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LIBERTY IN BYRON'S

CHILDE HAROLD'S PILGRIMAGE

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## **Poděkování**

Na tomto místě bych rád poděkoval vedoucímu práce Mgr. Tomáši Jajtnerovi, Ph.D. et Th.D. za veškerou pomoc a vedení při vzniku této práce.

## **Anotace**

Cílem této bakalářské práce je analýza konceptu svobody a jejích projevů v díle George Gordona Byrona *Childe Haroldova Pout'*. Práce podrobně mapuje konkrétní pasáže z díla, v nichž se autorovy myšlenky ohledně zkoumaného konceptu objevují a analyzuje je ve filozofickém, sociálním a literárním kontextu doby (včetně samotného literárního díla Byronova). Podstatné myšlenky práce jsou pak shrnuty v závěrečné části.

## **Abstract**

The aim of this bachelor thesis is to analyze the concept of freedom and its manifestations in George Gordon Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Passages in the poem, where the topic appears are discussed and analyzed in the philosophical, social and literary context of the period (including the work of Byron himself). The conclusion sums up the main points of the bachelor thesis.

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## **1 Introduction**

The history of the 19th century is very complex. Its second decade saw Britain in the double-edged era of regency, which brought a great upswing in arts, supported by the prince regent himself, but also a growing poverty, talked about perhaps too marginally. The stratification of the English society came as an imminent side-effect, remains of which last to the present times.

The artists of this period, in our case the British poets, might have followed similar paths, yet were far from being an integrated group. The difference is particularly evident when comparing the two major generations of British romantic poets. Lord Byron is often called the leading representative of the movement; but, if compared to the most prominent figure of the preceding generation, William Wordsworth, it becomes clear that there are moments where the former is far from being a Romantic, let alone something as their leader.

It is needless to say that authors should never be automatically placed to a certain group simply for writing in the given era, but more for the characteristic features of their works. Byron is a poet to whom it applies especially; he wrote in the period of Romanticism, and many of his lyrical poems are, indeed, its epitome. But then there is the satire, a genre which definitely was not common and popular in the Romantic era, and the one which arguably caused his ascension. The great men of satire (mostly Pope) became Byron's idols for one particular reason; that is, the aim of their poetry was not the pure amusement of the readers. They shared, as Wright calls it, "the idea that the poet should both entertain and perform a useful corrective function", which is "derived ultimately from the classical Roman poet Horace and his view that poetry should be 'dulce et utile' - enjoyable and useful" (Wright 693).

In the situation where part of the society remains complacent in the higher circles' convention, and the other (including Byron) continually grows tired of its clumsiness and craves for a 'fresh air', *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is published. Its mysterious nature and exotic savor, along with the myths surrounding its controversial author made Byron a "literary and social craze of Regency London" almost overnight (Bloom and Grundmann 12).

Thorslev summarizes the aspects of the Romantic trend, but insists on their being rather rediscovered than new:

... they can be conceived of as attempts to reintroduce into literature as into life some meaningful concepts of freedom— especially in the sense of self-expression and in the possibility for the emergence of genuine novelty; and destiny— in the sense of a process which can be seen to be universal and yet humanly relevant, giving extrasubjective and even superhuman sanctions to man's values and aspirations (Thorslev 54).

Even some of the Romantics perceived freedom as a concept of great importance. Holman reminds a famous phrase from Victor Hugo, for whom Romanticism was "liberalism in literature", and adds it is to be understood mostly as:

... the freeing of the artist and writer from the restraints and rules of the classicists and suggesting that phase of individualism marked by the encouragement of revolutionary political ideas (Holman 466).

As it was necessary to point out the problematics of Byron's belonging to Romanticism concerning his satirical work, it is of no less importance to admit, on the other hand, that his heartfelt regard to freedom in general is romanticist in every way. The lengthy narrative poem about the travels of Childe Harold falls somewhere between satire and a romantic poem. There is, on one side, the protagonist's need to freely roam the world, giving way to melancholy and admiring nature. On the other is a bitter contempt of

people, who continually and horribly fail to be perfect. The many aspects of freedom in Byron's conception, as expressed in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, are investigated on the following pages.

## 2 Byron's Conception of Freedom

### 2.1 Equality in Byron's Politics

Freedom has been a phenomenon connected with positive connotations throughout the whole history of mankind. It may, therefore, seem needless to highlight Byron's interest in something so generally regarded. But his life and work, however fluctuating moods may have gone along with it, are intertwined with this concept. It is necessary to notice the very rudiment, wherefrom Byron's ideas radiated towards the directions he concerned himself with - the freedom of an individual. To understand the concept better, it is necessary to scrutinize Byron's idea of equality, which is a key part of an individual liberty.

The revolutionary spirit of Byron's day brought many questions to the public. Among the most resonating belongs the matter of equality. It was far from being a brand new idea (with similar philosophical tendency dating itself back to John Locke at least), yet the French Revolution and its proposal of *égalité* imbued the debate with new energy.

Byron's life and work point out rather towards his being a dandy, which is considered to be sort of a counterattack, as it "resisted the Egalitarianism that would reduce everyone to the status of a commoner". It is, on the other hand, imperative to acknowledge it also encompassed its own opportunity of equality, by upholding "the egalitarian principle that the socially elite were distinguished by graces that could be assumed by all" (Burwick 47).

The idea of equality from the Dandyist point of view, in other words, consists of a generally accessible opportunity to become a 'social elite' rather than reducing the

existing elites to commoners. What is perhaps in contrast with pure Egalitarianism is the possible result of all things remaining unchanged. Its premise is an opportunity to ascend on the social ladder for everyone, but under a constant jeopardy of falling down again, as opposed to the egalitarian way, which is closer to a complete removal of all social differences. Harold embodies how fleeting glory is, which is not dissimilar from Shelley's *Ozymandias*:

... perchance they were of fame,  
And had been glorious in another day:  
But one sad losel soils a name for aye,  
However mighty in the olden time;  
(CHP 1:3)

However, both Egalitarianism and Dandyism shared perhaps the most important idea: the necessity to change the system of a 'fixed' elite, among which one was scarcely able to get without being born into it.

Byron inherited his title around the age of thirteen; but what his childhood had been like until then not many noblemen ever experienced. Until then he had been brought up in a relative poverty, to which his empathy with the less fortunate may be partially ascribed. The parliamentary speech he gave in the defense of the 'Luddites', a group of workers from his Nottinghamshire, who broke several weaving machines intended to substitute them, shows compassion and understanding, in such a case perhaps a bit unusual from a peer. It would, however, be highly suspicious for Byron if he avoided sarcastic remarks:

But the police, however useless, were by no means idle: several notorious delinquents had been detected; men liable to conviction, on the clearest evidence, of the capital crime of poverty; men, who had been nefariously guilty of lawfully begetting several children, whom, thanks to the times!—they were unable to maintain (The Parliamentary Speeches of Lord Byron 7).

The list of Byron's performances on the parliamentary grounds is not very long, due to which a deeper knowledge of his approach in similar scenarios will always remain clouded. His defense of the Luddites showed empathy with the desperate, and called for an equal enquiry as in similar cases (he stood up against the proposed change of the punishment from transportation to death). His following speech, which he gave approximately two months later, was once again in the light of a fight against inequality. Byron, some of whose arguments were an embodiment of liberal politics, suspected that a mere calling for freedom from the Whig opposition was unlikely to move the Tories. He thus asserted the opportunities England was losing by refusing the emancipation of the Irish Catholics:

... suppose the Irish were actually contented under their disabilities; suppose them capable of such a bull as not to desire deliverance, — ought we not to wish it for ourselves? Have we nothing to gain by their emancipation? What resources have been wasted? What talents have been lost by the selfish system of exclusion? (The Parliamentary Speeches of Lord Byron 32-33)

The image of Byron as a heroic defender of the oppressed necessarily collides with the more 'misanthropic' moments of his life. It has been a topic of many studies, some of which tended to the former as the authentic Byron, some to the latter. Taking into account his extreme moodiness, it is much more likely he was simply too vulnerable to impulses, resulting in a great unpredictability of behavior, but mostly clung to the same principles. Harold's travel to the Iberian peninsula multiplied his compassion with the oppressed:

... some acquaintance with the people and the land which Napoleon was despoiling aroused in Byron a bitter hatred for such wanton oppression and also a deep concern and sympathy for the fate of the people of Spain who waged what he considered an all but hopeless struggle against the might of Napoleon (Borst 5).

The detestation of war and all conflicts waged for wealth, rather than some more virtuous goals, remained Byron's *primum mobile* for the entirety of his life. But along the basic idea of equality for all people he was also a symbol of an unlimited freedom of speech; he himself represented the idea, and with his poetry encouraged, perhaps indirectly, many others to follow.

## **2.2 Freedom of Expression**

The focus on subjective experience, which all the great Romantic poets shared, presumes one additional condition in order for the poems to be authentic. It is, in Wordsworth's words, the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", which turns a mere feeling into a deep credible impression suitable for poetry (237).

The key is, however, not that much the subjective approach in itself (which all authors to some extent employ), as its spontaneous expression. It differs from poet to poet; Wordsworth used it to seize the powerful and touching moment of nature; to Coleridge it was the means necessary to capture an imagination, or a dream, forever. Byron's case is a little different. It is not an exaggeration to say that we partly owe the existence of some of his most satirical pieces to the outbursts of rage he often experienced. In most cases he made himself new enemies, but in some other (as with his critique of Scott in *English Bards*) he, after calming down, apologized.

Ridiculing some of his contemporary writers, or even politicians, which he indulged himself at, are an exemplary utilization of the freedom of speech. Being often on the verge of libel, his sharp wit in pointing out what others exasperated him with made Byron, using a modern word, a celebrity.

*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is neither a purely romantic poem, nor a pure satire. It combines a quest to find inner solace in an era of *Weltschmerz*, admiring the ideal state of things in the nature of exotic countries and its contrast in the ceaseless erring of human behavior. From Harold's griefs it is possible, however his author might have protested against being his *alter ego*, to derive some of his opinions concerning the war.

He is shocked by the Portuguese attempts to appease Napoleon, and would consider a resolute resistance to be an option more worthy of the proud and independent nation. He says that the 'Lusians' are "A nation swoll'n with ignorance and pride / Who lick, yet loathe, the hand that waves the sword / To save them from the wrath of Gaul's unsparing lord (CHP 1:16).

The sharpest criticism of the first canto Byron directed towards the 'knights' responsible for the result of the Convention of Cintra. He belonged among those most disgusted with it, saw it as a tremendous disgrace to Britain and a waste of lives lost in the battles. He was at the time hardly alone to perceive the Palace of Queluz, where the convention was signed, a "dome displeasing unto British eye" (CHP 1:24), and called a "dwarfish demon" responsible, for he "foiled the knights in Marialva's dome / Of brains (if brains they had) he them beguiled (CHP 1:25).

It would take many more pages to cite all the passages of Byron's open criticism in *Childe Harold*, for there is a great deal of such. For the purpose now the cited are sufficient. Some of the statements were perhaps too unbridled, no matter how masterfully Byron utilized his right to speak openly, which often led to a not very positive reception among more conservative readers. But there were, on the other hand, many critics who acknowledged the power of sincerity *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* offered, as Francis Jeffrey:

Its chief excellence is a singular freedom and boldness, both of thought and expression, and a great occasional force and felicity of diction, which is the more pleasing that it does not appear to be the result either of long labour or humble imitation (Bloom and Grundmann 145).

Many of the parts praised for its vigor are especially authentic because they were created in an unstable and passionate mind. Byron's custom of not restraining his feelings neither in life nor on the paper earned him a reputation of a notorious troublemaker. The phrase Lady Caroline Lamb used to describe him, saying he was 'mad, bad and dangerous to know' had become immortal and scarcely left out from any study on Byron. It is questionable if it was not his rather for his openness than the misdeeds themselves that he was causing so much indignation.

The moral aspect of the boldness of Byron's free-thinking poetry has scarcely ever been acknowledged as positive, and a positive moral outcome is clearly not the intention of *Childe Harold*, yet there is a point in which it is fair to give Byron credit. Rebec sees it thus:

If, however, the conservation of the public order ... , is properly no part of the business of poetry; but, on the other hand, integrity, authenticity is its first obligation, and freedom therein its unconditional prerogative, and this truth and freedom together its very breath of life; and if indeed in these things, rather than in conformity of any sort, consists likewise essence of morality,—then we may hold that Byron, even as compared with the most praised of his contemporaries, is entitled, both as a poet and man, to a distinguished renown (2).

His words defend the idea of freedom and independence as the crucial requirements to be met in order for an author to fulfill their role as the 'conscience of the nation'. As if Byron's periodical oscillation between the extremes of melancholy, boredom and zealous passion foreshadowed an imminent shift in the general taste; a taste which demanded exactly that type of hero Byron offered. He despised the convention as an obstacle in achieving true individual freedom. The reception of *Childe Harold's*

*Pilgrimage*, its manifestation in every sense, indicated that many a social custom was going to fall victim in the changing times. In the foreword to the English translation of Stendhal's *Racine et Shakespeare*, Maurois compares two different ages:

“[Racine] had written for a court audience—people accustomed to a politeness maintained even in the throes of passion, who would accept only a ceremonious vocabulary.” He emphasizes the difference by putting the Romanticism in contrast, asserting that the public “was no longer composed of little *marquis* but of a new class which had a growing thirst for strong emotions” (Stendhal 7).

That may rightfully, considering the popularity of Byron’s works, be considered a very poignant characteristic. But the emotion could never suffice if it was not intertwined with the sense of a totally free individual feeling. It was for a long time partially ‘prescribed’ by the etiquette how a man should feel (or at least in the public) about a concrete state of affairs, which the likes of Byron helped to change.

### **2.3 Freedom of Individual Destiny**

As the cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* were completed over many years, Byron’s ideas slowly crystallized to their final shape. So did his conception of liberty, which he seems to have understood very abstractly in the first canto, but eventually managed to transform into its more mature, integrated image.

It was then, and it is the same today, a great privilege of freedom to travel when one feels the desire to do so. For Harold it is a need more than a desire, as he “loathed ... in his native land to dwell / Which seemed to him more lone than eremite’s sad cell” (CHP 1:4). Such a ‘need’ to go on a pilgrimage from a reason purely emotional is

very characteristic for the melancholic soul of the archetypal romantic hero. Childe Harold might have set sails for many various reasons, including the simple need to leave his homeland, to gain experience, or to find a remedy for the misanthropy he was at times struck by. The final reason might be as well combined of all of the mentioned, as he wrote in a letter to his mother in February of 1806, expressing a wish to leave Cambridge and travel:

Improvement at an English University to a Man of Rank is, you know, impossible, and the very Idea *ridiculous* ... I can now leave it with Honour, as I have paid everything, & wish to pass a couple of years abroad, where I am certain of employing my time to far more advantage and at much less expense, than at our English Seminaries (Prothero).

Harold's decision to take the reins of life into his own hands by embarking on the Grand Tour is an example of living to the individual freedom in the Byronic sense. He held the opinion that it includes going forward to meet what had been predetermined to man, or what is to some extent expected from them to fulfill their destiny. Byron himself explained the attitude on the example Napoleon:

He was a glorious tyrant after all ... I blame the manner of his death: he shewed that he possessed much of the Italian character in consenting to live. There he lost himself in his dramatic character, in my estimation. He was a master of his own destiny; of *that*, at least, his enemies could not deprive him. He should have gone off the stage like a hero: it was expected of him (Medwin 223-224).

It is not very surprising that perhaps the happiest years of his life were those spent in the foreign countries, first on the trip, then in the 'exile'. Byron was certain that his nature, which so vigorously refused all restrictions to freedom, including social conventions, was feeling more comfortable outside England. Namely in Spain he found an attitude so very close to his heart. The Spanish ardor and determination fascinated

him even more after the experience in the submissive Portugal. Childe Harold observes that the passion the defenders of Sevilla show is their fate, and in facing it they would rather die than lose their freedom:

Full swiftly Harold wends his lonely way  
Where proud Sevilla triumphs unsubdued:  
Yet is she free—the spoiler's wished-for prey!  
Soon, soon shall Conquest's fiery foot intrude,  
Blackening her lovely domes with traces rude.  
Inevitable hour! 'Gainst fate to strive...  
(CHP 1:45)

It is, however, a destiny the Sevillans were free to choose, and the same applies for the destiny of Napoleon Byron commented. Such a destiny is compatible with the concept of free will, which some of the deterministic schools deny (or denied). Burwick puts some light into the problem, asserting that Godwin's *Enquiry concerning Political Justice* from 1793 prompts the reader "to anticipate a revisiting of the problem concerning free will versus determinism." He further says that the anticipation is "not misleading, but the grounds of the debate have been changed. Free will is not the condition opposite to absolute causal determinism; rather, free will is available to all who make the intellectual choice to use it" (189).

Byron, at least when judging the narrative of Childe Harold, decides to make that 'choice', while also acknowledging it to be compatible with one's destiny. More specifically, there is nothing in the poem showing that Harold's resolution to embark on the journey was caused by some outer force; his motives are expressed clearly and so is the free will he employs. Yet it is, at the same time, not contradictory to destiny. In Byron's conception it rather means a calling different for individual people, an ultimate objective of life to be accomplished when one gets 'off the stage' of life.

### **3 Liberty and Society**

#### **3.1 The Free Spirit**

The French Revolution was one of the most significant events to shape the opinions of the Romantic poets. It influenced all of them to some extent. It has to be acknowledged that it “produced a great impact in England, inciting optimism, hope and support for the cause of liberty and equality” (Dedovic-Atilla 28), but as it brought many dire consequences, some of those firstly enthusiastic (as Wordsworth and Coleridge) went into the opposition.

It is one of the main indicators to help distinguish the two English Romantic generations, as Byron and Shelley did not show such a disappointment, although the former especially expressed contempt towards the ceaseless wars. Yet even these two close friends differed in some ideas, especially those concerning the ideal governing principles to substitute monarchy. The roots of the left and right divide on the political spectrum are to be found in their age, with Byron and Shelley, as we would call it in the 21st century, somewhere on the liberal left. It is more accurate in Shelley’s case, whose works and ideas proposed therein Karl Marx himself admired.

The investigation of Byron’s ideas as a possible socialist would require many pages, and some agreement is likely to be found. Yet it can be claimed with much less certainty than in the case of his fellow poet. They found a common interest in encouraging people to break free from their bonds and it is just to claim their works “overflow with yearning to reclaim human freedom” (Dedovic-Atilla 29).

Both of them believed in a ‘free spirit’ and worked hard to demonstrate the importance of being unrestrained both by outer forces as well as in own minds. But it

was not Byron's goal to offer a substitution for the system of aristocratic rule; it would be a capital contradiction even by his standards, as he was never trying to hide being proud of being one of them: "Born an aristocrat, I am naturally one by temper," Medwin recorded Byron's words, and added that "many of the lines in *The Hours of Idleness* ... shew that in early life he prided himself much on his ancestors" (337-338)

In Byron's conception, the 'free spirit' plays a crucial role as a personal trait. Unlike other types of freedom, such as that of speech or religion, none can be denied, as he shows in his poem *On the Castle of Chillon*:

ETERNAL Spirit of the chainless Mind!  
Brightest in dungeons, Liberty! thou art,  
For there thy habitation is the heart—  
The heart which love of Thee alone can bind  
(Palgrave 252)

It is also something as a necessary requirement without which the actual act of becoming free is impossible. The defenders of Sevilla Harold so admires embody such a spirit. Their heroic determination to stand firm at all costs facing presumable doom brings even the most skeptical Childe Harold to a conclusion that with such an attitude, they "... might yet survive / And Virtue vanquish all, and Murder cease to thrive" (CHP 1:56)

It is in the question of how to utilize the free spirit once it is gained where Byron's and Shelley's ideas differ. Shelley, as it has been said, advocated a social and political change in favor of the working class. In this view he went further than Byron:

In Shelley, there was more than the vague striving after freedom in the abstract, and therefore his ideas are finding expression in the social-democratic movement of our own day. Thus Shelley was on the side of the bourgeoisie when struggling for freedom, but ranged against them when in their turn they became the oppressors of the working-class (Shelley and socialism).

Byron's idea of the free spirit, on the other hand, does not necessarily include any abolition of aristocracy, absolute equality or flattening the disparities of wealth among people. In the ideas of a political transformation, Shelley is to be seen as the more radical (with such ideas being considered much more extremist in the first half of the 19th century than they are today). The term itself, however, evokes perhaps more negative connotations than necessary and it would be therefore fair to shed a light into the meaning.

It is perhaps a stereotype too often repeated about Byron's wishing nothing than to destroy all the existing structures of government. But as inconsistent he is, so are often his desires based on grief. The First Childe Harold, how the first two cantos are called, follows that pattern. The melancholic tone scarcely offers any clear idea of what the world ideally should be like: it only assures that in Harold's eyes it is far from perfection. Absolute political radicalism consists of the part of being on the edge of the spectrum as well as willing to bring concrete changes. The former is Byron's case, the latter much less so. Grobe claims:

The modern stereotype of Byron as social rebel is inaccurate, as witnessed both by his attitudes in his poetry and by the facts of his life. Both bear testimony that he was not seeking to overthrow established conventions and institutions, but was rather seeking reform within the prescribed order. He did not advocate that society should revolt from traditional principles, but that it should fulfill the goals it professed. (iii)

The failure to fulfill the professed goals, or those expected from people in concrete situations, often triggered Byron's criticisms; from the generation affected by the 'world grief' his responses are one of the sharpest. His criticism, however, often ends with the expression of outrage or disappointment, but is hardly ever followed by a concrete plan for improvement. Byron's concerns about the worldly problems were genuine, as it is

apparent from the vigor with which he refers to them. He cannot be denied the will and the freedom with which he points out what he considers wrong. On the other hand, his outcries frequently seem helpless, as if he was uninterested in aiding with the actual progress. The resources available show his rather timid nature and, although he would sympathize with the revolutionary causes of his day, also a lack of ambition to actually initiate them. For that reason, it is perhaps more accurate to call him a political outcast rather than a radical.

### **3.2 Negative Liberty**

In the terminology proposed by Isaiah Berlin in *Two Concepts of Liberty*, the Byronic ‘free spirit’ is a representation of a positive liberty. It includes the control of one’s own destiny, the freedom of acting in some way without being coerced to act otherwise. In Berlin’s words, “...to be somebody, not nobody; a doer--deciding, not being decided for” (8). It is the very ability to make decisions for oneself and to be the only one responsible for them.

The negative liberty, on the other hand, is the measure to which one is or is not restrained by others. Berlin says: “If I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree...”, but at the same time mentions that it does not apply to what one is not capable doing. Such matters are, according him, naturally not a case of coercion: “If I say that I am unable to jump more than ten feet in the air, or cannot read because I am blind, or cannot understand the darker pages of Hegel, it would be eccentric to say that I am to that degree enslaved or coerced.” (3)

Berlin's conception of two liberties has established itself as one of the key philosophical works on the topic. The distinction he offers is accurate, and despite being introduced so much later, generally applicable even to Byron's works. The positive liberty he was encouraging in the form of the free spirit is an inner quality achieved by different means than the negative one.

The difference is well illustrated in *The Prisoner of Chillon*. One of its main themes is the endeavor not to lose hope even when the release from the dungeon is not likely to happen. The brothers are locked up, coerced to stay in a prison against their will; they are denied their negative liberty. They do not at the time possess the power to break free physically, they are, however, capable of remaining free and unbroken in their minds, which is the positive liberty; one the keepers cannot influence. The first brother to die is the one who is used to be physically free and suffers the most of them all. His spirit is broken, resulting in his giving up on all hope and perishing. The two remaining brothers do whatever they can to stay cherished and the latter, although very weak, eventually lives up to being set free.

The negative liberty in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is on a more political level. During his travels, Byron witnessed many cases of oppression and developed an attitude of contempt of war in general, perhaps with the exception of fighting back the oppressors to defend or regain independence. Byron's feelings towards the matter in all the great countries on Harold's route (after the Iberian Peninsula most notably Italy and Greece) are genuine. Their struggles for liberty are looked at with a personal interest of the narrator; Jeffrey claims that the parts embodying "those stern and disdainful reflexions, to which the author seems to recur with unfeigned cordiality and eagerness" are "the best parts of the poem" (Bloom and Grundmann 145).

Byron was often reproached for a lack of patriotic spirit, which is true only partially. The reason is not likely to be found in hating his homeland, but in his acquiring an original conception of nationalism. Harold clearly sympathizes with all the mentioned countries and is not indifferent to their progress towards freedom; he is gloomy at first, when the situation looks catastrophic for Spain: “Ah, Spain! how sad will be thy reckoning day / When soars Gaul's Vulture, with his wings unfurled / And thou shalt view thy sons in crowds to Hades hurled (CHP 1:52). But as Britain's aid in the Peninsular war finally brought some positive prospects for the people, even the tone of the poem becomes less depressive:

“Byron by no means changed his mind about the Peninsular operations in 1811 but at least he did adopt a somewhat more hopeful view. The added stanzas are less occupied with predicting Spain's certain downfall than they are with lamenting that her day of deliverance is not nearer at hand. The assumption now is that that day will eventually come. (Borst 48)

Witnessing the progress, Harold's perception of it changes to a universal problem capable of causing a domino effect in other countries and colonies: “Fall'n nations gaze on Spain: if freed, she frees / More than her fell Pizarros once enchained” (CHP 1:89).

Perhaps the best proof of Byron's genuine compassion with the countries struggling for what Britain already possesses is to be found in his own words:

No Italian could have rejoiced more than I, to have seen a Constitution established on this side the Alps. I felt for Romagna as if she had been my own country, and would have risked my life and fortune for her, as I may yet for the Greeks. I am become a citizen of the world (Medwin 282-283).

This, perhaps somewhat unusual, sense of universal patriotism Byron adopted lasted until his death. It appears that at the time of the conversation Medwin recorded the poet had already been decided to help the Greek cause, even admitting he might

possibly find his end in there, which eventually happened. Considering Byron's detestation of war, and the fact that he personally attended one, it is necessary to scrutinize the one exception in this rule - the war for freedom.

### 3.3 Justification of War

It evokes a feeling of ambiguity to read through the parts of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* concerning war. On one side Byron is clearly disgusted by it, feels its futility and a remorse for all those who have died pointlessly in the turmoil. On 7th July of 1815, only a few weeks after the Battle of Waterloo, he wrote to his friend Thomas Moore complaining he was "sick at heart of politics and slaughters" (Moore 174). In *Don Juan*, war is described as a nonsense that never brings any good:

History can only take things in the gross;  
But could we know them in detail, perchance  
    In balancing the profit and the loss,  
War's merit it by no means might enhance ...  
(Wright 322)

But then there is the war for freedom; a warfare which, should it be waged to free whole nations, Byron tolerates or even strongly advises. For him, all the war-efforts "in the end, except in Freedom's battles / Are nothing but a child of Murder's rattles" (Wright 322). It is a bit problematic, for the borderline between a just cause to wage war and a dishonorable bloodshed is very thin and subjective. History offers many lessons where the 'preservation' of a nation was misused in a propaganda as a simple pretext to conquer, or worse, eradicate opponents. If "war's a brain-spattering, windpipe-slitting art / Unless her cause by right be sanctified" (DJ 9:4), how does one

determine a truly righteous cause for a war? There are two conditions Byron seems to have required in such a case:

Firstly, there must be no deliberate and unprovoked aggression. The only exception to this rule is overthrowing a tyranny or any case of fighting to reclaim what has been ‘stolen’. Such is the case of Greece, whose independence he ended up supporting personally. Historically, the Ottoman supremacy was but a period in Greece’s rich history preceded by eras of greatness; it is therefore relatively safe to consider a war waged to liberate a territory lawfully belonging to them a right cause. Byron himself offers a comparison of battles:

While Waterloo with Cannae's carnage vies,  
Morat and Marathon twin names shall stand;  
They were true Glory's stainless victories,  
Won by the unambitious heart and hand ...  
(CHP 3:64)

Those of Waterloo and Cannae, though historically very significant, in Byron’s view represent the vanity of war and a meaningless bloodshed. It is a question whether he did not choose these because the side he had probably supported was defeated; George Ticknor, who was present at Byron’s house when the news of Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo arrived wrote that his immediate reaction was “I am d——d sorry for it” (Bloom and Grundmann 15), and Hannibal’s name is not even pronounced in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*: “Italia! too, Italia! looking on thee / Full flashes on the soul the light of ages / Since the fierce Carthaginian almost won thee” (CHP 3:110).

The mention of the battles of Morat and Marathon is, however, definitely much more important. Byron clearly exulted in the results of these battles, despite no less blood has been spilled in them. The Swiss Confederates in the former and the Greeks in

the latter both had to defend themselves against mighty foes who attempted to conquer their lands. Had not the sides whose cause for the war Byron considered righteous come victorious, even these battles would possibly serve as examples of a meaningless carnage.

The second main condition is that the righteous war must never be waged in order to gain property, wealth, power et cetera. Byron refers to those as to ‘ambition’ in several passages, which generally represents the greedy and dishonest purposes. For Byron France is a delicate example; the French Revolution and even Napoleon’s ascension symbolized many ideas he believed in, but the success of the emperor’s war campaign eventually led the French astray and corrupted them with ambition. Harold stresses not only this, but also the consequences it will have:

Because the deadly days which we have seen,  
And vile Ambition, that built up between  
Man and his hopes an adamantine wall,  
And the base pageant last upon the scene,  
Are grown the pretext for the eternal thrall  
Which nips Life's tree, and dooms man's worst—his second fall.  
(CHP 4:97)

### **3.4 Consequence**

Although Byron is with his revolutionary enthusiasm obviously much closer to Paine’s republican ideas, the lamenting of the Waterloo carnage necessarily resembles the warnings of Edmund Burke. Byron’s abhorred ‘ambition’ is where he is perhaps the closest to Burke’s conservative view, although the latter was, unlike him, able to predict it. Burke claimed of the French Revolution we “ought to suspend our judgment until the first effervescence is a little subsided” (2), and maintained that unless the new order is

well compatible with the necessary components of a well-functioning state, “liberty is not a benefit ... and is not likely to continue long” (3). Burke did not live to see Napoleon’s coronation, but republican ideas ending up in a dictatorship sort of confirmed his caution was proper.

Burke, nevertheless, was not biased toward revolution in general; he was, after all, a sympathizer of the American independence, but he abhorred the pace of the reforms in France. The *Reflections on the Revolution in France* is a result of the French temerity he resented; his earlier attitudes, as his support of the mentioned American cause, were however more liberal. In that time he and Paine were close friends, but the difference of opinion on the French events caused their becoming rivals.

Byron’s position between these two is, however, not that clear as it would seem. It is unlikely that he would not see the possible risks coming from such a rapid change in governing system, he was just, perhaps surprisingly, overly idealistic about the human nature. It has been said that he was disgusted by the ‘ambition’ which caused that ““France got drunk with blood to vomit crime”. He realized that the development would serve as a strong counterargument for more conservative politics and thinkers. Byron referred to the likes of Sir Arthur Wellesley, who had led the British army against Napoleon at Waterloo and who later built a successful political career on denouncing such revolutionary tendencies: “And fatal have her [France’s] Saturnalia been / To Freedom's cause, in every age and clime” (CHP 4:97).

Burke anticipated such a development. He emphasized the importance of tradition, being aware that it took centuries before the systems settled and it is, therefore, risky to build all of them anew. His was the idea that improved should be only the outdated and nonfunctional principles:

It is far from impossible to reconcile ... the use both of a fixed rule and an occasional deviation ... Even in that extremity (if we take the measure of our rights by our exercise of them at the Revolution) the change is to be confined to the peccant part only; to the part which produced the necessary deviation; and even then it is to be effected without a decomposition of the whole civil and political mass, for the purpose of originating a new civil order out of the first elements of society.” (Burke 7-8)

If the disappointment of the French ‘ambition’ was too grievous a wound, Byron’s love of liberty would likely recede before the risks of revolution and he would become more conservative. His death in the Greek War of Independence, however, indicates rather his prevailing idealism, and the power of the free spirit.

#### **4 Independence**

The countries visited by Childe Harold all faced a threat to their freedom and independence to some extent. Portugal and Spain were forced to fight for their sovereignty against the Napoleonic France, the future of Venice as a free state was jeopardized by Austria and uncertain. Greece was a part of the Ottoman Empire, and therefore the least free of them, let alone independent. Its condition especially was a torment for Byron, who loved it and its history since early childhood. Yet even the question of tyranny must not be seen with binary optics, as Byron admired many things about some tyrants, especially Ali Pasha of Ioannina and Napoleon. Being interested in these two, their strong sides and weaknesses, he formed an idea of what an ideal leader should be like.

#### 4.1 Despotism and the Concept of the Great Leader

After leaving the Iberian countries in an ongoing warfare with uncertain results, Harold's next destination is Albania, in comparison with Portugal, Spain and Greece perhaps an inconspicuous country. The stanzas from what was at the time "probably the least known and least accessible region in Europe" are apparently from a more mysterious and unpredictable land. That is supported even by the very fact that Byron was only the second Englishman to "penetrate north of the capital city Janina" not being on a diplomatic quest (Borst 58). Harold is well aware of it:

Now Harold felt himself at length alone,  
And bade to Christian tongues a long adieu:  
Now he adventured on a shore unknown,  
Which all admire, but many dread to view...  
(CHP 2:43)

The Albanian region is geographically so difficult to inhabit that it was in a sense an advantage for its freedom: "The extremely mountainous nature of the country has made it so difficult of access that it has been relatively free from foreign influences" (Borst 59).

The central figure of the Albanian stanzas is the Ali Pasha of Janina, an Ottoman-Albanian despot, who evoked mixed feelings in Byron. He finds his rigor in imposing what Harold calls the "lawless law" (CHP 1:47) terrifying, but also fascinating. What Byron admired about Napoleon can be applied to Ali Pasha as well; during the years of his tyrannical rule he managed to develop almost an independent position and had a position of a powerful and influential leader, despite being officially subordinate to the Ottoman Empire. Byron also mentioned the similarity in a letter to his mother, saying he

was “a remorseless tyrant, guilty of the most horrible cruelties, very brave and so good a general, that they call him the Mahometan Buonaparte (Prothero).

It was already noted that to Byron being the ‘master of own destiny’ was greatly appealing. For both Napoleon and Ali Pasha the despotic way of ruling ensured certain independence and their causes were therefore less likely to be much influenced by others. But both serve as an example that independence does not necessarily ensure civil liberties. It is also the point where Byron’s admiration for these two leaders diminishes; for they failed to fulfill their potential to become truly great. Grobe claims:

A conflict between base ambition and lofty desire for liberty was inherent in every leader, Byron believed. In the great leader, however, the valid aim for his people would dominate the degrading passion for personal gain. The great leader’s command of his own passions must include the capacity to subordinate himself to law, as political liberty involved the allegiance of everyone in the state, including the ruler, to "just" law. (ii)

## **4.2 Responsibility**

Although there are not many sources from which Byron’s opinion of Paine’s works may be derived, it is not likely that he would not have been familiar with them. The latter was, despite being born British, a proud American and one of the most prominent figures of the revolution in 1776. Ticknor wrote that Byron told him he “certainly feels a considerable interest in America” and that he “intends to visit the United States” (Bloom and Grundmann 14). Whether he was an admirer of his fellow revolutionary sympathizer or not does not really matter, it is, nevertheless, clear that some of Paine’s thoughts inspired him. On Childe Harold’s Iberian campaign Grobe illustrates that Byron not only believed that a free spirit is a necessary requirement for freedom, but went as far as to claim people are responsible for being oppressed:

Byron held the people responsible for the power which the tyrant wielded over them. Their passivity, or even obsequiousness, constituted the source of despotic command; Byron's admiration for the Spanish resistance to Napoleon contrasts sharply with his scorn for Portuguese indifference. (ii)

The same thought was expressed by Paine in his *Rights of Man*, where he wrote: "[Man] acquires a knowledge of his rights by attending justly to his interests, and discovers in the event that the strength and powers of despotism consist wholly in the fear of resisting it, and that in order to be free it is sufficient that he wills it" (Paine 320).

To Byron it is a significant idea, for it recurs many times throughout the whole poem. After disdainfuling the Lusians for lacking the will to defend their freedom he extols the Spaniards who are seen as the exact opposite. The Greeks are seen as a bitter disappointment, for the once great country is now unrecognizable, and its heroes have disappeared: "Nor rise thy sons, but idly rail in vain / Trembling beneath the scourge of Turkish hand" (CHP 2:74). Byron tries to awaken the idle Greeks and warns them that the freedom will not return without their help:

Hereditary bondsmen! know ye not  
Who would be free themselves must strike the blow?  
By their right arms the conquest must be wrought?  
Will Gaul or Muscovite redress ye? No!  
(CHP 2:76)

Venice is the only exception; though some argue that "Venice's 1300 years of liberty have been undermined by the loss of moral stamina in her people" (Grobe ii), Byron blames England. He uses the fall of the republic, which had lasted for more than a thousand years, as a warning for Britain before the same fate:

... and thy lot  
Is shameful to the nations,—most of all,  
Albion! to thee: the Ocean Queen should not  
Abandon Ocean's children; in the fall  
Of Venice think of thine, despite thy watery wall.  
(CHP 4:17)

It is not the objective here to investigate why had Byron decided to change the narration from the third canto on; but the events in his life in the pause between the First and Second Childe Harold certainly had an influence on the tone of the poem. Jeffrey mentions that the third canto offers “deeper and more mature reflections”, his impression is that Harold is “somewhat older since he last appeared on the scene” and that “his misanthropy ... appears less active and impatient, even although more deeply rooted than before” (Jump 29)

The ‘impatience’ has been one of the distinctive traits of Childe Harold in the first two cantos, it diminished as Byron himself grew more mature, and the progress resulted in a more contemplative tone. Harold has certainly not changed that much over those four years, but many parts of the poem indicate he is more of an advisor and less of a revolutionary. It would be naive to believe that he had lost his radical ideas and became a moderate conservative; most of Byron’s characteristic traits remain unchanged, but the way he instigates his ideas turned less naive and more coherent.

Between the most prominent men of the era many analogies can be found: “Both Byron and Napoleon had begun as outsiders; both experienced a meteoric rise in early manhood; both suffered a catastrophic fall; both had to contemplate exile” (Clubbe). Clubbe is not specific whether by the ‘catastrophic fall’ of Byron’s he means his being left by his wife (which happened only half year after the Battle of Waterloo) or his death at Missolonghi. While the latter is more probable, the separation from his wife and

daughter Ada struck him heavily and, paradoxically, resulted in something as a second wind for his poetical inspiration. It led to Byron's merging with the heroic type he created, at first in his mind, about which Rutherford remarked that "[Byron] had always been attracted by their melancholy, isolation, and rebellious pride, but now he seemed to be living through their actual experiences", and adds that the "immediate result of his new state of mind was the obliteration of his earlier distinction between hero and narrator" (Jump 182).

The latter is, however, not accurate. Byron clearly changed the narration; unlike the first two cantos a first-person narrator appears frequently: "Once more upon the waters! yet once more! / And the waves bound beneath me as a steed" (CHP 3:2), but the distinction was not 'obliterated' and Harold is still at times talked about in third person: "And Harold stands upon this place of skulls / The grave of France, the deadly Waterloo!" (CHP 3:18)

Either way the Second Childe Harold uncovers Byron's being somewhat more sober, or at least less impulsive. Looking at the battlefield in Waterloo, Harold is not that enthusiastic about the victory than his earlier self would perhaps be; in fact, it is quite the contrary of the expected. He alerts the victorious side not to exaggerate the success, because one tyrant may always be replaced by another:

Fit retribution! Gaul may champ the bit,  
And foam in fetters, but is Earth more free?  
Did nations combat to make ONE submit;  
Or league to teach all kings true sovereignty?  
(CHP 3:19)

What Byron asserts here is that the problem of tyranny is hardly solved by one victory, and is alarmed that the victors' pride may usher a new despot into the world:

What! shall reviving thralldom again be  
The patched-up idol of enlightened days?  
Shall we, who struck the Lion down, shall we  
Pay the Wolf homage? proffering lowly gaze  
And servile knees to thrones? No; PROVE before ye praise!

...

If not, o'er one fall'n despot boast no more!  
(CHP 3:19-20)

Byron was alarmed that the bloodshed of the Napoleonic Wars may possibly result into a new circle of conflicts and was therefore attempting to calm the enthusiasm down. He had been well aware that without some wider change it was only a matter of time before some new dictator emerged. At the time the Battle for Waterloo was seen as a decisive victory by the majority. Byron did not share the idea and mourned for Napoleon; his defeat meant the restoration of monarchy in France, which the former perceived as a crushing blow for liberty.

## **5 The Greek Struggle**

Throughout the whole poem Greece is a recurring topic, perhaps something as a culmination of the whole theme of liberty. It has already been said Byron's approach to oppression was to blame the oppressed for allowing it with a lack of their 'free spirit'. The beauties of the nature are supposed to encourage the Greeks, whom he considered too lax in attempting to break free from the Ottoman Supremacy. But at the same time he was well aware that the age of ancient Greek warriors is long gone and the contemporary Greece cannot 'boast' with such heroes:

Fair Greece! sad relic of departed worth!  
Immortal, though no more; though fallen, great!  
Who now shall lead thy scattered children forth,  
And long accustomed bondage uncreate?  
Not such thy sons who whilome did await,  
The hopeless warriors of a willing doom,  
In bleak Thermopylae's sepulchral strait—  
Oh, who that gallant spirit shall resume ...  
(CHP 2:73)

But some have also noticed that Byron, after spending some time in Greece himself, sort of sobered up in the expectations of the Greek's liberation efforts:

The extremes to which most observers had gone in their opinions of the Greeks aroused Byron's special wrath. While some debased them unduly, others praised them far beyond what was reasonable. Above all Byron insisted that one must look upon the Greeks as they *are*, without allowing himself to be blinded by what they once *were*. (Borst 140)

It is true that the poetical Greece in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and the actual one are somewhat different, as some claim, "Byron sets up the distinction between Greece as poetic subject and Greece as contemporary reality" (Caminita 56). Byron was aware that the vast majority of his readers did not have the experience with Greece he had, and that the public opinions thereof are based mostly on stereotypes available from news and literature. The Greek cause got under even greater pressure in the light of the preceding events:

[The readers'] knowledge of the realities of Turkish occupation was limited, and their understanding of what the Greeks faced in attempting to overthrow their current political system was overshadowed by the successful revolutions of France and America (Caminita 57).

Byron learned not to overestimate the Greeks of his time, yet seems preoccupied with their hesitancy, which makes them diametrically different from their ancestors, and insists that without the necessary change in attitude freedom is far from being gained:

When riseth Lacedaemon's hardihood,  
When Thebes Epaminondas rears again,  
When Athens' children are with hearts endued,  
When Grecian mothers shall give birth to men,  
Then mayst thou be restored; but not till then ...  
(CHP 2:84)

## 6 Nature and Time

If Harold's comments on politics fulfill the satirical role of the poem, the images of nature represent the one typically Romantic feature. The sceneries present a background for the overall theme of melancholy and grief, but at the same time are used to bring an additional meaning. Byron uses the terms 'freedom' and 'liberty' plentifully when expressing attitude to more political matters, whereas the natural elements add a deeper symbolism. His descriptions of nature personify freedom and eternity which man cannot attain. Though the mankind is capable of creating notable things, they will, unlike nature, always be susceptible to time. It is Harold's greatest consolation in the enslaved Greece:

There the blithe bee his fragrant fortress builds,  
The freeborn wanderer of thy mountain air;  
Apollo still thy long, long summer gilds,  
Still in his beam Mendeli's marbles glare;  
Art, Glory, Freedom fail, but Nature still is fair.  
(CHP 2:87)

There are two particular things about nature Byron endorses in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. The first, as has already been mentioned, is nature's stability, which is one of the few things to bring the pilgrim solace. Kingdoms rise and fall, the nature remains the same since the creation, as Byron writes in the final ode dedicated to the Ocean:

Thy shores are empires, changed in all save thee—  
 Assyria, Greece, Rome, Carthage, what are they?  
 Thy waters washed them power while they were free  
 And many a tyrant since: their shores obey  
 The stranger, slave, or savage; their decay  
 Has dried up realms to deserts: not so thou,  
 Unchangeable save to thy wild waves' play—  
 Time writes no wrinkle on thine azure brow—  
 Such as creation's dawn beheld, thou rollest now.  
 (CHP 4:182)

The second is directly derived from it; as man is not immune to the time flow but nature is, it is also unrestrained, free and constantly full of life. Byron frequently uses natural symbols as a metaphor of freedom: “Rienzi! last of Romans! While the tree / Of freedom's withered trunk puts forth a leaf / Even for thy tomb a garland let it be” (CHP 4:114). The tree is also used to symbolize the Spanish struggle. Although “they fight for freedom, who were never free” (CHP 1:86), it does not mean they are forbidden to gain it, as even a tree may adapt where it did not grow before:

When shall she breathe her from the blushing toil?  
 How many a doubtful day shall sink in night,  
 Ere the Frank robber turn him from his spoil,  
 And Freedom's stranger-tree grow native of the soil?  
 (CHP 1:90)

At the time of the composition of the third canto of *Childe Harold*, Byron described a feeling close to Wordsworth's ‘spontaneous overflow’. According to his letter to Thomas Moore, that canto was his favorite as he had written it in a mixture of strong feelings, including the splendor of natural sceneries: “I was half mad during the time of its composition, between metaphysics, mountains, lakes, love unextinguishable, thoughts unutterable, and the nightmare of my own delinquencies.” (Moore 339)

Byron was never perceived as a ‘poet of nature’, or at least by the standards of Romanticism. He was fascinated by its grandeur and independence on everything that is

humane. Not that he would have completely ignored it before, but the Second Childe Harold was apparently influenced by Wordsworth's poems. According to Medwin, he said Byron: "You are accused of owing a great deal to Wordsworth. Certainly there are some stanzas in the Third Canto of 'Childe Harold' that smell strongly of the Lakes..." to which the poet answered: "Very possibly ... Shelley, when I was in Switzerland, used to dose me with Wordsworth physic even to nausea, and I do remember then reading some things of his with pleasure" (236-237). But both poets have a different understanding for nature and it also served them for different purposes: "Wordsworth would have Nature as an Other, a thing mightier than man, a teacher of humility, of patience and submission," whereas "for Byron, Nature is another self – or rather, a reflection of his own ego, another way of rendering himself, not patient and philosophical, but more volcanic, alienated, and dramatic in the eyes of the world" (Cochran 3).

For both of them nature is a teacher, yet both poets differ in what they learn from it. For Wordsworth it is 'humility, patience and submission'; traits indicating certain subordination to nature's supremacy. Byron's case is a little different. As his ideas are deeply connected with the concept of freedom, so is Harold's relationship with nature; it seems to be more free and their positions mostly equal. In *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* nature is more of a companion to the pilgrim than a supreme power to be feared of, although its might is, especially in the Alpine passages, often emphasized:

But these recede. Above me are the Alps,  
The palaces of Nature, whose vast walls  
Have pinnacled in clouds their snowy scalps,  
And throned Eternity in icy halls ...  
(CHP 3:62)

Using nature in a little different way than sensitive Wordsworth, however, does not mean it is an empty concept in Byron's poetry. It plays other significant role; as the poem is not primarily telling a story and Harold is an obscure and mysterious figure, nature is frequently the poet's means of showing certain things. Firstly, it is the way of moving the narration onwards and expressing the mood:

Adieu to thee, fair Rhine! How long, delighted,  
The stranger fain would linger on his way;  
Thine is a scene alike where souls united  
Or lonely Contemplation thus might stray ...  
(CHP 3:59)

Secondly, Byron uses nature to put the glorious past of Greece in contrast with its pitiable state of his day. Despite loving the ancient country, he finds that there is not much to admire now. Nature, however, remains the same; free as the Greeks once were, a reminder of the freedom and power they used to have:

And yet how lovely in thine age of woe,  
Land of lost gods and godlike men, art thou!  
Thy vales of evergreen, thy hills of snow,  
Proclaim thee Nature's varied favourite now;  
Thy fanes, thy temples to the surface bow ...  
(CHP 2:85)

According to Grobe, the turning towards nature was Byron's "first attempt at dealing with the problem of unhappiness, of man's conflict within himself and with society" (Grobe 89). It in itself does not bring a solution to the problems of the man's world, it, however, brings sort of consolation. The discrepancy between what is ideal and the reality, or the Weltschmerz, seems weaker when the poet contemplates the nature, which does not subject to man. It might be the cause of some of the more

hopeful verses of Byron's, which, though not frequent, are the more significant among the many gloomy ones:

I have not loved the world, nor the world me,—  
But let us part fair foes; I do believe,  
Though I have found them not, that there may be  
Words which are things,—hopes which will not deceive,  
And virtues which are merciful ...  
(CHP 3:114)

However, Shelley believed that the tone of overwhelming grief in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is either a pose, or that Byron is hopelessly cycling in it. In his response to T. L. Peacock, who "criticized the misanthropy and gloom" of the fourth canto, said that Byron "is heartily and deeply discontented with himself; and contemplating in the distorted mirror of his own thoughts the nature and the destiny of man, what can he behold but objects of contempt and despair? (Bloom and Grundmann 175).

## **7 Harold's Farewell**

The subtitle of the poem has been considered misleading immediately after its publication:

Byron's contemporary critics, even those old enemies at the Edinburgh Review who so excoriated the teenager's first publication in 1808 of *Hours of Idleness*, praised the poem's vigor and originality while others complained of the seeming lack of point of a poem whose subtitle, *A Romaunt*, led readers to believe that Byron had produced a typical romance quest" (Caminita 1-2)

If the term romaunt stands for a romance in verse, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is one only partly. It is a question whether Harold really is a pilgrim, because the goal of his pilgrimage is not clear: "Byron's poetic nihilism makes his protagonist an aimless wanderer, unable to reach a specific goal because Byron will not allow him to choose

one” (Caminita 54). The whole poem rather consists of certain fragments, which sometimes make sense together, but often do not. The poem’s ending is to some extent an exception. It seems that Byron tries to summarize his impressions and ideas scattered all over the four cantos, or at least end the poem with some reconciliation and attempts to convey a deeper meaning to all Harold as gone through. He assures the reader that Harold is but one of many and that as the journey ends, so does he:

But where is he, the pilgrim of my song,  
The being who upheld it through the past?  
Methinks he cometh late and tarries long.  
He is no more—these breathings are his last;  
His wanderings done, his visions ebbing fast ...  
(CHP 4:164)

John Wilson in his review of the fourth canto in 1818 noticed that: “During the composition of the first cantos of Childe Harold, [Byron] had but a confused idea of the character he wished to delineate,—nor did he perhaps very distinctly comprehend the scope and tendencies of his own genius” (Bloom and Grundmann 169). But it is no less likely that all the time Byron was just ‘delineating’ himself. Even in that was the case, Wilson’s opinion would be still understandable, because as Byron was undergoing certain development over the years, so did Harold. The mood of the first two cantos is lamenting and bitter. But the last two show more ‘peaceful’ melancholy and ideas more aligned, which may perhaps be ascribed to Byron’s calmer nature after his final exile from Britain in 1816.

Although Byron at that time surely did not lost his interest in politics and vigor in commenting upon it, there is something of a reconciliation in the later stanzas, or at least a noticeable decrease in wanton provocation from his side. It may perhaps be ascribed to the change of environment, as Borst says: “When circumstances finally

forced the issue and Byron left England forever in 1816, he soon found Italy almost equally congenial to his tastes and temperament” (Borst 154). For Harold Italy is “the garden of the world, the home / Of all Art yields, and Nature can decree (CHP 4:26).

However abstract and relative the concept of freedom is, Byron makes several conclusions about it. That he did not consider glory and other ‘ambitious’ goals a justifiable reasons for war has already been scrutinized, and in the finale of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* he completes the idea:

There is the moral of all human tales:  
'Tis but the same rehearsal of the past,  
First Freedom, and then Glory—when that fails,  
Wealth, vice, corruption—barbarism at last.  
(CHP 4:58)

If glory is sought without taking freedom into account, the ambition eventually corrupts the formerly virtuous goals. Throughout the whole poem, many empires which are now but a shadow of their former self are lamented upon, but as the end of Harold and his journey draws draws near, Byron seems to learn from their story that not even the greatest human power can conquer time.

Opposed to this stands, once again, the nature; the Ocean, to which Childe Harold’s last stanzas are dedicated, is praised as an entity free from all, even from the desires of men. Even if Byron is frequently overwhelmed by the gloom of man’s imperfection, there are parts which show the power of his poetry. As Shelley claimed, “that he is a great poet, I think the address to Ocean proves” (Bloom and Grundmann 175). The ocean is Childe Harold’s farewell:

Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean—roll!  
Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain;  
Man marks the earth with ruin—his control  
Stops with the shore ...  
(CHP 4:179)

For Byron the ocean's invulnerability to man encompassed something as the ideal of freedom, which man cannot attain. The mankind tends to yield to their temptations and succumb to evil, which is deeply connected to their liberty as a whole:

Man's resistance to the evil within himself encompasses his resistance to political tyranny, which has its roots in the very heart of man. Man's struggle to be free from the evil within himself is basic to his aspirations for political freedom. The weak passion to yield is as destructive to liberty as is the base desire to tyrannize (Grove 106-107).

On the other hand, resisting the temptation is rewarding, Byron only laments that those able to do so are rare. He puts an emphasis on the importance of the free spirit because the physical freedom is possible without that in mind, but not vice versa. In the mentioned poem *On the Castle of Chillon* he proposes the idea that the inner freedom is a choice which no one can influence but ourselves. And the other way round, man without the freedom in heart is often a prisoner even when physically free.

## 8 Conclusion

The thesis investigates predominantly the period of his life around *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and, necessarily, the presence of the concept in this poem; it must be therefore taken into account that the knowledge of the preceding pages does not have to be accurate for his later works.

It has been shown that Byron's conception of freedom in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is complex, but focused around several key points. In a wider context the importance of equality, freedom of expression and the power to 'master' own destiny has been demonstrated. These are to be considered something as the pillars of general liberty for Byron, from which other particular freedoms of man are derived. More specifically, in order to be truly free an individual must not be seen as inferior because of relative and subjective things, such as being Catholic. He must not be coerced to express himself in a way generally accepted but in that which he himself wishes. And last but not least, man must possess a free will (not strictly according to the philosophical meaning opposed to destiny), an inner power to choose and act as he wants.

All these concepts are connected to the negative liberty Isaiah Berlin proposed, which concerns the extent of being able or unable to act in the desired way, but most importantly, to its 'positive' counterpart. The positive liberty, or as it has been called in relation to Byron, the 'free spirit', is the most crucial part from which the final form of one's liberty grows. Byron detested tyrants and oppressors, but it has been shown that he mostly held the oppressed responsible for it, as they lacked the free spirit and were often too frightened (or lax) to fight to gain freedom the way the heroes of the ancient civilizations would.

He saw the ideal example of such a spirit in the French and the American revolutions, but did not belong to those very much alarmed with the progress of the former. Byron saw Napoleon partly as a tyrant, but in the context of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* even more as a beacon of hope for changing Europe. He was thus in the minority considering the Battle of Waterloo not a victory, but rather an end of hope to replace monarchies.

The poem's finale, Byron's 'Ode to the Ocean' demonstrates how much he admired nature for its independence. If the main source of his grief was the imperfection of man, who is capable of attaining freedom, yet often too weak to fight for it, the ocean is the symbol of the ideal: unconquered by man and immune to all evil.

It is not possible to unify all Byron's ideas of freedom into one main concept. Yet if there is something the given fragments enable his reader to conclude, something as an ultimate form of freedom, for Byron it is unreachable unless the individual totally wills it. Should there be an absolute and general will to be free in all mankind, tyrants would scarcely thrive as they did in Byron's days. The melancholy of Childe Harold shows he suffered personally for those who were not free, but mostly because he blamed them for their weakness and a lack of will for freedom. It embodied the endless conflict between the ideal and the real; and because no human can ever be perfect, it will likely remain a struggle forever.

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