

Some Features of a Portrait of Byron

Yisroel Shtern (1924)

Translated by Jon Levitow (2006)

“Not with my hand, but my heart – have I a heart destroyed;¹
“Manfred”

What value do books have after all –

If they don't open like the heavens sliced through by lightning in order to pour out their stored up thunder, to echo in the ears of the universe² and bring forth fear of life and terror of death?

What value do books have after all, if they remain shut even after we've opened them because the heart from which they came was never broken, or if it was, the wound closed up bit by bit, covered by sheets of paper, and if we read in them of eternal wandering, of wandering's sorrow, of gloom with no beginning and suffering without end, this affects us, and we sympathize, but our whole psyche never becomes engaged; we can always find an air passage, a route to freedom, and no clots of dried blood stick to us. We see the wounds, but having already healed over in places, they mend before our eyes, and a skin forms over our compassion and our shared torment. The whole chill of life no longer reaches us. In fact, these books want to show us the end of the world, but arrayed in long ranks, they themselves block out the ruins...

What value do books have after all?

What value can they have unless their voice, their “Bas-kol,³” carries to the edge of the final distance because a person has lived and felt: “I cannot be silent!” When in everything said there is scant “yes-and-no,” in every letter marked down there is almost nothing freely chosen, just as the furious strides of a storm are not free, are driven by an unseen, mighty, superior power because of some sin against eternal and bloody banishment, because this person's word is the cry that would most willingly be stilled and stifled

¹(all footnotes by Translator) “Manfred,” Act. 2, Sc. 2, l.119. The translation is Shtern's, and he plays off it in the last paragraph of the essay, so I have kept it here. The original passage goes: “Not with my hand, but heart – which broke her heart; / It gazed on mine, and withered. I have shed/ Blood, but not hers – and yet her blood was shed; / I saw – and could not staunch it.” (ll. 119-123)

² Y.: “Velt-All,” lit., “World-All;” here Shtern hyphenates “veltal,” a word common to Yiddish and German, meaning “cosmos” or “universe.”

³ Shtern here makes use of a Rabbinical motif in which a “Bat Kol” or Heavenly Voice (lit., “Daughter of a Voice,” or perhaps, “Daughter-Voice”) delivers a proclamation or message to the world, for example, Pirkey Avot 6:2: “Each day a voice goes forth from Mt. Khoreb and proclaims, ‘Woe to those who have neglected the Torah!’”

but can't be – and so it tears itself free of all chains -- then the reader also has no recourse. Whenever, whoever, and wherever he may be, this word will encircle him and reverberate in his eyes and ears, just as the sadly distant, sad and distant howl of the wind approaches us.

When we get to the end of such works, our eyes close, and we sit shaken, filled with mysteries. We know that we have been dealing with more than a book; we have been breathing in aspects of the elemental.

What value do books have after all?

In order for books to acquire their real value, the value of their raw spirit, their source, and their essence, capable at times of breaking down all barriers and descending like an avalanche on everything that appears satisfied, soothing, and solid, burning for so long that the world-wilderness, the “darkness,” finds rest in the center of the earth – without reduction or consolation, and in all their harshness and nakedness the ruins become revealed to us. – In order to attain this, and in order for the attainment not to prove too strange and repellent in its fearsomeness, so that from behind the mask of horror an attractive face may appear, waiting, seeking the beautiful person, the beautiful distance, the beautiful silence; for the pelt of Cain to be lifted from Abel, for Cain to prove nothing other than a more human, more wistful, more philosophical version of Abel (for no one thinks more about God than Cain); for the murderer who can't shed a single tear to turn out perhaps even more unhappy than the victim from whom pools of blood spill, -- books can only win the reader over to such human realities by succeeding in coming so close to us that we can grasp the beat of their lines, the rhythm of their restlessness, just as we feel our weakened heart beginning to pound when we exceed our strength...

They take on their essential value only when they can come so close to us that they become a musical accompaniment to our actions in all their nuances, their deep base making our melody more serious and darker, and we come to love the way that through them, the tune acquires more depth, more truth, and more humanity.

We are at the same time robbed of something; the wholeness is shattered. Without knowing exactly how, suddenly our certainty finds itself at the edge of an abyss. A strange transformation takes place. We can no longer see what's before our eyes, only what's missing...and at this point we become aware of an incomprehensible happiness. Why? Perhaps because the same thing happens to us as to a person alone in a room. Figures on the walls repeat every one of his actions and movements. His isolation dissolves; he comes into contact with mysterious forms of unknown origin. Examining

his life as the leaping shapes on the wall re-enact it, he notices all at once that his shadow lacks a piece of head here, and someone has torn out a part of his knee there. -- He falls into contemplation. From somewhere sadness comes to the surface, but a minute later he sees something new. The person made of shadows is in fact much bigger than the one sitting at the table – and as he sits there, tears flow from his eyes. It's impossible to know why he cries: whether it's because so much of him is broken, because he bears so many wounds, or because he has grown so large...he himself doesn't know. One thing alone is clear, that at this moment a love has been awakened in him for the unsubstantial atmosphere in which he bitterly sighs, a love for the sad silence around him, for the malicious, threatening shadows that are so different from and yet so similar to him.

If books are like this – books which are as dark as shadows, which reveal to us our shattered heads and ruined bodies, as shadows are revealed, such books are larger than us exactly as our shadows are, and such books are as close to us as our shadows are -- we love them because they love us. They're madly in love with us, following our every step; without us they can't go on. Their entire existence consists of chasing after us, after the human, of experiencing us, of making our lives greater than they were before, of animating us human beings. Their dreaming consists of the dream of our horror and torment. Our unhappy existence floats through their bone marrow.

Such writers have found out the secret that in the planning of a work, one must draw a line, a form, a "triple thread,"⁴ from the one who suffers through the one who creates to the one who reads, in short: from the human through the human to the human, the bottom line being: "the human"...

What value do books have after all?

Here I would make a quick allusion to the fact that I have turned my back on the motif clung to by most writers of literary articles. Probably more than one reader will accuse me of having avoided the subject. I have intentionally steered clear of the simple task of isolating "characteristics." I have chosen instead to sketch no more than a few features in order that of its own accord, the slightest, most remote similarity might perhaps arise to this

⁴ Heb. "khut hameshulash," an allusion to "Kohelet" 4:12: "Vehakhut hameshulash lo bimheyra yinatek," "the triple thread is not easily broken." This motif takes on a wide variety of meanings in religious literature: as a reference to the three Patriarchs or to the unity of Israel, God, and the Torah, for example. R' Yokhanan Ben Zakay uses the expression in praise of R' Yehosua ben Khananya "in the "Avot D'Rabi Natan" 14:3, and it also serves as the name of a nineteenth century halakhic work by the three most prominent "Volozhiner" Rabbis, as well as of a biography of the "Khatam Sofer" by R' Akiva Eger.

gigantic figure, powerfully intimate to us because of its human form: Byron! This is the human form I mean.

What value do books have after all?

If one doesn't know how to read them, if one can't get to the seed within the fruit, wrapped up in the printed pages, then if we think seriously about Byron the person, we must certainly arrive at the thought that fate must have placed him on his life's path. In his very person he was able to disprove the opinion of Friedrich Schlegel that he, Byron, was a close associate of Satan himself. With his own essence he reduced to nothing the idea that he was the missionary of skepticism. Not only did his razor-sharp poems open our wounds and let the infection flow freely into the streets: see what terrible shape you're in, -- but his personal dealings themselves testify that above all there is: the human being!

In the first letter which Byron sent to Lord Holland we read⁵: "I'm sending you the report of the events in Nottinghamshire. As I look at them, I come to a different conclusion. I think the rebels are correct, and I have undertaken to support them. The working class is sorely oppressed. With mechanical means one person can now do the work of seven, and the rest go without work. We should rejoice in the progress of technology, but my Lord, it's not justice that the well-being of machines should come at the cost of the degradation of people." In his first book of poems, the physiognomy of the writer does not yet appear, but in this communication the authentic cry of Byron can be heard.

Of Byron – but not from the destroyer and demon that his opponents saw in him; of Byron – but not from the one his devotees took him to be, and in whose name they wandered at night through back alleys or drank opium or in the best of cases dragged themselves around with pockets full of the

⁵ Byron wrote several letters to the Whig politician, Henry Vassal-Fox, the third Baron Holland (1773-1840), discussing the 1811-12 Luddite riots in Nottinghamshire and opposing the law which Parliament eventually passed, making it a capital offense to destroy the "frame" for the mass-production of clothing that the Luddites targeted for their attacks. The original letter differs slightly from Shtern's Yiddish version: "I have the honor to return the Nottinghamshire letter to your Lordship. I have read it with attention, but do not think I shall venture to avail myself of its contents...For my part I consider the manufacturers as a much injured body of men...For instance, by the adoption of a certain kind of frame, one man performs the work of seven – six are thus thrown out of business...Surely, my Lord, however we may rejoice in any improvement in the arts which may be beneficial to mankind, we must not allow mankind to be sacrificed to improvements in mechanism...My own motive for opposing the bill is founded on its palpable injustice, and its inefficacy. I have seen the state of these miserable men, and it is a disgrace to a civilized country." ("Letter from Lord Byron to Lord Holland, Feb. 25, 1812," www.everything2.com)

pain of the world, writing books of Byronisms, considering it a frightful affront to dignity to have to consider such lowly considerations as the “moral” side of life; when I say Byron, I mean the man who was possessed of a fortune and gradually dispersed it among the weak, the downtrodden, and the poor, until at the end he had to pawn his own library...

What value do books have after all?

Of course, if Michelangelo left behind him no monuments, he would no doubt have faded into the past, but now, as his statues wink at us, we understand what they mean: if their master had been born without hands, he would still have been Michelangelo. If Byron had not given us, “The Prisoner of Chillon,” “Manfred,” “Cain,” “Don Juan,” he would have been recorded in the list of great philanthropists and fighters, and it probably would have ended there. Now, however, that he has left us such masses of scenes, forms, and ideas, grieving, asking, and complaining to earth and heaven, world and God, their lamentation un-stilled through the generations, we understand that even without these works, he would have been: Byron! I don’t want to be misunderstood. The same thing can’t be said of all famous artistic masters. With Byron in particular, his life shows us a great deal. Tell me, I beg you, who is greater, the one who decreed that his “Cain” should undergo scenes like a poor sheep struck by a snake, or the one who cried out in the English Parliament, “Do not sacrifice the human for the sake of the machine!” Which of the two is more Byronic, the one who polished verses for the mouth of his hero⁶ and commanded him to call down angels, spirits, and ghosts, and who, when they came, had only one request: “to forget!” because he could not forget, -- or the one who wrote plain letters in middle-class prose and occupied himself with such small matters as shoes for Italian immigrants?

Today we love both, and we come close to each through the other. It’s clear to us that if Byron is really the writer-destroyer, the writer-criminal, it’s as his Manfred says, “Not with the hand, but with the heart – did *he* a heart destroy;” such heart flows from him to us in spite of the anger lurking everywhere in his books, such an intimacy reaches us from him, such a familiarity from the greatest of men among the greatest of poets, such powerful nearness, that we believe in his existence just as we believe in the breathing of our lungs, and the thought of the destruction of his work is as hard for us to bear as when we suffer from the thought of our own mortality...

⁶ i.e., Manfred.