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BYRON'S CHILDE HAROLD: THE LIBERAL NATION - STATE

Review
Article

Keywords

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the topic of the liberal nation-state in Lord Byron's Childe Harold's Pilgrimage. This work is significant as it includes the beginnings of the liberal ideology. The paper will show that, during the times of British Romanticism, liberalism and nationalism coincided. The context of these times will be analysed in parallel with the Populist ideology nowadays to which it bears certain resemblances. Last, but not least, the issue of whether there is ideology or not in an apparent wish to do away with ideology in the call of the Romantic poets will be researched.

In *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Lord Byron writes about a young aristocrat who grows tired of pleasures and starts travelling. He is contemplating life in various cultures during a series of historical events, such as the Spanish peoples fighting against Napoleon, who was trying to conquer them, then he reflects over the way Napoleon had become too authoritarian, and afterwards he criticizes the Austrian authority over Italy. Byron praises the period of Republicanism in ancient Rome, which he considers a model for his Italian contemporaries. The main theme of the poem is a passion for liberty. His conclusions lead to the idea that there were, during the course of history, times described as progressive, when there was, to some extent, a democratic order. Byron is looking for simple people, who had not become corrupted under the influence of the bourgeois class, praising them for their greatness and courage (Anixt, 1965). The poem *Childe Harold* is a call to action for the people of his times, a way to give them an example of heroic behaviour and of motivating them towards adopting a revolutionary behaviour in order to achieve social change. Indeed, Byron has had a significant influence on the development of the democratic-revolutionary poetical genre as far as the XIXth century. The Romantics were situated within the aristocratic class facing decline, and they took over from Byron his pessimism and disappointment; what is more, the progressive poets developed the revolutionary and realist traditions he had established (Anixt, 1965). Lord Byron calls for a rebellion against a British lifestyle as well as for individual freedom: "Byron dressed splendidly, went to fight for the freedom of Greece, satirized many sides of English life, and hated all false and insincere talk." (Thornley and Roberts, 1984) Byron's critique of social rules extends to a critique reaching a higher level, from individuals to historical events. *Childe Harold* expresses his reaction to the historical events in Europe: "Byron is our one great interpreter of the mood of disillusion, cynicism, and unrest which, all over Europe, accompanied the reaction against the Revolution." (Buchan, 1923).

Byron has a significant contribution to the ideology of liberalism:

Byron was associated with liberty, rebellion, and revolution throughout the nineteenth century, and writers such as Thomas Carlyle and John Stuart Mill considered him seriously as a political poet in the early Victorian period. Mill's progressive liberalism did not stretch to Byron's 'transgressive eloquence', however, a poetics that spoke to, instead of on behalf of, the masses (Wootton, 2016).

Even Mill, the author of *On Liberty*, was influenced in his theory of liberalism by Byron.

Childe Harold is a call to a critique of a certain way of life and social order. After publishing this work, Byron regretted the violence of language, sarcasm and fury (Bălu, 2013). The way a society looks like is represented in a skeptical way:

It featured his first Byronic hero, a sceptical and melancholy young man grown old and exhausted before his time, promiscuous and covertly bisexual in his past love affairs, disorientated and cut off from belief in a benevolent God and divine Providence – in short, disillusioned by personal experience. It gave prominent expression to a many voiced movement already long underway in the wake of Enlightenment scepticism (Lessenich, 2017).

As the current state of affairs in a certain society and culture is no longer wished by, it should disappear. It is said that cultures die due to the phenomenon of implosion, from within not from without. This means that external events were not the source of the change, but simply the fact that it no longer fit with the current values of the contemporaries of Byron. This was the age of Romantic nationalism, which occurred at the same time with the disappearance of absolute monarchies. It was the time when liberal democratic movements were rising.

Childe Harold is about travelling across cultures, similarly to what cosmopolitanism means today. Byron tries to show how nationalism helps in defining the Britishness of a character, who can also be an outsider, in other cultures. The poem addresses a contemporary issue. The origins of liberalism are located in the XVIIIth-XIXth century, according to Taranu (2001), and it referred to meritocratic democracy.

The nation-state marks a break with the empires ruled by monarchies, and before them, with the political power of the Church. With the apparition of nation-states, the question of the territory is solved, as they have their own territory, and their borders are defined by the territory occupied by the respective nation. The most important feature is that they have a shared national culture, by which the people are united. The disappearance of empires went hand in hand with a feeling of national unity, as ethnic groups wished to take care of their own political destiny; this tendency extended towards the twentieth century. Nationalism is referred to as a "gravedigger of empires" (Hague et al 1998). Thus, the connection freedom and nationalism for the Romantics becomes clear, as a nation was free through its unity from the authority of a monarch as well as free since it did not depend on the empire they were

previously part of in their political decisions. The issue of the nation state and its borders is discussed by Clifford (1992) with respect to *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. In a review of Clifford's analysis, it is mentioned that Byron used Childe Harold's pilgrim character in order to debate "over the notion of patriotism": "Byron turned to the eighteenth-century notion of the cosmopolitan or 'philosophical traveller' to counter the domestic model of the patriot in native poets like Southey and Wordsworth." (Wohlgemut, 2009) The first two cantos of the poem are "a critique of conservative models of nation such as Edmund Burke's, which imagine the nation as a self-contained and unified whole". The notion of borders is discussed when it comes to the borders between Portugal and Spain, which are separated by a "silver streamlet" (1:33). "In contrast to Harold, whose view is bound only by the horizon and extends from one nation to the other without interruption, the peasants standing on either bank see the streamlet as divisive." (Wohlgemut, 2009) Byron's character is defined as "a citizen of the world": "Byron definitively cuts the romantic traveler loose from his nation, making him (irredeemably) a citizen of the world." (Wohlgemut, 2009).

The view of the Romantic Byron coincides with today's populist views, which are concerned with issues of identity, especially after Brexit. We witness, through populism, anti-globalist ideas, and with them, nationalist promotion. Populism, like Romantic nationalism, and liberalism, is against the elites, and against hegemony. Populism is defined as anti-ideology, reminding of the honesty and same interests of leaders and people as promoted by Romanticism. Populism, like Romanticism, deals with a critique of society, peacefully opposed to corrupt elites and supporting the legitimacy of the people's power. Populist ideology was defined as a new right-wing ideology that is against immigration and multiculturalism, as well as the involvement of religion in any size of the state. Thus, like Romanticism, it is concerned with the specificities of a culture, of a nation. Left-wing populism combines populist rhetoric and ideology with that of left-wing politics. It is generally a rhetoric of anti-elitist feelings, an opposition to the system, and the support of the people, reminding clearly of the revolutionary Romantics, Byron included, wishing to criticize the system and the present time elites, in the form of the aristocracy, and willing to grant the people political power. Among the concerns of left-wing populism are anti-capitalism, social justice, pacifism, anti-globalization; classroom theory in society and socialist issues are not as important as traditional left-wing parties. Leftist populism is based on the ideals of equality, which is common for British Romantics. By studying the historical age of British

Romanticism, we could gain insight into our contemporary issues. The Romantic age is thus not so remote from our times; on the contrary, just like their poetry, regarding emotions and aesthetic value, it is universal from a political standpoint as well.

The only difference between British Romanticism and Populism lies with their views on democracy. With Populism, there is growing scepticism in democracies. Due to moral concerns regarding traditional party politics, in the twentieth century, many citizens of the advanced democracies in the world have become solidary with left-wing and right-wing populism (Zabala, 2017). Communism was defeated, and we could witness the rise of the liberal democracy, of globalization. Meanwhile, democratic elections meant that there was a political discourse situated beyond the right and left wing opposition. Giddens explains that the purpose was to create a nation with one single idea of politics, where there was no authority without democracy. This referred to a moral politics, thus populism could become the only productive form of taking into account the wishes of the people, in order to promote collective participation (Zabala, 2017). If democracy wishes, nowadays, to remain superior to other political systems, then it should take into account what the people wishes for, which role is being taken over, for now, by left-wing populism. In the values sustained by populism, we can notice similarities with liberalism.

The old ideologies are adapted in the course of history to the contemporary world; this is the case of nationalism. There are values which last in time throughout different cultures, and which are taken over by ideologies wishing to convince the masses to choose a certain leader. The most widely spread ideology in the world is, currently, ethnic nationalism (Jisi, 2009), which advocates for social cohesion, and which reminds of British Romanticism and its nationalist values.

The contemporary relevance of Byron's work *Childe Harold* reaches even further than ideology resemblance and comparison. Vianu (Bălu, 2013) writes about the Byron phenomenon, whose life and work are significant and represent a symbol for the entire European culture preparing its political scene for modernity. Romania's history parallels the fight led by Byron for freedom in Italy and Greece. During those times, in Romania the revolt from 1821 was taking place, against the rulers imposed by the Turks in the Romanian Kingdoms, the national revolution in 1848, and the achieving of independence from the Ottoman Empire. Bălu tries to reconstruct the cultural road towards the European Union, with all the language which are used within it. According to Bălu (2013) the journey of Childe Harold goes on according to the contemporary aspirations of the epoch, as the travelogues from the eighteenth century and the

beginning of the nineteenth century revealed a wish to know other geographical spaces and other cultures. Leaving England was upsetting at the time, but the reason was to take a distance from the aristocratic society which had become a subject of despising, with its negative influence. The poet is involved passionately in his story, and he describes nature with sensitivity.

We could draw a parallel with the present-day Brexit event, by regarding the break of the British with the European Union as being a similar situation with the break of the British character Childe Harold from Britain itself and its aristocratic society. The break is one from imposed norms and ideology. We can also notice that the same issue of nationalism is emerging nowadays together with the phenomenon of the European Union integration. The British today are breaking free from the ideology imposed by the EU, just like Childe Harold and Lord Byron have decided to break free from the ideology of their times, imposed by British society. The appeal of other cultures is also heavily under discussion today, as the European Union's slogan is "unity in diversity", and the question remains as to what extent this can be possible, without the cultures losing their specificities. Today the industry of tourism is flourishing, also under the help of the EU policies of cultural heritage and foreign language learning promotion. The contacts and relationships among cultures are strongly encouraged, through travelling for business and studying purposes. Plenty of people nowadays can relate to Childe Harold as a travelling character, who goes abroad trying to find a better life according to his personal principles. The phenomenon of moving, studying and working abroad is in full progress once a country achieves European Union integration. The fact that leaving England was seen as upsetting for the character Childe Harold by his contemporaries resonates with the feeling of countries losing their working force and part of the population as people have the opportunities to leave their countries and move and work abroad. Childe Harold tries to find himself by leaving the society where he feels imprisoned by the norms which make him lead a life of pleasures. The life of pleasures during Byron's time can easily find an equivalent in today's consumerist culture, which promotes, in its turn, pleasure, and leaves traditional values and principles aside. People have become less serious about art, less concerned with skills and gifts, less concerned with beauty even when it comes to architecture, as Roger Scrutton claims in the documentary *Why Beauty Matters*.

By posing as a dandy, Byron believed he was a nonconformist and trying to do his best against the norms of his society. Through *Childe Harold*, readers can follow the process of ideological understanding of the poet (Grigorescu, 1961). All Byron's heroes refuse any compromise with

society, preferring to die rather than be conquered, remain alone, and not return from the way they had decided to start upon (Grigorescu, 1961). In *Childe Harold*, nature is not situated outside the human being: it comes to complete feelings, such as in the meditation on the field at Waterloo, where, during the description of the evening above Lake Lemán, the greatness of the Alps is in tune with psychological emotions, called by G. Bachelard "spectacular complex" (Bălu, 2013). Nature is synonymous with freedom, as it is unpredictable if we think about the natural phenomena, and it is viewed in opposition to society with its rules, and false hopes of freedom. Nature becomes a symbol of the wish to escape from the rules of the state, and from the belonging to a large empire.

However, nature and, by extension, travelling, or moving away from the established rules, taking a distance from them, are not a solution. Byron looks critically at the promised world of the ideology of liberalism: "Travel does not bring resolution of the conflict with society. Foreign societies, as well as English, the poet concludes, give verbal, not actual, homage to their standards. Between the profession and the practice of ideals is a world of transgressions." (Grobe, 1953) The character Childe Harold fails to find an ideal, liberal world in his journeys.

In *Childe Harold*, in the first canto, we look at Portugal from the point of view of the British, who were against them. They were prejudiced against the Portuguese, but they favoured the Spanish. The perspective of Childe Harold is, thus, not removed from the ideological lense of the times. The land of Spain is presented very positively:

"Oh, Christ it is a goodly sight to see
What Heaven hath done for this delicious land!
What fruits of fragrance blush on every tree!
What goodly prospects o'er the hills expand!"

Meanwhile, the land of Portugal is presented negatively. The people are poor, yet the country is beautiful:

"For hut and palace show like filthily;
The dingy denizens are reared in dirt;
No personage of high or mean degree
Doth care for cleanness of surtout or shirt.
Though shent with Egypt's plague, unkempt,
unwash'd, unhurt."

The second canto focuses on Byron's mourning the loss of the ancient Greek world's glory, that of its monuments, treasures, the theft of the ancient architecture which was then displayed in other countries. Byron is saddened at the sight of contemporary Greece, watching the ruins of the ancient world. By extension, we could interpret this canto in the light of the loss of hope in the political

situation of his contemporary world. The loss of ancient Greek treasures is an equivalent for the loss of the greatness of the British society of his time. The British society in Byron's times needed reconstruction in order to achieve greatness again. The loss of glory of the monarchy brings the loss of hope and stability for the British people.

The third canto contains the themes of breaking free from despotic authority, the misunderstood genius, and nature, together with two figures of greatness, two heroes: Napoleon and Rousseau. They are, in Byron's view, figures of misunderstood geniuses. He admires Napoleon for fighting for France's rights and Rousseau for his passion in supporting his ideas, some of them far-fetched. These two heroes are presented by Byron as "madmen who have made men mad/ By their contagion", by which he suggests that they could influence men in a very strong way and promote their ideals. Freedom is one common element when it comes to both heroes, Napoleon and Rousseau. Waterloo was an aggressive battle, a very bloody one, of which Byron does not approve. He prefers the battle of Morat, where the Swiss fought for freedom against the conquest of the Burgundians in the XVIth century. Like the battle of Marathon, the battle of Morat represents, for Byron, one of "true Glory's stainless victories." He sees Rousseau in a natural environment. For Byron, nature is not seen as a way of evading problematic issues, but as a way to confront them and magnify them. Man's emotional states are underlined by nature. Storms show man's dealing and struggling with problems, while the Alps are a symbol of the sublime, of what is beyond comprehension in nature.

The fourth canto contains the journey through Italy of Childe Harold. The theme of lost, ancient civilizations returns, in order to teach a lesson that we can learn from the destroyed civilizations in history. The focus is on the fallen empire of Rome, whose glory did not ensure its permanence. This is the fate of political institutions, Byron reflects. The need for stability is found, by Byron, in nature and in art. Architectural monuments such as the Colosseum are permanent. The beauty created by man throughout history is eternal. The beauty of nature, however, is preferred by Byron.

We could conclude that nature is a symbol for the spirit of man, of the freedom of man's spirit. Freedom of thought is above everything:

The most significant victory for imagination, however, is the domination of mind over material reality. The highest attainment of ideal freedom is possible only in mind and is, furthermore, the greatest realization. Byron's concept of liberty has transcended the aims of practical politics when he regards it as the 'Eternal Spirit of the chainless Mind.' Hence, for Byron, the ultimate

realization of liberty is the independence of spirit (Grobe, 1953).

Through his travels, Childe Harold does, indeed, reflect a lot and shows how he develops a critical mind by looking at what happens in the world around him. He reflects on the idea of freedom, tyranny, purpose of wars as means of achieving and preserving freedom, as well as on the decline of civilizations and on their golden phase throughout the poem. The character Childe Harold is portrayed as situated beyond the ideology of what goes on around him, yet he himself holds values related to the ideology of British Romanticism and judges them according to this latter grid of values and principles. Thus, liberalism for Childe Harold means independence from empires, and despotic rule, as well as the possibility to return to the golden, heroic phase of civilizations that he holds on as models. He wishes for a flourishing society, where the individual is free to choose and judge for himself. He tries to convince the reader that the ultimate value is freedom, which was sought for in wars across history, and that a flourishing society, with heroic models is what we all wish for. Art and nature are among the values promoted, as they both preserve a sense of permanence and stability through beauty. The examples of the glory of ancient civilizations and the highly held value of freedom preserved through wars are means of legitimizing what the poem promotes for Byron's contemporary society, and promises, like a politician through a campaign. Examples include the situation of countries in history, with the cause of which the poet sympathizes and, thus, promotes: "Byron sympathized with the cause of freedom both for Portugal and Spain" (Grobe, 1953). Through the idea of travelling of Childe Harold, Byron makes reference to taking part in foreign affairs and to the freedom of the individual:

From a superficial support of the traditional Whig doctrines, Byron's attitude developed into a lasting concern for the spirit of liberty in the individual. His interest in foreign affairs, even more than his participation in English politics, contributed to the evolution of his concept of political liberty (Grobe, 1953).

The poem reflects the spirit of the age and its ideology, as well as Byron's personal interpretation and enactment of ideological principles and values. His travels influenced him beyond traditional Whig principles: "Byron's tours of 1809 to 1811 and, further, his exile from England in 1816 tended to render him, as he later termed himself, 'a citizen of the world'" (Grobe, 1953). The character Childe Harold also reflects this concept, as he is portrayed as being free to move beyond borders and cultures and gain experience as well as critical thought.

The value of freedom is presented in contrast to the oppression, in cultures which in the past were free and are now under tyrannical rules, a symbol of civilization decline:

In the poems of the Childe Harold period, Byron considers various aspects of political liberty in connection with several foreign countries: Spain, Greece, and Venice impel him to emphasize the significance of the traditions of liberty. The concept emerges that the dominance of the love of freedom in the past citizens of a country makes present submission to tyranny even more ignominious (Grobe, 1953).

By representing freedom as belonging to the golden phase of civilizations, and contrasting tyranny to the corrupt and not at all glamorous present society, the poet tries to persuade his readers that freedom is a sign of a healthy society and of a flourishing civilization by all means, political and cultural. What is more, even the despotic leaders are portrayed not as glamorous and powerful, but as having weaknesses which cause them to adopt this style of leadership:

The valid aims and the false aims of the leader of a people are also analysed in Byron's verse, mainly from the observations of the rules of Ali Pasha and of Napoleon, Byron was to evolve his concept of the great leader. However, in Byron's regard, both of these sovereigns failed to fulfill that ideal. In Byron's poetry their weakness embodies the universal cause of despotism (Grobe, 1953).

In order to have individual freedom, and in order to attain a flourishing, stable society, Byron suggests, the people should choose a leader which allows them enough freedom, and which guides them towards achieving great deeds and permanent monuments of beauty. What is more, "In every country Byron marked the relationship of the spirit of liberty in the individual to political liberty in the state." (Grobe, 1953) Byron suggests, thus, that there is a direct connection between the way a state functions and the way an individual thinks. He shows how the ideology promoted by the state affects the individuals' lifestyles and ways of thinking, as they are the products of the values it promotes. Once the individual values freedom, if he resorts to action in order to change the political state of affairs, he will be granted many opportunities to achieve great works of arts that will become timeless, as suggested by the examples of ancient civilizations. He gives the example of Greece in order to illustrate this idea:

Before Greece can be free, Byron concludes, her people must undergo a change of heart. The true

patriot must feel, even in the midst of revelry, sadness for his country's fate. Greece shall be free only when Grecians feel the courageous conviction that she must be free (Grobe, 1953).

The liberal nation-state is a new stage of development both in the personal lives of the individuals as well as at the larger level of history. Byron tries to raise the awareness of his readers that, by standing up for their country's national specificities, by being patriots, they will do everything possible in order to achieve their dreams of freedom. A national state, with its national identity, becomes the equivalent of a free individual, free from the monarchical rule, free from depending on an empire.

The values promoted by Byron, however, ended afterwards in establishing the opposite. After Byron's liberal nationalism, and values of universal freedom, a poet appeared that promoted the opposite values of nationalism, those of dictatorship:

From Byron's death at Missolonghi in 1824 to D'Annunzio's capture of Fiume for Italy in 1919, the nationalism of universal liberalism and independence struggles changed, in literature as in politics, to cruel dictatorial fascism. Byron was followed by a series of idealistic fighter-poets and poet-martyrs for national freedom, but international tensions culminating in World War I exposed fully the intolerant, brutal side of nationalism. D'Annunzio, like Byron, both a major poet and charismatic war leader, was a key figure in transforming nineteenth-century democratic nationalism into twentieth-century dictatorial fascism. The poet's 'lyrical dictatorship' at Fiume (1919–20) inspired Mussolini's seizure of power in 1922, with far-reaching political consequences. The poet became the dangerous example of a Nietzschean *Übermensch*, above common morality, predatory and morally irresponsible (Aberbach, 2008).

Historical circumstances, thus, opposed to the values and principles promoted by Byron. This does not mean that he failed, but rather that societies need changes periodically and try to experiment with ways of preserving stability and flourishing of their culture. Perhaps it was because such an extreme approach to liberalism and freedom was utopic, and not rationally possible to be realized. After all, *Childe Harold* abounds in examples where there is a reality which shows a deep contrast in the situation of a certain country's present and its heroic past, the latter being Byron's and Childe Harold's dream:

Italy's right to be a free and united nation is discussed throughout Canto IV in the form of a

celebration of the country's ancient and prestigious past, and in the hope for a better and nobler future. Though politically enslaved and divided, Italy still appears in the imagination of an enthusiastic Byron as a land full of energy, ready to wake up after a long sleep:

'Yet, Freedom! Yet thy banner, torn, but flying,
Streams like the thunder-storm against the wind;
Thy trumpet voice, though broken now and dying,
The loudest still the tempest leaves behind;
Thy tree hath lost its blossoms, and the rind,
Chopp'd by the axe, looks rough and little worth,
But the sap lasts, and still the seed we find
Sown deep, even in the bosom of the North;
So shall a better spring less bitter fruit bring
forth.' (XCVIII)" (Bordoni, 2005).

The situation described sounds idealistic, and it requires not only strong will but also the means and circumstances for changes to be achieved. Yet, Byron was, after all, actively involved in the political cause of Italy: "Byron's support of the Italian revolutionary movements was not simply limited to an ideological and poetic encouragement." (Bordoni, 2005) Thus, Byron's and his followers' goals may have been too high and not possible on every occasion.

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