THE CONSISTENCY IN BYRON'S SOCIAL DOCTRINE*

IF WE were to apply Emerson's maxim of the foolish consistency to the mind of Lord Byron, we should find that it was neither small nor plagued with hobgoblins. His lordship was nothing if not inconsistent. His career bears witness to this fact, for his life was full of radical changes. His poetry, too, is inconsistent. For example, he experimented with many metrical forms, trying established measures of his own country (such as the heroic couplet of the school of Pope), as well as measures formerly used almost exclusively by foreign poets (such as the ottava rima of Pulci). In content, too, this inconsistency is manifest. His habit of changing, within a single paragraph or stanza, from a mood of high seriousness to one of light banality cannot be overlooked by even the most casual reader of his poetry. Yet, there was one point on which he never varied in his thinking.

In a recent study of Byron, Professor Paul Trueblood explains that the poet's medium was satire and that he began his career with satirical verse, turned from it to sentiment in *Childe Harold* and other poems, and finally returned to it in *Don Juan, The Vision of Judgment,* and works of the later period. He also explains that Byron became increasingly serious in political and social doctrines from December, 1820, when he broke off the composition of *Don Juan* after completing the fifth canto, to June, 1822, when he took up the poem again. He says, too, that there is evidence in the last eight cantos of *Don Juan* of revolutionary indoctrination, which was not apparent earlier.[1]

* A public lecture delivered at the Rice Institute on November 20, 1949.

There can be no doubt that Byron exhibited maturity and found his poetic medium in the satire of *Don Juan, The Irish Avatar,* and other of these later poems. In them he could attack cant, religious, political, and moral, as he had never been able to attack it in verses of the *Childe Harold* type. His nature was basically satirical, and he returned to that form of verse as a natural consequence of this nature.

If, however, he turned away from satire in the poems of the middle period, he did not turn away from the principles of his satiric verse, or from the abuses at which he directed it. He did not wield the cudgel so effectively in sentimental verse as in satire, but he wielded it, nevertheless, against the same enemy which he attacked in the later cantos of *Don Juan.*

This consistency in Byron's social doctrine is indicated best, I think, by an entry in his journal on January 16, 1814:

> As for me, by the blessing of indifference, I have simplified my politics into an utter detestation of all existing governments; and, as it is the shortest and most agreeable and summary feeling imaginable, the first moment of an universal republic would convert me into an advocate for single and uncontradicted despotism. The fact is, riches are power, and poverty is slavery all over the earth, and one sort of establishment is no better nor worse for a *people* than another. . . . I have no consistency, except in politics; and that probably arises from my indifference on the subject altogether.[2]

After we have loosed this statement from its tangle of Byronic facetiousness, one fact is clear: Byron's consistency was not in his politics, as he maintained. His interest in government was in what it would do for a people, and his consistent theme in his poetry, as in his life, was a relentless fight against oppression and for freedom. He was no more serious in thought and purpose in this respect in 1823 than he was in 1812.

What is purposed here is to indicate, by references to pertinent incidents in his career and to significant passages in his works, that love of liberty was a primary motivating force in his life and poetry, and that he constantly exerted himself on behalf of the oppressed. The opportunity of devoting himself to the cause of freedom came in the last few years of his career, during the Italian and Greek struggles for independence; but throughout his life he seemed to be seeking some cause on which to expend his energy. Had the opportunity presented itself earlier, there is little doubt that he would have flung himself into the fight then as wholeheartedly as he did in 1823.

The record opens with a letter to John Hanson, dated January 15, 1809, seven days before Byron's twenty-first birthday. Byron was looking forward to taking his seat in the House of Lords. He had not chosen sides as yet, not from any lack of knowledge of the political principles of Whig and Tory, but because he did not want to identify himself with either. He planned to stand aloof, speak what he thought, and above all maintain his independence.[3]

On December 8, 1811, he expressed a desire to speak in Parliament although he had not yet chosen his subject.[4] He did not have to wait long, however, and when the subject presented itself, he chose his side in the debate and spoke with characteristic fervor.

Late in 1811 a group of hosiers, employing weavers in their stocking-weaving establishments in Nottingham, saw fit to curtail expenses, and in order to do so they brought into use a wide frame for the manufacture of stockings and gaiters. This action had the desired result in that many weavers were dismissed and were thereby deprived of their livelihood. In December these weavers began to riot, entering houses and breaking frames. They were called Luddites after

a boy named Ludd, who had broken a frame some years before because he felt that it was the cause of his poverty. The rioters were admonished and threatened, but to no avail. Finally, the military was called out in an effort to curb the frame-breaking. This action served only to fan the flame, and, with brief intervals of quiet, the rioting continued throughout the early months of 1812.

Contemporary accounts of these uprisings indicate that the sympathy of the populace, as it was exhibited in the press, was not with the rioters. There seemed to be no idea of providing relief for these sufferers. They were guilty of a crime and should be punished for it. There is also evidence in these accounts that the weavers were not bent on wholesale destruction of everything which came before them. They had not reached a stage of mob violence. The following account is a good example of the disposition of the Luddites:

> In one house they had much trouble to obtain a light; and, while rummaging a cupboard to procure one, they discovered some plate and other valuables; but, having obtained a bit of paper, they shut the door, nor touched any thing in the house but the frames, which were the object of their vengeance. In another house it was well understood, that from fifty to seventy guineas were kept by the master; but, having exercised their wrath upon the obnoxious *iron*, they left the *gold* in possesion of the owner. . . . They wanted . . . the destruction of those instruments which prevented them from obtaining a livelihood. One poor man begged of the rioters to spare two frames that had been the fruit of his industry for many years: his request was granted.[5]

Certainly this is not the description of an undisciplined mob.

On February 20, 1812, a bill, increasing the severity of punishment for frame-breaking, was passed by the House of Commons. As it was introduced into the House of Lords, it (1) rendered the offence of frame-breaking punishable by death, and (2) compelled owners of frames to give informa-

tion about breakings to the magistrates. The second reading of the bill was the occasion of Byron's first speech in Parliament, and it marks the beginning of his lifelong fight against oppression.[6]

In speaking of his address, Byron says that he spoke "violent sentences with a sort of modest impudence, abused every thing and every body and put the Lord Chancellor very much out of humor."[7] He did not underestimate the seriousness of the riots, nor did he defend the rioters. He indicated that the cause went deeper than the mere employment of frames and displacement of so many workers. He laid the blame at the door of the politicians, who were responsible for England's bitter policy of destructive warfare of the past eighteen years, for it was this policy which destroyed the comfort and well-being of these men. His hope for settlement of these riots was that any measure proposed by the House of Lords would have had conciliation for its basis. He lamented that this body of men, who would debate for months on a bill which would provide relief for a suffering population, would hasten to pass a bill which provided the death penalty.

He did not hesitate in his defense of the people as a whole, as well; and his interest in and sympathy for the oppressed people of the land is apparent in the following statement:

> You call these men a mob, desperate, dangerous, and ignorant. . . . But even a mob may be better reduced to reason by a mixture of conciliation and firmness, than by additional irritation and redoubled penalties. Are we aware of our obligation to a mob? It is the mob that labour in your fields and serve in your houses . . . that have enabled you to defy all the world, and can also defy you when neglect and calamity have driven them to despair! You may call the people a mob; but do not forget that a mob too often speaks the sentiments of the people.[8]

Byron did not recognize the fact that the Industrial Revolution lay at the bottom of the trouble, and his speech in opposition to the bill did not offer any suggestion of the conciliation for which he cried. In his advocacy of tolerance, however, he exhibited more wisdom than the majority of his colleagues, for on March 5, 1812, they passed the bill against which he spoke.

Byron's protest was not confined to the speech in Parliament. "An Ode to the Framers of the Frame Bill" appeared in the *Morning Chronicle* on March 2. As poetry it is of minor importance, but it is a fitting follow-up of the speech. In it he attacks Lord Liverpool, who introduced the bill, and others who supported it. He ends the poem by saying:

> (And who will refuse to partake in the hope?)
> That the frames of the fools may be first to be *broken*,
> Who, when asked for a *remedy*, sent down a *rope*.[9]

He took up the cry again in 1816 when he wrote "Song for the Luddites." The theme is a continuation of his plea for freedom from the oppression imposed upon the weavers by the Frame-Bill, and he advocates revolution as a means of accomplishing this end.

A second speech followed close upon the heels of the first, and it was also on behalf of an oppressed class. This one was occasioned by the question of Catholic emancipation, which had been a sore spot in Parliamentary proceedings for a number of years. First Pitt, then Canning had pushed the question doggedly through Parliament. Byron's speech was made on April 21, 1812, during debate on the Earl of Donoughmore's motion for a committee on Roman Catholic claims. The motion for the committee was occasioned by an address to the Prince Regent and petitions presented to both houses of Parliament on behalf of the Catholics of Ireland.

The core of their complaint seems to be contained in the following two paragraphs taken from the address:

> . . . [T]he Roman Catholics of Ireland still remain subject to severe and humiliating laws, rigidly enforced, universely felt, and inflicting upon them divers injurious and vexatious disabilities, incapacities, privations, and penalties, by reason of their conscientious adherence to the religious doctrines of their forefathers.
>
> For nearly the entire period of the last twenty years, the progress of religious freedom has been obstructed; and whilst other Christian nations have hastened to unbind the fetters upon religious dissent, the Roman Catholics of Ireland have remained unrelieved.[10]

What were some of these unjust laws and penalties inflicted upon the Catholics of Ireland? Byron listed a number in his address: (1) They were not allowed freedom of religion in the army but were compelled to attend Protestant services. (2) The Church could not purchase land in Ireland upon which to construct its buildings of worship; instead, it was compelled to lease land from the laity. This practice subjected the Church entirely to the whim of the landlord, who might terminate the lease at will. (3) Irish Catholics could never have full benefit of trial by jury until permitted to share the privilege of serving as sheriffs and undersheriffs. (4) The laws which were passed in favor of the Catholics were, in many cases, rendered nugatory by the evasive action of the administrative officers. (5) Catholics were not permitted to endow foundations for the education of the priesthood without being subjected to the interference of the Orange Commissioners for Charitable Donations.

The remainder of the address was concerned with certain minor abuses, bitter denunciations of the "vipers of intolerance," and regrets that subjection of a people stifles so many talents and useful resources. He concluded by stating that his opinion, as his vote, was in favor of the measure.[11]

Again he was pleading a cause which was temporarily doomed to failure, for, at five A.M. on April 22, the House divided, and the majority voted against the motion.[12] Here, then, as in the first speech, Byron showed an understanding and sympathy for the oppressed, which was far ahead of that of most of his contemporaries.

He was to lash out against the treatment of the Catholics in Ireland again in *The Irish Avatar*, which appeared in 1821. In it he alludes to his second Parliamentary speech:

> My voice, though humble, was raised for thy right,
> My vote, as a freeman's, still voted thee free.[13]

Byron's third and final speech in the House of Lords was a short presentation of a petition signed by John Cartwright, complaining of having been seized, along with six other persons, by a military force, kept in close custody for several hours, carried before a magistrate, and finally released after an examination of his papers proved that there was "not only no just, but not even statutable charge against him." Moreover, the petitioner had never received a copy of the warrant against him, even though it had been promised. Byron presented this petition, he said, not particularly on behalf of this individual petitioner, but because the grievance of which he complained had been and still was felt by numbers of people. Again he failed in his attempt to soften the hearts of his colleagues, and his petition was not received, because, among other unpardonable wrongs, it "contained no prayer."[14]

It is not only significant that Byron opposed the majority of the members of the House of Lords by speaking in behalf of oppressed people, it is also worthy of note that the two really important issues on which he spoke were later given the consideration they deserved, for the policy of tolerance which he advocated was adopted by the House.

Byron's political career was brief and unprofitable; his interest in politics soon waned and was thenceforward admittedly small; but these addresses do show that he remained true to the promise he made to John Hanson in 1809, i.e., that he would maintain his independence and speak his mind. They also exhibit a seriousness of thought and purpose, which Trueblood maintains came to the poet shortly before the composition of the last cantos of *Don Juan*.

But Byron was first of all a poet; so it will be well for us to turn our attention from his brief and stormy political career in order to examine his literary productions. We look first at *Childe Harold*, because it is, I think, a key poem. In the first place, it covers a large part of Byron's creative period. He began work on it early in his career and did not finish it until 1818, six years before his death; and his mind was occupied with it during much of that time. In the second place, it contains many ideas on the subject of liberty, which he developed more fully in other poems and dramas. It is, therefore, a kind of catch-all and carry-all of Byron's thoughts on social doctrine.

It is a significant fact, I think, that Byron returns again and again to the love of freedom in his description of each of the places Childe Harold visits. This fact is true, not only of the first two cantos, published in 1812, but also of cantos three and four, published in 1816 and 1818 respectively. In Lisbon, for example, he notes with horror the poverty and slavery which abound there. In Spain he sees that Seville is free but must soon fall to the tyrant. The history of Spain indicates that the fight for freedom has been a long one, and he regrets that the tree of liberty is not yet planted in Spanish soil. The sons of Spain, who never knew freedom, fight on for their country, even though at this time (1812) they have no king

or state for which to fight, Charles IV and Ferdinand VII having abdicated in favor of Napoleon.

He also laments for Greece when he compares her present state with her past glory. He regrets that Greece is a "sad relic of departed worth." He laments the fact that the people are slaves from birth to death, and that every "carle can lord it o'er the land." He dreams that the hour is near which shall give Greece back the heritage that is hers—her lost liberty. "What spirit," he asks, "shall call thee from the tomb?" The Greeks themselves cry for foreign arms and aid. But he calls indignantly to these hereditary bondsmen: Do they not know that they who would be free must strike the blow themselves? Help from outside may "lay their despoilers low," but that will *not* win freedom's flame. He ends this plea by calling on Greece to change her lords; her "glorious day is o'er, but not [her] years of shame."

We are not surprised by the first significant fact exhibited in this passage. Byron shows here a deep love for liberty. He had shown that in the first canto and in some early poems and letters as well. We note, however, that in calling upon the hereditary bondsmen of Greece to rid themselves of their present lords, and in admonishing them that they alone can achieve the freedom they deserve, he is anticipating revolutionary indoctrination, which, as Mr. Trueblood points out, is part of the essence of the latter cantos of *Don Juan.* Byron was indoctrinated with revolutionary fervor a good while before the appearance of the great satires of the later period, or, for that matter, before the appearance of *Childe Harold,* Canto IV, in 1818. Had he found a more suitable means of expression in his earlier career, he would have raised a stronger voice on behalf of these principles.

Revolution, Byron would say, is the means by which a

country might rid itself of tyrants and achieve the freedom it deserves. The idea of revolution versus tyranny was much on his mind, and the thought of one seemed to lead to an expression of the other. Thus there are several discussions of each in *Childe Harold.*

For example, he speaks of the tripartite war of Spain, France, and England, and regrets the loss of life which paves the way for the tyrant. He deplores the outcome of Waterloo for the same reason. The world is not more free because Gaul is in fetters. There is no reason for man to pay homage to the wolf which struck the lion down. The result of Waterloo seems to him to be a revival of thralldom, which is to be the "patch'd-up idol of enlightened days."

The tendency toward revolution is expressed in a letter to Tom Moore, dated April 20, 1814. Byron explains that he refused to see Louis XVIII make his triumphal entry into London; but, he says, "In some coming year of Hegira, I should not dislike to see the place where he *had* reigned, shortly after the second revolution and a happy sovereignty of two months, the last six weeks being civil war."[15]

The "Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte," which was published in 1814, is in keeping with the spirit of this letter. The ode is an occasional poem, written at the time of Napoleon's first exile. Byron indicates the power which Napoleon held when tyrants of Europe had bowed to him and thanked him for a crown. He had both France and the rest of the world in his possession. Why, then, did he fail? One reason for his failure is best summed up in these lines:

> But thou, forsooth, must be a king
> And don the purple vest,
> As if that foolish robe could wring
> Remembrance from thy breast.[16]

Now Napoleon's return in 1815 placed Byron's ode in a very strange light. In a letter to Moore the poet says that he

can forgive the rogue for utterly falsifying every line of the poem, and calls to mind the story of the abbé who wrote a treatise designed to prove that the Swedish Constitution was indissoluble and eternal. He had no sooner corrected the last sheet than word came that the government had been destroyed by Gustavus III. "The King of Sweden may overthrow the *constitution*," said the abbé "but not *my book*."[17] What is there about Byron's ode that is like the abbé's book?

Napoleon had the opportunity of being something other than a tyrant, but he had to don the purple and tyrannize, as had those whom he conquered. Thus, he was doomed to failure. We note that Byron did not include his name with those who he thought were leaders "in talent and truth": Washington, Franklin, Penn, Mirabeau, or St. Just. Napoleon's return, then, falsified the ode in only one sense; in another it made the poem even more durable than the abbé's book, for his return, signifying desire for supreme rule, bore out Byron's thesis that tyrants are conquered only by tyrants, as he expresses it later in *Childe Harold.*

Another passage in *Childe Harold* gives an excellent analysis of the attitude which drives men to tyrannize. It is significant here in that Byron is again expressing the same idea that he voiced two years earlier in the ode. He is still speaking of Napoleon:

> But quiet to quick bosoms is a Hell,
> And *there* hath been thy bane; there is a fire
> And motion of the Soul which will not dwell
> In its own narrow being, but aspire
> Beyond the fitting medium of desire;
> And, but once kindled, quenchless evermore,
> Preys upon high adventure, nor can tire
> Of aught but rest; a fever at the core,
> Fatal to him who bears, to all who ever bore.[18]

Such agitation leads these men on, and they become so accustomed to conflict and strife that, after they have conquered all, their lives are empty, filled with sorrow and

supineness; and they die like a flame unfed. Once they have attained the tyrannical heights they seek, these men are destined to look down thenceforward on the hate of those below.

We trace this vein through the remainder of the poem. Byron points out that a contributing factor to Napoleon's downfall was one weakest weakness—vanity. However, this fault alone did not comprise the chief error or cause the failure of the emperor. One less sensitive than Byron to the needs and desires of a suffering humanity would have failed to see that, as the poet says in a note:

> The great error of Napoleon, "if we have writ our annals true," was a continued obtrusion on mankind of his want of all community of feeling for or with them; perhaps more offensive to human vanity than the active cruelty of more trembling and suspicious tyranny. Such were his speeches to public assemblies as well as individuals; and the single expression which he is said to have used on returning to Paris after the Russian winter had destroyed his army, rubbing his hands over a fire, "This is pleasanter than Moscow," would probably alienate more favor from his cause than the destruction and reverses which led to the remark.[19]

And what is the result of Napoleon's lack of community of feeling with mankind? What do we reap from this "barren being"? The result is oppression of the worst kind. Men fear lest their own judgments become too bright and their free thoughts be crime. Thus, they plod in sluggish misery from generation to generation, begetting inborn slaves, who wage war for their chains rather than be free. They fall in the same worn-out causes in which they have seen their fellows fall and do not realize, as he indicates in many places, that their hope lies within themselves.

The continuation of Childe Harold's pilgrimage in the last two cantos of the poem gives the poet more opportunities to expound his favorite theme. For example, when he visits the

Rhine, he regrets the "evil will" of the robber barons who built the castles along the banks of the river. He laments their power, which kept so many people in subjection for so long.

He eulogizes the soldier Marceau, not for his prowess in battle, but because

> . . . He was freedom's champion, one of those
> The few in number, who had not o'erstept
> The charter to chastise which she bestows
> On such as wield her weapons; he had kept
> The whiteness of his soul—and thus men o'er him wept.[20]

This picture is in striking contrast to the description of Napoleon in the same canto.

In a similar manner he contrasts Waterloo with Morat and Marathon. Perhaps time had obliterated the less heroic, more terrible memories of the two ancient battlefields, but, nevertheless, Byron believed that

> They were true Glory's stainless victories,
> Won by the unambitious heart and hand
> Of a proud, brotherly, and civic band.[21]

The poet is led to a brief discussion of the French Revolution, and herein lies much of Byron's philosophy of "revolution in the right cause." The French people made themselves a fearful monument, the wreck of old opinions. They went too far and overthrew good with evil; hence they left ruins and only the foundations upon which to renew dungeons and thrones. In short, tyrants were conquered by tyrants. Note how closely this idea is related to the "Ode to Napoleon" and to other passages in *Childe Harold,* to which attention has already been called.

But all hope is not lost, for man has felt his strength. He might have used it better, but Byron does not place too much blame upon those who have been oppressed so long,

if, at times, they mistake their prey. We notice also how closely this idea parallels some of the remarks Byron made in his speech on behalf of the frame-breakers. Certainly, his thinking on the subject had not become less serious in the intervening years.

The cause of liberty and laments for its loss are no less ardent in the last canto of the poem than they had been in the first three. Italy is the object of the poet's description, and he leads off with an account of his impressions of Venice. After a few introductory remarks he returns to his old theme. He regrets that Venice, after thirteen hundred years of freedom, is now in submission to foreign foes. Possibly Byron had not learned enough of the history of the city to form as definite an opinion about its freedom as he did at a later date. At any rate, in a drama which we shall examine presently, he began to realize that in the instance of the Venetian Government of the fourteenth century the word "republic" was not synonymous with "freedom."

He also expresses another idea which he was to elaborate in a later poem. In one stanza he states that in her love for Tasso, Venice should have cut the knot which bound her to a foreign tyrant. He speaks of Petrarch as one who arose to raise the language of his country from her barbaric foes. He also suggests that "Tulley's voice, Virgil's lay, and Livy's pictured page" will bring about the resurrection of fallen Rome. The idea that the hope for Italy lay in her art was reiterated and developed more fully in *The Prophecy of Dante.*

In 1819, before he had completed the fifth canto of *Don Juan,* Byron was writing another poem, which, though not as well known, is nevertheless important to the problem at hand. On February 21, 1820, he wrote to John Murray that

he had not done more than six hundred lines of "Dante's Prophecy."[22] Something must have incited him to work, however, for on March 14, 1820, he enclosed four cantos of "*Dante's Prophecy,* vision, or what not" in a letter to the publisher. If these cantos were approved, he intended to go on "like Isaiah."[23]

The Prophecy of Dante was not published until April 12, 1821; but since Byron first mentions it early in 1820, we may assume that it was on his mind the year before. If this assumption is correct, then, the composition of the poem was not far removed in time from that of the last canto of *Childe Harold,* and would naturally contain many of the ideas expressed in the earlier work.

The theme of the *Prophecy* is the unification and freedom of Italy. Byron views the country through the eyes of the great Italian poet, who has been exiled from his native Florence. Dante laments that Florence and Italy would not struggle for freedom and would not listen to his voice, which was raised on behalf of freedom. The history of Italy is then presented as if it were being prophesied by Dante. Italy, he says, will succumb to each tyrant who invades her. She has already fallen to the Goth and German; Frank and Hun are yet to come. But Italy still has "hearts, and hands, and arms" with which to fight oppression.

Dante again asserts his love for his country and prophesies her literary future. Poets shall rise and follow in the path he has made. Some, he says, shall sing of liberty, and Italy will hear their voices.

Finally, Dante predicts that Italy will become great through her art and that warring nations will pause in their conflict to cast envious eyes upon her. In this poem, as in the conclusion of *Childe Harold,* Byron takes occasion to eulogize

the great Italian poet and artists. The nationalism of these men interested him most, and he found his own theme of liberty in the poetry of each.

Italy will, in the end, honor the name of the great poet who thus prophesies her future, and the vengeance of his verse will outlive all the pride and wealth that Florence and Italy hold dear. It shall also outlive the worst of all evils, the sway of petty tyrants in a state. The second canto ends on the theme of the poem and explains how Italy might gain her freedom:

> What is there wanting then to set thee free,
> And show thy beauty to the fullest light?
> To make the Alps impassable; and we
> Her sons may do this with *one* deed—*unite!*[24]

The consistency in Byron's social doctrine is exemplified in his dramas as well as in his poetry. On April 9, 1820, he wrote to Murray that he had begun work on *Marino Faliero, Doge of Venice*. The drama was completed in July, 1820, and published with *The Prophecy of Dante* the following year. He found the story in Marin Sanuto's *Lives of the Doges*.

The plot is motivated by the action of Michele Steno, who, having been affronted by the Doge, wrote on the chair of state an offensive lampoon on Marino and his wife. The man was tried and given a sentence which Marino felt was inadequate. Discontented with this action and with his lot in general, the Doge entered into a conspiracy with a group of men who wanted to overthrow the Venetian Constitution and the rule of the governing body, called the Council of Ten, which they felt was oppressive and tyrannical. They set up Marino Faliero as their sovereign. The plot was discovered, the conspirators captured, and the Doge executed.

Although the tragedy was not completed until 1820, it was on Byron's mind a long time before that date. In the preface

to the drama he says, "It is now four years that I have meditated this work."[25] His first idea was to make the tragedy hinge on the jealousy of the Doge. However, he was dissuaded from this policy by his friend Matthew Gregory Lewis, with whom he discussed his intention in Venice in 1817. Lewis assured him that if he should make the Doge jealous, he would have to contend with established writers, to say nothing of Shakespeare, and that he would be better advised to shift the emphasis.[26]

The emphasis was shifted accordingly, and Byron takes the opportunity of striking a blow on behalf of freedom and another against the ambition and excessive pride which make tyrants. For the Doge seems to be a split personality. He did not want to be made Doge of Venice. The position was thrust upon him while he was happiest in his work as leader of his army. Nor does he like the restrictions placed upon him by the Council of Ten, who are the petty tyrants of whom Byron spoke in *The Prophecy of Dante.* Moreover, he sees the oppression of the people of his city and sympathizes with the conspirators who solicit his aid. But he is overcome with personal ambition and desires to exchange his Doge's cap for a crown. As far as the conspirators are concerned, he may have his wish, but such overwhelming ambition and desire for guilty glory can, in Byron's philosophy, bring him "naught but grief and pain." His plot is detected and fails, thus again expressing Byron's idea, first seen in *Childe Harold,* that revolution to gain freedom is worth while; but when revolution is staged for personal ambition, as in the case of that fostered by the Doge, it results in more tyranny and is doomed to failure.

Blind obedience to a state, on the other hand, is as wrong as desire for personal gain and glory, and it can lead to nothing better than that which is the final goal of tyranny. This

idea is nowhere so apparent as in *The Two Foscari*, which was published in 1821. In *Marino Faliero* Byron had condemned a cause which had gone too far and resulted in tyranny, the evil which it fought. In *The Two Foscari* he condemned a blind obedience which obviates the possibility of fighting for any cause at all.

The elder Foscari, Doge of Venice, is compelled by the Council of Ten to sit in judgment on his only son, who is accused of treason. Tossing aside all bonds of parenthood, the old man watches as his son is put to torture in order that a confession might be wrung from him. The father is not unmoved by the trial, but his oath of allegiance to the state, he feels, compels him to witness and condone it. The son is equally adamant, in that his great love for Venice will not let him explain that he is guilty of a betrayal which he thought was for the good of the city. Confession would mean exile. In the absence of the Doge, the council finds Foscari guilty and orders that he be banished. It is also decided that the Doge must be removed from office, even though he has been loyal to the city and has won her many conquests. This final action is too much for the old man, who dies of a broken heart.

The Council of Ten of this drama is the same council against which Marino Faliero revolted. Venice, presumably, is a republic, but Byron makes clear here, as in *Marino Faliero,* that the populace of the city is not free in any respect, and that, though the Doge or prince is not the supreme ruler of the city, he might as well be, for totalitarianism already is represented by the dreaded Council of Ten. These men have become as tyrannical as any monarch. Thus, we have the expression of the idea which he first stated in the journal of 1814, *viz.,* "One establishment is no better for a

people than another"—that is, he would have added, if that government begins to tyrannize.

The Doge's blind obedience to the laws of the state, and to his own oath of allegience, regardless of mitigating circumstances, is a philosophy which has seldom failed to bring about disorder. History, from the time of the fall of the Roman Empire to the fall of the Fascist states, illustrates this fact. The Doge's own words best sum up this concept:

> [Venice has] subdued the World; in such a state
> An individual, be he richest of
> Such a rank as is permitted, or the meanest,
> Without a name, is alike nothing, when
> The policy, irrevocably tending
> To one great end, must be maintained in vigour.[27]

The Doge's error was in adhering to the principles of a government which had so perverted its aim as to make, not its citizenry its primary concern, but the glory of the city itself.

Here, then, are the two extremes, and the mean was what Byron sought. It is what men who would be free have sought through the ages. Byron would be willing that men serve a state only that the state might serve men.

These three works on Italian history, all of which dealt with the problem of Italian freedom, were published at a time when unification was the primary question and the Carbonari were secretly active. They could not have escaped official notice. Byron's letters to friends in England at this time are full of allusions to the situation in Italy and of his own active participation in these affairs. He harbored the ammunition and arms of the liberals in his home, offered to defend any who were in danger of arrest by the authorities, offered his house as a kind of fort to be used by the liberals until the countryside could be aroused, and at one time wrote out an address to the Italian people, in which he proffered

both money and services to their cause. This address is supposed to have fallen into the hands of the Pontifical Government, thereby causing Byron trouble with the authorities. In short, the fact that the Carbonari attempted no general uprising at this time probably saved him from being arrested as a leader in the liberation movement.

The satires of the later period are much more powerful than the verses of the earlier and middle years; but they continue the theme which the poet adopted in 1812, in his speeches in Parliament and in *Childe Harold.* The difference in his attitude seems to lie in the fact that he has lost patience, not with the people, but with their willingness to continue in servility. Note, for example, the poem entitled *The Irish Avatar*, which was written on the occasion of the triumphal entry of George IV into Dublin, ten days after the death of Queen Caroline. He was greeted with an outburst of enthusiastic loyalty, which Byron abhorred because of the oppression of the Irish people. This poem is a satire on the king, it is true; but it is also a bitter denunciation of the courtesy extended him who was the cause of their oppression.

Consider also *The Vision of Judgment,* 1821, which was occasioned by Southey's poor eulogy of George III, in the preface to which Southey bittery attacked Byron and his works. Byron retaliated with this the best of travesties, which alone is responsible for the fact that Southey's poem is remembered. Byron goes far beyond attacking Southey in the satire; he takes occasion to denounce the policies of the king. He holds George III responsible for the oppression of countless millions, and while he grants that the king is an excellent example of virtue in private matters, he cannot forgive the fact that George constantly warred with freedom and the free. His virtue was adequate for *him,* but not for the mil-

lions who found in him the cause of their oppression.

With the exception of the last eight cantos of *Don Juan, The Vision of Judgment* was Byron's last great work. All that he had to say in earlier writings, however, is summed up in *Don Juan*, which is one of the best satires in our language. In this poem Byron attacks the faults of mankind: hypocrisy, cant, pride, the vanity of glory, the evils of needless warfare; and in an unusually subtle yet significant manner, he returns to his consistent theme—freedom from oppression.

Byron changes his tactics in these stanzas. Formerly, he had always viewed the situation from the standpoint of the oppressed. Now he places Don Juan, not with the masses, but in the company of these who are responsible for oppression. Juan first fights in the Russian Army under Suvoroff in the siege of Ismail. He then proceeds to the Russian Court at Moscow, where he becomes a favorite of Empress Catherine. From there he goes, as Catherine's ambassador, to England and mingles with the nobility and court periphery. There, amid the petty intrigues and trivial happenings of English high society, the poem breaks off.

The poet does not lose sight of his theme in the latter part of this poem, for he keeps it constantly on the mind of Don Juan. In order to trace this idea, we must go back to Canto VIII and the siege of Ismail. Juan fights valiantly in this bloody battle and is beginning to feel a little of the thirst for glory which comes to those who wage war successfully, when he is reined in sharply. He sees two Cossacks, bent on murdering a ten-year-old Turkish girl. He saves the child as she tries to hide among the bodies of her parents and friends. From that time on, Don Juan's first thought is for the safety and well-being of his charge. He takes her with him to Russia, where she serves as a contrast to the pomp of court life. She goes with him on his journey through the countries of

Europe to England, where her innocence is again juxtaposed to the banality and trivial intrigues of society. And Juan

> Loved the infant orphan he had saved,
> As patriots (now and then) may love a nation;
> His pride too felt that she was not enslaved
> Owing to him.[28]

For the child stands as a symbol of oppression. At a time when Don Juan was about to fall heart and soul into the pattern of tyranny, he was rescued by the act of rescuing this child. It is she also who is before him at the Russian Court and in England as a reminder of his love of liberty. It is true that Byron disposes of her in the twelfth canto by placing her under the tutelage of a stately, precise, and virtuous old lady, but the child is not forgotten by Don Juan or the reader; and we cannot be sure that Byron did not have plans for her in subsequent lines.

The fact that the girl is a Turk, against whom Don Juan, as a soldier in the Russian Army, is fighting, bears witness to the fact that the poet was interested in the cause of liberty for all people, not just for the Greeks. Italians, or others with whom he was in sympathy. In short, what Byron says is:

> I wish men to be free
> As much from mobs as kings—from you as me.[29]

The part Byron played in the Greek fight for independence is too well known and too complex to be discussed here. Suffice it to say that we now know that he did not go to Greece out of any feeling of boredom or philhellenic enthusiasm. Richard Edgecumbe and Harold Nicholson, in their studies of Byron's activities in Greece, did away with that misconception long ago. Indeed, some of his contemporaries realized the importance of his part in the Greek fight for liberty, as

witness this statement taken from an article in *The Gentleman's Magazine* for June, 1824:

> Lord Byron had succeeded . . . in stirring up among the people of the part of Greece in which he resided, an almost inconceivable enthusiasm. His exertions were incessant in their cause, and the gratitude of the people was proportioned to them. His influence was not lessened by being employed often to procure humane, even kind treatment towards the Turkish captives.[30]

This statement, from a letter from Mavrocardato to the secretary of the Greek Committee in England, indicates the attitude of the Greek patriots: "I shall attempt to perform my duty towards this great man: the eternal gratitude of my country will perhaps be the only true tribute to his memory."[31]

No better proof of the truth of these statements can be found than in the following quotation, taken from an article which appeared in *Times Literary Supplement* for May 13, 1949:

> It was Byron . . . who morally re-armed the defeated and disunited little nation. . . . [T]he Greeks owe English poets and poetry a great debt. And they are deeply conscious of the fact. To the Greek peasant of to-day every Englishman is in some sort a great-grandchild of the famous Byron, and he reaps in terms of friendship and hospitality the love and reverence that the poet himself did not live to enjoy.[32]

"Close thy *Byron;* open thy *Goethe,*" said Carlyle with characteristic vehemence. Now I should not like to reverse that statement, but in an age which is characterized by a struggle for the freedom of the individual, more than by any other one thing, I should like to suggest that we open our Byron and read what he has to say. It is true that he was a product of his age and that he stands with Shelley, the young Coleridge and Wordsworth, Leigh Hunt, Tom Moore, and

others as a poet of reform. But does he not also have a philosophy which is characteristic of our time?

An article entitled "Byron in Our Day" appeared in 1907, and I assume that each generation has thought of Byron as having aspects peculiarly suited to its own age. The reason for this fact is, I suppose, that basic human problems, hopes, and desires are, like the abbé's book, "indissoluble and eternal." The poet or dramatist who treats these social problems is not writing for his own, but for all ages. Thus we can, in one very real sense, speak of "Byron in Our Day" and present evidence substantiating the fact that his doctrines are as suitable to 1949 or 1950 as they were to 1907, or, for that matter, 1812 or 1823.

But do we not have more reason for opening our Byron? Are not his ideas on freedom, tyranny, slavery, and oppression applicable to this day of the United Nations Organization with its *Declaration of Human Rights?* Now, when "freedom from oppression" and "human rights" are key phrases, Byron speaks to us again; and there are indications that we are turning to him with new interest and understanding. We may laugh at the aspects of musical comedy heroism in his life, or at his clever satire of current social, economic, and political questions; but we can also be strengthened by the fact that his hopes for the future of man were the same as ours, and that he was unrelenting in his efforts to help secure the freedom he advocated. Shades of the Byronic hero have haunted the poet from the time of the publication of the Turkish Tales to the present. They have colored our reading of *Childe Harold* and other poems and have influenced our attitude toward his life and its achievements on behalf of humanity. To see Byron only in terms of the Byronic hero, however, is to take a fleeting glimpse of him. Other glimpses reveal the subjectivism caused by the personal tragedy of

1816, the disillusionment of 1819, and the valor of 1823. But if we are to understand Byron, we have to take, not glimpses, but an over-all view of the man and the poet. Such a view will reveal to us one who never wavered in the pursuit of his objective. He began his career with expressions of hope for the freedom of man. He continued to express this hope, which is a dominant element in most of his poetry, and he ended his days striving, successfully, to instill that hope and love of liberty in the hearts of a suffering people.

WILFRED S. DOWDEN

NOTES

1. Paul Graham Trueblood, *The Flowering of Byron's Genius* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1945), pp. 6-25.
2. Rowland E. Prothero (ed.), *The Works of Lord Byron: Letters and Journals* (London: John Murray, 1902), II, 381.
3. *Ibid.*, I, 209-210.
4. *Ibid.*, II, 85.
5. "Provincial Occurrences: Nottinghamshire," *Monthly Magazine*, XXXII (1811), 614.
6. Prothero, *op. cit.*, II, 97 n.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 428.
9. George Gordon, Lord Byron, *Complete Poetical Works* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1907), p. 1282.
10. "Petition of the Roman Catholics of Ireland," *Monthly Magazine*, XXX (1812), 280.
11. Prothero, *op. cit.*, II, 431-443.
12. T. C. Hansard, *The Parliamentary Debates* (London: Privately Printed, 1812), XXII, 703.
13. Byron, *op. cit.*, p. 664.
14. Prothero, *op. cit.*, II, 443-445.
15. *Ibid.*, III, 72.
16. Byron, *op. cit.*, p. 389.
17. Prothero, *op. cit.*, III, 187.
18. Byron, *op. cit.*, p. 226.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 241 n.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 230.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 231.
22. Prothero, *op. cit.*, IV, 409.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 418.

24. Byron, *op. cit.*, p. 544.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 568.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*, p. 744.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 1173.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 1155.
30. "Memoir of the Late Lord Byron," *The Gentleman's Magazine*, CXXXV (1824), 565.
31. *Ibid.*
32. "Hellene and Philhellene," *Times Literary Supplement*, May 13, 1949, p. 1.