

BYRON'S IMITATIONS AND TRANSLATIONS OF THE CLASSICS

Although Matthew Arnold and Goethe wished that Lord Byron had had a more profound learning and a more responsible way of looking at life, Byron himself declared that he had read a great number of great writers while at Harrow School and later on at Cambridge. In his own words the Greek and Latin authors he knew were «without number» (!). Yet, one will not be richly rewarded if he tries to determine the direct influences of the classics in Byron's work. The young poet had so much of his own to say, so much energy to express in his poetry, that it is wiser to say that the numerous classical allusions in his verse are «hints»—as he put it in one of his satires—rather than influences, I will not maintain that Byron's poetry would have been what it is had he not studied the classics. But the main romantic ideas, the so-called «Byronic Hero», and the manner in which all of Byron's idealism is expressed, would have been almost the same.

The relationship of Byron with the classics can be best examined from three angles :

- I. Translations and Imitations of the Classics.
- II. Thematic Influences.
- III. Historical and Factual Inspirations.

Under Thematic Influences can be classified poems like Byron's «Prometheus», and several of his satires, which treat themes suggested by the classics. Also, poems whose structure follows patterns based on ancient authors belong here.

Under Historical and Factual Inspirations one can classify all Byron's poems, or passages, that have allusions to historical events or persons of Greece and Rome. Many of these inspirations sprang from Byron's reading. Most of them, however, manifested themselves clearly when he came to the classical lands—and especially Greece—where a visit to the very place of Marathon, for instance, inspired him to write about the famous victory over the Persians there. The verses that were inspired

by Byron's empathy with the ancient world are so numerous throughout all his long and short poems, that they alone could be the subject of a dissertation.

Though works that belong to categories II and III will not be discussed here, a word should be added about Byronic satires after the Roman fashion

A close examination of the Latin «sermones» by Horace, Juvenal, and others, and a comparison of Byron's compositions with these, as well as with neoclassical treatments—e. g. Pope's, Dryden's—of the same themes and techniques, shows that Byron was influenced by, and imitated, the English neoclassicists primarily, and the Romans secondarily. Without questioning Byron's sincerity in implying that he had looked into Horace before writing «Hints from Horace» the reader cannot refrain from noticing that in tone and technique Byron is very close to Pope and Dryden. This is particularly true of Byron's satires on poetics and politics. The Romans made fun of bad poets, but their manner is not so elaborate as the tradition initiated by Marvell and continued by Dryden and especially Pope. Following the English tradition Byron wrote detailed and caustic remarks on poets and politicians he disliked in which only parts of the framework are borrowed from the Latins.

Under the first heading we can discuss a number of poems that Byron wrote during the early stages of his poetical career, and that appeared in the collection *Hours of Idleness*. The *Hours* include several translations and imitations from Anacreon, Aeschylus, Euripides, Catullus, Virgil, and Horace. A reader who is familiar with classical literature will quite soon realize that most of these pieces cannot be accepted as either literary or scholarly translations. They are not literary translations of the originals in the sense that Byron adds so much of his own, or expands an idea that appeals to him, to such a degree that these «translations» become almost as Byronic as the rest of his poetry. On the other hand, Byron's misreadings and misunderstandings of the texts are so numerous that at times his version becomes a quite different poem. Knowing Byron's character we are not surprised in the least. Byron was not the kind of man who would ask a good scholar for help or advice; nor would his pride allow him to accept suggestions or corrections if such were voluntarily offered. Consequently, these works, at their best, are interesting paraphrases.

A close comparison of Byron's «From Anacreon» with the Greek original shows that he wrote twenty-six tetrameter lines to render Anacreon's twelve trimeters. Byron's poem begins as follows:

I wish to tune my quivering lyre
To deeds of fame and notes of fire ;
To echo, from its rising swell,
How heroes fought and nations fell,
When Atreus' sons advanced to war,
Or Tyrian Cadmus roved afar :
But still, to martial strains unknown,
My lyre recurs to love alone (*). (p. 88)

The version continues in this manner for eighteen more lines. Now, a simple word by word translation of the whole poem by Anacreon is as follows :

To the Lyre

I wish to speak of the Atreides,
I wish to sing of Cadmus ;
But my guitar, with its chords,
Sings only of love.

First I Changed the strings,
Then the whole lyre ;
And I sang of Hercules' labors,
But the lyre echoed love songs.
Farewell then heroes ; for our lyre
Sings but of love (*).

It is apparent how much Byron has extended this short lyric.

Aware of the admiration and friendship that Byron felt, at that time, for the Irish poet Thomas Moore, one is led to compare the Byronic poem and the original with Moore's version of the latter.

I often wish this languid lyre,
This warbler of my soul's desire,
Could raise the breath of song sublime,
To men of fame, in former time.
But when the soaring theme I try,
Along the chords my numbers die,
And whisper, with dissolving tone,
«Our sighs are given to love alone» (*).

This poem consists of twenty - two lines. Of course, one should allow a few more lines for the English version, since the Greek language is very condensed and flexible and able to express much in small space. However, it is obvious that Byron's loquaciousness is due to his study

and imitation of the fashionable Moore, who was generous in words when he first paraphrased poems of Anacreon, as early as 1794, in Dublin (6).

In examining the second Anacreontean version by Byron one notices the same characteristics. Byron composed forty - eight tetrameters to express what the Yale scholar Erastus Richardson rendered in thirty - one lines faithful to the Greek text. A comparison of how both end their translations shows in what way Byron's version is more wordy and rather erroneous :

Byron «My bow can still impel the shaft :
 'T is firmly fix'd, thy sighs reveal it ;
 Say, courteous host, canst thou not feel it ? »

Richardson «Indeed my bow was unharmed, but see !
 Lo thou thyself dost feel the smart,
 That ever will burn, of a wounded heart» (6).

Forgetting Byron's liberties in translating, one is impressed with the facility he has in expanding the original by adding more and more to the main idea. However, his versions do not seem artificially lengthened and overstuffed with superfluous words. On the contrary, they give the impression that their dimensions fit their themes.

This «proliferation» of the idea—if we may use this term of Wallace Stevens—shows that Byron wrote with an eye on the poetic tastes of the public. The short lyric of the Elizabethan age did not impress the romantic public as much as a verbose and lengthy composition did. The tremendous success of Byron's narrative pieces later on, only proves this. Also, as a popular poet—and always trying to remain so—Byron used the rhyming couplet, which—though completely unknown to the classics—had been very popular with the British since the times of John Donne and even earlier, and had reached its climax with Pope and the neoclassical favorites of Byron.

A similar spirit of liberal use, and proliferation of the main idea, of classical texts will be encountered in all of Byron's other «translations».

Byron, a poet of fiery passions, was attracted by Euripides' tragedy *Medea*. Under its spell he tried his hand at a choral song philosophizing on the excesses of love. He composed fifty - six lines in seven stanzas to render the two strophes and two antistrophes of the original, totaling thirty - four lines. The result is not bad at all. Byron's version follows the spirit of Euripides. Or rather, his and Euripides' spirit coincide. However, Byron could not help adding his own to the extent that his last stanza has no counterpart in the Greek text. Here is the first strophe, translated by Prof. Richmond Lattimore, showing all its classical simplicity :

When love is in excess
It brings a man no honor
Nor any worthiness.
But if in moderation Cypris (r) comes,
There is no other power at all so gracious.
O goddess, never on me let loose the unerring
Shaft of your bow in the poison of desire (s). (II. 627—633)

And here is the Byronic version and proliferation of it :

When fierce conflicting passions urge
The breast where love is wont to glow,
What mind can stem the stormy surge
Which rolls the tide of human woe?
The hope of praise, the dread of shame,
Can rouse the tortured breast no more ;
The wild desire, the guilty flame,
Absorbs each wish it felt before. (p. III)

These verses are good. They rhyme a, b, a, b, c, d, c, d, whereas the original is unrhyming. Another thing one can observe is that Byron never used blank verse in his translations, though this is the English meter that is closest to the unrhyming dactyls or iambs of the classics. Later on, Byron used blank verse, especially in his dramas, with considerable ease and success. Probably his strong dislike of Wordsworth made him avoid a meter so widely used by the Lake poet.

Byron did an equally good job in paraphrasing another love poem. This time it was a Latin lyric by Catullus, which in its turn is a version of the original Greek by Sappho. Byron, as always, proliferates the idea, quite successfully though, and composes a charming love lyric reminiscent of his style in original compositions of this sort, like the «Maid of Athens», for instance, or his various addresses to beautiful women.

Byron's version of «Ad Lesbiam» shows his genius in organizing a poem. He does not hesitate to change the order of the arguments, nor is he apprehensive in adding some of his own to support the case presented by Catullus. The result is twenty-four Byronic lines equal in fire and passion to the original four quatrains. Here is a scholarly translation of the first quatrain by William E. Gladstone :

To Lesbia

Him rival to the gods I place,
Him loftier yet, if loftier be,
Who, Lesbia, sits before thy face,
Who listens and who looks on thee ;
Thee smiling goft (s).

And here is the Byronic amplification of it :

Equal to Jove that youth must be -
Greater than Jove he seems to me -
Who, free from Jealousy's alarms,
Securely views thy matchless charms.
That cheek, which ever dimpling glows,
That mouth, from whence such music flows,
To him, alike, are always known,
Reserved for him, and him alone. (p. 87)

At a first glance the reader sees that, among other additions and alterations, Byron introduces the motif of jealousy—something that does not appear in Catullus nor in Sappho ; but, possibly, this is a spontaneous revelation of the translator's character.

Another ancient piece of literature that appealed to Byron was the tragedy of Prometheus. Byron seems to have distinguished some of his own traits and attitudes in the legendary hero. Above all, Prometheus' defiance of Zeus' supreme authority was something that could hardly pass unnoticed by rebellious idealists like Byron and Shelley.

Byron, as early as December 1, 1804, made a «translation» of the first strophe and antistrophe only, of a long choral song from the *Prometheus Vinc-tus* (¹⁰) of Aeschylus. This is perhaps one of his poorest attempts. For one thing, there were no reliable translations which Byron could have used as a springboard ; on the other hand, Aeschylus' archaic idiom—quite close to Homer's—was, obviously, much too much for the young lord at Harrow. Moreover, choruses in Attic tragedies are written in Doric dialect, which is more difficult than Attic. This, plus the twisted syntax of the choruses in order to fit the tune they had to be sung to, makes it quite a task for the modern translator. Byron, however, never hesitating and always impetuous, produced sixteen lines rhyming a, b, a, b, which, curiously enough, cover the whole chorus of some thirty-four lines, jumping here and there, omitting a number of sentences, and finishing by mentioning the Nymphs and the Tritons, which Aeschylus does not mention in this part of the drama.

Here is a recent translation of the opening of this chorus by Professor David Grene :

May Zeus never, Zeus that all
the universe controls, oppose
his power against my mind :
May I never dallying
be slow to give my worship at

the sacrificial feasts
when the bulls are killed beside
quenchless Father Ocean :
may I never sin in word :
may these precepts still abide
in my mind nor melt away (¹¹). (II. 526—536)

Byron's beginning is not very far from this :

'Great Jove, to whose almighty throne
Both gods and mortals homage pay,
Ne'er may my soul thy power disown,
Thy dread behests ne'er disobey.
Oft shall the sacred victim fall
In sea - girt Ocean's mossy hall ;
My voice shall raise no impious strain
'Gainst him who rules the sky and azure domain. (p. 89)

However, Byron probably grew impatient with the difficulty of the rest of the text, and compressed some twenty - four lines into eight of his, messing things up, and concluding in a way that would have made Aeschylus frown.

Byron did not give up Prometheus so easily. Twelve years later, in 1816, he composed his own «Prometheus», a poem of fifty - nine lines, in couplets for the most part. This is Aeschylean only in its title. Byron simply borrows the name of the hero, plus some of his basic qualities : love for mankind, endurance, and defiance of a tyrannical supreme authority. Byron, like Shelley, went far beyond Aeschylus in idealizing Prometheus. He addressed the Titan thus :

Thou art a symbol and a sign
To Mortals of their fate and force ;
Like thee, Man is in part divine,
A troubled stream from a pure source ;
.
Triumphant where it dares defy,
And making Death a Victory. (II. 45—59)

This conclusion would not have appealed to the conservative and religious Aeschylus who made it clear—in the rest of the plays of the Promethean trilogy—that Zeus relented and a reconciliation took place between Titan and god (¹²).

Byron's Prometheus is not a re - creation or a resurrection of an ancient character. The Byronic Prometheus is a Byronic hero in all respects. Though a descendant of the classical Prometheus is more daring

and more heroic ; he is a scion that triumphs where his ancestor was satisfied with a mere compromise. And this is perhaps a good expression of the difference between classical and romantic temper.

This brief discussion of «Prometheus» leads one to the conclusion, and main thesis, of this paper. Namely, the translations and imitations of the classics that Byron attempted, when judged in terms of their themes and subjects, are shown to belong with the rest of his poetry. He «translated» poems about love, beauty, passions, and heroism ; and it is well known that the originals he composed deal with the same or similar themes. There is no difference in style and tone between his «translations» and his originals. Moreover, his personality is automatically diffused in his versions—the classical spirit is reduced to a remote shadow, or hint—and the classical characters and heroes become as Byronic as his own creations or even himself.

NOTES

- 1) Leslie A. Marchand, *Byron, A Biography* (New York, 1957), I, 85.
- 2) All quotations from Byron come from the Cambridge Edition by Paul E. More (New York, 1933). Pages are given in parentheses.
- 3) My translation.
- 4) Thomas Moore, trans. *The Odes of Anacreon* (New York, 1903) p. 57.
- 5) Moore, introduction, p. iii.
- 6) Erastus Richardson, *The Odes of Anacreon* (New Haven, 1928), p. 38.
- 7) Cypris: an epithet of Venus.
- 8) David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, ed. *The Complete Greek Tragedies, vol. III: Euripides* (Chicago, 1959).
- 9) Francis Godolphin, ed. *The Latin Poets* (New York, 1949), p. 5.
- 10) *Prometheus Vincit: Prometheus Bound*.
- 11) David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, ed. *The Complete Greek Tragedies, vol. I: Aeschylus* (Chicago, 1959).
- 12) L. R. Lind, ed. *Ten Greek Plays in Contemporary, Translations* (Boston, 1957), p. xxvii.

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