



Byron the Romantic

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Byron the Romantic

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Byron (with Robert Rushton) by George Sanders, 1807–9

[5:27] There was a great revolt, already, towards the end of the eighteenth century, against what might be called an orderly universe – tidy, rationally analysable – in which everything had its place and all human beings could be properly fitted into whatever kind of life would best contribute to the most rational and satisfactory exist-

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ence. [In Germany there was the so-called *Sturm und Drang* period, in which the ideal was free self-expression in knocking over established values – the despotism of the small German courts or the tidy rationalism of Frederick the Great.] And that found its most vivid expression, probably, in Schiller's play *The Robbers*, of which the hero, Karl Moor, is of course already an outlaw and outsider[, a man who avenges the great wrong which philistine society has done him, by murder, by pillage, by heading a robber band.] Byron, oddly enough, struck the European imagination as a man who lived that kind of life himself. And he gave flesh to what had hitherto simply been a kind of literary or emotional ideal, and that, I think, was perhaps his chief importance in binding his spell upon the European imagination.

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In one of the poems he says:

There was in him a vital scorn of all: [...]
He stood a stranger in this breathing world.¹

This is the absolute Romantic ideal of the man who doesn't seek happiness, doesn't seek security, doesn't seek wisdom. The whole previous ideal was to respect, in a sense, success – either in thought, the people who get things right; or in practice, the people who fulfilled what they set out to do, great conquerors or successful statesmen. Well, the Romantic ideal was not that at all. The Romantic ideal was to be true to some inner light, even if you failed to realise it. The great new value was integrity. Integrity meant that, provided you were faithful to your inner ideal, it didn't matter against what odds you fought.

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¹ *Lara* (1814), Canto I. 18, lines 313, 315.