

Lord Byron Alluding to the Great¹

Byron's poetry is a unique example of a text that abounds with quotations and allusions as stylistic means; biblical, mythological, literary, or historical images are called forth as vessels into which new contents are poured, offering a kind of interplay between various meanings. The whole world appears to be reflected in Byron's consciousness, as a result of his voracious reading and highly developed imagination. Allusions as stylistic means appear to be rather unique in the case of Byron, however. The poet not only alludes to mythological, biblical, literary or historical characters, but is mystically guided by them in real life. To be more precise, stylistic allusion with Byron may mean – the way of life. Byron is in constant touch with characters he encountered in his reading, challenging and competing with them, and thereby reincarnating their lives. For example, he actually swam across the Hellespont to reincarnate Leander and was, in fact, the first to emulate this mythological hero.

Byron's *Manfred* caused much debate as to whether the plot was borrowed from Marlowe, Goethe, or Aeschylus. Byron remarked that he had never read Goethe's *Faust*, as he knew no German, and he also denied that Marlowe was his progenitor. Of *Prometheus Bound*, however, he wrote the following:

“Of the “Prometheus” of Aeschylus I was passionately fond as a boy, (it was one of the Greek plays we read thrice a year at Harrow): indeed, that and the “Medea” were the only ones, except the “Seven Before Thebes”, which ever much pleased me. The Prometheus if not exactly in my plan, has always been so much in my head, that I can easily conceive its influence over all or anything that I have written” (CWL B, 353). Byron often alluded to the sorceress of Colchis, from Georgia,

¹ THE PLACE OF LORD BYRON IN WORLD HISTORY, Studies in His Life, Writings, and Influence, Selected Papers from the 35th International Byron Conference, Introduced and Edited by Nic Panagopoulos and Maria Schoina, Edwin Mellen Press, Athens, Messolonghi, May, 2012, p. 71-78.

calling her “my miss Medea,” and was in search of her in the real world. As a result, he fell in love with a simple Venetian woman, Margarita Cogni, because she reminded him of Medea. But Byron is not in search of Euripides’s Medea only; he is also in search of Prometheus, and it did not take him long to establish the desired character in real life.

By the time Byron reached his age of reason, Napoleon Bonaparte had become the dominant figure of the age. According to Thomas Moore since the age of five, Byron had been an avid and omnivorous reader, perusing everything that came his way; and at the age of eight he was caught up in the Napoleonic aura (Moore, 51). His ideas on Napoleonic heroism were supported and encouraged by his eccentric mother, Mrs Byron, who could not resist admiring Napoleon herself. The major Napoleonic event to affect the young Byron was Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign which had a profound effect upon the Emperor himself.

In literature, the East stirred the souls of Romantic poets and writers. Byron produced *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* as a result of his journey to the East, when he visited Spain, Portugal, Malta, Turkey, and Greece. “If I am a poet, I owe it to Greece” (Marchand, 409-10), he wrote. Significantly, the French Revolution of 1789 led the way to allusions to the East as the wellspring of legends, religions, and empires. Both in England and France, the East became the place to write about and to visit.

The Egyptian campaign was followed by the fear that Napoleon would invade England. We all remember how, during the anti-French and anti-Napoleonic fervour that gripped England at the time, the fifteen-year-old Byron at Harrow defended the bust of Napoleon from his fellow-pupils who were striving to destroy it. Napoleon who succeeded in toppling monarchs, thus liberating the oppressed, had become an idol for the liberally-minded, progressive young lord.

Byron's attachment to Napoleon appears to be complicated. He equates Napoleon to Prometheus, trying to emulate his beloved hero but at the same time criticises the contemporary figure. This attitude permitted Byron to distinguish a hero who fought against despotic regimes from an emperor striving to dominate the continent. "I deny nothing but doubt everything", he exclaimed.

Byron's ambivalence is demonstrated towards his mother, his homeland, even his beloved Greece and Napoleon. He admires Napoleon's power and liberating activities, but is unhappy with the abuse of that power. Later Byron was to share the attitude of many other romantic poets and writers, e.g. Coleridge, Southey, Wordsworth, Walter Scott and Shelley, who strongly criticized Napoleon. Disappointed in Napoleon, Byron aims to perform deeds far more important and significant than the composition of poetry. "Action—action—action—said Demosthenes. Actions—actions, I say and not writing—least of all rhyme," were Byron's words.

At the age of twenty-six, the author of *Childe Harold* announced an apparently quite serious resolution to withdraw from poetry. He entered in his journal the following words: "No one should be a rhymers who could be anything better... to be the first man—not the Dictator—not the Sylla, but the Washington or the Aristides—the leader in talent and truth is next to Divinity" (Marchand, 156). Speaking of George Washington as "the first man," Byron reminds us of the famous description by Henry Lee in the speech delivered to the House of Representatives on George Washington's death: "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen" (EB, 244). George Washington appears to be an ideal for Lord Byron.

On the morning of 9 April 1814, he writes to Thomas Moore:

No more rhyme for—or rather, from—me. I have taken my leave of that stage, and henceforth will mountebank it no longer. I have had my day, and there is an end... My great comfort is that the temporary celebrity I have

wrung from the world has been in the very teeth of all opinions and prejudices. I have flattered no ruling powers; I have never concealed a single thought that tempted me (BLJ, 293).

On the evening of the same day, a Gazette Extraordinary announced the abdication at Fontainebleau, and, the following morning, the poet broke his vows by composing “Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte.” His diary says: “April 10... I have sparred.... The more violent the fatigue, the better my spirits for the rest of the day... Today I have boxed an hour, written an Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte—copied it—eaten six biscuits—drunk four bottles of soda water, and redde away the rest of my time.”(CWL B, 264)

This is how the “Ode” was composed, the strictest condemnation of Napoleon ever expressed in poetry:

‘Tis done—but yesterday a King!
And arm’d with Kings to strive—
And now thou art a nameless thing:
So abject—yet alive! (st. I)

“A nameless thing,” “ill-minded man,” “dark spirit,” “so little worth,” “a thing so mean,” are phrases that characterize the former idol. In Byron’s opinion, Napoleon should have died rather than have abdicated: “If thou hadst died as honour dies, / Some new Napoleon might arise, / To shame the world again” (st. XI). This point is the main cause of the frustration and disappointment which Byron felt towards Napoleon leading him to despair.

“Ode to Napoleon” consists of nineteen stanzas and in it Byron displays a gallery of the great from ancient times up to his epoch: Dionysius the younger, Sylla, Tamerlane, the

Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, and George Washington. The latter is compared to the Roman dictator and legendary hero, Cincinnatus of the West:

Where may the wearied eye repose
 When gazing on the Great;
Where neither guilty glory glows,
 Nor despicable state?
Yes—one—the first—the last—the best—
The Cincinnatus of the West,
 Whom envy dared not hate,
Bequeath'd the name of Washington,
To make man blush, there was but one! (st. XIX)

All are vanquished except for George Washington, the first president of the United States whom “envy dare not hate.” In my opinion, the contrast of “a bequeathed name of Washington” to “the name that makes man blush” creates an additional subtextual meaning for the poem: George Washington is an example for succeeding generations, an ideal for the future of mankind. The line “to make man blush there was but one,” is a final condemnation of Napoleon that refers to and is reinforced by the previous line from the 11th stanza, “If thou hadst died as honour dies, / Some new Napoleon might arise, / To shame the world again.”

The question is: where is Prometheus in the gallery of the great, as displayed in “Ode to Napoleon”? Does Byron allude to him? He does indeed, in stanza XVI:

Or, like the thief of fire from heaven,
 Wilt thou withstand the shock?

And share with him, the unforgiven,
His vulture and his rock!
Foredoom'd by God—by man accurst,
And that last act, though not thy worst,
The very Fiend's arch mock;
He in his fall preserved his pride,
And, if a mortal, had as proudly died!

Byron very much hoped that Napoleon would reincarnate Prometheus but, alas, in vain. Despite the fact that, originally, stanza XVI was the final stanza of the “Ode” and the other three were composed as appendages, being solicited by John Murray, Byron reveals Napoleon's defeat both in contrast to the mythological Prometheus and to the historical George Washington.

Disappointed in Napoleon, at least subconsciously, Byron aimed to reincarnate the mythical liberator. And it took him exactly ten years from composing the “Ode” to fulfil his mission of liberating Greece and die as proudly as Prometheus. As I have already noted, Byron composed the “Ode” on 10th April, 1814. It was exactly on April 10th, only ten years later in 1824, that the thirty-six-year-old Byron recalled a prediction made to him by a famed Scottish fortune-teller when he was a boy: “Beware your thirty-seventh year.”(Marchand, 453) Unfortunately that prediction came true nine days later, on the 19 April. His death at Messolonghi in Greece shocked the world and unified Hellas. He became the symbol of disinterested patriotism and, with the final winning of independence, his name became even brighter in Greece.

The question is: How did Byron cover those ten years? How did he come to sacrifice his life and gain immortality? Did Byron give up Napoleon? The answer is that he

never did but kept his promise made on 9 April, 1814: “I won’t give him up even now, though all his admirers have.”

In 1816, while planning his second journey abroad, Byron ordered an enormous coach modelled on the one Napoleon had captured at Genappe. Besides a bed, it contained a library, a plate chest, and every apparatus necessary for dining. Like Napoleon, Byron would be accompanied by a private doctor and a biographer, Dr. Pollidori. At an early hour on 23 April 1816, Byron left England forever. It was the Napoleonic carriage that carried him away to a turbulent experience of life in Switzerland and Italy, promoting his intrepid career. At Antwerp, Byron admired the famous basins built for Bonaparte’s navy more than he did the paintings of the Flemish school. Travelling in the heavy coach, Byron and Hobhouse followed the Simplon road over the Alps, the same route taken by Napoleon.

According to John Clubbe, July 1818 is considered to be “the most fatal month of Byron’s literary life, for in it he began, virtually at the same time and together ‘*Don Juan*’ and his ‘Memoirs’” (Clubbe, p. 12). The questions remain insistent: Why together and why then? As Clubbe concludes, “answers lie in an unexpected quarter: namely, in Byron’s intense, lifelong, and usually subsurface involvement with Napoleon Bonaparte and the Napoleonic legend” (Clubbe, p. 12).

The green paint was beginning to chip from the Napoleonic coach, but Byron continued to travel in it. When in Italy in February 1822, news came to Byron of the death of his mother-in-law, Lady Noel. By the terms of the will, Byron inherited the Noel arms and could sign as “Noel Byron”. Doing this, Byron took a certain pride that his initials “N.B.” were the same as those of Napoleon Bonaparte. He continued to use them even after Napoleon was dead.

It appears that Napoleon was a long-lasting attachment for Byron. In my opinion, this attachment proves to be artistic and shows his desire to perform as Napoleon on the very stage of life. While *performing* as Napoleon, Byron was *perfecting* him through his

deeds, and this perfection was encouraged by the poet's ideal—the image of George Washington. Byron alludes to George Washington later in *The Vision of Judgment*, *The Age of Bronze* and *Don Juan*: “The prophets of Young Freedom, summon'd far/ From climes of Washington and Bolivar” (*The Age of Bronze* VIII) (CWL B, 657). Byron developed liberating aspirations through his own devotion and self-sacrifice for the cause of liberty.

“Granting the Emperor's hegemony in the realm of deeds, Byron refused to defer in the realm of words” (Clubbe, p, 21). “As Napoleon had conquered by battles, so Byron would conquer by poetry” (Clubbe, p. 17). I fully agree with Clubbe's statement that triumphs won by words outlast triumphs won by deeds, though I have to add that the Byronic victory was never gained only by words. Byron won first of all by his devotion and self-sacrifice. It was a unique case when the power of words and the power of deeds coincided and converged. Byron never spared his life; he showed the world his readiness to die and died for Greece—the point that was missing in the Napoleonic legend.

In Canto 9 of *Don Juan* (stanza 24), Byron states that he “will war, at least in words (and-should My chance so happen—deeds).” Besides Byron, Greece had many spiritual supporters among the European men of letters, but these Philhellenes did not offer self-sacrifice to Greece; words alone bled on pages, not men. Today it is universally acknowledged that, at Messolonghi, Byron did with his death what he could not do with his life: death was missing in the legend of Napoleon, so Byron filled the gap in his contemporary legend to approach and reincarnate the myth of Prometheus.

But on his mystical path to glory, myth, and immortality, Byron did not miss his ideal. The last days of Lord Byron resemble the last days of George Washington: shortly before their death, both were greatly worried by the political quarrels over high commissions. Moreover, both fell ill as a result of a long ride when exposed to cold

weather, both were bled heavily by doctors on their deathbed, and both faced the end with characteristic serenity.

When today we appreciate Byron's myth and speak of his role in the history of mankind, we must bear in mind that the Byronic victory was gained not only by the man who was the direct descendant of courageous, eccentric, and loyal aristocrats on the one hand, and Mary Queen of Scots on the other, but mostly by the man who reincarnated the great—especially, Prometheus as his aspiration, Napoleon as his idol, and George Washington as his ideal.

Works Cited

1. Byron's Letters and Journals, Edited by Leslie A. Marchand, John Murrey, vol. 4, 1975. – (BLJ).
2. Clubbe, John, Napoleon's Last Campaign and the Origins of Don Juan, the Byron Journal, London, 1997.
3. Encyclopaedia Britannica, William Benton Publisher, 1973. – (EB).
4. Marchand, Leslie A., Byron: A Portrait, London: Pimlico Edition, 1993.
5. Moore, Thomas, Letters and Journals of the Lord Byron: With Notices of his Life, in 2 vols, volume 1, London, John Murray, 1830-31.
6. The Complete Works of Lord Byron, from the last London edition, in one volume, Paris, Baudry's European Library, A. and W. Galignani and Co., 18, Rue Vivienne, 1837. – (CWL B).