

Childe Harold by Byron: Romantic Liberalism¹

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to look in Bryon's work Childe Harold for elements of Romantic Liberalism, in particular for his depiction of the liberal nation-state. Byron's work is critical of the state of the world in the British Romantic period. Liberalism and nationalism and inseparable in Romantic Britain.

Keywords

poetry; travelling; nationalism;
freedom

To what extent is poetry a product of the political influence of the times? The British Romantic poet Byron was very active in the political life as hero and rebel who could bring freedom and change. The ideologies of Romanticism that were being felt in the arts and liberalism and nationalism in politics are intertwined with the association of the image of ancient Greece with a problematic present and future, according to Beaton when he writes about Byron's *Childe Harold*². Byron is a radical liberalist who values classical ancient Athens for being the liberal constitution's pioneer. For Byron, the Revolution in Greece from 1821 represents a way in which his liberalist and nationalist politics expressed in his poetry can be converted into political action. What is specific to British Romanticism is its overlapping with Liberalist values and principles. British Romanticism can be divided in two phases: a conservative and a revolutionary one. The revolutionary poet Byron seeks, through his radicalism, and through his poetry, to

1 This article is a chapter of my MA dissertation paper, *Romantic Liberalism: Byron and Shelley*, coordinated by Professor Cătălin Partenie, defended in June 2018, at the Faculty of National Political and Administrative Studies.

2 Roderick Beaton, "From Ancient to Modern: Byron, Shelley, and the Idea of Greece", *The Athens Dialogues* 1 (2010): 1-22.

achieve "the well-being of the nation"³. At a political level, England, Scotland and Wales seek unification. Poetry thus served as a tie among members of the British nation, as it had become accessible to everyone, in a similar way in which poets place the sign of equality between them and the masses. Poetry was a means of convincing people to fight together for a common cause, a way of motivating them to keep together: "Poetry, by opening the eyes of readers to the feelings of their fellow men and to their own complicated psychological experience, had its special contribution to make to the well-being of the nation."⁴ Poetry is a product of the political influence of the times, in the sense that it promoted a certain set of values which are explainable by the specific political context of a certain specific age. In the case of the British Radical Romantic poets, the main values promoted are freedom and national identity, and the importance of these values comes from the political situation which involves the creation of nation-states and their independence through a strong national identity from the dependence on a larger empire. The breaking free from conventions and norms promoted by these poems does not refer only to a personal, individual level but to the level of the common good. Breaking free does not mean chaos but the creation of a stronger, common, national identity.

The work *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is a reflection of what was going on in the political life of the British Romantic society, through the choice of the main character and his reflections, as well as actions. The travelling hero is a symbol of the way the British Romantic radical poets had come to see what was going on at a larger level, with the Romantic movement in European context. The way Childe Harold judges what he sees in his travels is a symbol of the way the British Romantic poets reflected on their own society in a critical way.

In *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Lord Byron writes about a young aristocrat who grows tired of pleasures and starts travelling. He is contemplating life in various cultures during a series of historical events, such as the Spanish peoples fighting against Napoleon, who was trying to conquer them, then he reflects over the way Napoleon had become too authoritarian, and afterwards he criticizes the Austrian authority over Italy. Byron praises the period of Republicanism in ancient Rome, which he considers a model for his Italian contemporaries. The main theme of the poem is a passion for liberty. His conclusions lead to the idea that there were, during the course of history, times described as progressive, when there was, to some extent, a democratic order. Byron is looking for simple people, who had not become corrupted under the influence of the bourgeois class, praising them for their greatness and courage⁵. The poem *Childe Harold* is a call to action for the people of his times, a way to give them an example of heroic behaviour and of motivating them towards adopting a revolutionary behaviour in order to achieve social change. Indeed, Byron has had a significant influence on the development of the democratic-revolutionary poetical genre as far as the XIXth century. The Romantics were situated within the aristocratic class facing decline, and they took over from Byron his pessimism and disappointment; what is more, the progressive poets developed the revolutionary and realist traditions he had established⁶. Lord Byron calls for a rebellion against a British lifestyle as well as for individual freedom: "Byron dressed splendidly, went to fight for the freedom of Greece, satirized many sides of English life, and hated all false and insincere talk."⁷ Byron's critique of social rules extends to a critique reaching a higher level, from individuals to historical events. *Childe Harold* expresses his reaction to the historical events in Europe: "Byron is

3 Fiona J Stafford, *Reading Romantic Poetry* (Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 22.

4 Stafford, *Reading*, 22.

5 A. Anixt, *Istoria literaturii engleze* (București: Editura Științifică, 1965), 341.

6 Anixt, *Istoria*, 366.

7 G.C. Thornley, Roberts Gwyneth, *An Outline of English Literature* (Essex: Longman, 1984), 94.

our one great interpreter of the mood of disillusion, cynicism, and unrest which, all over Europe, accompanied the reaction against the Revolution."⁸.

Byron has a significant contribution to the ideology of liberalism:

Byron was associated with liberty, rebellion, and revolution throughout the nineteenth century, and writers such as Thomas Carlyle and John Stuart Mill considered him seriously as a political poet in the early Victorian period. Mill's progressive liberalism did not stretch to Byron's 'transgressive eloquence', however, a poetics that spoke to, instead of on behalf of, the masses.⁹

Even Mill, the author of *On Liberty*, was influenced in his theory of liberalism by Byron.

Childe Harold is a call to a critique of a certain way of life and social order. After publishing this work, Byron regretted the violence of language, sarcasm and fury¹⁰. The way a society looks like is represented in a skeptical way:

It featured his first Byronic hero, a sceptical and melancholy young man grown old and exhausted before his time, promiscuous and covertly bisexual in his past love affairs, disorientated and cut off from belief in a benevolent God and divine Providence – in short, disillusioned by personal experience. It gave prominent expression to a many voiced movement already long underway in the wake of Enlightenment scepticism.¹¹

As the current state of affairs in a certain society and culture is no longer wished by, it should disappear. It is said that cultures die due to the phenomenon of implosion, from within not from without. This means that external events were not the source of the change, but simply the fact that it no longer fit with the current values of the contemporaries of Byron. This was the age of Romantic nationalism, which occurred at the same time with the disappearance of absolute monarchies. It was the time when liberal democratic movements were rising.

Childe Harold is about travelling across cultures, similarly to what cosmopolitanism means today. Byron tries to show how nationalism helps in defining the Britishness of a character, who can also be an outsider, in other cultures. The poem addresses a contemporary issue. The origins of liberalism are located in the XVIIIth-XIXth century, according to Țăranu¹², and it referred to meritocratic democracy¹³.

The nation-state marks a break with the empires ruled by monarchies, and before them, with the political power of the Church. With the apparition of nation-states, the question of the territory is solved, as they have their own territory, and their borders are defined by the territory occupied by the respective nation. The most important feature is that they have a shared national culture, by which the people are united. The disappearance of empires went hand in hand with a feeling of national unity, as ethnic groups wished to take care of their own political destiny; this tendency extended towards the twentieth century. Nationalism is referred

8 John Buchan (ed.), *A History of English Literature* (London, Edinburgh and New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1923), 433.

9 Sarah Wootton, *Byronic Heroes in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing and Screen Adaptation* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 96.

10 Andi Bălu, *George Gordon, Lord Byron. Studiu monografic* (București: Contemporary Literature Press, 2013), 14.

11 Rolf P. Lessenich, *Romantic Disillusionism and the Sceptical Tradition* (Göttingen: V&R unipress GmbH, 2017), 17.

12 Andrei Țăranu, *Doctrină politică contemporană* (București: Editura Fundației PRO, 2001), 13.

13 Țăranu, *Doctrină politică*, 14.

to as a "gravedigger of empires"¹⁴. Thus, the connection freedom and nationalism for the Romantics becomes clear, as a nation was free through its unity from the authority of a monarch as well as free since it did not depend on the empire they were previously part of in their political decisions. The issue of the nation state and its borders is discussed by Clifford with respect to *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*¹⁵. In a review of Clifford's analysis, it is mentioned that Byron used Childe Harold's pilgrim character in order to debate "over the notion of patriotism": "Byron turned to the eighteenth-century notion of the cosmopolitan or 'philosophical traveller' to counter the domestic model of the patriot in native poets like Southey and Wordsworth."¹⁶ The first two cantos of the poem are "a critique of conservative models of nation such as Edmund Burke's, which imagine the nation as a self-contained and unified whole". The notion of borders is discussed when it comes to the borders between Portugal and Spain, which are separated by a "silver streamlet"¹⁷. "In contrast to Harold, whose view is bound only by the horizon and extends from one nation to the other without interruption, the peasants standing on either bank see the streamlet as divisive."¹⁸ Byron's character is defined as "a citizen of the world": "Byron definitively cuts the romantic traveler loose from his nation, making him (irredeemably) a citizen of the world."¹⁹

In *Childe Harold*, in the first canto, we look at Portugal from the point of view of the British, who were against them. They were prejudiced against the Portuguese, but they favoured the Spanish. The perspective of Childe Harold is, thus, not removed from the ideological lense of the times. The land of Spain is presented very positively:

Oh, Christ it is a goodly sight to see
What Heaven hath done for this delicious land!
What fruits of fragrance blush on every tree!
What goodly prospects o'er the hills expand!²⁰

Meanwhile, the land of Portugal is presented negatively. The people are poor, yet the country is beautiful:

For hut and palace show like filthily;
The dingy denizens are reared in dirt;
No personage of high or mean degree
Doth care for cleanness of surtout or shirt.
Though shent with Egypt's plague, unkempt, unwash'd, unhurt.²¹

The second canto focuses on Byron's mourning the loss of the ancient Greek world's glory, that of its monuments, treasures, the theft of the ancient architecture which was then displayed in other countries. Byron is saddened at the sight of contemporary Greece, watching the ruins of the ancient world. By extension, we

14 Rod Hague, Harrop Martin, and Breslin Shaun, *Political Science: A Comparative Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Worth Publishers, 1998), 9.

15 James Clifford, "Travelling Cultures", in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (ed.), *Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

16 Esther Wohlgemut, "Pilgrim, Exile, Vagabond: Byron and the Citizen of the World", in *Romantic Cosmopolitanism. Palgrave Studies in the Enlightenment, Romanticism and Cultures of Print* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 7-8.

17 Lord Gordon Byron, *Complete Works of Lord Byron* (Paris: Baudry's European Library, 1835), 369.

18 Wohlgemut, "Pilgrim", 7-8.

19 Wohlgemut, "Pilgrim", 14.

20 Lord Gordon Byron, *Complete Works of Lord Byron* (Paris: Baudry's European Library, 1835), 87.

21 Lord Gordon Byron, *Complete Works*, 87.

could interpret this canto in the light of the loss of hope in the political situation of his contemporary world. The loss of ancient Greek treasures is an equivalent for the loss of the greatness of the British society of his time. The British society in Byron's times needed reconstruction in order to achieve greatness again. The loss of glory of the monarchy brings the loss of hope and stability for the British people.

The third canto contains the themes of breaking free from despotic authority, the misunderstood genius, and nature, together with two figures of greatness, two heroes: Napoleon and Rousseau. They are, in Byron's view, figures of misunderstood geniuses. He admires Napoleon for fighting for France's rights and Rousseau for his passion in supporting his ideas, some of them far-fetched. These two heroes are presented by Byron as "madmen who have made men mad/ By their contagion", by which he suggests that they could influence men in a very strong way and promote their ideals. Freedom is one common element when it comes to both heroes, Napoleon and Rousseau. Waterloo was an aggressive battle, a very bloody one, of which Byron does not approve. He prefers the battle of Morat, where the Swiss fought for freedom against the conquest of the Burgundians in the XVIth century. Like the battle of Marathon, the battle of Morat represents, for Byron, one of "true Glory's stainless victories." He sees Rousseau in a natural environment. For Byron, nature is not seen as a way of evading problematic issues, but as a way to confront them and magnify them. Man's emotional states are underlined by nature. Storms show man's dealing and struggling with problems, while the Alps are a symbol of the sublime, of what is beyond comprehension in nature.

The fourth canto contains the journey through Italy of Childe Harold. The theme of lost, ancient civilizations returns, in order to teach a lesson that we can learn from the destroyed civilizations in history. The focus is on the fallen empire of Rome, whose glory did not ensure its permanence. This is the fate of political institutions, Byron reflects. The need for stability is found, by Byron, in nature and in art. Architectural monuments such as the Colosseum are permanent. The beauty created by man throughout history is eternal. The beauty of nature, however, is preferred by Byron.

We could conclude that nature is a symbol for the spirit of man, of the freedom of man's spirit. Freedom of thought is above everything:

The most significant victory for imagination, however, is the domination of mind over material reality. The highest attainment of ideal freedom is possible only in mind and is, furthermore, the greatest realization. Byron's concept of liberty has transcended the aims of practical politics when he regards it as the 'Eternal Spirit of the chainless Mind.' Hence, for Byron, the ultimate realization of liberty is the independence of spirit.²²

Through his travels, Childe Harold does, indeed, reflect a lot and shows how he develops a critical mind by looking at what happens in the world around him. He reflects on the idea of freedom, tyranny, purpose of wars as means of achieving and preserving freedom, as well as on the decline of civilizations and on their golden phase throughout the poem. The character Childe Harold is portrayed as situated beyond the ideology of what goes on around him, yet he himself holds values related to the ideology of British Romanticism and judges them according to this latter grid of values and principles. Thus, liberalism for Childe Harold means independence from empires, and despotic rule, as well as the possibility to return to the golden, heroic phase of civilizations that he holds on as models. He wishes

22 Camilla Grobe, "Byron's Idea of Liberty in the Poetry of the Childe Harold Period" (A thesis submitted to the Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The Rice Institute, Houston, Texas, 1953), V.

for a flourishing society, where the individual is free to choose and judge for himself. He tries to convince the reader that the ultimate value is freedom, which was sought for in wars across history, and that a flourishing society, with heroic models is what we all wish for. Art and nature are among the values promoted, as they both preserve a sense of permanence and stability through beauty. The examples of the glory of ancient civilizations and the highly held value of freedom preserved through wars are means of legitimizing what the poem promotes for Byron's contemporary society, and promises, like a politician through a campaign. Examples include the situation of countries in history, with the cause of which the poet sympathizes and, thus, promotes: "Byron sympathized with the cause of freedom both for Portugal and Spain"²³

Through the idea of travelling of Childe Harold, Byron makes reference to taking part in foreign affairs and to the freedom of the individual:

From a superficial support of the traditional Whig doctrines, Byron's attitude developed into a lasting concern for the spirit of liberty in the individual. His interest in foreign affairs, even more than his participation in English politics, contributed to the evolution of his concept of political liberty.²⁴

The poem reflects the spirit of the age and its ideology, as well as Byron's personal interpretation and enactment of ideological principles and values. His travels influenced him beyond traditional Whig principles: "Byron's tours of 1809 to 1811 and, further, his exile from England in 1816 tended to render him, as he later termed himself, 'a citizen of the world'"²⁵. The character Childe Harold also reflects this concept, as he is portrayed as being free to move beyond borders and cultures and gain experience as well as critical thought.

The value of freedom is presented in contrast to the oppression, in cultures which in the past were free and are now under tyrannical rules, a symbol of civilization decline:

In the poems of the Childe Harold period, Byron considers various aspects of political liberty in connection with several foreign countries: Spain, Greece, and Venice impel him to emphasize the significance of the traditions of liberty. The concept emerges that the dominance of the love of freedom in the past citizens of a country makes present submission to tyranny even more ignominious.²⁶

By representing freedom as belonging to the golden phase of civilizations, and contrasting tyranny to the corrupt and not at all glamorous present society, the poet tries to persuade his readers that freedom is a sign of a healthy society and of a flourishing civilization by all means, political and cultural. What is more, even the despotic leaders are portrayed not as glamorous and powerful, but as having weaknesses which cause them to adopt this style of leadership:

The valid aims and the false aims of the leader of a people are also analysed in Byron's verse, mainly from the observations of the rules of Ali Pasha and of Napoleon, Byron was to evolve his concept of the great leader. However, in Byron's regard, both of these sovereigns failed to fulfill that ideal. In Byron's poetry their weakness embodies the universal cause of despotism.²⁷

23 Grobe, "Byron's Idea", 6.

24 Grobe, "Byron's Idea", 1.

25 Grobe, "Byron's Idea", 1.

26 Grobe, "Byron's Idea", 2.

27 Grobe, "Byron's Idea", 2.

In order to have individual freedom, and in order to attain a flourishing, stable society, Byron suggests, the people should choose a leader which allows them enough freedom, and which guides them towards achieving great deeds and permanent monuments of beauty. What is more, "In every country Byron marked the relationship of the spirit of liberty in the individual to political liberty in the state."²⁸ Byron suggests, thus, that there is a direct connection between the way a state functions and the way an individual thinks. He shows how the ideology promoted by the state affects the individuals' lifestyles and ways of thinking, as they are the products of the values it promotes. Once the individual values freedom, if he resorts to action in order to change the political state of affairs, he will be granted many opportunities to achieve great works of arts that will become timeless, as suggested by the examples of ancient civilizations. He gives the example of Greece in order to illustrate this idea:

Before Greece can be free, Byron concludes, her people must undergo a change of heart. The true patriot must feel, even in the midst of revelry, sadness for his country's fate. Greece shall be free only when Grecians feel the courageous conviction that she must be free.²⁹

The liberal nation-state is a new stage of development both in the personal lives of the individuals as well as at the larger level of history. Byron tries to raise the awareness of his readers that, by standing up for their country's national specificities, by being patriots, they will do everything possible in order to achieve their dreams of freedom. A national state, with its national identity, becomes the equivalent of a free individual, free from the monarchical rule, free from depending on an empire.

The values promoted by Byron, however, ended afterwards in establishing the opposite. After Byron's liberal nationalism, and values of universal freedom, a poet appeared that promoted the opposite values of nationalism, those of dictatorship:

From Byron's death at Missolonghi in 1824 to D'Annunzio's capture of Fiume for Italy in 1919, the nationalism of universal liberalism and independence struggles changed, in literature as in politics, to cruel dictatorial fascism. Byron was followed by a series of idealistic fighter-poets and poet-martyrs for national freedom, but international tensions culminating in World War I exposed fully the intolerant, brutal side of nationalism. D'Annunzio, like Byron, both a major poet and charismatic war leader, was a key figure in transforming nineteenth-century democratic nationalism into twentieth-century dictatorial fascism. The poet's 'lyrical dictatorship' at Fiume (1919–20) inspired Mussolini's seizure of power in 1922, with far-reaching political consequences. The poet became the dangerous example of a Nietzschean *Übermensch*, above common morality, predatory and morally irresponsible.³⁰

Historical circumstances, thus, opposed to the values and principles promoted by Byron. This does not mean that he failed, but rather that societies need changes periodically and try to experiment with ways of preserving stability and flourishing of their culture. Perhaps it was because such an extreme approach to liberalism and freedom was utopic, and not rationally possible to be realized. After all, *Childe Harold* abounds in examples where there is a reality which shows a deep contrast

28 Grobe, "Byron's Idea", 2.

29 Grobe, "Byron's Idea", 15.

30 David Aberbach, "Byron to D'Annunzio: from liberalism to fascism in national poetry, 1815–1920", *Nations and Nationalism* 14/3 (July 2008): 478.

in the situation of a certain country's present and its heroic past, the latter being Byron's and Childe Harold's dream:

Italy's right to be a free and united nation is discussed throughout Canto IV in the form of a celebration of the country's ancient and prestigious past, and in the hope for a better and nobler future. Though politically enslaved and divided, Italy still appears in the imagination of an enthusiastic Byron as a land full of energy, ready to wake up after a long sleep:

Yet, Freedom! Yet thy banner, torn, but flying,
Streams like the thunder-storm against the wind;
Thy trumpet voice, though broken now and dying,
The loudest still the tempest leaves behind;

Thy tree hath lost its blossoms, and the rind,
Chopp'd by the axe, looks rough and little worth,
But the sap lasts, and still the seed we find
Sown deep, even in the bosom of the North;
So shall a better spring less bitter fruit bring forth. (XCVIII)³¹

The situation described sounds idealistic, and it requires not only strong will but also the means and circumstances for changes to be achieved. Yet, Byron was, after all, actively involved in the political cause of Italy: "Byron's support of the Italian revolutionary movements was not simply limited to an ideological and poetic encouragement."³² Thus, Byron's and his followers' goals may have been too high and not possible on every occasion.

Romantic liberalism was inspired by ancient Greek ideals and also by the Greek Revolution. The role of the poet was similar to the one promoted by the French Revolution, that of political activist: "Byron, who had been lukewarm about the prospects for Greek independence in 1812, belatedly discovered in the Greek Revolution of 1821 an outlet whereby the liberal/nationalist politics of his poetry could be transformed into political action."³³

Byron was very supportive of taking action against the ideals and principles of absolutist rule. The reform he sought was radical, as the revolutionary age across Europe opened the way for significant changes in the social order.

Such violent and radical changes were not new, as Byron suggested through his work as he returned to the age of heroes, of ancient Greece and Rome. The wandering character Childe Harold is also reminding of the wandering poets of the ancient world. However, there is a difference between the ancients and the Romantics: "The Greeks believed that they were the playthings of fate; [...] Romantics stressed self-expression [...]"³⁴. In this respect, the Romantics were more revolutionary, more self-assured and more hopeful to be able to achieve changes in society. Besides, the heroes are not alone in their wish for change: they gain the sympathy of others who think in the same way. Childe Harold gains the readers' sympathy and approval and they wish to follow his example. The parallels with the ancient Greek world continue with the character of the wandering Childe Harold, as in ancient

31 Silvia Bordoni, *George Gordon Lord Byron (1788-1824)*, The Byron Study Centre, Centre for Regional Literature and Culture University of Nottingham, 2005, 3-4.

32 Bordoni, *George Gordon*, 3-4.

33 Beaton, "From Ancient", 1.

34 Nozar Niazi, Siamak Niazi, "Graham Swift and the Ethical Self", *Studies in Literature and Language* 2/1 (2011): 119-127.

Greek culture there were wandering poets at the court of kings who would stay there for some time by invitation or due to competitions among poets³⁵.

The liberal ideas that come via the ancient world are there because the two poets make use of universal ideals of mankind. The fight against authority and the desire for change are universals across history. History is in itself a succession of changes and of regimes. Britain at the time was in the process of defining the sense of nation, which was a sign of freedom, comparable with the sense of individualism promoted by the Romantic poets:

Linda Colley suggests that the fifty years after 1776 were "one of the most formative periods [...] in the forging of British identity," principally because prolonged conflict with France helped to shape a "particular sense of nationhood."³⁶

Even though it was claimed that Romanticism "is a tendency away from reality"³⁷, which is visible in the utopian ideals promoted by the heroes and taking into account of the golden phase of the ancient world as a model for the present society, it was a time of radical change in the way a society functioned. It is still the way contemporary society functions today, with less and less societies relying on despotic governments. The role of the state suggested by the Romantics is that of protection, as symbolized by the model of the leader who is revolutionary and with whom the citizens sympathize. The leader, portrayed as one of them, inspires feelings of protection, not of tyrannical rule.

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35 Richard Hunter, Ian Rutherford, (ed.) *Wandering Poets in Ancient Greek Culture. Travel, Locality and Pan-Hellenism* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 18.

36 Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 7, 1 in Paul Stock, *The Shelley-Byron circle and the idea of Europe*. Palgrave Studies in Cultural and Intellectual History (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 4.

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