

## **Stylistic Allusion as Way of Life**

### **Reincarnating Napoleon**

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When young Byron approached the Bosphorus from the Black Sea, he dared to climb the Cyanean Symplegades that were believed to be the fabled rocks the Argonauts had passed on their way to seek the Golden Fleece.

The myth of Medea, as reflected both by Ovid and by Euripides, was on Byron's mind. He wrote about it in a letter to Henry Drury, saying: "Had not this sublime passage been in my head, I should never have dreamed of ascending the rocks."<sup>1</sup> When standing on the very summit of those blue rocks he composed a rollicking six-line parody of the nurse's dole:

O, how I wish that an embargo  
Had kept in port the good ship Argo!  
Who, still unlaunch'd from Grecian docks,  
Had never pass'd the Azure rocks;  
But now I fear her trip will be a  
Damn'd business for my Miss Medea.<sup>2</sup>

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 two meanings. The whole

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<sup>1</sup> Byron's Letters and Journals (BLJ), edited by Leslie A. Marchand, John Murrey, volume I, London, 1973, p. 246.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

world appears to be reflected in Byron's consciousness, as a result of his voracious reading and highly developed imagination.

We argue that in the case of Byron, however, allusions as stylistic means appear to be quite unique. 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, Byron is in constant touch with them, challenging them and competing with them, thus reincarnating their lives and images.

Byron is haunted by Medea's image in most of his female characters starting from early pieces including "Don Juan". Byron is aspiring to Colchian Medea and is in search of her. He fell in love with a simple Venetian woman, Margarita Cogni in so far as she reminded him of Medea, whom he brought to Palazzo Mochenigo to live with him.

In one of his letters to Thomas Moore Byron speaks of Lady Byron as of "mathematical Medea,"<sup>3</sup> as far as she attracted him not only due to her talent for poetry, but also due to her deep knowledge of mathematics. Lady Anabella Byron divorced him and became his most dangerous and revengeful enemy, involving him in slander and scandal, resembling the Colchian Medea.

The mythological Hellespont, the present Dardanelles, is especially famous for its myth of the brave Leander crossing the strait for his beloved lady named Hero.

When approaching the mouth of the Dardanelles young Byron became eager to try his swimming skills in imitation of Leander, though the feat was considered impossible, especially due to the icy currents.

On May 3, 1810 Byron tried and succeeded. Hobhouse, his friend and companion, wrote excitedly in his diary: "Byron... now swimming across the Hellespont – Ovid's Hero and Leander open before me."<sup>4</sup> This way Byron performed Leander but we trust that he dreamed of finding his

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<sup>3</sup> BLJ, volume XI, p. 197.

<sup>4</sup> Leslie A. Marchand, *Byron, A Portrait*, Pimlico Edition, 1993, p. 82.

Hero as well. The studies of Ovid's Hero<sup>5</sup> as compared to the characters of Lord Byron's real life permit us to say that the poet met his Hero shortly before performing Leander's feat across the Hellespont. It happened during his travels to Alexandria of Troas in April of 1810 when Byron met a Georgian girl at a slave market. The life and death of that unhappy girl and her feelings as described in Mathew Iley's biography of Byron<sup>6</sup> published in London in three volumes in 1825 permit us to conclude that the story of a Georgian girl could also serve as a prototype for composing poems to Thyrza. I have been presenting this version at several Byron International Conferences but from different viewpoints, the last time being in Valladolid in 2011<sup>7</sup>.

Poetic lines inspired by the mythological Medea or Hero are no exceptions with Byron.

Lord Byron's "Manfred" caused much discussion as to whether the plot was borrowed from Marlowe, Goethe or Aeschylus. Byron denied Goethe's or Marlowe's influence. However of "Prometheus Bound" by Aeschylus, he wrote the following:

"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"<sup>8</sup>.

Byron is in search of Prometheus. And it did not take much effort 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.

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<sup>5</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 7, 1-73, Medea agonises over her love for Jason, web site:

<http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Metamorph7.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> *The Life, Writings, Opinions and Times of the Right Hon. George Gordon, Lord Byron*, in three volumes, volume 3, Mathew Iley, London, 1825, p. 121-133.

<sup>7</sup> Innes Merabishvili, *Ovid's Hero And Medea As Reflected In Byron's Life And Works*, Proceedings of the 37<sup>th</sup> International Byron Conference, Valladolid, Spain, 2011, at <http://www.internationalbyronsociety.org>.

<sup>8</sup> Byron, George Gordon, *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron Complete in One Volume*, D. Appleton and Co., New York, 1869.

Napoleon who succeeded in toppling monarchs, thus liberating the oppressed, had become an idol for a liberally-minded progressive young lord.

We share the opinion of Professor John Clubbe<sup>9</sup> when saying that Byron's attachment to Napoleon appears to be complicated. He equates Napoleon to Prometheus and at the same time wishes to emulate this contemporary hero. The critical attitude to his beloved figure permits Byron to distinguish a hero who fought against despotic regimes from that of an emperor striving to dominate the continent.

He admires Napoleon's power and liberating activities but is unhappy with **the abuse** of that power. Therefore later Byron was to share the attitude of many other romantic poets: Coleridge, Southey, Wordsworth, Walter Scott and his friend Shelly who strongly criticized Napoleon.

Disappointed in Napoleon, Byron aims to produce deeds far more important and significant than composing poetry.

As we well remember at the age of twenty-six, the author of "Childe Harold" announced an apparently quite serious resolution to withdraw from poetry.

On the morning of the ninth of April, 1814 he writes to Thomas Moore about it.

But in the evening, a Gazette Extraordinary announced the abdication at Fontainnebleau.

Next morning the poet violated his vows by composing "Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte", the strictest condemnation of Napoleon ever made in poetry.

Here Byron displays a gallery of the great from ancient times up to his epoch.

Stanza XVI alludes to Prometheus:

#### XVI

Or, like the thief of fire from heaven,

Wilt thou withstand the shock?

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<sup>9</sup> John Clubbe, *Napoleon's Last Campaign and the Origins of Don Juan*, the Byron Journal, London, 1997, p. 21.

And share with him, the unforgiven,  
His vulture and his rock!

...

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, in vain. In Byron's opinion, Napoleon should have died rather than to have abdicated.

“If thou hadst died as honour dies,  
Some new Napoleon might arise,  
To shame the world again.”

(Stanza XI)

Napoleon was a long-lasting attachment for Byron. In our opinion this attachment proves to be artistic and shows his desire to act as Napoleon on the very stage of life.

In 1816, when planning his second journey abroad, Byron ordered an enormous coach copied from the one Napoleon captured at Genappe.

While *performing* as Napoleon Byron was *perfecting* him through his acts.

Disappointed in Napoleon, Byron, at least subconsciously, aims to reincarnate the mythological liberator. And it took him exactly ten years from composing the “Ode” in April, 1814 to fulfil his mission of liberating Greece and die as proudly as did Prometheus.

Besides Lord Byron, Greece had many spiritual supporters among the European men of letters. But the European Philhellenists did not offer self-sacrifice to Greece. Only words were bleeding on pages, not men.

Today it is universally acknowledged that with his death at Missolonghi, Byron did what he could not do with his life. Death was missing in the legend of Napoleon. **Byron filled the gap in his contemporary legend to approach and reincarnate the myth of Prometheus.**

Now we can recite his lines anew:

He in his fall preserved his pride,

And, **as a mortal**, had as proudly died!

Therefore, allusions with Byron are not stylistic means only but appear to be way of life. Napoleon and Prometheus are distinguished among them. This actually led to the establishment of another myth, the myth of Byron.

And now, in the result of my observations and findings, of course, I wish Lord Byron to be reincarnated...