

The Russian Episode in Byron's 'Don Juan'

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THE Russian cantos of *Don Juan* have often been unfavourably commented on. They are considered among Byron's failures on the ground that his Russia is made of cardboard.¹ The Petersburg episode is, at best, looked upon in the light of an introduction to the real subject of the poem — a description of England.² But Pushkin rightly observed that 'Byron read a good deal about Russia and made many inquiries about it . . . he seems to have loved it and to have known her recent history'.³ Since Catherine's empire obviously appealed to the poet's imagination it does not appear likely that his portrayal of her reign should have been introduced for a merely subordinate purpose. He certainly could not and did not know Russia as well as he knew England, and his Russian cantos lack the wealth of concrete detail that is so effective in his English ones. But the reason does not lie only in Byron's insufficient information. The Russian episode was intended to play a peculiar role in the structure of the poem. The method employed in the last cantos was not feasible on that occasion.

Byron did not stand in need of any literary sources for the English part of *Don Juan*. For the Russian part they were indispensable. The poet pointed out one of them himself. It was a history of modern Russia by Castelneau.⁴ In their respective editions of *Don Juan*, E. H. Coleridge and later W. W. Pratt

¹ R. Escarpit, *Lord Byron. Un tempérament littéraire*, Vol. II, Paris, 1957, pp. 226-7; Cf. Tr. G. Steffan, W. W. Pratt, *Byron's Don Juan*, Vol. I, Texas, 1957, pp. 235-6.

² H. Richter, *Lord Byron. Persönlichkeit und Werk*, Halle-Saale, 1929, S. 459.

³ Pushkin, *Polnoje sobranije sochinenij v svesti tomach*, t. V. Goslitzdat, Moscow, 1950, pp. 41-2.

⁴ *Essai sur l'Histoire ancienne et moderne de la nouvelle Russie par le Marquis Gabriel de Castelneau*, Vol. I-III, Paris, 1800.

quote page after page to prove how closely Byron followed Castelnau in his description of the siege of Ismael. But it was not only for the sake of martial scenes that the poet studied the French historian. He also made use of many of the author's observations of Catherine and her Court.¹

Byron's commentators duly noticed that Byron also owed much to Tooke's *Life of Catherine II*² and to Masson's *Secret Memoirs of Russia*.³ Coleridge cites Tooke for a portrait of Catherine, very close to that given by Byron in *Don Juan*, and for the story of her loves with Lanskoj.⁴ He also lists the poet's borrowings from Masson (the names of the empress's lovers, the role played by her maid of honour, Protasova, the rumours that Potemkin did not draw the line at murder when eager to get rid of his rivals).⁵

These parallels are unfortunately incomplete. The critics take no notice of Byron's preference for Masson when he happens to differ from his predecessors. Contrary to Castéra and Tooke, for example, Masson makes no bones about calling Catherine a murderess of her husband (sposicide);⁶ Byron on his side refers to her as Clytemnestra (ix, 80). Masson differs from Tooke in his insistence on the empress's blood-thirstiness and even states that she never dined without gazing upon Casanova's pictures of the slaughters of Ochakov and Ismael;⁷ Byron also calls Catherine 'bloody' (ix, 70) and says that on getting the news of another victory:

¹ Compare: *Histoire ancienne et moderne*, Vol. II, pp. 154-7; *Don Juan*, VII, 36-7. (Here and elsewhere the Roman figure stands for the number of the canto, the Arabic figure — for the number of the stanza.)

² W. Tooke, *The Life of Catherine II, Empress of Russia*, Vol. I-III, Dublin, 1800. Tooke spent 18 years in Russia, of which 15 in Petersburg, where he was chaplain to the colony of English merchants. His book is a free and much enlarged translation of the well-known book J. H. Castéra, *Histoire de Catherine II*, Vol. I-II, Paris, 1797. See: G. Blok, *Pushkin v rabote nad istorieskimi istonikami*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1949, pp. 151, 158, 159, 191; D.-S.-G. Simmons, *Samuel Johnson na beregach Wolgi. Sbornik: Mezhdunarodnye svjazi ruskoj literatury*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1963, p. 163. Cf. B. V. Tomashevskij, *Jean Castéra, avtor 'Istorii Ekateriny II'*. *Sbornik: Iz istorii russkich literaturnych otnoshenij, XVIII-XX vekov*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1959, pp. 75, 77-8.

³ C. F. P. Masson, *Mémoires secrets sur la Russie et particulièrement sur la fin du règne de Catherine II et le commencement de celui de Paul I*, Vol. I-III, Amsterdam, 1800.

⁴ Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, in *Poetry*, Vol. VI, ed. by E. H. Coleridge, London, 1903, pp. 392, 389.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 388, 399, 419. Cf. Tr. G. Steffan, W. W. Pratt, *Byron's Don Juan*, Vol. IV, pp. 200-4.

⁶ Masson, Vol. I, p. 110.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

Great joy was hers, or rather joys: the first
Was a ta'en city, thirty thousand slain.

.....
This quenched a moment her ambition's thirst
.....

As fall the dews on quenchless sands,
Blood only serves to wash Ambition's hands!

(IX, 59)

Masson is far more outspoken in his indignation at the disgraceful and sycophantic meanness of the courtiers . . . prostrating themselves before the latest favourite.¹ In this Byron, too, follows Masson (IX, 83). It is in his book that the poet found disrespectful allusions to the Czarina's fatness — and he, accordingly, speaks of her as 'spacious' (IX, 58), 'large' (IX, 62), 'plump' (IX, 72). Masson, finally, inspires Byron to compare Catherine to Elizabeth I.²

A study of Tooke's book also enables us to draw some parallels hitherto unnoticed. For one thing, he goes in for a detailed story of the celebrations of the victories of Rumjancev and Orlov;³ Byron echoes the story by describing the grand reception held at the palace after the capture of Ismael. Tooke has at least three ironical descriptions of thanksgivings and Te Deums in honour of the Russian army;⁴ Byron follows his lead with fine exasperation (VII, 64). Tooke writes: 'Catherine chose that he [Orlov] . . . should take the title of a prince of the Roman empire, desirous . . . that her former favourite should appear to the eyes of foreign

¹ Masson, Vol. I, p. 148. Cf.: Tooke, Vol. III, p. 263.

² Masson, Vol. I, pp. 114-15. In the course of this comparison Masson says that Catherine 'prostitutait son age, son sexe et son rang', *ibid.*, p. 146. Byron likewise accuses Elizabeth of having 'disgraced her sex and station', IX, 81. Both Tooke and Masson seem to have influenced Byron's Lambro (*Don Juan*, III). According to Tooke, Lambro Canziani was at the head of a small fleet that had been built by the Greeks to fight the Turks. The latter sank those ships and Lambro had the good luck to escape to Albania (Tooke, Vol. III, pp. 212, 216, 218). Masson calls him 'a famous pirate' (Masson, Vol. I, p. 70). Byron combines his two sources to state:

His country's wrongs and his despair to save her
Had stung him from a slave to an enslaver

(III, 53. Cf. III, 59)

It is true, Byron had heard of Lambro before he studied Russian history. In 'The Bride of Abydos' Selim had boasted to Zuleika that among his lawless men
' . . . Some to higher thoughts aspire, / The last of Lambro's Patriots there /
Anticipated freedom share' (Stanza XX).

³ Tooke, Vol. II, pp. 215, 276-7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 215; Vol. III, pp. 138, 199.

nations with a splendour worthy of the situation which he had enjoyed'.¹ Byron tells his readers:

So Catherine who had a handsome way
Of fitting out her favourites . . . to display
. . . her royal splendour . . .

(x, 46)

She sends Don Juan to England on a secret and honorary mission.

Coleridge and Pratt agree in saying that Byron ascribes to Juan the features of three actual favourites of Catherine² — a suggestion hardly to be trusted: Juan's adventures in Petersburg had been prepared by his previous evolution, abundantly demonstrating his capacity for easily yielding to any caprice of fate and passion. Juan's indifference to Gulbeyaz' importunities was not due to his stoicism, but to his sense of his own degradation at being a slave newly bought in the market and subjected to the indignity of a female attire. His rejection of Gulbeyaz is an assertion of his own dignity. During the encounter with Catherine he has a feeling he is an irresistible conqueror, an ever successful hero. He is flattered by the empress's approval and quite ready for his part in the little comedy.

It would be easier to suppose that the idea of making Juan a lover of the Czarina was suggested by Casti's 'Poema tartaro'.³ The hero of the poem, Tommaso Scardassale, turned up in Petersburg after he had managed to escape from the caliph's prison in company with one of his beautiful wives. Tommaso's acquaintance with Catherine and the subsequent picture of war come very close to Byron's tale.⁴

The critics' arguments in favour of Casti's influence are not uniformly convincing;⁵ more obvious traits of resemblance between

¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 68.

² Lord Byron, *Don Juan in Poetry*, Vol. VI, p. 388; Tr. G. Steffan, W. W. Pratt, *Byron's Don Juan*, Vol. IV, p. 200.

³ Compare C. M. Fuess, *Lord Byron as a Satirist in Verse*, New York, 1912, p. 137; G. Foà, *Lord Byron. Poeta e Carbonaro*, Firenze, 1935, pp. 104-5.

⁴ G. Foà, *Lord Byron*, pp. 105-6.

⁵ Foà maintains, e.g., that Juan's looks are not unlike Tommaso's (*ibid.*, p. 105). But Casti's hero is said to possess a tall figure, light hair and a long nose (Giam-battista Casti, *Il poema tartaro*, 1797, I, 5). Morally Juan is also unlike Tommaso who is just a vulgar adventurer, acting on the advice of his mentor in seeking his luck with the ageing empress (II, 56).

the two poems could easily be pointed out.¹ The details, however, are immaterial when compared with the essentials — the way Byron was impressed by the whole spirit of Casti's poem. His uncompromising hatred of despotism, his complete disillusionment, his naturalistic description of Russia's sovereign² were all attractive to Byron. But this fact has been as sparsely commented on as the influence upon him of the general ideas that inspired the historians Tooke and Masson.

Of the two Masson was certainly more akin to Byron, for his invective against Catherine's absolute power was brimful of democratic fervour. 'Oh Catherine! Je suis éblouis de ta grandeur, charmé de tes bienfaits, mais les flots de sang que tu a versé accourent et le renversent. Le bruit des fers de tes 30 millions d'esclaves m'étourdit . . . Désormais plus de gloire sans vertu! et que le crime et l'injustice sur le trône n'arrivent plus à la posterité que couronnés des couleuvres de Nemesis.'³ That is the sort of style that could not fail to appeal to Byron the tyrant-hater.

However heavily Byron may have leaned upon his sources, he was never utterly dependent on them. In opposition to Tooke he is not inclined to praise either the intelligence or the abilities of the empress, nor regard her as an enlightener of her own country, nor make much of her diplomatic talents. Even Masson has something to say about the energy of her activities — yet they are no concern of Byron's. Tooke dwells upon the cynicism that urged the Czarina to exploit, for purposes of her own, religious superstitions that she personally despised, Masson mentions the

¹ In Casti's poem Catherine gives the hero a costly ring (iv, 28); Juan could boast of a similar present, just as fairly earned (ix, 139). This giant diamond that cost Catherine £100,000 is mentioned by Tooke, Vol. II, p. 97. Also cf.: *Don Juan*, ix, 79, 82-4; and *Il poema tartaro*, iv, 54-5; also *Don Juan*, ix, 46, 52; and *Il poema tartaro*, II, 25, 52.

² e.g. *Il poema tartaro*, iv, 71. Catherine had every reason for insisting upon Joseph II banishing Casti from Vienna.

³ Masson, Vol. I, pp. 139-40. Also see pp. 89-91, 95, 101 for considerations on the unsoundness of Russian economics, on the incapacity of ministers and courtiers, on the slaughter in Ismael. Denunciations of the tyranny of the Czars were common in the liberal press of those times. e.g.: *Histoire des Trois Démembrements de la Pologne*, Par M. Ferrand, Paris, 1820. *Edinburgh Review*, 1822, Vol. 37, no. 74, pp. 508-9, 512, 516, 519; also: *L'Europe après le congrès d'Aix-la-Chapelle, faisant Suite au congrès de Vienne*. Par M. de Pradt, Paris, 1819, vol. 32, no. 64, pp. 408-10; also: *Sketch of the Late Revolution at Naples*, London, 1820, *Edinburgh Review*, 1821, vol. 35, no. 69, pp. 84-5.

broadness of her views and her sneers at fanaticism¹ — Byron ignores all these complexities of her mentality.

The poet makes use of nothing but what serves his own conceptions.² The latter are conditioned by two contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, Byron 'was much interested in the vast Northern empire. He was quick to observe the growth of the political and diplomatic importance of Russia'.³ He realized the role that she was and would be playing in the history of Europe — this idea is clearly expressed in his 'Age of Bronze' (Stanza v). On the other hand, Byron loathed despotism and looked upon the Russian empire as its most outstanding embodiment. This is borne out by his portrait of Alexander I and his sarcastic suggestion that the latter should free his country from slavery and the knout ('The Age of Bronze', x).

In Byron's eyes Catherine was an autocrat *par excellence*, a personification of arbitrary and absolute power. Whatever other features she may have possessed, there is no place for them in Byron's portrait of her, if they fail to express what she essentially was. Her very vices interest the poet only in so far as they increase the viciousness of her reign and the burden of her despotism. In giving way to depravity, Byron believed, she was contributing to the ruin of her country: the immorality of the woman spelt the immorality of the sovereign.

The biography — and biographers — of Catherine were no doubt rich in scandalous matter. But of all available facts Byron only assimilated those that could illustrate the satiric contrast between the high post of the person in power and the low passions unbridled by uncontrollable power. The poet does not create an individualized psychological portrait of the Czarina.

This is not to say, however, that the commentators are right in their dictum upon the weakness of that portrait. It is simply sketched on broader lines and belongs to the satirical genre that

¹ Tooke, Vol. I, pp. 311, 314, 334, 338; Vol. II, pp. 135-7, 176-7, 210-12; Masson, Vol. I, pp. 99, 82, 103.

² To these conceptions chronology is also sacrificed: in his wish to spare Juan, Byron considerably says that his royal mistress 'was ripe' (ix, 62) and in the 'prime of life' (ix, 72); but in point of fact, by 1790 she was 62 if she was a day.

³ M. P. Alekseev, *Autografy Bajrona v SSSR. Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, no. 58, Moscow, 1952, p. 975. In those years Russia often made first-page news. Vide, *Moniteur Universel*, 1820-2.

is ruled by different laws and requires nothing but attention to the main characteristics of a personage and their social functions. In Byron's poem, Catherine is just a tyrant, any tyrant, equally to be compared to the sultan of Turkey (vi, 95) and to the English Queen Elizabeth I (ix, 81).

The critics reproached Byron for having depicted nothing but Catherine in his Russian cantos, for his neglect of Petersburg and of Russia. But a vast canvas was not what the poet was aiming at: like Masson, he draws a great empire, using the court for its centre. Catherine is a standing symbol of all that interferes with the development of the state she rules. Though that state remains outside the poem, Byron was not oblivious of it and succeeded in catching the new modes of thought that reached the Northern land:

Almost as far as Petersburg, and lend
A dreadful impulse to each loud meander
Of murmuring Liberty's wide waves, which blend
Their roar even with the Baltic's.

(vi, 93)

What exactly do these words mean? Did Byron imply he knew that his radical poetry had travelled to the banks of the Neva? Had the rumours about Russian secret societies reached him in Italy? This is a question that must so far go unanswered. Among the Russians whom Byron definitely met M. P. Alekseev mentions Count A. G. Stroganov.¹ This brilliant highly educated and much travelled man describes the conversations he and the poet had while in Venice.² Stroganov's views were of a most radical description, and must have come pretty close to those of the so-called 'Decembrists', who rebelled against Nicholas I in 1825. Stroganov, that 'aristocrat with Decembrist leanings',³ could have told Byron of his fame in Russia and of the first efforts of secret revolutionary societies. Unfortunately, these are only guesses and surmises.

¹ M. P. Alekseev, pp. 975-6.

² S. Durylin, *Russkie pisateli u Gete* [Goethe] *v Veimare. Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, 1932, tt. 4-6, pp. 408, 413, 417, 419.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 404. Vide also the article on A. G. Stroganov, *Russkij archiv*, 1911, no. 1, pp. 175-6.

The stanza quoted above is the only one containing a direct allusion to current Russian affairs. But in the Petersburg episode thrusts at Catherine are really thrusts at contemporary Russian tyranny, or rather — at tyranny as such.

This could be proved by the place of the Russian cantos in the general structure of the poem. They immediately follow the central military cantos (VII-VIII) and form their logical conclusion: first comes war as it is, war unadorned, and then some of those for whose sake the battles are fought and who see those battles in a romantic light. The poet draws both the harsh truth and its idealization. Don Juan himself is presented in a double light: we see him 'firing, and thrusting, slashing, sweating, glowing . . . , dead bodies trampling o'er' (VIII, 19); he 'wallow'd in the bloody mire / Of dead and dying thousands' (VIII, 20) and 'Dash'd on like a spurr'd blood-horse in a race' (VIII, 54). And we next see him as 'Love turn'd a lieutenant of artillery'! (IX, 44), and duly rewarded by the empress. Between the scenes of inhuman carnage and the comedy in Petersburg there is a long digression with its crushing indictment of Wellington (IX, 1-10) who for his victories obtained the right to rob his country. The link is thus introduced between past and present: the horrors of the siege, according to Byron, should embody the horrors of war at large. Hence the natural transition to an invective against the politics of England and its role in Europe and, lastly, to individualized portraits of those who represent the ruling oligarchy.

The Russian episode is, therefore, both the conclusion of the poem's central part, and a sample of satirical and oratorical art, and at the same time a preparation for the realistic character-drawing of the last cantos.