
Research Papers



Byron: the Lord and the Poet

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Abstract

Lord Byron was descended from two of the most noted British aristocracy, i.e. the Byrons (Paternal) and the Gordons of Gight (Maternal). The Byrons trace their ancestry back to the Buruns, contemporaries of William the conqueror. Byrons seem to have grown more irresponsible with each generation, until the summit of social irregularity is reached in the character and conduct of the great-uncle and the father of the poet, if not indeed in the poet himself.

The Gordons of Gight, Byron's maternal ancestors, display a startling record of violence rare even in the annals of Scottish Lairds. They came to civilized state only a little before the line ran out with Byron's mother, Catherine Gordon. Thomas Moore has perpetuated among biographers of Byron the saying that,

“In the character of the noble poet the pride of ancestry was undoubtedly one of the most decided features.”¹

But Byron had a realistic appreciation of what his ancestors had contributed to his character. He mostly boasted of his Scottish descent from James I, but in the main it was the longer line of his paternal ancestry, which held his interest and stimulated his imagination.

The first owner of the Newstead was Sir John Byron, a strong supporter of Henry VIII. The second Sir John Byron, an illegitimate child of the first Sir John Byron, inherited the estates by deed of gift in 1576. He too acquired the title of Sir John

Byron by Queen Elizabeth. He was a faithful general of Charles I and was created Baron Byron of Rochdale. He died childless and after his death, his brother Sir Richard Byron succeeded to the barony. He too faithfully served Charles I in the civil war. Richard's only son, William became the third Baron. The fourth lord took three wives in succession. Born in 1722, the fifth lord Byron came to the title at the age of fourteen on the death of his father. He frequently visited London and he was known as a rake. He was extravagant and had already become a legendary figure among his tenants and neighbours. Both in town and country he lived luxuriously and indulged every whim. He had killed his kinsman and neighbour William Chaworth of Annesley Hall in a duel. He was called as “The Wicked” lord. Like the poet Byron he always carried pistols. When his grandson was killed at the siege of Calvi in 1794, his grandnephew, the poet George Gordon Byron (or George Byron Gordon, as he was called in

Scotland), then six and half years old, became heir presumptive to the ancient Byron estates and became the sixth lord Byron of Rochdale.

The fourth Baron's second son, John, grandfather of the poet, had nine children, the first son being the scapegrace father of the poet known as "Mad Jack". He was handsome and brave but apparently without feeling or principle in his amours, for it is said that to pay his gambling debts he did not hesitate to levy contributions upon the ladies who favoured him. After the death of his first wife captain Byron, in need of money to pay off his debts, was in search of a new heiress. And soon he succeeded in turning the head of Catherine Gordon of Gight, the mother of the poet. Her fortune of more than £ 23,000 seemed the most accessible to the captain. Their marriage did not prove a happy one. Captain Byron squandered the lands of Gights away and the lady could not resist him. The lady was put to poverty by the captain's extravagance and debts. He constantly deserted her to escape his creditors. Mrs. Byron lived a friendless life in London, constantly harassed by the captain's creditors. And in such difficult situation on Tuesday, January 22, 1788, Mrs. Byron's first and only offspring came into the world. He was christened George Gordon Byron in London.

By the quality of his Romanticism Byron was the most accessible of these three poets (Shelley, Keats and Byron) to foreign readers. He was the first to influence Europe, and had the widest action upon literature. Herein lies the dominant trait of his features. At the very centre of his being there is an element of morbidity; the inner life built up on the full indulgence of emotion and desire reveals one of the current forms of its possible disintegration: the dispersion of the personality through the absence of an organic discipline among the motives and the acts. It would be hard to find a character of more energy than that of Byron. But he was never completely master of himself; his life and work offer us the picture of an essential duality. That wound, which he profoundly parades throughout the world, is just the semi-pathological rupture of the tissue of tendencies, which has severed all connection between one part of him and the other.

"Since my young days of passion-joy or pain,

Perchance my heart and harp have lost a string." 2

Byron definitely establishes in England the European type of the Romantic artist, whose art

feeds on his very disease, who takes a voluptuous delight in self-reproach, and who weaves his remorse into a texture of beauty. His literary personality was no less complicated. His instincts were fundamentally classical, in the sense that he did not conceive of fitness in form without an adequate precision, and sacrificed nothing to suggestion. He was deeply influenced by the ancients, and still more by Pope and his school. He passed a very severe judgment on Wordsworth and Southey. A democrat through spite as well as generosity, but an aristocrat at heart, he despised Wordsworth's peasant prosaism, and what he regarded as the vulgarity of Keats. Among his contemporaries he praised Campbell and Rogers – the writers of semi-conservative style. Though a classical by bent of his mental agility; he was a powerful romantic by his wholly personal inspiration.

'Childe Harold' and the tales of the type of 'The Giaour' may be regarded as a group and the most influential in England and abroad. Here we have the development of the especially Byronic theme of a melancholy that is disenchanting and associated with all the variety of human endeavour, as with the beauties of nature; whether the scenic setting is taken from actual places, or from an east; whether history provides the plots, or fiction invents them. The first two cantos of 'Childe Harold' attempt to link up this theme with the contemporary vogue of the medieval past; but Byron's pilgrim knight is only a pretext. The last two cantos, with their more solid thoughts, a riper pathos and sure art, end by forgetting the existence of the said knight. Byron's "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" published when he was just twenty four, captivated the romantic imagination of the continent. He became the most celebrated poet in Europe.

"I awoke one morning and found myself famous" 3

It was the remark of the poet after the grand success of "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage". Despite Byron's negation of any resemblance between Childe and himself, readers fused him with Childe Harold—a brooding enigmatic pariah haunted by a dark past and an unknown guilt. If "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" is now no more than a series of episodes, these at least possess a striking vigour; the oratorical movement in the narrative turns into a note of lyrical eloquence when sustained by the personal feeling of the poet. The glory and the downfall of the past behind which lies the self are less soul stirring than the scenes from nature. It is

here Byron is most original. He points admirable pictures of the elements in their calm and fury. The emotion infused in these landscapes is borne of the delightful relaxing of a sorrow-laden soul. In Byron we have pantheism, very different from that of his contemporaries. The Universe for him is a mysterious power, and an accomplice. Nature for him is a help to souls in torment. Byron does not look to nature to find in it some spiritual essence that is actually there; he looks to it to echo and includes his own passion. It is to relieve him of the burden:

**“I live not in myself, but become
Portion of that around me; and to me
High mountains are a feeling, but the
hum Of human cities torture: ...”⁴**

After Childe's travelogue, now onwards the poet imparts more life to his heroes; the collection of these ill-fated and gloomy figures, which embody his Romantic feeling of himself, acquires a greater relief in his last portraits. “The Manfred” and the “Cain” of Byron represent the destiny of an individual stricken with remorse, doubt and revolt. “Manfred” was a new departure for Byron—an experiment in semi-lyrical romantic drama, which derived from Goethe's “Faust”. Manfred, who lives alone in Alps, suffers from remorse for some unforgivable and unmentionable crime or sin

“Man of strange words, and some half-maddening sin”⁵

In the last group of poems another Byron is shown. The doctrine of life is here the same, but is expressed in the lighter tone of irony, and not in that of pathos. Steeped as he was in the literary atmosphere of Italy, Byron had drawn his inspiration from noble memories when he wrote “The Prophecy of Dante” and “The Lament of Tasso”. At all times favourable to mock-heroic themes, Italian literature had very definite models to offer in the works of burlesque writers, from Pulci to Casti. The story of “Beppo” is of the slightest—a married woman's love affair, which instead of ending in the English fashion with a duel, divorce and ostracism, settles down on the return of the husband into a comfortable reunion. The leading theme is the contrast between English and Italian manners. His main achievement lies, however, in his satires in ottava rima, for his discovery of the “Beppo” style transformed him into a major poet. After having tried his verve in “Beppo”, Byron gave full and much more ample vent to it in “Don Juan.” “Don Juan” is an ironic

replica of the very subject of 'Childe Harold'. The new hero is hardly more substantial; and the sequence of events is quite as boldly made dependent on the poet's fancy. Of unequal merit but full of varied resources the tale carries us to the most diverse parts of Europe. The choices of scenes, numberless critical remarks, all are aimed against the system of conventional values. Byron's “Don Juan”, a poem having seventeen cantos, ranks as one of the most important long poems published in England since Milton's “Paradise Lost”. “Don Juan”, Byron's masterpiece, often called the epic of its time, has roots deep in literary tradition and, although regarded by early Victorians as somewhat shocking, equally involves itself with its own contemporary world at all levels – social, political, literary and ideological. Byron singles out the false rigour of principles, the weight of which he had one day been made to feel by an English society which he had threatened with scandal under one form or another, the wave of influence emanating from Byron was mingled with the current of French Romanticism itself.

“English Bards and Scotch Reviewers” is a satire in heroic couplets and inspired by Pope's “Dunciad” and William Gifford's “Baviad”. It lashes out indiscriminately at the whole literary world of the time. He criticises Wordsworth, Scott and Coleridge in the poem. “The Prisoner of Chillon” is the best of Byron's verse tales, and indeed the best of all his non-satiric works. Byron visited Chillon towards the end of June 1816, and the poem was written while his impressions were still fresh. The poem's fundamental contrast between Freedom and Imprisonment is presented as a contrast between Life and Death. Byron rapidly followed up his success with a series of metrical romances – “The Giaour”, “The Bride of Abydos”, “The Corsair” and “Lara”. The first three are tales of love, crime and adventure in the near eastern lands, which he had by now made his especial province; “Lara” is Gothic. For the most part Byron is employing the Scott formula for tales in verse, but adding a somber element of mystery and evil which makes it a far more potent brew. He is also developing the character of the Byronic hero—the dark, beautiful, blighted being who was inevitably to become more and more closely identified with himself, till his own actual career seems forced by some inner compulsion to follow the lines sketched out for it in fiction.

References:

1. Thomas Moore, Letters and Journals of Lord Byron: with notices of His Life (London: John Murray, 1830), I, p.1.
2. The Poetical Works of Lord Byron (1945; rpt. London: O.U.P., 1961), Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, canto III, stanza IV, p. 210.
3. R.E. Prothero, ed., Letters and Journals of Lord Byron (London: John Murray, 1898-1901), II, p.106.
4. The Poetical Works of Lord Byron (1945; rpt. London: O.U.P., 1961), Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, canto III, stanza LXXII, p. 219.
5. Ibid., Manfred, Act II, Scene I, l.30-31, p 395.