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BYRON AND THE AGE OF SENSATION

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A very warm welcome to my final lecture as Gresham Professor of Rhetoric. In my first four lectures in this series I explored ‘the Lake School’ of English poets, with particular reference to the figure perceived as leader of that school, William Wordsworth. Then last time I turned to the so-called Cockney School, the London poets and prose writers in the younger generation of English Romantics, most notably Leigh Hunt, John Keats and William Hazlitt. I perhaps should have called this final lecture ‘the Satanic School’ because that was the name given to the circle that emerged at the same time, during the Regency years, around the charismatic figure of Lord Byron. But I didn’t want to give the impression that I’d be lecturing about black magic, for fear of attracting the wrong kind of audience. Besides, Byron is such a towering figure that he stole the title and most of the lecture – my apologies, accordingly, to particular fans of P. B. Shelley, whose voice has not been much heard in this lecture series, other than via my reading last month of his sonnet *Ozymandias*.

The paradox of Byron is that he is both the most Romantic and the most anti-Romantic of poets. There are times when his tone is almost indistinguishable from that of William Wordsworth communing with himself and nature in the Lake District:

All heaven and earth are still—though not in sleep,
But breathless, as we grow when feeling most;
And silent, as we stand in thoughts too deep: -
All heaven and earth are still: From the high host
Of stars, to the lull’d lake and mountain-coast,
All is centered in a life intense,
Where not a beam, nor air, nor leaf is lost,
But hath a part of being, and a sense
Of that which is of all Creator and defence.

(*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, canto 3)

Yet his satire *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, written out of allegiance to the satirical rhyming couplets of Dryden and Pope, guys the Lake Poets quite unmercifully: ‘The simple Wordsworth’ is ‘dull’, an ‘apostate from poetic rule’ who ‘both by precept and example shows... that prose is verse and verse is merely prose’. As for Samuel Taylor Coleridge, he is the master of ‘turgid ode and tumid stanza’. This teasing vein of anti-Romanticism continues in Byron’s sprawling and hilarious comic epic *Don Juan*.

But when we speak of Romanticism and anti-Romanticism, it is important in this regard to remember that the group of poets whom we call the Romantics were not grouped together as such until later in the nineteenth century, long after their deaths. It is true that a conception of ‘Romantic poetry’ emerged in their time, but it only explicitly did so in Germany. The same year that Wordsworth and Coleridge published *Lyrical Ballads*, a self-conscious manifesto for the new poetry of the age appeared among a series of aphoristic fragments by the German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel. He and his brother August Wilhelm were part of a group of profoundly well-read writers based in Jena during the 1790s. They welcomed the new political, philosophical and literary innovations of the age. Friedrich proclaimed that the spirit of the age was best captured by the French Revolution, the philosophical theories of J. G. Fichte (who divided his vision of the world in the ‘I’ and the ‘not-I’), and Goethe’s novel *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, the archetypal *Bildungsroman*, or ‘coming of age’ tale, in



which the protagonist grows into his mature self by joining a company of actors and inhabiting the part of Hamlet. For Friedrich Schlegel, *Wilhelm Meister* was a perfect example of the ‘organic’ artwork – as indeed, according to Goethe’s novel, was *Hamlet*. Whereas neo-classical works were perceived as ‘mechanical’, their form determined by a prescribed set of rules (as laid down, perhaps, in learned French literary treatises influenced by the *Poetics* of Aristotle), the Romantic artwork was ‘organic’, its laws governed only from within, its growth more like that of a tree than a building. Friedrich Schlegel developed this idea in an essay in the *Athenaeum*, a journal that he and his brother launched in 1798. His brother would develop the theme in his lectures and from there Coleridge would develop the idea further in his *Biographia Literaria*.

The first issue of the *Athenaeum* also included nearly one hundred and fifty pages of aphoristic fragments, ranging from gnomic remarks about the nature of irony as the ‘alternation of self-creation and self-annihilation’ to a lengthy riff on ‘Romantic poetry’ as ‘a progressive, universal poetry’. The spirit of Romanticism mixes ‘poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature’; it embraces everything from a universal system of creative belief to ‘the sigh, the kiss that the poetizing child breathes forth in artless song’. Romantic poetry, Schlegel rhapsodizes, is ‘a mirror of the whole circumambient world, an image of the age’, but at the same time it is never finished and can never be fully analyzed. It is in a state of perpetual evolution, soaring beyond the boundaries of genre and form that had constrained poets in previous generations:

That, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected. It can be exhausted by no theory ... It alone is infinite, just as it alone is free; and it recognizes as its first commandment that the will of the poet can tolerate no law above itself. The romantic kind of poetry is the only one that is more than a kind, that is, as it were, poetry itself: for in a certain sense all poetry is or should be romantic.

Never before had such high – and inherently unrealizable, paradoxical – claims been made for the art and passion of poetry. There could be no better definition of the kind of poetry that the German, English and French Romantics all shared. And across Europe, the writer regarded as the embodiment of the new poetic spirit of the age was Lord Byron—despite the fact that he could be a savage critic and parodist of ‘the romantic kind of poetry’, as witnessed by his satirical epic *Don Juan*, which, alas, I won’t have much time to talk about today.

We have seen in earlier lectures how the French Revolution was a formative influence on Wordsworth and the first generation of Romantics, so we could legitimately speak of the ‘Age of Revolution’ in poetry. Edmund Burke, you may recall, described the French Revolution as the ‘most astonishing that has hitherto happened in the world’ and Charles James Fox called it ‘the greatest event that has ever happened in the world and how much the best’. A great event is a kind of spectacle. And the human response to a great spectacle can indeed be astonishment. And it is emotional responses—whether to political events, to the wonders of the natural world, or to any human encounter involving strong feeling (a love affair, a death, an act of sympathy) – that the Romantics were most interested in. Remember Wordsworth defining poetry as ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful *feelings*.’ Byron, analogously, called poetry ‘the larva of the imagination’ – that is to say, a volcanic eruption of passion in words. In the light of this, I’d like to suggest that a useful term with which to characterize this period of extraordinary innovation in poetry would be ‘The Age of Sensation’.

The word itself underwent some intriguing developments in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The primary meaning of ‘sensation’ during the eighteenth century was, to quote the scrupulously detailed definition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘an operation of any of the senses; a psychical affection or state of consciousness consequent on and related to a particular condition of some portion of the bodily organism, or a particular impression received by one of the organs of sense’. Eighteenth-century philosophers were especially interested in how such sensations operated: David Hartley, for example, after whom Coleridge named his eldest son, proposed that sense-perception and the association of ideas in the mind worked through a process of ‘vibrations’. The Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Thomas Reid explored the physicality of the process: ‘When I grasp an ivory ball in my mind, I feel a certain sensation of touch’. John Keats picked up on this idea in his letters, suggesting that one of the functions of the poet was to imagine the sensation of what it might be like



to be a billiard ball. Keats, of course, trained as an apothecary, and the medical theory of the time was also busy exploring the relationship between bodily sensations and the brain. Thus, Dr John Abernethy in his *Surgical Observations* of 1804: ‘He said his sensations were such as would induce him to believe that his brain was loose’.

A closely related meaning of the word switched the emphasis from sense perception to mental apprehension, the realization of some new feeling or insight in the brain. Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* proposed that it is ‘the prime merit of genius, so to represent familiar objects as to awaken in the minds of others a kindred feeling concerning them and that *freshness of sensation* [my italics] which is the constant accompaniment of mental, no less than of bodily, convalescence’. The therapeutic dimension of poetry is interestingly suggested here, by means of the word ‘convalescence’.

But there also emerges in the period a new meaning of the word: ‘An excited or violent feeling ... a strong emotion (e.g. of terror, hope, curiosity, etc.) aroused by some particular occurrence or situation ... the production of violent emotion as an aim in works of literature or art ... a strong impression (e.g. of horror, admiration, surprise, etc.) produced in an audience or body of spectators’. Thus in 1818, the third of the Lake Poets, Robert Southey wrote in a magazine article: ‘His death produced what in the phraseology of the present day is called, a great sensation’. The phrase ‘the phraseology of the present day’ signals that this is a new meaning of the word. We find Lord Byron using the word in the same sense, around the same time, also as it happens with regard to a character’s death, in *Don Juan*:

His death contrived to spoil a charming cause;
A thousand pities also with respect
To public feeling, which on this occasion
Was manifested in a great sensation.

A few years before, Byron wrote to the highly intellectual young woman Annabella Milbanke, who would become his wife (with disastrous consequences): ‘The great object of life is sensation – to feel that we exist – even though in pain – it is this “craving void” which drives us to Gaming – to Battle – to Travel – to intemperate but keenly felt pursuits of every description whose principle attachment is the agitation inescapable from their accomplishment’ (6 September 1813). See how he moves from the idea of ‘sensation’ to the notion of an exciting mental ‘agitation’.

The most popular literary form of the age catered to exactly this taste for sensation and delicious agitation of the nerves. We are reminded of what that form was by another letter of Byron’s, written when he was in exile in Venice: ‘I am going out this evening – in my *cloak* and *Gondola* – there are two nice Mrs Radcliffe words for you.’ Mrs Radcliffe was, of course, Ann Radcliffe, queen of the Gothic novel, whose hair-raising horror stories *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian* captured the imagination of many a young lady, most famously Jane Austen’s fictional Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*.

The following conversation, which took place between the two friends in the pump-room one morning, after an acquaintance of eight or nine days, is given as a specimen of their very warm attachment, and of the delicacy, discretion, originality of thought, and literary taste which marked the reasonableness of that attachment. They met by appointment; and as Isabella had arrived nearly five minutes before her friend, her first address naturally was:

“My dearest creature, what can have made you so late? I have been waiting for you at least this age!” ...

“... But, my dearest Catherine, what have you been doing with yourself all this morning? Have you gone on with Udolpho?”

“Yes, I have been reading it ever since I woke; and I am got to the black veil.”

“Are you, indeed? How delightful! Oh! I would not tell you what is behind the black veil for the world! Are not you wild to know?”



“Oh! Yes, quite; what can it be? But do not tell me – I would not be told upon any account. I know it must be a skeleton, I am sure it is Laurentina’s skeleton. Oh! I am delighted with the book! I should like to spend my whole life in reading it. I assure you, if it had not been to meet you, I would not have come away from it for all the world.”

“Dear creature! How much I am obliged to you; and when you have finished *Udolpho*, we will read the Italian together; and I have made out a list of ten or twelve more of the same kind for you.”

“Have you, indeed! How glad I am! What are they all?”

“I will read you their names directly; here they are, in my pocketbook. *Castle of Wolfenbach*, *Clermont*, *Mysterious Warnings*, *Necromancer of the Black Forest*, *Midnight Bell*, *Orphan of the Rhine*, and *Horrid Mysteries*. Those will last us some time.”

“Yes, pretty well; but are they all horrid, are you sure they are all horrid?”

“Yes, quite sure; for a particular friend of mine, a Miss Andrews, a sweet girl, one of the sweetest creatures in the world, has read every one of them.

Moralists thought that the extreme nervous sensation provoked by Gothic novels, together with their salacious matter, was corrupting girls and threatening the morality of the nation. A delicious caricature by James Gillray parodies the argument: notice the sexual abduction in the picture on the wall.

We don’t often think about Jane Austen in the context of the Romantic movement, but we should remember that she was born just a couple of years after Wordsworth and Coleridge, and that she began writing her novels in the revolutionary decade of the 1790s, when the ‘Novel of Sensation’ was all the rage. She is, along with Lord Byron and the wonderful Thomas Love Peacock, whom I wish I had time to talk about, one of the great satirists of Romanticism. Her acute consciousness that the Regency period, when she wrote her mature novels, was the literary ‘age of sensation’ is on full display in her last two books. Having parodied the sensationalism of the Gothic novel at the beginning of her career, she turns to Romantic poetry at its end.

Here is an exceptionally interesting passage in *Persuasion*, begun in late 1815 and finished by August 1816, First, Austen sets up the scene:

While Captains Wentworth and Harville led the talk on one side of the room, and by recurring to former days, supplied anecdotes in abundance to occupy and entertain the others, it fell to Anne's lot to be placed rather apart with Captain Benwick; and a very good impulse of her nature obliged her to begin an acquaintance with him. He was shy, and disposed to abstraction ... He was evidently a young man of considerable taste in reading, though principally in poetry; and besides the persuasion of having given him at least an evening's indulgence in the discussion of subjects, which his usual companions had probably no concern in, she had the hope of being of real use to him in some suggestions as to the duty and benefit of struggling against affliction, which had naturally grown out of their conversation.

Then she writes one of the longest sentences in her entire oeuvre, capturing the breathless enthusiasm of the reader of Romantic poetry:

For, though shy, he did not seem reserved: it had rather the appearance of feelings glad to burst their usual restraints; and having talked of poetry, the richness of the present age, and gone through a brief comparison of opinion as to the first-rate poets, trying to ascertain whether *Marmion* or *The Lady of the Lake* were to be preferred, and how ranked the *Giaour* and *The Bride of Abydos*, and moreover, how the *Giaour* was to be pronounced, he shewed himself so intimately acquainted with all the tenderest songs of the one poet, and all the impassioned descriptions of hopeless agony of the other; he repeated with such tremulous feeling the various lines which imaged a broken heart, or a mind destroyed by wretchedness,



and looked so entirely as if he meant to be understood, that she ventured to hope he did not always read only poetry, and to say that she thought it was the misfortune of poetry to be seldom safely enjoyed by those who enjoyed it completely; and that the strong feelings which alone could estimate it truly were the very feelings which ought to taste it but sparingly.

Anne goes on to suggest that Benwick should include 'a larger allowance of prose in his daily study', before realizing that as someone who has turned to poetry herself when in a state of heartbreak, she is hardly the person to set a proper anti-Romantic example.

The poems to which Captain Benwick refers were the most popular works of the age: the narrative poems of Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron. *Marmion: A Tale of Flodden Field* was Scott's second major poem, published in 1808. Constable, his publisher, was so sure that it would be a bestseller that he offered a thousand guineas for the copyright unseen. Two years later, Scott published a follow-up, *The Lady of the Lake*, which sold in phenomenal numbers and made the Trossachs into a tourist destination. Byron saw that a long narrative poem with a romantic setting and a love-story at the centre would be a recipe for success, and in 1813 and 1815 churned out his *The Giaour*, *The Bride of Abydos*, *Lara* and *The Corsair* (which sold ten thousand copies on its day of publication). Set in the Mediterranean and full of bloodthirsty pirates and gorgeous swooning women, not to mention the odd vampire, these Turkish tales inaugurated a fashion for what Byron called 'Orientalism'. Here he is dressing the part for a portrait. And here he is, mocking his own success in the short satirical poem *Beppo*, in which he tried out the witty new style that he would perfect in *Don Juan*:

Oh! That I had the art of easy writing,
What should be easy reading...
How quickly would I print (the world delighting)
A Grecian, Syrian or Assyrian tale
And sell you, mixed with Western sentimentalism,
Some samples of the finest Orientalism.

Jane Austen returned to the particular association between Byron's poetry and strong feeling in *Sanditon*, the novel on which she was working at the time of her death. Here is Charlotte, the naïve heroine, newly arrived in the fashionable seaside resort of Sanditon, being chatted up by Sir Edward Denham:

Stationing himself close by her, he seemed to mean to detach her as much as possible from the rest of the party and to give her the whole of his conversation. He began, in a tone of great taste and feeling, to talk of the sea and the seashore; and ran with energy through all the usual phrases employed in praise of their sublimity and descriptive of the *indescribable* emotions they excite in the mind of sensibility.

Sensibility: that key idea of the age, which Austen had previously satirised in *Sense and Sensibility*. Sir Edward has clearly been reading a lot of Byron: his marine language is shaped by Byron's sea poetry—*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and the Turkish tales—not by real experience of the sea, something that Jane Austen knew a lot about, thanks to her brothers, who had been distinguished sailors serving in the Royal Navy throughout the Napoleonic wars:

The terrific grandeur of the ocean in a storm, its glass surface in a calm, its gulls and its samphire and the deep fathoms of its abysses, its quick vicissitudes, its direful deceptions, its mariners tempting it in sunshine and overwhelmed by the sudden tempest -- all were eagerly and fluently touched; rather commonplace perhaps, but doing very well from the lips of a handsome Sir Edward, and she could not but think him a man of feeling, till he began to stagger her by the number of his quotations and the bewilderment of some of his sentences. "Do you remember," said he, "Scott's beautiful lines on the sea? Oh! what a description they convey! They are never out of my thoughts when I walk here. That man who can read them unmoved must have the nerves of an assassin! Heaven defend me from meeting such a man unarmed."



But Charlotte is a reader of poetry too:

‘What description do you mean?’ said Charlotte. ‘I remember none at this moment, of the sea, in either of Scott’s poems.’ ‘Do you not indeed? Nor can I exactly recall the beginning at this moment. But—you cannot have forgotten his description of woman—*Oh. Woman in our hours of ease*— Delicious! Delicious! Had he written nothing more, he would have been immortal.

Sir Edward has changed the subject because he has misremembered: it was Byron, not Scott, who wrote memorable lines about the sea, such as the opening of *The Corsair*:

O’er the glad waters of the dark blue sea,
Our thoughts as boundless, and our souls as free,
Far as the breeze can bear, the billows foam...

(One of my favourite remarks in Jane Austen’s letters is ‘I have read *The Corsair*, mended my petticoat, and have nothing else to do’.) For Sir Edward, accuracy of attribution does not matter. Poetry is all about extremity of passion:

If ever there was a man who *felt*, it was Burns. Montgomery has all the fire of poetry, Wordsworth has the true soul of it, Campbell in his pleasures of hope has touched the extreme of our sensations—*Like angels’ visits, few and far between*. Can you conceive anything more subduing, more melting, more fraught with the deep sublime than that line? But Burns—I confess my sense of his pre-eminence, Miss Heywood. If Scott *has a fault*, it is the want of passion. Tender, elegant, descriptive—but *tame*. The man who cannot do justice to the attributes of woman is my contempt. Sometimes indeed a flash of feeling seems to irradiate him, as in the lines we were speaking of—*Oh. Woman in our hours of ease*—But Burns is always on fire. His soul was the altar in which lovely woman sat enshrined, his spirit truly breathed the immortal incense which is her due.’

Austen, though, is troubled by the relationship between the poetry and the author. Burns was notorious for drunkenness and sexual promiscuity:

‘I have read several of Burns’s poems with great delight,’ said Charlotte as soon as she had time to speak. ‘But I am not poetic enough to separate a man’s poetry entirely from his character; and poor Burns’s known irregularities greatly interrupt my enjoyment of his lines. I have difficulty in depending on the *truth* of his feelings as a lover. I have not faith in the *sincerity* of the affections of a man of his description. He felt and he wrote and he forgot.’ ‘Oh! no, no,’ exclaimed Sir Edward in an ecstasy. ‘He was all ardour and truth! His genius and his susceptibilities might lead him into some aberrations -- but who is perfect? It were hypercriticism, it were pseudo-philosophy to expect from the soul of high-toned genius the grovellings of a common mind. The coruscations of talent, elicited by impassioned feeling in the breast of man, are perhaps incompatible with some of the prosaic decencies of life; nor can you, loveliest Miss Heywood,’ speaking with an air of deep sentiment, ‘nor can any woman be a fair judge of what a man may be propelled to say, write or do by the sovereign impulses of illimitable ardour.’ This was very fine—but if Charlotte understood it at all, not very moral; and being moreover by no means pleased with his extraordinary style of compliment, she gravely answered, ‘I really know nothing of the matter. This is a charming day. The wind, I fancy, must be southerly.’ ‘Happy, happy wind, to engage Miss Heywood’s thoughts!’ She began to think him downright silly.

Sir Edward Denham is an avid reader of Byron’s Turkish tales, with their grand passions, seductions and abductions (here is one of Delacroix’s illustrations of *The Bride of Abydos*, in which a character called Selim falls in love with the girl he believes to be his half-sister Zuleika). Sir Edward accordingly decides to model himself on Samuel Richardson’s seducer Lovelace – a great hero of Byron’s – who ends up raping the virtuous Clarissa in the most admired novel of the eighteenth century. Alas, Jane Austen’s illness got worse and she abandoned



Sanditon just as the ridiculous Sir Edward is on the brink of seeking to seduce, abduct or rape the virtuous Clara Brereton – an escapade that would doubtless have ended in comic deflation rather than the darker consequences of the actions of her earlier seducer, George Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*. The last we hear of him is that his attention to outdo the villainy of Lovelace and the exotic Orientalism of Byron's swashbuckling lovers has been somewhat thwarted by his lack of cash:

If she could not be won by affection, he must carry her off. He knew his business. Already had he had many musings on the subject. If he *were* constrained so to act, he must naturally wish to strike out something new, to exceed those who had gone before him; and he felt a strong curiosity to ascertain whether the neighbourhood of Timbuctoo might not afford some solitary house adapted for Clara's reception. But the expense, alas! of measures in that masterly style was ill-suited to his purse; and prudence obliged him to prefer the quietest sort of ruin and disgrace for the object of his affections to the more renowned.

Jane Austen had no time for what, in a wonderful phrase, she called 'superfluity of sensation'. That, she thinks, is a malady that can lead not only to over-the-top poetry and dangerously destructive love-affairs, but also to financially ruinous commercial enterprises of the kind that the Parker family engage in at Sanditon, and, for that matter, to hypochondria: 'The Parkers were no doubt a family of imagination and quick feelings, and while the eldest brother found vent for his superfluity of sensation as a projector, the sisters were perhaps driven to dissipate theirs in the invention of odd complaints.'

The character of Sir Edward is Jane Austen's coruscating portrait of The Byronic Reader. The exchange regarding the dissipated life of Burns, who had been safely dead for twenty years by the time Austen was writing *Sanditon*, is, I think, a displacement of an anxiety about Byron, who in April 1816 left England in disgrace, never to return, following his scandalously high-profile divorce. [SLIDE 19] Austen began *Sanditon* in January the following year, when gossip about Byron was still hot in the press and John Murray – the publisher she shared with Byron – had just published two new massive bestsellers, the continuation of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *The Prisoner of Chillon and other Poems*.

In *The Spirit of the Age*, that wonderful collection of essays about the leading writers and thinkers of the Romantic period, William Hazlitt says of Byron:

Intensity is the great and prominent distinction of Lord Byron's writings. He seldom gets beyond force of style, nor has he produced any regular work or masterly whole. He does not prepare any plan beforehand, nor revise and retouch what he has written with polished accuracy. His only object seems to be to stimulate himself and his readers for the moment— to keep both alive, to drive away ennui, to substitute a feverish and irritable state of excitement for listless indolence or even calm enjoyment.

Here Hazlitt nails Byron's dazzling but often slapdash style in the 'Turkish tales and suggests that what drives is a kind of psychopathology: 'to drive away ennui, to substitute a feverish and irritable state of excitement for listless indolence'. Co-ordinate with this motivation was a projection of his self into his poetry. 'You will perhaps perceive in parts a coincidence in my own state of mind with that of my hero', Byron said of *The Giaour*, but he could equally well have said it of *The Bride* or *Lara* or for that matter *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

Byron's life provoked far more comment than his poetry. Indeed, of all English poets, Byron must be the one whose life has exercised most fascination and whose work has been most persistently subordinated to his biography. Some of the most celebrated Romantic heroes are to be found in his poetry, but Byron himself is *the* quintessential Romantic hero. Thomas Babington Macaulay, reviewing a biography of the poet in 1831, noted shrewdly that:

It is always difficult to separate the literary character of a man who lives in our own time from his personal character. It is peculiarly difficult to make this separation in the case of Lord Byron. For it is scarcely too much to say that Lord Byron never wrote without some reference, direct or indirect, to



himself. The interest excited by the events of his life mingles itself in our minds, and probably in the minds of almost all our readers, with the interest which properly belongs to his works.

All Byron's characters, Macaulay suggests, are essentially the same. The Byronic hero looks up to the sky or stands apart in gloomy contemplation, he is an exile from his own country, he moves in a sublime landscape; he is frowning, darkly dressed, with a piercing eye, a haggard expression, and just the occasional smile. Macaulay goes so far as to say that:

Lord Byron could exhibit only one man and only one woman, a man, proud, moody, cynical, with defiance on his brow, and misery in his heart, a scorner of his kind, implacable in revenge, yet capable of deep and strong affection: a woman all softness and gentleness, loving to caress and to be caressed, but capable of being transformed by passion into a tigress.

This Byronic female, well represented by the characters of Zuleika in *The Bride of Abydos* and Medora in *The Corsair*, is very much a man's woman. She is also, of course, the kind of woman for whom Byron was always seeking among the hundreds he seduced, and one he perhaps found in his last great love, Teresa Guiccioli.

Macaulay keeps returning to the problem of Byron's own self: 'He was himself the beginning, the middle and the end, of all his own poetry, the hero of every tale, the chief object in every landscape.' The wandering Childe Harold, the pirate chief Conrad the Corsair, the Selim in love with his half-sister in *The Bride of Abydos*, Manfred in an Alpine landscape, and a crowd of other characters, were universally considered to be loose incognitos of the poet himself. But, as Macaulay suggested, there was a strong element of self-dramatization about the process: 'How far the character in which he exhibited himself was genuine, and how far theatrical, it would probably have puzzled himself to say.'

One factor which suggests that the Byronic hero was a theatrical pose, a projection into what the public wanted, is the literary context in which he wrote. It was as much the case that his life imitated the art of the previous thirty or forty years as that his art imitated his own life. The hero who is in despair, who is sick of life and at war with society, who is characterized by pride, will and defiance: such a figure is in tune with the broader attributes of Romanticism that we have been exploring throughout this lecture series: its *Weltschmerz* and *ennui*, its *Wanderlust* and isolation, its central focus on the self and the will, its association with rebellion and revolution, its admiration for the Prometheus of classical mythology and the Satan of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

In the third canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron introduces the ideas of 'fatal penitence' and an unspecified sin which forces the protagonist from society. But he makes a virtue of isolation. 'There is no doubt that the reader is intended to sympathize with the 'wanderers o'er Eternity / Whose bark drives on and on and anchored ne'er shall be'. Even in *Don Juan*, where he explicitly parodies and condemns the Wordsworthian pantheism of the fusion of self with mountain landscape, Byron still retains an image of himself as isolated, eternal wanderer:

In the wind's eye I have sailed and sail, but for
The stars, I own my telescope is dim.
But at the least I have shunned the common shore,
And leaving land far out of sight, would skim
The ocean of eternity. The roar
Of breakers has not daunted my slight, trim,
But still seaworthy skiff, and she may float
Where ships have foundered, as doth many a boat.
(*Don Juan*, canto 10)

The sea-voyage remains the central Byronic mechanism and metaphor.

Given the importance of voyages, of the freedom given by travel, the key contrary image is imprisonment or being chained. 'From our birth', he asserts in *Childe Harold*, 'the faculty divine / Is chain'd and tortured -



cabin'd, cribb'd, confined'. The Bastille provides one crucial Romantic image of imprisonment. The most relevant of Byron's poems in this respect is *The Prisoner of Chillon*, the story of a man who is imprisoned for so long that he can hardly cope with liberty when it comes:

My very chains and I grew friends,
So much a long communion tends
To make us what we are: - even I
Regain'd my freedom with a sigh.

The subdued ending of the poem undercuts the sonnet prefixed to it, which is an attack on tyranny, a clarion-call to the 'Eternal Spirit of the chainless Mind! / Brightest in dungeons, Liberty!' Byron is aware that freedom may be dearly bought; he is wary of naive, idealistic political solutions.

The Romantic hero is not only a mythic and literary type: he is also a figure in the contemporary world. The eighteenth century, with its emphasis on reason, community, and common sense, was not perhaps an age of heroes; the Romantic era, with its rebelliousness, its upheavals, its emphasis on the individual, emphatically was. Writers were unstinting in their praise of men of action: George Washington, the Polish freedom fighter Kosciusko, those 'great bad men' Robespierre and his crew, Horatio Nelson, and above all Napoleon. Among the poems in the *Prisoner of Chillon* collection is an 'Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte' that simultaneously praised his energy and power and exulted in his downfall after he had abused that energy and power. The ode turns on a typically Byronic image of our common mortality:

Weigh'd in the balance, hero dust
Is vile as vulgar clay.
Thy scales, Mortality! are just
To all that pass away.

The poem compares Napoleon to several of the archetypal rebels and exiles:

Or like the thief of fire from heaven,
Wilt thou withstand the shock?
And share with him, the unforgiven,
His vulture and his rock!
Foredoomed by God—by man accurst,
And that last act, though not thy worst,
The very Fiend's arch mock;
He in his fall preserv'd his pride,
And if a mortal, had as proudly died!

The suggestion here is that suggests Napoleon is somehow Prometheus, the Wandering Jew (or perhaps Cain), and Satan himself, all rolled into one.

For Byron's readers, the song 'To Inez' in the first canto of the highly autobiographical *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* would have conjured up a whole network of similar associations. Before the song Harold is described as a wanderer on whose brow 'life-abhorring gloom' has written 'curst Cain's unresting doom', then he is characterized by his isolation,

Still he beheld, nor mingled with the throng;
But view'd them not with misanthropic hate:
Fain would he now have join'd the dance, the song:
But who may smile that sinks beneath his fate?

Then he sings the lyric to Inez, in which he refers to his 'sullen brow' the 'secret woe' he bears 'corroding joy and youth', his weariness, his exile, the hell within his heart. All this would have suggested to the reader that



long tradition of famous and infamous rebels and exiles—especially as Harold actually makes specific reference to one of them:

It is that settled, ceaseless gloom
The fabled Hebrew wanderer bore;
That will not look beyond the tomb,
But cannot hope for rest before.

This is the altogether characteristic voice of Byron in his high Romantic mood, the Byron who awoke on the publication of *Childe Harold* to find himself famous and whose influence on nineteenth century European Romanticism was so massive.

Lord Byron was the original celebrity author. His death, on his way to fight for the freedom of Greece, made international headlines. In a very real sense, high Romanticism died with him (the next generation of writers were not helped by a financial recession which put publishers out of business and all but killed the market for poetry). His funeral procession, in which his body was taken through the streets of London and then north to his family seat in the midlands, along roads lined with weeping mourners, reads like an uncanny premonition of the day of Princess Diana's funeral. But Byron's literary life did not end with his funeral. At the Pushkin house in St Petersburg there is an inscribed copy of 'Byron, presented to Pushkin by the admirer of both, Adam Mickiewicz'. The Russian national poet and the Polish national poet: both idolized Byron. The cult of Byron, like the Romantic Movement itself, lived on through the nineteenth century and across Europe: Romanticism as the making of modern nation-states and modern sensibilities.

The spirit of the movement still lived on through the twentieth century. The association of creativity with genius, youth, loose living and early death has become embedded in popular culture. The suicide or overdose of Chatterton. Byron dying of rheumatic fever at Missolonghi. Shelley drowned. Keats coughing his last with consumption beside the Spanish Steps in Rome. Letitia Landon, known as the female Byron, taking prussic acid on the coast of West Africa. Let me close with an evocation of that spirit—and an opportunity to give Shelley his due and to remember the death of Keats once more. It is 1969, the year after the summer of love. The celebrity poet has been replaced by the celebrity rock star. Mick Jagger has a Byronic swagger. In loose-fitting white Regency smock, he clambers onto the stage in Hyde Park, in front of an audience of more than sixty thousand. Before he sings, he remembers Brian Jones, the founder and original lead guitarist of the Rolling Stones, found dead in his swimming pool at the age of twenty-seven.

The One remains, the many change and pass;
Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;
Life, like a dome of many-colour'd glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,
Until Death tramples it to fragments. - Die,
If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!
Follow where all is fled!

The Sixties have passed, but the influence of Romanticism remains.

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