

George Gordon, Lord Byron  
(1788 - 1824)

There are two distinct sides to Byron and his poetry, one good, the other bad, and those who write about him generally describe one side or the other in superlatives. Thus one critic speaks of his "splendid and imperishable excellence of sincerity and strength", another of his "gaudy charlatanism, blare of brass and big bow-wowishness". As both critics are fundamentally right, we shall not here attempt to reconcile their differences which arise from viewing one side of the man's nature and poetry to the exclusion of the other. Before his exile from England in 1816 the general impression made by Byron is that of a man who leads an irregular life, poses as a romantic hero, makes himself

out much worse than he really is and takes delight in shocking not only the conventions but the ideals of English society. His poetry of this first period is generally, though not always shallow and insincere in thought, and declamatory or bombastic in expression. After his exile and his meeting with Shelley in Italy, we note a gradual improvement, due partly to Shelley's influence and partly to his own mature thought and experience. We have the impression now of a disillusioned man who recognises his true character and who though cynical and pessimistic is at least honest in his unhappy outlook on society. His poetry of this period is generally less shallow and rhetorical, and though he still parades his feelings in public he often

Surprised us by being manly and sincere. Thus in the third canto of Childe Harold written just after his exile, he says:

In my youth's summer  
I did sing of one,  
The wandering outlaw  
Of his own dark mind,  
~~and~~ ~~and~~ ~~and~~

And as we read on to the end of the splendid fourth canto - with its poetic feeling for nature and its stirring rhythm that grips and holds the reader like martial music - we lay down the book with profound regret that this gifted man should have devoted so much of his talent to describing trivial or unwholesome intrigues and posing as the hero of his own verses. The real tragedy of Byron's life is that he died just as he was beginning to find himself.

The end. //

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