CHAPTER VI

ARNOLD ON BYRON
Byron's influence on Arnold is as pronounced as the influence of other major Romantics. It is traceable more in Arnold's mannerisms and dandyish airs than in his poetry. According to his brother's account, Byron's influence on Arnold was shortlived, as 'Goethe displaced Byron in his poetical allegiance when Arnold was at Oxford and the shift had come to stay for the rest of his life.' However, the one significant impact of Byronic influence in Arnold's poetry is discernible in the example that Byron set in the daring use of poetry to meet the challenges of the times.

As in the case of Wordsworth, Arnold's criticism of Byron too is found both in his poetry and (subsequently) in his prose writings exhibiting clearly the "fluxes and refluxes of opinion." A letter to Clough reveals Arnold's quick turning away from Byron, a reaction so violent that he says "the whole locality is spoiled by the omnipresence there of that furiously flaring bathieled rush light, the vulgar Byron."1

But the strong influence of Byron is understandable in the following passage in which he compares Heine with Byron.

"He has a good deal of power, though more trick; however, he has thoroughly disgusted me. The Byronism of a German, of a man trying to be gloomy, cynical, impassioned, moquer etc., .... with their honest bonhomistic language and total want of experience of the kind that Lord Byron, English peer with access everywhere, possessed, is the most ridiculous thing in the world. Goethe wisely said the German could not have a national comedy because they had no social life; ... they cannot have a Byronic poetry."²

It is this ambivalent attitude that manifests itself in Arnold's criticism of Byron, whose influence he shook off as soon as he defined his poetic goals more precisely.

From 1870 onwards Byron's reputation began very slowly to rise again. Arnold's criticism of Byron is in a way to sustain this trend as his criticism had done in the case of Wordsworth, to safeguard the readers from Wordsworthians.

He tended to concede his deficiencies as an artist. But he did more to insist upon the truth of his poetic vision and the admirable nature of his revolt. His assessment of Byron 'the fluxes and refluxes' lies in the way, Arnold, while 'deploiring the solvenliness and tunelessness of Byron's verse', commended Byron for his 'irreconcilable revolt and battle of which cynicism, falsehood, insolence, oppression, misgovernment, were the rousing factors, resulting in an ambivalent attitude that Byron is vulgar and false; Byron is also strong and sincere.

The Memorial Verses of 1850 which León Gottfried called 'a small store house of criticism' presents to us a consolidated and comprehensive view of Byron's Titanism, and Byron's deficiencies.

What helps it now, that Byron bore,  
With haughty scorn which mock'd the smart,  
Through Europe to the Aeolian shore  
The pageant of his bleeding heart?  
That thousands counted every groan?  
And Europe made his woe her own?

(Stanzas from the Grande)  
Chartreuse, 11135.8)

and his Promethean qualities, as mentioned in the above
quoted lines. There were many things in Byron which Arnold loved: his contempt for meaness, his love of freedom, and courage. It is not to be supposed that Arnold heaped only praise on Byron. Arnold, notwithstanding his admiration for him displays an imperfect sympathy for Byron, and even while acclaiming him as 'the world-famous son of fire', did not gloss over what he considered as glaring defects and deficiencies in Byron.

As pointed out by Leongottfried, Byron becomes a case study, a useful weapon of Arnold's attack on rigidity, insularity, narrowness, intellectual intransigence, Philistinism of British character.

In his essay on Heine, Arnold while speaking about the Romantics, writes about Byron and Shelley as perhaps the only major Romantics who have applied modern ideas to life, and he also remarks that Byron and Shelley, may prove more enduring than the others, though they failed for reasons as cited below:

"Byron and Shelley did not succeed in their attempt freely to apply the modern spirit in English literature, they could not succeed in it; the resistance to baffle them,
Arnold, mainly deals with Byron's deficiencies, in order to emphasize the inadequacy of English Culture and its need of new and invigorating influences - the crux of the many problems, presented in the essay *The Function of Criticism at the present time*. The example of Byron, thus is so important for Arnold as it enables him, in turn to criticise the cultural milieu, which has perhaps a direct bearing on the so called failures of Byron, H.J.C Grierson discusses the legitimacy of Arnold's criticism of Byron. For all his love of Byron Arnold was objective in his estimate of Byron's poetry. His charges against Byron are significant. He was critical of his coarse artistic conscience, his lack of awareness of form. He warned the admirers of Byron that Byronism was a fashion of the past. As Grierson observes "the poetry and criticism of Arnold were a protest against the over-exaltation in poetry of craftsmanship, of exotic and sensuous beauty, of indifference to subject or even a preference for subjects remote from actual experience... lending themselves to subtle and precious craftsman-

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ship .... Hence the emphasis he laid on Wordsworth as a poet of the soul, and on Byron as a poet, despite all his short comings of actual experience. Grierson concedes that "Arnold was not altogether wrong when he insisted on the subject as well as form in poetry, on content and form as distinguishable but not separable, his insistence on thought as an element in poetry as well as sensuous imagery and harmony; and therefore the appeal of Wordsworth's spirit of wisdom and contemplation, of Byron's vivid and sensitive reflection of his troubled age. But he cannot wholly accept Arnold's contention that the poetic spirit in Wordsworth and Byron is too often obscured by a limited and unequal art.

Arnold is not alone in his criticism of Byron. At the same time when Arnold was writing about Byron, Swinburne too, spoke about Byron appreciatively. But Arnold differed from Swinburne, in so far as his account of Byron's excellences, overshadowed all his defects, and this aspect is worth consideration as part of recent criticism centres on and questions the lenient attitude of Arnold towards Byron's, wantonness; while it is well known that Arnold dwelt at length upon the private lives of Keats and Shelley.


5 Ibid., p. 111.
Arnold asserts that Byron's stock will improve 'by selection' as in the case of Wordsworth. He feels that Byron is capable of being 'Tiresome if his whole out-pouring' is gone through. It is in this respect that he differs from Swinburne who considered Byron's virtues and defects, so inextricably entwined that he can be 'judged or appreciated in the mass', Arnold brings into focus the splendid imperishable excellences of Byron namely his sincerity and strength.

Arnold, joins Goethe, in piecing together praise and censure, and presents Byron as the splendid, unique, personality and the greatest talent of the century. But Arnold attempts to illustrate the virtues of 'sincerity and strength' 'biographically and psychologically, not critically'.

As pointed out by Trilling, Arnold's 'Byronism is more related to his personal struggle, with despondency', and apathy - and it is a key principle in Arnold's assessment of Byron and Wordsworth - for 'whatever these poets lacked, of art and intellect both represented vitality and power'. The reason why Arnold places Byron so high is, Byron's titanic personality, his importance as a 'soldier in the liberation war of humanity' rather than for artistic
merit. Byron's personality attracts Arnold, not so much for its superhuman qualities, 'but for its complex, tortured intense humanity'. In his Essays in Criticism Byron is presented as a symbol of helpless man, pitted against a harsh crabbed, unyielding civilization and the failure of the civilization is to provide an adequate intellectual environment for the artist.

As has been remarked by Leon Gottfried, Arnold's supreme interest in Byron lies in his virtue of power, 'pure and simple'. Arnold's simple reference to Byron in Memorial Verse of 1850 - as the 'fount of fiery life', is too well known.

It is quite clear that in the ultimate analysis, the essential Byron for Arnold is the poet of thunderous or moody passion and restless rebellious energy, - the titanic Byron of Childe Harold, Cain and Manfred.

Byron's daring and unquenchable courage is the main theme of Arnold's essay.

"He was a man of living energy and it is this which makes him so perpetually attractive ... for energy, power is the one thing after which we pine especially in a sickly age we do not want carefully constructed poems of mosaic,
self possessed and self-conscious, Force is what we need and what will heal us.\textsuperscript{6}

Arnold found force good but lacking in bulk. He did not believe in the healing power, though not in its formative influence of Byron's thought.

His only complaint was that Byron was wanting in constructive moral ideas needed for the good; unlike the rebellious one with which to struggle against the bad.

Byron's greatest failure was that he taught us little; though his fiery spirit and courage were at length celebrated. The point that he establishes is that whatever might be the virtues, Byron, truly speaking, was not a great poet. He takes recourse to style, as one of the standards by which he gauges Byron's greatness as a poet.

Arnold writes about the defects of Byron's style which probably justify selection:

"Byron is so negligent in his poetical style; he is often to say the truth, so slovenly, slipshod, and infeli-\textsuperscript{6}Leon Gottfried, Matthew Arnold and the Romantics, (London, 1963), p.156.
citous, he is so little haunted by the true artist's fine passion for the correct use and consummate management of words, that he may be described as having for this artistic gift the insensibility of a barbarian; — which is perhaps only another and less flattering way of saying, with Scott, that he manages, his pen with the careless and negligent ease of a man of quality. But, as remarked by Gilbert Phelps in his article 'The Byronic Byron,' Byron did make determined efforts to model himself stylistically on pope and other eighteenth century writers. Leslie A Marchand remarks that 'Byron's originality and wit sometimes transcended the limitations of the model.' He indeed succeeded better than usually acknowledged in his use of 'cliche, to telling effect.'

There be none of Beauty's daughters
With a magic like these
(There Be None of Beauty's Daughters)

There is sufficient evidence to show that he found the Augustan precision and control and a few other stylistic patterns quite inadequate owing to the peculiar circumstances and the wide range of content, he had to handle.


His creative role could not be purely a literary one. There was a youthful declaration to his half-sister ... I prefer the talents of action. Byron's period was that of Terror, marked by Napoleonic wars and changes in social, economic and human relationships as 'Industrial Revolution was gathering momentum. Thus the sense of blighted hopes, the disillusionment, melancholy, despair, that belonged to Byron's own temperament and life, experience were transmuted into a poetic creation - the Byronic hero, childe Harold.

In a sense, he was holding fast to Pope's edict - 'the proper study of mankind is man' and thus he could only substitute energy for precision and concentration. 'Yet freedom'. Yet thy banner torn but flying Streams like the thunder storm against wind' (Childe Harold IV Canto)

But Arnold's verdict that Byron possessed a wonderful power of vividly conceiving a single incident, of throwing himself upon it, of grasping it as if it were real and he saw it, and of making us see and feel it too could be justified by citing any number of passages from his poetry. But for the purpose of illustration, the description of galloping

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of the wild horse to which he is strapped from 

may be cited.

The wood was past; it was more than noon,
But chill the air, although in June;
Or it might be my veins ran cold -
Prolong'd endurance tames the bold;
And I was then not what I seem;
But headlong as a wintry stream,
And wore my feelings out before
I well could count their causes o'er ...

Whatever may be the inadequacies in Arnold's essay, in his estimate of Byron's greatness as a poet his criticism is singularly interesting.