CHAPTER XXIII

CULLING FROM BYRON

You know that the word "culling" means a gathering—that is to say, something that has been plucked or gathered. The word is especially used of flowers; therefore it has come to take also the signification of selections which represent the flowers of literature.

A few of Byron's beauties will form the subject of this lecture. He is not much read to-day, except in certain passages of "Childe Harold" prepared for use as school texts. But Byron cannot be fairly represented by any single composition. His variety is too great for that. There is very much fault to be found with him, chiefly because he did a great deal of rather careless work. But he also did so many things in so fine a way that every student of English literature ought to know more about him than what the ordinary school texts represent. He was successful during his day as a narrative poet, as a descriptive poet, as a lyric poet, as a dramatist and as a satirist. All of these successes could not be guessed from the reading of any single composition. But if they could be, then it would be at "Don Juan" that we should look rather than at "Childe Harold,"—for in this unfinished poem Byron shows at least three different kinds of capacity — satire, lyrical tenderness, and descriptive splendour.

But, as I said, no one poem can give a full knowledge of Byron at his best; and we need not trouble ourselves to consider him at his worst or even at his mediocre moments.

I think, however, that a few selections here and there may give you some new ideas about Byron's value. The

subject is opportune, for at this very moment there is going on in England something of a Byronic revival.

The greatest of modern German thinkers, the author of "Faust," and a passionate admirer of the English poet, said that Byron could not think — that Byron was a great dramatist, a grand poet, but not a thinker at all. No doubt there is some ground for this criticism. It is not to Byron that we should go for philosophy, for any suggestion of great metaphysical ideas. Nevertheless I should say that Byron can express large thoughts (whether his own or somebody else's does not matter at all), in a large and lasting way. I leave you to judge of this yourselves, in the following extract from the famous poem of "Don Juan." The subject is human life.

> Between two worlds life hovers like a star,
> 'Twixt night and morn, upon the horizon's verge.
> How little do we know that which we are!
> How less what we may be! The eternal surge
> Of time and tide rolls on, and bears afar
> Our bubbles; as the old burst, new emerge,
> Lash'd from the foam of ages; while the graves
> Of empires heave but like some passing waves.*

I do not say that the thoughts here are Byron's; they are thousands of years older than Byron—they are thoughts known to the Far East from very ancient times. But Byron's way of expressing them is entirely his own, and it would be foolish to deny that the expression of them is sublime, and will linger always in the mind of the reader. First, life is compared to a something hovering between the infinite world of the past and the infinite world of the future, in the thin moment of the present. Even so a star appears to hang sometimes on the horizon, between the two immensities of sky and sea. Next the poet utters the universal confession of man's ignorance as to his own nature, and as to the future. The utterance is not particularly striking—indeed, it is almost commonplace, and it might be criticized

* *Don Juan*, Canto xv. Stanza 99.

even as to form (for nothing that Byron ever wrote is absolutely perfect in execution). But after these plain lines, how splendid appears the great comparison of existence to a sea!—the great sea of life, whose foam bubbles represent the momentary lives of men, and the great waves the passing away of empires and of kingdoms. The suggestion is indeed one that reminds us how little we are in the eternal vastness of things. Only bubbles; and our bursting signifies nothing at all—there will be millions of new bubbles after we have gone. I think you will remember, in the English translation of Omar Khayyām, another comparison of human lives to bubbles; the original was probably inspired by some text of the ancient Indian philosophy. Now here Byron compares very well indeed with the finer poet; and, in point of sublimity, he is grander — he gives us a larger sensation.

There are few flashes in Byron like this; but this is sheet-lightning. Perhaps the word may be a little unfamiliar. In the season of thunderstorms, on a clear night, we sometimes see, far in the horizon, great, broad, bright flashes of lightning. There is no thunder, no sound; and these great noiseless flashes are called in England sheet-lightning, because the appearance is like that of a vast white sheet suddenly opened and shaken. Well, as I say, Byron seldom has such fine thoughts as this verse contains, but the stanza will suffice to show you that he can be great at moments.

As a descriptive writer also, Byron cannot be treated with contempt by the student of literature. When he wished to describe, Byron could describe quite as well as Sir Walter Scott, or even as Wordsworth, though his verses are less finished than theirs. Even as to finish, however, Byron must be spoken of with some respect. In two forms of verse he has shown extraordinary power; and these two forms are the Spenserian stanza and the *ottava rima*, neither of which is at all easy to master. The whole of "Childe Harold" is in the Spenserian stanza — eight iambic pentameters followed by a ninth line of six feet instead of five.

The whole of "Don Juan" is in the *ottava rima* — eight iambic pentameters, alternately rhyming, except the last two, which rhyme together. Now let us see how finely Byron can describe in these measures, even with very plain words. Here is a little description of the Lake of Geneva at night. You must imagine a very great still stretch of water, surrounded by immensely high mountains.

> It is the hush of night, and all between
> Thy margin and the mountains, dusk, yet clear,
> Mellow'd and mingling, yet distinctly seen,
> Save darken'd Jura, whose capt heights appear
> Precipitously steep; and drawing near,
> There breathes a living fragrance from the shore,
> Of flowers yet fresh with childhood; on the ear
> Drops the light drip of the suspended oar,
> Or chirps the grasshopper one good-night carol more.*

You might hear and see and feel all this in Japan quite as well as in Switzerland — the description is of sensations and sights that may be enjoyed in thousands of places among mountains or by water, in any part of the world. But how true it is, how clearly it reminds us of experiences that we have had on summer nights, in the open air, under the stars, far away from city dust and city noise! The great stillness, the dark pure air, the sound of water dripping from oars as boats pass by, the vast dim shapes of mountains in the distance looking larger than they really are through the darkness, and the tinkling and calling of night insects — have you not all heard and seen and felt these things?

Nor does the poet forget something else that we all remember, though we very seldom write about it — that sweet sharp smell of plants and grasses which is most agreeable in the hours of dew. You do not enjoy this smell of nature in the day as you enjoy it during the night, especially in woods or by flowing water. At night the air

* *Childe Harold*, Canto iii. Stanza 86.

is so still and so pure and so moist that the perfume appears to us much stronger.

Or let us take one stanza describing the hour of sunset, with a rising moon already in the sky. There are not very many English poets who have dwelt with pleasure upon the beautiful appearance of the sky in those hours when sun and moon happen to be together in the sky, or, as Tennyson says,* when we can sit down—"Between the sun and moon, upon the plain." If only for this reason Byron's verses are worth learning.

> The moon is up, and yet it is not night—
> Sunset divides the sky with her—a sea
> Of glory streams along the Alpine height
> Of blue Friuli's mountains; Heaven is free
> From clouds, but of all colours seems to be,—
> Melted to one vast Iris of the West,—
> Where the Day joins the past Eternity;
> While, on the other hand, meek Dian's crest
> Floats through the azure air—an island of the blest!†

High blue peaks in a line rising into a sky of yellow fire, as in some of Hiroshige's coloured prints; that is the view on one side, and on the other, where the sky and sea touch, the young moon appears like a fairy island of light at the end of the world. So much for the mere picture; now let us observe the extreme beauty of the use of words in the sixth and seventh lines. Let us first take the word "Iris." You know that Iris is the Greek name of the goddess of the rainbow; and you know that it also means a rainbow. There are no clouds, the poet tells us, yet there are rainbow colours in the sky. In any beautiful and cloudless sunset this fact may be observed, though it is more easily observed in the tropics than in colder countries. The colour of the sunset near the horizon is at first blinding yellow; then this yellow becomes orange, or vermilion. Immediately above the vermilion you can find yellows and pinks and greens of

* Cf. Tennyson *The Lotos-Eaters*, Lines 37—8.
† *Childe Harold*, Canto iv. Stanza 27.

the most delicate tints just like the beautiful faint colours that we see inside a great sea shell. These are the colours that the poet refers to in his use of the name Iris. But there is yet another beautiful suggestion in the use of the word—because "iris" also means the coloured part of the eye. So we have the comparison of the whole beautiful heaven to a great eye of many colours, with the sun itself for a pupil.

The other line, the seventh, has not less of philosophical or meditative than of artistic beauty. There, he tells us, behold in the west another day passing into the eternity of all past time. That is one of the grandest lines in Byron.

As for the comparison of the sky to a great eye, hundreds of poets have made comparisons of a somewhat similar kind. Even when English poets or French poets speak of a "tender sky" or of "tender blue," there is a feminine suggestion. Tender signifies at once gentle and soft and loving; and a certain quality of soft colour in the human eye is intimated by the use of these soft adjectives. You will see that it is natural for such comparisons to appear in the poetry of grey-eyed and blue-eyed races—indeed you can find such comparisons suggested even in old Arabian poetry; for not all Arabs were black-eyed. But comparisons of the sky to a dark eye, a black, sparkling, flashing eye, are not common at all in English poetry. Here, however, is a daring example from Byron. He is describing a storm in the Swiss mountains above the lake; and he likens the effect to the black flashing of a woman's eye in a moment of anger or passion.

> The sky is changed!—and such a change! Oh night,
> And storm, and darkness, ye are wondrous strong,
> Yet lovely in your strength, as is the light
> Of a dark eye in woman! Far along,
> From peak to peak, the rattling crags among
> Leaps the live thunder!*

* *Childe Harold*, Canto iii. Stanza 92.

The comparison, however, is less remarkable than the splendid lines immediately succeeding it. They are often quoted by men of letters even to-day, although Byron in general is now little quoted. One more bit of sunset description — this time from "Don Juan." It would be the most beautiful of all Byron's stanzas but for a slight defect of construction. But in spite of any defect, it is very fine. It is about the time when Don Juan and the young Greek girl that had saved his life suddenly feel drawn to each other, and kiss.

> They look'd up to the sky, whose floating glow
> Spread like a rosy ocean, vast and bright;
> They gazed upon the glittering sea below,
> Whence the broad moon rose circling into sight;
> They heard the waves splash, and the wind so low,
> And saw each other's dark eyes darting light
> Into each other.*

It is the repetition of "each other" that spoils the perfection of the stanza. Tennyson would never have been guilty of such careless writing. But Tennyson could not have improved on the splendid use of simple adjectives—every one like a flash of differently coloured light. How beautiful is the word "glittering" here, as describing the dancing of the light upon the rippling sea—for glittering is a word that moves — not a stationary word like "shine." And the simple adjective "broad" has only been used with equal power by one other English poet of that age; and that one poet happened to be Coleridge. But Coleridge applied it to the face of the setting sun.† Byron first applied it with grand effect to the rising moon.

Descriptions of ghosts are not so common in western poetry that Byron's power in this direction can be easily forgotten. There is, in "The Siege of Corinth," a little description of this kind which deserves quoting. You will observe that the chief merit in the description, made with

* *Don Juan*, Canto ii. Stanza 185.

† Cf. *The Ancient Mariner*, Lines 173—4.

very simple words, is the part referring to expression, the change in the face of the dead:

> He gazed, he saw: he knew the face
> Of beauty, and the form of grace;
> It was Francesca by his side,
> The maid who might have been his bride!
> The rose was yet upon her cheek,
> But mellow'd with a tenderer streak:
> Where was the play of her soft lips fled?
> Gone was the smile that enliven'd their red.
> The ocean's calm within their view,
> Beside her eye had less of blue;
> But like that cold wave it stood still,
> And its glance, though clear, was chill.
> Around her form a thin robe twining,
> Nought conceal'd her bosom shining;
> Through the parting of her hair,
> Floating darkly downward there,
> Her rounded arm show'd white and bare:
> And ere yet she made reply,
> Once she raised her hand on high;
> It was so wan, and transparent of hue,
> You might have seen the moon shine through.*

The scene is on a battle field at night, and the captain of the host, which is to attack the city at daybreak, is startled by seeing a girl enter his tent. He asks her who she is, and she remains silent. Then looking more closely at her, he is astonished to find that she is the maiden to whom he had made a promise of marriage. He does not know that the real woman is dead—that it is only her spirit that now glides before him. Even the reader does not discover the woman to be a ghost until he comes to the line about the moonlight shining through her hand as she lifts it. But the description has been preparing him for something strange. The silence, the soundlessness of the approach, the pallid sadness of face and the long loose hair, and the single robe, suggesting a shroud, — these make a

* *The Siege of Corinth*, Stanza 20.

weird effect quite naturally leading up to the sudden discovery that the person is only a ghost. However, in the story, the hero does not yet know what we know; he thinks that he is speaking to his betrothed, for he hears her voice; and it is not until she touches him that he knows.

> Upon his hand she laid her own—
> Light was the touch, but it thrill'd to the bone,
> And shot a chillness to his heart,
> Which fix'd him beyond the power to start.
> Though slight was that grasp so mortal cold,
> He could not loose him from its hold;
> But never did clasp of one so dear
> Strike on the pulse with such feeling of fear,
> As those thin fingers, long and white,
> Froze through his blood by their touch that night.*

And when she had warned him that he must die in the morning, she disappeared. She does not fade or gradually vanish; she simply ceases to be. He looks about; there is nothing there. But he now feels sure that he will perish in to-morrow's battle.

One of the most celebrated shorter poems of Byron is the dream entitled "Darkness." I imagine that this poem may not be well known to you; and as all our previous quotations have been from the long poems, it were well to offer you at least one first class example of the shorter work. This poem presents us with the strange fancy of the sudden extinction of the sun. What would man do if the sun were suddenly to go out? The poem is very curious and very terrible, but you will recognize that it could not have been written in our own time. To-day we know very well what would happen if the sun were to burn out — the result would be, of course, a cold so tremendous that no life could exist whatever. But this weird thing was written nearly ninety years ago, and we can easily excuse the probability, or impossibility, because it is only a dream.

* *The Siege of Corinth*, Stanza 21.

I had a dream, which was not all a dream.
The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars
Did wander darkling in the eternal space,
Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;
Morn came and went—and came, and brought no day,
And men forgot their passions in the dread
Of this their desolation; and all hearts
Were chill'd into a selfish prayer for light:
And they did live by watchfires—and the thrones,
The palaces of crowned kings—the huts,
The habitations of all things which dwell,
Were burnt for beacons.

So the poem begins; and it is an impressive beginning. Perhaps the word "darkling" in the third line may be new to some of you; it is the participle of the verb "to darkle," and conveys the idea of movement in darkness better than any other word in the English language. Notice also the fine alliteration in the fifth line of the words "blind and blackening" — blackening having the same meaning of motion in darkness as the participle darkling in the third line. The idea that men would burn their houses and palaces under such circumstances, in order to get light, must remind you how young our science of electric lighting and even of gas light, happens to be. But we are reading a poem written in the year 1816. To-day no such fancy would come to us in a dream; and our cities remain at night as luminous as we could wish, even when there is no moon. However, the fancy would have been natural enough in Byron's time. He goes on to tell us how whole cities were burned merely for the sake of light, and how the forests were set on fire for the same purpose. Perhaps it will seem strange to some of you that at the time when I was a little boy coal-oil had not yet come into general use in lighting, and whale-oil was used in lamps. It would indeed have been difficult in Byron's day to think of any means of large illumination except common fire — fire of

wood especially. Next we have a fancy about the effect upon the animal world of this sudden darkness:

> The wild birds shriek'd
> And, terrified, did flutter on the ground,
> And flap their useless wings; the wildest brutes
> Came tame and tremulous; and vipers crawl'd
> And twined themselves among the multitude,
> Hissing, but stingless—they were slain for food!

This is, though imagination, imagination well supported by facts. In certain countries, where great volcanic eruptions take place, things of this kind have actually been witnessed. Practically there is no sun or moon during the eruption, for the sky is darkened by ashes and smoke, and all is pitch-black. For example, in the great eruption of Java, a few years ago, there was just such a scene of horror for the time being as Byron pictures; and the birds stopped flying — came down to the ground and fluttered there in fear, while serpents and wild beasts seemed to have become perfectly tame. But such terrible conditions soon pass away. What would be the effect if the darkness always continued? Byron imagines that it would be like this:

> And War, which for a moment was no more,
> Did glut himself again:— a meal was bought
> With blood, and each sate sullenly apart
> Gorging himself in gloom: no love was left;
> All earth was but one thought—and that was death
> Immediate and inglorious; and the pang
> Of famine fed upon all entrails—men
> Died, and their bones were tombless as their flesh;
> The meagre by the meagre were devour'd,
> Even dogs assail'd their masters, all save one,
> And he was faithful to a corse.

Of course absence of light and warmth would mean the death of all vegetation — no harvests and famine. Famine might, very probably would, lead to cannibalism. But the ugliest part of the dream is the following episode, describ-

ing how, after the whole population of a great city had perished, excepting two men, these two men met and died.

> But two
> Of an enormous city did survive,
> And they were enemies: they met beside
> The dying embers of an altar-place
> Where had been heap'd a mass of holy things
> For an unholy usage; they raked up,
> And shivering scrap'd with their cold skeleton hands
> The feeble ashes, and their feeble breath
> Blew for a little life, and made a flame
> Which was a mockery; then they lifted up
> Their eyes as it grew lighter, and beheld
> Each other's aspects—saw, and shriek'd, and died—
> Even of their mutual hideousness they died,
> Unknowing who he was upon whose brow
> Famine had written Fiend.

I suppose you perceive the suggestion — each of those starving men had become so ugly, so horrible in appearance, by reason of long suffering that he looked like a demon or goblin; and each died of fright at simply beholding the other. They did not recognize each other at all,—they only screamed and died. In all English poetry there is nothing of more horrible strength than this poem of Byron's, and it marks a new departure. The eighteenth century classical school did not allow the obtrusion of very horrible details in descriptive verse of any sort; indeed, it objected to any strong display of emotion. But the romantic school returned to older traditions, arguing that the proper function of poetry was to stir the emotions, and that the emotion of fear was one to which literary art had a perfect right to appeal. Afterwards the French romantic school took the same ground; and Victor Hugo did exactly as Byron did in his "Darkness," often making the horrible for its own sake an artistic motive. I have shown you how Byron can be thoughtful and tender, and artistic in description, and horrible when he wishes to be; I shall now make a few remarks

about his power of vivid narrative—that is to say, his power of telling a story in verse, so that his personages and his scenery appear to be real and alive.

There are two of the narrative poems that I would particularly recommend you to read. One is "The Siege of Corinth," the story of the brave Greek governor of the city, who, when the Turks captured the place, blew up the magazine with his own hand—killing himself, of course, but also killing thousands of the enemy. That is founded upon historical fact, and affords a fine example of Byron's narrative quality. But the same quality is, perhaps, even better shown in his "Mazeppa."

"Mazeppa" is not so much read as it deserves to be. It is also founded upon fact — a fact in the history of Poland. There was a young page in the court of the King John Casimir, called Mazeppa. He was a very handsome boy, and some of the ladies of the court appear to have liked him too much. At all events the husband of a certain countess thought that he had good reason to be jealous of Mazeppa, and he did a cruel thing under that conviction. He had the boy stripped naked and tied to the back of a wild horse. Then the horse was set free — the expectation being that the lad would be torn to pieces. But fate willed otherwise. The horse had come from the Cossack province of Ukraine, and as soon as he found himself free, he made straight for his own country. He galloped for days, galloped right into the field from which he had been taken, and there dropped dead with Mazeppa still on his back. Some Cossacks found the lad in this condition, cut the ropes that still bound him to the dead horse, nursed him back to health and strength, and — finding that he was a brave lad, and a good rider,—adopted him into their nation. He married the daughter of a Cossack of rank, rapidly rose from grade to grade, at last became a hetman, and is historically famous for having assisted Charles XII. I do not tell you, as Byron will tell you presently, how he revenged himself upon the Count who gave him that cruel

ride. The facts of the poem are historically true; only the emotional part is Byron's own imagination, and it is imagined well.

The first part of the poem begins at the gate of the Count's castle, as the horse darts away into the country, while the Count's retainers roar with laughter at the cruel sight. Telling the story in his old age, Mazeppa says:

> There is not of that castle gate,
> Its drawbridge and portcullis' weight,
> Stone, bar, moat, bridge, or barrier left;
> Nor of its fields a blade of grass,
> Save what grows on a ridge of wall,
> Where stood the hearth-stone of the hall;
> And many a time ye there might pass,
> Nor dream that e'er that fortress was.
> I saw its turrets in a blaze,
> Their crackling battlements all cleft,
> And the hot lead pour down like rain
> From off the scorch'd and blackening roof,
> Whose thickness was not vengeance-proof.
> They little thought that day of pain,
> When launch'd as on the lightning's flash,
> They bade me to destruction dash,
> That one day I should come again,
> With twice five thousand horses, to thank
> The Count for his uncourteous ride.
> They play'd me then a bitter prank,
> When, with the wild horse for my guide,
> They bound me to his foaming flank:
> At length I play'd them one as frank
> For time at last sets all things even—
> And if we do but watch the hour,
> There never yet was human power
> Which could evade, if unforgiven,
> The patient search and vigil long
> Of him who treasures up a wrong.*

The horse in fear and rage rushes on, straight as an

* *Mazeppa*, Stanza 10.

arrow, over the great plain, heading for the place of his birth. The boy struggles in vain to loosen his hands; they have been too well tied. Then he tries the effect of his voice—uses all those caressing words and tones which horsemen know, and which usually can quiet a trained horse even in the moment of fear. But this was no trained horse —on the contrary, a wild stallion, that had never had a man on his back before; and the sound of the voice only frightens him more, makes him rush on faster. At last, the plain is passed, and the horse rushes into a forest. Mazeppa hoped that here the stallion might tire and rest, for it was already growing dark. But no, the horse will never stop until he dies; and a new danger comes, the horrible danger of wolves.

> The boughs gave way, and did not tear
> My limbs; and I found strength to bear
> My wounds, already scarr'd with cold;
> My bonds forbade to loose my hold.
> We rustled through the leaves like wind,
> Left shrubs, and trees, and wolves behind;
> By night I heard them on the track,
> Their troop came hard upon our back,
> With their long gallop, which can tire
> The hound's deep hate, and hunter's fire.*

The last two phrases are famous—so much is expressed of the hardihood of the animal in those few words. Wolves can tire out the strongest dogs sent in pursuit of them, and they can also tire out almost any horse that they follow. But this horse they do not overtake, though the pursuit lasts all night. The animal reaches a great river at last, swims across, and gallops off, still in a straight line, to the great levels of the Ukraine. He reaches them, knows his home, gives a long loud whinny, as if to call for help and sympathy. And at that cry, thousands of wild horses rise from the grass, and rush to meet him. But as they come near, they smell the man on his back, turn about, and gal-

* *Mazeppa*, Stanza 12.

lop away in panic. The poor stallion vainly tries to gallop after them; he falls dead with Mazeppa lying insensible upon his back. When Mazeppa opens his eyes again, he is lying in a bed, under a roof. And after the rush and sound of the verse describing that terrible ride, how very soft and charming comes the description of the little Cossack house, of the Cossack girl watching at his bedside:

I woke—where was I?—Do I see
A human face look down on me?
And doth a roof above me close?
Do these limbs on a couch repose?
Is this a chamber where I lie?
And is it mortal yon bright eye,
That watches me with gentle glance?
  I closed my own again once more,
As doubtful that my former trance
  Could not as yet be o'er.
A slender girl, long-hair'd, and tall,
Sate watching by the cottage wall;
The sparkle of her eye I caught,
Even with my first return of thought;
For ever and anon she threw
  A prying, pitying glance on me
  With her black eyes so wild and free:
I gazed, and gazed, until I knew
  No vision it could be,—
But that I lived, and was released
From adding to the vulture's feast:
And when the Cossack maid beheld
My heavy eyes at length unseal'd,
She smiled—and I essay'd to speak,
  But fail'd—and she approach'd, and made
  With lip and finger signs that said,
I must not strive as yet to break
The silence, till my strength should be
Enough to leave my accents free;
And then her hand on mine she laid,
And smooth'd the pillow for my head,
And stole along on tiptoe tread,

And gently oped the door, and spake
In whispers—ne'er was voice so sweet!
Even music follow'd her light feet.*

It is impossible to deny the name of real poetry to such a composition as this, with its amazingly sudden changes from passion to passion, and from violence to tenderness. After that first lurid outburst of the spirit of vengeance, we have the story of the death-race presented to us in verses that actually ring like the feet of a horse; then what a hush, what softness and sweetness in the scene of the sick room, and the portrait of the girl-nurse! There is no better example of Byron's narrative power than "Mazeppa." If you will take the trouble to read it for yourselves, I am sure you will quickly see one fact, that it could be translated into Japanese without losing much of its interest. And that is a great proof of power. But, in conclusion, let me remind you again, that Byron is never a careful poet—he always wrote straight out of his heart, without taking the trouble to polish his verses. Any critic can find bad work in Byron; but scarcely any poet can show us, at certain splendid moments, the same strength and the same fire of emotional life.

* *Mazeppa*, Stanza 19.