the middle of breakfast at Norman Abbey in Canto XVII. It was the natural end of the poem, in that its form was really co-terminous with Byron's life, both destined to conclude together.

Childe Harold too had been indefinitely extendable, and so had *The Giaour.* A preference for poetic forms which echo the diffuse and sprawling pattern of human existence is the natural consequence of Byron's attitude towards art, and one of the reasons why he was generally unsuccessful with lyric verse. The neo-classical concentration of plays like *Marino Faliero* and *Sardanapalus* was something he imposed upon himself experimentally, but it is no accident that subsequent dramas gradually became more and more open in their weave until, with *The Deformed Transformed,* dramatic structure deliquesced into a rhythm so like that of *Don Juan* that Byron himself seems to have recognized the similarity of the two works, and abandoned the play as redundant. *Don Juan,* however,

Distinguishes itself from his earlier, permissive forms by the complexity of its reconciliation between fact and fiction, the success with which it marries life and art. It is a success largely dependent upon its construction as a story set within a frame.

Where *Childe Harold* had blurred the lines between narrator and hero, *Don Juan* by contrast is absolutely clear. We are, on the one hand, following a story: a series of picaresque incidents involving harems and enchanted islands, warfare and love betrayed. The hero of these deliberately heightened adventures is a young man who, contrary to the 'lies' told about him by previous literary men, is not the world's seducer, but its prey. He is not even a complicated character. Generosity, affection, a capacity to form strong attachments, a strain of slightly ludicrous idealism, sway his actions. He is handsome, energetic, kind – and that is about all. In a poem filled with brilliant dialogue, we rarely hear Juan speak. Compared with most of the characters in his story: Julia, Lambro, Johnson or Lady Adeline, he has no personality at all. Only Haidee is as simple in outline as he, and this is one reason why she is his true love. Their very construction as characters unites them.

Byron's reasons for keeping Juan in this half-light owe something to the picaresque tradition, to Smollett and Fielding. They derive chiefly, however, from the fact that Juan must stand opposite the narrator in that strange dialectic between fiction and reality, art and life, which the poem sustains. Where Juan is simple, Byron as narrator is complex. Where the hero is passive, swept along on a tide of events, the narrator is the source of action: a Prospero-like contriver. Juan rarely reflects; his various involvements leave him no time. Byron has time on his hands, and reflects constantly. In the plot, Juan is surrounded with characters whose personalities are all more vivid than his own. Byron, in his historical present, dwarfs all the real people he summons up in his digressions, from Castlereagh and Southey, to Napoleon and George III. By a curious process of inversion, he is as dominant a figure in the commentary – many-sided, brilliant, individual – as Juan himself is colourless, simple and subdued in the story.

Juan and the narrator, the invented character and the real one, may represent the opposite poles of the poem, but their two worlds of fiction and of fact are linked in a number of ways. A surprising amount of the Juan story is actually true, either historically, or because it includes scenes and characters from Byron's own past. It is a fictional world with a heavy ballast of fact.

> *'Tis the part*
> *Of a true poet to escape from fiction*

Whene'er he can; for there is little art
In leaving verse more free from the restriction
Of truth than prose, unless to suit the mart
For what is sometimes called poetic diction.
(Canto VIII)

Conversely, the narrator is not above fictional impersonation. Again and again, he invents attitudes, fanciful responses for the benefit of the reader. He poses, and then parodies his own assumed role, creates as well as records a complex personality.

Most important of all perhaps is the link provided by the common factor of time. As we read, real time is running out for Byron, in Venice, in Ravenna and Pisa. Revolutions take shape in Italy and England and then peter out. Keats and Shelley die, and so does Byron's natural daughter Allegra; an Italian officer is suddenly and inexplicably shot dead in the street outside his house. All these events find their way into the narrator's part of the poem, as they might into a journal. This is real time, which the writer can describe, but over which he has no control. Poised against it is the more malleable time of fiction. According to this second clock, Juan grows up in Seville, seduces Julia, is sent abroad, shipwrecked, lives on the island, is sold into slavery, and embarks on a number of adventures in Turkey, Russia and (finally) England. This narrative time, unlike the other, is in the writer's control and what Byron did was to run it parallel with the time of fact. Both narrator and hero age side by side as the poem proceeds. The young man who arrives in England as Catherine's ambassador in Canto X may be no more complex as a character than he was at the beginning: he is a far sadder and more worldly figure. Even so, the Byron who placed Juan in Norman Abbey between Lady Adeline and her frolic Grace Fitz-Fulke was not the same man as the one who devised the bedroom farce of Canto I, a few years before. He too is older, concerned with his own apathy, his inability to feel. It is not the least of the poem's accomplishments that it can reveal to us this bitter process of ageing as it affects the writer, side by side with Juan's gradual accommodation to the way of a corrupt world. Fictional time grows out of the time of fact.

Ultimately, the unity of *Don Juan* is that of Byron's personality, a personality manifesting itself both as commentator and as creative agent. If it is a unity which sometimes seems based more upon the principle of contradiction pushed to an extreme than upon anything else, this is not really surprising. Byron's mind was neither orderly nor of a synthesizing kind. He recognized that his own nature was paradoxical, made up of opposites, and it seemed to him that experience itself, insofar as he could

understand it, was the same. He himself was both melancholy and gay, cynical and sentimental, endlessly amused by life and a prey to ennui. These qualities might clash with one another, but they were all of them genuine. To try and suppress one reaction in favour of its opposite, even to insist upon relating them, represented for him a tampering with facts, a tidying up of reality which made it false. Always, for Byron, two honest fragments, even if incompatible, were preferable to an artificially adjusted, and therefore half-true, whole. In life and in art, he mistrusted the shaping spirit of imagination, and this mistrust created serious problems for him, both as a person and as a writer.

Poetry after all is an ordering of experience. It implies choice, whether it is a discrimination among words, or that gradual elimination of the superfluous and discordant which expresses, and ultimately defines, form. Byron came to believe in *Don Juan* as he had believed in no previous poem partly because he had at last developed a structure which was like life itself in that, potentially at least, it excluded nothing. Irrelevance becomes a term without meaning; all contradictions can be allowed to stand. *Don Juan* is a poem which affirms in one stanza to deny in the next, which insists simultaneously upon conflicting points of view. Byron has been castigated by more than one modern critic for undercutting the love of Juan and Haidee, the idyll of the island, with mockery. The truth is, of course, that his treatment of the episode brilliantly incorporates both his own longing for life lived as an absolute, raised to the condition of art, and his realistic awareness of the basic impossibility of the attempt. Isolated on the island, Juan and Haidee manage for a little while to realize myth.

This is in others a factitious state,
An opium dream of too much youth and reading,
But was in them their nature or their fate:
No novels e'er had set their young hearts bleeding.
(Canto IV)

The miracle, however, is precarious. Lambro destroys it on his return, but he only does violently what Time would have accomplished, more slowly, without him. Already, in the palace scenes of Canto III there is a note of corruption in that new profusion of sherbets, and sweetmeats, dwarfs, black eunuchs and dancing girls. Haidee herself, although 'tis very silly/ To gild refined gold, or paint the lily' adds unnecessary, artificial aids to a beauty which effortlessly corresponds to the sculptor's most cherished ideal. In the great, tapestried chamber, with the stern words of the Persian moralists confronting the lovers from the walls, the mythic

simplicity of those earlier, Praxitelian, embraces by the sea vanishes. Gradually, life descends from the level of art. Haidee, given death as the best gift of the gods, does not live out this bitter transformation. Juan, who survives, is sold into a treble slavery: he is bound to the service of his purchaser, but also and more permanently to that of Time and a world in which ideal love, perfect beauty, are only diseases of the mind.

> *Who loves, raves – 'tis youth's frenzy; but the cure*
> *Is bitterer still. As charm by charm unwinds*
> *Which robed our idols, and we see too sure*
> *Nor worth nor beauty dwells from out the mind's*
> *Ideal shape of such; yet still it binds*
> *The fatal spell, and still it draws us on.*
> *Reaping the whirlwind from the oft-sown winds.*
> (Childe Harold, *Canto IV)*

It was Byron's respect for truth, no matter how unpalatable, which made him treat the Juan and Haidee episode as he did. Even so, it is entirely characteristic of him that, for all the anger of the anti-war cantos, he can still insist that Catherine's general Suwarrof was in certain respects admirable as well as despicable. He included the grotesque anecdote of the Russian officer who found his heel gripped firmly between the teeth of a severed head, because it was something which really happened in this campaign and, in the midst of his indignation over the needless sufferings of Ismail, he permitted himself a comic side-glance at those middle-aged ladies in the city who were 'heard to wonder in the din . . . Wherefore the ravishing did not begin'. (Canto VIII). For the Texas editors of the Variorum *Don Yuan,* blatant incongruities and lapses in tone of this kind blunt the force of the satire, even render it suspect.[23] Byron would almost certainly have replied to this criticism that he did indeed wish to persuade his readers that war is wrong, but that he could not do so by falsifying reality, by altering the heterogeneous facts of experience so that they all pointed artificially in one direction. The poet may wish to use a battle like Ismail as a piece of propaganda, but he has no right to forget that in its complex reality, for the people on both sides who lived through it, it could not be a unified, or singly-directed experience of this kind. To forget this is to lie, and thereby destroy something Byron was now, in rather special terms, willing to concede: the validity of poetry.

* * * *

After Byron's death, there came to light a curious fragment of verse which he had composed at Cephalonia, the island where he waited before

establishing himself on the mainland of Greece. This fragment, which bears the title 'Aristomenes' is dated by Byron September 10, 1823. It was first published in the *Collected Poems* of 1901. Aristomenes was an historical person. He was a general of Messenia, that province of the ancient Peloponesus which lay between Arcadia and the sea. He lived in the 7th century B.C., at a time when this province had, for some thirty years, been enslaved by Sparta and he became the hero of the Second Messenien War for freedom. His exploits are recorded in a number of Greek sources, including Pausanias and Diodorus of Sicily. A brilliant military commander, Aristomenes (like Aristides) also earned the epithet, 'the Just'. He was famed for his compassion, even to the enemy. Offered a crown by his people, he magnanimously refused it. He was a lover, and he is said to have written verse. On all these grounds, Aristomenes might naturally appeal to Byron at this moment of his own life, might confront him with new meaning from the almost forgotten past of his classical reading. Aristomenes is also, however, one of those historical figures whose life trespasses upon the territory of fiction. Much of his story is obviously invented: hair's breadth escapes in which he is aided by a fox and an eagle, legends about the women who loved him, or about his magical power to aid and advise his country from the tomb. Indeed, he became the hero of an Alexandrian epic, and it is said that even in the second century A.D. ballads were still being written about him, and sung, in Messenia. He is a creature half of fact, half of myth.

Byron seems to have intended a long poem about Aristomenes, because the fragment is headed 'Canto the First'. Only eleven lines were completed :

The Gods of old are silent on their shore,
Since the great Pan expired, and through the roar
Of the Ionian waters broke a dread
Voice which proclaim'd 'the mighty Pan is dead.'
How much died with him! false or true – the dream
Was beautiful which peopled every stream
With more than finny tenants, and adorn'd
The woods and waters with coy nymphs that scorn'd
Pursuing Deities, or in the embrace
Of gods brought forth the high heroic race
Whose names are on the hills and o'er the seas.

They are, I think, an extraordinary and unjustly neglected eleven lines. In them, Byron refers to that legend of the Greek sailor who, at the time of the birth of Christ, heard from the deck of his ship a great cry go up from

the shores of the Mediterranean : 'The god Pan is dead!' It is a story about the moment in which classical myth ceased to exist as part of the real world. What is remarkable about the Byron fragment - apart from the fact that the verse movement is totally different from anything in his previous work - is the relaxed confidence that 'false or true' the beauty of the dream, of fable, was its own excuse for being: a sufficient justification. Almost, he accepts the point of view of Keats in the opening lines of *Endymion.* What Byron would have made of 'Aristomenes' had he lived, we cannot know. From the lines which survive, and from the nature of the hero he had selected, it looks as though he planned a poetic construct more formal than *Don Juan.* He could afford to do this now, afford to honour fiction and to admit that, between them, reality and the imagination can work out something of which neither is capable alone. The road which leads to this final position was long and difficult, but 'Aristomenes' is the work of a man who had at last made his peace with art.

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