Byron was born in an age which had essentially a revolutionary character. The political revolutions of the time caused a radical change in the form of Governments and ushered in the era of democracy and the industrial revolution which had been going on for quite sometime brought in a change in the economic and social life of the people. These revolutions had their inevitable effect upon the society which began to take a new shape totally different from that of the past. In the words of Dickens, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" - it was an age of doubt and of confidence, it was an age of progress and prosperity and also of misery and suffering, it was an age of wars and revolutions and it was an age of a new order. There was change in all spheres of human activities and old values were being replaced by new ones. This change in the sense of values was brought about by the political, economic and consequent social changes that were characteristic of the age. Byron, who belonged to the class of intellectual radicals of his time, played his own part of the game, not only intellectually but also personally, not only as a poet but also as a man.
The American way of independence made the beginning of two very important things. It introduced for the first time in the modern world a democratic form of Government. The makers of this new age proclaimed the equality of all men by birth and their inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That the people should be their own rulers was a revolutionary idea which overthrew the belief of the divine right of kings. Secondly, from a historical point of view, it made the beginning of the end of colonial rule.

The events in America caught the imagination of the oppressed people of France who in 1789 tore off the shackles of an absolute monarchy in a bloody revolution. These happenings led the people to the conviction that just as there was no divinely ordained socio-economic order, there could be no political system which could claim absolute authority. The idea that some are born to rule and some are born to serve became untenable. This was a revolutionary outlook and made the beginning of what we to-day call mass consciousness.

Byron was no revolutionary in the sense that he very much disliked blood-shed, though he was dynamic in his outlook and welcomed changes. He was sufficiently far-sighted to realise that the days of the ruler and
the ruled were going to come to an end, and the time was not far when self-rule would be introduced all over the world. Byron had a clear idea of the contemporary situation and could feel the pulse of the time. He saw the establishment of democratic forms of Government in America and France to be only a beginning which would sweep the world in the days to come. "The king times are fast finishing. There will be bloodshed like water and tears like mist; but the peoples will conquer in the end. I shall not live to see it, but I foresee it", he wrote in his diary on 13th January, 1821.

To achieve this end revolutions are indispensable but at the same time deplorable for the horror and misery that causes, "revolutions are not to be made with rose water. My taste for revolutions is abated, with all my other passions". But he knew that that was inevitable and was more welcome than the continuance of centuries of tyranny and oppression, "Your infamous government will drive all honest men into the necessity of reversing it. I see nothing left for it - but a republic now - all history and experience is in its

favour, even the French— for they butchered thousands of citizens at first, yet 'more' were killed in any one of the great battles (those of the wars that brought back the Bourbons) than ever perished by a democratical presumption— America is a model of force and freedom and moderation with all the coarseness and rudeness of the people." He accepted the bloody process of a revolution as a necessary evil for the greater good to the greater number. His aversion to bloodshed, however, did not stop him from fighting for the oppressed and the enslaved, and he fought for them both with his pen and sword. His mission as a poet was not merely to reach the intellectual elite, but step down to the common reader. Naturally he was drawn towards telling stories than writing lyrics like his contemporaries.

The success of the French inspired the other oppressed people of Europe for whom the revolution opened the door to a new horizon. Plots were hatched and there were popular uprising against the governments in many places. Junior officers hatched the Italian conspiracy of 1820 in Naples, Medona and other places. In Spain they rebelled against the King Ferdinand VII. They also made the Decembrist uprising in Russia. There was the ill-fated Polish rebellion of 1830 against Russia and

the fateful Greek war, where in the swamps of Missolonghi, Byron lost his life.

Italy at that time was being gradually swallowed up by the expanding Austrian Empire. Byron's historical imagination was fired by the idea of a renaissance and resurgence of the two great nations of the past - Italy and Greece. "It is a grand object - the very poetry of politics. Only think - a free Italy!!!" he wrote in his diary on 18th February, 1821. Naples became the hot centre of the conspiracy and Byron, in his revolutionary zeal, made himself a part of it. He was made the head of one of the local bands, that of the 'Cascintori Americani'. In this he had no other motive but to free the land of Dante, Horace, Juvenal and Pulci from the Austrians whom he called the Huns". I shall, if permitted by the natives, remain to see what will come of it, and perhaps take a turn with them - for I shall think it by far the most interesting spectacle and moment in existence, to see the Italians send the barbarians back to their dens".

Byron had doubts about the Italians' unity and consistency to achieve their aims. His practical sense and experience told him that the Italians lacked the

organising ability to overthrow an established regime, a mere passion for liberty was not enough. But he believed that they meant to make a fight of it and was ready to take up arms with them. "They mean to insurrection here, and are to honour me with a call thereupon. I shall not fall back; though I don't think them in force or heart sufficient to make much of it, But onward! it is now the time to act, and what signified 'self', if a single spark of that which would be worthy of the past can be bequeathed unquenchedly to the future? It is not one man, nor a million, but the 'spirit' of liberty which must be spread. The waves which dash upon the shore are, one by one, broken, but yet the 'ocean' conquers nevertheless". He observed in his diary of 9th January, 1821. He accepted bloodshed but only to spread the 'spirit of liberty' and to liberate the oppressed. This spirit of liberty, the unshackled souls, is to be found in the characters of his narrative poems. They perish tragically to realise their self-identity, because the odds are too heavy.

The common people in England enjoyed little political liberty for the pattern of representation was irrational and unjust. Workers had no right to a minimum wage and the law to enforce a minimum wage was repealed. There was death penalty for rioting - Byron dissented.

Habeas Corpus Act was repealed and there were severe restrictions on the freedom of the press. A Tory government of landowners passed the Corn Laws designed to keep out cheap foreign corn. Five 'rogues who roared for bread', in Byron's phrase, were hanged in Cambridgeshire and the struggle began which culminated in the 'Peterloo massacre' celebrated by Shelley in 'The Masque of Anarchy'. Castlereagh employed German mercenaries at the flogging of English peasants. Of him Byron remarks, "Cold-blooded, smooth-faced, placid miscreant! / Dabbling its sleek young hands in Erin's gore". In fact the Government started a legalised reign of terror. We may sum up by saying that the whole period was an age of plot, conspiracy, riot and revolt on the one hand and repression, censorship and police rule on the other. "It was an age when nationalists of all lands felt themselves united in a common struggle against dynastic legitimism. Upto the advent of Marx in 1848 it is reasonable to speak of a peoples' camp facing an alliance of kings", and in this struggle Byron always sided with the people.

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7. "The Walts". I - 165
8. Don Juan /I/12.
The growing political consciousness of the people clashed with the interests of the privileged landed aristocracy. They now refused to yield to any power which they themselves had not created. In England the Peterloo massacre, the Blanketeers' march, the Catostreet Conspiracy, agricultural rioting, Luddite machine-breaking, bore the sure signs of a spontaneous reaction of a people who were hungry for liberty; economic, no less than political. "The idea began to gain ground that neither ancestry, nor birth, religion or class, predistines one's station in life; work, effort and talent are the levers by which man obtains his position in life. That was the essence of the anti-feudal revolution." ¹⁰ And though Byron himself was a feudal lord he was progressive and modern enough to see its rottenness and ebbing power. The whole set up of the society smelt abominably by being static and hence regressive, for the privileged aristocracy, who was its mainstay, opposed all changes to save their own skin. It almost became a question of survival of the individual against injustice in all forms. Hence the revolts, the riots, the bloodshed - the imprisonments, the flaggings, the hangings. The people in general were totally disappointed with the static past and almost of necessity became inclined to revolt and there was the

craving of the persecuted for personal and collective identity. As a narrative poet Byron's appeal is to this newly emerged collective personality of his times. Men wished to be free from all restrictions imposed by religious tradition, political absolutism and a hierarchical social system and Byron attacked all these three institutions relentlessly, sparing none and nothing. He was accused of blasphemy for his 'Cain' and his 'Don Juan' is a tirade on the hypocrisy of the English aristocratic society and almost all his important heroes are socially alienated.

The king, George III, was solemn and conscientious - a good king but not a good ruler. His following a non-partisan patriotic line to purify the political life got him nowhere. He had to face the Catholic Emancipation and Parliamentary reform within and the American War and the French Revolution without. He resisted the Catholic Emancipation and termed it 'Jacobinical' expressing his hostility towards the Revolution. The various administrations through which George III ruled were mainly referred to as Tory. The Whigs were more progressive of the two and they took pride in the fact that they welcomed changes. But their progressiveness was only skin-deep, so long as their own interests remained untouched. In fact the administration was kept going by setting group against
group, distribution of hush money, appointments, pensions and royal patronage. Byron was professedly a whig but he knew the whig character inside out because they came from his own class, the aristocrats. He realised the hollowness of their so-called progressive outlook and spoke out bluntly, "Where were my friends the whigs? Exactly where they were" (N.3/X/18). His dislike for party politics was due to the fact that the politicians did nothing for the uplift of the common people but worked only to keep their own position secure.

The Industrial Revolution which relentlessly moved forward had its consequent effect upon the economic life of the country in general and the working population in particular. The necessity of heavy investment in the establishment of factories and scientific farming inevitably squeezed the semi-independent artisans and peasants out of the scene. The curse of the capitalistic economy like unemployment, underemployment, lack of security in jobs, child labour, etc. began to raise its ugly head. This naturally brought untold suffering to the labour class and brought them to the door of starvation and drove them to revolt and riots. The commercial prosperity brought by the industrial revolution was almost neutralised by financial and agricultural crises. And the prosperity remained confined to the factory-owning class,
the newly born capitalists, who now vied with the old aristocracy in wealth and was soon to vie with them in power.

The growing discontent of the hungry and the oppressed found its outlet in trade union activities and labour agitation. The government reacted quickly and ruthlessly and tried to gag it with a number of repressive laws. The invention of the spinning frame rendered the weavers jobless. They reacted by breaking the frames which often ended in violent riots. Lord Liverpool brought a Bill in the parliament making frame-breaking punishable by death. Byron who was always for the underdogs and the enslaved vehemently defended the frame-breakers almost in a Marxist vein. "Are we aware of our obligations to a 'mob'? It is the mob that labour in your fields and serve in your houses - that man your navy and recruit your army - that enabled you to defy all the world - and also can 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 sentiment of the people". He also wrote to Lord Holland, "Surely, my Lord, however we may rejoice in any improvements in your arts which may be beneficial to mankind, we must not allow mankind to

be sacrificed to improvements in mechanism.

You call these men 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.  

This shows not only his broad-mindedness and progressive outlook - himself being an aristocrat - but also his keen practical sense, his ability to see a political problem in its true perspective.

And even when he left England he did not lose his sympathy for the frame-breakers. "Are you not near the Luddites?" (Named after Ned Ludd, a village boy who began the practice of smashing the frames) he wrote to Moore from Italy, "By the Lord! If there's a row, but I will be among ye! How go on the weavers - the breakers of frames - the Lutherans of politics - the reformers?"

As the liberty lads o'er the sea
Bought their freedom, and cheaply,
with blood,

So we, boys, we,
Will 'die' fighting or 'live' free,
And down with all kings but

King Ludd".

12. March Vol - 2 P - 165
This 'die fighting or live free' is the creed of all the heroes of Byron, whether in the narratives or in the dramas; in them there is no passive surrender to the odds of life. He had great respect for all, who rebelled against injustice or oppression or even circumstances and who fell to assert themselves.

George III lapsed into madness towards the end of 1810 and the Prince of Wales became Regent and assumed the throne in 1820 when the old king died. This period also coincides with Byron's stay in England from 1811 to 1816. This was also the period in which Byron rose to the peak of his fame and popularity in England after the publication of his 'Childe Harold' followed by the 'Tales', till he was booed out of England in 1816 after his separation with his wife. The peculiarity of the Regency society was that the aristocrats formed the one and only one stratum of the society that counted. Byron belonged to this aristocratic class with all their virtues but little of their vices. In all things the fashionable Regency society was graceful and just a little showy, Egalitarian notions did not penetrate far and masters remained masters and servants servants, though in many cases there were very good personal relationships between them. Byron, who loved violent
physical exercises, boxed with his young servant Rushton in Nevstaed Abbey. The social life of the upper stratum was glittering and extravagant and often narrow and snobbish with which Byron had little to do and against which he fought all his life. The upper stratum wallowed in luxury and ease and the lower stratum starved and raved fruitlessly. His fame for 'Childe Harold' and his title naturally drew him to this show and glitter but against all this he rebelled inwardly, "Last night, party at Lansdowne House, to night, party at Lady Charlotte Graville's - deplorable waste of time, and something of temper. Nothing imparted, - nothing acquired - talking without ideas - if anything like thought in my mind it was not on which we were gabbling. Heigh ho-and in this way half London pass what is called life". 14 This life in Regency society gave him at least one very important thing, it gave him all the materials he needed for his 'Don Juan'. It is no wonder that Byron who hated all senseless act, social gossip and small talk, began to nourish an ineffaceable dislike for the English aristocratic society.

Byron has drawn this Regency Society wonderfully in the poem "The Waltz" - the tint of Satire is unmistakable.

"Blest was the time Waltz chose for her 'debut';
The Court, the Regent, like herself were new;
New face for friends, for fees some new rewards;
New ornaments for black and royal guards;
New laws to hang the rogues that roar'd for bread;
New coins (most new) to follow those that fled;
New victories - nor can we prize them less;
Though Jenky wonders at his own success;
New wars because the old succeed so well,
That most survivors envy those that fell;
New mistresses - no, old - and 'tis true,
Though they be 'old', the thing is something new;
Each new, quite new -(except some ancient tricks)
New white-sticks, gold sticks, broom-sticks,
all new sticks !
With vest or ribands - deck'd alike in hue,
New troopers strut, new turncoats blush in blue"

(1.161 - 178)

There is also a subtle dig at the lax morals of the day,

"My wife 'now' waltzes - and my daughters 'shell';
'My' son-(or stop- 'tis needless to inquire -
These little accidents should never transpire;
Some ages hence our genealogic tree
Will wear as green a bough for him or me) -

(1. 251 - 255)"
Between the Revolution and the Reform Bill the structure of English politics was aristocratic. The supposedly progressive Whigs only voiced the dissatisfaction of the rising business community - the capitalists - and wanted a freer hand in transactions with less government interference. But they did not dare to destroy the old system, nor did they wish to reform according to the changing needs of the day, they only wanted to restore the old structure with minor changes. The ideals of the French Revolution appealed to them in a different way. They wanted to eat the French potato with an English sauce. The revolutionary ideals of the French were to be pressed into an English mould to give it the traditional English character, a constitutional movement and not a thorough-going democratic movement aiming at the removal of all class distinctions and transfer of the political power to a different social stratum. They wanted new ideas but dared not override tradition; they wanted to remove abuses when they should have brought the whole structure down.

On the other hand the revolutionary movement represented by Godwin and Paine embodied the doctrine of natural equality and rights of men. It was decidedly and sincerely a democratic movement and caused a growing
cleavage between the capitalists and the working class. It had no faith in the old tradition like the former but aspired to recast entirely the existing social order. They did not simply wish to diminish the power of the government but wanted the transference of real power to the lower classes. The younger generation of intellectual radicals, particularly Shelley, imbued this spirit of the revolution and he became its greatest singer.

The revolutionary character of the age produced this new generation of poets, the Romantics, who broke away with the past and started a new genre of poetry. Some of them like Wordsworth and Shelley remained true to the ethics of poetry and became poets of contemplation but Byron, who was no singer, became a poet of action. He took active part in the Neapolitan uprising in Italy and when that failed, plunged himself headlong in the Greek war of liberation. Not being a theoretician he translated his ideals into action. His narrative poems also carry the stamp of this passion for liberty and his war against the enemies of freedom. The idea of a liberated Greece appealed to him as strongly as the idea of a liberated Italy. He was chosen by the London Greek Committee to act as its agent in Greece. Missolonghi, where Byron established his camp, was no place for Byron's already sapped strength. There was constant rain, the
roads were muddy and there were swamps all around. Added to this was the nightmare of settling the quarrels among the ranks, composed of soldiers of different nationality, arranging their pay and organizing the war effort. It was too much for both his body and nerves and he caught fever from which he could not recover. He died on 24th April, 1824 - a fiery soul snuffed out by bad weather and exasperation.

As a poet of action he visualized a republic to be the only form of government that could make an end of the legal tyranny of all other forms. The perfectly balanced state has been envisaged in "Marino Faliero",

"Condensing in a fair free commonwealth,
Not rash equality but equal rights,
Proportional like columns to the temple,
Giving and taking strength reciprocal".

(Act III/Sc.II).

There was to be no rash equality, for a sudden transfer of power to the lever stratum, before the ground was prepared, might lead to its abuse and disaster might result, as the 'Reign of Terror' in the French Revolution had shown. Byron's natural desire was to preserve the constitution and the aristocracy, if possible - for its long experience in managing state-craft - but never at the cost of the common people.
Thus politically Byron's only hope appeared to be what he called a republic. In his journal of 18th February, 1814, he wrote with his characteristic realism, "The greater the equality, the more impartially evil is distributed, and becomes lighter by the divisions among so many - therefore a republic".15 In 'Detached Thoughts' he comments, "There is nothing left for mankind but a republic, and I think that there are hopes of such".16 He was no utopian dreamer like his contemporaries but thought, and whenever possible acted, including in his narratives, in concrete terms. This preoccupation with the thoughts of action made him a story teller of the authentic type. In his 'Prophecy of Dante' also he expressed his views on democracy. A copy of the translation of the poem had gone to Volterra and fell into the hands of the Commissioner of that small city. Its contents struck him as extremely dangerous. "It is most decidedly not written in the spirit of our governments. To me, indeed, it seems designed to augment popular agitation which is already sufficiently aroused. Lord Byron makes Dante foresee democracy and independence as the true good of the people".17

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15. March. Vol - III P - 244.
The Europe that Byron faced was the Europe after the Congress of Vienna. The political countenances were trying frantically to restore the Pre-Napoleonic Status-Quo. All around him he saw the detestable humbug and shady manoeuvres of professional politicians and the shedding of crocodile tears and he wrote indignantly in his diary, "and here we are, retrograding to the dull, stupid old system - balance of Europe - pelting straw on King's noses instead of wringing them off! Give us a republic". 18 As an imaginative writer he was held to be the torch-bearer of a new hope for the enslaved and the downtrodden. We may recall that the first revolt against the Czar, the Decembrist uprising of 1825, had a leader, the poet Ryleyev, who went to his death with a volume of Byron in his hand. "Spher historians have gone on record as saying that, Byron single-handed had a demonstrable influence in neutralising the effect of the Congress of Vienna". 19

In England, France and Germany the period of pre-Romanticism (1750 - 1800) coincides not only with the rise of science but also with the rise of the middle class bourgeoisie, while the period of Romanticism coincides with the American War of Independence, the

18. Marsh, Vol - 3, P - 218
French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars and its aftermath. Hence the Pre-Romantic literature only expressed bourgeois dissatisfaction with the aristocratic culture of the landowning class. Their desire was to attack the individual oppressor but not the system that produced him. But the Romantic radicals were forced to explore reality by the spirit of their time; by being completely different in its ideals and aspirations from the old school their literature became a class by itself - it became a literature of revolt.

The Neo-classical outlook of the Pre-Romantic era was an heir to the Greek thought and experience. It had the same Greek view of human endeavour, a sense of the reasonable and a dislike of the disproportionate. By the application of reason to art and literature the Neo-classicist meant that art and literature ought to be meaningfully expressed in an intelligible design. They moved within the limited sphere of this enchanted circle; everything was subordinated to the purity of form and singleness of purpose. The result of following these pre-conceived rigid rules in the pursuit of art and literature was obvious; the product also became rigid and lifeless in the long run. The blind following of the Greek tradition with but little attempt to be original inevitably made the product dull and, "It was the dullness of the second raters that led to the Romantic
rebellion at the end of the 18th Century”.20

The dominant tone of the Neo-classical or the Augustan literature is its belief in the ideals of good sense and reason. The Augustans were the masters of style and they laid great stress on a refined taste, elegance and temperateness of expression. Within this prescribed limit they wrote elegant poetry served with a sauce of irony. But they never had the daring and the curiosity to tackle anything new and they were afraid lest the bell should grow bigger than their hands. Their social and moral criticism rarely extended to the foundation on which the whole structure stood. No doubt the dazzle of their wit dazzled the people for sometime but their devotion to the Status Quo did not allow them to see the changed needs of the time. There were no new ideas, no experiments, no attempt to beat out a new track, no literature that pulsed with life and, in the aliny waters of this stagnant pool the Romantics refused to swim. Augustanism had to bow out because it was no longer creative. "As the literature ceases to be truly representative and adheres to the conventionalism of the former period, it becomes unnatural and the literary forms becomes a survival instead of a genuine

The ghost of the classical age still walked the stage, only the scenes and footlights were changed.

Considering its literary aspect, the Romantic Movement in England was an offshoot of the 'Sturm und Drang'—Storm and Stress—movement in Germany. The essence of the movement was rebellion against finite restrictions in any shape or form—literary, social, political. The personal experiences and emotions were to be transformed into art through the creative power of the poet's unbridled imagination. The English, with their respect for tradition and love for moderation, shaped the peculiar English Romantic movement. It was the least self-conscious and less organised as a group, hence it was fresher and freer than the German or the French schools. The look for the beyond, the search for a universal identity, the quest for an unattainable ideal in a visionary sphere of his own creation, came from the German school but it remained to the core peculiarly English. "To the revolutionary naturalism of Rousseau and melancholy piety of the Pre-Romantics was now added the transcendentalism of the German philosophers."}

Under the influence of Fichte who said, "Heed only yourself, turn your gaze from all around you, and inwards onto yourself; that is the first demand that philosophy makes upon its apprentice. Nothing outside you matters, but solely you, yourself", the German school developed a perfect system of subjectivism where the artist considered himself at the centre of his own creation. But the English school had a leaven of democratic ideals in their work. This we find more particularly in Wordsworth and, in Byron's penchant for narrative poems, for they are more accessible to the common reader than the diaphanous lyrics of his contemporaries.

A transcendental attitude to experience replaced the cold empirical philosophy of the preceding age. For facts they looked into the contemporary situation and the past, and for expression they leapt into the untrodden future, and for an attitude to life in general they relied on their own individuality and experience. Linked with reality by the slender thread of facts they flung themselves in diverse directions carried by the wings of their imagination. This sometimes led to a sort of indiscipline and made their works seem obscure and unreal. But the Romantics did

not care if they were indisciplined, for they did not consider themselves answerable to any fixed set of values; they wanted to create new ones. Indiscipline was a part of their game because they wished to unshackle themselves, once and for all, from the time-worn tradition. And as a poet Byron was the most indisciplined of them all, an outlaw among outlaws, so far as language and style are concerned.

"One hates an author that's 'all author', fellows
In foolscap uniforms turned up with ink,
So very anxious, clever, fine, and jealous.
One don't know what to say to them, or think,
Unless to puff them up with a pair of bellows".

(Beppe./75)

or,

"Tis said that Donna Julia's grandmamma
Produced her Don more heirs at love than law"

(D.J/1/58)

His contemporaries would have thought twice before they would write such things in such language and with such careless nonchalance. They were highly individualistic and hence always were lonely travellers. In their attitude towards life and experience, their faith in imagination, their expression of the self - they had some common tendencies, yet each walked his own way. "Each poet has his
peculiar flavour, the visionary ecstasy of Blake; at once simple and complex, the realism of Wordsworth, the imaginative surrealism of Coleridge, the sensuous richness of Keats, the so-called aetherialism of Shelley, the satirical wit of Byron". 25

"There are basically three elements in the new state of mind, sporadically exemplified by certain pre-Romantic writers and becoming more general by the turn of the century: dissatisfaction with the contemporary world, restless anxiety in the face of life, and sadness without cause", 26 hence they 'looked before and after and pined for what is not'. The Romantic soul longed passionately for the beautiful in all its forms, particularly colourful and brilliant forms. There are in their works insight, daring, grandeur, exploration and independence on a lavish scale. The works tended to be characterized by emotional intensity and a disregard for formal rules. They aimed at the realization of the true self in relation to the living spirit of nature. His unbridled imagination, he hoped, would help him to become independent of space and time and would enable him to overcome the influence of objective material reality. The finite reality, for him, became a

spring board to achieve an infinite spiritual reality. They desired to create something new but in their creation the 'new' is buried in the personal philosophy which gives it a tone of uncertainty, "From these our interviews, in which I steal / From all I may be, or have been before, / To mingle with the universe, and feel / What I can never express, yet cannot all conceal" (C.H/IV/178). To get at the 'new' there is reliance on inspiration, spontaneity, intensity, and passion in creation and the use of symbol, myth, allegory and ambiguous imagery in execution. René Wellek finds three characteristics of the Romantic poetry peculiar to all, "imagination for the view of poetry, nature for the view of the world, and symbol and myth for the poetic style". Byron however, did not wander in any world of vision; he was quite sure of what he was going about. He had all the passion, intensity and spontaneity of a Romantic but in his method of execution he was straightforward and down to earth. He knew that his narrative poems would not allow any ambiguity in the language or in the choice and conception of the subject. But it would be more correct to say that it was his lack of faith in the poetic ideals of his time that made him a story teller and not a visionary philosopher. "If I ever return to England", he wrote to Murray in 1821, "I will write a

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poem to which 'English Bards' etc. will be New Milk in
cmparison. Your present literary world of mountebanks
stands in need of such an Avatar; but I am not yet quite
bilious enough: a season or two, more, and a provoca-
tion or two will wind me up to the point, and then,
have at the whole set! I never saw such work or works.
Campbell is lecturing, Moore Idling, Southey twaddling,
Wordsworth drivelling, Coleridge muddling, Joanna Baillie
piddling, Bowles quibbling, Squabbling and Snivelling".28

Considered in its social aspect the Romantic
Movement of England was a part of a much wider humanis-
tic movement that took Europe by storm after the
American and the French Revolution. These revolutions
causd a reshuffle in the social strata and the gap
between the Patricians and the Plebeans began to lessen.
The Regicide in France destroyed the belief of the
inviolable divinity of Kings and the establishment of
democracy in America proved the power of the people to
determine their own political destiny. On the other hand
the newly emerged capitalist class, created by the Indu-
strial Revolution, reduced the importance of the landed
gentry in wealth and power. Men from the lower stratum
heaved themselves upward and overcame their Plebian

origin. Rich tradesmen and manufacturers bought estates and boroughs and became 'gentlemen'. The effect of this social mobility was that, serious attempts were being made all over Europe to reassess and reassert human values, seen against the background of the changing political and economic conditions. In the Augustan period there was still a cohesive European culture, stable and orderly in its own limited sphere. But it began to wobble under the impact of the new demands of the time and its authority began to slacken and lose its grip. This created a sort of vacuum in the cultural atmosphere of the time and the Romantics stepped in to fill this vacuum. "TheRomantics tried to find in the nature of man, in his longings, aspirations and uncertainties, above all in his imaginative life, some basis of a common culture for a new set of sustaining beliefs." They wished to communicate to the common people, as memorably as might be, their solitary thoughts and glorious moments.

Byron's preference for narrative poems sprang from this humanitarian consideration, his concern for the common reader. He realised that it was not the subjective

29. Dyson and Butt. 'Introduction to English Literature Augustans and Romantics'. Vol. 3 Cresset. 1950 P - 84.
lyrics but 'prosaic' narratives which would be accessible to all and sundry. His eyes were turned forward but he did not allow it to wander. He created his own poetic convention out of his own experience and personality and in this he was unique. Once John Murray suggested that he should devote eight years to compose a great literary work and Byron indignantly answered, "So you and Mr. Foscolo etc. want me to undertake what you call a 'great work'? an epic poem, I suppose, or some such pyramid. I'll try no such thing; I hate tasks. .... and works too. ! - is 'Childe Harold' nothing? You have so many 'divine' poems, is it nothing to have written a 'Human' one? Without any of your worn out machinery. Why man, I could have spun the thoughts of the four Cantos of that poem into twenty had I wanted to bookmake, and its passion into as many modern tragedies". 30

The most important element of the new literature was its stress on imagination. For the new poets the process of creation, even the basis of experience was shaped by acts involving imagination. Since it was so much valued by the Romantics it would be worth our while to know what the contemporaries of Byron and Byron himself thought about this. Blake says, "This world of imagination is the world of eternity, it is the divine

bosom into which we all shall go after the death of this vegetated body. This world of imagination is infinite and eternal, whereas the world of generation or vegetation is finite and temporal. There exists in that eternal world the permanent realities of everything which we see reflected in this vegetable glass of nature. Coleridge, the poet turned philosopher, not only stressed the importance of imagination but also developed the idea of 'Self' in relation to it. "The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and Prime Agent of all human perception and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM." The finite 'I' realises its goal in the eternal and infinite through the living process of imagination. Wordsworth referred to all serious writing as "works of imagination and sentiment." Shelley defined poetry as "the expression of imagination." Keats characterized the poetic process in the shortest way possible, "I describe what I imagine." Byron, who

34. Ibid. P - 102.
was made of a different fibre, would have none of these. In a letter on Bowler’s “Strictures on Pope” he wrote, “It is the fashion of the day to lay great stress upon what they call imagination and invention, the two commonest qualities; an Irish peasant with a little whisky in his head will imagine and invent more than would furnish forth a modern poem”.36

If that be the view of Byron about the most important element of Romantic poetry then we might entertain doubts about his Romantic virtues. But it is a point to bear in mind that Byron was unlike any of his contemporaries, including Shelley and Keats of his own generation. All of them strove for some visionary, unattainable ideal which Byron shunned. In a sense all others escaped into their dreams and visions, only Byron remained faithful to the hard realities of life. Whereas the others had a tendency to idealize life and experience, Byron had a sober perception of the life that we really live. “They (Southey and his school) knew nothing of the world; and what is poetry, but the reflection of the world”.37 For the others this reflection was transformed into some personal ideals and philosophy with the alchemy of their imagination, for Byron the

36. L & J, Vol. 5 P - 554
37. March. Vol. 4 P - 85
reflected image was as vivid and as real as life itself. This perception of the realities of life had its root in his life's experience and his downright commonsense. The hard realities of life and the hollowness and sham of it all; which the others, either tried to polish or forget in their Romantic ideals; turned him cynical and mocking and helped to develop his satiric wit and instead of becoming a Romantic idealist like the others, he became a narrative satirist. He had the same romantic belief that the so-called codes of honour of the society are artificial and hence unnatural, and hence the necessity of attack, not to renovate or reform, but to destroy and rebuild.

The French Revolution had a profound influence upon the new generation of intellectuals who had a great sympathy for the developments in France. They were hopeful of its democratic ideals which, they believed, would remove all class distinctions and create a new social order, would ensure the liberty of men and freedom of thought and the end of all tyranny. John Scott wrote "The Drum" in 1782 against war itself and expressed the pity of war. Burns in one of his best known songs "For a' that", asserted his democratic faith in equality and fraternity,
It is coming yet for 't that
That Man to Man the world o'er,
Shall brothers be for 't that.38

Blake felt this pity of war which is evident in his
drawings and poems written during the American war and
the French Revolution. Wordsworth recollected his feel-
ings in "The Prelude" (Book. IX. 1 - 107 - 124). As a
school boy Coleridge celebrated in verse the storming
of Bastille. So they wrote the revolutionary drama '
Wat Tyler'. Mary Wollstonecraft wrote, 'Vindication of
the Rights of Man' (1790); Tom Paine's 'Rights of Man'
(1791) was extremely influential, simple, shrewed and
vigorous; Godwin's 'Political Justice' (1793) showed
his optimistic confidence in the almost unlimited power
of reason to promote human wellbeing. The greatest
singer of the Revolution was perhaps Shelley. His 'Revolt
of Islam' is an idealized allegory of the Revolution in
which the rebel leaders fell martyrs to the existing
world situation.

Romantic poetry broke the tradition of the
Augustans by evolving a new form which evidently invol-
ved a new set of imagery and vocabulary. The Christian
imagery of the Augustans and the Pre - Romantics to some

38. Smith, S.G. Ed. 'A choice of Burns poems and songs',
Faber and Faber. 1968. P - 18.
extent, like that of the classical mythology, had got so hackneyed and worn out with the centuries of use that it could hardly be made the vehicle of the new human experience. To overhaul the whole machinery of poetics expressive of their new ideals and aspirations, the Romantics had to evolve a new form. Not that the words were always changed but they carried a new meaning, the implications became quite different. From being mimetic as it was in the hands of the Augustans, poetry became expressive in the hands of the Romantics by the use of a new set of devious and oblique imagery. "The Romantic image is a mode of exploring reality, by which the poet is in effect asking imagery to reveal to him the meaning of his own experience. With the Romantic poet the image seeking faculty is unleashed and wanders at large, whereas with the classicist it is tethered to a thought, a meaning, a poetic purpose already clarified and its radius is thus limited."39 The genius of the Romantic imagination was not to form images of reality but images which go beyond reality. Being looked at from a different and unusual angle the whole idea is revealed to us with an unusual, different and

deeper meaning. It was the extreme subjectivity of the Romantic spirit that led them onto that tortuous track. "Romantic art shows how the spirit withdraws in sublime ingratitude from what was for one blissful season (in classical antiquity) its home and harbour in the sensuous human reality and leaves it, with sorrow and with destiny, to seek its ultimate realization and freedom in its own proper medium, in the pure inwardsness of human subjectivity." Hence it is in the poems of meditation, the hymn, the melancholy, or rapturous ode, and the personal lyric, that Romantic poetry finds its most characteristic expression. And in the midst of all these dreamers and singers Byron stands out like a square peg, wide-eyed and cynical. He looks at this crowd of cooing rhymers from the corner of his eyes with a faint mocking smile hovering over his lips. "Byron touched life at many points. Admire as we may the more admirable of his contemporaries, the fact remains that Byron simply knew more about life—experienced more, and reflected on a wider range—than Wordsworth or Coleridge, than Shelley or Keats; and what he knew made him, not infrequently, smile where Wordsworth or Keats would have wept." And so,

"Let us have wine and women, mirth and laughter, Serious and Soda water the day after".
(D.J./II/178).

This preference for the purely mundane side of life to the contemplative made him a rebel in his own community. He set up his machinery to attack the new god of the Romantics, imagination; setting his own house on fire, as it were, so that the heat may vaporise the film of High Imagination and the light may show the real truths of life. So instead of becoming a poet of contemplation he became a poet of action, the actions which he expressed most effectively through the art of narration.

But it is not simply the influence of the age that makes a man what he is, his heredity and upbringing play no small part in it and in Byron's case they played significant roles. We now propose to enquire how Byron's reactions to the different social forces of his time coupled with his heredity made him a satirical narrative poet.

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