

Why we need Byron

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Byron: Child of Passion, Fool of Fame, by Benita Eisler, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1999, 837 pages.

Lord Byron, the English poet, cast an immense shadow in the first half of the nineteenth century. Only a year and a half after his death, one of the Decembrist plotters against the czarist regime climbed the scaffold in St. Petersburg in 1825 carrying a volume of his poems. Alexander Herzen, a socialist opponent of the czar, would describe the poet a generation later as “a menacing Titan, flinging his scorn in men’s faces.” In an article written for a Swiss journal in 1843 Friedrich Engels observed that in England “Byron and Shelley are read almost exclusively by the lower classes.” He repeated the comment in *The Condition of the Working-Class in England* and praised Byron for “his glowing sensuality and his bitter satire upon our existing society.”

The Brontë sisters avidly read their father’s edition of Byron’s works; in *Wuthering Heights* Emily would create one of the arch-Byronic figures in Heathcliff. The poet fascinated the painters Delacroix and Turner. Schumann, Berlioz and Tchaikovsky composed pieces based on Byron’s works; Verdi wrote two operas based on his dramas. A circle that included the poet Théophile Gautier devoted themselves to recreating Byron’s ancestral home in their Paris café. His influence over European intellectual life was immense during his lifetime and in the decades following his death in 1824.

It is perhaps difficult for us to grasp how strongly he seized the imagination of so many as a figure of passion and opposition. So much of what he represented as a personality to an earlier age has long since ceased to resonate with the audience that might be expected to read him. Society has undergone massive transformations and experienced catastrophic shocks, with corresponding and necessary changes in sensibility. Among opponents of the status quo the “Byronic hero” long ago fell out of fashion. This may be all to the good. The brooding, scornful outcast, standing on a windswept cliff, threatened to become something of a self-parody even in his creator’s day.

There is far more to Byron than that, however, and even *that* contains a fascinating element. A century and three-quarters after his death, I would argue that his massive popularity was not simply an accidental phenomenon, rooted in a passing mood, or based on a misapprehension, so to speak. There was genius in his life and work, and rekindling some of the extraordinary interest in Byron, in *his best work* and in *his example*, would have an entirely salutary effect on contemporary culture and society.

Benita Eisler has written a conscientious account of Byron’s life. The watchword of the contemporary biographer is detail, and in the all-too-common absence of real historical perspective, one settles, more or less happily, for well-organized and carefully presented detail. Eisler could have done without a few of the facts she includes, but her book builds up a picture of the poet and provides the reader the opportunity to draw further conclusions on his or her own.

As the author explains, the Byron family traced its origins back to two brothers who accompanied William the Conqueror in 1066. The family’s ancestral home, Newstead Abbey in Nottinghamshire, had been founded by Henry II in the twelfth century as a monastery and sold to John Byron,

the first lord of that name, by Henry VIII during the Reformation. At the time of the poet’s birth, his granduncle, the fifth Lord Byron—known as the Wicked Lord for his licentiousness and violence—was ensconced at Newstead.

Byron’s father, known as “Mad Jack,” was a profligate drunk, who married twice for money (the second time to Byron’s mother, Catherine Gordon), slept with his sister and died in poverty of tuberculosis and alcoholism in France at the age of 36. (The same age as his son and granddaughter.) When the Wicked Lord died in 1797, nine-year-old George Gordon, living with his impoverished (and republican) mother in cramped quarters in Aberdeen, Scotland, became the sixth Baron Byron of Rochdale.

Money problems continued to beset the youthful Byron and would do so for most of his life. His sexual activity began at a very early age, “so early—that few would believe me,” he later wrote. At Harrow, an exclusive private school, and in his early years at Cambridge—where he famously kept a tame bear in his quarters—the objects of his desire were boys and young men.

Hours of Idleness, Byron’s first volume of poems available to the public, appeared in 1807. The *Edinburgh Review*, a leading literary journal, attacked it violently, prompting a savage satirical reply from the poet. Byron attained his majority in 1809 and thereupon took his seat in the House of Lords. In July of that year he set off on a trip abroad, to Portugal, Spain, Malta, Albania, Greece and Turkey, that would last two years. The experience provided the basis for the first two parts of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, which were published in 1812. The public response to this fictionalized and romanticized account of his travels was instantaneous. He awoke, he said, to find himself famous. He was soon to be notorious.

In February 1812 Byron made his first speech in the House of Lords, denouncing the government’s effort to pass a bill, aimed at rioting Nottinghamshire weavers, that would have made destruction of machinery punishable by death. He campaigned as well for the rights of Irish Catholics. He also pursued a number of significant love affairs during this period, most famously with Lady Caroline Lamb, the wife of a future prime minister, and Lady Oxford, a leading Whig intellectual. In 1813 he began a liaison with his half-sister, Augusta Leigh. Byron also found time to write a number of Oriental or otherwise exotic poetic tales in 1813-14, *The Giaour*, *The Bride of Abydos*, *The Corsair* (whose entire first edition of 10,000 sold out on the day of its publication, a success in poetry that has apparently never been equaled) and *Lara*.

While continuing his sexual relationship with Augusta, Byron courted and won the heart of Annabella Milbanke. They were married January 2, 1815. The union proved a catastrophe. Byron, filled with self-loathing and guilt and also perhaps horrified by the thought that he had attached himself to someone of a rather conventional character, treated his wife abominably. At one point, for example, the couple paid a two-week visit to Augusta, and brother and half-sister would stay up half the night cavorting while Annabella was sent to her room. A year after their wedding Lady Byron returned to her parents’ house; a legal separation was drawn up and signed in April 1816. London society, which disapproved of

Byron primarily for his radical political views, took advantage of the scandalous marital break-up and the rumors of incest to snub him. Caroline Lamb's view, that Byron was "Mad, bad, and dangerous to know," was apparently shared or at least encouraged by a great many. The poet also faced severe financial difficulties. On April 25, 1816 he left England for good.

Byron settled first in Geneva, where he met up with fellow poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Godwin Shelley and Mary's stepsister, Claire Clairmont (with whom Byron had begun an affair in London and eventually had a child). It was in June 1816, while the company exchanged ghost stories and speculated about both science and the supernatural, that Mary Shelley began working on *Frankenstein*. Later that summer Byron and Shelley toured the shores of Lake Geneva together, visiting all the places associated with philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. At this time Byron wrote the third canto of *Childe Harold* and *The Prisoner of Chillon*. Giving some indication of the reputation Byron then enjoyed, Eisler notes that at one gathering in Switzerland hosted by the renowned Madame de Staël, "an Englishwoman ... fainted with horror upon hearing his name announced."

In October 1816 Byron entered Italy, where he was to spend most of the remainder of his life. He lived much of 1817 and 1818 in Venice, where he led an existence of "promiscuous dissipation," in the words of one commentator, conducting "casual affairs with many lower-class women." He also began work on his masterpiece, *Don Juan*. In 1819 Byron encountered Countess Teresa Guiccioli, with whom he was to have the most enduring relationship of his life. Through Teresa's brother and father he made contact with Italian patriotic circles and joined a revolutionary society. In early 1821 the abject failure of a planned revolt against Austrian rule deeply disappointed Byron. (Eisler notes Byron's account of a conversation with Teresa: "'Alas,' she said with the tears in her eyes, 'the Italians must now to return to making operas.'" "I fear," Byron agreed, "that and macaroni [sic] are their forte.")

After the failure of the Italian revolution the poet, still at work on *Don Juan* (uncompleted at the time of his death), became increasingly interested in the cause of Greek independence, enlisting as a member of the London Greek Committee in May 1823. Two months later he forsook Italy and Teresa and spent the months of his life left to him in Greece, attempting to help the squabbling nationalist forces organize themselves for the struggle against Turkish rule. He died, from a fever and the mistreatment of his doctors, at Missolonghi in April 1824.

"I was born to opposition," Byron said of himself. He had ample opportunity to employ this trait, spending most of his life in a deeply reactionary age. The British ruling classes responded in terror to the French Revolution, creating what Eisler calls, in the opening pages of her book, "a police state." She points out, "War with France began when Byron was five years old; it would continue until 1815, when he was twenty-seven." Following the defeat of Napoleon, reaction grew triumphant.

The biographer reports these facts, but they remain largely a passive background. To explore the relationship between historical development and emotional life, relatively unexplored territory even in Marxist literature, would not enter the mind of most contemporary scholars. But let us assume for the sake of argument that entire peoples or social classes as well as individuals experience *trauma* (from the consequences of counterrevolution or repression, betrayal, the crushing of aspirations, the loss of hope) and that for *the most susceptible individuals* this will have potentially life-shaping consequences.

In this light, it is tempting simply to note that 1815, during which Byron suffered his greatest personal disaster, was also, from the point of view of mankind's progressive social aspirations, one of history's most disheartening years. It witnessed the conclusion of the Congress of Vienna (that gathering of tyrants which restored the monarchy or traditional

dynasties in France, Austria, Prussia, Spain, Sardinia, Tuscany, Modena and the Papal states), the battle of Waterloo, Napoleon's exile in St. Helena and the renewal of the counterrevolutionary Quadruple Alliance between England, Austria, Prussia and Russia.

That Byron happened to inflict extraordinary pain on his wife and himself during those particular 12 months was of course a genuine coincidence—if the personal reflected the historical process so neatly and immediately, there would be no need for analysis at all! In a more profound sense, I would argue for a connection, if only to the extent that Byron's extraordinary anguish of the time had to contain an element of despair, conscious or not, at the restoration of the *ancien regime* throughout Europe and Tory triumphalism in England. His mental state (also worsened by horrible worries about money) would have made any relationship difficult, and a harmonious union with someone who seemed, through no fault of her own, a representative of the established and offending order, impossible. "I am determined to fling Misery around me & upon all those with whom I am concerned," he wrote to his sister at the time, and proved as good as his word.

To go beyond this and investigate in detail how the historical enters into the personal is a subject for the specialist, should any such be interested in the matter.

An effort of that sort would not be a substitute for examining an individual's formative psychological life, but it would give that examination a new meaning and concreteness. In Byron's case, both the personal and historical elements are rather spectacular. If one adds the facts of his childhood (the gulf between his paternal family's aristocratic heritage and pretensions and its highly straitened circumstances; an overbearing, emotionally and financially desperate mother and an absent, half-mad and alcoholic father; sexual initiation and physical abuse at the hands of his Scottish nursemaid, etc.) to a political situation that the poet must have found greatly distressing, is it surprising that there is extreme instability and volatility in Byron's conduct? It helps explain the often conflicting moments of insouciance, self-conscious introspection, sparkling wit and disillusionment one encounters in his poetry and prose, sometimes in different works, sometimes, rarely, in combination (*Don Juan*, the final cantos of *Childe Harold*, certain lyrics, his letters).

In a recent review of Eisler's book in the *New Yorker*, John Updike, one of the finest contemporary American novelists, writes that the biography "leaves us little to like about Byron except his written works." I don't know to what extent this is a concession to the type of ahistorical character analysis currently prevailing or whether it merely reflects Updike's instinctive aversion to what he perceives to be Byron's "anti-establishment radicalism and anarchy," but I can't agree with his conclusion. I find a great deal to like and admire about Byron.

He did many arrogant, irresponsible and callous things: he abandoned lovers by the score; he mistreated his wife; he had friends co-sign loans and other financial dealings and, when he couldn't pay, left them high and dry; he placed his illegitimate daughter in a convent and never paid her a single visit before she died; in Italy he bargained with poor and not so poor parents for the sexual favors of their daughters. All this, and perhaps worse.

But Eisler also notes instances of extraordinary unselfishness, patience and warmth, not to mention Byron's undoubted fearlessness and heroism. A young American, George Ticknor, who visited Byron in the summer of 1815, at the height of the latter's celebrity, was astonished to find the poet "in everything ... un-like" the characters he had created. Ticknor referred to Byron's "gentle" manners and his "natural and unaffected character." After a second visit, he observed, "Of his own works he talks with modesty, and of those of his rivals, or rather contemporaries, with justice, generosity, and discriminating praise." Even Annabella, in the midst of her wretched year of marriage, noted in her journal "the instinctive goodness of his heart." How are we to make sense of the man?

Some degree of historical perspective is surely in order. Byron could not jump out of his skin any more than any of us can. It should only be sufficient to recall, first of all, that he was born into the remnants of the landed aristocracy. (For all his radicalism, Byron retained fierce pride in his title and all it implied. Considering their outcast state and social views, that Byron and Shelley were separated by a barrier, according to Eisler, because the former “never allowed Shelley to forget the distance that separated a peer of the realm from a mere scion of the landed gentry,” says something about the extraordinary and tenacious power of tradition.)

There are episodes in the life of the fifth Lord Byron, the Wicked Lord, his immediate predecessor in the title, that have something extremely primitive and brutal about them, suggestive of feudal times. In 1765 during a dispute in a tavern, for example, the Wicked Lord ran a kinsman through with his sword and killed him, a crime for which he apparently went unpunished. Eisler writes that from a “sense of guilt and grievance, the fifth lord descended into episodic madness.” Stories were told that “his lordship shot his coachman over a trifle, then, heaving the corpse into the carriage with his wife, took the luckless servant’s place on the box and drove off. Other rumors claimed that, when displeased, he would throw Lady Byron into the pond.”

This was Byron’s social and moral point of departure, notwithstanding the role played by his democratically-inclined mother. Without making any excuses for his reprehensible behavior, I am less astonished by it than by his ability to function emotionally as well as he eventually did, to view quite self-critically and with a great deal of self-deprecating humor his own shortcomings and, moreover, to make a clear-sighted and penetrating analysis of his society and times. I see in this aspect of Byron’s achievement an indication of the remarkable mutability and flexibility of human consciousness and its ability to reflect on itself. He made himself into a relatively conscious, modern being. And his work suggests too that by the beginning of the nineteenth century the industrial-technical and human forces capable of making freedom a realistic social proposition, and not merely a noble dream, were coming into existence.

After all, this is a man who wrote three years before his death: “The Powers mean to war with the peoples. Let it be so—they will be beaten in the end. The king-times are fast finishing. There will be blood shed like water, and tears like mist; but the peoples will conquer in the end. I shall not live to see it, but I foresee it.... The waves which dash upon the shore are, one by one, broken, but yet the ocean conquers nevertheless.”

I don’t know that it would serve much purpose to answer with any degree of exactness the question: what was Byron’s social outlook? One could say somewhat pedantically that he was a bourgeois democrat, but I’m not convinced, particularly when applied to certain artists, such a phrase has much meaning. Isn’t it closer to the truth to say that through the great artistic figure—and this is one of the defining characteristics of his or her greatness—flows the current of the *absolute* love of freedom, which must necessarily, due to historical and individual circumstances and the nature of aesthetic cognition, find a relative and imperfect expression?

I would take Byron at face value when he writes in his journal, “I have simplified my politics into an utter devastation of all existing governments,” or in Canto IX of *Don Juan*:

*And I will war at least in words (and should
My chance so happen—deeds), with all who war
With thought; and of thought’s foes by far most rude,
Tyrants and sycophants have been and are.
I know not who may conquer. If I could
Have such a prescience, it should be no bar
To this my plain, sworn, downright detestation
Of every despotism in every nation.*

Byron at one point considered buying land in America. The existence of slavery forestalled him. He noted in his journal: “Two or three years ago, I thought of going to one of the Americas, English or Spanish. But the

accounts sent from England, in consequence of my enquiries, discouraged me ... there is *no* freedom, even for *Masters*, in the midst of slaves; it makes my blood boil to see the thing. I sometimes wish that I was the Owner of Africa, to do at once what [British abolitionist William] Wilberforce will do in time, viz.—sweep Slavery from her deserts, and look on upon the first dance of their Freedom!”

This same sort of democratic sentiment helps explain his enthusiasm for the task of writing poems which a young Jewish composer and musician, Isaac Nathan, promised to set to music, based on traditional melodies. Already abused as “an infidel,” Byron noted his sister’s remark, “they will call you a *Jew* next.” Eisler observes: “Byron defined himself as a romantic in his intellectual enthusiasm for folkloric archaeology; he was always fascinated by surviving evidence of ancient popular culture.... He felt particularly inspired by ‘remains’ that gave voice to despised or forgotten peoples.” Byron wrote some of his more memorable lyrics, including “She Walks in Beauty,” for Nathan’s *Hebrew Melodies*.

In a magazine piece in 1820, Byron wrote: “‘The life of a writer’ has been said, by [Alexander] Pope, I believe, to be ‘a warfare upon earth’.” Byron took this proposition seriously. The poet quite fearlessly flung his hatred of the British establishment in its face. While the appeal of his Oriental epics has substantially faded and his portrayals of the tormented, lonely hero in *Manfred* and elsewhere have to be taken with a large grain of salt, the attractiveness of his corrosive and wonderfully amusing attacks on the powers that be, as well as some of his more relaxed lyrical efforts, has only increased. Byron was perhaps the only one of the Romantic poets to properly value Pope’s work, in particular his satires. (Byron took his literary idols seriously. He harbored resentment toward and underestimated John Keats, until the younger poet’s untimely death, in part because the latter had expressed dislike for Pope.)

In *The Vision of Judgment* Byron celebrated the death George III, who died in 1820 after decades of insanity. (“He died!—his death made no great stir on earth ... And when the coffin was laid low,/It seemed the mockery of hell to fold/The rottenness of eighty years in gold.”) This “incendiary” piece, as Eisler terms it, which caused its publisher to be indicted for libel of the King, was a reply to an odious epic, *A Vision of Judgment*, penned by Robert Southey, England’s poet laureate and a one-time radical. Byron had good reason to despise Southey. The poet laureate had accused Shelley and Byron of forming a “League of Incest” and described Byron as leader of a “Satanic School.”

Byron’s most devastating attack on Southey and the English establishment generally came in *Don Juan*. Its *Dedication* famously begins:

*Bob Southey! You’re a poet, poet laureate,
And representative of all the race.
Although ‘tis true that you turned out a Tory at
Last, yours has lately been a common case.
.....
You, Bob, are rather insolent, you know,
At being disappointed in your wish
To supersede all warblers here below,
And be the only blackbird in the dish.
And then you overstrain yourself, or so,
And tumble downward like the frying fish
Gasping on deck, because you soar too high, Bob,
And fall for lack of moisture quite a dry Bob.*

The last phrase was particularly insulting because, as Eisler explains, “a ‘dry bob’ was slang for ‘dry humping.’”

Don Juan is a work that ought to be widely read. Byron’s hero is not the womanizing nobleman of Tirso de Molina, Molière or Mozart. He is a shy and relatively passive Spanish youth, a naïf, who wanders about the world and falls into a number of affairs and adventures.

This raises another issue. As Eisler hints at on a number of occasions,

although she never steps back and makes much of the fact, Juan was far closer to Byron's self-image than one might at first suspect, based on his reputation as an aggressive sexual predator cutting a swath through the female population of various social classes in several nations. The character of his sexuality and his relations with both men and women would require a special study. This much can be drawn from Eisler's book. However he may have chosen to appear to others, privately Byron felt himself to be at the mercy of female sexuality, a largely passive being, someone acted *upon*. The attraction of his half-sister, Byron repeatedly insisted, was that she was the only one able to govern or "manage" him.

I think in this light for Eisler to refer on a number of occasions to Byron's "misogyny" really misses the point. It might rather be said, simplifying a complex process, that frightened by the depth of his feelings and his sense of helplessness in the face of the latter he sometimes responded with defensiveness, anger and extreme aggression, channeled through the prejudices and assumptions of his class and epoch.

His inability until late in life, if ever fully, to pursue relations with women of his intellectual equal hardly makes Byron stand out in the history of the male sex. The unique element, contributing to his endless amatory escapades, was a set of circumstances—a psychological make-up from which self-restraint was largely absent, extraordinary fame and, I would suggest, a desire for refuge from a generally dismal political situation—that permitted him to indulge his inclinations.

In any event, in *Don Juan* the protagonist's ramblings and intrigues provide the author an opportunity to express his thoughts about contemporary life and morals. Or, as Byron wrote to his publisher in 1822: "... *Don Juan* will be known by and bye, for what it is intended, - a *Satire* on *abuses* of the present states of Society, and not an eulogy of vice: it may be now and then voluptuous: I can't help that."

He also digresses "now and then" from his tale and speaks to contemporary political life. The poem's famous Canto IX directly addresses the Duke of Wellington, then much celebrated in England as the conqueror of Napoleon at Waterloo. The fourth stanza goes:

*You are 'the best of cut-throats.' Do not start;
The phrase is Shakespeare's and not misapplied.
War's a brain-spattering, windpipe-slitting art,
Unless her cause by right be sanctified.
If you have acted once a generous part,
The world, not the world's masters, will decide,
And I shall be delighted to learn who,
Save you and yours, have gained by Waterloo?*

One can be certain without looking into the matter that somewhere there is a "radical" historian or literary critic, or more than one, who has made it his or her business to debunk the myth of Byron as an oppositionist: "This aristocrat, wife-abuser, whoremonger, hypocrite, moral leper!" For my part, when I come across passages such as the attack on Wellington or Byron's unforgiving tribute to Lord Castlereagh, the reactionary cabinet minister and oppressor of the Irish who committed suicide in 1822 ("So he has cut his throat at last!—He? Who?/The man who cut his country's long ago."), I ask myself who at the time, aside from an individual born into the highest social ranks, would have possessed the knowledge, self-confidence and *specific audacity* to write such lines, to look the establishment straight in the eye and spit in it? The thought that someone of their own class was exposing their villainy to the world infuriated and terrified the ruling circles in England.

If *Don Juan* is indispensable, along with a number of his shorter poems, so too are his letters and journal. Marvelously fluid and spontaneous, literate without a trace of affectation, wildly funny, obscene, Byron's informal prose is virtually without equal. Here he hurtles along undisturbed. There is little point in reproducing excerpts, the letters need to be read in bunches. But here is Byron defending *Don Juan*, or "Donny Johnny" as he called it, to a friend, who criticized its ribaldry: "As to

'Don Juan'—confess—confess you dog—and be candid—that it is the sublime of *that there* sort of writing—it may be bawdy—but is it not good English—it may be profligate—but is it not *life*, is it not *the thing*?—Could any man have written it—who has not lived in the world? and tooled in a postchaise? in a hackney coach? in a Gondola? against a Wall? in a court carriage? in a vis-à-vis?—on a table?— and under it?"

This may not be to everyone's taste, of course. And there are passages which will be to virtually no one's taste. In general, there's no need in the course of gaining all that one can from Byron to lose sight of his shortcomings or prettify matters on any front. The dominant trend in literary criticism today may be to strive to find as little of value as possible in the work particularly of those who were opponents of the existing social order (everyone, it turns out, was a hypocrite, a double-dealer), but the opposite tendency is still sometimes found among us: to exaggerate the artist's progressive political or moral credentials to justify our liking his or her work.

This is something in which Stalinist literary critics have always excelled. Annette Rubinstein's *The Great Tradition in English Literature from Shakespeare to Shaw* is a valuable work for the material it includes, but its author has a tendency only to find "the best" in people, i.e., their consistently uplifting behavior and democratic spirit. The unpleasant bits tend to be swept under the carpet.

This effort to smooth out history's rough edges can only have a harmful impact. It deludes people about the character of their own time and lulls them to sleep. Moreover, what is the *political* implication of an argument that tends to suggest that artists of a previous period were well-rounded embodiments of "Democratic" or "Socialist Man"? It is a kind of reformism in reverse. Such an outlook grossly underestimates the damage inflicted by class society and the scars this damage produces. It leaves out of account, specifically, the immense social and psychological pressure exerted on the oppositional artist by the establishment. (E.P. Thompson, in his valuable book, *The Romantics*, details both the organized and unrelenting hostility faced by William Wordsworth as a supporter of the French Revolution and democratic ideals in the 1790s, and how the poet withstood it, more or less, for 15 years.) In the most general sense, this conception fails to grapple with *how badly* the present state of affairs needs to be overthrown.

Furthermore, the effort to "improve" the past artist's ideological stance is mistaken because it tends to locate subversiveness in the conscious outlook of the individual artist and not in his or her *work*. *Don Juan*, for example, is not simply an "expression" of Byron's views and feelings; groundbreaking work develops its own momentum, the artist goes beyond himself, maximizes his antagonism to the existing state of things, *exaggerates* it, brings it to a point, precipitates a *crisis*. In so doing, the artist is not simply drawing on the truth of his inner self as an isolated being, but he is absorbing the most emotionally and intellectually demanding currents from the *general* atmosphere and adding them to his work.

If the important artist is this sort of "communicating vessel," there ought to be less interest in the perfection or imperfection of the vessel and more in the purity and implications of the current passing through him.

Byronism and with it, Byron, fell largely out of favor within revolutionary circles by the end of the nineteenth century. (Although it is worth noting that when Trotsky was making his impromptu speech in May 1924 known to us as *Class and Art*, the first names he thought of to raise against the suffocators of culture in the Soviet Union were those of "Shakespeare and Byron.") One can see why Byron's work or life had lost some of its allure. There is something of the utopian, premature and futile about the Byronic struggle, at least as it was generally perceived. The growth of modern industry and production, a proletariat and a mass labor and socialist movement put an end to a certain historical stage and its corresponding imagery of opposition, indeed potentially transformed that

sort of opposition into something quite different.

Georgi Plekhanov made this point explicitly in his comment on Swedish novelist Knut Hamsun, “Doctor Stockmann’s Son” (1909), observing that the contemporary “Byronic type” now reserved its hatred not for those above, but those below. Why, he asked, has this social type degenerated? “Why are ‘outstanding people’, who once hated despotism and more or less sympathized with the liberation movements of the peoples, now ready to applaud despots and trample in the mud the emancipatory aspirations of the working class? Because social relations have changed. Bourgeois society is now going through an entirely different stage of its development. It was young when the real (i.e., not degenerate) ‘Byronic type’ shone. It is on the decline now, when the *Nietzschean type* ... is shining in its peculiar way, like a new brass nickel.”

This is a telling argument, but it should not be confused with blaming Byron for the sins of his supposed ideological descendants. Byron was an implacable enemy of reaction *in relation to the institutions of his own time*. His moral and intellectual *equivalents* in Plekhanov’s day would have been (or were) equally ferocious enemies relative to *theirs*, that is to say, they would have shed their Byronic skin. Those who were still playing at unalloyed “Byronism” by the beginning of the twentieth century were likely to have played a retrograde role.

More years now separate us from Plekhanov in 1909 than separated Plekhanov from Byron at the time of the poet’s death in 1824. What blocks a general revival of interest in Byron under present circumstances, I would guess, is not so much the social changes Plekhanov refers to, nor the peculiarities or archaism of the poet’s language, but widespread disillusionment, cynicism and out-and-out corruption within the intelligentsia. What seem so out of place today are the intensity and sincerity of Byron’s art.

As to what the attitude should be toward the poet in the camp of political opposition, without belaboring the point, I would merely suggest that the socialist movement too has gone through a number of historical stages. Certain attributes which were deemed passé, rightly or wrongly, 90 years ago or even more recently, may have new significance at a higher stage of the historical process. Revolutionary individualism, genuine independence of thought, hatred of tyranny in all forms, the willingness to take on the established order no matter the cost—would the reemergence of these qualities within a significant segment of the population represent a *blow* to the cause of human liberation? It hardly seems so. We need Byron, it turns out, with his great genius and great flaws, more than his own time did.

*I have not loved the world, nor the world me,
But let us part fair foes; I do believe,
Though I have found them not, that there may be
Words which are things, hopes which will not deceive,
And virtues which are merciful nor weave
Snares for the failing. I would also deem
O'er others' griefs that some sincerely grieve;
That two, or one, are almost what they seem,
That goodness is no name and happiness no dream.*
(*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto III)



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