

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion

Byron  
Died April 19<sup>th</sup> 1824

My epitaph shall be my name alone;  
If *that* with honour fail to crown my clay,  
Oh! may no other fame my deeds repay!  
*That*, only *that*, shall single out the spot;  
By that remember'd, or with that forgot.

[1803] Byron

A century and three-quarters after his death in 1824, Lord Byron's massive popularity was not just an accidental phenomenon or based on a misapprehension. His phenomenal success in the world of European literature is nothing short of fascinating. Byron was a genuine literary genius whose poems provoked extraordinary interest among readers that resulted in an enduring impact on contemporary culture and society. The singular conception of the Byronic hero was undoubtedly Byron's legacy to literature, a cultural icon not just of the Romantic period but the modern century as well. The generations of intellectuals including writers, poets, philosophers, artists and composers who have been influenced by the Byronic hero is due testimony of this fact.

Despite his huge influence on modern literary culture, however, New Critics of twentieth century European literature concerned with identifying a "Romantic spirit" were initially hostile both to Byron and his "legacy" of the Byronic hero.<sup>1</sup> In 1934, Allen Tate expressed his distaste and saw Romanticism as a revolt of the individual will against all forms of a supposed "scientific" order. Quoting H.A. Taine on Byron, he says:

Such are the sentiments wherewith he surveyed nature and history, not to comprehend them and forget himself before them, but to seek in them and impress upon them the image of his own passions. He does not leave the objects to speak for themselves, but forces them to answer him.<sup>2</sup>

It was only after the publication of renowned critic T.S Eliot's essay on Byron entitled "A New Byronism" (1920) that brought about a favourable critical estimate of Byron among writers and critics. Among notable Byron researches were Peter Quennell who wrote the immensely popular biography *Byron: The Years of Fame* and notable critic I.A. Richards who wrote to Elliot in 1937 to thank him for the Byron essay and admitted that he was "curious to know how he looks through your eyes."<sup>3</sup>

The influence of the Byronic hero continued throughout Europe after Byron's death in 1824. Bertrand Russell in the *History of Western Philosophy* devotes an entire chapter to the Byronic Hero, giving Byron credit for establishing on the Continent a type of "aristocratic rebel" – a rebel not concerned with social revolution or remedial legislation, but with some "intangible and metaphysical good." This rebellion "takes the form of titanic cosmic self-assertion, or ...of Satanism. Both are to be found in Byron"(747). Russell points out that Byron was not a philosopher in the strict academic sense of the word but he had a huge impact on European philosophy, most notably on Friedrich Nietzsche. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche acknowledges that his own concept of the Superman (Der Übermensch) owes much to Byron, in particular to Byron's defiant and independent hero *Manfred*. Nietzsche goes on to say that as a model for the fully autonomous hero, in charge of his own destiny and in need of no salvation from beyond his own soul, Byron's *Manfred* is even greater than Goethe's *Faust* (Thorslev, 195). Generations of Romantics from Alfred de Musset in France to Alexander Pushkin in

Russia have been influenced by the Byronic hero. Pushkin was a follower of Byron and became Russia's first national poet. His popular poems were *Boris Gordunov* (1829) and *Eugene Onegin* (1837). In Germany, Nikolaus Lenau's *Faust* (1836) or his fragmentary *Don Juan* (1851) were both written under the influence of Byron and not Goethe.<sup>4</sup> In France, the influence of Byron on French literature is most evident in the poems of Baudelaire. Byron's strong influence on Baudelaire, who made various references to Byron in his work and letters. In a letter written to his mother in July 1857 shortly after the publication of his poem *Les fleurs du mal*, Baudelaire declares:

They deny me everything, the spirit of invention and even knowledge of the French language. I could care less about all these imbeciles, and I know that this volume, with its qualities and its faults, will make its way in the memory of the lettered public, along with the best poetry of V.Hugo, of Th. Gautier and even of Byron.<sup>5</sup>

The Bronte sisters avidly read their father's edition of Byron's works. When Byron died at the age of thirty-six in 1824, Charlotte Bronte was eight years old. Bronte's youthful age, however, did not preclude Byron and his works from having a profound effect on her and her writing, as seen in her portrayal of Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, who is a descendant of the Gothic Villain-Hero. In addition, Emily Bronte created one of the arch Byronic heroes in Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. Harold Bloom notes that "between them, the Brontes can be said to have invented a relatively new genre, a kind of northern romance, deeply influenced both by Byron's poetry and by his myth and personality, but going back also to the Gothic novel and to the Elizabethan drama"(262).

Other famous writers who have been notably influenced by Byron's heroes include Goethe, Balzac, Carlyle, Mazzini, Flaubert, Tennyson, Stendhal, and Ruskin. In all their fictions, as in Byron's own, the shadow of Napoleon is discerned together with his

revolutionary ideals. Byron was simply the first to dramatize the attitudes of the new and unknown man who risks life for glory and justice. Encouraged by success, he went out to analyse within himself the sensations of this representative temperament but the traits he singled out were not inventions of his own - they were part of the human nature of his time.<sup>6</sup> Instilling hope and love of liberty in the hearts of the oppressed, the Byronic hero seized the imagination of so many as a passionate and rebellious figure. Shades of the Byronic hero have haunted the poet from the time of publication of the Turkish Tales to the present. The Turkish Tales have incited generation after generation of readers. They speak rebellion only to those fuming against convention and oppression. In times and places of political unrest and social change, the tales have been much translated and widely circulated (Woodring, 167).

In the twentieth century, the Byronic hero bears striking similarity to the heroes of Ernest Hemingway. The Hemingway hero is the product of a lost generation, disillusioned by the results of war and the hypocrisy of a materialist society. Like the Byronic hero, he is a wanderer and expatriate, lamenting the futility of existence and dramatizing it through self-indulgence and the violations of conventions. He also aspires to an ideal love and loses it through fate. He fears death, but both seeks and defies it. He is sometimes the revolutionist, sometimes the outlaw, always a law unto himself. He suffers from guilt and remorse more mysterious than the Byronic hero's. Perhaps the most important difference between them is the way in which each expresses his defiance. In the Byronic hero, the conflict is intellectual, and the hero's ego is asserted through the independence and superiority of mind, but in Hemingway's heroes, the conflict is physical

and the hero establishes his identity through violence, physical strength and courage (Bostetter, 11).

The Byronic hero's unique individuality not only influenced the literary world but also extended to music. French composer Hector Berlioz's music is characterised by a unique combination of classical detachment and Romantic involvement, qualities that Byron's famous hero Childe Harold shares. In his famous composition *Harold in Italy*, Berlioz depicts Harold's epic flight from a disastrous love affair to the European mainland, where he becomes the alienated observer of a world ravaged by time and tyranny. Berlioz freely draws on earlier sections in the poem, in which Harold stands amazed at the beauties of the Alps. Berlioz's *Harold in Italy* interweaves a classically noble portrait of Harold's isolation with a frenziedly romantic depiction of the landscape through which he moves. Byron's mixture of detachment and immersion stands in marked contrast to the remorseless subjectivism. Berlioz's fascination with Byron and his admiration for the Byronic hero is recorded in his Memoirs written during his time in Rome in the early 1830s. Sitting amidst the historic and majestic architecture of the Coliseum and St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, he drifts off into Byron's fantasy world in *The Corsair*:

...I liked spending the day there when the summer's heat became unbearable. I would take a volume of Byron and, settling myself comfortably in a confessional, enjoy the cool air of the cathedral; and in a religious silence, unbroken by any sound but the murmur of two fountains in the square outside, wafting in as the wind stirred momentarily, would sit there absorbed in that burning verse. I followed the Corsair across the sea on his audacious journeys. I adored the extraordinary nature of the man, at once ruthless and of extreme tenderness, generous-hearted and without pity, a strange amalgam of feelings seemingly opposed: love of a woman, hatred of his kind.<sup>7</sup>

Like millions of Byron's readers, Berlioz was clearly captivated by the Byronic hero's magnetic charisma, fearless courage and heroic virtues. Russian composer Tchaikovsky's *Manfred* is based on what is arguably the most influential of Byron's works, *Manfred*, often referred to as the ultimate Byronic hero. Just as *Manfred* draws upon Byron's own incestuous relationship with his half sister Augusta, Tchaikovsky also deals with his own guilt and tortured emotions. In love with his own nephew, Vladimir Davidov, Tchaikovsky faces his own transgressive passion, his own terrible secret – and in Byron's depiction of the relationship between Manfred and Astarte, he found a vent for both his desire and his anguish. The Manfred Symphony contains some of the most agonised music ever written. Much of it is the sound of a soul in torment, and it remains the most uniquely disturbing work in Tchaikovsky's output, as well as one of his greatest and most popular works in his lifetime. Both Berlioz and Tchaikovsky's works are acknowledged as masterpieces and both remain potent expressions of human isolation in a damaged world.<sup>8</sup>

The Byronic hero also has had its counterpart in the film stars, rock stars and charismatic revolutionary heroes of the twentieth century including Rudolf Valentino (the cinematic reincarnation of Byron's Corsair), James Dean and Che Guevara whose fame was spread through photographs, posters, film and television. Atara Stein in *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television* emphasizes the importance of the Byronic hero's influence on the celluloid world. Stein suggests that the Byronic hero serves its audience as an emblem of defiance and complacency. In her book, Stein bridges nineteenth and twentieth century studies in pursuit of an ambitious, antisocial, arrogant, and aggressively individualistic mode of hero from his inception in Byron's *Manfred*, *Child Harold*, and *Cain*, through his incarnations as the protagonists of Westerns, action flicks,

space odysseys, vampire novels, neo-Gothic comics, and sci-fi television. She asserts that such a hero “exhibits supernatural abilities, adherence to a personal moral code, ineptitude at human interaction and an ingrained defiance of oppressive authority. He is typically an outlaw, and most certainly an outcast or outsider. Given his superhuman status, this hero offers no potential for sympathetic identification from his audience. At best, he provides an outlet for vicarious expressions of power and independence”(236). While the audience may not seek to emulate the Byronic hero, Stein notes that they desire to emulate him by “rehumanising” the hero, and through their admiration of ordinary human values and experiences.

In her analysis, Stein classifies the Byronic heroes into two categories. First, the leader-hero who pursues justice outside the law through explosive violence, is illustrated in a trio of Clint Eastwood Westerns and the Arnold Schwarzenegger *Terminator* movies. Second, the angst-ridden loner hero who views his power as a burden and pines for human existence, is represented in Anne Rice’s vampire novels and Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman* graphic novels. She also provides a detailed examination of one manifestation of the Byronic hero who embodies traits of both leader-hero and gloomy egotist: Q, the omnipotent alien from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. The Byronic heroine is also present in our culture, as Stein proves by her inclusion of *Terminator*’s Sarah Connor and *Alien*’s Ellen Ripley. Both assume Byronic traits as they war against oppressive institutional authority while also actively seeking liberation from socially imposed constraints of gender. Stein concludes her innovative study with an engaging discussion of pop culture’s most current and complete version of the Byronic hero, the brooding vampiric champion of

Angel.<sup>9</sup> A vampire with a human soul, Angel, just like Manfred, is tortured by immortality and eternal pain as a result of his evil deeds.

The Byronic hero with his many brooding faces has asserted his popular appeal with audiences for over two centuries. Each generation has thought of Byron as having aspects peculiarly suited to his own age. The reason for this is that basic human problems, hopes and desires are “indissoluble and eternal.”<sup>10</sup> The poet or dramatist who treats these social problems is not writing for his own, but for all ages. Perhaps Byron’s genius and his legacy of the Byronic hero is best summed up in Goethe’s words:

The wonderful glory to which Byron has in the present, and through all future ages, elevated his country, will be as boundless in its splendour as it is incalculable in its consequences, nor can there be any doubt that the nation which boasts so many great names will class Byron among the first of those through whom she has acquired such glory.<sup>11</sup>



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Jane Staller ed., *Byron* (London: Longman, 1998) 5.
- <sup>2</sup> Allen Tate, *Essays of Four Decades* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) 11.
- <sup>3</sup> John Constable, ed., *Selected Letters of I.A. Richards* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 100.
- <sup>4</sup> Peter L. Thorslev, *The Byronic Hero: Types & Prototypes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962) 192-193.
- <sup>5</sup> Extract from Joshua Wilner, "Drinking Rules! Byron and Baudelaire," *Diacritics* 27.3 (1997) 34-35.
- <sup>6</sup> Jacques Barzun, "Byron and the Byronic," *The Atlantic Monthly* Aug. 1953: 47 – 52.
- <sup>7</sup> David Cairns, ed., *A Life of Love and Music, The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz, 1803-1865* (London: Folio Society, 1987) 119-20.
- <sup>8</sup> Tim Ashley, "Burned by Byron," *The Guardian* 1 Aug. 2003. 20 May 2004 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/>>.
- <sup>9</sup> Atara Stein, *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television* (New York: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004) 145.
- <sup>10</sup> Wilfred S. Dowden, "The Consistency in Byron's Social Doctrine," *British Romantic Poets Recent Revaluations* Shiv.K. Kumar ed., (London: University of London Press Ltd., 1968) 156.
- <sup>11</sup> Walter A. Briscoe, ed., *Byron, The Poet* (New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd., 1967) 35.

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