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Karel Štepaník

The Return of the Romantics

- BYRON. By Herbert Read. *Writers and Their Work*: No. 10. Longmans, Green & Co., London 1951. Reprinted 1955. Pp. 43.
 SHELLEY. By Stephen Spender. *Writers and Their Work*: No. 29. Longmans, Green & Co., London 1952. Reprinted 1960. Pp. 56.
 JOHN KEATS. By Edmund Blunden. *Writers and Their Work*: No. 6. Longmans, Green & Co., London 1950. Revised 1959. Pp. 40.

The essays on Byron, Shelley and Keats written by three living poets and critics of distinction — Sir Herbert Read, Stephen Spender and Edmund Blunden — are worth attention for many reasons besides the natural curiosity about the progressive English Romantic poets whose best work has been and still is enjoyed by countless readers all over the world. Not the least important of these reasons is that, together with the essays on William Blake, Robert Burns, William Wordsworth, S. T. Coleridge, Walter Scott, Charles Lamb etc. published in the same series, these brief monographs form a notable addition to contemporary critical studies of Romantic poetry which have been steadily accumulating during the last twenty years or so. All this critical (and editorial) activity is significant of the widespread revival of interest in English Romanticism which is noticeable even outside the English speaking countries; though, to tell the truth, the prestige and popularity of Byron and Shelley on the Continent had never sunk so low as it was in England in the twenties and thirties of the present century. A Continental student of English literature may therefore only feel satisfaction at the recent return of the Romantics to something like their former glory, while for some of his British or American colleagues this development must have been a rather unpleasant surprise, especially if they believed with T. S. Eliot that there may be a place for romanticism in life, but there is no place for it in art (see Graham Hough's *The Romantic Poets*, London 1953). „The results of the deliberate refusal of the romantic experience in this century is the present decay of creation, and the desiccation of much of our” (that is to say, English) „criticism“ (*ibidem*). This conclusion reached by Graham Hough bears evidence that there are contemporary critics and poets in England who do not share the negative neo-classical attitude to the historical achievements of the great Romantics.

The authors of the three essays under review are much less dogmatic in their estimates of Byron, Shelley and Keats than these poets themselves, with the exception of Byron, had been in their romantic revolt against the classicist school of English poetry, particularly Alexander Pope. Their approach to the representatives of the younger, more progressive Romantic generation rather demonstrates that the present revulsion from neo-classical refusal of the Romantic heritage is by no means a simple return to the earlier, mainly late Victorian uncritical identification of romantic poetry with Poetry at its highest: a tendency reflected in the reminiscence of Stephen Spender who, when at school „gained the impression that Great Poetry in England began with Chaucer, continued with Shakespeare and then developed by means of Milton and Wordsworth directly to Keats, Byron, and Shelley. These were the Great Poets, and nearly everyone else was Minor“ (*Shelley*, p. 44). Such simplification of the history and character of English poetry obviously needs no comment. What rather surprises the reader of Spender's solid and sensitive appreciation of Shelley's life, character, ideology and poetry is the statement that Shelley „is perhaps not a Great Poet“ and his subscription without a word of protest to Byron's opinion „that Pope was a greater poet than Byron himself or any of his contemporaries“, an opinion which (he adds) is „now“ (that is to say in 1952) „generally recognized“ (*Shelley*, p. 45). Such conclusion, if we are to take it seriously, is unwarranted by anything Spender himself says on the subject of Shelley's real or alleged defects and is belied by all he says about Shelley's intellectual, moral and artistic qualities. This and other, often contradictory statements in the concluding chapter of Spender's essay give it a rather equivocal

character and leave us in doubt about his own valuation of Shelley as man, thinker, or artist. Whether this is only a regrettable methodological error, or whether the author has really been unable to make up his own mind about Shelley's status in the hierarchy of English poets, the fact itself leads us to reconsider the question of one poet sitting in judgment upon another.

This certainly seems to be the leading editorial principle of the great majority of studies published in the *Writers and Their Work* series, of which nearly 150 issues have appeared so far, the first 55 titles under the general editorship of T. O. Beacheroff. It is moreover one of the features of the series which is worth our attention and is very probably based on the assumption that creative writers are better equipped for the task of appreciating the work of their fellow-craftsmen than literary critics who have not penned a line of original verse or prose. But historical as well as contemporary experience, as often as not, has proved that the assumption of fuller sympathy and more impartial justice on the part of one artist for another is a fallacy. It is well known, for instance, that Byron, Shelley and Keats themselves have sinned in this respect, and in their turn have been sinned against by others, both poets and professional reviewers or critics. Nor does it seem that the case is greatly improved if the author invited or volunteering to write about another has distinguished himself in both critical and creative writing, as have Read, Spender and Blunden whose essays are the subject of this review. For in spite of all expectation neither Sir Herbert Read nor Stephen Spender have shown full sympathy or done sufficient justice to Byron and Shelley. Only Edmund Blunden's essay on Keats is both sympathetic and, within its rather limited scope, also objective and just.

And yet, the selection of all three authors for their specific tasks may be defended on several plausible grounds. Herbert Read was probably chosen to write a reassessment of Byron because of his life-long interest in the great Romantic poets and his original studies of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Shelley and Keats, whose poetry and poetic theory has strongly influenced his own creation. His greatest achievement in contemporary criticism was „re-discovery of the great Romantic poets, and re-presentation of them in new terms, acceptable to his own and the subsequent generation“, by which he successfully opposed Eliot's „low rating“ of these poets. But his interpretation and estimate of Byron's poetry and significance is disappointing, nor is there much affinity between his own beliefs and temperament and those of his subject. (See *Herbert Read*. By Francis Derry. *Writers and Their Work*: No. 45. Revised edition 1961.) Though both Herbert Read and Edmund Blunden have written valuable studies of Shelley, Stephen Spender may have been indicated as a more fitting interpreter of Shelley's life, ideology and poetry. Apart from certain remarkable traits of poetic kinship with the greatest English revolutionary romanticist for which he was greeted by Herbert Read as „another Shelley“ (when he made his first appearance as poet before the public), Spender reminds us of Shelley also in his progressive „leftist“ political sympathies and philosophical as well as social beliefs. Though it is impossible to agree with him in all particulars, and we are especially disappointed by what we called the equivocal character of his conclusion, we concur in the editorial opinion that to his study of Shelley „he brings knowledge, critical acumen, and clarity of judgment“. Edmund Blunden's selection as author of the essay on the youngest poet of the second Romantic generation, John Keats, was happy indeed. Not merely because Blunden has devoted most of his critical studies to the writers of the Romantic movement (Lamb, Leigh Hunt, Shelley and their friends), but also on account of the general character of his own lyric poetry singing the simple sensuous beauties in nature and life like Keats in some of his sonnets and odes. Besides, Blunden is a conscientious, well-informed and kindly critic who has set himself a comparatively modest task which he could fulfill to his own and his readers' satisfaction. His mainly biographical method allows for just as much critical and expository matter or comment as is consistent with the aim of his essay as an introduction to the enjoyment and understanding of the poet. A Keatsian scholar may not learn any new facts or startling interpretations in this brief story of Keats's life and work, but he will not be likely to find anything there he would object to. There are, certainly, enough controversial issues in Keats's ideology and poetics that Blunden's essay does not touch upon. However, as he could not hope to discuss them with any hope of finality, Blunden did well in ignoring them, for those who wish to enlarge their study of Keats can always resort to the books listed in the selective but up-to-date bibliography. (These bibliographies are a regular and most useful feature of the essays published in the series, but they generally list only works by English or American authors.)

The preceding remarks have tried to clear the ground for a more detailed discussion of Read's, Spender's and Blunden's studies of the great trio of the second-generation Romantic

poets. They have also suggested the general trend of our arguments concerning these authors' critical methods and conclusions. In the following paragraphs it will not be necessary to add much on the subject of Blunden's appreciation of Keats and our entire attention may be concentrated on Read's and Spender's reassessments of Byron and Shelley.

Sir Herbert Read as critic of literature and art has been strongly influenced in his aesthetic principles and method by both the Romantic theory of imagination and the so-called modern psychology, particularly Jung. In the history of contemporary English criticism he distinguished himself as the most active and consistent apologist of the Romantic poets and was pioneer in applying the postulates of Freudian individual psychology to the problems of connexion between personality and its expression in imaginative writing. On that account his assessment of Byron, perhaps the most controversial figure among the European romantic poets, should be of particular interest. The very first sentence of his essay is promising: „The only hope“, he writes „of treating Byron's life and work with any degree of freshness is to return to the poems, letters and other personal records.“ To return *ad fontes* is indeed the essential condition of any successful historical or critical investigation. But its object is certainly to search for truth, not merely to treat the subject „with some degree of freshness“. Even when the issues „are primarily poetical“ as Read declares in the same paragraph, they must not be treated in isolation from the other, non-poetical features of Byron's life and character, such as „his social rank“, or „his private vices and public virtues“, or from „the fact that he gave his life to the cause of freedom“, features and facts which according to Read are „incidental“ and have no „bearing on the position Byron should occupy in the world of letters“. It is true that Byron's private and public non-literary activities cannot in themselves be the cause of his poetic achievements and reputation. But his work is nevertheless their reflection and expression; and if we are to understand it and estimate its real value we must not disregard them. For Byron's work would not be what it is if these „incidental“, irrelevant things had been different.

Though Read is convinced that in Byron's case „it is necessary to guard against the importation of moral judgments into a literary context; or, conversely, against allowing our literary values to influence, one way or the other, our estimate of the moral significance of the poet's actions“, he does not deny the determining and formative influence of objective non-literary realities on the substance and quality of his poetry. This is evidenced in his search for the genuine sources of Byron's *Weltschmerz* which he defines (rather incompletely) as the „peculiar amalgam of naturalistic sentiment, cosmic anxiety, and dispositional spleen“. He believes to have discovered them chiefly „in heredity and in early environment“, to be more concrete, in Byron's idealization of his lost father who became the „ego-ideal“ of the young Byron and in certain early experiences whose nature is not clearly revealed by Byron's journals and letters (from which Read quotes rather copiously), but which produced „a permanent psychological trauma“. Apart from its biographical value, this research into Byron's temperament proves that the frequent expressions of the moods of despair or scepticism in Byron's poems had their origins, at least partly, in personal experience and cannot be regarded as mere affectation.

But the characteristic Byronic *Weltschmerz* had deeper roots than the poet's private sorrows and disappointments. It was an integral part of the widespread emotional atmosphere resulting from the defeat of the bourgeois democratic ideals and the victory of the forces of political reaction in all European countries. Read is not quite unaware of this wider, more impersonal aspect of *Weltschmerz*, for he points out that it had its origin in Germany and that it was an „infectious complaint“. Quite correctly he regards it as characteristic of the contemporary „Spirit of the Age“, but he still maintains that „in the case of a poet it has little to do with the quality of the poetry“.

His negative attitude to sociological methods and principles of art criticism is best apparent from the passage in which he tries to meet and refute the possible objections of a Marxist critic to his purely academic interpretation of Byron's philosophy which he characterises as Nihilism. „At this point“, he writes, „a Marxist critic would no doubt attempt to relate Byron's state of mind to the profound social changes that were taking place in his time. There he was, representative of an old order (positively feudal!); around him, a new order with which he had no sympathy was coming into being; his very estates were to be sold to make way for the industrial revolution. Vulgarity was everywhere triumphant, and politics authoritarian. All this, to the full extent of a sociological thesis, we can admit; but in the end we have not explained why Byron became a nihilist and Shelley, in the same circumstances, a utopian socialist. In social status, in material environment, in historical destiny, nothing separated these

two men; yet the quality of their poetry is totally distinct and their philosophy of life antithetical. They agree only in their revolt from the society into which they were born.

Read's statement of the alleged Marxist approach to Byron shows but a superficial acquaintance with the methods and principles of historical and dialectical materialism and their application in literary science. But it admits at least that there is a connexion between Byron's „state of mind“ or his philosophy of life and „the society into which he was born“. Marxist studies of Byron and Shelley (Elistratova, Demeshkan, Anixt etc.) have already convincingly explained why, not in the same, of course, but in similar circumstances, the quality of their poetry is distinct (though not totally distinct). Their conclusions are based on a critical examination and analysis of the entire known literary production of Byron and Shelley as well as on a sound knowledge of the history of their age; and they do not support Read's thesis that Byron is a nihilist and that his and Shelley's philosophy of life is antithetical. Even some contemporary English critics (Bowra, Hough, Daiches etc.) have arrived at similar conclusions, for they refuse to divorce poetry from its historic context, to pay attention exclusively to the written text and not even the whole of it, and to disregard the nonliterary public circumstances and activities of the poet as „incidental“ or irrelevant, as deliberately does Sir Herbert Read in his study of Byron. Read concludes his essay with a fine tribute to Byron's character when he says that „There is at the base of all Byron's work an essential sanity, a hatred of sham and humbug, generous impulses and manly courage“, but the whole tenor of his assessment of Byron the Poet as well as Byron the Symbolic Figure manifests a strange lack of sympathy for both on the part of a man who enjoys the well-deserved reputation as humanist and fervent apologist of the great Romantic poets.

While for Byron it has been claimed that he expressed (particularly in his major poems from *Childe Harold* to *Don Juan*) what thousands of his contemporaries felt and that his understanding of the life around him which he absorbed was so wide that he is a poet not merely of England but of all Europe (in Sir Maurice Bowra's *The Romantic Imagination*), Stephen Spender has to open his essay on Shelley with the admission that this poet is a man in whom his countrymen least recognize their own image though he has many qualities which are characteristic of them and are recurrent among the English upper classes. There is no reason to doubt that this is true as regards the personal character of this revolutionary romanticist. But we are more interested in what Spender has to say about Shelley's poetic creation and reputation. For though Shelley did not have so immediate and wide an appeal as Byron „he is one of the very few English poets to have been taken to heart by many workers in the Labour Movement“ and is still enchanting lovers of poetry all over the world and even influencing modern writers.

Spender's study is a sensitive, appreciative and stimulating reevaluation of Shelley's character and opinions, public activities and poetic theory and practice. But a reviewer may be excused if he, for lack of space, refrains from considering the chapters dealing with the poet's personal life, understanding and interesting as they are, because they do not bring to light any fresh data; and also if he limits his remarks concerning Spender's interpretation of Shelley's poetic creation (covering all the major poems from *Queen Mab* to *The Triumph of Life*) to the discussion of a few debatable issues. For, on the whole, one may agree with Spender's opinion that „the ideas which agitated Shelley so violently“ (and which are nearly all reflected in his poetry) „are, for the most part, still living issues“, and therefore „we are almost as far from making a final evaluation of his work to-day as critics were a hundred years ago“.

As we know, the inspiration and substance of most of Shelley's poems as well as some of his critical essays is his political and moral philosophy, derived partly from his private and public experience, partly from his favourite authors. In his early works the most profound philosophical influence was that of William Godwin's *Political Justice*. Spender sums it up as follows: „Shelley's ideas of free love, his impatience with the unreasonableness of political and religious institutions which held men in bondage, his belief in the efficacy of reason in promoting action leading to a redistribution of worldly goods and offices, his hatred of priests, tyrants and rich oppressors, all more or less corresponded with the views of Godwin, from whom he largely derived them.“ In a different connexion, for he does not discuss Shelley's philosophy in isolation from his account of the poet's life and poetry, Spender outlines Shelley's ideological development: „It is true that Shelley, unlike Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey, never went back on his revolutionary principles. Yet there is this important difference between the younger and the older Shelley. The first believed that evil is an external burden imposed on men by human institutions, which can be removed by an external change. The later Shelley had looked far deeper into the heart of man and saw the corruption of power which turns to evil the means intended for good... His early view that society was divided into

tyrants and priests on the one hand, and the enslaved strugglers towards freedom on the other, deepened into a tragic view of the war between good and evil in the human heart. In his personal life, the young Shelley was a rebel; but the Shelley who died at the age of thirty grew into English literature with some of the qualities of a hero of tragedy." This conclusion is drawn by Spender mainly from his reading of Shelley's unfinished last poem *The Triumph of Life* and also from *Prometheus Unbound*. Nevertheless, in spite of this change of view which was most likely due to the triumph of reaction after the Napoleonic wars and the brutal suppression of workers' demonstrations (like the Peterloo Massacre in 1819), Shelley, in the last months of his life, „wished no less to change society“; for though „his experience of life tended to modify his abstract ideas with concrete reality, the strength of his ideas prevented him from reacting from the revolutionary position of his youth into an opposite position of conservatism“.

Spender's understanding sympathy with Shelley's revolutionary ideology is clearly expressed throughout his systematic and comparatively full discussion of the poet's aesthetic views and his individual poems. His lucid and succinct précis of the chief object of Shelley's poetic endeavours deserves quoting in full: „Shelley knew well that he was two men, a man and a poet... one of the characters in his double-personality was a man trying out the crude material of his poetry in his life; the other, the poet who purifies, moulds, and transforms this material in his work... The political thinker and activist, Shelley lived out ideas which often seem staring caricatures of themselves in his example: the poet was engaged in a perpetual struggle to express these ideas in vivid and impassioned imaginative language, so that they might pierce beneath the surface habit of thinking of his readers, to a deeper level where human existences are bound together in love, and thus change men by giving them a new and truer view of their natures, so that they in turn might change society“.

But in our opinion Spender fails to relate the poet's ideas with the objective reality they reflect. That is a serious flaw in his discussion of the connexion between art and actuality, from which we quote passim: „There is a divorce between art and actuality, or, at any rate, a marriage in which the relationship between the two is governed by the realization that they deal with different kinds of reality. Shelley was one of those poets who found it very difficult to see the difference between the truth of actuality and the truth of poetry. On the level of the actuality in which he lived he knew... all sorts of truths which he wished to introduce into his poems. But for the purposes of his poetry, the deep conviction that man must be freed from bonds of unreason was not enough. It was only a known idea, not an experience derived from living... The history of Shelley's development is the gradual taming of his „known ideas“ by his increased experience...“

I fail to grasp Spender's distinction between „the truth of actuality and the truth of poetry“ unless it means the obvious difference between objective reality and its subjective but faithful reflection in the mind of the poet with its subsequent realisation in the medium of poetry. If this is so, then Spender's surmise that „the conviction that man must be freed from bonds of unreason“ was only a known idea, not „an experience derived from living“ is meaningless and untrue. We know — and so must Spender — that this deepest conviction of the poet was derived from his personal experience and knowledge of the real condition of the vast majority of people living in England, Wales, Ireland, Switzerland and Italy, not merely from books or abstract speculation. These experiences are expressed directly in his political pamphlets and they form the „crude material“ of nearly all his didactic, lyric, confessional and satiric poems. His experiences were not so rich and varied as Byron's, but they were deeper and certainly not as narrow as Spender would have us believe. Besides, Shelley's intellectual and imaginative faculties were of an exceptionally high order which enabled him to derive from his experience and knowledge vast and true generalisations that his poetry — deliberately aiming to improve the destiny of all humanity — has made both inspiring and convincing.

Though we could not pay attention to all the questions discussed by the authors of the three essays under review we have tried at least to suggest the general trend of development in contemporary English criticism which we have called the return of the Romantics. It is reflected, of course, in many more studies and books than those few discussed or alluded to in the present article. Indeed, it is a highly needed and important development for the great Romantic poets and critics have left us works of imagination and wisdom which we could hardly afford to neglect.