MANFRED: A CRITICAL STUDY

KIYOSHI YOSHIMURA

Byron is a poet "completely out of favour." John Drinkwater considers the hero of Manfred as "a child boldly declaiming an argument that it does not understand." Roughly speaking, these verdicts sum up the critical attitude of the twentieth century towards the literary value of Byron's poetry. But then Byron was not very popular even among the critics of his time, and Byron the man has always attracted by far the more attention than Byron the poet. For instance, the literary evaluation of Manfred suffered very much from the critics' overemphasis upon its so-called autobiographical significance. The central theme of Manfred was considered to be an agony of remorse caused by the commission of a mortal sin. The name of Astarte and the few supposed allusions in the poem to a crime of incestuous nature were bandied about in the course of a hot controversy as to whether or not Byron had been actually guilty of incestuous relationship with his half-sister. But the appearance in 1905 of a voluminous book entitled Astarte almost put an end to this controversy, and it has since been established beyond dispute that Byron sinned against Augusta. That the publication of Manfred on June 16, 1817 caused much wild speculation among his friends or rather his foes in England and led to a certain passage of psychological arms between Lady Byron and Augusta is now a matter of only historical interest.

But if the poem is viewed with an eye unprejudiced by false emphasis,

1 T. S. Eliot; From Anne to Victoria, Ed. B. Dobrée, 1937.
2 The Pilgrim of Eternity Byron—A Conflict, p. 312.
3 i.e. "that all-nameless hour," etc.
4 Ralph Milbank; Astarte, a fragment of Truth concerning George Gordon Byron, sixth Lord Byron, 1905.
5 André Maurois; Byron, ch. xxvii.
it is clear that the drama is a poem of much larger human interest and
deepere significance than a document of mere biographical interest.
It certainly is something more than a washing of dirty linen in public
on the part of the poet. It can even be considered as Byron’s attempt
at reinterpretation of his well-known outlook on life and nature, which
he had made so glamorous among the reading public of his time through
a series of verse romances—an attempt to place Byronism on a larger
basis than the mere fashionable pose it had so far been and to give it
a deeper philosophical significance.

In Byron’s eyes Manfred was to be a pretentious work in spite of his
rather depreciatory allusion to it as a Witch Drama1. About the poem
there is little of the fashionable air of nonchalance which more or less
characterizes his preceding works, especially the group of poems com-
posed around 18132. For the first time in this poem Byron used blank
verse. And many of the larger problems of life—the limited range
and power of human knowledge, freedom of the will, belief in the
infinite capacity of the mind, etc.—are woven into the play and help
to produce the tension of the dramatic situation. Moreover, there
are a number of passages which are clearly reminiscent of Shakespearian
tragedies and certain purple patches of Paradise Lost. All these facts
point to the pretentious ambition with which Byron set about the com-
position of the work, although whether all these efforts on the part
of the poet really helped to improve the quality of the poem as a work
of art is open to question.

Byron had read parts of Goethe’s Faustus translated for him by
Lewis before the composition of Manfred. This fact, however, de-
tracts little from the originality of the poem. Faustus3 enters into a
pact with Mephistopheles, yielding himself to the powers of the Devil.
The tragedy of Goethe is a tragedy of irreparable loss of freedom of
the spirit, while the central issue of Manfred turns upon the superhuman
fortitude with which the hero refuses to commit himself to the forces
of Evil.

As for the much-discussed incest-motif, it does play a role in the
drama, but it is relegated to the background as one of the factors

1 Byron’s note to The Incantation.
2 i.e. Cantos I and II of Child Harold; The Giaour; The Bride of Abydos; The
Corsair; Lara; Hebrew Melodies.
3 The first part of Faustus.
bringing the drama to a tragic conclusion. There is really nothing in the poem to warrant the supposition that Manfred’s remorse for his hidden sin is the predominant cause of his despair. Manfred’s illicit love for Astarte was somehow an indirect means of her death, although he did not kill her “with his hand.”

... (his) embrace was fatal.

II. i. 87.

His sense of guilt has become so much an obsession in his mind that he, in a moment of distraction and hallucination, sees blood in a cup of wine the chamois-hunter offers him to restore his exhausted strength after the mental strain of his attempted suicide.

Man. Away, away. There’s blood upon the brim!
Will it then never—never sink in the earth?

II. i. 21–2.

And he refers to his keen sense of remorse for the crime as the “core of his heart’s grief” during his detailed account of his life’s miseries to the Witch of the Alps. Especially, the syntactical sequence of the following passage in the first scene of the first act is ambiguous and gives us the impression that Manfred’s despair centers around his sense of guilt as if there had been no weight of other sorrows oppressing his heart before that “all-nameless hour.”

But this avail’d not:—Good, or evil, life,
Powers, passions, all I see in other beings,
Have been to me as rain unto the sands,
Since that all-nameless hour. . .

I. i. 21–4.

But if we look at the play as a whole in proper perspective, we can easily see that the true and main source of Manfred’s grief is a conflict present in his mind—the struggle of his spirit to break through the walls of bodily existence and to identify itself with the mystery of the

1 John Galt, in his Life of Lord Byron, advances the theory that “the story is derived from the human sacrifices supposed to have been in use among the students of the black art.”

2 Manfred, II. i. 87.

3 . . . Oh, that I were / The viewless spirit of a lovely sound, / A living voice, a breathing harmony, / A bodiless enjoyment—born and dying / With the blest tone which made me! (Manfred, I. ii. 52–6.)
The English Society of Japan

Kiyoshi Yoshimura

202

Universe. The conflict is one between his belief in the infinite capabilities of the human mind on the one hand and the blind forces of Nature and human destiny baffling his efforts to reach out to the Unknown on the other hand. In other words, Manfred's misery is caused by the ambivalence in his mind of two contending elements—his insatiable thirst for knowledge and his increasing awareness of ineffectuality in his quest. All his means of search have failed him and left him with a harrowing sense that the limited knowledge he has so far acquired has brought him nothing but sadness.

Sorrow is knowledge; they who know the most
Must mourn the deepest o'er the fatal truth,
The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life.
Philosophy and science, and the springs
Of wonder, and the wisdom of the world,
I have essayed, and in my mind there is
A power to make these subject to itself
But they avail not.—

It is strange to find Manfred—a man of such superhuman intellect to be fatalistic.

I have affronted death—but in the war
Of elements the waters shrunk from me,
And fatal things pass'd harmless; the cold hand
Of an all-pitiless demon held me back,
Back by a single hair, which would not break.

II. ii. 133-9.

Byron himself seems to have been troubled with a vague sense of determinism in his own life as well as in human life in general. This is indicated by the introduction in the poem of Arimanthes, Nemesis, and the three Destinies. They represent the blind forces working through the affairs of men, making and marring their fortunes. Generally speaking, the Byronic hero is a contradiction in himself—a fact which often makes him cut a very ludicrous figure in the eyes of a cool-headed observer. His intellect is not capable of developing an ordered system of ideas, nor is it mature enough to cling to order. His personality is a very complex one, containing the last elements we should expect to find together in one psychological entity,—a jumble of instincts too ill-defined to be called ideas. It is perhaps truer to say that what really tortured Manfred was a chaotic concourse of wild and blind instincts warring with each other in his mind.

Let us examine Manfred's character, setting him against the so-called
"MANFRED": A CRITICAL STUDY

Byronic hero, and see how far he has outgrown the childishness of the type. He still retains some of the characteristics of the Byronic hero—"a fierce, outlandish, solitary man, driven by an inner fatality, a hurricane let loose upon the world like a simoom." "He knew neither repentance nor patience nor expiation; what is done cannot be undone; the indelible cannot be wiped out;' he will find no peace this side the tomb. Most often he is a renegade or an atheist—

I would not, if I might be blest;  
I want no Paradise, but rest. ...

To find distraction from himself he rushes into action, into struggle; corsair or brigand, he declares war upon society, and chases after violent emotions. Even though he must die in this struggle, he must at all costs escape the ennui of life."¹ These traits of character are more or less common to Childe Harold, Selim of the Bride of Abydos, Conrad the corsair, Lara, and all the other Byronic heroes. Like Childe Harold who "sighed to many though he loved but one,"

Nor midst the creatures of clay that girdled (him)  
Was there but one  
II. ii. 58-9.

whom Manfred loved sincerely. Like Lara who

... stood a stranger in this breathing world,
An erring spirit from another hurl’d ... ²

Manfred confesses that

I have not named to thee  
Father or mother, mistress, friend, or being,  
With whom I wore the chain of human ties;  
If I had such, they seem’d not such to me.  
II. ii. 100-3.

Maurois’s description of the Byronic hero which has been quoted above at length shows that narcissism is a marked characteristic of Byronism, as it was of Byron. Nothing is a surer sign of an immature personality than a marked narcissistic tendency in an adult. Byron for all his experience with women was a narcissist. Stendhal said of him “Lord Byron was the unique object of his own attention.” Sometimes a very keen psychologist of the female heart, he failed to be his

¹ André Maurois; Byron, Ch. xx.  
² Lara, Can. I, St. xviii.
own psychopathist and came to grief. How naively the narcissist betrays himself in the following passage!

*Man.* She was like me in lineaments; her eyes
Her hair, her features, all, to the very tone
Even of her voice, they said were like to mine;
But soften'd all, and temper'd into beauty:
She had the same lone thoughts and wanderings,
The quest of hidden knowledge, and a mind
To comprehend the universe. . . .

II. ii. 105-11.

Byron was a more interesting pathological case than even Poe. There are some other vestiges of the Byronic hero in the character of Manfred. These traits of character when regarded as a reflection of Byron’s character, are much of a fashionable pose, and it is not difficult to see through this thin mask of dissimulation and discern behind it the “over-expansive sensitiveness” and childish pride of Byron. This pose and, for that matter, all of what we imply by Byronism is an indication of the fact that Byron’s character contained ‘infantile levels of personal development.’ Indeed the salient feature of Byronism is puerility.

But there is something about the character of Manfred that makes us feel that the Byronic hero has come of age in Manfred. It is, however, very difficult to put our finger on the difference. Manfred is represented as a Magian, who

. . . . passed
The nights of years in sciences untaught,
Save in the old time; and with time and toil,
And terrible ordeal, and such penance
As in itself hath power upon the air,
And spirits that do compass air and earth,
Space, and the peopled infinite, . . .

and, who had made his eyes familiar

. . . . with Eternity
Such as, before (him), did the Magi, and
He who from out their fountain dwellings raised
Eros and Anteros, at Gadara.

II. ii. 90-93.

As far as literary criticism is concerned, the important question here is how far Byron’s description of the hero harmonizes with the accepted notions of such a character. Is the character of Manfred true

1 Mérimée’s words quoted in Maurois’s *Byron* (p. 149).
"MANFRED": A CRITICAL STUDY

205
to nature as it is actually presented in the drama? We are inclined to answer in the affirmative. For instance, the following passage is imitation of the Miltonic manner, and a very bad sort of Miltonic declaiming if taken by itself.

The mind which is immortal makes itself
Requital for its good or evil thoughts,—
Is its own origin of ill and end
And its own place and time. . .

III. iv. 129–32.

But the question here again is how well the thoughts and feelings represented in the passage fit in with the general character of Manfred. The answer again is that they are not quite out of place in the dramatic situation. There is a certain sort of harmony and appropriateness in the character of Manfred.

The drama is often considered as a poem of Byronic revolt, but there is little which suggests reckless and puerile diabolism about Manfred's revolt against established orthodoxy. As a rule, Byronic revolt has no justifiable reasons behind it to support its inordinate hatred of, and irrational resistance to, constituted authority. For instance, Conrad, simply because he was deprived of his love,

. . . hated man too much to feel remorse,
And thought the voice of wrath a sacred call,
To pay the injuries of some on all. . . .

Byronic revolt, in its last analysis, may be traced to persistence of a very crude and childish sense of justice in an adult consciousness. When a child meets with some violent outrage to its sense of justice far beyond its feeble psychological powers of adaptation to outside stimuli, the outrage becomes an obsession with the child. His sense of justice is checked in its development and is left behind in the general growth of his consciousness into a sound and healthy ego. The psychological origin of Byronic revolt can be accounted for by the supposition of some unforgettable childhood experience in which Byron's sense of justice suffered (subjectively) violent outrage. Maurois's description of a characteristic scene of Byron's childhood is illustrative. Whether it is based on fact or is imaginary does not matter. May Gray had been reading to him a passage from the Book of Genesis. "Why did the Lord refuse poor Cain's sacrifice? 'Because of his sin,'

1 The Corsair, Can. I, St. xi.
said May Gray. Sin? What was sin? Cain had not yet slain Abel. No, Cain was damned, said May Gray. Damned? What did damned mean? It meant that Satan would take him, and have him burnt in the fires of hell, for ever and ever."1 In this connection Byron's disposition to brood over and remember for an astonishingly long period of time a wrong he suffered should be recalled.

Manfred does not believe in authority of any kind. But the central theme of the drama justifies his revolt. And there is something even dignified and noble about the manner in which he rejects the offer by the Bishop of St. Maurice of the consolation of religion, and in which he jealously guards the freedom and independence of his spirit and will against the forces of Evil. He shows a certain respectful regard for established religion, although he refuses to submit to it.

*Man.* Old man! there is no power in holy men,
Nor charm in prayer, nor purifying form
Of penitence, nor outward look, nor fast,
Nor agony—nor, greater than all these,
The innate tortures of that deep despair,
Which is remorse without the fear of hell,
But all in all sufficient to itself
Would make a hell of heaven—can exorcise
From out the unbounded spirit the quick sense
Of its own sins, wrongs, sufferance, and revenge
Upon itself; there is no future pang
Can deal that justice on the self-condemn'd.
He deals on his own soul.

III. i. 66–78.

*Man.* Old man! I do respect
Thine order, and revere thine years; I deem
Thy purpose pious, but it is in vain;
Think me not churlish.

III. i. 154–7.

Byron's grasp of the dramatic situation and his control over his revolt-consciousness is so firm that Manfred, in his revolt, evinces more of the virtuous qualities of fortitude and manhood and shows less of the quality of irrationality so characteristic of Byronic revolt.2 In the light of other evidence, this is an indication of the fact that Byron's personality was undergoing some maturing process around the period during which this poem was composed.

1 André Maurois; *Byron*, Ch. iii.
“MANFRED”: A CRITICAL STUDY

Now let us turn to what is called the Wordsworthian note in Byron. We know that Byron loved Nature in his own way—that his love of Nature was genuine. But he often allows himself to air his love of Nature, simply because it is appropriate for a self-styled misanthrope to admire Nature and love solitude, and it becomes part of his pose. Hence we may conclude with equal justice that Byron did not love Nature so much as the airing of his ‘natural piety’. In such cases, the expression of this particular sentiment in his poetry does not ring true, in whatever flowery language it may be expressed.

Then stirs the feeling infinite, so felt
In solitude where we are least alone.¹

On the face of it, the sentiment sounds very fine, but we somehow come to feel that it is false. We realize that Byron is repeating a borrowed platitude instead of a felt sentiment of his own. This is the case, wherever the problem of truth and exactitude of expression is involved. For instance, at the first reading, we feel that the following sentiment is not without a certain comeliness of its own.

I depart,
Whither I know not; but the hour’s gone by,
When Albion’s lessening shores could grieve or glad mine eye.²

But as we read on, we can hardly avoid the conclusion that the poet does not believe in what he professes he does—that he is affected. We begin to feel this is Byronic affectation of bitterness and nonchalance rather than any real distaste for his country. We detect Byron in the act of complacently admiring the projected image of himself—an unmistakable sign of narcissism, and feel disgusted. It often happens that Byron’s falsification of sentiment becomes apparent when we read his poetry in some quantities.

Perhaps there is no certain way of proving falsity of sentiment in poetry. We simply sense it because falsity cannot bear close scrutiny. But in the art of poetry, sincerity of feeling and truth of expression seem somehow to go together and are inseparably bound up with each other. For, when a sentiment is genuine it is sure to find expression in poetry in such a way that we can feel it. Now let us take the following passage by itself.

¹ Childe Harold, Can. III, St. xc.
² Childe Harold, Can. III, St. i.
Kiyoshi Yoshimura

... and in her (Night's) starry shade
Of dim and solitary loveliness,
I learned the language of another world.

III. iv. 5-7.

This is simply plagiarism and one of those sentiments Wordsworth said that Byron was stealing from him. But it is dangerous to jump to a conclusion on the strength of single sentences. Manfred stood

List'ning, on the scatter'd leaves,
While Autumn winds were at their evening song.

II. ii. 73-4.

Here and elsewhere, especially in the description of the Coliseum scene, we hear delicate music which can only be born of a genuine perception of beauty in natural objects. And we cannot help concluding that Byron's note of 'natural' mysticism is genuine and consequently that his insight into Nature had gained in depth by the time this poem was written. This is true of all his later works, where he generally shows a finer perception of natural beauty than in his earlier poems. This fact can be brought out even by the comparison of the first two cantos and the last two cantos of Childe Harold. It seems that his extensive travels on the Continent had the salutary effect of slowly maturing his personality, enlarging his thoughts and deepening his feelings. In this connection, it is significant that he ascribed the inspiration of Manfred to the beauty of Alpine scenery. "It was the Staubach and the Jungfrau, and something else, much more than Faustus that made me write Manfred."1 This statement cannot be dismissed as a piece of mystification, in which Byron was in the habit of indulging.

We have seen that Manfred's character as described in the drama is something distinct from the Byronic-hero type. There is an air of etherealized nobility about him in spite of his declamatory inclination. The drama itself contains certain passages which breathe a lofty note, reflecting a depth of thought and feeling on the part of the author. Manfred is a poem of considerable interest as an indication of a certain transformation which the philosophical outlook and literary technique of Byron was undergoing at the time it was written.

---

1 Byron's letter to John Murray, 7 June 1820.