BYRON

A Symposium

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edited by
JOHN D. JUMP

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1975

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First published 1975 by

THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD

London and Basingstoke

Associated companies in New York

Dublin Melbourne Johannesburg and Madras

SBN 333 17828 9

ISBN 978-1-349-02484-1 ISBN 978-1-349-02482-7 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-02482-7

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PREFACE

Most of the essays in this collection derive from lectures given in London, Cambridge, and Manchester in commemoration of the 150th anniversary of Byron's death; all of them have been written with that commemoration in mind. Eight of the contributors seek to define the special insights and pleasures to be obtained from reading what Byron wrote. The other sheds an oblique light on the poet's life and character.

Readers used often to complain that they could find very little interesting discussion of Byron's literary achievement. There was any amount of writing about him, but it was overwhelmingly concerned with the man rather than with his work. The complaint was valid until around fifteen years ago. Then, shortly before and after 1960 a number of unusually important biographical studies appeared. These must temporarily have sated the curiosity they were designed to satisfy, for between then and the sesquicentenary the literary critics had the field largely to themselves. Each of them was liable to congratulate himself on being a lonely pioneer, but in fact the 1960s and the earlier 1970s saw the publication of a great deal of literary criticism of Byron's poetry. In most of this the poems in the octave stanza received the highest praise, in conformity with a well-established trend in British and American criticism. But there appeared also scholarly and perceptive studies of Byron's work in other forms, including that written during his earlier years.

The fact that 1974 witnessed a considerable resumption of biographical activity should surprise no one. Centenaries of authors

commonly have that effect, and the present volume opens appropriately with an essay in which a Cornishman describes some of Byron's Cornish relatives. A. L. Rowse concentrates mainly upon Sophia Trevanion, who was Byron's paternal grandmother, and Henry Trevanion, who was the great-grandson of Sophia's sister. Having married one daughter of Augusta Leigh, Henry became the lover of another, Medora, who is commonly believed to have been Byron's child by Augusta, his half-sister. Medora's relationship with Trevanion evidently ruined a great part of her short life. Sophia, the poet's ancestor and Medora's, seems to have been an intelligent and attractive woman. Her husband was 'Foul-weather Jack', the admiral whom the poet mentions more than once in his writings. From her and from his mother, Rowse claims, Byron inherited 'the Celtic temperament'.

Generalisations about racial characteristics are notoriously tricky, but this phrase can serve us by drawing attention to Byron's remarkable mobility of thought and feeling. Thanks to this, his letters and journals exhibit a simply astonishing versatility. Reviewing the new edition of these that began to appear in 1973, Michael Foot, himself an able literary man as well as a successful politician, suggested that Byron was the finest letter-writer in the English language. The second essay in the present collection is designed to support some such assessment.

Its essential plea is that Byron's journals and letters should be read not only as informative documents but also as, in effect, dramatic monologues. They reveal and characterise their author as he writes; they record responses to his immediate situation that compel us to realise it in our turn; and his distinctive tone with each correspondent brings that correspondent vividly before our imagination. Utterly informal prose in intention, Byron's letters and journals do at their frequent best achieve the status of works of art.

From an early age he exhibits in them his wit and humour, his gaiety and playfulness, his shrewd observation of men and manners, and his sardonic realism. But these are attributes that it will take him years to introduce effectively in his verse. Even so, his early poetry, though deprived of so much that might have

enriched it, embraces many powerful and deeply impressive achievements. Francis Berry celebrates the chief of these in his lecture on *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

The subject calls for eloquence, and Berry supplies it. He writes as a member of the literary generation that grew up in Britain and America during the period of T. S. Eliot's predominance as poet and critic. Those who followed Eliot in prizing above all a poetry that was complex and diffident were naturally prone to dismiss Byron's as commonplace and crude. But today we no longer esteem hesitancy and scepticism so highly. Social and political passions have regained urgency among us, even to the extent of manifesting themselves in deplorable acts of destruction. In the world as it now is, claims Berry, a poetry of drive, vigour, and assurance, a poetry that celebrates heroes and action, a rhetorical poetry, has become very much to the point.

No one is likely to accept this view without question. Perhaps Berry has drawn too sharp a contrast between the 1930s and the 1970s. But the contrast as he draws it is admirably dramatic, and it enables him to praise *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* for qualities such as Byron's contemporaries found in it, and at the same time to see these qualities as relevant to our modern situation. Defenders of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* have occasionally tried to detect in it the virtues proper to the Age of Eliot. Berry's lecture convinces us, if we needed convincing, that they were simply asking the wrong questions. The young Byron with whom he leaves us is a political liberal and 'a man speaking to men'. He has a sharp sense of fact and a proper appreciation of the enduring importance of great historical events. He uses words skilfully to sway a large and important audience.

This audience rapidly became international. In country after country, readers and writers surrendered to the Byronic spell. The French proved particularly susceptible. They had felt the heady idealism of the early years of their Revolution, and they had felt the sour disillusionment of the aftermath, down to the Restoration of the despised Bourbons in 1815. The Byronic hero, a man embittered by the virtual extinction of a hope which nevertheless struggles to survive, might have been made for them. *The Giaour*

astonished Alfred de Vigny and dazzled Lamartine; Lamartine thought *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* the only epic possible in his day. Hugo, de Musset, Gautier, and George Sand also responded to the Byronic influence. It reached Goethe and Heine in Germany, Leopardi in Italy. It spread even to Russia. In order to read the English poet in the original, Pushkin studied his language; he alludes to him repeatedly in *Eugene Onegin*; and he sometimes employs a truly Byronic irony at his expense:

By a most happy whim Lord Byron
Has clothed a hopeless egoism
In saturnine romanticism.
(III.xii)

Lermontov in *A Hero of Our Own Times* portrays a very fully developed Byronic hero. Early experience, a sceptical habit of mind, and an excessive self-consciousness have made Pechorin cold, egotistical, and destructive.

My mind has been corrupted by the world, my fancy is fickle, my heart insatiable, everything seems petty; I get used to sorrow as quickly as to enjoyment, and my life grows emptier day by day. One expedient is still left me—travel.

('Bela')

Both the predicament and the solution are those Byron confers on Childe Harold at the beginning of his pilgrimage.

The Byron who exercised this wide sway was not the comic and satirical poet of the octave stanza, the author of *Beppo*, *Don Juan*, and *The Vision of Judgment*, but what Gilbert Phelps calls 'the Byronic Byron', the author of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, the Turkish tales, and *Manfred*. Phelps stresses the difficulty of the Byronic Byron's problem. Genuinely feeling an impatience with his 'sedentary trade' such as Yeats later professed to feel, he sought to reconcile Romantic aspirations with the unalterable facts of the contemporary situation and of the human condition in general. He

could not for this purpose employ either the established techniques of eighteenth-century poetry or the newer techniques which his Romantic contemporaries were developing. His solution was bold and original: he gave the freest possible scope to his creative energy and wrote a swiftly-moving rhetorical poetry that simply asks to be read in long stretches.

During the middle years of the twentieth century, shortbreathed devotees of 'close analysis' used to deplore its lack of conciseness and concentration. But they are no longer in a position to impose their preferences on the rest of us; and those with the mental stamina to enjoy Byron's long, symphonic movements may easily shrug off their scolding.

Phelps has much more to say than this. He rightly emphasises, for example, the importance in the Byronic Byron of the notion of a lost innocence which experience has rendered irretrievable and which remains a tantalising memory. He shows that the Byronic hero is an embodiment both of the spirit of revolt and of the sense of blighted hopes. Above all, he argues that such extended and recurrent images as the Byronic hero, whatever fault we may find with particular presentations, acquire a bold impressiveness from the furious energy which creates and sustains them.

This brings back to mind the drive, vigour, and assurance praised by Berry. Both critics, in fact, are indicating the quality which more than any other gave Byron his vast nineteenth-century reputation throughout Europe and beyond it. To a greater extent than Berry, Phelps dwells upon the profound pessimism which accompanied Byron's defiant liberalism. Much that he claims for the Byronic Byron could be said with equal truth of the comic and satirical Byron. But there is no need to defend *Don Juan* against him. He is ready to agree that it is Byron's masterpiece.

In the three essays that follow, Patrick Yarker, A. B. England, and W. Ruddick take this for granted and ask questions relating to Byron's development as a satirical poet. Within the broad limits of their consensus, they develop some interesting divergences of view.

Yarker writes on the early satires, in which, he says, Byron

models himself on Pope and Gifford but lacks the seriousness and purposefulness of his masters. For complete success in the genre, Byron has to discover a form in which he can express his satirical sense of the gap between the actual and the ideal – the gap which Phelps sees the Byronic Byron as striving to close – with the cheerful ease his friends and correspondents already recognised in him. He finds this form in J. H. Frere's 'Whistlecraft' poem, and he achieves his complete success in *Beppo*.

Some of Yarker's insights should interest the critic who will one day explore carefully the literary relationship of Byron and Gifford. This was, after all, a very odd relationship indeed. In 1812, when the two men entered into communication, Byron was a youthful Whig poet of aristocratic birth, Gifford a middle-aged Tory scholar and critic of plebeian origin. Yet Byron revered Gifford, not merely as the satirist responsible for *The Baviad* and *The Maeviad* but in all his roles as a man of letters. For years he was to allow the admired and admiring Gifford to choose for him, and in his absence, between alternative readings that he would leave in the manuscripts of his poems. A creative writer could hardly have shown a more entire trust.

Without denying that Byron often writes in the Augustan tradition represented by Pope, England argues that the style of *Don Juan* connects even more significantly with that of Swift. Perceptive close analyses of specimen passages from all three poets enable him to claim that, whereas Pope in describing a chaotic miscellaneousness will invariably evoke the principle of order which the confusion flouts, Swift and Byron are alike in more commonly doing nothing of the sort but allowing the chaotic miscellaneousness to stand as their offered vision of reality. *Don Juan* is extremely varied, of course; the early part of Canto XIV is not the only place where Byron is certainly writing as a successor to Pope; but the literary affiliation that England traces keeps us in mind of the negative and destructive aspects of what remains at the same time a paradoxically cheerful poem.

In Ruddick's view, Byron was inhibited in his early work by his observance of the Augustan distinctions between genres and between styles. To be sure, he achieved some powerful successes

within these limits. But for the full fruition of his particular gifts he had to transcend the distinctions he had inherited. Ruddick holds that his friend Thomas Moore, the Irish lyrist, helped him to do this. Moore was already developing in *The Twopenny Post-Bag* 'a light, urbane, rapid-paced, and aristocratically toned satire of a kind which was genuinely new'. Byron learned from him as well as from Frere, and in the resultant *ottava rima* poems he revitalised Popean satire for his own very different age. This is the case above all in *The Vision of Judgment* and in the late cantos of *Don Juan* which bring its hero to England. These late cantos point straight forward to the Victorian novel.

During the years which we now tend to imagine as dominated by the composition of *Don Juan*, Byron wrote also a number of plays. Undeterred by his insistence that he wrote them only for the reading public, Anne Barton urges the staging of *Marino Faliero*, *The Two Foscari*, and *Sardanapalus*. She believes that this would lead to a correct appreciation of them as finely reasoned political tragedies. Like other contributors to the present volume, she is constantly impressed by the relevance today of what Byron wrote in that earlier age of revolutions. She finds it possible to compare him as a playwright with Brecht, who likewise aimed through historical dramas to change men's minds and influence their actions. Both of them wished to make their audiences think and declined to facilitate mere escape 'into a world of daydreams and somnambulist repose'.

There follows a further attempt to secure a more favourable reception for comparatively neglected work. P. D. Fleck praises Byron's last complete poem, *The Island*, as at once unmistakably Romantic and unmistakably Byronic. In his view, it affirms the possibility of bringing the world of our heart's desire into alignment with the world we have in any case to accept as given. *The Island* briefly closes that gap between the ideal and the real which Phelps describes the Byronic Byron as striving to close. An inescapable awareness of this same gap is what Yarker, as we have seen, thinks fundamental to the satire of Byron and others.

Of the contributors to the present collection, some seek to justify further the current high estimate of certain of Byron's works,

while others seek to promote more favourable responses to works they think still underrated. I have welcomed a similar variety in approach and in presentation. Some of the papers keep fairly closely to the lecture form; others have been written, or rewritten, as articles for reading. I have been happy to see each study take the particular form that was best suited for it and have left each author to judge for himself how extensive an apparatus of references his own contribution required, and to some extent what form these references might most appropriately take. But, in view of the fact that L. A. Marchand's edition of the letters and journals began in 1973 to supersede R. E. Prothero's, I have ensured that all exact references to this material take the form merely of the dates of the letters or diary-entries in question. These dates will suffice to enable readers to trace quotations in whichever text is the more readily accessible to them.

The British Council, the Byron Society, and the Extra-Mural Departments of the Universities of London and Manchester sponsored the lectures out of which most of the following papers developed. My last words here must be an expression of gratitude to them.

Manchester

John D. Jump

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

ANNE BARTON has recently relinquished the Carlile Chair of English at Bedford College, London, and has become Fellow and Tutor in English Literature at New College, Oxford, and University Lecturer in English. As Anne Richter she published *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (1964). She is now married to John Barton of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Her present paper is a companion piece to her Nottingham Byron Foundation Lecture (1968).

FRANCIS BERRY, Professor of English, Royal Holloway College, London, is author of *The Galloping Centaur, Morant Bay and Other Poems*, and *Ghosts of Greenland* (verse); and of *Poets' Grammar, Poetry and the Physical Voice, The Shakesperian Inset*, and *Thoughts on Poetic Time* (criticism).

A. B. ENGLAND teaches at the University of Victoria, British Columbia. He is the author of a forthcoming book, *Byron's 'Don Juan' and Eighteenth-Century Literature*, and is at present engaged in a study of Swift's poetry.

P. D. FLECK, Professor of English, University of Western Ontario, London, Canada, has lectured widely on Byron and Shelley and is currently working on a study of the influence of these poets on each other. The essay published in the present volume was first prepared as the Byron Memorial Lecture, given at the Royal Institution, London, for the Byron Society, 17 April 1974.

JOHN D. JUMP, Professor of English, University of Manchester, has published critical studies of and editions of works by various Renaissance playwrights, Byron, Tennyson, and Matthew Arnold. He is general editor of the Critical Idiom series. His *Byron* appeared in 1972.

GILBERT PHELPS has worked in higher education and for the B.B.C.; he is now a freelance writer, lecturer, and broadcaster. The latest of several books on Latin America, *The Tragedy of Paraguay*, and his ninth novel, *The Low Roads*, are due in 1975. He has published an anthology, *The Byronic Byron* (1971), has written programmes on the poet for the B.B.C., and is continuing to work on him.

A. L. ROWSE, historian and poet, leading authority on the Age of Shakespeare, is first and last a Cornishman. Everything Cornish, at home and abroad, interests him. In his essay published in the present volume, he brings to light new information about Byron's Cornish ancestry and relations, which has its importance for understanding the poet's background and temperament.

W. RUDDICK teaches at the University of Manchester. He has written on Byron's historical tragedies and on Byron's relations with Thomas Moore. He is currently engaged on a study of the poetry of George Crabbe.

P. M. YARKER teaches at King's College, London. The nineteenth century is his area of special interest, and he has published editions of works by Wordsworth and Ruskin.