

Napolean as a byronic hero



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Romantic poetry can be said to have emerged as a counter-current to the 18th century intellectual and philosophical movement, the Enlightenment, which believed reason to be the predominating signifier of human greatness while completely shoving aside everything which can fall within the scope of emotions. On this very note, Geoffery Hartman states that the poetry of Wordsworth, which can imply the Romantic poets who fall into the same thematic bracket, nurtured a 'culture of feeling'. The almost-autocratic ideal of reason reigning over everything else, created a sense of discontent laying down the germs of Counter-Enlightenment that tried to dissolve this barrier in order to allow man to return to his authentic self. Romantic poets are said to have gone the extra mile in this counter current, possessing Rousseauistic traits – identification of the intellect with desire; dominance of emotion over reason; and the assertion of the Ego above the claims of the society.

Romantic literature can be characterized as possessing a meditative immersion (where the poet has an internal affinity and understanding of his subject where his individuality dissolves in order to become one with it), expressing subjectivity (emphasis on the inner life of the individual accompanied by an evidence of aspiration and longing of the write), sublime (trying to negotiate states of consciousness and cognition by trying to grasp infinity i. e. that which is beyond reason, a quest for perfection, and a love of the picturesque (an element of strangeness added to beauty)).

Although this thematic consistency with similar styles and ideas overlapped his other contemporaries, Byron is said to have run against them in his insistence in adhering to archaic vocabulary. With no social duties controlling him and no belief systems guiding him, his assertion of the individual will is

emphasized through his poetry. However, he wavered and between respect for tradition and revolution; fluctuated between allegiance to the antique style of classicism and promotion of new styles of poetry. Helen Richter in “Byron, Klassizismus und Romantik” says that there are satiric elements in his romantic poems; and, conversely, there are romantic passages in his satires. However, despite the differences between Lord Byron and the arch romantics, however, he was chiefly representative of the Romantic period.

His contributions to Romanticism center on ‘Childe Harold’ and ‘Manfred’.

To some extent it is the creation of a tragic, highly perceptive character whose tragedy envelops him, and goes around observing the beauty of forests, streams and ruined civilizations, in his secret shame. So full of perception about the world and tragedy in his own nature, him as an architect of the literary movement has created the ‘Byronic Hero’.

Substantially said to be based upon himself, Byron ascribes traits such as rebelliousness against rules, laws, and conventions prevailing in society, isolation, moodiness, passionate nature, arrogance, charisma and pangs of remorse. Deborah Lutz defines the Byronic hero as “...the tormented melancholy failure who nears success and fails and experiences the eternal loss, the repetition of the impossibility of bliss.” And as suggested by Childe Harold, Napoleon too was depicted as this Byronic hero.

Since his days in Harrow, Byron was a loyal Bonapartist for in Napoleon, he saw the person he wanted to be. John Nicol in Byron says that even then “he himself believed that his real qualities would emerge...in the life of action.”

Byron thought of helping the revolution by using his pen, but all throughout it he believed that he was destined to achieve greatness through his actions

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and not his writings. Having always regarded himself as a soldier despite being stopped from the life that was intended for him due to physical limitations, Bonaparte's successes were taken as his own. Psychologically speaking, this personality transference influenced Byron so much, that numerous evidences suggest that Byron is said to have become Napoleon. Much of Byron's admiration for Napoleon sprang from his own adherence to the cause of liberty.

The seven poems that center around Napoleon were written by Byron in 1814-1816 i. e. after his downfall. Several issues are addressed sporadically where confusion, reprimand, and glorification are woven into these tapestries where one thread of thought predominates the other from time to time. The deepest impression that manifests itself in his poems is confusion as he is perplexed and fails to comprehend the reason and the factors that led to the rapid downfall of such an elevated figure. After the first abdication, Byron's evaluation of Napoleon is dual in nature, as his idolization is coupled with admonition. However, this very vacillation between reprimand and admiration in much of his poems which helps one connect the dots between the emperor and the Byronic hero. The trajectory of Napoleon's tendencies throughout his military career can be captured by the characteristics of Byronic hero who essentially creates himself, personifying the evolution of the individual, and his eventual self-destruction due to his egotistical sense of self superiority. A tragic figure, an historical embodiment of contradictions, Napoleon for Byron represents both a figure of heroic aspiration and someone who has been shamefully mastered by his own passions – both a conqueror and a captive.

In “ Ode to Napoleon Bonaparte” Byron expresses his view about how Napoleon was a promethean giant above all humans and despite the fact that he was dethroned, he supposedly deserved to be placed besides other great historical figures. The typical duality of the Byronic hero is dramatized in the story of Napoleon’s bold rise and graceless fall as Napoleon loses his titanic status and becoming a ‘ mortal human’. Napoleon acted as the epitome of individualism and will for Byron, opening up new possibilities for the human spirit. A liberator and a man of action, Byron, contrary to Wordsworth did not see Napoleon as a tyrant and oppressor but rather an iconic and unique character. However, his disillusionment towards Napoleon is evident as he realizes the ordinary in the emperor. Along the historical dimension, Byron creates a Napoleonic myth as he compares him to the fallen angel, Lucifer, who for Byron symbolized light and change. The Byronic hero is evident in his myths as he creates the image of this individual who was bold enough to defy authority, fight against fate, and wanted to reach heights.

The world weary Childe Harold in Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, which evokes Napoleon in Cantos III, is said to have personified the Byronic hero. This semi-autobiographical poem talks about a dark and brooding individual’s travels. Byron sees Napoleon as a deeply ambiguous heroic figure which made him rise above the ordinary ranks of human beings but questions the goals pursued by the Emperor. Condemning Napoleon for his unbridled ambition, Byron wonders whether Napoleon covets after the petty honors than ordinary men do. The dualistic nature of the Byronic hero is evident as the canto explores the contradictory aspirations and inclinations of Napoleon

as one was supposed to respond to ' the greatest, nor the worst of men.' His ' lust of war' coupled with his inability to govern his ' pettiest of passions', shows the darker side of the Byronic hero. Fascinated by this military figure, he conceptualized him as of true heroic capability destroyed by his own ego and relentless desire. In the latter half of the poem, Byron attempts to extract what he believed to be the driving impulse, which has a twofold aspect, in Napoleon. In the face of vanquish, this tendency is marked by an indifferent and resigned, rather a stoic recognition, ' which be it wisdom, coldness or deep pride'. The other aspect characterized by Byron is an aspiration which wishes, " Beyond the fitting medium of desire', whose inexhaustible restlessness of spirit further isolates the person and conceives hate as once given impetus it tricks you into chasing a higher sense of adventure. He eventually points out about how this desire may escalate one to mountaintops yet he would have to bear witness to the hate brewing of those below.

According to T. S. Elliot, " Byron's diabolism... was of a mixed type. He shared, to some extent, Shelley's Promethean attitude, and the Romantic passion for liberty; and this passion ...merges into a Satanic (Miltonic) attitude. The romantic conception of Milton's Satan is semi-Promethean, and also contemplates Pride as a ' virtue'...But I've come to find in him certain qualities, besides his abundance, that are too uncommon in English poetry... absence of some vices that are too common...With his charlatanism, he has also an unusual frankness; with his humbug and self-deception he has also a reckless raffish honesty, he is at once a vulgar patrician and a dignified toss-pot; ...he is genuinely superstitious and disreputable." Despite this remark

from Eliot one cannot deny the influence of the Byronic hero throughout the later Romantic and early Victorian periods. Frankenstein, Wuthering Heights, The Hunchback of Notre Dame and David Copperfield have characters depicting the Byronic hero who Lord Byron may have molded upon his idol, Napoleon Bonaparte, or may have a figure Byron uses for purposes of both self-revelation and self-concealment.

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