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## THE SENSATIONALISM OF BYRON

“The great object of life,” said Byron, “is sensation—to feel that we exist, even though in pain.” He declared also, in a famous passage (*Childe Harold* III, xcvi), that if he could express his inmost thought and feeling in one word that word would be *Lightning*. The remark is highly characteristic of him and reveals the unhealthy sensationalism of a good deal of his work. Lightning is by far the most startling, the most sensational exhibition of the power of nature. One may say that it is indeed almost theatrical; and this is why it was so congenial to Byron. That the word and its implications were much in his mind is proved by its repetition in at least three other passages: *Manfred*, Act I, Scene 1, 153-157; *Don Juan*, Canto I, Stanza LXI, and Canto VIII, Stanza XXXIII. I quote the three in order:

Slaves, scoff not at my will!  
The Mind—the Spirit—the Promethean spark,  
The lightning of my being, is as bright,  
Pervading, and far darting as your own,  
And shall not yield to yours, though cooped in clay!

Her cheek all purple with the beam of youth,  
Mounting, at times, to a transparent glow,  
As if her veins ran lightning.

He knew not where he was, nor greatly cared,  
For he was dizzy, busy, and his veins  
Filled as with lightning—for his spirit shared  
The hour, as is the case with lively brains.

His love of energy and action seems to culminate in this figure; and in the first quotation (from *Manfred*) he boldly identifies the lightning of his being with the soul. In the second passage, evidently *animation* would be a weak term to express the Byronic conception of the fair lady's glowing cheek. And in the third the soldier feels the same electrical thrill. Applied to three different moods and persons, the word becomes valuable as an indication that Byron was a Latin rather than an Anglo-Saxon in his emotions. The intensity of his petulant rebellion against the established order of things, his dissatisfaction with Wordsworthian calm and Shelleyan ethereality, his genius for expressing himself in brief, stabbing passages of sensationalism good and bad, rather than in that continuity, that uniformity, which marks alike an excellent poetic or an excellent prose style—they are all in his worship of Lightning. If he can produce a sudden effect he is satisfied—no matter how much mediocrity or even rubbish may precede and follow it. I cannot believe that it is unjust to say that Byron was merely a creator of great passages rather than of great poems—that he betrays the discontinuity, as well as the brilliancy, of the most sensational thing in nature.