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BYRON AND THE MODERNIST WRITERS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

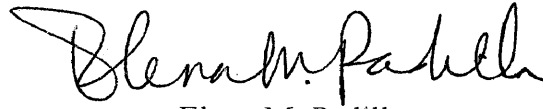
Elena M. Padilla

2002

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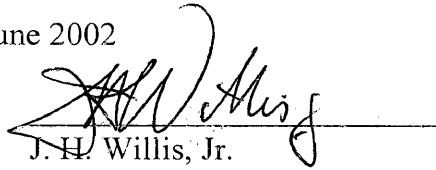
This Thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts



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Approved, June 2002



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Christy Burns

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to examine Byron's popularity among the modernist writers, in particular: James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, W. H. Auden, and T. S. Eliot. Some attention was also given to Harriet Monroe, founder and editor of one of the modernist period's leading poetry magazines.

The years covered are from 1906 to 1938. During those years Byron's popularity with these writers stemmed from how closely they perceived him as one of their own. That is, his popularity was not born out of their admiration for his Romantic sensibilities, but rather, for what they perceived as his divergence from them. But this difference would not have been enough. They also admired him for the similarities he and his writings had to them.

BYRON'S POPULARITY WITH MODERNIST WRITERS

JAMES JOYCE, VIRGINIA WOOLF, W. H. AUDEN, AND T. S. ELIOT

INTRODUCTION

By the time of his death, Byron's infamy had lessened. And though the circumstances of his death were filled with as much drama as his life, it did not stir as much controversy as its centenary did years later in 1924. The anniversary of his death fell at the middle of the early modernist period, and it is worth considering how Byron was perceived by the modernist writers. Their interest in him can be measured against the period's emphasis on satire, as well as against the individual writer's sense of culture and political values.

The writers I will examine here, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, W. H. Auden, and T. S. Eliot were important creators and shapers of literary modernism, and their re-evaluation or re-discovery of Byron was one dimension of that modernism. Byron's centenary may have been the catalyst for the modernist writers' interest in Byron, but these writers had other reasons for referring to Byron and assessing his works. They liked his irreverent and iconoclastic spirit, which was boldly innovative and similar to theirs, and they also admired his satire and narrative skill. By examining the references to Byron in the works of Joyce, Woolf, Auden, and Eliot, I intend to demonstrate what specifically these writers found useful in him and how their reading of him defines them more than it does Byron.

The year of Byron's centenary elicited a large scholarly response. Over one hundred titles were published, ranging from commemorative books, to essays celebrating

the centenary, to biographical articles. Oscar Santucho divides the biographical material into four categories: those that deal with the people in Byron's life, with the places he visited, with the stages in his life, and with what Santucho describes as "morbid interests," namely Byron's lameness or final illness (57). For the most part, the non-biographical material relates to the standard topics of critical assessment: his style, form, content, and satire. In Byron studies these evaluative works were considered a step forward because his writing was finally being assessed critically after the preoccupation with the sensationalism of his personal life.

The years 1906 to 1938, the period which I will cover, show a spotty publication history for Byroniana, except for the centenary year 1924. The year 1922 managed to revive the incest scandal surrounding Byron and his half-sister Augusta since it was in that year that Lady Lovelace published the letter that, some say, proves the incest charge. But it was not this and other salacious events surrounding Byron's reputation that held the interest of the modernist writers. When they examined him they claimed his style and form and spirit were like their own.

James Joyce has a character read Byron's poetry first in the Dubliners story, *A Little Cloud*, written in 1906 (published in 1914). Virginia Woolf had been referring to Byron privately, in her diaries and letters, since 1908. In 1936 W. H. Auden wrote Byron a verse letter during his trip to Iceland. And T.S. Eliot's essay "Byron," written in 1937, did much to establish the poet as a subject worthy of analysis. Eliot's essay caused a critical reevaluation of Byron's works, with a new appreciation of Don Juan (1819-24). It is during this time that it supplants Childe Harold (1812-18), in the critics' appraisal, as

Byron's greatest work. This is due partly to Eliot's high regard for Byron's satiric ability, and from this moment begins the long tradition of assessing and acclaiming Byron's satire as among the best in English literature.

But these were not the only writers making references to Byron. Oscar Santucho documents that over one hundred titles related to Byron were published in 1924. Among them was Samuel Chew's Byron in England (1924), which was reviewed favorably in March 1924 by John St. Loe Strachey, who was editor of *The Spectator* and cousin to Lytton Strachey, a member of Bloomsbury. Harold Nicolson also reviewed Chew's book in the *Nation and Athenaeum* in April 1924, finding it "an indispensable work of future reference for all students of Byron literature" (18). That same year Nicolson published his own book on Byron titled, Byron, the Last Journey: April 1823 – April 1824, which was reviewed by Clive Bell and John St. Loe Strachey. Bell enjoyed the book, finding it a "pleasure to read" and one which he was "sorry to finish" (25). Strachey wrote that the "book is a very true delineation of Byron's mind and character, a true general analysis" (427).

Another title issued in 1924 was one written by Harriet Monroe, the founder and editor of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. Her article was significant because she published one of the most important poetry magazines that helped define her era. *Poetry* was the first American magazine to publish Ezra Pound, Robert Frost, and T. S. Eliot. Monroe's article commemorated and extolled Byron's talent on the centenary of his death. She summarized the fame of Byron the man, and then turned to a serious examination of his poetry, anticipating what Eliot would say thirteen years later:

Well, as a poet where does he stand after these hundred years?—for it should be our business to strip his work of all those so potent glammers of personality, rank, beauty, amatory indiscretions, political enthusiasms; to disregard as well the over-severe reactions of contempt which these glammers have evoked during the past century; and to judge his poems as works of art. (“Byron” 35)

Monroe went on to praise the passion with which he infused his poetry, a passion she found lacking in her contemporaries. And as she praised Don Juan as his masterpiece, she said that Byron also ushered in a new poetic mode which she described as “conversationally familiar narrative verse” (37). Like Woolf, Auden, and Eliot, she praised Byron’s gift for the narrative form, his satiric mastery, and realism:

but no one had effected quite this combination of lightly touched humorous satire, sharp description, and narrative covering episodes amusing, pathetic, tragic, absurd—indeed, sometimes all four together, with the inconsistency of life itself. It was an unshrinking realism then new to poetic art and not yet improved upon by any of the moderns who have worked in this genre. (38)

She ended her article by asserting that in the world of 1924, Byron's rank was secure among the greatest of Romantic poets.

Not all of the books published on Byron in 1924 dealt solely with his poetry. Dora Raymond wrote The Political Career of Lord Byron (1924). It was reviewed in the *New Republic* in October 1924 where it was praised for dealing soundly with Byron’s

ideas. And according to the reviewer, Chew and Raymond both wrote books that clearly showed how Byron's contemporaries feared him, not for his immoral behavior, but because he was a man of ideas:

It is becoming increasingly clear that he was cast out by British society, not because he had love affairs so much as because he had ideas. The Tories were afraid of his habit of independent criticism, and the divines were uneasy because of his powers of debate. The Byronic hero is a little gaudy now, but the mentality of the poet is still fresh and vigorous and interesting. (Jones 6)

The reviewer, Howard Mumford Jones, finished with the following: "And we, whose poets are over-concerned with technique and not concerned with ideas, we may well turn to the vigor of *Don Juan* and *The Vision of Judgment* to learn that the secret of immortality is not necessarily perfection of form but rather fundamental brain work" (7). It was that "brain work," that Byron demonstrated in his satires and in his irreverent and iconoclastic spirit that caught and held the admiration of Joyce, Woolf, Auden, and Eliot.

I. Joyce

In 1894, at the age of twelve, Joyce was bullied by some of his school-fellows, for declaring Byron the greatest poet. “Byron was a bad man,” they answered, proceeding to capture Joyce, “the heretic,” to try and force him to recant his opinion (Ellmann 40). The incident became prototypical for Joyce: he, stubbornly, suffered for his opinions. As Ellmann implies, Joyce should have named someone other than Byron, someone less controversial, someone like Tennyson, as his school-mate Connolly did (40). But Joyce’s preference cannot be dismissed as one made by a young mind that had yet to understand the consequence of what it said. His choice of Byron was not made on a whim for undoubtedly Joyce had considered the matter. He would later incorporate the incident in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914).

Joyce’s first published reference to Byron is in the *Dubliners* story *A Little Cloud*, written in 1906, but published in 1914. The story’s main character, Little Chandler, reads a portion of Byron’s poem *On the Death of a Young Lady, Cousin of the Author and Very Dear to Him* (written in 1802, published 1807) when, after meeting with his old friend Gallaher, he becomes dissatisfied with himself and his surroundings and wishes more than ever to be a poet. While performing the mundane, that is, while watching the baby as his wife steps out to the market, and dwelling more and more on the sources of his unhappiness, he opens a book of Byron’s poetry and settles upon one of Byron’s earliest poems, one that is remarkable more for its youthful sentimentality than for its artistry. The irony is that Little Chandler does not realize it. He is too caught up in his poetic,

melancholy dream. Little Chandler's poetic sensibility is under-developed. He has before him the volume of a great poet, but he is not inspired by Byron's better poetry. When the crying baby interrupts him, Little Chandler despairs, saying "He couldn't read" (100). And therein lies the irony, for Little Chandler means it literally but the reader knows it is figurative as well. Joyce's tribute to Byron lies in using Byron's early work to show Little Chandler's inadequacies.

Little Chandler may have some knowledge of poets, choosing from the works of a better known and gifted poet, but that just adds to story's overall tone of failed dreams and romantic illusion (or delusion). Little Chandler is thirty-two and still holds aspirations of becoming a great poet. Yet, his timidity prevents him from spontaneously reciting poetry to his wife. And when he is brave, it is merely to walk a dark city street "...whenever he found himself in the city late at night he hurried on his way apprehensively and excitedly. Sometimes, however, he courted the causes of his fear. He chose the darkest and narrowest streets..." (83). He is a stunted image of the Byronic (and Joycean) hero. Unlike Byron's Cain, Childe Harold, or Juan, Little Chandler is not brave. He does not challenge convention in any manner. In fact, his thoughts betray his own conventionality, such as when he wishes his name were "more Irish-looking" (86), when he timidly insists that Paris is immoral (90), and when he thinks that Gallaher should not be more fortunate than he since Gallaher is his "inferior in birth and education" (95).

Joyce said of Dubliners that his "intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of [his] country." And that he wrote it "for the most part in a style of scrupulous

meanness” (Letters 2: 134). But Byron never held the artistic vision that Joyce did. As Hermione de Almeida says, Byron wanted Don Juan “to be a map of Europe in his time, especially of its social mores” (15). By satirizing Regency England’s society he exposed its hypocrisy, which may or may not have been his intention, for as he wrote to John Murray, “do you suppose that I could have any intention but to giggle and make giggle?—a playful satire with as little poetry as could be helped—was what I meant” (Byron, Selected Letters 214).

Joyce’s second reference to Byron is in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, in which Stephen Dedalus answers “Byron, of course” when he is asked who he thinks is the greatest poet (81). Joyce’s brother, Stanislaus, wrote in his diary about A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man that, “It is to be autobiographical, and naturally as it comes from Jim, satirical” (Ellmann 147). Joyce presents Stephen’s development as an artist using two major elements: Stephen’s desire for solitude and his ultimate exile.

Throughout the novel Stephen is presented as an outsider, of both circumstance and choice. It is only at the children’s party that he begins to revel in it: “But when he had sung his song and withdrawn into a snug corner of the room he began to taste the joy of his loneliness” (68). After enjoying his solitariness, he consciously imitates Byron when he attempts to write his own verses to the girl he likes: “He knew it was right to begin so for he had seen similar titles in the collected poems of Lord Byron” (70). As he enters young adulthood, he plunges into sexual excess, visiting brothels and prostitutes.

Childe Harold and Don Juan seem to be models for Stephen since they were also exiled. But there is a difference between how Joyce and Byron used exile. Byron used it

as a starting point for his two characters; he did not make their exile a culmination for either of them. For Byron, in his own life as well as in his poetry, exile was necessary. Cut from society he had no recourse but to leave. Byron may have wanted to prove that life continued outside of England. He and his characters continued to lead interesting and colorful lives which were always popular subjects for discussion in England. With Joyce, matters were different. For him, exile became a moral and artistic decision. Ellmann says that “Joyce needed exile as a reproach to others and a justification of himself . . . He was neither bidden to leave nor forbidden to return” (109). And later, “Joyce's books were to describe various kinds of separation,... His heroes were to seek freedom, which is also exile, by will and by compulsion” (109). Exile was something that happened to Byron; Joyce chose it.

Separation and exile were manifest forms of escape for Joyce who found his ties to mother and homeland constricting for his formation as an artist. This was probably why he used self-imposed exile as the culmination for A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Stephen's departure marks him as one who is driven by the urge to be an artist, one who will go to great lengths to escape the restrictions of his Catholic culture and society. His inability to conform to his society also makes him rebellious. He cannot conform to their strictures or conventions. He is an outsider whose only recourse is exile.

Joyce referred to Byron next in Ulysses. Walter Anderson argues that Joyce used Don Juan to plan Ulysses, imitating it when he too modeled his own work on the classical epics. But Anderson's most interesting point is how Joyce arrived on the date for his novel. He says that Joyce described the events of June 16th as Nora's seduction of

him, which was close to the date of June 6th, when Juan was seduced by Donna Julia. Granted, the dates do not align perfectly, but as Anderson says “Joyce may have been struck by the coincidences between Juan’s and his own case and through Byron’s example realized their aptness for literary exploitation” (830). He goes on to argue that Joyce acknowledges the debt to Byron and Nora when he has Bloom present Molly with a copy of Byron’s poems during their courtship (*Ulysses* 612:185). This is revealed during the *Penelope* episode, which Joyce wrote in 1921. Molly also reveals that Bloom tried to look like Lord Byron (612:209). Bloom, like Stephen, thought of Byron when courting a woman. And they both tried to imitate Byron—Bloom by physically trying to look like him and Stephen artistically, when beginning his verses like him.

In *Ulysses* Bloom refers to Byron twice. The first time is in the *Lotus-Eaters* when, on his way to the post-office, he passes the tea merchants and thinks of the far east. During this reverie, he says “Flowers of idleness,” which is referring to Byron’s volume *Hours of Idleness*, published in 1807 (58:34). The second reference Bloom makes to Byron is during the *Nausicaa* chapter. After realizing Gerty is lame (similar to Byron’s condition with a club foot), he remains and has a silent monolog, during which he repeats Childe Harold’s parting words to England: “My native land, goodnight” (308:1080). This seems a fitting thought for Bloom since it is nearing 9:00 P.M., but he cannot return home. He knows that for this evening he has been displaced by Blazes Boylan.

Between the publication period of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce’s letters record his attempt from September 1930 to January 1931 to make an opera of Byron’s *Cain*, describing both as “the work and name of a great poet” (*Letters* 296). He began by

writing to the composer George Antheil in 1930. His excitement over the project was evident, writing to Antheil that the “People here think that the combination Cain-Byron-Antheil-Sullivan with myself thrown in as scissors-man would be the greatest event in the artistic future” (Letters 296).

He had completed Act I and wanted to start Act III; unfortunately, Antheil did not think it would succeed on the German stage unless Joyce wrote the libretto, but Joyce “would never have the bad manners to rewrite the text of a great English poet” and sensing Antheil’s enthusiasm waning, dropped the matter gracefully (Letters 297). In 1934 Joyce tried to persuade another composer, Othmar Schoeck, to write the Cain opera, but without success (Ellmann 669).

What may have interested Joyce in Byron’s Cain is that Cain is forced into exile after killing his brother. His parents curse him to wander without friends or shelter, never finding solace for the crime he committed: “May all the curses / of life be on him! and his agonies / Drive him forth o’er the wilderness like us / From Eden” (3.1.421-4) and later, “Cain! get thee forth: we dwell no more together” (3.1.444). But before his crime, Cain is presented to the reader as a solitary figure, one who does not conform to rules of society. He manifests his rebellion when he refuses to pray to God and when he questions Adam’s and Eve’s fear and piety: “it *was* the tree of knowledge; / it *was* the tree of life:—knowledge is good, / And life is good; / and how can both be evil? (1.1.36-8). Later Cain is convinced that following Lucifer will satiate his thirst for knowledge. After Cain kills Abel and is condemned by his family, an Angel appears, confirming Cain’s fate: “a fugitive shalt thou / Be from this day, and vagabond on earth!” (3.1.475-

6). An interesting note to this, is that Joyce once referred to himself as a vagabond in a letter to Nora: “I cannot enter the social order except as a vagabond” (Letters 2: 48).

Joyce last referred to Byron in his fiction in Finnegans Wake and since all characters, conversation, and history are blended, it is no surprise that among the many voices and images are Byron and his personas, Harold and Juan. In Finnegans Wake, Joyce reveals that H. C. Earwicker is, among others, Haroun Childeric Eggeberth. HCE’s son, Shem, flees into Byronic exile “making his pillgrimage of Childe Horrid.” (176, 423). Later, in a wonderfully ironic moment, Joyce’s Jaun condemns Shem of committing incest, “like boyrun to sibster” (465). Then, as noted by Robert Gleckner, “Childe Harold remains as HCE and Byron, his creator, is properly seen as Shem-Joyce” (44). This seems Joyce’s final tribute to Byron, his intentional confusion and intermingling of himself and his characters with Byron and his characters, and it acknowledges what the public has always done to both Byron, and Joyce.

Joyce admired Byron because he, like Joyce, was satirical, cynical, and spirited. Joyce never recorded his reasons for thinking of Byron as the greatest poet. Neither did he ever write an outright tribute to Byron, although the *Cain* opera might have been one. But, by examining Joyce’s writings it is evident that his choice of greatest poet was someone he was inspired by, and referred to. Joyce’s tribute to Byron lay in his long-standing admiration for the early Byronic heroes, Manfred and Childe Harold, as well as the later satirical Byronic narrator in Don Juan.

II. Woolf

Virginia Woolf read Byron for the first time in 1908, when Clive Bell gave her an edition of Byron's poetry as a Christmas gift. The only reason she had not read Byron before, she wrote, was for "a lack of an edition to read him" (Letters 1: 376). It was only in 1904 that the complete collection of Byron's works was finally made available by the publishers Coleridge and Prothero. Unlike Joyce, whose references to Byron are mostly in his fictions, Virginia Woolf made more detailed references to Byron in her diaries and letters.

She found his writing more compelling, especially his style, which she thought endlessly versatile. And she admired his talent with satire, just as Joyce did. Woolf also had high regard for Byron's prose. As for his letters, she remained firm; they were among the best she had ever read. On August 7, 1918, she wrote in her diary "Byron had superb force; his letters prove it." (Diary 1: 180).

In the next day's entry she raised some of the issues that T. S. Eliot would discuss nineteen years later in his essay "Byron." Woolf had been reading Don Juan, which she described as "the most readable poem of its length ever written" (Diary 1: 180-1). She praised "the springing random haphazard galloping nature of its method," which she considered "a discovery by itself. Its what one has looked for in vain—a[n] elastic shape which will hold whatever you choose to put into it" (Diary 1: 181).

Woolf focused on Byron's writing method because in it she saw a way of writing that was not constricting. She wrote that he "wasn't committed to be poetical; & thus

escaped his evil genius of the false romantic & imaginative” (Diary 1: 181). Byron could attack any subject he wanted without being tiresome because he was willing to remain flexible with whatever he wrote. And Woolf did not mind if his subject matter was racy or daring so long as he was realistic: “these kind of illicit books are far more interesting than the proper books which respect illusion devoutly all the time” (Diary 1: 181). When he wrote, Byron did not attempt to appease or shelter his audience and thus was an honest writer: “he could say whatever came into his head” (Diary 1: 181).

Woolf stressed the writer’s freedom to say whatever she chose because by doing so the writer could write honestly. A year later, in her 1919 essay, “Modern Novels,” she was working on the idea of form and its effect on style when she wrote that “It is doubtful whether in the course of the centuries, though we have learnt much about making machines, we have learnt anything about making literature” (“Modern Novels” 31). For Woolf, the influences, or rules, of the past were constricting both the novel and the novelist. She wrote that

the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-filling vestments as we provide. Nevertheless we go on perseveringly, conscientiously, constructing our thirty-two chapters after a design which more and more ceases to resemble the vision in our minds.
 (“Modern Novels” 32-33)

She is talking about the modern novelists’ difficulty in writing what they want as well as the doubt they feel about the form to which they adhere. The formula for what makes a novel is less and less satisfying to them, yet, they continue to follow it and become like

the novelists that Woolf mentioned earlier, materialists, past writers who described the very last detail in their novels because that is what they knew of novel writing. When modern novelists comply with the old thirty-two chapter rules they inhibit the novel's development. Woolf suspected that modern novelists did not believe this is how novels should be constructed and urged them to let go of the past. "The proper stuff of fiction' does not exist," she wrote, "everything is the proper stuff of fiction; whatever one honestly thinks, whatever one honestly feels" ("Modern Novels" 36).

Her desire for writers to write whatever they chose was also part of the culture fostered by the Memoir Club when it was formed by the Bloomsbury group in 1920. They demanded absolute frankness in their memoirs since the goal was to recall reality, not create it (L. Woolf 114). In an unfinished essay that she began in early 1922, Woolf returned to the topic of Byron writing from actual observation of life, not the generalization of it. Byron was not like the poet who wrote of life in general; he used language in an "exact and ordinary" manner. "Byron was a novelist—that is to say he came at his conception through his observation of actual life. Byron...writes the perfection of prose" (Essays 3: 481).

In addition to Woolf's references to Byron in her letters, diaries, or essays, she also referred to him in her fiction. It is interesting to note that those moments are when she is on the topic of letter writing. In 1918 she had said that Byron's letters had "superb force." In Jacob's Room (1922) the narrator interrupts to comment "Let us consider letters" (92). The narrator holds letters in high regard for they are "venerable...infinitely brave, forlorn, and lost" and "Life would split asunder without them" (93). But,

important as they are, they barely communicate. “The hand in them is scarcely perceptible, let alone the voice or the scowl” (92). Still, as the narrator says, “people have tried. Byron wrote letters” (93).

There is also, in the novel, an association of youth with Byron. When selecting something by which to remember Mr. Floyd, Jacob, the school-boy, chooses a volume of Byron’s works (21-2). The association with Byron and youth is referred to again, when Jacob, thinking of who he is, recalls images from his youth, among which are “the moors and Byron” (36). And years later, when Mr. Floyd sees Jacob on the street, the one thing he recalls is that Jacob chose Byron’s works as his gift from Mr. Floyd (173). Woolf made the association of Byron with youth, just as Joyce had with young Stephen Dedalus.

Virginia Woolf’s 1919 criticism of modern novels had not changed by 1925, when she published the edited version of that essay. Materialistic writers continued to “write of unimportant things” (“Modern Fiction” 286). She continued to emphasize taking advantage of her freedom to write what she chose, to follow her literary instincts, and produce what she wanted instead of following what convention or tradition dictated. For Woolf, the years up to then had done little to improve the modern novelist’s freedom to write outside of tradition’s boundaries. Then in 1927 she published “Poetry, Fiction and the Future,” in which she wrote that the future of the novel lay in taking over tasks formerly left to poetry: “It may be possible that prose is going to take over—has, indeed, already taken over—some of the duties which were once discharged to poetry” (“Art” 224). She noted that “Byron in *Don Juan* pointed the way; he showed how flexible an

instrument poetry might become” (“Art” 224). She was not expressing a new sentiment. In her 1922 unfinished essay she had written that Byron was a novelist.

Later, in her February 16, 1930 diary entry, she noted five elements in Byron’s style. She had been re-reading Childe Harold, which, she thought, contained descriptions that were sometimes “‘beautiful’; [Byron was] like a huge poet.” She noted elements of his posturing, affectation, and silliness, but she also admired his strengths, his “vigorous” rhetoric, his moments of sincere poetry, and, “then there is of course the pure satiric.”

These I think make him up; and make much that is spurious, vapid, yet very changeable, and then rich and with greater range than other poets, could he have got the whole thing in order. A novelist, he might have been. (Diary 3: 287-288)

Woolf was not alone among Bloomsbury members in thinking that Byron would have made a better novelist than poet; Lytton Strachey thought the same. In Characters and Commentaries he wrote that “the world would have been the gainer if Byron had written novels instead of poetry” (55).

In The Waves (1931) Woolf returned to the theme of Byron and letter writing mentioned in Jacob’s Room. Early in the novel, Bernard thinks of writing a letter to the girl he loves. He desperately wants to communicate his self in an off-hand, brilliant manner. He quickly thinks over and plans the letter and her reaction to it, saying: “It is the speed, the hot, molten effect, the lava flow of sentence into sentence that I need. Who am I thinking of? Byron of course” (79). Then, as he begins to find his rhythm, “Now I am getting the hang of it. Now I am getting his [Byron’s] beat into my brain (the rhythm

is the main thing in writing)” (79). But he fails—“it falls flat.” He cannot write, cannot communicate to her in a letter. He gives up to try again the next day, but evidence suggests he will not for, as he says later, “my room is always scattered with unfinished letters” (84).

Throughout the novel Bernard struggles to be a writer. When he is young he keeps a book in which he logs useful phrases, based on his observations, for his future book. But he is destined to struggle unnecessarily to be a writer because he is never himself. He is always willing, in fact desirous, to become someone else, but this very desire prevents him from finishing what he starts: “For it is difficult to finish a letter in somebody else’s style” (250). Bernard never writes what he wants. He writes what and how he thinks a writer should write. Later Neville accuses Bernard of trying to be Byron but failing: “that is not Byron; that is you” (87). Towards the end of his life Bernard admits to himself that he had wanted to be Byron (249). Thus Woolf, like Joyce, had associated Byron with youth and passion.

III. Auden

W. H. Auden read Don Juan for the first time at age of twenty-nine in 1936, or so he wrote in his verse letter to Byron. Auden's assessment of Byron was somewhat like Virginia Woolf's in that he too praised Byron's style of writing. However, Auden's obvious "tribute" to Byron was the five part verse poem "Letter to Lord Byron," which he wrote during his first trip to Iceland in the summer of 1936. The trip was arranged with an advance from the publishers Faber and Faber, for whom Auden agreed to write a travel-book based on his experiences there. While in Iceland Auden wrote to his wife, Erika Mann, his intention to write Byron a letter:

I brought a Byron with me to Iceland, and I suddenly thought I might write him a chatty letter in light verse about anything I could think of, Europe literature, myself. He's the right person I think, because he was a townee, a European, and disliked Wordsworth and that kind of approach to nature, and I find that very sympathetic. This letter in itself will have very little to do with Iceland, but will be rather a description of an effect of traveling in distant places which is to make one reflect on one's past and one's culture from the outside. But it will form a central thread on which I shall hang other letters to different people more directly about Iceland. (Iceland 139)

Auden made three interesting points. The first was about the poem's tone. He planned on writing it in chatty, light verse, perhaps to imitate the tone Byron used in Don Juan. Auden's comment also recalls what Harriet Monroe described as Byron's

“conversationally familiar narrative verse” (37). The second point was regarding the liberating effect of travel and how it can help the writer to gain perspective. This is similar to Joyce and Byron, whose separation from homeland played such an important role in their creativity. The third was that he intended to use the letter as a central thread upon which to hang the other letters, in other words, around which he would structure the book. Years later, Auden wrote that Byron’s character Don Juan “is a dummy, not a hero, a peg upon which Byron can hang his reflections about the world” (“Life of That-There Poet” 146).

Auden’s “Letter” is simple enough in its form. It is a verse poem written in rhyme royal and comprised of five parts, each part dealing with a particular topic that Auden thought might interest Byron and around which he structured the other letters he wrote. Auden himself admitted that the proper form to pay his compliments to Byron would be ottava- rima, but begged off by saying that “Rhyme-royal’s difficult enough to play” (1.22.4). Regarding Byron’s form, Auden wrote, in his review of Leslie Marchand’s biography of Byron, that he could “think of no other poet in the world whose work demonstrates so clearly the creative role played by form” (144). Thus, argued Auden, Childe Harold was a failure and Don Juan a success since the former was written using the Spenserian stanza while the latter was written in an ottava-rima that imitated more closely its Italian form, which was hendecasyllabic with feminine rhymes and since rhymes could easily be found, the subject could either be comic or serious. When English poets copied it, they shortened the lines to decasyllabics with masculine rhymes. Unfortunately, this made it difficult to write a serious poem of length without padding the

lines or using banal rhymes. But what made it unsuitable for serious poetry made it highly suitable for comic poetry because double and triple rhymes in English are usually comic. Byron used this to full effect and also took advantage of the stanza's structure. The eight line stanzas can either contain one thought or event without running onto the next or the stanza can contain short statements without disrupting the stanza since the rhymes help it maintain its cohesiveness. (Dyer's 396-99).

In part one of the "Letter," Auden explains to Byron that he is writing to him because, of the two authors Auden was reading on the trip (Austen and Byron), he has no right to contact a novelist: "But I decided that I'd give a fright to / Jane Austen if I wrote when I'd not right to" (1.13.4-5). Auden comments in this part that novel writing is "a higher art than poetry altogether" (1.14.3). This is Woolf's opinion also. But whether Auden meant it is doubtful; after all, his writing is poetry. He was probably donning a lightly satirical air, mimicking and paying tribute to Byron's tone in Don Juan. Auden made another comment that is similar to Woolf's. About the letter's form, he wrote that he wanted one that is "large enough to swim in, / And talk on any subject that I choose" (1.21.1-2). Of course Woolf said this about Byron and Auden admits one stanza later that he is not using ottava-rima, but rather rhyme-royal, of which he wrote that "If, from Chaucer to Sackville, it was not ottava-rima but rhyme-royal which was the staple vehicle for a long poem, one reason, at least, was that rhyme-royal calls for only one rhyme triplet, not two" (Dyer's 397).

In part two of the "Letter," Auden gave Byron a history of England since Byron's day. In part three Auden gave more reasons for liking Byron. He thought Byron's

greatest strength lay in being an ordinary but observant man of the town. He likes Byron's muse: she's "gay and witty... whose voice does not make me jump" (3.4.1, 5). But he also likes Byron himself, finding him a "good townee, / Neither a preacher, ninny, bore, nor Brownie" (3.4.7). But Edward Mendelson wrote that Auden, in this poem, was more "didactic than in anything he wrote before" only adding a "note of comic self-mocking irony" whenever the poem became too didactic (286).

Auden moved on to discussing how Byron fared historically with other critics. This section of part three shows that Auden considered a writer's intention and innovation very important for establishing a writer's place in history: "You've had your packet from the critics, though: / They grant you warmth of heart, but at your head / Their moral and aesthetic brickbats throw" (3.6.1-3). And later,

A poet must be judged by his intention,
 A serious thought you never said you aimed at.
 I think a serious critic ought to mention
 That one verse style was really your invention. (3.7.2-5)

Auden set great store on the artist's intention, taking issue with those critics who dismissed it. Too often people forget that the motivating force behind writing is simply entertainment: "Art, if it doesn't start there, at least ends, / Whether aesthetics like the thought or not, / In an attempt to entertain our friends" (3.21.1-3). As well as a poet's intention, Auden also placed some emphasis on a poet's biography when trying to understand a poet's work. In an introduction for Byron's poems in *Fifteen Poets* (1938), Auden wrote that though biography can never fully explain why a poet writes one way as

opposed to another, it can help the reader understand why a poet's work “is of a particular kind” (294).

Auden also analyzed Don Juan, and drew conclusions similar to those in Eliot’s “Byron” (1937) essay. Auden saw Juan not at all as a hero figure, but rather as a passive figure to whom experiences happened, “a device enabling Byron to get down to the business for which his talents were really suited, a satirical panorama of the ruling classes of his time” (295). But on one important point Auden differed from Eliot and that was that Auden thought Byron a comedic poet rather than a satirist. Auden wrote that “Byron’s genius was essentially a comic one, and his poetic history is a quest [...] to discover the right verse vehicle for a comic poet in his time” (“Making” 14).

Overall, Auden’s introduction to Byron in Fifteen Poets was one that quietly praised Byron and his talents. Auden was aware of Byron’s private life and how it carried over into his work, affecting it for good and ill, and concluded that once Byron learned to work with his egoism he became a better man and poet. Edward Mendelson wrote that Auden was referring as much to himself as to Byron when he wrote that. Once Auden realized and accepted his own egoism, he, like Byron, became a better poet (359-60).

In Auden’s “Letter” to Byron, part four begins with Auden’s journey home. His trip to Iceland was over and while ship-bound for England he recounted his life and family history for Byron, ending that part with vows to be a better poet and a better man. In part five he speculated on England and the hint of war, but finished with his outlook of Utopia, in which he supposes, poets are saved. Auden wrote a verse letter to Byron, not

as an outright tribute, but rather as a means of structuring his own travel book. The poem is not among Auden's best, though it is entertaining, nor did it help the success of the travel book. Christopher Isherwood, ironically, regretted that a novelist was not among the party as "Poets never seem to notice anything" (Listener 311).

What is puzzling about the modernist writers' interest in Byron is that they tended not to admire the Romantics. Neither Joyce nor Woolf complimented Byron on his Romantic sensibility, as projected through his early characters Childe Harold and Manfred; rather, they forgave him for it or saw him as superior to the other Romantic poets. But what the modernist writers especially admired, was the later satirical Byronic narrator projected through Don Juan. Stephen Spender, however, offered an interesting view of how the Romantic sensibility was present among the modernist poets. Spender wrote in The Struggle for the Modern that though there was a backlash against the Romantic poets, modern poets were brought back to the idea of the poetic imagination as a revealing consciousness as opposed to the Classicist view of the imagination as a tool for "dressing up [...] preconceived ideas about the important values of living" (12-13).

IV. Eliot

In his 1937 essay “Byron,” T. S. Eliot called for a reevaluation of Byron studies. He was aware that most critics and readers approached Byron with a predisposition to judge him and his poetry as immoral. Eliot’s complaint was that readers treated Byron and his poetry as inseparable. Byron’s personality and lifestyle, or what can be referred to as Byronic, were so dominant that they affected his poetry, which Eliot found lacking in merit because it was filled with “impression and experiences” that expressed Byron the man. Eliot thought that poetry should not be “the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (“Tradition” 43).

The one area in which Eliot said Byron had talent was as a narrator; here Eliot was like Woolf and Auden who also praised Byron’s narrative skill (“Byron” 227). Eliot stressed Byron’s ability to know exactly when he must digress and diverge from the story-line in order to keep the reader interested. For this technique to succeed Eliot conceded that Byron’s self-absorption was useful. He singled out the narrator of Don Juan, which let Byron deviate from the plotline in a manner that Eliot felt did not detract from the poem’s overall effect. Byron utilized this technique to its fullest, by having the narrator vary the perspectives and “by a dexterous turn from one subject to another. He has the cardinal virtue of being never dull” (232).

But Eliot charged Byron with falsity. He did so not for Byron’s lack of sincerity, but rather for Byron’s poor command of the English language:

Of Byron one can say, as of no other English poet of his eminence, that he added nothing to the language, that he discovered nothing in the sounds, and developed nothing in the meaning, of individual words. . . . This imperceptiveness of Byron to the English word . . . indicates for practical purposes a defective sensibility. (232-233)

Auden agreed that Byron did not hold words in reverence, but he did not fault him for it. Instead he saw it as the virtue of a comic poet. “Serious poetry requires that the poet treat words as if they were persons, but comic poetry demands that he treat them as things and few, if any, English poets have rivaled Byron’s ability to put words through the hoops” (Dyer’s 399). But Byron was never concerned with the formation of language on the page. He was concerned with the actual power that words hold over the reader; hence, he was well known for his satire. The writer’s need for change is a powerful driving force behind satire and in order to achieve that change the satiric writer wants to reveal falsity and hypocrisy wherever it is present, hoping to instigate social reform. And when it came to writing satire Eliot admitted that Byron possessed an ability superior to others.

Eliot thought that Byron chose the stanza that was best suited for his talent.

When Byron discovered the merits of the Italian form of ottava-rima, he also discovered a stanza that “was admirably suited to enhance his merits and conceal his defects” (234). Auden agreed, and wrote similar words in an introduction to a collection of Byron’s poetry: “In the work of no other poet, I think, is the success or failure of a poem so closely bound up with the choice of meter and stanza form” (“Don Juan” xii). As Eliot wrote, the form he chose along with his “genius for digression, for wandering away from

his subject...and suddenly returning to it” was at the height of its power in Don Juan (“Byron” 234).

As Kenner wrote about Eliot, he took from the Symbolists the idea that the pure work of art implies the disappearance of the poet, “who yields place to the words” (Kenner 137). Eliot wanted the author to be absent from the work. He envisioned writers and poets producing pieces that only represented their personae, not their personality. Eliot criticized Byron for devoting too much time to living the role he created. And Eliot was most critical of Byron when he saw him wasting “gigantic energy” exploiting the Byronic personality he had created so that it became confused with him, to the extent that they became inseparable. Alice Levine, in her article on Eliot and Byron, did not agree with Eliot. For her, Byron’s presentation of a false personality was indicative of his unwillingness to express himself directly in his poetry, which she said was similar to Eliot:

The fragmented, disconnected quality of the poems may be seen to be a function of Byron’s and Eliot’s reluctance to express themselves in a direct way in poetry. They remain almost nervously noncommittal.

Although both are “confessionally” present in these poems, for instance, they make a great effort to camouflage their identities. (531)

Despite Eliot's often negative assessment of Byron, he recognized that more critical scholarship on him was necessary, primarily because he felt that too much emphasis had been placed on Byron’s private life and not enough on his artistry. Too much time had been wasted on analyzing Byron the man instead of Byron’s poetry. Eliot

wrote that the reason so much time had been devoted to Byron was because Byron “was an actor who devoted immense trouble to becoming a role that he adopted; his superficiality was something that he created for himself.” This made it “difficult, in considering Byron's poetry, not to be drawn into an analysis of the man” (“Byron” 238).

Eliot's admiration for Byron's satire, however, was clear. He wrote that Byron's satire of English society, “in the latter part of *Don Juan*, is something for which I can find no parallel in English literature” (238). Eliot closed his essay by admitting that Byron's use of satire was as genuine as Byron ever could have been because in it he expressed his feelings on hypocrisy, a subject about which he felt profoundly. The latter cantos of Don Juan were filled with many sharp and insightful observations of English society that show Byron's disillusionment with it. His loss of faith with England stemmed from his realization that there was nothing romantic about a society more concerned with shallow hypocritical appearances than with honesty. Eliot performed Byron a service by evaluating him as a poet. He concluded his essay by writing that he was “speaking of the qualities and defects visible in [Byron's] work, and important in estimating his work: not of the private life, with which I am not concerned” (239).

V. Conclusion

The four modernists discussed here recognized the necessary break with past methodologies for writing fiction and poetry. What distinguishes them from other writers is that they demonstrated one dimension of their modernism through their admiration of Byron's works and his persona, the Byronic hero. Though they each had their own specific reasons for admiring Byron, those reasons stemmed partly from the modernist ethos. Joyce admired Byron for his satire and because Byron was an iconoclast. Woolf admired Byron for his writing style. Auden enjoyed Byron's wit and comic style and praised his innovative use of form. And while Eliot did not approve of Byron's authorial presence in his works, he did admire Byron's narrative skill.

Their admiration of Byron reflected what they were doing in their own work, such as experimenting with language, form, and style in an effort to write novels and poetry that were realistic, entertaining, and, sometimes, satirical. They challenged convention and tradition and displaced the authorial voice. When they admired Byron it was not out of nostalgia for the past, but rather a nod of approval and respect to a poet who, like them, challenged convention and tradition.

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