

Holding the Mirror up to the "Spirit of the Age": Byron, His Hero, and Celebrity Culture

Elli Karampela

Aristotle University

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Lord Byron was heralded as a newborn celebrity at a time of rapid development in Britain's publishing industry, a time recognized also as one of instability, unrest, and deep socio-political changes. During the years of fame (1812-1816), Byron handed to the hungry contemporary reader one of the most mysterious, dark, and radically adventurous figures in the European literary agenda ever, the Byronic hero, who instantly acquired immense popularity and became identified with Byron himself. Was it a coincidence that Byron became a celebrity during the time of the Romantic period? The Byronic hero answered efficiently the dominant tensions of the age, and registered the importance Romanticism would place upon the individual, the creative potential of the human mind and the paradox of human nature. Through a continuous interaction between Byron, his poetry and his readers, we witness their mutual shaping and reshaping. In this paper, I will argue that the whole Byron phenomenon is an offspring of the socio-political matrix of the early nineteenth century, by focusing specifically on the significance of the Byronic hero as portrayed in the first two Cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and in Byron's famous Eastern Tale, *The Giaour*. The Byronic hero, a mysterious genius that is alien and solitary but at the same time a devoted advocate of individual and social freedom, reflects and responds to the spirit of the age, an age filled with conflicting forces wrestling in its anxious bosom, hovering between an individuality that yearned for national solidification and one which desired a release of creative energy and change. The notion of celebrity will therefore be approached not as a passive and whimsical phenomenon, but as actively related to the context of the era.

The early nineteenth century witnessed the disruption of order and experienced serious tensions as an inevitable result of deep socio-political and ideological changes

destined to leave scars that would never be totally healed. The outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 had spread its nets of influence throughout Europe, implanting the promise of a new millennium – a promise captured in William Wordsworth's famous line from the *Prelude*, "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very Heaven!" (*Prelude* ll. 108-109) - only to tear it down with the Terror of the 1790s and the imperial designs of Napoleon in the early 1800s, who represented both the liberty-cause of the Revolution, and the despotic ambitions of the new ruler in the place of the old ones. William Hazlitt successfully rendered the shattering of a generation's dream when he wrote in *The Spirit of the Age* that "[t]he volcano of the French Revolution was seen expiring in its own flames, like a bonfire made of straw: the principles of Reform were scattered in all directions, like chaff before the keen northern blast" (215).

When in 1812 Byron woke up to greet his fame, England was still torn between a conservatism that suppressed liberal ideas because of lingering fear and suspicion, especially after France's declaration of war against England in 1793, and an equally restless yearning for change. If anything, there was urgent need for national affirmation and solidification, combined nevertheless with intrinsic unrest. The emergence of the power-hungry middle classes, the dissatisfaction among the underprivileged because of poverty and lack of parliamentary representation, enclosures of land, questioning of religious dogmas, scepticism towards ideologies that voted for what Percy Shelley termed in his *Defence of Poetry* (1821) the "calculating principle" (1243), all inaugurated a period of disillusionment and despondency. Byron lived in a time of changes, changes in thought, religion, manners, fashions, communications, technology, and in the whole pattern of social and economic organization (10) according to Gilbert Phelps. It is natural, then, that such a restless society would leave people in need for something that would stir their sensibilities and satisfy their jaded palates.

With the publication of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* Cantos I and II the celebrity of Lord Byron became an unprecedented reality. The word "celebrity" resonates with our contemporary world of celebrity culture, but it is crucial to bear in mind that the characteristics of celebrity world originated during Byron's era, and

evolved around the construction of Byron's poetic image.<sup>[1]</sup> Tom Mole insightfully sums up the prerequisites for the emergence of the phenomenon: "an individual, an industry and an audience. Modern celebrity culture begins when these three components routinely work together to render an individual personality fascinating" (1). Essentially interwoven, these three components moulded a well set mechanism that would affect the notion of celebrity throughout the Romantic period; Mole mentions some of the developments that promoted the apparatus: industrial progress in print, the development of the periodicals, the growth of "infrastructure" which made easier the dissemination of information to an ever-increasing, literate population, and the transition from "subscription publication to unmediated commercial publication" (9). One should add to the list a demand for new poetic talents. In the middle of all this abundance, the readers felt isolated and with good cause; with the development of industrial culture, as Barbara Benedict claims, the eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of "a growing class of writers who considered themselves professionals" (1), and who, together with "printers, publishers, booksellers, [...] readers" succeeded in rendering literature a product for consumption that cast away its former definition as a pleasure accessible only to the elite (1-2). What the readers felt alienated from was an intimate link with a truly affecting literary experience; they were bombarded instead with ever-increasing new poetical voices; Lord Byron's Byronic hero-model offered something novel, namely a new ground for self-projection and speculation upon the concerns of the divided reader; Lord Byron's poetry would effect "a powerful, emotive response" (26) as Jason Goldsmith argues.

*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* Cantos I and II, published in March 1812, together with the subsequent *Eastern Tales* published throughout Byron's years of fame, revolve around the Romantic axis of the unfamiliar, the sensational, the fascinatingly exotic, the paradoxical, and, above all, the subjective. Rather than yielding solutions to the contradictions of the age, Romanticism responded variously to the new, pervasive changes of the late-eighteenth-early nineteenth century: Peter Thorslev acknowledges this when he argues that "the Romantic movement was a rebellion in the name of individualism" (189), coupled with the humanistic and the rebellious

Satanic, and juxtaposed with belief in the god-head and the orderly on the other side of the question (189). In an age of heroes and an eager belief in the capacities of the self, as well as of an instinctive resistance to oppressive conventions, Byron handed down to the anxious reader a hero that was, in fact, an anti-hero: as Jerome McGann claims, in such occasions the hero became a  $\beta$ □□destructive force, $\beta$ □□ inevitably warring with corruption and being turned into an  $\beta$ □□anti-hero $\beta$ □□ (18). In essence, characteristics of an age of change, despair, melancholy, liberal callings, fear were combined to render the fascinatingly alluring and contradictory character of Byron $\beta$ □□s hero, who sceptically lingers upon a chaotic universe.

The first description of the Byronic hero is unfolded in the first Canto of *Childe Harold $\beta$ □□s Pilgrimage*; with the full character of his origins pointedly concealed, the Childe is a descendant of a noble, possibly famous, but also alluringly gloomy family line; the narrator refuses to expose the details -  $\beta$ □□whence his name / And lineage long, it suits me not to say; / Suffice it, that perchance they were of fame, / And had been glorious in another day $\beta$ □□ - but he goes on to hint at a shadowy act haunting their past:  $\beta$ □□nor honied lies of rhyme / Can blazon evil deeds, or consecrate a crime $\beta$ □□ (1.3.19-22, 26-27). Later on, more concrete features of the Byronic hero are introduced which would certainly persist and even become intensified in descriptions of him; in his self-exile, he is alienated both from his homeland, loathingly unwilling  $\beta$ □□in his native land to dwell, / Which seem $\beta$ □□d to him more lone than Eremite $\beta$ □□s sad cell $\beta$ □□ (1.4.35-36), *and* from his fellow beings  $\beta$ □□  $\beta$ □□Still he beheld, nor mingled with the throng $\beta$ □□ (1.84.828); according to Thorslev, like a typical Romantic poetic figure, he is destined to live in isolation from society, in which he would otherwise love to participate (137). Incessantly tormented by some lurking sin, an  $\beta$ □□unrequited love $\beta$ □□ (Thorslev 137) that denies him any peace and rest, he often exhibits something hidden deep within;  $\beta$ □□oft-times in his maddest mirthful mood / Strange pangs would flash upon Childe Harold $\beta$ □□s brow / As if the memory of some deadly feud / Or disappointed passion lurk $\beta$ □□d below $\beta$ □□ (1.8.64-67). Restless and mysterious, disdainful and yet courted by a sensitivity that hovers in his temperament but is halted by his persistent pride - as the narrator explains,  $\beta$ □□ $\beta$ □□Tis said at times the sullen tear would start, / But Pride congeal $\beta$ □□d the

drop within his self (1.6.48-49) the Byronic hero is both free in his self-reliance and enslaved by his own despondency. Experiencing the same inner division between desire and despair, the Childe seems to internalize the tensions that divide and confuse early nineteenth-century Europe.

Childe Harold's self-exile from his country led to speculation upon a series of country-monuments that survived as proof of shattered glory and present wretchedness. As Caroline Franklin postulates, the narrator puts himself in mind and body on the stage of European history (86). His pilgrimage is not an ordinary Grand Tour realized by aristocrats during their youthful years; rather, it is a journey of the soul, a pilgrimage that allows the Childe commentary upon the contemporary state of Europe. Portugal is the first stop on his map; it formed part of Byron's travels in 1809, and, as Philip Martin maintains, it is difficult to picture a more politically suitable place for Byron's journey (81), since, at the time, Spain and Portugal, after a series of political agreements and violations of contracts with France and England, became victims of Napoleon's imperialistic expansion; further degradation followed with the argument over the famous Convention of Cintra, which sacrificed the Spanish popular cause (81), and eventually led France out of the Peninsula by the sweeping hand of the Duke of Wellington. It is these events that lurk underneath Childe Harold's thoughts as they are being articulated by the narrator throughout stanzas 24, 25 and 26, and the convention is dismissed as a thing that turned a nation's shallow joy to gloom (1.25.300); an attack is fired, fully expostulated in stanza 41: Three hosts combine to offer sacrifice; / Three tongues prefer strange orisons on high; / Three gaudy standards flout the pale blue skies; / The shouts are France, Spain, Albion, Victory! (1.41.441-444). The message stands in apparent opposition to Britain's attempts for intervention on the Peninsula, which as Goldsmith observes, went together with the reassurance of those who felt uncertainty about national identity as well as with the desire for justification of imperial expansion; Byron stirred tensions about national identity by disturbing such visions (31). One of the evils the Byronic hero despises is the abortive implications that freedom acquires in the hands of despotic personages; he stands disappointed as he witnesses in horror the enslavement of the Peninsula people. Urged by his love for freedom, he

exclaims: "Awake, ye sons of Spain! Awake! Advance!" (1.37.405), and poses himself elsewhere in the poem against every act of slavery and corruption; this is what happens, for example, with his reaction to the abhorrent sight of the bullfights towards the end of Canto I. Thoughts of despair spring in his mind as he nostalgically looks back into the glorious past and compares it to the historical present.

This comparison permeates the poem in a way that definitely accounts for the disdainful and melancholic mood of the Byronic hero. Unable to forget, he wanders around with "that settled, ceaseless gloom / The fabled Hebrew wanderer bore" (*To Inez* 5.853-854) characteristic of the mythical Wandering Jew who is condemned in an endless journey vainly waiting for salvation from his sins. The juxtaposition of the ideal and timeless image of the past with the painful reality of the present is more elaborately emphasized when Harold arrives in the capital of Greece, Athens. "Where are thy men of might?" the narrator nostalgically asks, "Thy grand in soul? / Gone glimmering through the dream of things that were" (2.2.11-12), and continues in subsequent stanzas with lamentations about the present deprivation of Greece; according to him, "Cold is the heart, fair Greece! That looks on thee" (2.15.127). The inability of modern Greeks, the now "Hereditary bondsmen" (2.76.720), to raise the dagger against Turkish despotism, comes together with the pillaging of Greece's monuments by British hands<sup>[2]</sup> such as Elgin's to form the themes of his despair in the later stanzas. Upon his arrival at Spain, the Childe, instead of something that would represent a paradisaic state as in the days of yore, confronts "Birds, beasts of prey, and wilder men, / Accompanied by gathering storms that convulse the closing year" (2.42.377-378). Corruption is followed by further corruption in the endless circle that despotism performs back unto itself, and the hope for restoring the glorious past that is portrayed in the ideal of Greece can become nothing but frustrated. This is exactly what utters the disillusioned state of Europe during Byron's years of fame, a state amply mirrored in the split psychological state of his hero. The Childe laments while he notices the way that "selfish Sorrow ponders on the past, / And clings to thoughts now better far removed!" (2.96.901-902); the process of history finds ample reflection in the Childe when he voices the frustrated yearning for freedom in a world

of individual alienation. In fact, history can be viewed as a field where hope and frustration engage in constant interplay, leaving the individual, like the Byronic hero, hopeless and disillusioned, with "A burning forehead, and a parching tongue" (ll. 30) to use John Keats's line from his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.

Elizabeth, Duchess of Devonshire wrote about the popularity of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*: "This poem is on every table, and himself [Byron] courted, visited, flattered, and praised whenever he appears" (376).<sup>[3]</sup> In the reviews, the poem was praised for its assertive power and passionate feeling, yet received mixed critical opinions which nevertheless do not fail to attest to the poem's general imposing influence upon the reader. For instance, while George Ellis of the *Quarterly Review* commented negatively on the young hero, who, according to him, "cannot surely be expected to excite any tender sympathy, and can only be viewed with unmixed disgust" (49), Francis Jeffrey argued that the disturbing character of Byron's hero "excites a kind of curiosity" (40): "We do not know, indeed, whether there is not something *piquant* in the very novelty and singularity of that cast of misanthropy and universal scorn" (40). Among many, Byron's friend John Cam Hobhouse also traced the poem's source of attraction in the universality of feeling it raised: "the great success of *Childe Harold* is due chiefly to Byron's having dared to give utterance to certain feelings which every one must have encouraged in the melancholy and therefore morbid hours of his existence" (100). Most reviewers objected to the portrayal of the Byronic hero as something disturbing, and definitely attributed his features to the image of Byron himself, however much the poet denied the similarity. Linking poetry with the spirit of the age, Jeffrey declared in the *Edinburgh Review* that poetry "displays the agency of powerful passions" (54). Although he preferred action over writing, Byron, being unable to perform the former at that point in his life, inserted the powerful depth of his complex feelings into his poetry and created an "abortive" hero correspondent to those anxious times.

True, the image of the Byronic hero is indeed controversial, yet it is an immediate offspring of an age full of ambivalences in itself, and succeeds in alarming the readers into a potent reflection of the self, enabling them, as Mole says, "to

project ideas and emotions connected with the author onto his characters (20); this points to the reader's crucial role in shaping back the literary text. In essence, while Byron questions contemporary efforts for national consolidation, he also offers opportunities for fostering national consciousness (Goldsmith 29) by constructing a kind of community of selected readers who would identify with an English personality, within the apparatus of "an age of personality" (Mole 12), that slaked their thirst for something new and intimate. It is especially the mysteriousness of the Byronic hero that offers a free space for the projection of the reader's thoughts and feelings. In line with this idea, Ghislaine McDayter correctly points out that we must "dig out" from inside the Byronic hero, "imaginatively trailing him into his closet and midnight chamber" (12). An active reader is urgently required if one is to grasp the full implications of Byron's poetry. The Byronic hero is further developed in Byron's later Eastern Tales; it is to Byron's famous Tale *The Giaour*, an indicative one as it were, that I shall now turn.

Although it is interesting to observe the way in which the hero of Byron's 1813 fragmentary poem *The Giaour* exhibits the characteristic temperament of the Byronic hero, and even develops them further (being a darker and more active persona than the Childe), what I am chiefly interested in is how he internalizes tensions inherent in the notion of heroism. The *Giaour* is heroic in his intention to avenge Leila's death by killing the man who halted their freedom to experience their love; he raves under the pain, and what torments him is a love long lost but impossible to be forgotten; "She died I dare not tell thee how," the *Giaour* confesses, "But look tis written on my brow! / There read of Cain the curse and crime" (ll. 1056-1058). Instead of passively accepting his fate, he becomes an active agent of destruction, since, living in exile and isolation from his own country, he hurries to disrupt the established state; "the *Giaour*," McGann remarks, "is a hero without a country an enemy to every surrounding social order and, as a result, an enemy to himself" (19).

This fits well with the conditions of the age that gave birth to this type of anti-hero, and it is useful to note his relationship to the notion of freedom in the poem. The



revolutionary element frames *The Giaour* from the very beginning, when it opens with a meditation on the state of Greece and its bygone heroes. The narrator sadly observes that "Tis Greece but living Greece no more!" (ll. 91), and invokes one more time the comparison between a living then and a dead now. His devotedness to individual freedom - "Arise, he urges the Greeks, and make again your own" (115) - is enmeshed with the bitter realization of the present degradation: "Now crawl from cradle to the grave, / Slaves" (ll.150-151). His opposition to the tyranny of Hassan is matched with his equally forceful disdain for any established religious creed; he declines the convent oath (ll. 899) when asked to embrace the Christian faith in order to save his soul. Together, they mark the freedom-seeking spirit that pervades the hero. As Phelps claims, the Byronic hero is a symbol of resistance against tyrannical power and of hopes that have been long gone (8). True, but upon close inspection, the poem unfolds another layer of meaning. McDayter, in her illuminating study, links the feminized hysteria caused by the French Revolution with the behaviour of the hero, arguing for a suspension of desire that keeps the balance in the Turkish Tales,<sup>[4]</sup> like the Giaour's when he wishes his story to remain a mystery: "Be neither name nor emblem spread / By prying stranger to be read" (ll. 1326-1327) and denies to expose the truth about his relationship with Leila (84-85). What is implied is hidden in the following lines: "Yet did he but what I had done / Had she been false to more than one" (ll. 1062-1063). What does this mean? The statement does not only imply but declares that the Giaour would maintain the same tyrannical stance with Hassan were he in his place. McDayter insightfully sums up her argument: "*The Giaour* is not only a political commentary on the failure of the Revolution to remain true to its republican ideology, but also an examination of the ways in which true freedom is always maintained only through considerable and indeed unspeakable violence to the feminized other" (85). Freedom and tyranny are terms which are deconstructed in Byron's mind in order to be held under close sceptical enquiry and reconstructed under a new light.

The poems analyzed reveal with characteristic energy the double face of freedom and heroism, and hold up their tensions in inexhaustible dialectic. They

manage to β□□expose to the observer his own hidden heartβ□□ (29) as McGann maintains; Byron and his hero, being inextricably bound together and promoted to the public through the ever growing apparatus of celebrity culture, hold the mirror up to an age of change felt deeply by everyone. Byron, a newly emergent literary phenomenon that spoke to the heart of his audience, weaved a personal relationship with his devoted readers through literary creations that invited reflection on personal feelings and anxieties.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Peter Quennel suggests that β□□ although the poet often bagged at the part he was obliged to play, his presentation revealed an instinctive grasp of showmanship β□□ (189).

<sup>[2]</sup> In a note to Canto II of *Childe Harold* Byron wrote about the vanity of man when β□□ Drest in a little brief authority β□□: β□□ never did the littleness of man, and the vanity of his very best virtues,

of patriotism to exalt, and of valour to defend his country appear more conspicuous in the record of what Athens was, and the certainty of what she now is (85).

[3] Vere Foster, *The Two Duchesses*, 1898, 375-6. All extracts from reviews and opinions about Byron's fame and poetry used in this paper are taken from Rutherford, Andrew, ed. *Byron: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970. Print.

[4] McDayter maintains that the repression of desire allows the void which has to be kept free from a despotic filling by desire - to remain empty so that democracy can be preserved (84).