

**INSPIRERS OF FREEDOM: LORD BYRON AND MICHAEL
NALBANDIAN**
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The study of the lives and works by Lord Byron and Michael Nalbandian (1829-66), great Armenian publicist and writer, initiator of critical realism in Armenian literature, reveals the similarities and parallels that both poets shared in the development of their outlook, as well as their revolutionary-democratic activities.

Both Byron and Nalbandyan praised the ideas of freedom and patriotism in their work, criticized dictatorship and tyranny, advocated national-liberation movements, as well as making their own contributions to the fight for liberty.

As we know, Byron made an impact on nineteenth-century European poets in his own lifetime and throughout the whole century. Byron's revolutionary romanticism attracted especially those countries (Italy, Spain, Poland, Russia, and so on) where dictatorship dominated or where people suffered under the yoke of alien enslavement and fought for freedom.

In Russia, it was the future Decembrists who were fascinated by Byron's activities and appreciated the poet not only as a literary leader but a political ally as well. The prominent Russian poet Alexander Pushkin responded to the Decembrist's movement through his political poems, praised freedom and ridiculed violence (*Freedom, The Village, To Chadayev*, and so on). During his exile spent in the South of Russia, young Pushkin was charmed by Byron, whose moving lyrics he considered to be predictive of the perspective of forthcoming revolutionary events in Europe and whom he identified with a heroic inspirer of freedom. During those years, under the influence of Byron's Oriental Poems, Pushkin wrote his poems "of the South" (*The Prisoner of the Caucasus, Robber Brothers, The Fountain of Bakhchisaray, The Gypsies*, etc.) where he voiced his ideas of freedom, and expressed his faith that in order to maintain one's rights, one should establish freedom in society. As the writer himself says, his poems *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* and *The Fountain of Bakhchisaray* were inspired by his reading Byron who he "was mad about",¹ and the novel *Eugene Onegin* was written in verse "like *Don Juan*",² which Pushkin believed to be a work of genius, "Byron's chef-d'oeuvre"³ that displayed "an amazing diversity characteristic of Shakespeare".⁴

It was Russian reality that affected Michael Nalbandian's outlook, as at that time one part of Armenia (Western Armenia) suffered under the Turkish dictatorship, whereas the rest (Eastern Armenia) was enslaved by Tsarist Russia. Though Michael Nalbandian was born in

1: A. S. Pushkin, *Collected Works*, in ten volumes, vol. VI, Moscow, "Pravda" publishing House, 1981, p. 117 (in Russian).

2: A. S. Pushkin, *A Letter to P. A. Vyazemsky, on November 4, 1823, from Odessa to Moscow*, vol. IX, p. 120 (in Russian).

3: *Ibid*, *A Letter to P. A. Vyazemsky, the second half of November 1825*, p. 247 (in Russian).

4: A. S. Pushkin, *About Olin's Tragedy "Corsair"*, vol. IV, p. 47 (in Russian).

Nor Nakhichevan (now Rostov-on-Don), one of the numerous Armenian communities in Russia, received his preliminary education there, and later studied at Moscow and St. Petersburg Universities, his contribution to the nineteenth century Armenian national liberation movement was significant.

As it is known, having settled in Italy since 1816, Byron joined the Carbonari movement at the beginning of 1820 in Ravenna. A fighter for liberty, the poet could finally make his own contribution to the serious and perilous political struggle. At last he could afford the opportunity to live the complete and diverse life he had so long been striving for. The poet stopped being a mere watcher but became an active participant in the events that took place in Italy at that time. Not once did he mention that he would sacrifice everything for Italy's liberty, even his life. Thus, in one of his diary notes, made on January 11th 1821, he states: "I should almost regret that my own affairs went well, when those of nations are in peril. If the interests of mankind could be essentially bettered (particularly of these oppressed Italians), I should not so much mind my own 'sma peculiar'".⁵

The ideas of democracy, freedom and pan-European revolution appealed to Michael Nalbandian still in the period of his studies at Moscow University (1854-8), where he communicated both with young Armenian and foreign leaders. The spiritual growth of the poet was fostered by such publications, as collections *Polyarnaya Zvezda* and a newspaper *Kolokol*, published in London by the Russian political refugees A. Herten⁶ and N. Ogaryov,⁷ the so-called "London Propagandists", as well as the progressive newsletter *Sovremennik*⁸ published in Russia at the time.

In a letter, addressed to one of his friends in September of 1858, Michael Nalbandian writes: "My life is nothing as compared to the whole nation and the truth and I have felt the commitment to sacrifice it since the moment I took the pen to write. Up until my death, will I fight against lies and darkness ..."⁹

During his first trip abroad (1859), Nalbandian established ties with Armenian and western European democratic circles, and during his second trip (1860-2), during which his destination was Turkey, he for the first time visited Armenia and stayed there for a month and a half. In Constantinople, in co-operation with H. Svachian,¹⁰ he founded the democratic organization "Youth Union", which sought to unite the forces of Armenian national liberation movement with those of other oppressed peoples in the Ottoman Empire, Western Europe, and Tsarist Russia. In Italy, Nalbandian maintained contacts with the followers of Garibaldi: in London was in friendship with A. Herten, N. Ogaryev and M. Bakunin.¹¹ He also met I. Turgenev in Paris.

Back in 1817, in a letter addressed to Thomas Moore on February 28th, Byron writes: "... If I live ten years longer, you will see, however, that it is not over with me – I don't mean in literature, for that is nothing; and it may seem odd enough to say, I do not think it my vocation. But you will see that I shall do something or other – the times and fortune permitting – that,

5: *The Works of Lord Byron*, Published by Silas Andrus & Son, Hartford, 1850, p. 250. - *Lord Byron's Letters and Journals*, Chapter 8: *The king-times are Fast Finishing*, Scanned, selected and Edited by Jeffrey D. Hooper, <http://engphil.astate.edu/gallery/byron9.html>.

6: Alexander Herten (1812-70), Russian writer and publicist, early in 1847 he left Russia escaping the prosecution of the Tsar, moved abroad and settled in England. From 1855 to 1862 (since 1856 in co-operation with N. Ogaryov) he published the literary, social and political collections *Polyarnaya Zvezda* (*A Polar Star*) and from 1857 to 1867 together with N. Ogaryov he published the newspaper *Kolokol* (*The Bell*), levelled against the government prevailing in Russia and attacking serfdom.

7: Nikolay Ogaryov (1813-77), a Russian poet, publicist and political activist. After several arrests, he emigrated to England in 1856. N. Ogaryov was one of the founders of the secret revolutionary society "Land and Freedom".

8: *Sovremennik* (*The Contemporary*) was a Russian literary, social and political magazine, published in St. Petersburg, in 1836-1866. It came out four times a year between 1836-1843 and once a month after that. The magazine published poetry, prose, critical, historical, ethnographic, and other materials. *Sovremennik* originated as a private enterprise of Alexander Pushkin.

9: Michael Nalbandian, *Complete Works*, in six volumes, vol. 5, Publishing House of National Academy of Sciences of Armenian SSR, Yerevan, 1984, pp. 72-73 (in Armenian).

10: Harutyun Svachyan (1831-1874), western Armenian public-political figure, revolutionary-democrat, writer, publicist and satirist. He founded and published literary and economic semi-annual review *Meghu* (*Bee*) in Constantinople. In the 1860-ies, under the direct influence of Michael Nalbandian, he stated to adhere to revolutionary democrats.

11: Mikhail Bakunin (1814 -1876) a well-known Russian revolutionary and theorist of collectivist anarchism.

‘like the cosmogony, or creation of the world, will puzzle the philosophers of all ages’¹². Byron had more than once expressed the idea that a man should do more for society than just writing poetry. Over the last years of his life, the poet was able to achieve his goal. In Ravenna, his house every day hosted the Carbonari leaders, whom the poet supplied with weapons purchased at his own expense. Byron’s lifelong dream had been to see Italy liberated and he was ready to sacrifice anything to achieve this goal. In one of his diary notes, made on February 18th 1821, Byron writes: “It is no great matter, supposing that Italy could be liberated, who or what is sacrificed. It is a grand object – the very poetry of politics. Only think – a free Italy!!!”¹³ The failure of the revolution in Italy saddened the poet; he never ceased to believe that some time all the oppressed nations, Italians among them, would gain victory over tyranny and dictatorship. In this respect, the poet made the following diary note on January 13th 1821: “The king-times are fast finishing. There will be blood shed like water, and tears like mist; but the peoples will conquer in the end. I shall not live to see it, but I foresee it.”¹⁴

Sadly enough, Byron’s premature death did not let him see the victory of the Italian national liberation movement, but Nalbandian was fascinated and inspired by this struggle and fortunately was able to witness its partial success. It is with great enthusiasm that Nalbandian writes to Harutiun Svachian on December 30th 1860 from Naples: “When our steamer sailed up to the shore, one could see a large crowd of young people standing in the port of Messina, who were wearing bright red shirts, an indicator that they were the followers of Garibaldi, the Italian Hero. Their faces expressed joy and peace and admirable glory adorned their brows. The people kept chanting Viva Italy, viva Garibaldi ...”¹⁵ Though there is little evidence on Nalbandian’s stay in Italy, the poet’s contemporaries testify that Nalbandian knew Garibaldi. Other facts also confirm that Nalbandian had established contacts with Giuseppe Garibaldi.¹⁶ In the aforementioned letter, Nalbandian points out that he is “really happy to see Italy liberated” but “the weakness of my own nation sets my mind at unrest and tortures my heart.”¹⁷

The events in Italy captured Nalbandian’s and his contemporaries’ attention, as the heroic fight of Garibaldi and his followers gave them faith and hope that their own country would also be liberated. In fact, a lot of oppressed nations, and Armenians among them, related their national liberation aspirations to Garibaldi’s name. Nalbandian’s desire to meet Garibaldi was not only conditioned by his reverence and admiration for that man, but also by his dire need to seek counsel or assistance. Thus, where Byron was involved in the Carbonari movement in Italy, Nalbandian was inspired by Garibaldi’s followers.

It is worth motioning that other representatives of Armenian culture also touched upon Garibaldi and his followers. The prominent painter Hovhannes Aivazovsky (1817-1900) who pictured Byron in his painting *Byron’s visit Mechitarist on the Island of St. Lazarus in Venice* (1898), exhibited his painting *Garibaldi and his Followers aboard the Steamer*¹⁸ in the World Exposition held in Chicago in 1893. Avetik Issahakian, an outstanding Armenian poet (1875-1957), on the occasion of Garibaldi’s hundredth anniversary, wrote a touching short story entitled *The Garibaldi Follower*. Still, Michael Nalbandian was the first to immediately respond to the Italian patriotism and heroic struggle with his *Italian Girl’s Song* (1859), where he praises the bravery and heroism that the Italian patriots demonstrated when fighting for their country. In the poem, an Italian girl hands a handmade banner to a Garibaldi follower and says:

Land of our fathers, wretched and abandoned
Trampled by our enemies:

12: *The Works of Lord Byron*, Published by Silas Andrus & Son, Hartford, 1850, p. 106. - *Lord Byron’s Letters and Journals*, Chapter 6: *A Dissipate in Carnival Season*, Scanned, Selected and Edited by Jeffrey D. Hooper, <http://engphil.astate.edu/gallery/byron7.html>.

13: *The Works of Lord Byron*, Published by Silas Andrus & Son, Hartford, 1850, p.257. - *Lord Byron’s Letters and Journals*, Chapter 8: *The King-times are Fast Finishing*, Scanned, Selected and Edited by Jeffrey D. Hooper, <http://engphil.astate.edu/gallery/byron9.html>.

14: *Ibid*, p.251.

15: Michael Nalbandian, *Complete Collection*, in six volumes, vol. 5, Publishing House of National Academy of Sciences of Armenian SSR, Yerevan, 1984, p.112 (in Armenian).

16: Ashot Hovhannisyanyan, *Nalbandian and his Time*, Book one, Haypethrat (Armenian State Publishing House), Yerevan, 1955, pp.445-6 (in Armenian).

17: Michael Nalbandian, *Complete Collection*, in six volumes, vol. 5, Publishing House of National Academy of Sciences of Armenian SSR, Yerevan, 1984, p.116 (in Armenian).

18: Minas Sargsyan, *The Great Sea Painter’s Life*, “Anahit” Publishing House, Yerevan, 1990, p. 352 (in Armenian). – The same in Russian: translated from Armenian by Yervand Barashyan, Publishing House “Koktebel”, Theodosia • Moscow, 2010, p.213.

Its sons and daughters now proclaim
To revenge its rancour and vengeance...

.....
Brother, take this banner,
Made with my own hands,
During sleepless nights,
And bathed in my tears.

See, it has three colours,
Our hallowed symbol,
May it sparkle before the foe!
May Austria ruin!

.....
Death is everywhere the same,
Man is born just once to die,
But blest is he who gives his life
To defend his nation's freedom.¹⁹

This poem achieved immediate recognition, was secretly circulated, and was included into various poetry collections, recited and sung everywhere, making its author famous. Today the poem is a part of the national heritage.

Neither Byron nor Nalbandian could perceive Italy as an alien country, as its extensive history and culture made part it of the world heritage. Therefore, the nations of the world should not put up with the idea of oppressed Italy:

Yet, Italy! Through every other land
The wrongs should wring, and shall, from side to side ... (CHP IV st.47)

But the poet also requires that the Italians themselves should struggle against foreign yoke, following the lead of their national heroes.

In July of 1862, when Nalbandian was arrested, a search in his papers had revealed Garibaldi and Mazzini's photos, as well as a glossary of cryptograms, written by his hand, where Garibaldi's cryptic name was "Livorno's friend" and Mazzini's was "Martiros".

Nalbandian expressed his affection and warm feelings for the Italian patriots still in 1858 in the *Diary of Count Emmanuel*, in his essays on Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, later in his pamphlet *Satan's Official Ball*, his letters, and still in his publicizing work *Agriculture as the Right Way* (1862). It is with great anger that the poet notes: "Austria tyrannizes Lombardy and does not want to miss Venice"²⁰ and harshly criticizes the Austrian chancellor Metternich's notorious quote "Italy is only a geographical expression",²¹ by writing: "Let St Mazzini's and Garibaldi's hands have always been on Habsburg".²²

The Italian period opens a new page of struggle and ideas in Byron's life and work. The poet's contribution to the Carbonari movement fostered his growth. The impact of Byron's poetry was particularly obvious on Carbonari poets in Italy, where the poet had already joined the circles of Milanese romantic poets in 1818. The poet enjoyed love and respect both as a literary and a political figure. On one occasion, Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-72), an Italian revolutionary, an outstanding political figure in the Italian national movement of Italy, as well as Byron's ardent devotee, writes: "The day will come when democracy will remember all that it owes to Byron."²³ We believe Nalbandian to deserve the same praise, as the poet stated: "people's rights and freedom are equal. If one enjoys more freedom and rights than his friends,

19: Michael Nalbandian, *Complete Collection*, in six volumes, vol. 1, Publishing House of National Academy of Sciences of Armenian SSR, Yerevan, 1979, pp.107-8 (in Armenian).

20: Michael Nalbandian, *Agriculture as the Right Way*, in "*Complete Collection*, in six volumes, vol. 4, Publishing House of National Academy of Sciences of Armenian SSR, Yerevan, 1983", pp. 87 (in Armenian).

21: L'Italie est un nom géographique - in a letter to British Foreign Minister, Lord Palmerston of August 6 1847.

22: Michael Nalbandian, *Agriculture as the Right Way*, in *Complete Collection*, in six volumes, vol. 4, Publishing House of National Academy of Sciences of Armenian SSR, Yerevan, 1983", p.84 (in Armenian).

23: Giuseppe Mazzini, *Byron and Goethe*, in *Literary and Philosophical Essays: French, German, and Italian*, New York, P. F. Collier & Son, 1910", p.419.

it means that he has stolen it from others. One's advantage is at the expense of others' poverty ..."²⁴

Although political motives were quite popular from the 1840s to the 1860s in Armenian poetry, before Nalbandian's freedom-inspired poetry, Armenian verse could mostly boast poems full of sadness, sorrow and misery. It was Nalbandian who first introduced the revolutionary spirit into the Armenian poetry with his *Liberty*.

Too strait and narrow is this world
For him who loveth Liberty...²⁵

With ardent passion does the poet praise freedom and urges the Armenians to fight for it:

"Freedom!" I answered, "on my head
Let fire descend and thunder burst;
Let foes against my life conspire,
Let all who hate thee do their worst:
I will be true to thee till death;
Yes, even upon the gallows tree
The last breath of a death of shame
Shall shout thy name, O Liberty!"²⁶

These lines are reminiscent of the first five lines of the *Song for the Luddites* by Byron.

As the Liberty lads o'er the sea
Bought their freedom, and cheaply, with blood,
So we, boys, we
Will die fighting, or live free,
And down with all kings but King Ludd!

The poem *Liberty* by Nalbandian became at once popular in Russia, the Caucasus, Turkey, Iran, and India. All the Armenians of the world read the poem, which was not only recited and sung, but also had become a national song. Later, one could come across some records of the poem in the song-books. The poem was also used in the Armenian theatres to stir patriotic feelings among the audience and to call them for political struggle. Such was the popularity of *Liberty* that it was copied on the poet's photos and sung by revolutionary-disposed people. In fact, the role the poem played was one of which Nalbandian could only dream. Within short time, it achieved immediate recognition and became an inextricable part of the Armenian spiritual legacy. Since the 1890s, the poem has been translated into various languages, among them Russian, English, French, Danish, Ukrainian, and Swedish. At the end of the nineteenth century, when the Turks massacred the Armenians, the famous American statesperson, publicist, reporter and translator Alice Stone Blackwell,²⁷ as a sign of protest, rendered into English and published the highlights of Eastern and Western Armenian poetry. The collection was published in Boston under the title *Armenian Poems*²⁸ and boasts the last quartet of Nalbandian's *Liberty* in Armenian on its title page. The collection also comprises the translations of the poems *Liberty* and *Days of Childhood*.²⁹ Due to the book's success, the first publication sold out within days, and the book was reprinted fifteen days after it was first published.

24: Michael Nalbandian, *A letter to H. Svachyan*, dated December 30th 1860, in "*Complete Collection*, in six volumes, vol. 5, Publishing House of National Academy of Sciences of Armenian SSR, Yerevan, 1984", pp.112-13 (in Armenian).

25: Michael Nalbandian, *Liberty*, in the collection *Armenian Poems*, Rendered into English Verse by Alice Stone Blackwell, Caravan Books Delmar, New York, 1978, p.40.

26: Ibid.

27: We would like to mention that through her translations Alice Stone Blackwell (1857-1950) advocated the culture of oppressed nations. She is the translator of *Songs of Grief and Gladness* translated from Yiddish and she published anthologies of poetry translated from other languages. In 1893, she was appointed to the secretary of the society "Friends of Armenia" (USA).

28: *Armenian Poems*, Rendered into English Verse by Alice Stone Blackwell, Roberts Brothers, Boston, 1896. The collection was republished in 1917, in Boston and in 1978, in New York.

29: Ibid, pp. 39-42.

Michael Nalbandian's poems *Days of Childhood* and *To Apollo* are closely related to *Liberty*. In the poems, Nalbandian calls for fighting for freedom and intends to join the fight himself. In *Days of Childhood*, Nalbandian notes with great pain:

My country's woes weighed down my heart,³⁰

and adds

There never could be joy for me,
While speechless, sad, in alien hands,
My country languished to be free.³¹

Only the fight for the country's freedom can relieve the poet's pain.

Apollo, take the lyre again,
And let its voice, amid the groves,
Sound for some man who may in peace
Devote his life to her he loves!

To the arena I will go,
But not with lyre and flowery phrase;
I will protest and cry aloud,
And strive with darkness all my days.

What boots to-day a mournful lyre?
To-day we need the sword of strife.
Upon the foeman sword and fire, -
Be that the watchword of my life!³²

Those lines echo with the following journal entry Byron made on January 8, 1821: "Out of such times heroes spring. Difficulties are the hot-beds of high spirits, and Freedom the mother of the few virtues incident to human nature."³³ They also echo with the following lines from *Song for the Luddites*:

When the web that we weave is complete,
And the shuttle exchanged for the sword,
We will fling the winding sheet
O'er the despot at our feet,
And dye it deep in the gore he has poured.

Later, Hovhannes Toumanyan, an outstanding Armenian poet, writes by making a reference to Nalbandian that the times were severe, as poets wanted to praise love but had to write about thirst for freedom, the dire conditions of the people. "Don't you even dare think that this poet was not capable of sacrificing his life for his beloved? It would be wrong to perceive him that way ... Another time, he would have done it but in his times he had to bear the burden of his nation's bitter fate and account for any time wasted. His are not days of ease, love, and lyre, it's dark all around ... these days the poet suffers yet another pain ..."³⁴ This is how one can explain the political pathos in *Liberty*, *Days of Childhood* and *To Apollo*.

Unfortunately, both poets spent some part of their life in exile; Byron's being a "self-imposed" one; and regrettably, both poets died prematurely at the age of thirty-seven. Despite this, their literary legacy saturated by the ideas of freedom and democracy still enjoys and will enjoy a great popularity.

30: Michael Nalbandian, *Days of Childhood*, in the collection *Armenian Poems, Rendered into English Verse* by Alice Stone Blackwell, Caravan Books Delmar, New York, 1978", p. 41.

31: Ibid.

32: Ibid, p.42.

33: Byron, Extracts from a diary January 4 - February 27, 1821, *Lord Byron's Letters and Journals*, Chapter 8: *The King-times are Fast Finishing*, Scanned, Selected and Edited by Jeffrey D. Hooper, <http://engphil.astate.edu/gallery/byron9.html>.

34: Hovhannes Toumanyan, *Complete Collection*, in ten volumes, vol. 8, Publishing House Gitutyun (Science) of NAS RA, Yerevan, 1999, p.52 (in Armenian).

Thus, Nalbandian following Byron, Garibaldi, Mazzini, and the Russian revolutionary-democrats associated the liberation of Western and Eastern parts in Armenia with the victory of Russian and European revolutionary movements.

Like Byron, Nalbandian emerged in Armenian reality as a great patriot, a loyal soldier carrying a sword in one hand, and a torch in another. Throughout a century, Nalbandian's poetry has guided the Armenians, inspiring them to struggle for the country's and nation's freedom, fraternity, fight against tyranny, despotism and cruelty. Generations of Armenians learnt to share his ideas, cherish loyalty and were inspired by his passion for freedom. It was not a mere coincidence that at the end of the 1980s, when the Armenians were fighting for independence, Nalbandian's freedom-loving words were chanted by the demonstrators.

Sadly enough, Byron did not live to see Italy independent, but Nalbandian did. Unfortunately, Nalbandian never saw Armenian independent but my generation did. Let us hope that one day Byron's and Nalbandian's dream will come true and all the peoples in the world will experience freedom.