

CHAPTER XXII

BYRON

EXTREMES of morality provoke a reaction, just as do extremes of immorality. Contrary to the vulgar proverb, there can be too much of a good thing. The namby-pamby morality of Richardson provoked a reaction in prose, headed by Fielding. We are now going to see how the same kind of reaction came into poetry during the next century. People were tired of the coldness and the speculative tendencies of poetry. They wanted passion instead of philosophy; they wanted human characters instead of ghosts. They did not say so, but they felt that way. Wordsworth did not give them anything which they could understand that was not tiresome. Coleridge and Scott and Southey gave them fairy-tales. And they were quite ready to listen to anybody else who could give them a change. Anything for a change—even a little immorality and a little atheism could not do much harm. There had been altogether too much talk about virtue and religion and the soul. When the Satanic School began to speak, the Lake School immediately ceased to interest the public at all. Everybody stopped even trying to read the Lake Poets, and Sir Walter Scott himself was obliged as early as 1814 to stop writing poetry. Byron had begun to sing his cynical and splendid song.

Byron is the chief figure of the Satanic School; and it is impossible to consider justly the history of this school without considering also the extraordinary lives of the men who belonged to it. We must therefore speak of Byron himself before we speak of his work. Byron was at once extraordinarily fortunate and unfortunate. Though of noble

descent, and heir to a fortune, he had inherited from his ancestors characteristics of a most unhappy sort. On his father's side, for some time back, the race had morally degenerated. Byron's father, Captain Byron, was as handsome as he was wicked. He had been obliged to leave the army because of conducting himself in such a manner that no one of his brother officers would speak to him. He was not only a rake, a spendthrift and a drunkard; he had figured as an adulterer, having eloped with another man's wife, by whom he had had a child, Byron's half sister. Other male relations of the future poet were equally good-for-nothing. The nobleman from whom Byron inherited the estate was known all round the country as "the wicked lord." Byron's mother was of good family but intensely passionate, fretful, and vindictive in her disposition—a disposition which was aggravated by the treatment received from Byron's father. He had married her only to get her money, and having spent that in debauchery, he left the family by his death almost destitute. All these misfortunes so embittered Byron's mother that she often acted like an insane woman, and very probably she was, or had been made, a little insane. Even at the time of the boy's birth she acted wildly and foolishly, with the result that the foot of the child was deformed. With such parents, and with such ancestral tendencies to be reckoned with, Byron's future could not be altogether happy.

Yet he was unusually gifted in body as well as in mind, with the solitary exception of the injury to his foot. He was certainly one of the handsomest men of his time, having that dark type of beauty especially admired in England, perhaps because it is there less common than elsewhere. If he had inherited his father's beauty, he had also inherited something of his father's passions. But in youth these only seemed part of his natural charm; the intensity of his likes and dislikes, of his love or anger, did not appear to indicate anything sinister beyond the common. Perhaps Byron would never have been in any respect dis-

reputable, had he made a sensible marriage. He never was a spendthrift, and he had no disposition to ruin himself by debauchery. On the contrary, it was his hope to repair the fallen fortunes of the family. But his marriage ruined everything. He married a young woman of noble family, but of the most conventional turn of mind—cold, unsympathetic, unforgiving, and prudish to an extraordinary degree. In the case of a common person, a good or bad marriage may not signify very much; but in the case of an English lord, it is the most important act of his life. It means his future place in society; it means public opinion; it means, in short, good fortune or absolute ruin. When Byron's wife suddenly left her husband, and gave the world to believe that no honest woman could live with such a monster, Byron was doomed. All society immediately turned against him. He could not even live any longer in England. He was practically, for the rest of his life, a banished man. And he felt that this treatment was unjust. The world had condemned him without even listening to his story. They had listened only to his wife, and she had never been able to say why she had left him. She represented in herself all the convention and cant and hypocrisy of her age; and Byron naturally hated those characteristics of society which were impersonated in his wife. From childhood he had been a fighter, and he was not in the least afraid to fight society. For the remainder of his short life he struck back at that which had struck him, and struck very effectively. He attacked all the conventions, all the hypocrisies, all the moral commonplaces of English society in his poetry; he made heroic crime appear more attractive than cowardly virtue, and he even boldly ridiculed the religious beliefs that excused or sheltered social falsehood.

Unfortunately he did not content himself with attacking social shams in his poetry; he set an example of reckless living which appeared to more than justify all the bad things said about him. Byron's position was like this: "You said I was immoral when I tried to live decently. Now I

shall be immoral, and you can do as you please about it." Nor can the treatment to which he had been subjected justify his conduct in Italy and elsewhere. Shameless living is bad enough, but when cruelty is combined with shamelessness, we can feel no sympathy; and Byron was cruel to women—even at times brutally so. At length, however, his better nature asserted itself. There were two Byrons. One was naturally reckless, selfish, and sensual. The other was generous, heroic, and truly noble. The second Byron manifested himself after the death of his friend Shelley. He suddenly gave up writing poetry, and went to Greece to place his fortune and all his abilities at the disposal of the Greeks in order to help them obtain their liberty. He worked for them arduously, faithfully, and unselfishly, and died for the cause which he had espoused. Whatever may have been the faults of his life, his death was unquestionably the death of a hero.

Now let us take the facts of Byron's life in brief details. He was born in 1788, and was educated at Harrow and Cambridge, but left the University without taking a degree. While he was still a University student, he published his first book of poems, in 1807. The poems were not good, and were very severely criticized by the *Edinburgh Review*. Byron resented the criticism by writing a satire, after the manner of Pope, not only upon his critics, but upon all the literary people of the day, including even Sir Walter Scott. The satire entitled "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers"—reckless and unjust though it was—proved that the young student had more than common talent, and gave him a certain amount of literary reputation. Then, leaving the University, he travelled in Europe for two years, obtaining the materials for the first part of his poem "Childe Harold," published in 1812. This gave him immediately a very great reputation, not less than seven editions being sold in little more than a month. His vogue had commenced. During the next three years—only three years, remember—he wrote and published "The Giaour," "The Bride of Abydos," "The

Corsair," "Lara," and "The Siege of Corinth." The public went simply wild with delight; fourteen thousand copies of "The Corsair" alone were bought in one day. So far everything promised well for Byron's future. But then came the miserable marriage, in 1814, ending in 1815; and with the breaking of the marriage Byron's English work ends. Three months after his wife left him, he went to Italy and never came back. In Switzerland, Venice, Ravenna, Pisa, and Genoa, he passed a considerable number of years, partly in company with young Shelley, of whose companionship we shall have to speak later. The better part of his work was all written during this time. Byron's Italian period gave us the dramas of "Manfred," "Cain," "Sardanapalus," and "Marino Faliero"; also the poems of "Beppo," "Mazepa," "The Dream," "Darkness," and the wonderful but unfinished "Don Juan." This is the cream of Byron's work. In 1823 he gave up poetry for ever and went on his Greek expedition. He died in 1824 at Missolonghi.

What was the value of this short, passionate, misdirected life? What did it bequeath to us? What was it that Byron did for English poetry?

The critical world is still fighting over these questions. But I think that they can now be fairly answered. The first fact for you to observe is that no poet ever had such vast and sudden popularity, not only in England, but all over Europe, as Byron. Such was his temporary influence that it crushed all competition out of existence. Nobody else could get a hearing while Byron sang. Nor is this all that is to be said about him. His influence chiefly made the French romantic movement. His influence was left in Germany through the work of an infinitely greater poet than himself, the poet Heine. Furthermore, Spanish, Italian and Russian literatures were all influenced by Byron. Goethe spoke of him as without any equal in the history of English poetry—indeed, he said more than this; he said that Byron was a European phenomenon, such as might not be seen again for hundreds of years. And yet, within a generation,

this popularity ebbed and vanished. Byron is now scarcely read. It is true that at the very moment of this lecture a new edition of Byron's works is being given to the public; but I think that its success will be only of a limited kind. Byron is almost dead in our literature. All this seems very contradictory; but I think that it can be explained, and explained in a really interesting way.

Since I began lectures on the subject of literature, I have always tried to bring forward one fact relating to the creation of all great work in poetry or prose; and that one fact is the absolute necessity of patient self-control. Literature means hard work, no matter how much genius is behind it. And literature means the self-control necessary for hard work. I am not speaking here merely of moral self-control. There may be cases in which there is no right conduct in life, and nevertheless splendid conduct in work. But there is no escaping the general truth that moral and intellectual self-control go together; for the man who cannot conquer himself in one direction is apt to find it very difficult to control himself in another. Now Byron is a striking example of this truth. The reason that his work is no longer read or valued, except by the young, is that it is nearly all done without patience, without self-control, and therefore without good taste or the true spirit of art. For all art requires the pain of sustained effort; and sustained effort in the highest sense was not possible to Byron. Indeed, towards the end of his life, he bravely confessed that he was not fit to be a poet, and that he had made a mistake in taking up poetry as a profession. What he said was perfectly true. Poetry requires qualities of character that did not exist in the nature of Byron. Endowed with a marvellous talent for writing in verse as easily as other men write in prose, he poured out his poems as a bird pours out its song, almost without any other effort than the emotional expression, the emotional passion of the moment. Therefore he thought, on learning of his great success with the public, that passion—that is to say, emotion—was

poetry; and he actually said so, more than once. This is a great mistake. Passion is not poetry. To utter one's feelings in verse is not poetry. That is only the beginning, the foundation, of a poem. So in making a bronze statue, the casting of the metal is only the beginning of the real work; after that there is the labour of correcting, smoothing, polishing. Byron never would do any careful revising, correcting, or polishing. He simply threw down his thoughts on paper, in easily rhyming lines, and left them in that shape for all time. Wherefore, they remain defective for all time. Speaking of himself and his emotions, he said

The cold in crime are cold in blood,
 Their love can scarce deserve the name;
 But mine was like the lava flood
 That boils in Ætna's breast of flame.*

At least we have good reason to suppose that these lines refer to his own feelings, though they are put into the mouth of one of his heroes. Now the lava of a volcano is used for artistic purposes; but it has to be very carefully chosen, because it comes out of the crater mixed with all kinds of dross. And Byron's verse resembles lava by its heat and force, but it also resembles lava in being full of dross. You can scarcely find twenty lines of Byron's poetry which would be called perfect. There is splendour, the splendour of great genius, but splendour always in the shape of ore. The great genius never did its best, never tried to do its best, never could have done its best, because there was no power of patience or self-control to help it. Some critics to-day go so far as to say that Byron never wrote any real poetry at all. Mr. Saintsbury is one of them; and he is not a small critic. But I would say that if either Mr. Saintsbury or anybody else denies poetry to the following verse from "Don Juan," then I cannot agree with him:

They looked up to the sky, whose floating glow
 Spread like a rosy ocean, vast and bright;

* *The Giaour*, ll. 1099—1102.

They gazed upon the glittering sea below,
Whence the broad moon rose circling into sight;
They heard the waves crash, and the wind so low,
And saw each other's dark eyes darting light
Into each other; and beholding this,
Their lips drew near and clung into a kiss.

Now in spite of its obvious imperfection—you must notice the repetition of “each other,” in a way that jars upon the sense of exquisiteness—I hold that this verse is very beautiful and very true poetry. But if Mr. Saintsbury means only absolute perfection of *form*,—then I fear we must acknowledge that Byron did not write any poetry in the higher sense. It took the public twenty or thirty years to find this out; and when they found it out they stopped reading Byron. Evidently it is not to Byron's poetical art that we must look for any explanation of his immense influence. We must find another reason for it; and this will oblige us to make a little digression.

What did the world admire in Byron? Matthew Arnold said it was immense sincerity and force. Byron has these, but I think that Matthew Arnold was wrong—that they could not explain his influence. Let us briefly note the character and the subjects of his work, and learn what these can tell us.

We can understand the first success of “Childe Harold” as being partly due to the subject. In those days travelling was difficult and expensive, and the English public knew very little about the Southern countries, Spain and Portugal, and Greece and Turkey. Italy and France were better known, but Italy had not been much written about by English men of letters. So the work of the young poet had all the charm of absolute novelty, as well as of certain melancholy beauty which still touches us while reading certain parts of it. A poem of the same kind written fifty years later would have attracted no attention at all. The succeeding poems—the narrative poems, such as “The Giaour,” “Lara,” “The Corsair,” also interested the public by their

novelty of subject and their vigorous verse, but these alone would not explain the immense popularity which they obtained. The fact was that a new style of character had been introduced into English poetry, a type of character comparable to nothing else remembered except the Satan of Milton. In all these poems there was a spirit of revolt against God and man, against human and divine law, a revolt maintained with colossal pride and colossal power. Like Satan, indeed; but unlike Satan in the fact of being human, not supernatural. People imagined that they saw something of Byron himself in these strange figures of renegades, pirates, and desperate adventurers. Curiosity as well as sympathy was aroused. In former poems, heroic figures had been of a very different type; the human devil had not yet been invented—not a regular devil, but a sublime and gloomy figure, having the twofold charm of mystery and beauty. Next came plays, or dramas, such as “Manfred,” and “Cain,” in which conventional ideas were strangely upset by the glorification of strength and pride against law and religion. The figure of the rebel was always more or less the same; but the dress and the accessories were sufficiently varied to give a sensation of novelty. Pieces like “Mazeppa” and “The Siege of Corinth,” were equally opposed to the moral traditions of English literature; in the first there is a suggestion of justified crime, and in the second the sympathies of the reader are with the man who has denied his faith and his country. As for “Beppo” and “Don Juan,” they owed their success chiefly to their scandal, a new expression of immorality, a new mockery of social conventions, and, in the case of the second poem, a satire upon all the foibles of civilized society. Everybody was shocked, but everybody was pleased. Byron had all the sympathy that he possibly could have wished for. He became the great hero of his age, his portrait was hung up in thousands and thousands of rooms all over Europe, his verses were translated into all languages. He was the dream of beautiful women, and the admiration of

imaginative young men. Even his dress was imitated by thousands of people. A Byronic fashion came into existence. Barbers dressed the hair of their customers so as to make them look as much as possible like Byron. To stand like Byron, to sit like Byron, and to sneer like Byron were considered accomplishments. High society and the church might say what they pleased of the man; they could even banish him from his native country. But the public made him its darling, its idol, its object of passionate worship.

This is strange, because the whole of the work that created this frenzy is in every way immoral, according to the conventions respected by the same public that admired it. It is either cynical, or erotic (in the bad sense), or rebellious against everything most esteemed by the English people—law, order, religion. How are we to explain the matter?

We can best do so by a few illustrations. Really there are two distinct moralities believed in by the whole civilized world, however much the fact may be denied. One is a religious morality, framed in words and taught by precepts. The other is something very different. Take for example two cases of theft. A man whom you once respected goes into your room during your absence and steals the sum of one dollar. This is found out; and if the thief escapes prison, he does not escape public opinion. Nobody, knowing what he has done, will ever trust him or employ him. He will be outlawed by good society. But now take the case of a man able to steal five hundred millions of dollars. Men who can do thieving on a very great scale are never obliged to part with the money; they are able to keep what they steal, because they are stronger than the law. Now according to pure morality, religious morality, the second thief is five hundred million times more guilty than the man who stole one dollar. But will you say, candidly, that you despise the man who steals five hundred million dollars? No; you cannot despise him, however much you try. Will society despise him? No, it will not: it will worship him;

it will give him every honour; he will marry his daughters to princes, and he will marry his sons into noble families. But, morally speaking, is he not five hundred million times worse than a common thief who is put into prison at hard labour? Yes, but there is something more to be said.

There is another kind of moral law than the moral law which is taught us either by our fathers or by our religious teachers. It is not in accordance with human ideas of right and wrong. It is the iron law of the universe, older than all religions, and stronger. Whatever you believe, you have to obey that law. I call it a moral law, because it is moral to this degree, that it requires self-sacrifice of a particular kind. Perhaps we might call it the law of nature. Nineteenth century philosophy calls it the law of evolution. But whatever we call it, it means simply this: "Make yourself strong, or I shall kill you." Religion tells us, "Try to be good, to be honest, to be loving and kind to everybody; then you can trust to the gods, and you will be happy after death. If you are not clever and strong, never mind; goodness is strength enough, virtue is cleverness enough. Do your duty as well as you know how, and that is all that is necessary."

But the law of the universe tells us a very different story. It says: "I have nothing to do with goodness or virtue. These are only other names for weakness and cowardice. The only important thing is to be strong. My law is the law of battle; the prizes are to the strongest—strongest in mind, strongest in body. An oyster, a worm is good. But such creatures exist only as food for my strong ones. You must either do my will, or vanish from the face of the earth." Now, as a matter of fact, life is battle. War is not a moral thing. We all know that war is necessary, that war must sometimes bring glory and honour and fame; but nobody can dare to call war a moral thing. According to no system of human morals can we consider it right to destroy the bodies of our fellow-men, to cover the ground with the scattering of their blood and brains.

Nevertheless there must sometimes be war. This is a fair example of the contradiction between the religious moral law and the cosmic law. The first makes goodness the all important thing in this world, the second makes power the all important thing, and both have to be obeyed.

Nor is this all. In the present imperfect state of human society the universe-law has to be obeyed even more than the other, though we all feel that this is not right. Mere goodness will not enable us to secure the best things in life. One may be good, and yet very stupid; one may be very virtuous, and yet very weak. It is necessary for success to be clever rather than good, and strong rather than virtuous. If one could be both, of course that would be much better; but, as I say, human nature is still imperfect, and the chances of the man who is both good and strong are not so great as the chances of the man that is simply strong, and not good. The latter is less restrained by scruples. Nearly all business, commerce in the western sense, is conducted according to knowledge of the latter fact. Business morality can be only relative. A man who should try to carry on any large business in Europe according to purely moral principles, would become bankrupt in a very short space of time.

Now you will see my meaning better in regard to the man who could obtain five hundred million dollars by any means, no matter how dishonourable. The world will respect him because of what he represents according to the law of the universe, not because of what he represents according to the law of religion. The man capable of performing such a feat, considering the conditions of the modern financial world, would have to be almost superhuman; the brain of such a man would have to be a structure superior to the brain of a Napoleon. He would represent, first and foremost, the most prodigious mental power in the world, and power cannot be despised. He would represent also the money power that he had acquired by means of the intellectual power; and that could not be despised. It may seem

shocking to say so, but the fact is indisputable that any human being able to prove himself superior to the moral, the social, and the civil law will be honoured, and greatly honoured, in any European country, because of what he represents in the battle of life. Some years ago there was a serious talk of marrying an English prince of the blood to the daughter of an American known to have made something more than one hundred millions of dollars by dishonourable means. This was not only because of the worship of money in itself; it was also because of the recognition that a man capable of doing such things must be of uncommon intellect. Great thefts can be managed only by great means, not by vulgar means. On the other hand, who steals one dollar, or less, is justly despised, because his action shows weakness of the lowest kind.

Well, after this digression, let us return to the subject of Byron's influence. If Byron was able to influence all Europe, as he really did, it was not by telling, but by suggesting, the truth which I have just been trying to illustrate. He did this quite unconsciously. He was not a philosopher; he was not even a logical thinker. But he forced people to think in a new way. He made them ask themselves whether it was really enough to be simply good in this world, and whether what we have been accustomed to call evil and wicked might not have not only a reason for being, but a certain infernal beauty of its own. He infused the whole of European literature for a time with something which, for want of a better name, was called the Satanic spirit; and this Satanic spirit really signified a vague recognition of another law than the law of pure morality—the law of struggle, the law of battle, and the splendour of strength even in a bad or cruel cause. Remember that Byron never intended to do this; that he was not clever enough to have intended it. But he did it in spite of himself, and this explains his momentary power over literature. His own admiration of desperate and evil characters made people see in such characters what Byron himself could not see—that

they were in themselves indications of a life-law from whose influence no one can be entirely free. Later on, greater minds than Byron's showed the same truths in a larger and healthier way. Then Byron was forgotten.