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BYRON'S CONCEPT OF POETRY

THE ABSENCE IN BYRON'S WORK of systematic thought concerning the nature of poetry is well known. "For much of his career he stood alone among the great Romantics in not holding any theory of poetry",¹ writes a recent critic. It is true that in Byron's prefaces and letters, as well as in the poems themselves, one finds many pronouncements about the nature and function of poetry and the poet, but unfortunately these statements are inconsistent and often contradictory. Dislike and distrust of systematic thought is one of the few consistent elements in Byron. He wrote Leigh Hunt, "I have not yet had time to attack your *system*, which ought to be done, were it only because it is a system",² and he later remarked that "when a man talks of system, his case is hopeless" (*L & J*, IV, 237). When Byron became involved in the Pope controversy, he was angered not only by the slurs of Bowles on the character and artistry of Pope, but almost equally by his arrogant phrase "the invariable principles of poetry". The principles of poetry, Byron replied, "never were nor ever will be settled. These 'principles' mean nothing more than the predilections of a particular age" (V, 553). One cannot impose order where none exists, and the contradictions of Byron's thought are inescapable. Yet it may be possible, at least, to discover some central and relatively stable principles.

It would be easy to create an image of a neo-classic Byron. In many respects Byron was out of harmony with his age, conspicuously so in his literary preferences. His intense admiration for Pope—"the most faultless of poets", "the moral poet of all civilization" (V, 560)—is familiar. The decline of Pope's reputation meant more to Byron than a change of literary fashion: it signalled a disastrous decline of literary standards and a triumph of dullness, egotism, and incompetence. He emphatically did not accept the romantic revaluation of English literature, with its exaltation of Shakespeare, the lesser Elizabethans and the early seventeenth century, and its depreciation of the neo-classic period. He had the full neo-classic sense of Shakespeare's barbarism: "One can hardly find ten lines together without some gross violation of de-

gency". Shakespeare was "the worst of models, though the most extraordinary of writers".³ Even this limited approval Byron refused to "those old *ruffiani*, the old dramatists, with their tiresome conceits, their jingling rhymes, and endless play upon words".³ For Byron, the main line of English poetry was the line of Dryden and Pope, not that of Spenser and Milton. Like his fellow-romantics he looked back to a greater past, but for him that past was the early eighteenth century.

Equally neo-classic, and anachronistic, was Byron's belief in the unities, a belief which he held so strongly that during his last years he devoted great effort to a quixotic attempt to reform the English drama. "I am determined to make a struggle for the more regular drama",⁴ Byron wrote in 1821, and his plays were intended to provide models of language and structure which would offer an alternative to the methods of the Elizabethans. Simplicity of style and of plot—"good English and a severer approach to the rules" (V, 243)—were intended to be their distinctive features. Byron was thoroughly classical in his opinion that action rather than language was the core of tragedy. "What has poetry to do with a play, or in a play?" he asked, and deliberately aimed at "the avoidance of rant" and "compression of the speeches in the more severe situations" (V, 371-72). A drama such as Coleridge's *Remorse*, which ignored the requirements of the unities, was a poem, not a play. Great tragedy would be produced not by following Shakespeare but by "writing naturally and regularly, and producing *regular* tragedies, like the Greeks" (V, 475). "Naturally and regularly"—the phrase indicates that for Byron, as for Pope, the "rules" were not an arbitrary dogma but rather "Nature still, but Nature Methodiz'd."

Since none of the plays was very favourably received, Byron's persistence in writing them indicates that his devotion to the unities had led him to violate another neo-classic principle—respect for the judgment of the public. On occasion, however, Byron professed his readiness to direct himself by public opinion, not to increase his popularity but because of a belief that "the public is generally right".⁴ He vigorously contradicted Wordsworth's opinion that no great poet had ever had immediate fame, and tried to demonstrate that all great poets had enjoyed it. The poet who did not, like Wordsworth, "may have a sect, but he will never have a public" (IV, 488), and a reputation founded on such a narrow basis could not endure. For Byron, great poetry was recognizable in part by its general and immediate appeal to educated readers. Poetry, to him, was a form of communication, and if it failed to communicate to a wide audience it was of slight value. Clarity thus became a major poetic

virtue and obscurity a fatal defect. Byron was enraged by what he felt was a dangerous tendency to equate intelligibility with superficiality and difficulty with profundity. His attacks on Wordsworth seem motivated as much by the supposed obscurity of "this archapostle of mystery and mysticism" (III, 239) as by his political apostasy (although Byron tended to equate poetic obscurity with political obscurantism).

Byron's criticisms of Wordsworth are highly revealing. As might be expected, he ridicules the theory of poetic diction, partly because it was contrary to the practice of Pope and partly, no doubt, because it was a theory, and parodies the Wordsworthian egotism. More important, Wordsworth's attitude toward nature was, except during one short period, foreign and even antipathetic to Byron. That exception was the Swiss interlude of 1816, which resulted in *Manfred* and Canto III of *Childe Harold*. Byron's tour of the Alps represented an unsuccessful experiment, an attempt to find self-forgetfulness and healing through the closest contact with nature in the grandest possible surroundings. The failure was confessed in Byron's journal: "neither the music of the Shepherd, the crashing of the Avalanche, nor the torrent, the mountain, the Glacier, the Forest, nor the Cloud, have for one moment lightened the weight upon my heart nor enabled me to lose my own wretched identity in the majesty and the power, and the Glory, around, above, and beneath me" (III, 364). Byron's normal attitude was the thoroughly eighteenth-century one of the picturesque tourist and connoisseur of landscapes. The natural environment, in his poetry, is usually decorative rather than functional.

Byron refused to admit that "Nature" was intrinsically poetic and human activities and creations unpoetic. In his reply to Bowles he remarked, in obvious reference to "The Rape of the Lock", that "a good poet can imbue a pack of cards with more poetry than inhabits the forest of America" (V, 557), and alluded contemptuously to "this 'Babble of green fields' and of bare Nature in general" (V, 549) which seemed to characterize contemporary poetry and criticism. Classical works of architecture and sculpture "are as *poetical* as Mont Blanc or Mount Aetna, perhaps more so, as they are direct manifestations of mind, and *presuppose* poetry in their very conception" (V, 548).

Somewhat inconsistently, perhaps, Byron rejected the romantic conception of the imagination as a creative and transforming power, the primary faculty of the poet. "Imagination" and "invention", he declared, "are the two commonest of qualities. An Irish peasant with a little whiskey in his head will imagine and invent more than would furnish forth a modern poem" (V, 554). He would no doubt have accepted as an accurate, and favourable, judg-

ment Keat's comment that the difference between himself and Byron was that "he describes what he sees—I describe what I imagine."⁵

Concerning metrics, diction, and poetic form in general, Byron had comparatively little to say, but his poetry clearly reveals the strong influence of the neo-classic tradition. He obviously did not share the romantic impatience with what in the Dedication to *The Corsair* he called the "good old and now neglected heroic couplet", "the best adapted measure to our language", which he wrote from almost the beginning to almost the end of his career. Byron, however, was an expansive writer, incapable of the compression achieved by Pope, and he admitted the difficulty of a verse form in which "the last line, or one out of two, must be good".³ The poetic diction of the eighteenth century was a natural language for him, and he felt no need to analyze or justify it. From Canto I of *Childe Harold*, which offers such capitalized abstractions as Meditation, conscious Reason, Rapine, Murder, and Desolation, to "The Island", Byron's poetry abounds in neo-classic personifications and clichés.

Byron's fondness for satire, a declining genre, further indicates the neo-classic temper of his mind. His defense of satire, however, lacks the seriousness of Pope's and seems hesitant and inconsistent. Near the opening of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* he invokes its moral function in a time "When knaves and fools combined o'er all prevail", but without the intensity of Pope's "O sacred weapon! left for Truth's defense,/Sole dread of folly, vice and insolence". Byron merely hoped that the knaves and fools might "more darkly sin, by satire kept in awe", and added that he made no attempt to chastise vice, but that his sole aim was to pursue folly and his hope to arouse "at least amusement in the race". Pope might in fact have sometimes been provoked by personal slights and insults, but as poet and satirist he would acknowledge no motive but "The strong antipathy of good or bad". It is impossible to imagine him destroying the moral basis of his satire as did Byron when he referred to *English Bards* as "this miserable record of misplaced anger and indiscriminate acrimony".⁶

Byron's apologetics for *Don Juan* strikingly exemplify his confusion about the nature and function of satire. At various times he argues that the poem really has a moral purpose, that whether moral or immoral it is justified by its realism, and finally that the question of morality is irrelevant. Byron's first argument, that the poem was intended as "a Satire on abuses of the present state of Society, and not an eulogy of vice", and that occasional "voluptuousness" was required by the nature of the subject, is conventional and seems

obviously disingenuous. The second argument, that of the poem's truth, is also traditional but is individually interpreted and, as will be seen later, is a fundamental position in Byron's poetics. The third is the most original, and it contradicts the first position completely and the second at least partially: "The poem will please if it is lively, if it is stupid, it will fail" (IV, 283). It was a "work never intended to be serious", only "to giggle and make giggle" (IV, 343).

Other elements of neo-classic poetics—the distinction between high and low styles, with the special appropriateness of the latter for satire and truth; the concept of poetry and painting as sister arts; the belief that the highest art is a representation of ideal beauty—may be found in his letters and poems. Yet Byron was not, and could not be, a neo-classic poet. He was unable to accept consistently the absolutism which underlay the neo-classic position, the belief that the "rules" are in accord with nature and reason and therefore must be the same in every age. When Byron, in his reply to Bowles, denied the existence of "invariable rules of poetry", and added that "these 'principles' mean nothing more than the predilections of a particular age", he expressed a relativism which undercut his whole position as a defender and exponent of the unities and other neo-classic doctrines. His greatest poem, *Don Juan*, comprehensively attacks the conventions, subject-matter, and values of epic poetry—the genre most admired by neo-classic critics. The satire of *Don Juan*, unlike that of Pope and Dryden, does not ridicule deviations from a fixed code of morals, manners, and tastes assumed to be in accord with nature and reason; rather, in Auden's words, "It is the weapon of the rebel who refuses to accept conventional laws and pieties as binding or worthy of respect. Instead of speaking in the name of all well-educated and sensible people, it speaks in the name of the individual whose innocence of vision has not been corrupted by education and social convention."⁷

Meyer Abrams, in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, has shown that the concept of poetry as primarily a form of self-expression, rather than of communication, is almost a common denominator of romanticism. This concept, in spite of his ridicule of obscurity and egotism, Byron accepted. To him, as to Wordsworth, poetry is an expression of the author's emotions: "poetry is itself passion" (V, 582). For Byron, however, the poem results from an immediate and irresistible overflow of feeling: "poetry is the expression of excited passion" (V, 318) rather than of "emotion recollected in tranquillity". As a result, Byron's poetry, when directly autobiographical, nearly always deals with the immediate past. Thus the experiences which formed the basis

of Canto III of *Childe Harold* and the composition of the poem itself occupied together a little less than two months.

Poetic composition became for Byron a kind of therapy, allowing the poet to escape to a world of his own creation, or providing a release from overwhelming emotional pressure. (The natural corollary of such an attitude was his headlong method of composition and his impatience with revision.) Powerful emotion, Byron held, is essential to a poet, to supply him with materials and incentive for writing. Poetry itself represents a state of movement rather than of completion, of process or becoming rather than of being. Every poem is a segment of one great poem which is ended (not completed) only by the author's death. Such an attitude is presented through a familiar romantic image in Canto III of *Childe Harold*:

on the sea,

The boldest steer but where their ports invite;
 But there are wanderers o'er Eternity
 Whose bark drives on and on, and anchor'd ne'er shall be (lines 667-70).

The metaphor, however, implies on the part of the poet a degree of control over his life and work, the control which a sailor has over his ship—it may be driven by the winds, but he at least steers it. Elsewhere in the poem the concept is symbolized by an image which may be less poetically effective but which corresponds more closely to Byron's thought and experience:

I am as a weed,

Flung from the rock, on Ocean's foam to sail,
 Where'er the surge may sweep, the tempest's breath prevail (lines 16-18).

Byron frequently appears to conceive of the function of the poet as simply self-expression with the utmost possible freedom. Declarations of indifference to the public were common in his later years. When Murray suggested "a poem in the old way, to interest the women", Byron replied "I follow the bias of my own mind, without considering whether women or men are or are not to be pleased" (VI, 40). When *Cain* was denounced by the orthodox, Byron was moved to the fullest expression of his independence: "I shall not be deterred by any outcry; your present public hate me, but they shall not interrupt the march of my mind, nor prevent me from telling those who are attempting to trample on all thought, that their thrones shall yet be rocked to their foundations" (VI, 140). One cannot imagine such a phrase as "they shall not interrupt the march of my mind" being used at any earlier period: it is essentially romantic in its claim of absolute independence and its

conception of the poet's mind as being necessarily in a state of continuous movement and development.

Paradoxically, however, complete egotism led to social involvement and commitment. In resisting attempts to interfere with the "march of his mind" the poet became a defender of freedom and a rebel against tyranny. Byron used Mme. de Stael's aphorism that "all talent has a propensity to attack the strong" as a standard by which to condemn Wordsworth and Southey. Significantly, Byron's favourite Greek tragedy, which "has always been so much in my head, that I can easily conceive its influence over all or anything that I have written" (IV, 174) was the *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus, the archetypal presentation of the rebel.

Whether the poet's duty is to himself or to mankind, it is equally necessary for him to protect the integrity of his work against all attempts at censorship or expurgation, whether moral, religious, or political in origin. As his career advanced, Byron's concern for this integrity increased. He had readily allowed possibly offensive stanzas to be cut from the first two cantos of *Childe Harold*, but he demanded that *Don Juan* "shall be an entire horse or none" and stubbornly insisted on publishing against the remonstrances of his friends, resolved "to battle my way against them all like a Porcupine".

In this apparent chaos of unrelated, varying or conflicting opinions, where is the essential Byron to be found? Certainly his poetics cannot easily be summarized and systematized. Perhaps, however, a degree of unity and consistency is provided by his concept of, and increasing devotion to, poetic truth—a "truth" very different from that of the other romantics and also from that of Pope. Truth was, for Byron, the highest quality of poetry. His comment on Pope's lines "That not in fancy's maze he wandered long,/But stooped to truth and moralised his song" was that "He should have written 'rose to truth'" (V, 554). Truth, for him, seemed to imply a rather literal realism and a faithfulness to the facts of experience closer to the novel than to poetry, at least as poetry had previously been conceived of. "I hate things all fiction", Byron wrote in 1817. "There should always be some foundation of fact for the most airy fabric, and pure invention is but the talent of a liar" (IV, 93), which poets often were, in his opinion. Faithfulness to experience, the poet's own or another's, was necessary to safeguard poetry from irresponsibility and resulting triviality. Accordingly, when Byron wished to describe a shipwreck he drew on his own experiences as far as possible and beyond that point faithfully followed his written sources. His account of the siege of Ismail is historically accurate and based on careful study, since his own experience was of

no use to him here. Obviously Byron considered this realism a principal merit of his poetry. Of the shipwreck scenes he remarked "there was not a single circumstance of it not taken from fact" and went on to make a similar claim for the entire work: "Almost all *Don Juan* is real life, either my own or from people I Know . . ." (V, 346). All of his own experiences he observed with an eye to their poetic possibilities (e.g., his often-repeated comment that, depending on its outcome, his Greek journey would provide another canto for either *Childe Harold* or *Don Juan*) and the extent and variety of his experience seemed to Byron one of his major poetic assets, although he was prepared to admit that another kind of experience might also be valuable. "The pity of these men", he wrote concerning some contemporary minor poets, "is, that they never lived either in *high life*, nor in solitude; there is no medium for the knowledge of the *busy* or the *still* world", (V, 362). The former kind of knowledge, of the busy world, Byron claimed for himself. This concept of truth or realism was certainly a guiding principle in the writing of *Don Juan* and its revision; Steffan has pointed out the frequency with which Byron's revisions consist of "packing",⁸ an attempt to increase the circumstantiality of the poem by replacing generalizations with factual detail and by multiplication of examples.

Truth was of course fatal to romantic illusions, to sentimentality, to moral and religious hypocrisy, to everything which Byron summed up in the word "cant". The poet must clear his own mind of cant, expose its falsity, and subject it to ridicule. This task Byron performed constantly in *Don Juan*, thus outraging both the orthodox and the sentimental: "It is TOO TRUE, and the women hate everything which strips off the tinsel of Sentiment" (V, 97). Byron was aware of the changing moral standards of his time, but denied that increasingly careful observance of properties represented a genuinely improved morality. "This immaculate period, this moral millennium of expurgated editions . . ." with its affected delicacy, was "not a whit more moral than, and half so honourable as, the coarser candor of our less polished ancestors . . ." (V, 575). "The damned cant and Toryism of the time" was a dangerous enemy to poetic freedom, and if carried to its logical conclusion would have required not only the suppression of *Don Juan* but the expurgation of Shakespeare and the Elizabethan dramatists, the writers of the Restoration, Ariosto, La Fontaine, "in short, *something* of most who have written before Pope and are worth reading, and much of Pope himself" (IV, 275). Byron's defence of the integrity of *Don Juan*, his refusal to permit cuts and his insistence on publication, was then a defence of the freedom of poetry and of true morality.

But now I'm going to be immoral; now
 I mean to show things really as they are,
 Not as they ought to be . . . (*Don Juan*, XII, stanza 40),

Byron wrote, but the morality thus violated was obviously a false and merely conventional morality, with no relation to the facts of experience. Byron referred contemptuously to "parson-poets" (V. 352); the combination of parson—upholder of convention in religion and morality, unable to speak freely about most subjects, unable to speak at all about many—and poet was an impossible one.

Byron's devotion to his concept of poetic truth explains his distrust of the imagination and his inability to accept consistently the theory that great art presents the ideal rather than the actual. It accounts also for his suspicion of systematic thought, which may lead to an inability to recognize, or accept, reality. As Ridenour has observed, "It is to his interest (as well as to his taste) to undermine any systematic formulation of reality . . . and to exalt the primacy of that immediate experience (what he sometimes calls 'fact' or 'existence') of which the poet is a peculiarly authoritative spokesman".⁹ Reality, for Byron, was immensely varied and complex, and his own variability allowed him to comprehend more, to omit less and to distort less, than was possible for those who applied moral, religious, political, or literary theories to experience with rigid consistency: "But if a writer should be quite consistent/How could he possibly show things existent?" (*Don Juan*, XV, stanza 87).

NOTES

1. Andrew Rutherford, *Byron: A Critical Study* (London, 1961), p. 4.
2. *The Works of Lord Byron: Letters and Journals*, ed. R. E. Prothero. III, (London, 1922), 248. Subsequent references to this edition appear in the text.
3. Thomas Medwin, *Conversations of Lord Byron*, (London, 1824), pp. 105, 296.
4. *Lord Byron's Correspondence*, ed. John Murray, (London, 1922) II, 201, 194.
5. *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Maurice Buxton Forman, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1935), p. 356.
6. Quoted in *The Works of Lord Byron*, ed. E. H. Coleridge (London, 1922), I, 247.
7. W. H. Auden, review of Leslie Marchand, *Byron: A Biography* (New York, 1957), *New Yorker*, April 26, 1958, pp. 133-50.
8. Truman Guy Steffan, *Byron's Don Juan: The Making of a Masterpiece*, (Austin, 1957), pp. 132-36.
9. George M. Ridenour, *The Style of Don Juan* (New Haven, 1960), p. 112.