

## BYRON'S AND SHELLEY'S REVOLUTIONARY IDEAS IN LITERATURE

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### Abstract

The paper explores the revolutionary spirit of literary works of two Romantic poets: George Gordon Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley. In the period of conservative early 19th century English society that held high regard for propriety, tradition, decorum, conventions and institutionalized religion, the two poets' multi-layered rebellious and subversive writing and thinking instigated public uproar and elitist outrage, threatening to undermine traditional concepts and practices. Acting as precursors to new era notions and liberties, their opuses present literary voices of protest against 19<sup>th</sup> century social, religious, moral and literary conventions. Their revolutionary and non-conformist methods and ideas are discussed and analyzed in this paper through three works of theirs: Byron's *The Vision of Judgement* and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*.

**Keywords:** Romanticist era, poetry, insurgent, Byron, Shelley

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The English Romantic era marks the period between 1785 and 1830 in which great changes occurred, affecting and shaping the literature of the time. This turbulent period witnessed the French Revolution, which produced a great impact in England, inciting optimism, hope and support for the cause of liberty and equality. The age saw social and economic changes: the Industrial Revolution brought improved techniques in production and manufacturing; a new laboring population inhabited growing mill towns; with the process of enclosure, home industry disappeared in rural areas; impoverished landless villagers struggled for survival; the original landscape was transformed into modern ambiance; the population was starting to polarize into the capitalist class and the laboring class, thus widening the gap between the rich and the poor; the working class was faced with exploitation through low wages, long working hours, strict discipline and child labor; introduction of new machinery replacing people resulted in the first modern industrial depression. Overwhelming changes brought misery and suffering to the majority of people, who started to demand their rights. This resulted in political terror of the ruling class, tightening their grip on the people with harsh repressive measures. The escalation of the conflict came with the Peterloo Massacre of 1819 in which the authorities exercised control over people by violent killing and wounding the trade unionists protesting against the exploitation. This historical context heavily influenced the writing of the time (Casaliggi & Fermanis, 2016). Seeing so much misery, terror and poverty around them, most of the writers of the era turned to the ideals of the French Revolution, which „generated a pervasive feeling that this was an age of new beginnings when, by discarding traditional procedures and outworn customs, everything was possible, and not only in the political and social realm but in the intellectual and literary enterprises as well“ (Abrams, 2003, p. 6). Perhaps the greatest literary proponents of the new social, political and economic order that would be governed by liberty, justice and equality were Romanticist writers. Works of poets such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Blake, Percy Bysshe Shelley and George Gordon Byron permeate with notions inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution (Forward). Although their fervor was abated by the subsequent Reign of Terror and first-generation Romanticist poets witnessing the horrific turns of events actually divorced from the French Revolution in political sense, the literary opuses of the above mentioned poets were in their own distinctive

divergent ways influenced and shaped by the (theoretical) ideals of the French Revolution (Heath, n.d.).

Considering the fact that the scope of this type of paper cannot possibly accommodate investigation into the works of all the above mentioned poets, two second-generation Romanticist poets were selected: George Gordon Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Neither of the two directly witnessed the French Revolution. Therefore, their works embrace The French Revolution as an idealist construct representing values of liberty, justice and love, taking a revolutionary stand and promoting novel notions about the world, state, religion and humanity in general.

### **Young Romantics: Byron and Shelley**

Byron and Shelley were among the most controversial writers of the English Romanticist era. Both of them were attacked during their lifetime on political, religious and moral grounds. Shelley was assaulted for his atheism, while Byron's works were condemned for having blasphemous and nihilistic attitudes, lacking conventional religious convictions. He was also reproached for his political attitudes: his favorable attitude towards Napoleon, his severe assaults of George III and Castlereigh, his uncompromising criticism of every destructive war and his lack of patriotic spirit. On the other hand, Shelley's political socialist principles advocating equality, abolition of private property and monarchy were considered radical and unacceptable (Redpath, 1973, p. 168-169).

They shared the same image regarding moral issues too. Byron was accused of misanthropy and unhealthy pessimism, while Shelley's flaws were his egotism and self-assurance. Both of them were considered depraved and sexually permissive, which was being evidenced by their various love affairs and defense of free love (which included incestuous relationships). Both of them being considered outcasts, the two rebels were compelled to leave England. They met in Europe and started the most important literary friendship of their lives (Franklin, 2006, p. 15).

Both poets' literary works overflow with yearning to reclaim human freedom. Affected by the spirit of the French Revolution, the two poets recurrently employed the concept of liberty as their literary motif. However, as a more thorough investigation into

their works in the following sections of the paper will illustrate, their conceptualization of freedom underwent transformations in relation to “liberté” as perceived in the French Revolution. For the Revolution, freedom referred to liberation from authoritarian social oppression. Drawing heavily on Enlightenment philosophy, it championed logic, order and reason. It stood for collective national well-being and equal human rights in an organized society. For Byron and Shelley, freedom translated into unconfined individual free spirit. For them, at the heart of freedom there is an unbound inward-looking, creative, contemplative, intensely instinctual individual on the quest to know the self.

In spite of all attacks on them, Byron and Shelley left as their legacy some of the greatest works of the English Romanticist era (Ferber, 2012). This paper will focus on analyzing three of their works, accompanied by relevant background biographical information. The three works are all a fine representation of the poets’ revolutionary literary spirit in their own distinctive manners. Byron’s *The Vision of Judgement* was deemed “Heavenly! Unsurpassable!” by Goethe (Marsben, 1953, p. 327), while his *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* “is famous for making him famous” (Markovits, 2011). Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, being his “most ambitious work” (Barbuscia, 2016, p. 55), was placed “among the sacred books of the world” (Yeats, 1961, p. 65). The following sections are dedicated to further elaboration on the poets and the above mentioned works.

### **George Gordon Byron: Libertarian or Libertine?**

Byron was one of the most controversial British poets of his time. Born in an aristocratic family, he was given a chance of high-class education in Cambridge. However, Byron was more interested in enjoying himself than studying, which pushed him into heavy debts. (Franklin, 2006, p. 4). He indulged himself in boxing, swimming, cricket and many other activities (Dizdar, 1999, p. 161), which testify to his energetic and vivacious spirit. He toured throughout most of Europe visiting classical ancient sites, but also the places of modern historic significance. These extensive travels gave him an insight into the Oriental Eastern culture in the countries under Ottoman rule. All this experience and gathered knowledge of different civilizations and people resulted in his producing works with adventurous themes, oriental motifs and glorious sites, which brought him popularity throughout the country and the possibility of entering the

highest social circles (Dizdar, 1999). However, at this time of conservative and moralist principles being at a high-price in England, Byron stood out as an outcast with his radical, libertarian, and nonconformist ideas. Namely, at the time of the conservative Tories in power, Byron joined radical factions of Whigs. In addition, during French and British antagonism and fighting in Peninsular Wars, Byron showed a great respect and admiration for Napoleon and the ideas of the French Revolution in some of his works. Finally, while the age held decorum and morality in high regard, Byron shocked the public with his loose morale, many relationships and adulterous affairs of which one was incestuous (relationship with his half-sister Augusta Leigh). (Franklin, 2006, p. 12) There were even some indications of his bisexual nature. The public scorn made Byron leave his homeland never to return. He spent the rest of his life in Italy, where he tried to influence the political situation and unite different political factions, and in Greece, fighting for the cause of the Greek War for Independence, where he eventually died (Franklin, 2006).

All of Byron's private affairs, political attitudes and overall beliefs and ideals are projected in his works in which he shows his dissent and mockery of the mainstream society. His rebellious nature in his private life is always reflected in his works in one way or another. His unconventional religious perceptions, his abhorrence of hypocrisy and adulation, his ideas of liberty and personal freedom and attitudes towards warfare are all presented in his works. Byron is a sharp and critical observer of society whose condition, habits, beliefs, and actions he portrays thoroughly in his works (e. g. *Don Juan*; *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*; *English Bards, and Scotch Reviewers*; *The Vision of Judgement* etc.). His revolutionary spirit is shaped ambivalently: he uses innovations in literary techniques, and subverts traditional established literary concepts and writing conventions; also, he depicts society, people, religion, and authorities in a novel way by sharp and thorough critical portrayal and analysis, stripping away all their masks. His detailed and pessimistic image of society, under a magnifying glass, is to compel a reader to re-examine and actively re-think the established political, social, or religious structure.

Byron wrote more than 40 works in either verse or prose. They include divergent themes and are of various quality. Some of his earlier works manifest only the hints of techniques and ideas he would develop in his later and more mature literary phase. However, a unifying force behind all of his works is a passionate, forceful desire

to break free from any imposed norm or standard. Individual unconfined freedom is one of his central themes. That is why it is no surprise that both Napoleon, as a larger-than-life, Moses-like, liberating figure, and the ideals of the French Revolution, are his obsessions. However, highly turbulent political and societal changes transformed Byron's own views towards Napoleon. Over the course of time, Napoleonic efforts having become tainted with blood and violence, Byron's "attitude to the Emperor changed, from being a worshipper, via being a critic, to becoming, after Napoleon's death, his would-be alternative, an avatar, or reincarnation" (Cochran, 2013, p. 1). Thus, Napoleon and the French Revolution hovered in Byron's mind as emblems of unrestrained liberty, of "what could be", and his glorification of these ideals in his works is a wish to glorify ultimate freedom.

Both Byron's private life and his career are strikingly insurgent and non-conformist in their nature. Revolutionism in his works naturally flows from his innermost nature. It needs no external cause. Natural revolutionary was born in perfect time to join the radical bandwagon with other dissenters. Therefore, the distinction between his loose morals and his advocacy of freedom (libertine-libertarian dichotomy) becomes irrelevant, for his private and professional actions are harmonious and interconnected – they are uniform. They both stem from his innate longing to break free from customary, religious and institutional norms.

### **Byron's Carnavalesque: *The Vision of Judgement***

One of Byron's later works incited a great debate due to its content. Being full of unconventional and excessively progressive ideas for 19th century England, *The Vision of Judgement* was hard to publish. Byron's own publisher refused to print the poem (Jones, 1981, p. 10). However, he managed to publish it in the radical periodical *Liberal*, although with some parts removed. The fact that John Hunt, who published the poem, was prosecuted and imprisoned, and the poem declared "calumnious, wounding and a danger to the public peace" (Jones, 1981, p. 10), testifies to the rebellious and nonconformist quality of the poem. Byron wrote the poem as a response to Robert Southey's work *A Vision of Judgement* that he, as Poet Laureate, produced after the death of the king George III (Jones, 1981, p. 10). In his poem, Southey presents George III as a noble, wise and dignified king who deserves a place in Heaven, while the rest of his contemporary

political opponents are presented in a negative light and sent to Hell (Dizdar, 1999, p. 188). Taking Southey's poem as the basis and source of his parody, Byron construes an opposite image reversing the traditional system of values. He makes satirical references to political figures and authorities of the time, undercuts the traditional roles of devils and saints, and subverts both the Christian conceptions of Hell and Heaven, and Biblical representations of heavenly figures, by employing them all into his comedy.

*The Vision of Judgement* can be perceived as a great political satire characterized by "the nimbleness, the daring, the impudence, the lightsomeness" (Elton, 1925, p. 28), in which all of the characters assume roles of the real political figures of the time. The major opponents in the poem St. Michael and Satan, who are fighting respectively pro and against the king's entering Heaven, make a clear connection to real people. Byron writes himself into the role of Satan in the poem, as a response to an ironic Southey's remark that Byron belongs to "Satanic School" of poetry. His assuming the Satanic role in the poem is not surprising, considering Byron's inclination to insert some of his own aspects of personality in most of his works. However, it was not only Southey's remark that prompted Byron to assume Satanic role. The very nature of Satan, who is a symbol of rebellion against the establishment and prevalent ideology, a figure who seeks alternatives and liberation from the constraints of the highest authority, is in overall accordance with Byron's own revolutionary spirit. By making a sarcastic observation that "we learn the angels all are Tories" (*The Vision of Judgement* XXVI), an inevitable conclusion follows: the angels' opponent Satan is a Whig, the leader of Radical Opposition (Byron was, at some point of his life, enrolled in British politics as a Whig - a radical member in the House of Lords, which is another argument for identifying Satan with Byron (Peterfreund, 1979, p. 278)). After meeting Satan, Michael states:

"Our different parties make us fight so shy,  
I ne'er mistake you for a *personal* foe;  
Our difference is *political*.."

(*The Vision of Judgement* LXII)

This necessarily leads to the conclusion that Michael is a Tory and that Byron related him too with a true political figure. Thorough analyses by critics acquainted with Byron's political life led them to conclude that Michael is a reflection of Lord Eldon and that Pater's original is Lord Harrowby. They were both members of the Parliament (at

the same time as Byron), but representatives of opposition with whom Byron had political quarrels over passing some laws (Peterfreund, 1979, p. 279). Thus, Byron takes real identities and allocates them new roles of representatives of tyranny and the oppressive Whig authority he abhors. The meeting between Satan and the two overflows with autobiographical allusions to Byron's real meeting and relationship with the two politicians. Therefore, the king is brought to trial before "heavenly" House of Lords: Michael/Eldon as Lord Chancellor, Satan/Byron as the self-styled leader of the radical Opposition and Peter/ Harrowby as the President of the Council (Peterfreund, 1979, p. 287). The hilarious trial begins in which witnesses against the king are brought, all being real figures of opposition: John Wilkes, Fox and Junius. In this kind of setting filled with allusions, every action has an ironic, ambivalent meaning: The poet's exclamation "God save the king" (The Vision of Judgement XIII) does not only refer to the British national anthem, but serves as a reference to a concrete dramatic event of trial to the king in which his salvation is at the stake; George III's blindness in the celestial world, as well as Louis XI being decapitated, do not only refer to the concrete conditions in which they died, but bring additional amount of humiliation and great humor through the fact that the king cannot see and decipher the actions around him. The comic spirit progressively increases as the trial goes on and reaches the hilarious climactic point with the appearance of Southey, whom Satan accuses of adulation, hypocrisy and betrayal of principles, for "he had written for republics far and wide, And then against them bitterer than ever" (The Vision of Judgement XCVIII). Southey himself confirms it by offering first to Satan, and then to Michael too to write them autobiographies. Besides mocking Southey's yielding principles and his self-interest, Byron produces a hilarious slapstick when Southey starts reciting his poem and all the spirits and saints start running away in horror. Finally St. Peter, "an impetuous saint, upraised his keys,/ And at the fifth line knocked the poet down" (The Vision of Judgement CIV), thus saving them all from listening to Southey's obnoxious and boring poetry. The king slips into Heaven and thus saves himself in a much undignified, humiliating manner, while Southey falls into "his lake" among other Lakers whose servility and dishonest flattery of the monarchs Byron despised.

Byron's ridicule of the political figures, of the monarch and Southey is not intended only as a parody of the concrete historical figures. Satan in the poem says that

all those who “uttered the word 'Liberty!' Found George the Third their first opponent” (The Vision of Judgement XLV), thus accusing the king for oppressive despotic reign. However, his poem is an outcry on a broader level, for he speaks not only against the monarch, but against the monarchy itself that as an institution serves to oppress people and restrict their liberty.

Besides being a political satire, the poem has another dimension that stirred people's spirit. Namely, for traditional, religious England, Byron's presentation of Christian sanctities was outrageous: St. Peter is bored and unoccupied, he “yawns and rubs his nose” (The Vision of Judgement XVII), having nothing to do; he is also impetuous and does not jib from using violence (he knocks Louis XVI's head off of his arms and hits Southey); he is ignorant of the things on the Earth and does not admit the earthly authorities (he does not know who George III is); St. Paul is “a parvenu”; there are no people entering Heaven, but all going “on the other side”; cherubs' song is discordant; Satan and St. Michael are talking in a civil, polite manner and there is “a high, immortal, proud regret” (The Vision of Judgement XXXII), that they were made enemies for eternity; Satan is a positive concept and a dignified figure. Besides the fact that “the very essence of Byron's manner is contemptuous defiance of decorum and propriety” (West, 1963, p. 83), all these untraditional notions were considered blasphemous and disrespectful of Christian religion. Thus, not only does Byron's satire challenge the established political system speaking against the tyranny and advocating liberty, but it also plays with the Christian dogma subverting some of its most basic concepts.

Through the progressive dynamic action and rhetoric that is “impressive, with its sweep over history, its rises and falls, its easy command of bitter irony” (Thomson, 1994, p. 529), Byron produced a great satire of the society providing laughs and amusement for the readers, especially for the contemporary ones, who could find in every verse multifold parodies and allusions to the current issues. But beyond the level of sheer amusement and comedy, Byron's satire stands as an outcry against inhumanity, oppression, tyranny and adulation of the corrupted monarchy and society and calls for justice and freedom for which he himself fought in his life.

However, *The Vision of Judgement* being a satire that parodies certain concepts, institutions and figures, it only signals Byron's outlook towards egalitarian and

libertarian principles, the ideals of the French Revolution and his perception of the war. This aspect of Byron's revolutionary and humanist spirit is more prominent and conspicuous in one of his early extensive works: *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

### **The Journey is the Reward: *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage***

*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is an extensively written romance consisting of four cantos and around 4,500 verses (Dizdar, 1999, p. 165). The travelogue produced as an outcome of Byron's journeys throughout Europe is peculiar and revolutionary in several aspects: Byron's undermining the literary conventions of a romance, his introduction and development of Byronic hero for the first time, an extraordinary tribute and glorification of the ideals of the French Revolution, liberty and equality juxtaposed to the tyranny and oppression.

Byron's entitling his work a romance instigates in the reader a set of expectations: firstly, the very title mentioning childe (a young knight) prepares a reader to go back into the glorious medieval past to read about a virtuous, masculine, courageous knight; pilgrimage implies a definite and familiar destination; romance as a genre also includes a chivalrous hero's quest who is to overcome various calamities and to fight against monsters and evil spirits, in order to save and unite with a beautiful and chaste damsel in distress; a hero is always masculine, active and combative, while his heroine is passive, fragile and unprotected in the men's world; the knight is always of a glorious lineage and has patriarchal, protective and authoritative role in his family or the entire society; the romance as a genre is formulaic with established and familiar chronology of events; the language is elevated and sublime. (Glenn, 2005)

All these conventions of the romance as a genre were observed as a tradition by writers for centuries. However, being everything but a traditionalist, Byron borrowed the standards of writing a romance and dissolved it into a new mock genre. Taking the precepts of romance, adjusting, and modifying them to reach his own objective is one of the revolutionary components of his work.

Although there was an established form for writing a romance, Byron acquires Spenserian stanza for pragmatic reasons: "to give full scope to my inclination, and be either droll or pathetic, descriptive or sentimental, tender or satirical, as the humour strikes me" (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Preface). A reader does not encounter a

medieval, epic and sublime language, but instead, a colloquial, conversational tone with occasional insertions of archaic expressions: “wight”, “whilholm”, “ee” and “mote”. Unlike a traditional romance, where the narrator speaks of events from the past, we learn that Harold’s adventures take place in the contemporary time, for he visits the sites of Napoleonic Wars and travels into various countries of modern Europe. Not only do we learn about Harold’s adventures and moods, but about the narrator’s too, who finally marginalizes his hero and takes the role of the main protagonist. Thus, Byron inserts his autobiographical experiences and makes references to people from his life: often mentions his child or dedicates part of the poem to his deceased friend. This personal undertone is another new element that Byron introduces into his romance. The reader’s puzzlement and confusion do not stop here, for another objection to his piece of writing is that Harold has no clear destination, which is another deviation from the traditional romance. “Calling Byron’s romance the narrative of the modern tourist” is quite possibly the most perfect description of the romance quest Byron presents to his public. Byron presents his readers with his own contemporary romance, with his protagonist as a Regency everyman traveling through the contemporary world of war-torn Europe. Harold is a pilgrim of Byron’s cosmopolitan, polyglot, and sliced-up Europe, not a world of the past filled with obsolete ideals that seemed anachronistic in the current experience of industrialization and political revolutions” (Caminita, 2008, p. 25).

However, of all conventions that Byron violates, the greatest and everlasting impact was produced by his conception of a hero. Childe Harold is a mock-hero and stands as a contrast to the paragon of a medieval knight. This anti-hero is a young man “Who ne in virtue's ways did take delight” (Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage 1.2) and likes concubines and carnal company (Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage 1.3). He does have noble and famous origins, but Byron says: “But whence his name and lineage long, it suits me not to say” (Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage 1.3). He is a brooding, melancholic figure whom “One blast might chill into misery” (Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage 1.4). He is haunted by his past wrongdoings and seems a mystery to others:

“Strange pangs would flash along Childe Harold's brow  
As if the memory of some deadly feud  
Or disappointed passion lurk'd below:  
But this none knew, nor haply cared to know;“

(Child Harold’s Pilgrimage 1.8)

He is an isolated individual feeling rejected and unfit for his social setting. Although he had many affairs, he loved only one woman. However, unlike a traditional hero who would try to prove his love towards her, Harold decides that she would be better off without him. Therefore, being a recluse and judged by society that stifles him, the libertine decides to leave England to go travelling through Europe. "Byron's hero is running away from his women, and he is running away from his patriarchal responsibilities to his women, tenants and servants" (Caminita, 2008, p. 30). He becomes a vagrant without any definite goal. Thus, Harold's personality of a mysterious, melancholic, misanthropic and burdened outcast becomes a representative of Byronic hero, of a mock-hero that will occur in Byron's later works such as *Don Juan*. This new kind of a fallen hero that Byron introduced into literature is a precursor to the modern hero who is likewise remote from an ideal, medieval bold knight that remains just a relic of another time.

As already mentioned, besides breaking from tradition, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* significance lies in another aspect of Byron's revolutionary spirit. Namely, his personal ideals of liberty and revolution are projected in this romance, particularly in the later cantos (III and IV). In the first two cantos, Harold travels through Spain and Portugal, visits ancient sites of Greece and reaches Albania and Turkey. Throughout the voyage, Harold is in a constant state of resignation and lamentation. Through the ruin sites of ancient glorious civilization he is always reminded of the futility of life and inevitability of transitoriness and mortality. Only on the sites of glorious battles for freedom is he able to find certain solace and internal peace. Byron laments for the grandeur of past battles in Spain and Portugal, and finally in Greece, the ancient symbol of liberty, he exclaims in anguish: "Where are thy men of might? thy grand in soul?" (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* 2.2). The same melancholic and pessimistic undertone is retained in Byron's following cantos that he produced after his second and final leaving of England. In these cantos Harold is gradually suppressed by narrator until he finally completely disappears in the last canto and becomes replaced by Byron.

In the second part of the voyage, the poet universalizes Harold's condition by juxtaposing him to something greater than his own personal misery. Namely, Byron brings Harold to 'this place of skulls, / The grave of France, the deadly Waterloo!' (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* 3.18). He stands on the glorious site of Napoleon's defeat,

the place of dissolution of the ideals of the French Revolution, but also of the restoration of monarchical dynastic rule in Europe. Byron envisions the great battle recreating the night before it happened, and brings us to the very spot of a grand combat. However, Byron proceeds with an elegiac mourning for all the young men who gave their lives in the battle, seeing it as a calamity and not a victory. He then reflects on human capacity to endure the pain, which finally brings him to an analysis of the larger-than-life figure, Napoleon himself. Bonaparte is presented as “the greatest,” the “Thunderer of the scene” who could “shake the world again”. He is a rebellious figure who fought against the entire world and for whom Byron expresses admiration, but also identifies himself with this titanic figure, for Byron himself feels as an outcast and a rebel against the prevalent ideologies and established institutions and their traditions. Even though Byron had no monolithic view of Napoleon throughout his life, Napoleon here stands as a great symbol: “He now sees Napoleon, the foe of all corrupt and obscurantist tyrannies, as having tried to be to Europe what Prometheus had been to mankind – a beacon, a light, one who shows the way and provides an instrument by which darkness can be illuminated. Like Prometheus, he has been defeated and isolated, but his gift cannot be taken away. Reason will finally triumph over Power. That Napoleon had also been ruthless, self-aggrandizing, and obsessed with Power himself – anxious to be a mortal Zeus, not a Prometheus – makes no difference. The source may indeed be corrupt, but the pure quality of the stream is unaltered” (Cochran, p. 5).

Besides Napoleon, Byron mentions other historic figures, proponents of freedom, such as Rousseau, who helped instigate the French Revolution with his political writing, Voltaire, a freethinking Enlightenment philosopher and Gibbon, an ironic and satiric historian. All of them share the same Byronic rebellious spirit and advocate libertarian principles, prompting Byron to remember these grand figures in an elegiac tone. From glorification of the grandiose past embodied in the famous historic advocates of liberty, but also in the revolutionary combats that were to found the new world, to the lamentation of the loss of the ideals of the French Revolution, Byron finally ends his poem in Italy which would provide “a rebirth of political liberty and enshrine it in the creation of a new nation-state. For Republicans such as Byron and his friends, the ruins of the ancient Rome were of a more than antiquarian interest. After the defeat of the French Republic, young idealists turned to Italy (most of which was ruled by Austria), as

well as Greece (part of the Ottoman Empire), and fixed on them their dreams of revolution against imperial, monarchical tyranny” (Franklin, 2006, p. 44). In Italy, Byron recalls Renaissance poets such as Tasso, Dante and Petrarch who stand as the prophets of love and liberty and releases an optimistic outburst:

“Yet, Freedom! yet thy banner, torn, but flying,  
Streams like the thunder-storm *against* the wind;  
Thy trumpet voice, though broken now and dying,  
The loudest still the tempest leaves behind;  
Thy tree hath lost its blossoms, and the rind,  
Chopp’d by the axe, looks rough and little worth,  
But the sap lasts, – and still the seed we find  
Sown deep, even in the bosom of the North;  
So shall a better spring less bitter fruit bring forth.”

(Child Harold’s Pilgrimage 4.98)

Beginning with desperation and melancholy, moving to the recalling and lamentation over the grand past, Byron ends his work in hope and call for the restoration of the revolution that will bring liberty and justice to the world. This outcry is not a pose, or a poetic instrument of achieving dramatic effect, but a candid and zealous call of a man who himself spent his last years of life fighting for the cause of freedom in the Greek War for Independence.

Byron was a writer whose all works are pervaded with the idea of freedom. The release of humankind from oppression and tyranny and the establishment of freedom were his omnipresent obsessions.

### **Red Shelley**

Besides Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley was another nonconformist writer who opposed the mainstream society in his works. Already as a young man he caused the detestation of the public with his work: *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811), claiming that God cannot be proven by ratio, which resulted in his being expelled from the college. His promiscuous behavior, elopements and inconsistency in his affections toward women procured him a label of a scandalous libertine. Therefore, his denial of God in the conservative, religious 19<sup>th</sup> century England together with his profane behavior caused societal judgment and frequent attacks on his (im)morality. Thus, together with Byron,

Shelley was put in the line of moral outcasts whose writing was assessed primarily through their private endeavors, while their literary achievements and qualities were put aside as being of the second-rate importance. Shelley abhorred institutions of any kind: religious, political or social. As a believer in the potency of human progress and a relentless optimist and proponent of hope and liberty, unconditional submission to institutions was unacceptable for Shelley, who believed that all types of organized human establishments acted as tyrannical weapons of enslaving human minds. However, although Shelley denies Christianity as an established religion, he does not dismiss the belief in an omnipresent, prevailing spirit that rules the universe, for he says: "Since in reality I believe that the universe is God" (Gingerich, 1918, p. 446). This omnipotent concept coeternal with the cosmos Shelley called Necessity. The concept of Necessity is his private personal belief, but also a principle echoing through his writing. The animating and living spirit from which flows all life governs every phenomenon and action in the universe and people's lives. Shelley believes that kings and priests are an outcome of Christian religion and that in essence the rewards and punishments based on belief are tyranny. The submission that Christianity asks from its followers is "only the pitiful and cowardly egotism of him who thinks he can do something better than reason" (Gingerich, 1918, p. 450). Therefore, to this tyranny, Shelley juxtaposes an all-prevailing spirit that rules neutrally and does not impose any humiliating oppression on people, for people are the agents molding their own destinies. Thus, Shelley rejected any kind of higher human authority or belief in fatalism, replacing it with his inherently optimistic belief in the concept of human liberty, unrestrained potential and free will.

All these traits of his character, which make him anti-institutional, anti-capitalist, anti-religious and a firm believer in the necessity of social change and revolution, make him a socialist in his ideology. He produced many Marxist works of insurgent nature that he compiled in *A Philosophical View of Reform*. In this "revolutionary left" work Shelley makes specific references to Tory government and the oppressive British political system. Some of the most powerful and intense of these poems with socialist undertones are: *Sonnet: England in 1819* and *Song to the Men of England* in which Shelley challenges "the audience to reject their subhuman images...and to assume their full status as human beings. The deluded masses fall into the habit of nurturing their oppressors, literally 'giving them all they have', rather than risk the destabilizing trauma

of resisting thus unjust arrangement” (Keach, 1997). Shelley outpours frenzied hatred towards the Crown, Church and state and their inhuman, egotistic, despotic control over people, who need to liberate themselves from fear, servility and tyranny and establish liberty and human dignity and equality.

These kinds of libertarian and egalitarian principles that deny established authorities permeate all Shelley’s works, for he wrote about the worldview in which he fully and candidly believed his entire life. However, of all the works that Shelley produced perhaps his most famous, most valuable and most extensive piece of writing encompassing and overflowing with all his hopes, beliefs, concepts and doctrines is his lyrical drama *Prometheus Unbound*. (Ristić, 2000, p. 69)

### **Retribution Replaced by Redemption: *Prometheus Unbound***

Shelley composed *Prometheus Unbound* as a reactionary work to Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*. The famous mythical story speaks of Prometheus who stole fire from god Zeus (or Jupiter in Roman mythology) giving it to humans and thus enabling their progress. This, together with the secret that Prometheus knows about Jupiter, but would not reveal, is the reason for Zeus’s putting Prometheus in the chains as punishment. In Aeschylus’s drama, the resolution comes in Prometheus’s and Jupiter’s reconciliation. However, in his own work, Shelley develops the story in a different direction that suits his own principles and the message he wants to communicate to the readers.

This work has been analyzed from various perspectives and critics provided myriad of interpretations, which testifies to the drama’s complexity. It is one of those works that literary analysts will always reexamine and reinvestigate providing new shades of meaning every time. However, the possible multifold interpretation that speaks of the work’s perennial quality can be dissolved into two main aspects. Firstly, *Prometheus Unbound* can be perceived as an individual struggle speaking of a human’s imprisonment and his inclination towards liberation. Also, this story can be interpreted as a microcosm and personification of the entire society and its aspirations, outlooks and laws of mutability.

In his preface, Shelley explains that his Prometheus is “the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and truest motives to

the best and noblest ends" (Prometheus Unbound) and that the only character resembling him somewhat is Satan. Satan is, however, tainted with envy and revenge, which deprives him of the possibility to be Shelley's kind of a hero. Already in the preface, we are given a signal of Shelley's ideal hero: the one who dares to rebel and raise his voice against authority. Due to rebellion against the highest authority of Jupiter, he gets punished, and Prometheus in return casts a curse on Jupiter. However, Prometheus undergoes transformation, repents for his curse and ceases to hate his enemy. Supported by Ione and Panthea, the incarnations of hope and faith, he endures all the pains. Jupiter is dethroned by Demogorgon, while Prometheus is liberated by Hercules and then reunited with Asia, personification of Love. Love triumphs over hatred and violence. Humankind is ready to be reborn in freedom and the drama ends with the optimistic outburst of the impending vision of a new society based on love.

Jupiter is an embodiment of evil tyrannizing the entire world. On the other hand, with his desire to help mankind and incite progress, Prometheus usually stands as a contrast. However, Shelley signals that Prometheus' uttering a curse full of hatred does not differentiate him much from Jupiter. Prometheus is being described as "firm, not proud" (Prometheus Unbound 1. 337) and Jupiter's Phantasm has "gestures proud" (Prometheus Unbound 1. 258). Prometheus uttered the curse with "a calm, fixed mind" (Prometheus Unbound 1. 262) and Phantasm looks "calm and strong" (Prometheus Unbound 1. 238) while repeating the curse. Thus Shelley makes his point that Prometheus is alike Jupiter, for he is too led by hatred and anger. Due to this, the major alteration in the drama occurs when Prometheus decides to forgive Jupiter. He says he "hates no more", but "pities" (Prometheus Unbound 1. 53-57) Jupiter. Therefore, after transcending hatred, it is only (ideologically) proper that the curse (which Prometheus forgot) cannot be repeated by anybody else but by Jupiter's Phantasm. The evil curse can be repeated only by the evil god, for Prometheus does not want evil of his words "pass again his lips or those of aught resembling him" (Prometheus Unbound 1. 220). Jupiter, being equated with Prometheus' former self, is the only one deserving to utter the evil words. At this point we are made to realize that "the difference between Prometheus and Jupiter's Phantasm is that between Prometheus and his former self" (Abrams, 1975, p. 389). Prometheus's ability to conquer his evil alter ego is the main change that enables his liberation, for only after he is completely morally purified can his imprisonment cease. Therefore, "Prometheus's struggle is really a contest within

himself" (Abrams, p. 389) and an inevitable conclusion follows that liberation comes only after we make alterations in our minds. At this dramatic moment of forgiveness we realize why Satan could never be Shelley's hero, for "with his sufferings, love and readiness to forgive the omnipotent he resembles Jesus Christ. With his defiance he is like Milton's Satan" (Ristić, 2000, p. 81). His great moral strength is tested by Furies who torture him with the images of Christ in pains, but with his feeling of pity for the tyrants he manages to drive them away. Only after his mental change will Prometheus be able to finally reunite with Asia representing love, which, for Shelley, is the only concept that can change the world. Demogorgon at one instance says: "Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance, and Change? To these All things are subject but eternal love" (Prometheus Unbound 2. 4. 119-120). These words also imply that Demogorgan's power is not eternal and that he will fall eventually. Demogorgan who represents Necessity, the concept that governs the universe and turns the wheel of fortune, finally realizes what the driving force behind the world is.

It is peculiar that Jupiter is not dethroned by Prometheus, for he remains passive, immobile figure. However, Shelley implies that Necessity will bring change, as it always does, but emphasizes that the man's role is to use the change for the good cause. Precisely in this lies the importance of Prometheus as a character. Namely, he is the one who as the new Christ-like figure will utilize the new situation and spread justice, equality and liberty in the world with his love. This merit makes him a grand hero, for as a man who has transcended hatred and evil, he is able to build a new world on the foundations of love, instead of simply replacing Jupiter as an instrument of tyranny – a likely scenario had he remained former embittered Prometheus. Thus, on a personal level, *Prometheus Unbound* is a story of a man imprisoned not by external oppressor, but rather by his own internal mental demons impeding him from making headway. Liberty can be attained only after we choose to reform our mind, disregard the evil, elevate ourselves from aggressors and their malice and radiate love. Therefore, we learn that nobody can really encase us but ourselves, and nobody can really liberate us until we liberate our mind and heart.

Besides transmitting a powerful message as a personal story, the drama is nothing less effective in communicating its ideas on a broader plane through the use of symbolism. On a more universal level, Jupiter stands as a paragon of all tyrannies that

humankind impose on themselves through institutions of Church, monarchy or conventions. Shelley believes that the human mind makes the implementation of evil possible by imposing on itself imaginary authorities that he calls tyrannies. So, tyrannies are “fabricated by the mind, which then abdicates to these fictions its own powers and enslaves itself to its own creation” (Abrams, 1975, p. 386). Therefore, for Shelley, Jupiter is actually the conventional Christian God, his priests and the monarch. Men abandoned their inherent freedom after opting to obey these established authorities. In a similar manner, people distanced themselves from the true, benevolent and ennobling teachings of the Christ when they accepted Christianity as a religion that eventually turned into despotism and failed the original Christ’s tenets. Prometheus is paralleled to Christ, for the knowledge and power that he gave to humans was also misused.

Besides being a criticism on religion and discrepancy between original Christ’s principles and Christianity as religion, Shelley refers to political tyranny too. Necessity, that “all-pervading Spirit”, bestows on people its gift of change such as the French Revolution that could and should transform society and recreate the world. However, the Revolution was abused by Napoleon’s despotism which halted the Revolution from evolving into freedom. Instead of people’s utilizing the potential given by Necessity, they simply replaced one reign of terror with another one. “Shelley is observing that in all of history the release of the good in any of its forms , whether virtue, wisdom or freedom, will, unless it is safeguarded by love, become perverted into a self-oppressive and therefore self-destructive force, just as Christianity has subverted Christ’s doctrine and as Jupiter has subjugated Prometheus with Prometheus’ own gifts. True revolution is rebellion governed by patient suffering and by love and benevolence; rebellion alone grows into self-destructive civil war that reinstates with its own gains what it was designed to overthrow” (Abrams, 1975, p. 407).

Therefore, Shelley’s underlying message behind his work is the necessity of love, for love is the driving force that will bring physical and mental liberation to mankind. Only when we learn to love will we be able to spread “truth, liberty and love” among all the nations of the world. This relentless optimism, elation, altruism and unconditional belief in human potential that Shelley projects in his work are perhaps the greatest aspect of his revolutionary spirit that does not tolerate terror, oppression or any kind of human humiliation.

## Conclusion

Byron and Shelley are among the most influential poets of the Romantic era. Both of them wrote in a spirit of revolt, asserting the dignity of the individual spirit and hollowness of the time-rusted values. Their perennial value lies in their non-conformist spirit that does not tolerate tyranny and oppression imposed on men and their mind. For this libertarian cause Byron fought even personally in the Greek War for Independence, while Shelley retained his eagerness for liberty in the field of his writing. Both of them were eager revolutionaries who rejected enslavement of people's minds through social, religious and political establishments. Precisely in this rebellious, bold and energetic intercession of human freedom, justice and equality we find perhaps the grandest and the most substantial aspect of their literary existence. Byron and Shelley may be accused by various critics on the various grounds, but they are not the ones guilty of the sin of silence at the times demanding the voices of protest, which makes them admirable and unique historic figures.

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