

A detailed oil painting of Lord Byron in profile, looking to the left. He has dark, curly hair and is resting his chin on his hand. He is wearing a white cravat and a dark coat. The background is a textured, dark brown.

JOHN PISTELLI | THE INVISIBLE COLLEGE

“THE LIGHTNING OF MY BEING”

LORD BYRON

GEORGE GORDON, LORD BYRON

- ▶ Born in 1788 in London, England to an aristocratic family
- ▶ Attended Harrow from 1801 to 1805 and Cambridge from 1805 to 1808
- ▶ Published *Hours of Idleness* in 1807 and responded to negative critics with *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* in 1809.
- ▶ Traveled in Europe from 1809 to 1811, visiting Greece, Turkey, and Italy.



GEORGE GORDON, LORD BYRON

- ▶ Known for scandalous relations with men and women, including Lady Caroline Lamb, his half-sister Augusta Leigh, Isabella Milbanke (married in 1815, had daughter Ada Lovelace), Claire Clairmont (stepsister of Mary Shelley), Teresa, Countess Guiccioli, and more
- ▶ Supported the Greek War of Independence and died of fever in 1824 in Greece at age 36
- ▶ Major works include *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812), *Manfred* (1817), and *Don Juan* (1819-1824)
- ▶ Major legacy is the Byronic hero, an influence on literature and culture from Captain Ahab to Batman



MANFRED: THE BYRONIC HERO AND THE ÜBERMENSCH

MANFRED. The lamp must be replenish'd, but even then
It will not burn so long as I must watch:
My slumbers—if I slumber—are not sleep,
But a continuance of enduring thought,
Which then I can resist not: in my heart
There is a vigil, and these eyes but close
To look within; and yet I live, and bear
The aspect and the form of breathing men.
But grief should be the instructor of the wise;
Sorrow is knowledge: they who know the most
Must mourn the deepest o'er the fatal truth,
The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life.

MANFRED. Ye mock me—but the power which brought ye here
Hath made you mine. Slaves, scoff not at my will!
The mind, the spirit, the Promethean spark,⁶
The lightning of my being, is as bright,
Pervading, and far-darting as your own,
And shall not yield to yours, though coop'd in clay!
Answer, or I will teach you what I am.

made in this language an incalculable distance behind us. I must be profoundly related to Byron's *Manfred*: of all the dark abysses in this work I found the counterparts in my own soul—at the age of thirteen I was ripe for this book. Words fail me, I have only a look, for those who dare to utter the name of *Faust* in the presence of *Manfred*. The Germans are *incapable* of conceiving anything sublime: for a proof of this, look at Schumann! Out of anger for this mawkish Saxon, I once deliberately composed a counter-overture to *Manfred*, of which Hans von Bülow declared he had never seen the like before on paper: such compositions

MANFRED: GNOSTICISM AND IDEALISM REVISITED

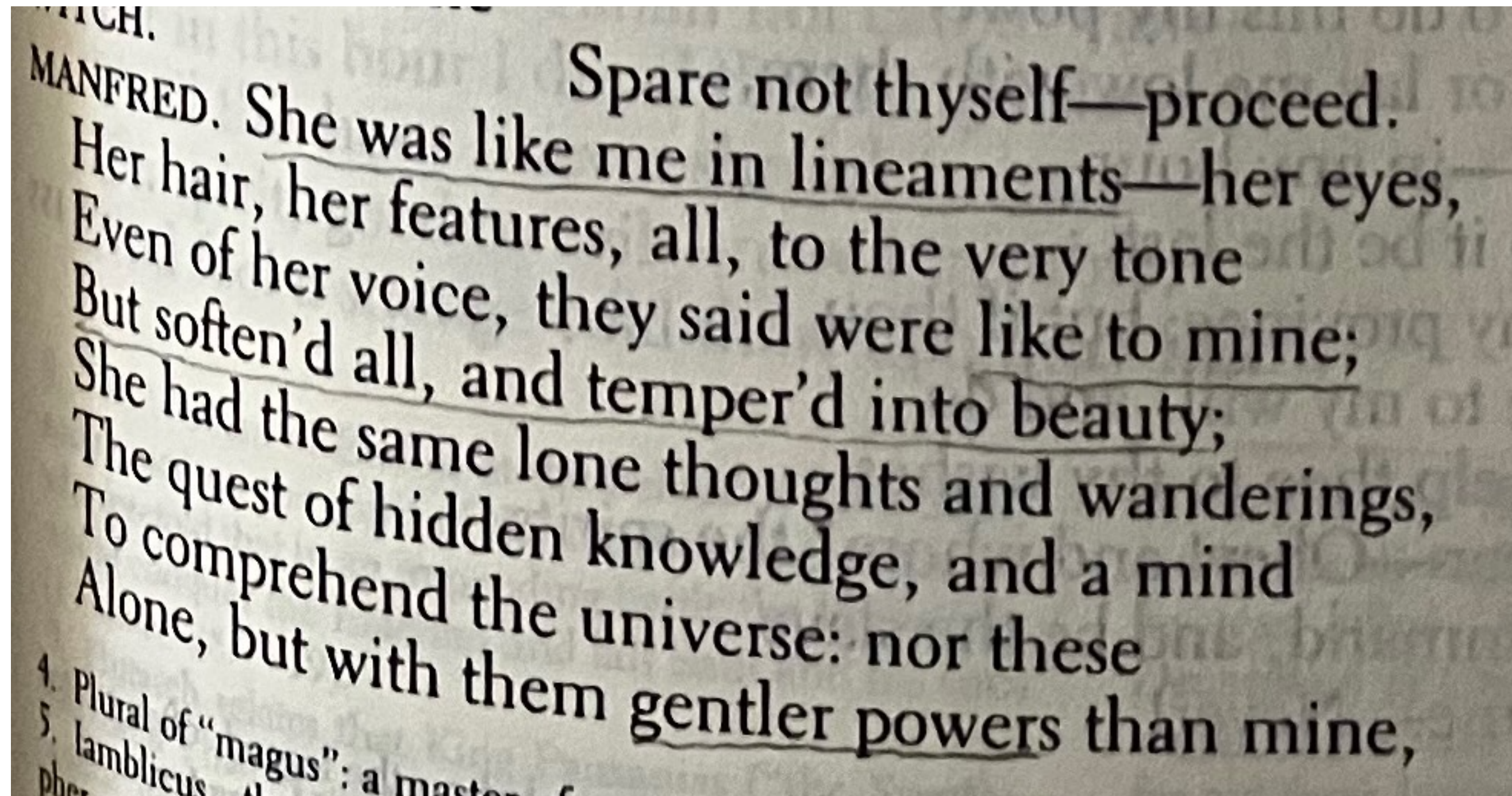
MANFRED. Well, though it torture me, 'tis but the same;
My pang shall find a voice. From my youth upwards
My spirit walk'd not with the souls of men,
Nor look'd upon the earth with human eyes;
The thirst of their ambition was not mine,
The aim of their existence was not mine;
My joys, my griefs, my passions, and my powers,
Made me a stranger; though I wore the form,
I had no sympathy with breathing flesh,
Nor midst the creatures of clay that girded me
Was there but one who—but of her anon.
I said, with men, and with the thoughts of men,
I held but slight communion; but instead,
My joy was in the Wilderness, to breathe

The difficult air of the iced mountain's top,
Where the birds dare not build, nor insect's wing
Flit o'er the herbless granite; or to plunge
Into the torrent, and to roll along
On the swift whirl of the new breaking wave
Of river-stream, or ocean, in their flow.
In these my early strength exulted; or
To follow through the night the moving moon,
The stars and their development; or catch
The dazzling lightnings till my eyes grew dim;
Or to look, list'ning, on the scattered leaves,
While Autumn winds were at their evening song.
—These were my pastimes, and to be alone;

MANFRED. Ay—father! I have had those earthly visi
And noble aspirations in my youth,
To make my own the mind of other men,
The enlightener of nations; and to rise

MANFRED. Look on me! there is an order
Of mortals on the earth, who do become
Old in their youth, and die ere middle age,
Without the violence of warlike death;

MANFRED: ROMANTIC INCEST AND SEXUAL PERSONAE REVISITED



Lord Byron makes Romantic incest stunningly explicit. I see *Manfred* (1817) as a cross-fertilization of Goethe's *Faust* with Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*. Byron's passionate hero is tormented by guilt for some mysterious crime. He is obsessed with his dead sister Astarte, his twin in eyes, face, and voice. Byron relishes sexual criminality. Forbidden love makes his characters superhuman. Rejecting all social relationships, Manfred seeks only himself in sexually transmuted form. Wordsworth's sister allows him to remain alone, sex-free, but Astarte (Phoenician Venus) lures Manfred into the vertigo of sex.

DON JUAN: BYRON'S ANTI-ROMANTIC MANIFESTO

200

My poem's epic, and is meant to be
Divided in twelve books; each book containing,
With love, and war, a heavy gale at sea,
A list of ships, and captains, and kings reigning,
New characters; the episodes are three:
A panorama view of hell's in training,
After the style of Virgil and of Homer,
So that my name of Epic's no misnomer.

201

All these things will be specified in time,
With strict regard to Aristotle's rules,
The *vade mecum*² of the true sublime,
Which makes so many poets, and some fools;
Prose poets like blank-verse, I'm fond of rhyme,
Good workmen never quarrel with their tools;
I've got new mythological machinery,³
And very handsome supernatural scenery.

204

If ever I should condescend to prose,
I'll write poetical commandments, which
Shall supersede beyond all doubt all those
That went before; in these I shall enrich
My text with many things that no one knows,
And carry precept to the highest pitch:
I'll call the work "Longinus o'er a Bottle,
Or, Every Poet his own Aristotle."

205

Thou shalt believe in Milton, Dryden, Pope;⁵
Thou shalt not set up Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey;
Because the first is crazed beyond all hope,
The second drunk, the third so quaint and mouthy:
With Crabbe it may be difficult to cope,
And Campbell's Hippocrene⁶ is somewhat drouthy:
Thou shalt not steal from Samuel Rogers, nor—
Commit—flirtation with the muse of Moore.

MODERN DECOMPOSITION OF THE EPIC

- ▶ If the epic encompasses the **WE** of an entire society, then modernity's drive toward individualism and differentiation decomposes this plural "we" into three singular pronouns:
 - ▶ the **I** of the lyric poem and its reflection on the consciousness and language of the poet in Wordsworth and Coleridge's conversation poems, Shelley and Keats's odes, Whitman, Hopkins, Yeats, Stevens (anticipated by the invocations to the muse and personal asides of Homer, Virgil, Dante, Milton)
 - ▶ the **SHE** of the bourgeois realist novel and its focus on domestic space and inner life in Austen, Eliot, James, Woolf (deriving from the home-front similes of the *Iliad*, the Ithaca sections of the *Odyssey*, the tragedy of Dido in the *Aeneid*, the exultation of Beatrice in Dante, and the loving portrait of Eve in Milton)
 - ▶ the **HE** of emerging mass and popular culture focused on new mythopoeic figures in Mary Shelley, Byron, Poe, Stevenson, Stoker, Doyle, and pulps and comics (resembling the gods, heroes, and monsters of Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Milton)