

The Great Romantics: Napoleon in Lord Byron's Poetry

Ivane Menteshashvili

Two hundred forty years ago the great man was born, who is still admired by millions. Napoleon during his lifetime delighted even those, who were fighting against him. What is the secret of this delight and admiration which Napoleon has gained among millions? History knows other great military commanders and great lawmakers, who had won a lot of battles and set up the political and social frame of the society. The same can be said about those ones, who streamlined the ravings of extremely radical champions of freedom. But had the predecessors of the Emperor of the French such an admirers who permanently carried with them his portraits like Julien Sorel from the "Scarlet and Black" by Stendhal was doing this?

His fame is really dual. On the one hand he is praised as the greatest commander, lawmaker and statesman, on the other hand he is blamed despot, who had trampled freedom and victimized millions of lives. He is viewed as giant and pygmy at one and the same time. But where is the truth, how we can find genuine benchmarks? Can we treat him as some sort of a lot of the providence, or he must be viewed only as an output of his own boundless ambitions, omnipotent military genius and thirst of power and military fame?

No person, even genius, who has no match can be considered out of the general content and spirit of his epoch and exist independently of them as Conte says. What was the most significant phenomenon of Napoleonic times? This was romanticism of the epoch and Napoleon can he treated as a man romance, because with all his military genius he was embodiment and revival of medieval chivalry and knighthood. So, in order to characterize him it is necessary to address another great romantic, but

romantic of poetry, particularly Lord Byron, Napoleon's junior contemporary.

The age of reason, with its strict, unequivocal prescriptions and norms, absolutely impeccable forms were expressed in public life by an absolute monarchy. It was like pyramid crowned by the royal power. Each section of this pyramid, like the art of the classicism times was elegant, beautiful, but strictly limited. There was no space or principle, permitting to manifest something arbitrary. Any arbitrary move was excluded. The well-known motto *L'État c'est moi* was the verbal manifestation of this political principle.



Votaire & Rousseau

Jean Jacques Rousseau was the first who stroke values, worshipped by 18th century. This was the romantic breakthrough in the selfsameness of then time society. The French revolution, destroyed monarchy was the romantic breakthrough, in all fields of life. Strictness and accuracy of the forms of absolute monarchy were substituted by chaos, tumult and revolutionary instability.

Europe of then times already had revolutionary experience, particularly civil War in England. But to that war, waged in an appropriate manner, in compliance with its rules, the French contrasted overwhelming revolutionary enthusiasm. The Civil War in England was led by the stern sprint of Puritans, while the French

revolution poured out mighty feelings and tumults. Therefore this great political quake from the very beginning had been accompanied at first by Andres Chenier's poem "Jeu de Pomme". Later that revolutionary passion had been manifested in immortal "Marseillaise". Ascetic puritans, so called "Saints" leveled everything and everybody in the face of the almighty and relentless God of the Old Testament. The French revolutionaries were eager to distinguish themselves. Therefore Abbot Gregoire the deputy of the Convention while one of the sessions exclaimed. "We are becoming the nation of the Gods".

Therefore through this inspiration the French revolution was imitating Antiquity. On its own side Antiquity was full of heroes, endowed with civic and military virtue. This was the main distinguished element of the revolutionary romanticism. The destiny of the heroes is fighting. They fight in order to demonstrate their grandeur because their inspiration can not be restricted by their physical limits. As much as their spirit is great their battle becomes greater, but in such case the heroes fight not each other, but they challenge the universe. When they perceive their own place in the universe and then conquer it, they acquire immortality and grandeur. And if their activity meets the demand of reality history glorifies them and they become heroes.

Napoleon had come out from the revolution, from the chaos of freedom which still had been shrinking in convulsions. But being its offspring he had not strangled it, but just streamlined, transformed it into a system and gave to it his own style. Being the child of Revolution he took an enormous amount of romantic energy and poured it out while his epic, putting European nations into motion. All these to a certain extent were the harbinger of modern EU. But heroes cannot be satisfied with the insignificant success. They

always dare for more. Their life cannot be occurred in a regular manner, they were inspired by romanticism. If they took heart they could be defeated too, so great was their goal. Grandeur of their enterprise sometimes destroys them and raises mediocrity. Therefore it is possible to refer to Lord Macaulay that "that age was full of lessons for the greats and amusements for the weak". And he points out to two great persons who advanced too much and overtook the humanity. One was buried in Longwood, another in Missolongi, says Lord Macaulay.

Considering Lord Byron from Lord Macaulay's point of view, who put him on the same desk with Napoleon it is necessary stress not only their grandeur, but the specific traits of their character, particularly of Lord Byron's who is treated as dashing, mysterious figure exhibiting a fascinating kind of self-destructive energy, wandering the face of the earth, in expiation for some unnamed sin.

Actually the same can be said about Napoleon, who also had been wandering around the earth. If Lord Byron was destroying norms and limits in poetry Napoleon was doing the same in the art of war. Not for nothing, while his first Italian campaign, Napoleon disguised under the uniform of the Austrian officer of Italian ethnicity secretly entered the Austrian camp and had been listening the reprimands of Austrian generals, addressed to one young French general (i.e. himself) who was fighting against any rules of warfare.

But not only discordance with the rules related these two genii to each other. They had similar creed and exhilaration. And all these are manifestation of romantic feelings. En route to Egypt, in 1798, on the board of the ship "Orion" the young general exclaimed really historic phrase: "We need poets". This is nothing else than romanticism. Longing for to conquer Egypt

and to take his place beside Alexander the Great, the young general at the same time was reading continuously books from the ship library and encouraged others to do so. The poems by the legendary Celtic bard Ossian were always beside him. The diary of young officer was full of consideration over such notions as "Glory", "Virtue", "Patriotism". Therefore his attention always was attracted by those heroes who had faced death for the sake of their principles (Earl of Essex, Algernon Sidney).

He was full of sentimental and melancholic approach. Being ready to die, as any professional military, he being young officer and even a cadet he was thinking about suicide because held that "Men are so far removed from the nature! They are cowardly, vile, cringing! What spectacle will I see in my country? My compatriots are in fetters: trembling, they kiss hand which press them!"

If one of the pillars of romanticism was idealizing and interest in the Past here it can be said, that he was keen of history and ordered on the board of the "Orion" to read only historical books.

To Napoleon's romanticism can be related his attitude to woman and love. This deals with the most delicate issues. Being a young officer, Napoleon speaks to the prostitute in Palais Royale, but not for to have her as a prey, but in order to understand her spirit to perceive her psychology. She had passed along him not in a usual challenging manner, but with a certain timidity, which had encouraged him and he dared to speak to her. She asks him to go to her place where he will have pleasure. But he is more interested in understanding why she had taken to this way of life. So, it was not rustic satisfaction of wishes, but an attempt to perceive the psychology of the woman, who had been forced to take to the street.

His attitude towards love affairs was admirable. While consulate, being informed that one young officer had committed suicide through failed love affairs the First Consul issued proclamation: "He was good officer, but one heeds the same fortitude and endurance for to withstand tumult which is needed not to waver under of constant and goaling shelling of enemy". So, he cherished love!

All these tumults which had tortured young Napoleon were expressed later by fifteen years old Lord Byron in his "On leaving Newstead Abbey".

Lord Byron being mutineer, extreme individualist and therefore according to Thomas Peacock was the only hero of all his poems. Thus, what was the attitude of this conqueror of Parnassus towards the first servant of the Mars? What could be General Bonaparte, then the First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte and finally Emperor Napoleon I



for the young rebellious romantic nobleman who by the beginning of the Revolution was just one year old, at the start of the Empire 16, and by the time of resignation of Napoleon 27? If poetry as Lord Byron had said himself is a sensation of past and future then how the great poet, champion of

liberty conceived the great storm of feelings and passions which were embodied in his great contemporary, who being genius of the sword from time to time exclaimed with desperation: "I can not fight!"

In order to clarify this issue it is necessary to notice that all poems by Byron about Napoleon were written in 1814-1816 i.e. after his downfall. In all seven poems several issues are manifested intermittently. These are confusion caused by Napoleons defeat, reprimands for the rapture of power and glorification. The first, the most impressive sense which is manifested in any of his poems is confusion. Byron is dazzled, surprised by the contrast between the rise and the downfall of Napoleon. He is dazzled and cannot understand the reasons for this enormously great rising and rapid downfall.

Actually this confusion to a certain extent was reflection of those ideas which were dominant throughout the Europe. Fighting Napoleon his enemies were at the same time admiring his

grandeur. Therefore while farewell of the Emperor with Old and Young Guard in Fontainebleau everybody gave way to his feelings and the British Commissioner Mr. Campbell even exclaimed with the tears in his eyes: "What an effusive scene and how it is worthy of this great man!" Napoleon and his meteoric epic caused admiration and confusion at the same time.

It is rather interesting to follow Byron's evaluation, which he had done after the

First Abdication. "On my return, find my little pagod, Napoleon pushed of his pedestal. It is his own fault. Like Milo, he would rend the oak, but it dosed again, wedged his hands; and now the beasts, - Lion, bear, down to the dirtiest jackal, may all tear him". Here we can see a certain duality. Lord Byron avows Napoleon as his idol, but at the same time he reprimands him. What for? For defeat? It means that if there would not be downfall the hero would be stayed out of rebuke.

Such types of reprimands are stated in "Ode to Napoleon Bonaparte" where Byron says about Napoleon: "Who strewed our earth with hostile bones. Who scourge thy kind Who bowed so low the knee?" The downfall of the hero as Byron says unexpectedly showed millions the futility of his ambitions.

And immediately the idol is turned into". Pagod things of sabre-sway, With fronts of brass and feet of clay". Here Byron reprimands most of all the rapture of power in Napoleon.

"When the immeasurable power, unsated to resign, Had been an act of purer fame, Than gathers round Marengo's name and gilded thy decline". While criticizing Napoleon for the thirst of victory and triumph Byron at the same time contrasts him with the Roman dictator Sulla and Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire Charles V, who resigned being at the climax of their power.

But here at the same time has appeared the first sign of Byron's wavering.



Reprimanding hero for his ambition, the poet at the same time stresses the grandeur of his personality: "And monarchs, bowed the trembling limb, And thanked him for a throne! Oh! never may, tyrant leave behind A brighter name to lure mankind!" The purpose of Napoleon according to Byron is to prevent the appearance of new Napoleon.

Most of all Byron is confused by the downfall of Napoleon. He cannot understand and explain this phenomenon. "Though haste the to the sullen isle, And gaze upon the sea; That element may meet your smile – It never was ruled by thee!" And here an excellent parallel is made with Prometheus: "Or, like the thief of fire from the heaven, Will thou withstand the shock? And share with him the unforgiving, His vulture and his rock?" Proceeding from here it can be said that Napoleon's exile is something like repentance of the sin by romantic hero who thus expiates quakes of his military genius and dooms himself to eternal torture of isolation and inactivity. But abstract idea of liberty again attracts poet and he states George Washington his new hero, comparing him with Cincinnatus: "Yes One – the first, the last, the best, The Cincinnatus of the West! ..."

Wavering of the poet can be traced also in "On the star of the Legion of the Honour". He glorifies the Order: "Star of the brave! – whose beam has shed such glory over quick and dead". But at the same time it is "radiant and adored deceit". And here again Byron rises the same question, why the downfall had taken place? For him it is the greatest mystery and enigma, "Wild meteor of immortal birth! Why rise in Heaven to set on Earth?" Praising Order, tricolor Byron actually glorifies Napoleon who so tightly was interconnected with these symbols. After restoration the Bourbons brought back white flag, Prince Polygnac drew the Order of Legion of Honor in the streets of Paris fastened it to

the tail of the horse. It was mean, which even conquerors – the Russians, British, Prussians or Austrians had not done. Therefore its degradation causes pity of the poet. Mediocrity will rise instead of the brightness of the star. "Star of the brave! The ray is pale, And darkness must again prevail! When thy bright promise fades away, Our life is but a load of clay!" Thus here even the abstract idea of freedom is overshadowed by the brilliance of the glory of hero.

"From the French" is the most genuine expression of the feelings felt by the soldiers to Napoleon. Here is love to the chief, commander, leader who led them to victory through what they shared glory. It is easy to understand, that poet not only manifests feelings of the soldiers, but shares with them in their admiration. It is felt well through the enormous passion of the verse which imbibes each line. It is veristic approach in the poetry, so veritable feelings are showed there.

In spite of Byron's adherence to the idea of freedom his admiration with Napoleon's personality is manifested in "Napoleon's Farewell". Although he makes proviso that these are ideas of Napoleon himself rather than his own the strength of passion and the depth of definitions point out that all these are the output of Byron's reflection. Here is contemplation from the outside. The fighting of the giant with the universe is shown in which the hero though the greatest is doomed to the failure. "I have coped with nations which dread me thus lonely, The last single captive to millions of war!" The final line is an excellent template of poetical passion through which Byron confers upon Napoleon's personality the sense of eternity. "There are links which must Break in the chain that had bound us, Then turn thee and call on the Chief of thy Choice!" So glory is the crucial thing for Byron and he bows in front of it.

It is rather interesting to consider the poem "Age of Bronze". The critique, at least the Soviet one stated that in this poem Byron at last debunks his hero, i.e. Napoleon. In our opinion this statement must be revised. Debunking of the false hero takes three big chapters! If the hero really were a nobody he could be unmasked just in a several lines! But here is pretty different spectacle. The genius of the pen is at his best while describing Napoleon's deeds and finally instead of destroying portrays giant, names him lion and praises him enormously. It is a gigantic work, which is full of passionate admiration. Pygmy does not deserve such amount of work. It could be debunked by means of the stinging epigrammes, which Byron had already addressed to Castlereagh or William Pitt the younger. In this case it is not debunking but glorification. Here, like in other verses the focal point is again the comparison of rising and downfall. Byron details this issue and tries to understand the essence of Napoleon's downfall. He tries to explain the swing between the rising and downfall.

Vacillation of Byron between reprimand and admiration is overcome here in a brilliant passage which starts the Chapter V. "O Heaven! Of which he was in power a feature; - Oh Earth! Of which he was a noble creature!" It is enormously laconic and elegant way to show that hero is favorite of the fate, benefited by the providence. Byron creates the image of superman. And immediately this piece is followed by perennial question: "Alas! Why passed he too Rubicon - the Rubicon of Man's awakened rights, To herd with vulgar kings and parasites?" In this passage poet tries to find answer why heroes dare to cross the so-called Rubicon and dare to take on the heavy burden of power. If not everybody dares to do this, it means that daring ones are favorites of fate.

The other testimony of Byron's admiration with Napoleon is that very fact that in

April, 1816 being in Belgium while working on "Child Harold" he visited Waterloo and rode twice through its length and breadth. Later, by Child Harold's mouth he again names Napoleon lion, expresses pity that after downfall of the lion the world is forced to prostrate in front of the wolf. Waterloo caused restoration of the kings. In this battle, continues Harold the greatest, not the worst among men had been fallen. Here Byron stresses bravery of the hero. Bravery is his distinguished trait. Through bravery he had come to 18, Brumier and to Waterloo. If he were moderate or cautious he still would be on the throne, or the throne would not be at all. For Byron Waterloo is not military defeat only, which could suffer any military commander ... "Thou art nothing, save the jest of the fate" - addresses Byron the Battle it self.

Therefore in "Ode from the French" Byron exclaims "The Chief was fallen but not by you, the vanquishers of Waterloo!" Thus Byron tries to show that Napoleon, even defeated is greater than his enemies, because he was defeated by the fate. He was defeated says Byron because "he sunk into the king". But at the same time he leaves to the humankind the idea of the fighting against reaction.

If admiration towards Napoleon manifested in "From the French" to a certain extent can be treated as an expression of the love of the soldiery, in "On Napoleon's Escape from Elba" Byron completely appears as an adamant admirer of Napoleon. Actually in these two poems Byron appears as the worshipper of the glory. Glory and grandeur are these two things which Byron admits unequivocally. Byron bows in front of Napoleon's halo. Fame and power force Byron to forget even his hatred toward tyranny. This can be proved by Stendhal in his memoirs. They met in Milan in 1817. "I subsequently discovered that Lord Byron was at once in favor of Napoleon and jealous of his fame". He used to say:

“Napoleon and myself are the only individuals who sign our names with the initials N.B. (Noel Byron)” – said Stendhal.

So, for Lord Byron Napoleon is something meteorically flashing, mysterious, even incomprehensive. Being romantic Lord Byron sees in Napoleon knight, great warrior, offshoot of the heroic age of feat and bravery. All those were enormously precious for romantic self-awareness. Victory, so important for romantic perception as the symbol of glory and grandeur of the person is the main criterion for Byron while considering Napoleon’s personality. Napoleon is valuable for Byron as victorious hero. This heroic, romantic

charm is so important for Lord Byron that the downfall of Napoleon is held by him as the coming of the reign of mediocrity interconnected with the political reaction.

Very interesting in Lord Byron’s creation is that he always tries to understand and explain the reason for downfall of Napoleon. This phenomenon confuses Byron and it is one more proof that Napoleon really bore in himself some mystery which still needs to be perceived. Otherwise it would not be possible to understand why the champion of liberty was at the same time the admirer of the greatest master of the sword.