

General Introduction

From selected poems of Lord Byron by Paul Wright
Published by Wordsworth Poetry Library

The appearance of the anti-hero of a scandalous novel published in 1816 is described thus:

It was one of those faces which, having once beheld, we never often times forget. It seemed as if the soul of passion had been stained and printed on every feature. The eye beamed into life as it threw up its dark ardent gaze, with a look of ready inspiration, while the proud curl of the upper lip expressed haughtiness and bitter contempt; yet, even mixed with these fierce characteristic feelings, an air of melancholy and dejection shaded and softened every harsh expression. Such a countenance spoke to the heart.

The novel is *Glenarvon*. * Its eponymous central character, who turns out tellingly to have at least two identities, is both a seducer murderer and political radical. Its author was Lady Caroline Lamb, wife of the man who was to become Lord Melbourne, and one of Queen Victoria's prime ministers. She was also for a time one of Byron's many lovers. That Byron should have enjoyed such an affair reveals something of his celebrity status at the time: as the enigmatically attractive twenty-eight-year-old author of bestselling poetry he occupied a position not dissimilar to that of a modern pop star. Yet, the very grounds of this celebrity, rooted in sexual scandal and gossip, explain his uneasy relationship with what would become Victorian respectability. The portrait itself is a picture of Byron as he was perceived by his

contemporaries; it is a picture he did much to cultivate. Indeed, it still haunts our own understanding of Romanticism, the European movement around the turn of the nineteenth century which Byron perhaps more than any other single individual came to epitomise. In its concentration on 'passion', 'feeling' and 'inspiration' it captures the Romantic insistence on subjective engagement with the world; yet in its 'melancholy and dejection' it highlights the possibility, always present within Romanticism, that such engagement might fail, on a political as well as a personal level. Most of all, it suggests that the Romantic embodies this dilemma directly for his audience with 'a countenance' that speaks 'to the heart', whilst, paradoxically, cultivating 'haughtiness and bitter contempt' for that very audience. As Frances Wilson reminds us such a picture is 'not Byron himself. .. but his myth'(Wilson, 1999, p. 9). This myth is very powerful. It is, as Byron himself recognised, to some extent the subject matter of the poems, from the self-conscious early lyrics, to the loosely biographical travels of Childe Harold and Don Juan, to the personally motivated satire of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* and *The Vision of Judgement*. It resonates throughout the nineteenth century in, for example, the figure of the vampire first written about by Byron's own doctor, Polidori, made famous by Bram

Stoker's *Dracula* and still with us in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. And it can be traced in the sexually charged anti-hero found as much in pop-culture figures, such as James Dean, Mick Jagger and Kurt Cobain, as in the brooding protagonists of the nineteenth-century novel, like Heathcliff and Mr Rochester. However, as always, the man and the work are rather different. George Gordon Byron was born in London in 1788 the year before the French Revolution, the date from which the Romantic period itself is often said to have started. His mother, Catherine, was a Scottish heiress, and he spent the first ten years of his life in Aberdeen, roaming the very countryside that was to become representatively Romantic in the works of Walter Scott and others. Throughout his life he would enjoy the kind of distance from an essentially English metropolitan establishment granted him in these early years, whilst, echoing the *Glenarvon* paradox, seeking to be at its very centre. He felt further marginalised by an accident of birth that left him with a club, or deformed, foot and a constant need to prove himself in physical activity, notably boxing and swimming; a need explored in many of his poetic inventions. He was also imbued with a kind of Presbyterian morality, a sense of being tormented by remorse, a '[w]oe without name, or hope, or end' (G 1276), which might be said to be characteristic of both the man and the myth. In a sequence of events worthy of one of his own tales, Byron's initial prospects were compromised in that his father Captain John ('Mad Jack') Byron, who had only married his mother for her fortune, abandoned her as soon as he had spent it. He died in France in 1791. Three years later Byron's cousin, the heir to the title of Byron, was killed by a cannon ball, and in 1798 the incumbent fifth Lord Byron (the 'wicked lord') died, unexpectedly leaving Byron the title, the crumbling gothic seat of Newstead Abbey in Nottinghamshire, and many debts. The house provides something of a model for Norman Abbey in the English cantos of *Don Juan*, which explore Byron's own ambivalence at becoming part of a landed English aristocracy. Fittingly, in 1801 aged thirteen, Byron went to the public school Harrow, and began the 'deliberate self-fashioning' (Elledge, p. 1) that would transform him into the society figure by developing an interest in the theatre and in public speaking. His chosen texts for speech days, the villainous Zanga the Moor from Edward Young's *Revenge* (1721) and *Lear on the heath*, for example, suggest an interest in the persona fully captured in Caroline Lamb's portrait. As if living up to the role of the sneering medieval lord, he would go on to keep a bear in his rooms at Cambridge. Yet, he could be equally critical of the need to hark back to some imagined feudal past, so much a part of Romanticism. The bear episode alone might also be said to epitomise the playfulness, the wilful challenge of the conventions of utilitarian and bourgeois values from which many nineteenth-century norms were derived, which characterises so much of Byron's writing. He famously dismissed these values, which he saw as essentially hypocritical, in a letter written in 1821: 'The truth is that in these days the grand primum mobile [prime mover] of England is cant; cant political, cant poetical, cant religious, cant moral' (5:542). Byron began writing seriously whilst at Cambridge in 1805 -though, unlike many of his contemporaries, he often felt that writing could never really be the serious undertaking of a gentleman and a man of action manque: 'Who would write who had anything better to do?' (4:62) he once only half

jokingly asked. His first efforts were privately circulated. He published *Hours of Idleness* in 1807. Negative critical response to this - an early indication, for him at least, of 'cant poetical' - in the powerful journal *The Edinburgh Review* occasioned his first sustained satire *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* in 1809, which was his first popular success going through four editions. It is considered at greater length, along with some of Byron's other satirical work, later in this volume. Soon after the publication of *English Bards*, Byron turned twentyone and took his seat in the House of Lords. Much has been written about Byron's politics. * Here, it can only be noted that he lived through the period of revolutionary hope suggested by the French Revolution; the Napoleonic Wars, and the oppressive regimes established throughout Europe after the Congress of Vienna (1815); and the stirrings of popular rebellion in the 1820s, not least in Greece, whose rule by Turkey was tacitly accepted by the European powers. Many of these events are touched on directly in his long narrative poems, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan*, which, again, are considered at greater length later. Indeed, much of his poetry can be seen as Jerome McGann sees *The Corsair* (1814), as 'partly a symbolic formation of the political situation of the day, as Byron saw it, with its contest between the equivocal forces of revolt and the established powers of the old and corrupt order' (CPW 3, p. 445).

Byron could certainly take part in this contest on what might be seen as the liberal side. His major speeches as an actual politician took the side of what might be seen as 'the forces of revolt': he spoke in support of oppressed workers, at a time when they had no political power, and against anti-Catholic discrimination. He could look hopefully towards the end of what he called 'the King-times' (5: 173). Yet, again remembering the complexities of Glenarvon - the political activist and self-serving cynic - he could also declare: 'Born an aristocrat . . . with the greater part of my property in [government] funds, what have I to gain by a revolution?' (6:338). To some extent, of course, whilst holding it up as some kind of ideal, or at least the best of possible worlds (see DJ 10), Byron simply got bored with the British parliamentary system as he did with much else. As befitting a 'born' aristocrat, shortly after entering the Lords for interest in maths; but the marriage foundered on rumours of Byron's infidelities, his bisexuality, and a possible incestuous affair with his half-sister Augusta Leigh - many rumours, again as if playing up to the Glenarvon role, encouraged by Byron himself. These rumours fuelled a public scandal, an example of the kind of cant Byron sought to target; and he was forced, like one of his heroes, to flee England, never to return, in April 1816.

He took to travelling around Europe once more, and it was again as / an outsider that Byron could write. In Switzerland he met Shelley - 'the best and least selfish man I ever knew' (9: 189) - and his circle; he had an affair and a child with Shelley's sister-in-law, Claire Clairmont; and he continued to write material which was still popularly received at home. When the Shelleys returned to England in 1817, Byron took responsibility for his daughter and moved to Venice. Italy proved more of a home. Byron had always been

influenced by its literature, from the classical works he studied as a schoolboy, to Dante and Pulci. Under this influence, he began *Don Juan* and produced many dramatic works. Politically, Italy's emerging, if ultimately unsuccessful, freedom movement against the rule of the Austrians received his support. Encapsulating his own peculiar sense of how freedom was bound up with a sense of nationhood derived from cultural traditions, sustained not least in poetry, he wrote:

It is no great matter, supposing that Italy could be liberated, who or what is sacrificed. It is a grand object - the very poetry of politics. Only think a free Italy! [8:47]

He was also attracted by the more relaxed attitude to sexual relations. In Venice, and later Ravenna, he began a lasting relationship with the married Teresa, Countess of Guiccioli. From Italy too he kept up a quarrel with the prevailing poets of the day, which had begun in English Bards. It is yet another paradox that despite being in many ways typically Romantic, Byron himself valued the neo-classical poetry of the eighteenth century and particularly Pope above so much of that produced by his contemporaries (5:256). This dislike was fuelled by the belief that key Romantic figures, Wordsworth and the Poet Laureate, Southey - 'the vainest and most intolerant of men' (9:62) - had rejected the once radical position which Byron believed he shared with them. It culminated in the writing of the satirical *A Vision of Judgement* (1822). The failure of the Italian freedom movement led Byron to turn his attention to Greece's struggle for independence. Greece had always represented for him the most extreme case of an oppressed nation, and, perhaps more importantly, a people who had lost contact with their own cultural heritage, represented for Byron in the very neoclassical values he sought to defend. As always, he expressed an ambivalence towards the Greeks and his own political idealism (for example, 11:32,83,54-55, and not least in passages in *Cantos Two and Three of DJ*); but, equally, he worked tirelessly for the cause. In July 1823 he armed a ship and sailed for Greece. Such was his fame that there were rumours that he might even be made king of a free Greece. However, in Missolonghi in April 1824, preparing his troops for an attack on the Turks, Byron died, not in an heroic action, but from rheumatic fever caught in a downpour. This was the kind of irony that would not be lost on him. Considering mortality in *Don Juan*, Byron wrote:

... and so our life exhales, A little breath, love, wine, ambition, fame, Fighting, devotion, dust -perhaps a name. [DJ 2:4]

He might also have been amused that it took another hundred and fifty years after the life, which reflected many of these priorities, 'exhale[d]' for him to be accepted by the establishment. He was granted a plaque in Westminster Abbey in 1968. The establishment of his day refused to bury him there. Despite this rejection, something that he felt coloured his colourful life, he could not be denied a name. The fame he sought is secured in part by the Byron myth, but ultimately by the poetry.

