

BYRON AND CHATEAUBRIAND INTERPRET SPAIN

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Chateaubriand and Byron never met, but early on a rivalry developed, one that continued, at least for Chateaubriand, long after Byron's death. Whereas in life the older writer circled the younger poet like a wary old fox seeking to find an advantage, and had, particularly in later years, much to say about Byron, Byron, aside from the occasional jab or witticism directed at Chateaubriand's ultra-conservative political views, kept his distance. Why so virtually complete a silence about Chateaubriand on Byron's part? Perhaps, conjectures André Maurois in his lively biography of the French author, Byron wished "to banish an untimely ghost."¹ Or did Byron perhaps sense that in temperament and achievement Chateaubriand was too much like him? Like Byron, he early acquired an international audience. Restless, widely travelled, hugely prolific, shrewd in assessing peoples and places, Chateaubriand remains a imposing figure in French literature and culture. A magnificent stylist, his language resonant, often eloquent, he became one of the masters of French prose. Along with Goethe in isolated Weimar, whose diverse gifts fascinated his contemporaries, and Scott in distant Edinburgh, who turned to novel-writing after Byron had usurped his once dominant position as a poet, Byron faced in Chateaubriand his main rival as premier man of letters of Europe. This rivalry is plausible, but not, in my view, the main reason for Byron's relative silence with regard to Chateaubriand. His reserve was chiefly due to political grounds. The dichotomy between the two becomes especially apparent when considering their responses to Spain. These I discuss within a general overview of the apparent similarities, yet deep divergences, in their literary and personal lives. Contemplating Chateaubriand in relation to Byron illuminates both figures.²

1

That Byron in his poetry and journals rarely refers to Chateaubriand does not prevent Maurois from claiming that the English poet "was steeped in Chateaubriand" and that, despite the absence of surviving letters, he corresponded with him. He claims that "as early as the publication of *Atala*" Byron wrote to Chateaubriand. In a passage apparently intended for his *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* (*Memoirs from Beyond the Tomb*), Chateaubriand tells us that when *Atala* appeared in 1802, he received many fan letters at the time, including one from the fifteen-year old Byron at Cambridge, "un astre non levé" (a star not yet risen).³ Though Chateaubriand destroyed most of his fan letters, he believed he may well have answered Byron's. But since no trace of his letter or of Byron's has been found, biographers of both figures have doubted their existence. It's easy to pick holes in what Maurois says of Chateaubriand. For example, in 1802 Byron was fourteen, not fifteen, and at Harrow, not Cambridge. Given Chateaubriand's habitual distortions of reality we have reason to doubt the later memories in which he recalls this incident. Maurois goes even further, claiming that Byron "was steeped in Chateaubriand. . . . All his life he imitated his attitudes, followed in his footsteps as a traveller and borrowed even his imagery."⁴ Might we not claim that the opposite – Chateaubriand being enthralled by Byron – holds as much or more truth?

The key fictive works by Chateaubriand which may have played a role in Byron's imagination are his tales, *René* and *Atala*, published separately but eventually reunited in the massive *Génie du Christianisme* (*The Genius of Christianity*). *Atala*, which draws upon his American experiences, involves a young Indian (Chactas) and his Intended (*Atala*) who, faithful to the vow she made to her mother, dies a virgin. Chateaubriand loosely

1: André Maurois, *Chateaubriand. Poet. Statesman. Lover* (New York and London: Harper, 1938), 329.

2: Cocteau once quipped, "Victor Hugo was a madman who thought he was Victor Hugo." Of Chateaubriand, and sometimes I think of Byron, we can say the same.

3: *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*. 2 vols., ed. Maurice Levaillant and Georges (Paris: Gallimard, 1951) 1: 1090.

4: Maurois, 329.

based his story on his American experiences.⁵ *René*, a tale of incestuous desire of a sister for her brother, perhaps also somewhat autobiographical, may have influenced Byron. Chateaubriand, who himself regarded *René* as derivative of Rousseau and of Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*,⁶ believed the first cantos of *Childe Harold* drew much of their mood and feeling from his own melancholy, self-absorbed titular hero. According to Chateaubriand, *René*'s Byronic descendants also include Conrad in *The Corsair* and the eponymous heroes of *The Giaour*, and *Manfred*. Though other sources abound for these works, we should not dismiss out of hand Chateaubriand's claim – albeit much disputed – that *René* lies behind the Byronic hero.

Even before Byron, Chateaubriand had toured the East. Whereas Byron explored the southern part of the Iberian peninsula and several lands within the Ottoman empire – present-day Albania, Greece, and Turkey – Chateaubriand in his voyage of 1806-7 visited Greece, Palestine, and Egypt. Whereas Byron began his adventure with Portugal and Spain, Chateaubriand ended his by returning via Spain.⁷ Spain at this time was still thought to be a land somewhat apart from Europe, half Oriental, primitive, unstable, mysterious, a land, too, in which it might be dangerous to travel. Essentially roughing it as they went along, both Byron and Chateaubriand were travellers, not catered-to tourists.⁸

Chateaubriand when he went to the East was well into his thirties. He doesn't seem to have experienced there life-changing revelations comparable to those experienced by the much younger Byron, but twenty-one when in 1809 he set forth on his Eastern trip with his friend John Cam Hobhouse. It turned out to be a life-changing adventure for Byron. But foreign travel also helped shape Chateaubriand, twenty years older than the English poet. When in the early 1790s he spent two years in the newly-created United States, Chateaubriand was about Byron's age when he journeyed through the East. It was in the New World, not in the Orient, that he had *his* life-changing experiences. Chateaubriand's two great journeys, or as he himself spoke of them, his "pilgrimages," one to the East and one the West, left him, in his opinion, one-up on his fellow traveller.⁹

Chateaubriand wrote up his Eastern adventure as *Itinéraire de Paris à Jerusalem*, or in its contemporary English translation as *Travels in Greece, Palestine, Egypt, and Barbary during the Years 1806-7* (1811). It had three editions in its year of publication, two more the next year. In his Eastern travels Chateaubriand encompassed a wider trajectory than did Byron, as rendered in *Childe Harold*'s first two cantos. His voyage

5: It became the source of a famous painting by Girodet, *Les Funérailles d'Atala* (1808).

6: E.g., Jean-Paul Clément, Chateaubriand. "Des Illusions contre des souvenirs" (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 59. Like most commentators, Clément bases his claims on Chateaubriand's own account in *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, 1: 414-20, 1092-3.

7: When not travelling, Chateaubriand lived most of his life in France. Byron, too, was a wanderer. The allied armies in 1814 and, more lastingly, in 1815, had (aided by British support) toppled his idol, Napoleon, from his throne and replaced him with the Bourbon monarch, Louis XVIII. In 1816 Byron himself, perhaps with the example of Napoleon's exile in mind, abandoned England and took himself to the Continent. The route he took deliberately avoided setting foot in what was now Bourbon-controlled France. In his lifetime, particularly in later years, he absorbed many of the classics of French literature and was probably more familiar with Chateaubriand's writings than he wished to admit.

8: Many writers and artists have explored the landscapes and peoples of Spain during the nineteenth century and after. The literature by travelers to Spain is endless. For a sampling of their reports, see *Portrait of Spain. British and American Accounts of Spain in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, selected and edited by Thomas F. McGann (New York: Albert A. Knopf, 1963). Among travellers in Byron's and Chateaubriand's time, the volume includes extracts from accounts by Ticknor, Irving, Disraeli, and Borrow. Well worth reading are works as diverse as *The Spanish Journal of Elizabeth Lady Holland* (first published in 1910), Southey's *History of the Peninsula War* (1823), and Théophile Gautier's *Tra los Montes. Voyage en Espagne* (1843). The standard modern history of the Peninsular War is David Gates's *The Spanish Ulcer* (1986). G. R. Gleig's *The Subaltern. A Chronicle of the Peninsula War* (1825), oft-reprinted, is deservedly a classic of that war seen from the ranks. J. Lucas-Dubreton, *Napoléon devant L'Espagne. Ce qu'a vu Goya* (1946) offers a French perspective. His *Le voyageur d'Espagne* (1963) takes up French travelers in Spain. Specifically on Byron in Spain, see William A. Borst, *Lord Byron's First Pilgrimage* (New Haven: Yale U P, 1948; rpt. 1969); Gordon Kent Thomas, *Lord Byron's Iberian Pilgrimage* (Provo: Brigham Young U P, 1983); and Diego Saglia, *Byron and Spain. Itinerary in the Writing of Place* (Lewiston, New York / Salzburg, Austria: Edward Mellen Press, 1996). See also, for the larger picture, Saglia's excellent later study, *Poetic Castles in Spain. British Romanticism and the Figurations of Iberia* (Amsterdam / Atlanta, Ga.: Rodopi, 2000).

9: Paraphrased from *Transports, Travel, Pleasure, and Imaginative Geography, 1600-1830*, ed. Chloe Chard & Helen Langdon (New Haven and London: Yale U P, 1996), 292.

preceded in time, and his *Itinéraire* slightly in date of publication, Cantos I and II of *Childe Harold*. The narrative thus did not influence Byron's poem. Although Byron read the *Itinéraire* only *after* he had composed his cantos, it is apparent that he did read it. A note in *The Bride of Abydos* of the next year picks up the tale told to Chateaubriand *voyageur* by a "young French renegado" he encountered, namely, that only in galloping around the desert did he truly feel free.¹⁰ This note is Byron's first and, I think, only reference to Chateaubriand's *Itinéraire*. Marvellously and contemptuously witty and more than a tad insulting, as are his several subsequent references to the French author, it accentuates the disdain he already felt toward "L'Enchanteur", a sobriquet French enthusiasts sometimes bestowed on Chateaubriand.¹¹ Whether he saw Byron's note when *The Bride of Abydos* first appeared in November 1813 or later in a French translation in 1822, he always made a point of insisting that he had preceded Byron in voyaging to the Orient, then, admittedly, a rather adventuresome destination: only after *he* had visited the classical ruins of Greece, "*après moi*" as Chateaubriand said, did Byron visit them.¹²

The *Itinéraire* may well be the closest European analogue to *Childe Harold*'s first cantos, yet with regard to politics their respective authors diverged fundamentally. Whereas the *Itinéraire* reeks of sentimental nationalism, Byron in *Childe Harold* already has adopted a broader European perspective. While in Egypt Chateaubriand had felt imperialist pride in the staggering legacy left by Napoleon's 1798 expedition to Egypt. By contrast, Wellington's impressive victory at Talavera (27th-28th July 1809) left the *Childe* unmoved.¹³ Chateaubriand's experiences abroad did not affect his ardent Catholicism, but the *Childe*, unconvinced by Christianity's claims to moral superiority, becomes an admirer of the Moslem world.

Spain also makes brief appearances in Chateaubriand's other works, including his early *Voyage en Amérique*.¹⁴ But the most appealing of his writings about Spain may well be his tale called *Les aventures du dernier Abencérage* (*The Adventures of the last Abencérage*). Worthy to be set in the company of the two classics *Atala* and *René*, this tale, published in 1826, takes place in late fifteenth-century Spain, in the years after the final expulsion of the Moors in 1492. Like *René* and *Atala*, the narrative focuses on a love relationship, but the setting is Grenada, visited by Chateaubriand in 1807 on the last leg of his Mediterranean tour. Obviously, given his awareness of Grenada and its countryside the tale chronicles, the author must have dallied there longer than he did elsewhere in Spain. The love that erupts between the Moor Ben-Hamet, the last of his line, in exile in Morocco, and the Spanish Bianca, the only child of the well-named (from my New Mexico perspective) Duke of Santa-Fe, apparently draws upon Chateaubriand's liaison with Madame de Noailles. Chateaubriand, it turns out, came home via Spain less to survey the country and more to have a rendezvous with his former mistress. The *Itinéraire* does not, understandably, mention this prearranged meeting between himself and a married woman. Unlike that passing affair, the lovers in *Les aventures du dernier Abencérage* separate reluctantly, and, while never ceasing to long for each other, hold fast to their respective religions and live on in their respective lands and there die. Chateaubriand's finest pages on Spain, however, may lie in the autobiographical *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*.

Spain was not only a touchstone for Byron and Chateaubriand in their rivalry in terms of travel and travel-writing, but also in complex ways for their rivalry *vis à vis* Napoleon. The French emperor was easily the most important person in the imaginative lives of both. Byron and Chateaubriand were both aristocrats, both

10: Cf. CPW 3: 441, note to 1.389 of *The Bride of Abydos*. McGann notes that the note is not in the manuscript. Presumably it was added later.

11: Among Byron's few subsequent references to Chateaubriand two stand out. In 1816 he asked James Perry, editor of the *Morning Chronicle*, to imply in a headnote to his "Ode (from the French)," one of his strongly pro-Napoleon poems of these years, that it was written by Chateaubriand. Perry did as asked when he published it. In line 716 of *The Age of Bronze* (1823) Byron mocks Chateaubriand for the role he played in the Congress of Verona. To add insult to injury Byron adds a delicious note (CPW 7: 129).

12: *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* 1: 416.

13: *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* (1811; Paris: Les productions de Paris, 1963), 316. Napoleon is not named in connection with Egypt. CPW 2: 43 (Canto 1, stanza 90, line 918). Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East. Anxieties of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1992), 34-5, highlights the contrast between the two travelers, a comparison made earlier by Mario Praz in *The Romantic Agony* (1933), 67-8.

14: *Voyage en Amérique, in Oeuvres de M. le Vicomte Chateaubriand*, 20 vols. (Paris: Lefèvre, 1833), 12 (part 2): 222 ff. (in the section "Républiques espagnoles").

writers, both travellers. Both were intoxicated with the myth of Napoleon during his lifetime, and after his death in 1821 both took part in the legend of Napoleon rapidly spreading across Europe. The three figures had a kind of triangular relationship with each other. Jacob Burckhardt, the great Swiss historian, once wrote that “history sometimes loves to concentrate itself in a single human being, whom the world thereupon obeys; time and the man enter into a great, mysterious covenant.”¹⁵ For Chateaubriand as for Byron (and for that matter, for Beethoven as well), Napoleon was the human being who became the subject of their most intense focus. He became for them a kind of alter ego, a double, an irritant, a model, whose position as the dominant figure of the age all three creators – in their respective realms of prose, poetry, and music – wished to usurp. Like Byron’s, Chateaubriand’s response to Napoleon vacillated wildly between admiration and repudiation. But unlike Byron’s Napoleonic mood swings, which were set off by Napoleon’s military or political actions, Chateaubriand’s more often than not were triggered by how Napoleon responded to *him* and those, like the Duke d’Enghien, who were stand-ins for his values. In 1802 Chateaubriand fawningly dedicated his *Génie du Christianisme* to the then First Consul. But after Napoleon failed to reward him according to his own opinion of his deserts, Napoleon’s “murder” of d’Enghien, and subsequent extreme censorship of Chateaubriand’s 1811 *discours* for admission to the French Institute, Chateaubriand became decidedly anti-Napoleon, and so he remained for several years.

In his bitter polemic, *De Buonaparte et les Bourbons* (1814), Chateaubriand venomously attacked the defeated Napoleon, now in British custody preparing to depart for exile on the island of Elba, and passionately defended France’s newly-restored Bourbon monarchy. Rewarded for his support of Louis XVIII, Chateaubriand briefly served in several important political posts. Napoleon held no lasting grudge against him either for his 1814 polemic or for his employment in a royalist government. In memoirs dictated on St. Helena to Las Cases and to others he expressed admiration for Chateaubriand’s genius. In 1819 Chateaubriand in turn wrote an admiring essay about Napoleon. A decade later, having retired from public life, he continued work on his *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*. In this massive compendium, not published until 1848-9 after his death, he offered his thoughts about the course of his life and the places he had been. Of the authors he favoured, Milton and Byron stand out.¹⁶ *Vis-à-vis* Napoleon and Spain, Chateaubriand, I shall argue, in essence wished to trump both his rivals, Byron and Napoleon, by reasserting the value of the absolutist world of Europe prior to the French Revolution, whereas Byron supported what he believed were the Napoleonic ideals of liberty which had evolved from the French Revolution.

2

In 1809 Byron crossed into Spain from Portugal, camped in the Sierra Morena amidst Spanish partisans in the revolt against Napoleon’s armies, and stopped in Seville, where he admired the women (and would in *Don Juan* have his young hero undergo a flawed upbringing). Byron then journeyed to Cadiz and, leaving Spain behind, took ship for Gibraltar.

Meanwhile, the country continued its fierce resistance to the occupying forces of the French. In March 1812, the month *Childe Harold* exploded upon the literary world, the Spanish Junta in Cadiz promulgated a great liberal constitution. During the years it was in force it made the name of Cadiz a rallying cry for Europe’s reformers. Byron’s lines in *Childe Harold* recalled the heroic days of the Spanish struggle for freedom. Ironically, that struggle, although focused against a Napoleonic occupation, had in part been inspired by Napoleon’s earlier support for the ideals of the French Revolution.

With Napoleon’s fall from power in early April 1814, the Congress of Vienna, which began that autumn, restored to the Spanish throne the Bourbon prince Ferdinand VII, the cruel and reactionary son of the deposed king, Carlos IV. Ferdinand proved less popular than his predecessor, Napoleon’s older brother Joseph, known locally and rather insultingly as *Pepe Botellas*, or Joe of the Bottles, alluding to his fondness for wine. Ferdinand was even less popular than his father, Carlos IV, one of the weakest and stupidest of the Spanish

¹⁵: I cite this paraphrase of Burckhardt from Joachim Fest’s biography, *Hitler* (1973; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 149.

¹⁶: Surprisingly perhaps, he rated Byron the finest English poet since Milton (*Mémoires d’outre-tombe*, 1: 418).

Bourbon monarchs, who had ruled before Joseph.¹⁷ Carlos's moronic countenance (along with that of his stupefyingly ugly queen and imbecilic family) has been brilliantly preserved for posterity in the paintings of Goya, many of which now reside in the Prado. No man in his time saw more deeply into the human soul than Goya, Spain's most powerful and probing painter and one of the truly towering geniuses of the age.¹⁸ It was to restore Ferdinand, that promising young tyrant, to the Spanish throne, that Wellington's troops along with their Spanish and Portuguese allies fought Napoleonic armies for six years. Ferdinand's return also meant the return of the Inquisition and other iniquities, including state-inflicted torture and repression, that Goya so mercilessly depicted.

The fractious situation in his native land depressed Goya. In his series of etchings, *Los desastres de la Guerra* (*The Disasters of War*), 1810-after 1814, Goya had with unmistakable clarity communicated the bitter disillusionment that the Peninsular War had produced in his country among intelligent, open-minded people. Byron would never see these etchings (not published until the 1860s), but with such a cast and such a conflict, it is easy to understand why Spain fascinated him.

Stimulated by memories of his youthful traversal of southern Spain, Byron over the years kept up with events in that tortured country. Early impressions remained vitally alive in his imagination. In 1816, in a sarcastic note to a line in *Childe Harold's* third Canto – "Dungeons and Thrones, which the same hour refill'd. See Spain and France etc. etc., Ferdinand 'the Beloved' – Louis 'the Desired,'" – Byron alludes to the prisons that would flourish upon Ferdinand's and Louis XVIII's accession to the thrones, respectively, of Spain and France.¹⁹ Byron's *A Very Mournful Ballad on the Siege and Conquest of Alhama* (1816-17) takes up the renewal of tyranny in Spain under Ferdinand's rule. The poem, as Diego Saglia points out, draws clear parallels with current English politics.²⁰ Early in 1817, Hobhouse reports, Byron also began a novel set in Spain. "He [Byron] adumbrates himself Don Julian. Florian has made himself also a young Spaniard – there is not, however, the least plagiary or resemblance, it must be said."²¹ For the first cantos of *Don Juan*, written in 1818, Byron drafted a vivid prose preface, not published until the twentieth century, that recreated the atmosphere he and Hobhouse had experienced in 1809 in the Sierra Morena amidst a camp of the Spanish guerrillas.²² In 1820 Spanish Liberals, led by General Rafael del Riego y Núñez, revolted against Ferdinand VII's absolutist rule. Upon hearing of the uprising, an exultant Byron declared that November, "The Spaniards are the boys after all."²³ Shelley agreed. His *Ode to Liberty* of this time turned the Spanish rebellion of 1820 against the incorrigibly absolutist Ferdinand "into the fulcrum of an idealized vision of successful revolutions in the South."²⁴ Shelley prefaced his poem with a couplet from Canto IV of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*: "Yet, Freedom, yet thy banner torn but flying, / Streams like a thunder-storm against the wind."²⁵ The revolt in Spain appeared about to succeed, and like other European liberals Byron hoped that that battered land might

17: Pepe Botellas: I cite this nickname from John A. Crow, *Spain. The Root and the Flower. An Interpretation of Spain and the Spanish People*, 3rd ed., expanded and revised (1963; Berkeley / Los Angeles / London: U of California P, 1985), 244.

18: For Crow's interpretation of Goya's depictions of Carlos's attributes, see 238. Goya is the key figure for understanding the turmoil and confusion in Spain at this time. Besides the several series of etchings referenced here, consult for an overall perspective Goya. *Das Zeitalter der Revolutionen. 1789-1830* (München: Prestel, 1980) and the recent biography by Robert Hughes, *Goya* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

19: Note intended for *Childe Harold*, canto 3, stanza 82, ll. 777-8. See CPW 2: 310. The note did not surface until 1976, upon the discovery in a London bank of the Scrope Davies archive.

20: CPW 4: 103-8 and note on 475-6. See also the detailed commentary in E. H. Coleridge, *The Works of Lord Byron: Poetry* 4: 529-30, and Saglia, *ibid.*, 104-7.

21: Lord Broughton (John Cam Hobhouse), *Recollections of a Long Life*, ed. by his daughter Lady Dorchester, 6 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909-1911), 2: 88. I cite the text as corrected by Peter Cochran in his edition of Hobhouse's journal on his website (<http://petercochran.wordpress.com/hobhouse-diary/>).

22: See *Byron's Don Juan. A Variorum Edition*. Edited by Truman Guy Steffan and Willis Pratt, 4 vols. (1957; Austin and London: U of Texas 1970), 2: 3-7.

23: BLJ 7: 237.

24: Saglia, *Byron and Spain*, 19. When the Congress of Vienna met in 1821 at Laibach (Ljubljana), it focused on suppressing the Neapolitan revolt, not the Spanish.

25: Stanza 98, lines 1-2. The lines come from the last of twenty-one stanzas in which liberty combats tyranny.

regain individual liberties in the form of a constitutional government, as promised by the Cadiz constitution, liberties such as several of Spain's former colonies in South America had achieved.

There was, it seems, reasons for hope. As William St. Clair observes, "In 1821 the European system which had been set up after the final defeat of Napoleon looked distinctly shaky." To the European powers "Liberty seemed like a euphemism for revolution and they feared and detested revolution like an epidemic disease that would not respect national frontiers."²⁶ In 1822 the main participants in the Congress of Vienna – Austria, Prussia, and Russia – decided to convene a meeting in Verona to discuss what they considered to be the deteriorating situation in Spain. Metternich, the Austrian diplomat nicknamed by his unillusioned diplomatic colleagues the "Grand Inquisitor of Europe," was the chief instigator behind the move to hold a congress. The Congress which convened at Laibach (today's Ljubljana, capital of Slovenia), was essentially brought into being for the purpose of allowing the French ultras to deal with the Spanish insurgency. Tsar Alexander, who still dreamed of having a major voice in European affairs, supported a French invasion of Spain.²⁷ England, to its credit, opposed it. Both Wellington, Britain's main delegate at Verona, and Canning, who had replaced Castlereagh as foreign minister, disassociated Britain from decisions made at Verona. Contrary to Byron's opinion and to much subsequent scholarly opinion on Byron, it was not the Congress at Verona that decided on war with Spain but France that decided to invade Spain alone.²⁸ The French, in effect given *carte blanche* by Austria and Russia to deal with the situation, sent an army south into Spain in the spring of 1823 to suppress the liberal uprising. It met little opposition, and within a few months it had restored Ferdinand to the throne of Spain.²⁹

One very much involved in the French intervention was Chateaubriand. Minister to Britain from 1822 to 1824 and for a year or two heavily involved in Foreign Affairs, it was he who was most instrumental in orchestrating the invasion. Ferdinand, who had learned nothing and forgotten nothing, had upon his return to power in 1823 immediately suppressed the liberal constitution. Under pressure earlier, however, he had promised his people that he would govern as a constitutional monarch. Chateaubriand desired that Ferdinand break that promise. Then as later he proudly claimed the credit for what one historian has termed "one of the least defensible wars in history."³⁰

3

Byron's response to the tense European situation, one that pitted diehard ultras against liberal opponents, was *The Age of Bronze*. This poem, among the least known of his major works, draws upon historical precedents to assess the situation in Spain as of late 1822.³¹ Both Napoleon and Chateaubriand feature in *The Age of Bronze*. The more we read and reread this marvellous poem, the better we may savour Byron's acute awareness of post-Napoleonic Europe. Whereas the Ismail cantos in *Don Juan* take place during the early years of the French Revolution and the English cantos recall Byron's "years of fame" in England, *The Age of Bronze* assesses what Byron perceives as the dire state of Europe in the early 1820s.³²

Sketched in October 1822, the poem burst into being from December 2nd to 17th. It begins with Byron's most extended, most ambitious portrait of Napoleon, who had died on faraway St. Helena on May 5th,

26: William St. Clair, *That Greece Might Still Be Free. The Philhellenes in the War of Independence* (London: Oxford U P, 1972), 30.

27: In *Don Juan* (canto VI, stanza 93) and in a letter (BLJ 10: 92) Byron had queried the "legitimacy" of the Tsar, son of Catherine the Great, pillar of the Holy Alliance.

28: Jean-Paul Clément, *Chateaubriand. Biographie morale et intellectuelle* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), 247.

29: In *The Age of Bronze* Byron, hoping for a repeat of Spanish courage against a foreign invader, recalled the past heroism of the Maid of Saragossa in the earlier siege of that city (ll. 366-9). Goya also commemorated her heroism in one of the most striking etchings of *The Disasters of War*, "Que Valor! (What courage!)." Unlike many of the other etchings in this series, he based it on an actual happening.

30: Duff Cooper, *Talleyrand* (1932; Stanford, California: Stanford U P, 1937), 306.

31: Lines 314-77 of *The Age of Bronze* parallel developments in cantos 7-12 of *Don Juan*, argues Saglia, which Byron also worked on in the autumn of 1822 (*Byron and Spain*, 110-18).

32: Intermittently, but well beyond the scope of this essay, *The Age of Bronze* is also a very funny poem. E.g., l.400 (CPW 7: 13).

1821. In chronological time, its appraisal of Napoleon comes after Madame de Staël's impassioned assessment in her *Considerations on the French Revolution* of 1818, an assessment so lengthy it swamps a book ostensibly about the Revolution, a book which Byron was acutely aware. *The Age of Bronze* precedes completion of the long-pondered, often euphoric, often disillusioned, but always brilliant book-length biography of Napoleon that Chateaubriand embedded in his *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*.³³ This survey of Napoleon's career takes up most of the first third of *The Age of Bronze*. The remaining two-thirds consider the Europe Napoleon left behind. Now that Napoleon is no more, Byron gauges his place within the history – and future – of European civilization.

Why did Byron write *The Age of Bronze*? His letters of the time have little to say about his purpose except that "it is calculated for the reading part of the Million – being all on politics, &c. &c. &c. and a review of the day in general."³⁴ The usual explanation for the poem's creation – advanced by E. H. Coleridge and, more recently, by Jerome McGann – has Byron prompted to write down his thoughts when he heard that the Congress of Vienna would reconvene in Verona during October 1822.³⁵ This supposition strikes me, for several reasons, as unlikely. European congresses had come and gone before 1822, and Byron occasionally mentions one, e.g. Laibach, in a letter. True, he offers detailed political evaluations, country by country, of the European scene, evaluations of a kind that the narrative scheme of *Don Juan* did not allow. But though he deplored the impact the Congresses had had upon post-Napoleonic Europe, none had previously engendered a poem, whereas Napoleon – and Byron's obsession with him – had inspired a number of poems and passages.

The initial stimulus for *The Age of Bronze* came about, I shall argue, not from Byron's hearing news of the upcoming meeting of the Congress at Verona but from his reading a book which had just appeared, Barry O'Meara's *Napoleon in Exile; or, a Voice from St. Helena* (1822). It proved enormously popular, with five editions in its year of publication. A copy evidently made its way to Byron with some speed, and in the late summer of 1822 he devoured O'Meara's two hefty volumes.³⁶ Reading O'Meara stirred him in the contemporaneous *Don Juan* to compare his earlier self to Napoleon, when in Regency England he ruled as "the grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme."³⁷ *The Age of Bronze* alludes to O'Meara's memoir at least three times, and when Byron began the poem early in October 1822, he drew specifically and extensively on the Irish writer for his reconsideration of Napoleon's career and for numerous details of his existence on St. Helena.

The Age of Bronze contains the last, longest, and most searching of Byron's major evaluations of Napoleon. Whereas in *Childe Harold*, Canto III, Byron had probed Napoleon's psychology to illuminate his own, in *The Age of Bronze* he limns a panoramic perspective of the Emperor's career. He recognizes Napoleon's impact in reshaping Europe. Less autobiographical than previous evaluations of Napoleon, Byron's yet analyzes the unquiet spirit whose life he felt had intertwined with his own. Though he still *felt* Napoleon's being intensely, Byron, in his anguished assessment of Napoleon's achievements and failures involves himself less directly than before. He strives for objectivity, and a balanced portrait gradually emerges. Though *The Age of Bronze* does not mark the end of Byron's intense self-mediation upon Napoleon's career, it represents his final attempt to put that tremendous life into some kind of historical perspective.

33: The Napoleon chapters in the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* form a unit, but Chateaubriand in the course of his epic narrative includes much else on Napoleon. The commentary on Napoleon throughout the *Mémoires* has been edited and published separately in *Napoléon par Chateaubriand*. Introduction par Christian Melchior-Bonnet (Paris: Albin Michel, 1969).

34: BLJ 10: 81; also 90.

35: Poetry, ed. E. H. Coleridge, 7 vols. (1898-1904. London: John Murray, 1924) 5: 537-40. McGann describes the poem as "his response to the Congress of Allied Sovereigns at Verona" (CPW 6: 738; see also 7: 120). Frederick L. Beatty also believes that "Byron's disgust with the political implications of the Congress of Verona prompted *The Age of Bronze* (*Byron the Satirist* [DeKalb, Illinois: Northern University U P, 1985], 171).

36: Although the preface to the first edition of O'Meara's *Napoleon in Exile* is dated August 21 of that year, the book seems to have been available in England earlier. Thomas Carlyle was reading it on or about August 1st (*The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, ed. Charles Richard Sanders et al, 38 vols. to date, 1970- [Durham, N.C.: Duke U P, 1970] 2: 157). As it had Carlyle, O'Meara's gripping narrative prompted Byron, *The Age of Bronze* reveals, once again to meditate on the paradoxes of Napoleon's career.

37: *Don Juan*, canto 11 stanza 55. Byron had often drawn parallels between his life and Napoleon's, and, more recently, his defeat and exile and Napoleon's, in which he compared the relative failure of his recent poems to Napoleonic defeats.

Only after Byron had wrestled with Napoleon's impact upon Europe (sections I-V) does he survey the world the exiled emperor left behind in 1815, the world upon which successive Congresses had tried desperately to turn back the clock. The poem's second and longer part (sections VI-XVIII) takes up the Congress of Vienna's role in shaping the European scene to 1822. In contrast to the restoration monarchs propped up by the Holy Alliance, Napoleon's imperfections appear trivial. In the short run, the reactionary policies of the Congress seem to have triumphed. But in the long run? Their triumph might be questionable. Or so Byron wished to believe. A new Europe where freedom prevails, he felt, must inevitably emerge. If the poem loses some of its energy with Napoleon fading out, Byron compensates by a dazzling portrait of post-Napoleonic Europe.

Because of Napoleon's being and achievement "the spark's awakened" (l.260). It is the spark of freedom, and it is Napoleon's chief legacy. The torch of liberty, of which we are reminded by the name "Bolivar" (l.251), burns brightly in South America. Spain's rebellious colonies set powerful waves in motion elsewhere. From the New World the torch returns to the Old. The imagery of ocean adumbrates irresistible processes. The absolutist rulers of France, Spain, and Italy, who had suppressed basic freedoms, "shrink vainly from the roused Atlantic's roar" (l.281). The waves even crash on the shore of that home of liberty, Greece. The Greek uprising against the Ottoman Turks draws inspiration, as it did in Byron's thoughts, from those in South America (ll.276-9). At this time Byron believed the Greeks should avoid foreign entanglement, particularly with Russia, and go it alone ("Greeks only should free Greeks," l.298). But within the year he would jettison his own counsel, and become embroiled in the Greek cause and die.

In *The Age of Bronze* Byron calls on modern Spaniards, now again faced with a French invasion, to remember how centuries before they had expelled the Moors. Like some historians today, he considered this expulsion a major loss for Spain, for the Moors left behind "more Antichristian foes than they; / The bigot monarch and the butcher priest, / The Inquisition" (ll.333-5). The decadent Christian society in existence after the Moors' departure eventually produced "the stern or feeble sovereign [*that is, Ferdinand VII*], one or both / By turns" (ll. 340-1); also in the wake of this seismic shift was "the long degenerate noble; the debased Hidalgo, and the peasant less disgraced / But more degraded" (ll.342-4). Given these factors, Spain had been for several centuries past a country in disarray. But under freedom's banner it could remake herself and "form the barrier which Napoleon found" (l.361). There was in late 1822 still hope amongst Spanish Liberals and their supporters, Byron among them, for the country's future. A decade before, Napoleon, to his surprise and regret, had discovered he had on his hands an "exterminating war," that is, a war of attrition, a guerilla war (ll.361-6). That war he lost. To win, today's Spanish patriots needed to engage in another such war, a total war in effect. If they fought now with the same spirit and determination that they had fought against Napoleon, they could repulse an invading army. So Byron then believed.

The new constitution that was proclaimed following the revolution of 1820 had given even Goya a glimmer of hope. Another series of etchings known as *Los disparates*, most likely created between 1819 and 1823, lay bare the innermost workings of his mind during these years. Several of them are as forceful and mysterious as the earlier *Disasters of War*. After Ferdinand's second restoration in 1823, a fierce reactionary backlash took hold in Spain. It extinguished Liberal hopes and also prevented the publication of *Los Disparates*. In despair over the vicissitudes of his native land, Goya in 1824 chose exile in Bordeaux, where four years later he died.

Since 1815 the French themselves had lived under the absolutist yoke of the French Bourbon monarch Louis XVIII and his reactionary ministers, the Ultras, who surrounded him. If the French had the courage to emulate the Spanish Liberals, thought Byron, they too could throw off an oppressive government and regain the freedom they had lost (l.377). Neither liberation occurred: the French army restored Ferdinand to the throne, and, predictably, another decade of chaotic misrule and oppression by him followed. Likewise, Louis XVIII continued to rule France until his death in 1824, upon which his even more reactionary brother, Charles X, acceded to the throne. Not until "les trois glorieuses" (the three glorious days) of 1830, commemorated in a celebrated painting by Delacroix, was this last of the French Bourbons deposed. The Spanish Bourbon dynasty rules in Spain to this day.

Chateaubriand did not weigh in with a full account of the events in Spain until 1838, when he published a massive tome, *Le Congrès de Vérone. Guerre d'Espagne. Négociations. Colonies Espagnoles* (*The Congress of Verona. The War in Spain. Negotiations. Spanish Colonies*). This detailed if somewhat dreary 513-page volume (I cite the edition of 1862) chronicles French involvement in Spain from the first invasion of 1808 through that of 1823 and even beyond. As the title-page indicates, it also includes material on the diplomatic negotiations attendant to the war in Spain and corresponding developments in the rebellious Spanish colonies. Chateaubriand supplements his recollections of all the above with ample extracts from his correspondence of that time. Encompassing as it does his life and duties as a French minister in the year or two previous to the invasion of 1823, responses to his actions in England and France, developments since the invasion, and reflections on subsequent events in Spain in the years afterwards, his account is remarkably thorough. It is a book by one who had lived through complex times and who knew everybody involved. Chateaubriand always professed to regard his political, not his literary, career as primary. He made sure contemporaries were well aware of what posterity has deemed a dubious achievement.³⁸ But his reactionary political views were, as *The Age of Bronze* indicates, well known – and anathema to Byron.³⁹

About Spain Chateaubriand, like Byron, had much to say. He had known the country since 1807, when on his return from his Mediterranean jaunt he had traversed it from bottom to top. The summary descriptions of Spanish cities and sites from Cadiz to the French frontier that close his *Itinéraire* rank among the least illuminating pages of that work. Landing at Cadiz on April 6th, L'Enchanteur proceeded east and north via Cordova, Andujar, Grenada, Aranjuez, Madrid (which he reached on April 21st), from which he went out to visit the Escorial, then hurried on to Segovia, Burgos, Miranda, and Vittoria. On May 3rd he set foot again on French soil.

The commentary on Spanish places in the *Itinéraire* is cursory. But much of what Chateaubriand saw in the country must have stayed with him. This is evident in *Congrès de Vérone*, where his knowledge of Spain, its customs, its peoples, the varied life he encountered in different parts of the country, is impressive, stunning even. This volume thus complements the discussion of Spain in Chateaubriand's then partly written but as yet unpublished *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, the writing of which occupied him during his final decades and which – except for excerpts published to raise cash – did not appear until after his death in 1848. He spoke of the war in that work as “ma guerre d'Espagne” (my war of Spain) and was proud of the role he had played in orchestrating the French invasion, referring to it there as “the great political event of my life.”⁴⁰

By late summer 1823 Byron was on the way to Greece and unaware of the latest reports from Spain. Had he known of Chateaubriand's role in the French intervention and in fomenting the suppression of the Spanish Liberals, he would surely have denounced both.

38: *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, 2: 103-7.

39: E.g., *The Age of Bronze*, 1.716 and note (CPW 7: 23, 129).

40: *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, 2: 103 (“ma guerre d'Espagne . . . le grand événement politique de ma vie”).