

## Romantic Scholarship and Culture 1960-2001. A Byronic View

Jerome McGann

“Return with me now to those thrilling days of yesteryear!” So did the narrator introduce The Lone Ranger radio program, a passion of mine twenty-five years before I had ever thought to read anything by Lord Byron: “The Lone Ranger” -- that is to say, another (mid-twentieth century) revenant of *The Giaour*, *The Corsair*, *Mazeppa*. Beyond Bronte, Baudelaire, Berlioz, Kierkegaard, Melville, Nietzsche, etc., the Byronic generations do go on. But in 1961, when I began my doctoral work, those generations had been dispersed almost entirely into popular cultural venues. What soon struck my attention was a remarkable shift in cultural values. For nearly a hundred years Byron had fairly defined, in the broadest international context, the *meaning* of romanticism, That was the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the 20<sup>th</sup> he had all but disappeared from the most serious forms of academic and professional attention. It seemed odd that such a glaring historical anomaly, not to say contradiction, should not be at the very center of scholarly interests in the 1960s. But it wasn't. And yet the problem raised all kinds of issues affecting literary and cultural studies - - theoretical and methodological issues as well as substantive and practical ones.

I am writing that paragraph in January 2000, in the same room -- the Rare Books Room of the British Library (erstwhile, “The North Library”) -- where I wrote my doctoral thesis in 1965. Non sum qualis eram -- but more importantly, neither are romantic studies.

If Byron today does not loom across the European scene as he did in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he has clearly returned as a figure of immense importance. What has happened between the early 1960s and today that has caused such an amazing cultural shift? Why this remarkable “return of the repressed”?

We’ve built in the past 20 years some pretty formidable scholarly engines for handling questions of that kind. Useful as they are, they sometimes forget the importance of small human factors. I’m going to be a little personal here because it’s the only way, in this case, to notice a couple of those factors.

Why the re-emergence of Byron, then? Because two men, Leslie Marchand and Jock Murray, created between them a new set of conditions -- material resources as well as inspiring example and encouragement -- for exposing Byron and his work to the world. Without their work we would never have seen the important editions of the past 20 years or the critical and biographical scholarship that continue to feed off those editions.

They were the immediate agents of the change. But even their work and enthusiasm would have failed of success, I think, had it been pursued earlier in this century. The epoch of Postmodernism received, as Blake might have said, -- the excess of their delights -- and their work. Jock and Leslie came at a moment that was prepared to understand and develop their work, as the earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century, academically dominated by a Modernist neo-classicism, was not. Think of what did NOT come from the splendid work of scholars like Prothero, Coleridge, Quennell, and Mayne!

Since I was the protégé of both Leslie and Jock, I think I may be able to shed some useful light on the problem I originally posed. My own work was literally called into existence by them. In the spring of 1970 Leslie met me in London for lunch and asked me to

stop the work I was doing -- work on Swinburne and Victorian studies more generally -- and take up the OET edition of Byron's poetry. He took me up to Oxford and got the publishing contract arranged, we went back to London and over to Albemarle Street to check with Jock and get his support. All the groundwork was being set in place and in a few weeks I began a journey that would become a kind of quest. The center of this quest was the edition of Byron, but it came to involve a great deal more. It continues to this moment, perhaps more intensely than ever.

Since 1992, when the last volume of my edition was published, I have been principally occupied with other critical and scholarly projects. In fact, these pick up in certain ways exactly where I left them off when Leslie and Jock took me away to Byronland -- that is to say, they pick up with the PRB and the associated world of Victorian studies. And yet those 25 years adventuring with Byron shaped everything I'm doing now, not least of all my work with digital technology and editing and, more recently, with new forms of critical and interpretive procedures based on performative models. The Byron work shaped as well my general grasp of literary and cultural studies during this important and extended period, and it explains why my own work took the odd trajectory it did take. Let me try to tell that story now.

It requires a certain amount of academic pre-history, which I shall try to give in a spirit appropriate to such a pretentious undertaking.

Everybody here knows this story. Once upon a time there was historicism and philology, creatures of western Europe and especially Germany. They created a great nineteenth-century empire and installed a dynastic line, The Romantics, to rule what Keats

might have called its desmesne. But in doing these things -- such is the fate of empires -- they provoked the gods, those monstrous reactionaries.

And as the smart ship grew  
In stature, grace and hue  
In shadowy silent distance grew the iceberg too.

The iceberg we now call Modernism, which sank the great ship H.M.S. Romanticism.

The survivors of the cataclysm went on to sail other, largely neo-classical ships. No more leaky Pre-Raphaelite boats, full of pagan and apostate characters. No more of those distressingly critical Pilgrims of Eternity like Hugo and Byron. Most of all, no more highfalutin Romantic messiness. So out of the violent embrace of Romanticism and Modernism - a great artistic and even (as Freud shows us) a great erotic event -- came a new generation, a new clerisy. Wild children were born in the marches of Europe -- Heathcliffian Russians and Slavs -- who would later gain more legitimacy in the well-ordered English speaking homes of England and America, where well-behaved offspring were being properly raised. These were called New Critics, a civic minded group whose principal passions were not artistic but educational and cultural. They were those remarkable persons long ago summoned by Plato when he expelled the artists and poets from the republic. Plato said how sorry he was to be doing such a thing, and how he would happily revoke his order. But first, he said, the artists or their friends must make a case for bringing them back as good and well-behaved and right-thinking citizens.<sup>1</sup>

And that is exactly what the New Critics did. They taught a couple of generations how to read closely and clearly. This meant getting rid of anything that might interfere with their sometimes rather chilly clarities -- history, for starters, because history is very messy indeed, full of unreconciled contradictions and apparent irrelevancies, full of disagreeing and disagreeable characters who might dispute what was the best that has been known and thought in the world.

The program was brilliantly managed, not least in the political compromise it fashioned between those estranged lovers Romanticism and Modernism, who made up their differences, as we say, "for the sake of the children". They went to therapy together for some time -- those records have just come to light, by the way -- and each gave a little and took a little. Artists don't like to make accommodations B that's partly why Plato tossed them out of the republic -- but educators and cultural institutions are very good at it. So the Modernists agreed to cut some of their dearest relationships, some of their closest and most brilliant friends -- Gertrude Stein, Laura Riding, John Cowper Powys -- and to establish a sensible hierarchy of persons. Yeats and Joyce and Eliot would take over the main offices in the organization and the spoils would be distributed in the ways we now know very well. The Archives have been opened for all to see, the last of the secret tapes are being regularly released.

For their part, that saving remnant of Romantics -- the survivors of the titanic collision -- agreed to stop sulking like Satan in Paradise Lost. The new cultural gods had places for the Visible Darkness if it would, for its part, either civilize or abandon its most excessive and disorderly characters. And we know the result of that. Oaths of allegiance were sworn to this early version of a New World Order by -- or perhaps we should say on

behalf of assorted characters of death and blight. Those who would not submit -- Swinburne, Rossetti, most famous of all, Lord Byron -- were cut loose.

It was a brilliant political strategy, like the settlement of Europe after the fall of Napoleon. As in that earlier case, however, it also contained the seeds of its own destruction. For there were forces at work -- INvisible darkneses -- that would rise and dismantle these tidy arrangements.

The first of those forces came from unexpected quarters: from Eastern Europe and the fascist-occupied territories. That great emblem of our 20<sup>th</sup>-century civilization and enlightenment, the Second World War, completed the splendid work begun earlier between 1914-1918. Out of those furnaces -- alas, no mere metaphor as it turned out -- came a troop of living and dead persons to change the way we would have to think about this cultural work we were doing. Most of them came to America, the new seat of Empire, and those who didn't found ways to make their voices heard here.

Now you'll understand when I say that I have to be very careful at this point -- very discreet -- because in fact we're still living under the authority of this old New World Order. Most people call it Postmodernism but it has lots of names and permeates all aspects of our lives. One of its oddest qualities -- I mean, given the extreme diversity of this multinational corporation -- is the many ways it has of pledging allegiance. Most important is that you should pledge allegiance somewhere, somehow -- this is called, generically, "political correctness", a phrase that defines what you're expected to do, how to behave, by telling you what you're expected not to do. It is a flexible organization -- like an obedient horse, it turns equally well to the left or to the right.

It occurs to me, as I write this, that *one* word might eventually come to describe this sad and ludic age we live in: APPROPRIATE. I wonder if I'm behaving appropriately by saying that?

Well, I digress, not perhaps itself a very appropriate thing to do.

But turn, and turn again -- the devil take it!

This story slips for ever through my fingers.

That's Byron again, I probably have too much of him by heart. There you can blame my grammar school teachers, who made us memorize stacks of verse and prose. Not Byron of course, he was expelled from school. But I was a good student -- I went to Catholic schools after all -- and I learned what was appropriate. First to memorize and recite, then later, in New Critical college and university -- to interpret and discover deep meanings.

Then came those renegade postmodern clerics, the Theorists -- you see, I've quietly managed to slip back into my narrative again. A wave of European refugees swept across our world, as we recall, in the 60s and 70s. It was the best of times, it was the worst of times as each of us began to build our new library of sacred cultural tomes: for me, Marcuse and Adorno, Barthes and Sontag, Kate Millett, Galvano Della Volpe, Jakobson, Benjamin, Bakhtin. At the same time, in the tight little island of Romantic studies, a parallel but different upheaval was taking place. You will forgive the personal move here but it seems unavoidable, because, as I've already mentioned, these were the years when I began my Ph.D. work at, of all places, Yale, where a new set of collisions and accommodations were taking place. I don't have to explain myself if I simply give a list of the cast of characters: Cleanth Brooks, Maynard Mack, Bill Wimsatt, Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, Don

Hirsch. A great struggle of ideas was taking place, a struggle that has not yet fully resolved itself.

A resolution of sorts, or at any rate a path through the wilderness, opened up for me only after I left New Haven for my first job, at U. of Chicago. At that point, partly because of the ethos of that university, partly because of the historical moment -- 1965-1975 -- and partly because of a purely chance and personal event, I began to participate in the history I've just been sketching for you. The U. of Chicago: a locus of the most unfettered and wide-ranging intellectual debate and exchange, unguarded, often reckless, serious as if your moral life depended on the intensity of your intellectual life (which is not necessarily, of course, your spiritual life). 1965-1975: what can we say but "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive", when one's personal, social, and political being were all laid bare.

These were also the years when by the chance circumstances I already spoke about, I began work on the OET edition of Byron. For me personally, then, my engagement with Postmodernism, Literary Theory, New Historicism and Cultural Studies took shape in a scholarly world that was at once politically volatile and deeply pedantic. "Theory", so-called, came to me as a problematic set of forms, many if not most of them recalcitrant and mystified. Eventually I wrote The Romantic Ideology and its evil twin, A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism, to try to clarify my sense of immediate cultural history: the period from approximately 1910 to the present of those two books, 1978-80 -- which is when both were written, more or less simultaneously, though they only appeared in 1983. The period seemed dismally uniform, not only in its colossal brutalities, but closer and more narrowly to home, in our institutions of cultural production.

Why this continuity? Because in that span of time history became, as the word went, “bunk”: bunk at the beginning in the eyes of Henry Ford, bunk at the end in the echoing words of Ronald Reagan. The view was not so different in the academies, despite the difference in overt political allegiances. Literary scholars and critics practiced theory in the 60s and 70s largely as a continuation of the anti-historical practices of the 30s and 40s. Nor did it seem to make much difference if you were pursuing the lower criticism, so called, or the higher (that is to say, the study of material documents, on one hand, or the study of the interpretation of those documents on the other).

Clarity, such as it was, came to my view from that chance invitation to do a full critical edition of Byron. Such a marginal, dryasdust project, so out of the mainstream of the cultural conversations of 1965-1985. But that was precisely its greatest virtue, for the project set me slightly but significantly apart from the principal lines of the theoretical work that prevailed through those decades. It took 22 years, 1970-1992, to complete the edition. But I have come to bless those years, for they brought an important and quite unexpected insight into the practice of Theory itself. What did I discover? Not so much a sunken Titanic as The Wreck of the Deutschland, so to speak. That is to say, the disappeared world of philology, that once dominant mode of literary and cultural studies invented and codified by a line of great, largely German, scholars during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Textual scholars many of them, and historicists virtually all -- even those, like Nietzsche, who carried on a searching critique of the historicist imagination. This movement had installed a kind of unified field theory for humanities scholarship. And it was precisely this movement that 20<sup>th</sup> century academic Theory from New Criticism through Deconstruction worked so assiduously to dismantle.

My narrative now arrives at its second fortuitous moment. The first came in that meeting with Leslie Marchand in 1970. The second came in 1992-1993. The connection between these two events is odd and truly remarkable. To explain that, let me back up and recapitulate a bit.

For some years now “Theory” has lapsed as a driving force in literary and cultural scholarship. The main lines of the work have been felt as complete (for the time being) and we observe a widespread process of implementation and refinement.

“Theory” remains volatile and exploratory in one area, however: in textual and editorial studies. This remarkable situation is the effect of an historical phenomenon affecting every level of society, not least of all education and the humanities: the breakthrough of internet and digital technology into our normal practices of work and living. Digital media are ultimately forms of textuality. It is therefore unsurprising that the first practico/theoretical explorations of these technologies in the humanities should be made, as they are being made, at the foundational levels of literary scholarship and education: in the libraries and archives and in the work of editors, linguists, and textual scholars of all kinds. One has to return to the fifteenth-century to find a situation comparable to the one we now witness and participate in.

The recent explosion of “History of the Book” studies is a direct function of the nexus of historical studies and humanities computing, for the new technology has driven our view of books and texts to a higher level of abstract perception. The moment when one can make a virtual book, when you can reconstruct it according to the design protocols of computer technology, you realize that you “understand” the book in a new way and from a different, and in certain crucial ways from a higher, critical vantage.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, recent years have shown remarkable explorations into the structure and relation of image and text. The most dynamic

(not to say the most volatile) developments in these areas are being driven by digital technologies. Indeed, we are beginning to realize how and why we can deal with (analyze, read, interpret) text as image and vice versa. The realizations emerge, however, not from the reflections of “theory” in the traditional sense, but from people actually building and implementing computerized tools and instruments.

Why do I raise these matters here? Because my work on Byron and Romanticism was shaped in a trajectory of textual and editorial work that only reached its fruition in the hypermedia theory and electronic scholarship that has dominated my work since I went to Caltech in 1981. At that point several things began to become clear. First, that textual theory and editorial practise were and had to be the foundation of all literary studies; second, that all synthetic and interpretive operations -- what used to be called “The Higher Criticism” -- were implicitly shaped “in the last instance”, as the Marxists would say, by these forms of so-called “Lower Criticism” (the processes of language and document transmission; or, the materials, the means, and the modes of production); and finally, that at certain critical historical moments the only theory that will serve as such has to be some kind of particular, goal-driven practise.

When I began my work as a scholar, Byron and editing were both marginal literary concerns. To work on Byron in 1965 was perforce to work on a subject of “purely/merely/largely historical interest”. Until about 1980 each of those three adverbs in the phrase were in regular use. Afterwards, however, the adverb would be replaced by others. But to edit Byron between 1970-1992 was to drive the historical issues in special directions. For one thing -- I will come back to this -- it focussed my attention on the field of the closely read text. “Closely”, but not “new critically”. For another, it made me aware as I had never been that the literary works descending to us have been made and remade by specific people and in particular

institutional settings. Finally, I saw quite clearly that all these makings were historically relative and relevant, and that the edition I was making was of the same kind. “Romanticism” itself was objective and determinate only because (and as) it had been made, revised, and refashioned under different conditions by different people with different agendas and purposes. (A relativist perspective had of course been fairly widespread in the academy since the early 60s at least, and it would grow more acute during the 70s and 80s. The perspective did not develop robust historicist forms and methods until the 80s and 90s, however.)

Those last two effects of my editorial work changed everything since they led me to execute the edition under a regular attention to its circumstantial character. Editing Lord Byron. The Complete Poetical Works (1981-1992) thus became a continual reflection on the limits of its own design, and on the material and historical determinants of those limits. Eventually I found myself needing, seeking after, critical and scholarly instruments that could incarnate, so to speak, those kinds of reflexive and experimental demands. History would become the lover of necessity. Editing Byron in codex form passed over to editing Rossetti in online hypermedia: from editing as a closed system to “Editing as a Theoretical Pursuit”.<sup>3</sup>

The coming of the Internet and the digital technology it rides along is already changing humanities scholarship in the most profound ways. This process will continue and will bring a radical transformation of our disciplines -- not least because it will radically alter the ways we archive, transmit, and study our documentary inheritance, and the ways we create and develop it in the future. It takes no great prophet to see that, on the brink of a new Renaissance, the whole of our humanistic inheritance will have to be re-edited, and that this re-editing will perforce bring entirely new kinds of interpretive procedures. At UVA I’ve been extremely lucky to be able to work with a group of students and colleagues who are actively pursuing these new scholarly

and critical models. Some other time, perhaps, when we have more time, I could tell you about these activities. I bring them up here, however, because of their relevance to Byron, or at any rate to the Byron I was fortunate enough to discover during the past thirty-and-more years. So let me conclude this talk by returning to that subject.

A key problem here surely lies in the way critical and theoretical writing -- commentaries and reflections on primary acts of imagination -- commit themselves to perceiving, defining, and even acquiring "general" truth. "To generalize is to be an Idiot" Blake declares. Of course it isn't at all idiotic to generalize -- unless you're an artist! But from the artistic point of view, works of culture will always be regarded with suspicion. For works of culture do and must aspire to general authority, and the greatest of these works achieve some degree of that authority.

But artists and works of art occupy an equivocal position in the world of culture, as Plato saw. His view was that the poets and artists should be expelled, that they were at best charmingly unreliable. He went on to say -- it's important to recall this -- that they might come back if they "or their friends" could make a case for their work in other-than-artistic terms. It never occurred to Plato that artistic work -- not art as mediated by philosophers or critics, persons like myself that is to say -- that artistic work as such possessed its own intellectual or cognitive authority -- or that this authority rested exactly in the peculiar intellectual character of artistic work: that it embodied a reflexive form of unmediated knowing. For Plato -- and the view remains widespread, if much less lucidly held -- art is a craft, a rigorously procedural but non-conceptual and non-abstract method of knowing the world and reflecting on the self.

Building on the empiricism of Enlightenment, Romanticism installed "The Aesthetic" as a form of knowing. The institutions of culture have always resisted this claim of art, and in our own epoch, when the claim had been so powerfully advanced by the Romantic Imagination, their

resistance took an accommodating form. So “the function of criticism at the present time” has been to translate works of art, and especially works of Romantic art, into normative cultural terms. Poetry is thrown out of the republic by being taken in, and all are offered the chance to pledge allegiance to Cultural Literacy.

This being the case -- as I think it is -- we may find it odd that so much of our enlightened scholarship should be widely scorned or attacked by persons interested in “cultural values”. But this is yet another of our illusory contradictions. The scholarly world, even in the rich little “desmesne” of Romantic studies, mirrors the larger world. While many people these days inveigh about a crisis of moral values, it seems to me we live in a staggeringly moral, not to say moralistic, not to say puritanical, age. The problem is that morality and puritanism run in a free market, like so much else these days. There’s fierce competition for control of the moral market and the result is – capitalism’s so great at this -- that the players look for every chance to cut costs. A good moral product should be simple, unambiguous, and easily consumable. So moral market players put a high value on knowing -- or on *Somebody* knowing -- when something’s right and when it’s wrong. (That’s “Somebody” as in Swinburne, whose favorite devotional utterance was “Thank Somebody”.) Remember New York’s Mayor Giuliani, who recognized the wickedness of an African madonna! And other Somebodies have such keen sight that they know an axis of evil when they see it.

It’s true, I’m digressing again. But that’s a very romantic thing to do, as you all know. It isn’t perhaps very moral, however; it’s kind of slippery and shape-shifting and only capable in negative and ambiguous ways. We used to know what Romanticism was but now look at the scene. A mob of scribbling women exploding across the landscape, gothic monsters unloosed everywhere. As for that solid and saving remnant, non sunt quales erant. Think of poor

Coleridge and Byron, what a mess they were! Morally speaking, I mean. Shelley was an atheist, Keats -- by his own account -- a “nothing”, and Blake an antinomian wierdo whose hostility to all forms of cultural order except the free and unfettered artistic imagination was virtually absolute. At least there’s Wordsworth, you might think -- an apostate, true, but an apostate not from but to rectitude. Yet even there, appearances are mightily deceiving. Fornicator, political apostate, and -- perhaps most dismaying of all -- a man who recoiled from his best friend because he saw his weakness and his sin.

How are the mighty fallen.

But perhaps that fall is felix. Do we really want our artists to be good citizens, or their work sold on the market of morals? We might think otherwise if we think again about Plato. When he proposed to throw the artists out of the Republic, we may recall, he said he would let them stay if they “or their friends” -- that’s us, folks, the scholars and critics -- could make a case for including them. Few remember any more, however, that Plato laid down a restriction on the kind of case they would be allowed, in his scheme, to make: it had to be a prose case, no fancy and deceptive and shape-shifting poetical tricks! In other words, it had to be a case made on Plato’s terms. A philosophical case. A moral case. If a beautiful case, a beauty like the Ten Commandments. Not beautiful like The Prelude, that astonishing act of self-revelation by self-deception and, ultimately, by self-crucifixion. Not like Don Juan, that Nietzschean star dancing so gracefully, so bravely, so deliberately on its own grave.

What is the price of such art and such experience,

Do men buy it for a song,

Or wisdom for a dance in the street? No, it is bought with the price

Of all that a man hath, his house, his wife, his children.

Wisdom is sold in the desolate market where none come to buy.

[Four Zoas, Night Second]

What kind of romantic acts are worthy of a Millennial moment? Fallen, ruined -- human acts. But plain and open to see, like those human faces who have spent their time shopping in desolate markets East of Eden and its “tents of prosperity” -- the tents Blake also called, in that wonderfully direct way of his, “the wastes of Moral Law”. Wordsworth’s bad and failed faith is written all across his poetry, whose greatness feeds upon that source: “For we have built our temples in/ The place of excrement”. What else should we decorate ourselves and our gods with except dung, what else do we really have to offer! The great truth of American evangelism, a distinct form of romantic expression, is exactly its tawdry and factitious display, nowhere more surely shown than on the endless empty spectacle of television. Moralists of every stripe decry that pitiful landscape of hopes and illusions. But the landscape is populated with unforgettable human faces -- the on-screen reflecting the off-screen world, as art always does. There we are, look at us. True, it’s often hard to do, we turn away in disgust. Pat Robertson, Heraldo, the wastelands of Jeopardy, pro wrestling, and endless endless “sports”. Katie Couric (insipid), Martha Stewart (vacuus), Rosie O’Donnell and Oprah Winfrey on the road of their good intentions.

There we are, look at us. It’s a romantic world, late and decadent. But as Harold Bloom acutely saw and said, years ago, to be romantic is perforce to be belated. Why shouldn’t Byron have come back to us 150 years after he died?

Of all the great Romantics, he stood and stands apart in one well-known respect: his opposition to what he called “system” of any kind. This opposition made it difficult for the culture industries circa 1820-1960 to translate him and his work into marketable forms of an abstract or moral kind. That translation of Romantic practises, however, was carried out during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries by laying such forms of enlightenment over Romantic practises -- forms lifted, shrewdly, from the speculative and theoretical writings of some key Romantic figures. Blake called the process “choosing forms of worship from poetic tales”.

And so there is Byron. For if that notorious man’s once fabulous valuation plunged in those markets and culture industries that were pursuing, as Arnold famously put it, “the best that has been known and thought in the world”, it sustained itself elsewhere: in the market of images. This is a very different and, as it would turn out, a very Postmodern thing. It is a market dominated by biographers, by collectors, and -- in the 20<sup>th</sup> century -- by the Media industries. Byronic heroes run rampant across the silver screen, and with the emergence of “our” age, aptly called the Society of the Spectacle, Byron’s aesthetic aptitudes have, I believe, never seemed more relevant.

Why is this so? Because poets do not fashion their materials abstractly, they produce critical forms -- which is to say, reflexive forms -- that escape the limits of discursive form. The artist’s primary care is to generate ideas through material practises: to make something, to make something concrete and specific. These material forms are physically determinate but cognitively flooded. Underdetermined conceptually, overdetermined materially. Aesthetic work is apparitional and, as such, open -- famously open -- to different interpretive uses. Who is the hero of “hero” of Paradise Lost: God, Christ, Satan, Adam and Eve? The Reader?

So poetry will always be the demon -- the redemptive dream -- of philosophy. In our day Byron has emerged, has returned, as a demon of great consequence precisely because of his famous despair and disillusionment. He is an artist -- an illusion-maker -- who reflects what it means to live humanly in a world seen through a disillusionment that is as cool as it is innocent. His observation, carried out with a kind of pitiless sympathy, is most effective because it includes the observer, Lord Byron, in the contradictory Spectacle it half creates and half perceives -- a spectacle swinging between extremes of depravity and splendour. Think of the image, the legend, of the man himself and then pose yourself the question, as we might pose it of Paradise Lost: "Who is the hero of Lord Byron's works?" A shape-shifting figure begins to form itself for us. Moral judgments of praise and blame rise up and fall away from him and will never cease to do so. "Others abide our question, thou art free". Just so. Yet freedom itself is a highly equivocal moral idea, despite the unexamined ideology of our reigning, democratic Empire.

And now insert Lord Byron and his works into this age of ours, this Spectacular Society and American Empire. We have had fifty years to look back with clarity and horror and an inevitably cynical wonderment at the spectacle of Western Civilization. We have an Imperial view of this scene, our American view (whether or not we are US citizens). We are -- as Byron knew himself to be, as Wordsworth (for example) deliberately chose not to be -- "citizens of the world" -- a phrase that fairly defines the (equivocal) meaning of the word "Imperial". Byron's eyes have been here before, have seen all this. And most important of all, Byron saw himself as part of the scene: a player, a participant, "doomed to inflict or bear", as he once so memorably said. What a difference it makes to survey the Great Wars' bestial floors from the vantage of Viet Nam, Palestine, Northern Ireland -- Bosnia, Kosovo, Cambodia, Chile, Uganda, Afghanistan. . . .

How does one live in such a world and with such a disillusioned view of it, being in it? Byron's verse poses that question over and over again -- it is one of his "leading tendencies", to pose the question and to keep posing it. Here is one famous posing (from Childe Harold):

But let us ponder boldly – 'tis a base  
Abandonment of reason to resign  
Our right of thought -- our last and only place  
Of refuge; this, at least, shall still be mine:  
Though from our birth the faculty divine  
Is chain'd and tortured, cabin'd, cribb'd, confined  
And bred in darkness lest the truth should shine  
To brightly on the unprepared mind,  
The beam pours in, for time and skill will couch the blind.

(st. 127)

The truth of this text comes as the contradiction between its "what" and its "how". "Reason" and a "Right of Thought" are declared "our last and only place of refuge", and the argument is that a persistence of disciplined inquiry will bring enlightenment. But even assuming this actual result, what then? To see thus clearly, we now grow to see, is to be astonished with a visible darkness stretching back across the forty-nine stanzas before this one and forward to forty-four that directly follow it, all linked to "the electric chain of that despair" (st. 172) which is the Byronic byword. You shall know the truth and it will not set you free: that is an essential part of the message here.

It is not the whole of the message -- or rather, the text is imagining itself beyond its discursive form. The chain of despair is electric, forbidding rest or any but momentary comforts. To be Byronic is precisely not to be laid asleep in body to become a living soul. So beyond the dream of Reason and its Right of Thought is the driving verse, the famous passion emblemized by those astonishing enjambments that fractured for ever the purity of the Spenserian inheritance:

I know not why -- but standing thus by thee  
It seems as if I had thine inmate known,  
Thou Tomb! And other days come back to me  
With recollected music, though the tone  
Is changed and solemn, like the cloudy groan  
Of dying thunder on the distant wind;  
Yet could I seat me by this ivied stone  
Till I had bodied forth the heated mind,  
Forms from the floating wreck which Ruin leaves behind;

And from the plank, far shatter'd o'er the rocks,  
Build me a little bark of hope, once more  
To battle with the ocean and the shocks  
Of the loud breakers, and the ceaseless roar  
Which rushes on the solitary shore  
Where all lies foundered that was ever dear:

But could I gather from the wave-worn store

Enough for my rude boat, where should I steer?

There woos no home, no hope, nor life, save what is here. . . .

There is the moral of all human tales;

'Tis but the same rehearsal of the past;

First Freedom, and then Glory -- when that fails,

Wealth, vice, corruption -- barbarism at last,

And History, with all her volumes vast,

Hath but *one* page,-- 'tis better written here

Where gorgeous Tyranny hath thus amass'd

All treasures, all delights, that eye or ear,

Heart, soul, could seek, tongue ask -- Away with words! draw near,

Admire, exult, despise, laugh, weep,--for here

There is such matter for all feeling:--

(Sts. 104-106)

And so on, relentlessly. It has been said that Byron's verse can't be appreciated in brief quotation. These stanzas illustrate why (and how) that's true. This is verse observing its own passion of thought, the passion of its insistence, its determination to think and think again and again. The imagined "refuge" -- the dreams of home, hope, and life -- are precisely "here", in these moving lines that signal a decision never to cease thinking this side of an absolute

extinction. Nor is there any thought that the thinking will come out “right”, for this is thinking that lives in its expenditures. Unlike Wordsworth (once again), Byron’s writing begins and thrives in disillusion. At its finest moments it is either ludic or it is failing. Like Beckett, however, the texts rise to unbuild themselves repeatedly. In the process they cast not dark shadows but a kind of invigorated negative textual space. So here “meaning” slips free of every conclusion, including the idea of conclusiveness, and fuses with its eventuality.

Lyric self-expression marks a romantic ethos, and this verse fairly epitomizes its style. So for a hundred years Byronism in poetry was another name for romanticism. At that point, with the emergence of Modernism’s neo-classical demands, a different style of romanticism was summoned from the deep romantic chasm. This was called “The Greater Romantic Lyric”.<sup>4</sup> It is not a form that Byron cultivated, and on the one occasion when he undertook it, in Canto III of Childe Harold, he did so only to heat it to meltdown. His practise forecast what would emerge in late twentieth-century romantic scholarship, starting with the immensely influential work of Geoffrey Hartman and Paul DeMan. Romantic lyricism, we came to see, was a field of “aporias” and brave self-conflictions. But this was not to deconstruct the art of romanticism, it was to break off from a neo-classical reading of that art. (And to point this out here, let me hasten to add, is not to say that the neo-classical reading is “wrong”, it is merely to signal its case and its kind.)

Byron’s cultural re-emergence in the late twentieth-century is thus an historical fate. Who else could redeem romantic self-expression from the conceptual heavens that threatened it? Byron’s lyric style became romanticism’s dark angel when his work was officially cast off and set apart. That critical move, which can be given a precise historical locus as we know, would insulate Byron from the aesthetic challenge raised by deconstruction. His

work is nearly invisible through deconstructive lenses exactly because it is a discourse of failure, plainly imperfect -- a "spoiler's art" whose first aim is to grow in its own spoliation.

own value. Lamb was, however, “a moderate minded bard”, and the unpretentious clarity of this splendid work -- which I won’t soil by calling great -- might well be an even better than Byronic “light to lesson ages. . .and voluptuous princes”.

#### Verses for an Album

“Clasp the book”: I would like to leave you with that touching, ambiguous figure as an amulet for passing into the new Millenium, shadowed as it is with the struggle of Arnoldian bands and digital technologists, who both seem too often to forget that they too are Leaving Las Vegas.

---

<sup>1</sup> See The Republic X. 606e-608b.

<sup>2</sup> See "The Rationale of HyperText", in Electronic Text. Investigations in Method and Theory, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford, 1997), 19-46.

<sup>3</sup> "Hideous Progeny, Rough Beasts: Editing as a Theoretical Pursuit" (the 1997 presidential Address to the Society for Textual Scholarship), TEXT 11 (1998-1999), 1-16.

<sup>4</sup> The phrase of course refers to the justly celebrated essay by M. H. Abrams, “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric,” From Sensibility to Romanticism, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York, 1965), 527-560.

<sup>5</sup> For a fuller exploration of this important feature of Byron=s work see my pamphlet Byron and Wordsworth (The Byron Foundation: Nottingham, 1998).