

## **THE OPTIMISM OF BYRON**

Everything is against our appreciating the spirit and the age of Byron. The age that has just passed from us is always like a dream when we wake in the morning, a thing incredible and centuries away. And the world of Byron seems a sad and faded world, a weird and inhuman world, where men were romantic in whiskers, ladies lived, apparently, in bowers, and the very word has the sound of a piece of stage scenery. Roses and nightingales recur in their poetry with the monotonous elegance of a wall-paper pattern. The whole is like a revel of dead men, a revel with splendid vesture and half-witted faces.

But the more shrewdly and earnestly we study the histories of men, the less ready shall we be to make use of the word "artificial." Nothing in the world has ever been artificial. Many customs, many dresses, many works of art are branded with artificiality because they exhibit vanity and self-consciousness: as if vanity were not a deep and elemental thing, like love and hate and the fear of death. Vanity may be found in darkling deserts, in the hermit and in the wild beasts that crawl around him. It may be good or evil, but assuredly it is not artificial: vanity is a voice out of the abyss.

The remarkable fact is, however, and it bears strongly on the present position of Byron, that when a thing is unfamiliar to us, when it is remote and the product of some other age or spirit, we think it not savage or terrible, but merely artificial. There are many instances of this: a fair one is the case of tropical plants and birds. When we see some of the monstrous and flamboyant blossoms that enrich the equatorial woods, we do not feel that they are conflagrations of nature; silent explosions of her frightful energy. We simply find it hard to believe that they are not wax flowers grown under a glass case. When we see some of the tropic birds, with their tiny bodies attached to gigantic beaks, we do not feel that they are freaks of the fierce humour of Creation. We almost believe that they are toys out of a child's play-box, artificially carved and artificially coloured. So it is with the great convulsion of Nature which was known as Byronism. The volcano is not an extinct volcano now; it is the dead stick of a rocket. It is the remains not of a natural but of an artificial fire.

But Byron and Byronism were something immeasurably greater than anything that is represented by such a view as this: their real value and meaning are indeed little understood. The first of the mistakes about Byron lies in the fact that he is treated as a pessimist. True, he treated himself as such, but a critic can hardly have even a slight knowledge of Byron without knowing that he had the smallest amount of knowledge of himself that ever fell to the lot of an intelligent

man. The real character of what is known as Byron's pessimism is better worth study than any real pessimism could ever be.

It is the standing peculiarity of this curious world of ours that almost everything in it has been extolled enthusiastically and invariably extolled to the disadvantage of everything else.

One after another almost every one of the phenomena of the universe has been declared to be alone capable of making life worth living. Books, love, business, religion, alcohol, abstract truth, private emotion, money, simplicity, mysticism, hard work, a life close to nature, a life close to Belgrave Square are every one of them passionately maintained by somebody to be so good that they redeem the evil of an otherwise indefensible world. Thus while the world is almost always condemned in summary, it is always justified, and indeed extolled, in detail after detail.

Existence has been praised and absolved by a chorus of pessimists. The work of giving thanks to Heaven is, as it were, divided ingeniously among them. Schopenhauer is told off as a kind of librarian in the House of God, to sing the praises of the austere pleasures of the mind. Carlyle, as steward, undertakes the working department and eulogises a life of labour in the fields. Omar Khayyam is established in the cellar and swears that it is the only room in the house. Even the blackest of pessimistic artists enjoys his art. At the precise moment that he has written some shameless and terrible indictment of Creation, his one pang of joy in the achievement joins the universal chorus of gratitude, with the scent of the wild flower and the song of the bird.

Now Byron had a sensational popularity, and that popularity was, as far as words and explanations go, founded upon his pessimism. He was adored by an overwhelming majority, almost every individual of which despised the majority of mankind. But when we come to regard the matter a little more deeply we tend in some degree to cease to believe in this popularity of the pessimist. The popularity of pure and unadulterated pessimism is an oddity; it is almost a contradiction in terms. Men would no more receive the news of the failure of existence or of the harmonious hostility of the stars with ardour or popular rejoicing than they would light bonfires for the arrival of cholera or dance a breakdown when they were condemned to be hanged. When the pessimist is popular it must always be not because he shows all things to be bad, but because he shows some things to be good. Men can only join in a chorus of praise even if it is the praise of denunciation. The man who is popular must be optimistic about something even if he is only optimistic about pessimism. And this was emphatically the case with Byron and the Byronists. Their real popularity was founded not upon the fact that they blamed everything, but upon the fact that they praised something. They

heaped curses upon man, but they used man merely as a foil. The things they wished to praise by comparison were the energies of Nature. Man was to them what talk and fashion were to Carlyle, what philosophical and religious quarrels were to Omar, what the whole race after practical happiness was to Schopenhauer, the thing which must be censured in order that somebody else may be exalted. It was merely a recognition of the fact that one cannot write in white chalk except on a blackboard.

Surely it is ridiculous to maintain seriously that Byron's love of the desolate and inhuman in nature was the mark of vital scepticism and depression. When a young man can elect deliberately to walk alone in winter by the side of the shattering sea, when he takes pleasure in storms and stricken peaks, and the lawless melancholy of the older earth, we may deduce with the certainty of logic that he is very young and very happy. There is a certain darkness which we see in wine when seen in shadow; we see it again in the night that has just buried a gorgeous sunset. The wine seems black, and yet at the same time powerfully and almost impossibly red; the sky seems black, and yet at the same time to be only too dense a blend of purple and green. Such was the darkness which lay around the Byronic school. Darkness with them was only too dense a purple. They would prefer the sullen hostility of the earth because amid all the cold and darkness their own hearts were flaming like their own firesides.

Matters are very different with the more modern school of doubt and lamentation. The last movement of pessimism is perhaps expressed in Mr Aubrey Beardsley's allegorical designs. Here we have to deal with a pessimism which tends naturally not towards the oldest elements of the cosmos, but towards the last and most fantastic fripperies of artificial life. Byronism tended towards the desert; the new pessimism towards the restaurant. Byronism was a revolt against artificiality; the new pessimism is a revolt in its favour. The Byronic young man had an affectation of sincerity; the decadent, going a step deeper into the avenues of the unreal, has positively an affectation of affectation. And it is by their fopperies and their frivolities that we know that their sinister philosophy is sincere; in their lights and garlands and ribbons we read their indwelling despair. It was so, indeed, with Byron himself; his really bitter moments were his frivolous moments. He went on year after year calling down fire upon mankind, summoning the deluge and the destructive sea and all the ultimate energies of nature to sweep away the cities of the spawn of man. But through all this his sub-conscious mind was not that of a despairer; on the contrary, there is something of a kind of lawless faith in thus parleying with such immense and immemorial brutalities. It was not until the time in which he wrote 'Don Juan' that he really lost this inward warmth and geniality, and a sudden shout of hilarious laughter announced to the world that Lord Byron had really become a pessimist.

One of the best tests in the world of what a poet really means is his metre. He may be a hypocrite in his metaphysics, but he cannot be a hypocrite in his prosody. And all the time that Byron's language is of horror and emptiness, his metre is a bounding 'pas de quatre.' He may arraign existence on the most deadly charges, he may condemn it with the most desolating verdict, but he cannot alter the fact that on some walk in a spring morning when all the limbs are swinging and all the blood alive in the body, the lips may be caught repeating:

'Oh, there's not a joy the world can give like that it takes away,    When the glow of early youth declines in beauty's dull decay;    'Tis not upon the cheek of youth the blush that fades so fast,    But the tender bloom of heart is gone ere youth itself be past.'

That automatic recitation is the answer to the whole pessimism of Byron.

The truth is that Byron was one of a class who may be called the unconscious optimists, who are very often, indeed, the most uncompromising conscious pessimists, because the exuberance of their nature demands for an adversary a dragon as big as the world. But the whole of his essential and unconscious being was spirited and confident, and that unconscious being, long disguised and buried under emotional artifices, suddenly sprang into prominence in the face of a cold, hard, political necessity. In Greece he heard the cry of reality, and at the time that he was dying, he began to live. He heard suddenly the call of that buried and sub-conscious happiness which is in all of us, and which may emerge suddenly at the sight of the grass of a meadow or the spears of the enemy.