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Philip W. Martin
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Introduction

Despite an abundance of contemporary critical material, the modern reader is unlikely to find a more stimulating comment with which to begin his study of Byron than the following, written by Macaulay in 1831:

[Voltaire], like Lord Byron, put himself at the head of an intellectual revolution, dreading it all the time, murmuring at it, sneering at it, yet choosing rather to move before his age in any direction than to be left behind and forgotten.¹

Although we may be disturbed by Macaulay's comparison of Byron to Voltaire, as well as by his use of the word 'intellectual', his description of Byron's relation to his age can be usefully placed alongside an interesting yet puzzling observation made by W. W. Robson in his penetrating 'Byron as Poet':

He is a poet not only in that (to use a convenient vulgarism) he 'gets across' his egoistic passions; he conveys along with them, though doubtless unwittingly, a sense that his vehement indulgence in them is, deep down, against the grain. And our recognition of this ultimate probity is allied to our pleasure in Byron's vitality.²

The attraction of this is that it encourages us to see a rebellion within the bombast and emotional generosity of the early poetry, but even the most sympathetic reader is likely to wonder how this can be achieved, and the current state of Byron criticism offers no means of assistance. This is where Macaulay is of use. His description of Byron's relation to his period demands that we recognize the significance of his relation to his public. It is this, Macaulay implies, that in turn

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determines his competitive and anxious relation to his contemporaries, and governs the nature of his poetry.³ If we take the force of this, we are compelled to look at the manner of Byron's presentation of himself to a public whose applause was alluring and simultaneously the subject of his contempt: we are forced to study a performance in which the performer exhibits himself in a way that he resents, and in which, therefore, there may exist indications of his distaste.

If we are to approach Byron in this way, then we must first evolve a more satisfactory view of his motivation for writing than that which is usually offered. Obviously the answer is going to be radically different from those produced in the cases of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, but not because of anything that is to be explained in his own terms: his much-exhibited views of himself as an erupting volcano or a man seeking relief from the tortures of his ennui. And in thinking of the distinctive nature of Byron's relation to his public, we are reminded that the history of his poetry is also the history of a relatively new public, the nature of which his verse proved uniquely capable of revealing. If this pushes us away from comparisons with the major Romantic poets and towards Scott, it is only to notice that the effects of this public's existence on Byron are not merely to be explained in terms of its constituting a demand. That might be all that one would wish to conclude about Scott's relation to his readers, but Byron's case is different, both in terms of what he offered his audience, and in terms of their expectations. In *Childe Harold I & II*, Byron invited his reader to equate the emotions of his verse with the real emotions of the poet, the experience alluded to in the poem with the real experience of Lord Byron of Newstead. I shall argue that he did this – at least in part – facetiously, but his public chose not to recognize the disclaimers. Herein lies the difference between Scott's reception and Byron's. The blindness, and one is tempted to say wilful blindness, of Byron's readers testified to the extent of their control over his product, but his loss of artistic independence was compensated for by the attractions of the image they had fashioned for him. Thus at the beginning of his career Byron was confronted by an unsophisticated reading public that was tempting him to produce material through which this image could be sustained or strengthened. This, obviously, makes the critic's task an awkward one.

Indeed, what makes the poetry from *Childe Harold I & II* on-

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wards so difficult to approach is its instability as textual material. So much of it is evidently being used by the poet as a means of creating fantasies about himself, fantasies which are not self-sufficient, but require the reinforcement provided by the public's willingness to participate in them. What Byron includes in these fantasies, therefore, is governed by what his audience is prepared to believe about him. Further, it is not simply a case of Byron imagining that he is, or could have been, the Giaour or Lara. He is involved in larger, more consequential fantasies: at the centre of his entire achievement lies the illusion that a wealth of worldly experience, or at least a huge capacity for worldly experience, provides him with the essential qualifications of a great poet. This is an illusion partly presented to him by the circumstances of his success, by his readers' responses, by his critics' claims, and Byron naturally finds it seductive. It also derives from his strong sense of belonging (after his introduction to the Holland House circle in 1812) to a metropolitan literary milieu that felt its tastes threatened by the distinctly provincial verse of the Lake poets:

They are a set of the most despicable imposters – that is my opinion of them. They know nothing of the world; and what is poetry, but the reflection of the world? What sympathy have this people with the spirit of this stirring age? . . . They are mere old wives. Look at their beastly vulgarity, when they wish to be homely; and their exquisite stuff, when they clap on sail, and aim at fancy. Coleridge is the best of the trio – but bad is the best. Southey ought to have been a parish-clerk, and Wordsworth a man-midwife – both in darkness. I doubt if either of them ever got drunk.⁴

The fantasy of poetic greatness is structured around a fantasy of his experience of life, whether received or expected: he is prepared to believe in himself as a great poet because he is prepared to believe in his capacity for the kind of experience upon which he thinks great poetry is founded. But to perpetuate the illusion of his capacity for life, Byron needs his poetry. Paradoxically, it becomes the surrogate for the life he has not had, or for the life that he has not *felt* as intensely as he considered himself bound to feel.

The circumstances are made more complex by another paradox, the paradox of Byron's success; his discovery of public (and social) acceptance by his presentation of himself as an isolate. This, one senses, was not merely the employment of a popular motif, but received its initial impulse from the resentment of an aristocratic poet whose historical circumstances denied him an elite audience,

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an audience whose habits and tastes complemented his own. By presenting himself as a social outcast, he was able to persuade himself that he was preserving his artistic and aristocratic independence, although his resentment, and thereby his assumed posture, became more extreme as the applause of the usurping middle-class audience rang louder in his ears. Once again, a vicious circle was established, for to Byron that applause represented a form of support for his private vision of himself. 'He is', wrote Hazlitt, 'that anomaly in letters and in society, a Noble Poet',⁵ and the nature of his verse, as we shall see, suggests that he felt it too.

These, I suggest, are the forces acting upon Byron's verse of which we have to be aware. It is insufficient simply to pronounce the poetry to be good or bad – we have to consider its determinants. And charting the nature of Byron's relation to his art and audience need not be a guessing game. There are indications within the verse suggesting much about his attitudes, and these can be clearly apprehended if we are prepared to see the poetry not as a mysterious autonomous text, but as a consciously produced artefact designed for the appeasement of a particular audience, a performance conducted under special conditions, the nature of which I have outlined above. And the significance of this performance, I suggest, inheres not in its script, nor in the manner of its presentation, but ultimately in the degree of conviction with which it is conducted. Here I am in disagreement with Robson, who has called attention to the usefulness of seeing Byron's poetry as a performing art:

On that question of Byron's sincerity . . . the comparison with a dramatic performer throws some light. It is possible, in watching a great actor, to respond simultaneously in two ways: 'How moving!' and 'How well he plays his part!' And we should not feel the actor's greatness less, were we to infer a corresponding duality of consciousness in him. There is no question of insincerity; the performance is successful or unsuccessful, good or bad, but it is not sincere or insincere. Success is a matter of being able to mobilize emotions which one has either had, or can imagine having, without necessarily having them at the moment.⁶

The difficulty is that so frequently we cannot 'infer a corresponding duality of consciousness' in Byron of this kind. The most awkward and persistent worry that confronts his readers is that which grows out of the recognition that his being seduced by the attractions of a particular role (be it that of *Childe Harold* or *Don Juan*) is of such a

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nature that it impedes the manifestation of a controlling self-awareness in the poetry. The creation of a figure of the poet, an image of a man behind the verse, is apparently his primary concern, and where he stands in relation to this fiction, and in relation to the performance which created it, is frequently obscure or ambiguous. It ought to be said here that this is as true of *Don Juan* as it is of *Childe Harold*. The later poem succeeds in postponing the question by its repeated warnings against taking its poet's stances seriously, but the mask which Byron adopts so that he may claim his right of access to this kind of mobility – that of a man grown old before his time, numbed by the excesses of his experience – is one which we are apparently required to accept without questioning whether it belongs to the mechanism of the performance. He may occasionally utilize this posture whilst expanding his repertoire of burlesque gestures, but elsewhere, both inside and outside the poem in contemporaneous pieces, we are asked to defer to it, to make the concession by which the Byronic myth is to be sustained. The sense received when reading much of Byron's verse is not so much 'How well he plays his part!' nor even (conversely) 'He doesn't mean it really and of that he is aware' as 'He fails to convince me and himself that he means it here, but he thinks he might, he thinks he could do.' And within this kind of response, we may concern ourselves with the degree of Byron's conviction.

In determining this, and in attempting to understand how Byron conceived of his verse, I have found it useful to examine its constitution (or perhaps in this case 'chemistry' is a better word). For within the instability of much of Byron's poetry may be seen the strong traces of a productive process that has no real equivalent elsewhere in English Romanticism, a process wherein disparate and eclectic elements are taken and mixed together in such a way as to deny the reader the impression of there being a single controlling idea, or clearly envisaged purpose, behind the experiment. The presence within a single work of such oddly sorting elements as Rousseau, Young, and Wordsworth, or the *Lyrical Ballads*, Dante, Sterne, and Philips (see Chapter 3), alerts us to the complexity and peculiarity of Byron's methods. It is not that his handling of, say, Rousseau, can be taken simply as a matter of 'source' or 'influence'. Rousseau's presence in *Childe Harold III* suggests the presence of an interference: he is the means by which Byron comes to terms with Wordsworth. This study concerns itself with interfer-

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ences and interpolations of this kind, for they offer themselves as means of understanding the nature of Byron's relation to his art and his audience. They are, in fact, his literary contexts, and they have remained largely unexplored.

The approach I have adopted may solve two of the most awkward problems that all students of Byron confront. The first is the question of development. Few would deny that *Don Juan* is Byron's finest poem, but the way in which it is commonly related to his earlier works – as a document which undermines them and thereby demonstrates an intellectual transcending of their bombast and limitations – is manifestly unsatisfactory. Not only do we find Byron writing *Mazeppa*, *The Island*, and *Heaven and Earth* at points in his career when, by the implications of this approach, he should be producing much finer things, but also this thesis does nothing to explain the close proximity of *Childe Harold IV* and *Manfred* to *Don Juan*, any more than it is willing to provide a precedent for *Don Juan*'s impressive manoeuvrings. The maturity and quality of *Don Juan* cannot be defined or given precedent by reference to a developing consciousness, but they can be understood as deriving from a shift of mode which permits the dramatization of a kind of performance that had found its skills inhibited by the restrictions of Byron's earlier modes. Looking at Byron in this way may surprise some readers. On the one hand they may be disappointed by the suggestion that *Don Juan* proceeds from the same kind of consciousness that informs the earlier works. On the other, looking at the whole of Byron's achievement, they may be pleased to recognize the earlier works as deriving essentially from the same consciousness that makes *Don Juan* what it is.

The second problem declares itself most clearly in that penetrating remark of Santayana's – 'he did not respect himself, or his art, as much as they deserved' – a remark justly appreciated in Robson's essay. The obstructions for the critic are ostensibly large: how can we approach a poet who, quite apart from his self-mutilating tendencies (both inside and outside *Don Juan*), so frequently displayed scant regard for his craft? Here there are wider issues to be considered. Byron's treatment of his poetry does not derive entirely from a dilemma explicable in psychological terms: the question of his attitude towards his art, and towards himself as artist, demands a consideration of the social conditions which made his poetry possible. We could say that the technical crudity of the

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Turkish Tales shows Byron respecting his art as much as it deserves and no more. For art in these lays, and for that matter in most of Byron's poetry, is not to be vaguely defined in terms of a consecrated wider concept, but in terms of the demands that elicited it into being, the demands of popular consumption. These demands, creating a relaxation of critical standards, subsequently resulted in there being no serious resistance to Byron's propensity to use his verse for the purposes of building fantasies about his ego. By not conceiving of his poetry too seriously Byron was able to protect himself against the less acceptable facets of his poetic production; able too, by his subsequently achieved sense of detachment, occasionally to conduct minor internal performances for himself, of which he expects his readers to remain oblivious. Their function is to support his illusion of independence: they may be seen as attempts to persuade himself that he was not committed to a business in which success was necessarily defined in terms of publishers' receipts. Further, this non-serious relation to his verse allowed Byron the possibility of a non-serious relation to his fantasies, of which, we may conjecture, he had need in his more sombre moments of reflection. Again, if we are prepared to approach the poetry by seeing it in terms offered by the analogy of a performance, we need not be coerced into disapproving of Byron's lack of artistic self-respect, but recognize it instead as an inherent part of his production. Apart from being an essential step towards seeing Byron in the context of his age, this is also a means of discovering his 'probity', of understanding how and why we feel that his 'indulgence . . . is . . . deep down, against the grain'.

I have not begun with these hypotheses and attempted to wrench the poetry into a corresponding position. The view of Byron presented here is one which depends almost entirely upon the verse itself. 'The assessment of Byron's poetry . . . must begin and end with the poetry.'⁷ Quite so: if we accept the trend of current Byron critics and advocate taking him seriously without a proper examination of the verse, we will find ourselves involved in the same kind of ostentatious critical games, displays which demonstrate that taking Byron seriously is equivalent to not taking the poetry (or indeed the critic's task) seriously. The sincere student of Byron must accept that a large proportion of his time will be spent examining poetry written without serious intent. It may be that when proper acknowledgement of the unstable relationship between

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poet and public has been made, we are left feeling sceptical about Byron's status as a major poet, particularly when considering the verse not written in *ottava rima*. But we cannot ignore this essential, perhaps unique, dimension of a poet's work simply because it may affect his conventional standing. If we wish to persist in perpetuating the Byronic myth, in seeing the poetry as the issue of single-minded passion, or in registering the reiteration of a limited number of gestures and motifs as an expression of the *Zeitgeist*, and no more, then we must read Byron with our eyes half-closed. To insist that he was a philosophical poet, or even that the verse was written with the earnestness of a Shelley or a Wordsworth, necessitates a perversion of what is before our eyes on the page. Although an approach based on such assumptions may be able to claim superficially that it is a positive appreciation, ultimately it offers us only an impoverished experience of the verse. By not starting from an acceptance of Byron as a great poet, however, we can liberate ourselves from this narrowness. What I wish to argue for here is a fuller, richer experience of the poetry by considering its determinants, a reading which may allow us to recognize and understand the nature of the integrity with which 'our pleasure in Byron's vitality' is closely associated.

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1

Experiment in *Childe Harold I & II*

The Preface to *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* seems to indicate that Byron is unsure of the kind of poem he has written:

The stanza of Spenser, according to one of our most successful poets, admits of every variety. Dr. Beattie makes the following observation:–

‘Not long ago I began a poem in the style and stanza of Spenser, in which I propose to give full scope to my inclination, and be either droll or pathetic, descriptive or sentimental, tender or satirical, as the humour strikes me; for, if I mistake not, the measure which I have adopted admits equally of all these kinds of composition.’ Strengthened in my opinion by such authority, and by the example of some in the highest order of Italian poets, I shall make no apology for attempts at similar variations in the following composition; satisfied that, if they are unsuccessful, their failure must be in the execution, rather than in the design sanctioned by the practice of Ariosto, Thomson, and Beattie.

If one proceeds from here to the original manuscript, and in particular to the stanzas which Dallas and Murray persuaded Byron to omit, the question of the nature of the poem Byron was writing on his Grand Tour becomes even more awkward and persistent:

But when Convention sent his handy work
 Pens, tongues, feet, hands combined in wild uproar;
 Mayor, Aldermen, laid down the uplifted fork;
 The bench of Bishops half forgot to snore¹

This sort of flippancy – the quality which Byron admired in the author from whom he took his poem’s epigraph² – is capable of being sustained and indulged for its own sake:

Eftsoons his little heart beat merrily
 With hope of foreign nations to behold,
 And many things right marvellous to see,

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Of which our lying voyagers have told,
 In many a tome as true as Mandeville's of old.³

It is capable too of anticipating *Beppo* (but perhaps not the more sophisticated games of *Don Juan*) by exploiting a trick probably learnt from Prior:

In golden characters right well designed
 First on the list appeareth one 'Junot';
 Then certain other glorious names we find,
 (Which Rhyme compelleth me to place below):
 Dull victors! baffled by the vanquished foe,
 Wheedled by conynge tongues of laurels due,
 Stand, worthy of each other in a row –
 Sirs Arthur, Harry, and the dizzard Hew
 Dalrymple, seely wight, sore dupe of t'other tew.⁴

How did Byron conceive of *Childe Harold* when he was writing it? The question is one that has troubled few critics: the majority are either irritated by its postures or content to recognize in them a suitable context for the embodiment of a distinctly Romantic *Weltschmerz*. The poem is thus either considered to be of limited interest or conceived of as a confessional piece of occasional rhetorical power and considerable poetic promise.⁵ The latter reading seems to me to be the more perverse, but neither takes account of the poem's tonal variety. However much *Childe Harold's* reception and subsequent criticism have obscured its tonal variation, it is clear from his apology in the Preface that even after the revision of the original manuscript, Byron was only too aware of this quality in his poem.

After a glance at the poem's opening stanzas, it is surprising that this aspect of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* should have been so neglected. Only Bernard Blackstone has chosen to comment on the peculiarity of the invocation:

It is a measure of Byron's artistry that this address to the Muse, though couched in terms of Delphi, and though added to the poem as late as July–November 1811, is subtly adapted in its tone to the half-flippant picture of Harold at Newstead which immediately follows. The tone is not disrespectful – Byron could never be that about Delphi – but it is ironical and slightly debunking.⁶

Yet the stanza is devoid of the kind of control and assurance upon