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3: BYRON ***

CRITICAL MISCELLANIES

BY

JOHN MORLEY

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BYRON

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BYRON.

It is one of the singular facts in the history of literature, that the most rootedly conservative country in Europe should have produced the poet of the Revolution. Nowhere is the antipathy to principles and ideas so profound, nor the addiction to moderate compromise so inveterate, nor the reluctance to advance away from the past so unconquerable, as in England; and nowhere in England is there so settled an indisposition to regard any thought or sentiment except in the light of an existing social order, nor so firmly passive a hostility to generous aspirations, as in the aristocracy. Yet it was precisely an English aristocrat who became the favourite poet of all the most high-minded conspirators and socialists of continental Europe for half a century; of the best of those, that is to say, who have borne the most unsparing testimony against the present ordering of society, and against the theological and moral conceptions which have guided and maintained it. The rank and file of the army has been equally inspired by the same fiery and rebellious strains against the order of God and the order of man. 'The day will come,' wrote Mazzini, thirty years ago, 'when Democracy will remember all that it owes to Byron. England, too, will, I hope, one day remember the mission—so entirely English yet hitherto overlooked by her—which Byron fulfilled on the Continent; the European rôle given by him to English literature, and the appreciation and sympathy for England which he awakened amongst us. Before he came, all that was known of English literature was the French translation of Shakespeare, and the anathema hurled by Voltaire against the "drunken savage." It is since Byron that we Continentalists have learned to study Shakespeare and other English writers. From him dates the sympathy of all the true-hearted amongst us for this land of liberty, whose true vocation he so worthily represented among the oppressed. He led the genius of Britain on a pilgrimage throughout all Europe.'^[1]

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The day of recollection has not yet come. It is only in his own country that Byron's influence has been a comparatively superficial one, and its scope and gist dimly and imperfectly caught, because it is only in England that the partisans of order hope to mitigate or avoid the facts of the Revolution by pretending not to see them, while the friends of progress suppose that all the fruits of change shall inevitably fall, if only they keep the forces and processes and extent of the change rigorously private and undeclared. That intense practicalness which seems to have done so many great things for us, and yet at the same moment mysteriously to have robbed us of all, forbids us even to cast a glance at what is no more than an aspiration. Englishmen like to be able to answer about the Revolution as those ancients answered about the symbol of another Revolution, when they said that they knew not so much as whether there were a Holy Ghost or not. The same want of kindling power in the national intelligence which made of the English Reformation one of the most sluggish and tedious chapters in our history, has made the still mightier advance of the moderns from the social system and spiritual bases of the old state, in spite of our two national achievements of punishing a king with death and emancipating our slaves, just as unimpressive and semi-ineffectual a performance in this country, as the more affrontingly hollow and halt-footed transactions of the sixteenth century.

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Just because it was wonderful that England should have produced Byron, it would have been wonderful if she had received any permanently deep impression from him, or preserved a lasting appreciation of his work, or cheerfully and intelligently recognised his immense force. And accordingly we cannot help perceiving that generations are arising who know not Byron. This is not to say that he goes unread; but there is a vast gulf fixed between the author whom we read with pleasure and even delight, and that other to whom we turn at all moments for inspiration and encouragement, and whose words and ideas spring up incessantly and animatingly within us, unbidden, whether we turn to him or no.

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For no Englishman now does Byron hold this highest place; and this is not unnatural in any way, if we remember in what a different shape the Revolution has now by change of circumstance and occasion come to present itself to those who are most ardent in the search after new paths. An estimate of Byron would be in some sort a measure of the distance that we have travelled within the last half century in our appreciation of the conditions of social change. The modern rebel is at least half-acquiescent. He has developed a historic sense. The most hearty aversion to the prolonged reign of some of the old gods does not hinder him from seeing, that what are now frigid and unlovely blocks were full of vitality and light in days before the era of their petrification. There is much less eagerness of praise or blame, and much less faith in knife and cautery, less confidence that new and right growth will naturally and necessarily follow upon demolition.

The Revolution has never had that long hold on the national imagination in England, either as an idol or a bugbear, which is essential to keep the poet who sings it in effective harmony with new generations of readers. More than this, the Byronic conception was as transitional and

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inadequate as the methods and ideas of the practical movers, who were to a man left stranded in every country in Europe, during the period of his poetic activity. A transitional and unstable movement of society inevitably fails to supply a propulsion powerful enough to make its poetic expression eternal. There is no better proof of the enormous force of Byron's genius than that it was able to produce so fine an expression of elements so intrinsically unfavourable to high poetry as doubt, denial, antagonism, and weariness. But this force was no guarantee for perpetuity of influence. Bare rebellion cannot endure, and no succession of generations can continue nourishing themselves on the poetry of complaint, and the idealisation of revolt. If, however, it is impossible that Byron should be all to us that he was to a former generation, and if we find no direct guidance in his muse, this is no reason why criticism should pass him over, nor why there may not be something peculiarly valuable in the noble freedom and genuine modernism of his poetic spirit, to an age that is apparently only forsaking the clerical idyll of one school, for the reactionary mediævalism or paganism, intrinsically meaningless and issueless, of another.

More attention is now paid to the mysteries of Byron's life than to the merits of his work, and criticism and morality are equally injured by the confusion between the worth of the verse he wrote, and the virtue or wickedness of the life he lived. The admirers of his poetry appear sensible of some obligation to be the champions of his conduct, while those who have diligently gathered together the details of an accurate knowledge of the unseemliness of his conduct, cannot bear to think that from this bramble men have been able to gather figs. The result of the confusion has been that grave men and women have applied themselves to investigate and judge Byron's private life, as if the exact manner of it, the more or less of his outrages upon decorum, the degree of the deadness of his sense of moral responsibility, were matter of minute and profound interest to all ages. As if all this had anything to do with criticism proper. It is right that we should know the life and manners of one whom we choose for a friend, or of one who asks us to entrust him with the control of public interests. In either of these two cases, we need a guarantee for present and future. Art knows nothing of guarantees. The work is before us, its own warranty. What is it to us whether Turner had coarse orgies with the trulls of Wapping? We can judge his art without knowing or thinking of the artist. And in the same way, what are the stories of Byron's libertinism to us? They may have biographical interest, but of critical interest hardly the least. If the name of the author of *Manfred*, *Cain*, *Childe Harold*, were already lost, as it may be in remote times, the work abides, and its mark on European opinion. '*Je ne considère les gens après leur mort,*' said Voltaire, '*que par leurs ouvrages; tout la reste est anéanti pour moi.*'

There is a sense in which biographical detail gives light to criticism, but not the sense in which the prurient moralist uses or seeks it. The life of the poet may help to explain the growth and prominence of a characteristic sentiment or peculiar idea. Knowledge of this or that fact in his life may uncover the roots of something that strikes, or unravel something that perplexes us. Considering the relations between a man's character and circumstance, and what he produces, we can from this point of view hardly know too much as to the personality of a great writer. Only let us recollect that this personality manifests itself outwardly in two separate forms, in conduct, and in literary production, and that each of these manifestations is to be judged independently of the other. If one of them is wholly censurable, the other may still be the outcome of the better mind; and even from the purely biographical aspect, it is a plain injustice to insist on identifying a character with its worse expression only.

Poetry, and not only poetry, but every other channel of emotional expression and æsthetic culture, confessedly moves with the general march of the human mind, and art is only the transformation into ideal and imaginative shapes of a predominant system and philosophy of life. Minor verse-writers may fairly be consigned, without disrespect, to the region of the literature of taste; and criticism of their work takes the shape of a discussion of stray graces, of new turns, of little variations of shade and colour, of their conformity to the accepted rules that constitute the technique of poetry. The loftier masters, though their technical power and originality, their beauty of form, strength of flight, music and variousness of rhythm, are all full of interest and instruction, yet, besides these precious gifts, come to us with the size and quality of great historic forces, for they represent the hope and energies, the dreams and the consummation, of the human intelligence in its most enormous movements. To appreciate one of these, we need to survey it on every side. For these we need synthetic criticism, which, after analysis has done its work, and disclosed to us the peculiar qualities of form, conception, and treatment, shall collect the products of this first process, construct for us the poet's mental figure in its integrity and just coherence, and then finally, as the sum of its work, shall trace the relations of the poet's ideas, either direct or indirect, through the central currents of thought, to the visible tendencies of an existing age.

The greatest poets reflect beside all else the broad-bosomed haven of a perfect and positive faith, in which mankind has for some space found shelter, unsuspecting of the new and distant wayfarings that are ever in store. To this band of sacred bards few are called, while perhaps not more than four high names would fill the list of the chosen: Dante, the poet of Catholicism; Shakespeare, of Feudalism; Milton, of Protestantism; Goethe, of that new faith which is as yet without any universally recognised label, but whose heaven is an ever-closer harmony between the consciousness of man and all the natural forces of the universe; whose liturgy is culture, and whose deity is a certain high composure of the human heart.

The far-shining pre-eminence of Shakespeare, apart from the incomparable fertility and depth of his natural gifts, arises secondarily from the larger extent to which he transcended the special forming influences, and refreshed his fancy and widened his range of sympathy, by recourse to what was then the nearest possible approach to a historic or political method. To the poet, vision reveals a certain form of the truth, which the rest of men laboriously discover and prove by the tardier methods of meditation and science. Shakespeare did not walk in imagination with the great warriors, monarchs, churchmen, and rulers of history, nor conceive their conduct, ideas, schemes, and throw himself into their words and actions, without strengthening that original taste which must have first drawn him to historical subjects, and without deepening both his feeling for the great progression of human affairs, and his sympathy for those relative moods of surveying and dealing with them, which are not more positive, scientific, and political, than they may be made truly poetic.

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Again, while in Dante the inspiring force was spiritual, and in Goethe it was intellectual, we may say that both in Shakespeare and Milton it was political and social. In other words, with these two, the drama of the one and the epic of the other were each of them connected with ideas of government and the other external movements of men in society, and with the play of the sentiments which spring from them. We assuredly do not mean that in either of them, least of all in Shakespeare, there is an absence of the spiritual element. This would be at once to thrust them down into a lower place; for the spiritual is of the very essence of poetry. But with the spiritual there mixes in our Englishmen a most abundant leaven of recognition of the impressions and impulses of the outer forms of life, as well as of active sympathy with the every-day debate of the world. They are neither of them inferior to the highest in sense of the wide and unutterable things of the spirit; yet with both of them, more than with other poets of the same rank, the man with whose soul and circumstance they have to deal is the ποικίλον ζῶον, no high abstraction of the race, but the creature with concrete relations and a full objective life. In Shakespeare the dramatic form helps partly to make this more prominent, though the poet's spirit shines forth thus, independently of the mould which it imposes on itself. Of Milton we may say, too, that, in spite of the supernatural machinery of his greatest poem, it bears strongly impressed on it the political mark, and that in those minor pieces, where he is avowedly in the political sphere, he still rises to the full height of his majestic harmony and noblest dignity.

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Byron was touched by the same fire. The contemporary and friend of the most truly spiritual of all English poets, Shelley, he was himself among the most essentially political. Or perhaps one will be better understood, describing his quality as a quality of poetical *worldliness*, in its enlarged and generous sense of energetic interest in real transactions, and a capacity of being moved and raised by them into those lofty moods of emotion which in more spiritual natures are only kindled by contemplation of the vast infinitudes that compass the human soul round about. That Shelley was immeasurably superior to Byron in all the rarer qualities of the specially poetic mind appears to us so unmistakably assured a fact, that difference of opinion upon it can only spring from a more fundamental difference of opinion as to what it is that constitutes this specially poetic quality. If more than anything else it consists in the power of transfiguring action, character, and thought, in the serene radiance of the purest imaginative intelligence, and the gift of expressing these transformed products in the finest articulate vibrations of emotional speech, then must we not confess that Byron has composed no piece which from this point may compare with *Prometheus* or the *Cenci*, any more than Rubens may take his place with Raphael? We feel that Shelley transports the spirit to the highest bound and limit of the intelligible; and that with him thought passes through one superadded and more rarefying process than the other poet is master of. If it be true, as has been written, that 'Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge,' we may say that Shelley teaches us to apprehend that further something, the breath and finer spirit of poetry itself. Contrasting, for example, Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*, with the famous and truly noble stanzas on the eternal sea which close the fourth canto of *Childe Harold*, who does not feel that there is in the first a volatile and unseizable element that is quite distinct from the imagination and force and high impressiveness, or from any indefinable product of all of these united, which form the glory and power of the second? We may ask in the same way whether *Manfred*, where the spiritual element is as predominant as it ever is in Byron, is worth half a page of *Prometheus*.

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To perceive and admit this is not to disparage Byron's achievements. To be most deeply penetrated with the differentiating quality of the poet is not, after all, to contain the whole of that admixture of varying and moderating elements which goes to the composition of the broadest and most effective work. Of these elements, Shelley, with all his rare gifts of spiritual imagination and winged melodiousness of verse, was markedly wanting in a keen and omnipresent feeling for the great course of human events. All nature stirred him, except the consummating crown of natural growth.

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We do not mean anything so untrue as that Shelley was wanting either in deep humanity or in active benevolence, or that social injustice was a thing indifferent to him. We do not forget the energetic political propagandism of his youth in Ireland and elsewhere. Many a furious stanza remains to show how deeply and bitterly the spectacle of this injustice burnt into his soul. But these pieces are accidents. They do not belong to the immortal part of his work. An American original, unconsciously bringing the revolutionary mind to the climax of all utterances possible to it, has said that 'men are degraded when considered as the members of a political organisation.'^[2] Shelley's position was on a yet more remote pinnacle than this. Of mankind he was barely conscious, in his loftiest and divinest flights. His muse seeks the vague translucent spaces where the care of man melts away in vision of the eternal forces, of which man may be but

the fortuitous manifestation of an hour.

Byron, on the other hand, is never moved by the strength of his passion or the depth of his contemplation quite away from the round earth and the civil animal who dwells upon it. Even his misanthropy is only an inverted form of social solicitude. His practical zeal for good and noble causes might teach us this. He never grudged either money or time or personal peril for the cause of Italian freedom, and his life was the measure and the cost of his interest in the liberty of Greece. Then again he was full not merely of wit, which is sometimes only an affair of the tongue, but of humour also, which goes much deeper; and it is of the essence of the humoristic nature, that whether sunny or saturnine, it binds the thoughts of him who possesses it to the wide medley of expressly human things. Byron did not misknow himself, nor misapprehend the most marked turn of his own character when he wrote the lines—

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I love not Man the less, but Nature more,
From these our interviews, in which I steal
From all I may be, or have been before,
To mingle with the universe and feel
What I can ne'er express, yet cannot all conceal.

It was this which made Byron a social force, a far greater force than Shelley either has been or can be. Men read in each page that he was one of like passions with themselves; that he had their own feet of clay, if he had other members of brass and gold and fine silver which they had none of; and that vehement sensibility, tenacious energy of imagination, a bounding swell of poetic fancy, had not obliterated, but had rather quickened, the sense of the highest kind of man of the world, which did not decay but waxed stronger in him with years. His openness to beauty and care for it were always inferior in keenness and in hold upon him to his sense of human interest, and the superiority in certain respects of *Marino Faliero*, for example, where he handles a social theme in a worthy spirit, over *Manfred*, where he seeks a something tumultuously beautiful, is due to that subordination in his mind of æsthetic to social intention, which is one of the most strongly distinctive marks of the truly modern spirit. The admirable wit both of his letters, and of pieces like the *Vision of Judgment* and *Don Juan*, where wit reaches as high as any English writer has ever carried it, shows in another way the same vividness and reality of attraction which every side of human affairs possessed for this glowing and incessantly animated spirit.

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In spite of a good many surface affectations, which may have cheated the lighter heads, but which may now be easily seen through, and counted off for as much as they are worth, Byron possessed a bottom of plain sincerity and rational sobriety which kept him substantially straight, real, and human, and made him the genuine exponent of that immense social movement which we sum up as the Revolution. If Keats's whole soul was absorbed by sensuous impressions of the outer world, and his art was the splendid and exquisite reproduction of these; if Shelley on the other hand distilled from the fine impressions of the senses by process of inmost meditation some thrice ethereal essence, 'the viewless spirit of a lovely sound;' we may say of Byron that, even in the moods when the mightiness and wonder of nature had most effectually possessed themselves of his imagination, his mind never moved for very long on these remote heights, apart from the busy world of men, but returned again like the fabled dove from the desolate void of waters to the ark of mortal stress and human passion. Nature, in her most dazzling aspects or stupendous parts, is but the background and theatre of the tragedy of man.

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We may find a secondary proof of this in the fewness of those fine descriptive strokes and subtle indirect touches of colour or sound which arise with incessant spontaneity, where a mastering passion for nature steeps the mind in vigilant, accurate, yet half-unconscious, observation. It is amazing through how long a catalogue of natural objects Byron sometimes takes us, without affixing to one of them any but the most conventional term, or a single epithet which might show that in passing through his mind it had yielded to him a beauty or a savour that had been kept a secret from the common troop. Byron is certainly not wanting in commanding image, as when Manfred likens the lines of foaming light flung along from the Alpine cataract to 'the pale courser's tail, the giant steed, to be bestrode by Death.' But imaginative power of this kind is not the same thing as that susceptibility to the minutest properties and unseen qualities of natural objects which reveals itself in chance epithet of telling felicity, or phrase that opens to us hidden lights. Our generation is more likely to think too much than too little of this; for its favourite poet, however narrow in subject and feeble in moral treatment, is without any peer in the exquisitely original, varied, and imaginative art of his landscape touches.

This treatment of nature was in exact harmony with the method of revolutionary thought, which, from the time of Rousseau downwards, had appealed in its profound weariness of an existing social state to the solitude and seeming freedom of mountain and forest and ocean, as though the only cure for the woes of civilisation lay in annihilating it. This was an appeal less to nature than from man, just as we have said that Byron's was, and hence it was distinct from the single-eyed appreciation and love of nature for her own sake, for her beauty and terror and unnumbered moods, which has made of her the mistress and the consoler of many men in these times. In the days of old faith while the catholic gods sat yet firm upon their thrones, the loveliness of the universe shone to blind eyes. Saint Bernard in the twelfth century could ride for a whole day along the shore of the Lake of Geneva, and yet when in the evening his comrades spoke some word about the lake, he inquired: 'What lake?'^[3] It was not mere difference of temperament that made the preacher of one age pass by in this marvellous unconsciousness, and the singer of another burst forth into that tender invocation of 'clear placid Leman,' whose 'contrasted lake with the wild world he dwelt in' moved him to the very depths. To Saint Bernard the world was as

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wild and confused as it was to Byron; but then he had gods many and saints many, and a holy church in this world, and a kingdom of heaven awaiting resplendent in the world to come. All this filled his soul with a settled certitude, too absorbing to leave any space for other than religious emotion. The seven centuries that flowed between the spiritual mind of Europe when Saint Bernard was its spokesman, and the spiritual mind of which Byron was the interpreter, had gradually dissolved these certitudes, and the faint lines of new belief and a more durable order were still invisible. The assurance of science was not yet rooted, nor had men as yet learned to turn back to the history of their own kind, to the long chronicle of its manifold experiences, for an adequate system of life and an inspiring social faith. So they fled in spirit or in flesh into unfamiliar scenes, and vanished from society, because society was not sufficiently social.

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The feeling was abnormal, and the method was fundamentally artificial. A sentimentalism arose, which is in art what the metaphysical method is in philosophy. Yet a literature was born of it, whose freshness, force, elevation, and, above all, a self-assertion and peculiar aspiring freedom that have never been surpassed, still exert an irresistible attraction, even over minds that are furthest removed from the moral storm and disorder, and the confused intellectual convictions, of that extraordinary group. Perhaps the fact that their active force is spent, and that men find in them now only a charm and no longer a gospel, explains the difference between the admiration which some of us permit ourselves to feel for them, and the impatient dislike which they stirred in our fathers. Then they were a danger, because they were a force, misleading amiable and high-minded people into blind paths. Now this is at an end, and, apart from their historic interest, the permanent elements of beauty draw us to them with a delight that does not diminish, as we recede further and further from the impotence of the aspirations which thus married themselves to lofty and stirring words. To say nothing of Rousseau, the father and founder of the nature-worship, which is the nearest approach to a positive side that the Revolution has ever possessed, how much fine colour and freshness of feeling there is in *Réné*, what a sense of air and space in *Paul and Virginia*, and what must they have been to a generation that had just emerged from the close parlours of Richardson, the best of the sentimentalists of the pre-revolutionary type? May we not say, too, in parenthesis, that the man is the votary, not of wisdom, but of a bald and shapeless asceticism, who is so excessively penetrated with the reality, the duties, the claims, and the constant hazards of civilisation, as to find in himself no chord responsive to that sombre pensiveness into which Obermann's unfathomable melancholy and impotence of will deepened, as he meditated on the mean shadows which men are content to chase for happiness, and on all the pigmy progeny of giant effort? '*C'est peu de chose*,' says Obermann, '*de n'être point comme le vulgaire des hommes; mais c'est avoir fait un pas vers la sagesse, que de n'être plus comme le vulgaire des sages*.' This penetrating remark hits the difference between De Senancourt himself and most of the school. He is absolutely free from the vulgarity of wisdom, and breathes the air of higher peaks, taking us through mysterious and fragrant pine-woods, where more than he may find meditative repose amid the heat and stress of that practical day, of which he and his school can never bear the burden.

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In that *vulgaire des sages*, of which De Senancourt had none, Byron abounded. His work is in much the glorification of revolutionary commonplace. Melodramatic individualism reaches its climax in that long series of Laras, Conrads, Manfreds, Harolds, who present the fatal trilogy, in which crime is middle term between debauch and satiety, that forms the natural development of an anti-social doctrine in a full-blooded temperament. It was this temperament which, blending with his gifts of intellect, gave Byron the amazing copiousness and force that makes him the dazzling master of revolutionary emotion, because it fills his work with such variety of figures, such free change of incident, such diversity of passion, such a constant movement and agitation. It was this never-ceasing stir, coupled with a striking concreteness and an unflinching directness, which rather than any markedly correct or wide intellectual apprehension of things, made him so much more than any one else an effective interpreter of the moral tumult of the epoch. If we look for psychological delicacy, for subtle moral traits, for opening glimpses into unobserved depths of character, behold, none of these things are there. These were no gifts of his, any more than the divine gift of music was his. There are some writers whose words but half express the indefinable thoughts that inspired them, and to whom we have to surrender our whole minds with a peculiar loyalty and fulness, independent of the letter and printed phrase, if we would liquefy the frozen speech and recover some portion of its imprisoned essence. This is seldom a necessity with Byron. His words tell us all that he means to say, and do not merely hint nor suggest. The matter with which he deals is gigantic, and he paints with violent colours and sweeping pencil.

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Yet he is free from that declamation with which some of the French poets of the same age, and representing a portion of the same movement, blow out their cheeks. An angel of reasonableness seems to watch over him, even when he comes most dangerously near to an extravagance. He is equally free from a strained antithesis, which would have been inconsistent, not only with the breadth of effect required by Byron's art, but also with the peculiarly direct and forcible quality of his genius. In the preface to *Marino Faliero*, a composition that abounds in noble passages, and rests on a fine and original conception of character, he mentions his 'desire of preserving a nearer approach to unity, than the irregularity which is the reproach of the English theatre.' And this sound view of the importance of form, and of the barbarism to which our English genius is prone, from *Goody Blake and Harry Gill* up to the clownish savagery which occasionally defaces even plays attributed to Shakespeare, is collateral proof of the sanity and balance which marked the foundations of his character, and which at no point of his work ever entirely failed him.

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Byron's admiration for Pope was no mere eccentricity.

We may value this self-control the more, by remembering the nature of his subjects. We look out upon a wild revolutionary welter, of vehement activity without a purpose, boundless discontent without a hope, futile interrogation of nature in questions for which nature can have no answer, unbridled passion, despairing satiety, impotence. It is too easy, as the history of English opinion about Byron's poetic merit abundantly proves, to underrate the genius which mastered so tremendous a conflict, and rendered that amazing scene with the flow and energy and mingled tempest and forlorn calm which belonged to the original reality. The essential futility of the many moods which went to make up all this, ought not to blind us to the enormous power that was needed for the reproduction of a turbulent and not quite aimless chaos of the soul, in which man seemed to be divorced alike from his brother-men in the present, and from all the long succession and endeavour of men in the past. It was no small feat to rise to a height that should command so much, and to exhibit with all the force of life a world that had broken loose from its moorings.

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It is idle to vituperate this anarchy, either from the point of view of a sour and precise Puritanism, or the more elevated point of a rational and large faith in progress. Wise men are like Burke, who did not know how to draw an indictment against a whole nation. They do not know how to think nothing but ill of a whole generation, that lifted up its voice in heartfelt complaint and wailing against the conceptions, forms, and rulers, human and divine, of a society that the inward faith had abandoned, but which clung to every outward ordinance; which only remembered that man had property, and forgot that he had a spirit. This is the complaint that rings through Byron's verse. It was this complaint that lay deep at the bottom of the Revolution, and took form in every possible kind of protest, from a dishevelled neckcloth up to a profession of atheism. Byron elaborated the common emotion, as the earliest modern poets elaborated the common speech. He gave it inflections, and distinguished its moods, and threw over it an air of system and coherency, and a certain goodly and far-reaching sonorosity. This is the usual function of the spiritual leader, who leaves in bulk no more in the minds of those whom he attracts than he found, but he leaves it articulate with many sounds, and vivid with the consciousness of a multitude of defined impressions.

That the whole movement, in spite of its energy, was crude, unscientific, virtually abortive, is most true. That it was presided over by a false conception of nature as a benign and purifying power, while she is in truth a stern force to be tamed and mastered, if society is to hold together, cannot be denied of the revolutionary movement then, any more than it can be denied of its sequels now. Nor need we overlook its fundamental error of tracing half the misfortunes and woes of the race to that social union, to which we are really indebted for all the happiness we know, including even this dignifying sensibility of the woes of the race; and the other half to a fictitious entity styled destiny, placed among the nethermost gods, which would be more rightly regarded as the infinitely modifiable influence exercised by one generation of ourselves upon those that follow.

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Every one of these faults of thought is justly chargeable to Byron. They were deeply inherent in the Revolution. They coloured thoughts about government, about laws, about morals. They effected a transformation of religion, but, resting on no basis of philosophical acceptance of history, the transformation was only temporary. They spread a fantastic passion of which Byron was himself an example and a victim, for extraordinary outbreaks of a peculiar kind of material activity, that met the exigences of an imperious will, while it had not the irksomeness of the self-control which would have exercised the will to more permanent profit. They destroyed faith in order, natural or social, actual or potential, and substituted for it an enthusiastic assertion of the claims of the individual to make his passions, aspirations, and convictions, a final and decisive law.

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Such was the moral state which Byron had to render and interpret. His relation to it was a relation of exact sympathy. He felt the force of each of the many currents that united in one destructive stream, wildly overflowing the fixed banks, and then, when it had overflowed, often, it must be confessed, stagnating in lazy brackish pools, while new tributaries began to flow in together from far other quarters. The list of his poems is the catalogue of the elements of the revolutionary spirit. For of what manner is this spirit? Is it not a masterful and impatient yearning after many good things, unsubdued and uninformed either by a just knowledge of the time, and the means which are needed to bring to men the fruits of their hope, or by a fit appreciation of orderly and tranquil activity for the common service, as the normal type of the individual life? And this is precisely the temper and the spirit of Byron. Nowhere else do we see drawn in such traits that colossal figure, which has haunted Europe these fourscore years and more, with its new-born passion, its half-controlled will, its constant cry for a multitude of unknown blessings under the single name of Freedom, the one known and unadulterated word of blessing. If only Truth, which alone of words is essentially divine and sacrosanct, had been the chief talisman of the Revolution, the movement would have been very different from that which we know. But to claim this or that in the name of truth, would have been to borrow the language which priests and presbyters, Dominic and Calvin, had covered thick with hateful associations. Freedom, after all, was the next best thing, for it is an indispensable condition of the best of all; but it could not lead men until the spirit of truth, which means science in the intellectual order, and justice in the social order, had joined company with it.

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So there was violent action in politics, and violent and excessive stimulation in literature, the positive effects of the force moved in each sphere being deplorably small in proportion to the intense moral energy which gave the impulse. In literature the straining for mental liberty was

the more futile of the two, because it expressed the ardent and hopeless longing of the individual for a life which we may perhaps best call life unconditioned. And this unconditioned life, which the Byronic hero vainly seeks, and not finding, he fills the world with stormy complaint, is least of all likely to offer itself in any approximate form to men penetrated with gross and egotistical passions to their inmost core. The Byronic hero went to clasp repose in a frenzy. All crimson and aflame with passion, he groaned for evening stillness. He insisted on being free, in the corroding fetters of resentment and scorn for men. Conrad sought balm for disappointment of spirit in vehement activity of body. Manfred represents the confusion common to the type, between thirst for the highest knowledge and proud violence of unbridled will. Harold is held in a middle way of poetic melancholy, equally far from a speechless despair and from gay and reckless licence, by contemplation of the loveliness of external nature, and the great exploits and perishing monuments of man in the past; but he, equally with the others, embodies the paradoxical hope that angry isolation and fretful estrangement from mankind are equivalent to emancipation from their pettiness, instead of being its very climax and demonstration. As if freedom of soul could exist without orderly relations of intelligence and partial acceptance between a man and the sum of surrounding circumstances. That universal protest which rings through Byron's work with a plangent resonance, very different from the whimperings of punier men, is a proof that so far from being free, one's whole being is invaded and laid waste. It is no ignoble mood, and it was a most inevitable product of the mental and social conditions of Western Europe at the close of the eighteenth century. Everlasting protest, impetuous energy of will, melancholy and despondent reaction;—this is the revolutionary course. Cain and Conrad; then Manfred and Lara and Harold.

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In studying that portion of the European movement which burst forth into flame in France between the fall of the Bastille and those fatal days of Vendémiaire, Fructidor, Floréal, Brumaire, in which the explosion came convulsively to its end, we seem to see a microcosm of the Byronic epos. The succession of moods is identical. Overthrow, rage, intense material energy, crime, profound melancholy, half-cynical dejection. The Revolution was the battle of Will against the social forces of a dozen centuries. Men thought that they had only to will the freedom and happiness of a world, and all nature and society would be plastic before their daring, as clay in the hands of the potter. They could only conceive of failure as another expression for inadequate will. Is not this one of the notes of Byron's *Ode on the Fall of Bonaparte*? '*L'audace, l'audace, et toujours l'audace.*' If Danton could have read Byron, he would have felt as one in front of a magician's glass. Every passion and fit, from the bloody days of September down to the gloomy walks by the banks of the Aube, and the prison-cry that 'it were better to be a poor fisherman than to meddle with the governing of men,' would have found itself there. It is true that in Byron we miss the firmness of noble and generous hope. This makes him a more veritable embodiment of the Revolution than such a precursor as Rousseau, in whom were all the unclouded anticipations of a dawn, that opened to an obscured noon and a tempestuous night. Yet one knows not, in truth, how much of that violence of will and restless activity and resolute force was due less to confidence, than to the urgent necessity which every one of us has felt, at some season and under some influence, of filling up spiritual vacuity by energetic material activity. Was this the secret of the mysterious charm that scenes of violent strife and bloodshed always had for Byron's imagination, as it was perhaps the secret of the black transformation of the social faith of '89 into the worship of the Conqueror of '99? Nowhere does Byron's genius show so much of its own incomparable fire and energy, nor move with such sympathetic firmness and amplitude of pinion, as in *Lara*, the *Corsair*, *Harold*, and other poems, where 'Red Battle stamps his foot,' and where

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The giant on the mountain stands,
His blood-red tresses deep'ning in the sun,
With death-shot glowing in his fiery hands,
And eye that scorseth all it glows upon.

Yet other and intrinsically nobler passages, where this splendid imaginative energy of the sensations is replaced by the calmer glow of social meditation, prove that Byron was penetrated with the distinctively modern scorn and aversion for the military spirit, and the distinctively modern conviction of its being the most deadly of anachronisms. Such indirect satisfaction to the physical energies was to him, as their direct satisfaction was to the disillusioned France of '99, the relief demanded by a powerful nature for the impotence of hope and vision.

However this may have been, it may be confessed that Byron presents less of the flame of his revolutionary prototypes, and too much of the ashes. He came at the end of the experiment. But it is only a question of proportion. The ashes belong as much and as necessarily to the methods of the Revolution in that phase, as do the blaze, that first told men of possible light and warmth, and the fire, which yet smoulders with abundant life underneath the gray cinders. And we have to remember that Byron came in the midst of a reaction; a reaction of triumph for the partisans of darkness and obstruction, who were assured that the exploded fragments of the old order would speedily grow together again, and a reaction of despondency for those who had filled themselves with illimitable and peremptory hopes. Silly Byronic votaries, who only half understood their idol, and loved him for a gloom that in their own case was nothing but a graceful veil for selfishness and mental indolence, saw and felt only the melancholy conclusion, and had not travelled a yard in the burning path that led to it. They hugged Conrad's haughty misery, but they would have trembled at the thought of Conrad's perilous expedition. They were proud

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despondent Laræes after their manner, 'lords of themselves, that heritage of woe,' but the heritage would have been still more unbearable, if it had involved Lara's bodily danger.

This shallowness has no part in Byron himself. His weariness was a genuine outcome of the influence of the time upon a character consumed by passion. His lot was cast among spent forces, and, while it is no hyperbole to say that he was himself the most enormous force of his time, he was only half conscious of this, if indeed he did not always inwardly shrink from crediting his own power and strength, as so many strong men habitually do, in spite of noisy and perpetual self-assertion. Conceit and presumption have not been any more fatal to the world, than the waste which comes of great men failing in their hearts to recognise how great they are. Many a man whose affectations and assumptions are a proverb, has lost the magnificent virtue of simplicity, for no other reason than that he needed courage to take his own measure, and so finally confirm to himself the reality of his pretensions. With Byron, as with some of his prototypes among the men of action in France and elsewhere, theatrical ostentation, excessive self-consciousness, extravagant claims, cannot hide from us that their power was secretly drained by an ever-present distrust of their own aims, their own methods, even of the very results that they seem to have achieved.

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This diffidence was an inseparable consequence of the vast predominance of exalted passion over reflection, which is one of the revolutionary marks. Byron was fundamentally and substantially, as has been already said, one of the most rational of men. Hence when the passionate fit grew cold, as it always does in temperaments so mixed, he wanted for perfect strength a justification in thought. There are men whose being is so universally possessed by phantasies, that they never feel this necessity of reconciling the visions of excited emotion with the ideas of ordered reason. Byron was more vigorously constituted, and his susceptibility to the necessity of this reconciliation combined with his inability to achieve it, to produce that cynicism which the simple charity of vulgar opinion attributes to the possession of him by unclean devils. It was his refuge, as it sometimes is with smaller men, from the disquieting confusion which was caused by the disproportion between his visions and aspirations, and his intellectual means for satisfying himself seriously as to their true relations and substantive value. Only the man arrives at practical strength who is convinced, whether rightly or wrongly, that he knows all about his own ideas that needs to be known. Byron never did thus know himself, either morally or intellectually. The higher part of him was consciously dragged down by the degrading reminiscence of the brutishness of his youth and its connections and associations; they hung like miasma over his spirit. He could not rise to that sublimest height of moral fervour, when a man intrepidly chases from his memory past evil done, suppresses the recollection of old corruptions, declares that he no longer belongs to them nor they to him, and is not frightened by the past from a firm and lofty respect for present dignity and worth. It is a good thing thus to overthrow the tyranny of the memory, and to cast out the body of our dead selves. That Byron never attained this good, though he was not unlikely to have done so if he had lived longer, does not prove that he was too gross to feel its need, but it explains a moral weakness which has left a strange and touching mark on some of his later works.

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So in the intellectual order, he knew too much in one sense, and in another too little. The strong man is not conscious of gaps and cataclysms in the structure of his belief, or else he would in so far instantly cease to be strong. One living, as Byron emphatically did, in the truly modern atmosphere, was bound by all the conditions of the atmosphere to have mastered what we may call the natural history of his own ideas and convictions; to know something of their position towards fact and outer circumstance and possibility; above all to have some trusty standard for testing their value, and assuring himself that they do really cover the field which he takes them to cover. People with a faith and people living in frenzy are equally under this law; but they take the completeness and coherency of their doctrine for granted. Byron was not the prey of habitual frenzy, and he was without a faith. That is to say, he had no firm basis for his conceptions, and he was aware that he had none. The same unrest which drove men of that epoch to Nature, haunted them to the end, because they had no systematic conception of her working and of human relations with her. In a word, there was no science. Byron was a warm admirer of the genius and art of Goethe, yet he never found out the central secret of Goethe's greatness, his luminous and coherent positivity. This is the crowning glory of the modern spirit, and it was the lack of this which went so far to neutralise Byron's hold of the other chief characteristics of that spirit, its freedom and spaciousness, its humaneness and wide sociality, its versatility and many-sidedness and passionate feeling for the great natural forces.

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This positivity is the cardinal condition of strength for times when theology lies in decay, and the abstractions which gradually replaced the older gods have in their turn ceased to satisfy the intelligence and mould the will. All competent persons agree that it is the first condition of the attainment of scientific truth. Nobody denies that men of action find in it the first law of successful achievement in the material order. Its varied but always superlative power in the region of æsthetics is only an object of recent recognition, though great work enough has been done in past ages by men whose recognition was informal and inexpress. It is plain that, in the different classes of æsthetic manifestation, there will be differences in objective shape and colour, corresponding to the varied limits and conditions of the matter with which the special art has to deal; but the critic may expect to find in all a profound unity of subjective impression, and that, the impression of a self-sustaining order and a self-sufficing harmony among all those

faculties and parts and energies of universal life, which come within the idealising range of art. In other words, the characteristically modern inspiration is the inspiration of law. The regulated play of forces shows itself as fit to stir those profound emotional impulses which wake the artistic soul, as ever did the gracious or terrible gods of antique or middle times. There are glories in Turner's idealisation of the energies of matter, which are at least as nobly imaginative and elevated, in spite of the conspicuous absence of the human element in them, as the highest products of the artists who believed that their work was for the service and honour of a deity.

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It is as mistaken to suppose that this conviction of the supremacy of a cold and self-sustained order in the universe is fatal to emotional expansion, as it would be to suppose it fatal to intellectual curiosity. Experience has shown in the scientific sphere, that the gradual withdrawal of natural operations from the grasp of the imaginary volitions of imaginary beings has not tamed, but greatly stimulated and fertilised scientific curiosity as to the conditions of these operations. Why should it be otherwise in the æsthetic sphere? Why should all that part of our mental composition which responds to the beautiful and imaginative expression of real truths, be at once inflamed and satisfied by the thought that our whole lives, and all the movements of the universe, are the objects of the inexplicable caprice of Makers who are also Destroyers, and yet grow cold, apathetic, and unproductive, in the shadow of the belief that we can only know ourselves as part of the stupendous and inexorable succession of phenomenal conditions, moving according to laws that may be formulated positively, but not interpreted morally, to new destinies that are eternally unfathomable? Why should this conception of a coherent order, free from the arbitrary and presumptuous stamp of certain final causes, be less favourable, either to the ethical or the æsthetic side of human nature, than the older conception of the regulation of the course of the great series by a multitude of intrinsically meaningless and purposeless volitions? The alertness of our sensations for all sources of outer beauty remains unimpaired. The old and lovely attitude of devout service does not pass away to leave vacancy, but is transformed into a yet more devout obligation and service towards creatures that have only their own fellowship and mutual ministry to lean upon; and if we miss something of the ancient solace of special and personal protection, the loss is not unworthily made good by the growth of an imperial sense of participation in the common movement and equal destination of eternal forces.

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To have a mind penetrated with this spiritual persuasion, is to be in full possession of the highest strength that man can attain. It springs from a scientific and rounded interpretation of the facts of life, and is in a harmony, which freshly found truths only make more ample and elaborate, with all the conclusions of the intellect in every order. The active energies are not paralysed by the possibilities of enfeebling doubt, nor the reason drawn down and stultified by apprehension lest its methods should discredit a document, or its inferences clash with a dogma, or its light flash unseasonably on a mystery. There is none of the baleful distortion of hate, because evil and wrong-doing and darkness are acknowledged to be effects of causes, sums of conditions, terms in a series; they are to be brought to their end, or weakened and narrowed, by right action and endeavour, and this endeavour does not stagnate in antipathy, but concentrates itself in transfixing a cause. In no other condition of the spirit than this, in which firm acquiescence mingles with valorous effort, can a man be so sure of raising a calm gaze and an enduring brow to the cruelty of circumstance. The last appalling stroke of annihilation itself is measured with purest fortitude by one, whose religious contemplation dwells most habitually upon the sovereignty of obdurate laws in the vast revolving circle of physical forces, on the one hand, and, on the other, upon that moral order which the vision and pity of good men for their fellows, guiding the spontaneous energy of all men in strife with circumstance, have raised into a structure sublimer and more amazing than all the majesty of outer nature.

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In Byron's time the pretensions of the two possible answers to the great and eternally open questions of God, Immortality, and the like, were independent of that powerful host of inferences and analogies which the advance of physical discovery, and the establishment of a historical order, have since then brought into men's minds. The direct aggressions of old are for the most part abandoned, because it is felt that no fiercest polemical cannonading can drive away the impalpable darkness of error, but only the slow and silent presence of the dawning truth. *Cain* remains, a stern and lofty statement of the case against that theological tradition which so outrages, where it has not already too deeply depraved, the conscience of civilised man. Yet every one who is competent to judge, must feel how infinitely more free the mind of the poet would have been, if besides this just and holy rage, most laudable in its kind, his intellectual equipment had been ample enough and precise enough to have taught him, that all the conceptions that races of men have ever held, either about themselves or their deities, have had a source in the permanently useful instincts of human nature, are capable of explanation, and of a historical justification; that is to say, of the kind of justification which is, in itself and of its own force, the most instant destruction to what has grown to be an anachronism.

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Byron's curiously marked predilection for dramatic composition, not merely for dramatic poems, as *Manfred* or *Cain*, but for genuine plays, as *Marino Faliero*, *Werner*, the *Two Foscari*, was the only sign of his approach to the really positive spirit. Dramatic art, in its purest modern conception, is genuinely positive; that is, it is the presentation of action, character, and motive in a self-sufficing and self-evolving order. There are no final causes, and the first moving elements are taken for granted to begin with. The dramatist creates, but it is the climax of his work to appear to stand absolutely apart and unseen, while the play unfolds itself to the spectator, just as the greater drama of physical phenomena unfolds itself to the scientific observer, or as the order of recorded history extends in natural process under the eye of the political philosopher. Partly, no doubt, the attraction which dramatic form had for Byron is to be explained by that

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revolutionary thirst for action, of which we have already spoken; but partly also it may well have been due to Byron's rudimentary and unsuspected affinity with the more constructive and scientific side of the modern spirit.

His idea of Nature, of which something has been already said, pointed in the same direction; for, although he made an abstraction and a goddess of her, and was in so far out of the right modern way of thinking about these outer forces, it is to be remembered, that, while this dominant conception of Nature as introduced by Rousseau and others into politics was most mischievous and destructive, its place and worth in poetry are very different; because here in the region of the imagination it had the effect, without any pernicious practical consequences, of giving shape and proportion to that great idea of *ensemble* throughout the visible universe, which may be called the beginning and fountain of right knowledge. The conception of the relationship of the different parts and members of the vast cosmos was not accessible to Byron, as it is to a later generation, but his constant appeal in season and out of season to all the life and movement that surrounds man, implied and promoted the widest extension of consciousness of the wholeness and community of natural processes.

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There was one very manifest evil consequence of the hold which this idea in its cruder shape, gained over Byron and his admirers. The vastness of the material universe, as they conceived and half adored it, entirely overshadowed the principle of moral duty and social obligation. The domestic sentiment, for example, almost disappears in those works which made Byron most popular, or else it only appears, to be banished with reproach. This is quite in accordance with the revolutionary spirit, which was in one of its most fundamental aspects a revolt on behalf of unconditioned individual rights, and against the family. If we accept what seems to be the fatal law of progress, that excess on one side is only moderated by a nearly corresponding excess of an opposite kind, the Byronic dissolution of domestic feeling was not entirely without justification. There is probably no uglier growth of time than that mean and poor form of domesticity, which has always been too apt to fascinate the English imagination, ever since the last great effort of the Rebellion, and which rose to the climax of its popularity when George III. won all hearts by living like a farmer. Instead of the fierce light beating about a throne, it played lambently upon a sty. And the nation who admired, imitated. When the Regent came, and with him that coarse profligacy which has alternated with cloudy insipidity in the annals of the line, the honest part of the world, out of antipathy to the son, was driven even further into domestic sentimentality of a greasy kind, than it had gone from affection for the sire.

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Byron helped to clear the air of this. His fire, his lofty spaciousness of outlook, his spirited interest in great national causes, his romance, and the passion both of his animosity and his sympathy, acted for a while like an electric current, and every one within his influence became ashamed to barter the large heritage of manhood, with its many realms and illimitable interests, for the sordid ease of the hearth and the good word of the unworthy. He fills men with thoughts that shake down the unlovely temple of comfort. This was good, to force whoever was not already too far sunk into the mire, high up to the larger atmosphere, whence they could see how minute an atom is man, how infinite and blind and pitiless the might that encompasses his little life. Many feeble spirits ran back homewards from the horrid solitudes and abysses of *Manfred*, and the moral terrors of *Cain*, and even the despair of *Harold*, and, burying themselves in warm domestic places, were comforted by the familiar restoratives and appliances. Firmer souls were not only exhilarated, but intoxicated by the potent and unaccustomed air. They went too far. They made war on the family, and the idea of it. Everything human was mischievously dwarfed, and the difference between right and wrong, between gratification of appetite and its control for virtue's sake, between the acceptance and the evasion of clear obligation, all became invisible or of no account in the new light. That constancy and permanence, of which the family is the type, and which is the first condition alike of the stability and progress of society, was obliterated from thought. As if the wonders that have been wrought by this regulated constancy of the feeling of man for man in transforming human life were not far more transcendently exalting than the contemplation of those glories of brute nature, which are barbaric in comparison.

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It would be unjust not to admit that there are abundant passages in his poems of too manifest depth and sincerity of feeling, for us to suppose that Byron himself was dead to the beauty of domestic sentiment. The united tenderness and dignity of Faliero's words to Angiolina, before he goes to the meeting of the conspirators, would, if there were nothing else, be enough to show how rightly in his better moods the poet appreciated the conditions of the family. Unfortunately the better moods were not fixed, and we had *Don Juan*, where the wit and colour and power served to make an anti-social and licentious sentiment attractive to puny creatures, who were thankful to have their lasciviousness so gaily adorned. As for Great Britain, she deserved *Don Juan*. A nation, whose disrespect for all ideas and aspirations that cannot be supported by a text, nor circulated by a religious tract society, was systematic, and where consequently the understanding is least protected against sensual sophisms, received no more than a just chastisement in 'the literature of Satan.' Here again, in the licence of this literature, we see the finger of the Revolution, and of that egoism which makes the passions of the individual his own law. Let us condemn and pass on, homily undelivered. If Byron injured the domestic idea on this side, let us not fail to observe how vastly he elevated it on others, and how, above all, he pointed to the idea above and beyond it, in whose light only can that be worthy, the idea of a country and a public cause. A man may be sure that the comfort of the hearth has usurped too high a place,

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when he can read without response the lines declaring that domestic ties must yield in 'those who are called to the highest destinies, which purify corrupted commonwealths.'

We must forget all feelings save the one—
We must resign all passions save our purpose—
We must behold no object save our country—
And only look on death as beautiful,
So that the sacrifice ascend to heaven
And draw down freedom on her evermore.

Calendaro. But if we fail—

I. Bertuccio. They never fail who die
In a great cause: the block may soak their gore;
Their heads may sodden in the sun; their limbs
Be strung to city gates and castle walls—
But still their spirit walks abroad. Though years
Elapse, and others share as dark a doom,
They but augment the deep and sweeping thoughts
Which overpower all others, and conduct
The world at last to freedom. What were we
If Brutus had not lived? He died in giving
Rome liberty, but left a deathless lesson—
A name which is a virtue, and a soul
Which multiplies itself throughout all time,
When wicked men wax mighty, and a state
Turns servile.

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And the man who wrote this was worthy to play an even nobler part than the one he had thus nobly described; for it was not many years after, that Byron left all and laid down his life for the emancipation of a strange land, and 'Greece and Italy wept for his death, as it had been that of the noblest of their own sons.' Detractors have done their best to pare away the merit of this act of self-renunciation by attributing it to despair. That contemporaries of their own humour had done their best to make his life a load to him is true, yet to this talk of despair we may reply in the poet's own words:

When we know

All that can come, and how to meet it, our
Resolves, if firm, may merit a more noble
Word than this, to give it utterance.

There was an estimate of the value and purpose of a human life, which our Age of Comfort may fruitfully ponder.

To fix upon violent will and incessant craving for movement as the mark of a poet, whose contemporaries adored him for what they took to be the musing sweetness of his melancholy, may seem a critical perversity. There is, however, a momentous difference between that melancholy, which is as the mere shadow projected by a man's spiritual form, and that other melancholy, which itself is the reality and substance of a character; between the soul to whom dejection brings graceful relief after labour and effort, and the soul which by irresistible habit and constitution dwells ever in Golgotha. This deep and penetrating subjective melancholy had no possession of Byron. His character was essentially objective, stimulated by outward circumstance, moving to outward harmonies, seeking colour and image and purpose from without. Hence there is inevitably a certain liveliness and animation, even when he is in the depths. We feel that we are watching clouds sweep majestically across the sky, and, even when they are darkest, blue interspaces are not far off. Contrast the moodiest parts of *Childe Harold* or of *Cain* with Novalis's *Night Hymns*. Byron's gloom is a mere elegance in comparison. The one pipes to us with a graceful despondency on the edge of the gulf, while the other carries us actually down into the black profound, with no rebellious cry, nor shriek of woe, but sombrely awaiting the deliverance of death, with soul absorbed and consumed by weariness. Let the reader mark the note of mourning struck in the opening stanzas, for instance, of Novalis's *Longing after Death*, their simplicity, homeliness, transparent sincerity, and then turn to any of the familiar passages where Byron meditates on the good things which the end brings to men. How artificial he seems, and unseasonably ornate, and how conscious of his public. In the first, we sit sadly on the ground in some veritable Place of a Skull; in the second, we assist at tragical distress after the manner of the Italian opera. We should be disposed to call the first a peculiarly German quality, until we remember Pascal. With Novalis, or with Pascal, as with all those whom character, or the outer fates, or the two together, have drawn to dwell in the valley of the shadow, gloom and despondency are the very stuff of their thoughts. Material energy could have done nothing for them. Their nerves and sinews were too nearly cut asunder. To know the quality of Byron's melancholy, and to recognise how little it was of the essence of his character, we have only to consider how far removed he was from this condition. In other words, in spite of morbid manifestations of one sort and another, he always preserved a salutary and vivid sympathy for action, and a marked capacity for it.

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It was the same impetuous and indomitable spirit of effort which moved Byron to his last heroic

exploit, that made the poetry inspired by it so powerful in Europe, from the deadly days of the Holy Alliance onwards. Cynical and misanthropical as he has been called, as though that were his sum and substance, he yet never ceased to glorify human freedom, in tones that stirred the hearts of men and quickened their hope and upheld their daring, as with the voice of some heavenly trumpet. You may, if you choose, find the splendour of the stanzas in the Fourth Canto on the Bourbon restoration, on Cromwell, and Washington, a theatrical splendour. But for all that, they touched the noblest parts of men. They are alive with an exalted and magnanimous generosity, the one high virtue which can never fail to touch a multitude. Subtlety may miss them, graces may miss them, and reason may fly over their heads, but the words of a generous humanity on the lips of poet or chief have never failed to kindle divine music in their breasts. The critic may censure, and culture may wave a disdainful hand. As has been said, all such words 'are open to criticism, and they are all above it.' The magic still works. A mysterious and potent word from the gods has gone abroad over the face of the earth.

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This larger influence was not impaired by Byron's ethical poverty. The latter was an inevitable consequence of his defective discipline. The triteness of his moral climax is occasionally startling. When Sardanapalus, for instance, sees Zarina torn from him, and is stricken with profound anguish at the pain with which he has filled her life, he winds up with such a platitude as this:

To what gulfs
A single deviation from the track
Of human duties leaves even those who claim
The homage of mankind as their born due!

The baldest writer of hymns might work up passion enough for a consummation like this. Once more, Byron was insufficiently furnished with positive intellectual ideas, and for want of these his most exalted words were constantly left sterile of definite and pointed outcome.

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Byron's passionate feeling for mankind included the long succession of generations, that stretch back into the past and lie far on in the misty distances of the future. No poet has had a more sublime sense of the infinite melancholy of history; indeed, we hardly feel how great a poet Byron was, until we have read him at Venice, at Florence, and above all in that overpowering scene where the 'lone mother of dead empires' broods like a mysterious haunting spirit among the columns and arches and wrecked fabrics of Rome. No one has expressed with such amplitude the sentiment that in a hundred sacred spots of the earth has

Fill'd up
As 'twere, anew, the gaps of centuries;
Leaving that beautiful which still was so,
And making that which was not; till the place
Became religious, and the heart ran o'er
With silent worship of the great of old—
The dead, but sceptred sovereigns, who still rule
Our spirits from their urns.

Only he stands aright, who from his little point of present possession ever meditates on the far-reaching lines, which pass through his point from one interminable star-light distance to another. Neither the stoic pagan, nor the disciple of the creed which has some of the peculiar weakness of stoicism and not all its peculiar strength, could find Manfred's latest word untrue to himself:

[Pg 251]

The mind, which is immortal, makes itself
Requital for its good or evil thoughts—
Is its own origin of ill and end,
And its own place and time: its innate sense,
When stripped of this mortality, derives
No colour from the fleeting things without:
But is absorbed in sufferance of joy,
Born from the knowledge of its own desert.

It is only when a man subordinates this absorption in individual sufferance and joy to the thought that his life is a trust for humanity, that he is sure of making it anything other than 'rain fallen on the sand.' In the last great episode of his own career Byron was as lofty as the noblest side of his creed. The historic feeling for the unseen benefactors of old time was matched by vehemence of sympathy with the struggles for liberation of his own day. And for this, history will not forget him. Though he may have no place in our own Minster, he assuredly belongs to the band of far-shining men, of whom Pericles declared the whole world to be the tomb.

FOOTNOTES

- [1] See also George Sand's Preface to *Obermann*, p. 10. '*En même temps que les institutions et les coutumes, la littérature anglaise passa le détroit, et vint régner chez nous. La poésie britannique nous révéla le doute incarné sous la figure de Byron; puis la littérature allemande, quoique plus mystique, nous conduisit au même résultat par un sentiment de rêverie plus profond.*'

The number of translations that have appeared in Germany since 1830 proves the coincidence of Byronic influence with revolutionary movement in that country.

[2] Thoreau.

[3] Morison's *Life of St. Bernard*, p. 68 (2d edit.)

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CRITICAL MISCELLANIES, VOL. 1, ESSAY 3:
BYRON ***

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