

## The Polemics of the Quest for Liberty in the Poetry of George Gordon, Lord Byron

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**Abstract** *The quest for liberty in Lord Byron's poetry is a polemical issue because most critics have termed it nihilistic and satanic simply because the poet and his protagonists question Christian revelation and man-made laws. This article sets out to show that although Lord Byron and the Byronic hero as can be seen in the different poems do question Christian revelation and flout a number of generally accepted moral values, they do so in an attempt to find answers, which might help the individual to understand the universe, and be of help to the rest of mankind. The desire for liberty becomes the basic inspirational force, where conflict and warfare are justifiable pathways to the desired end. This paper also looks at the quest for liberty in Byron's poetry from the perspective of the heroes' ideals, justified by human nature and references to mythical rebels. Contrary to the generally accepted critical opinion that Lord Byron's quest for liberty is essentially egocentric, this article seeks to show that the quest for liberty is the Byronic creed and the only constant element in the poet's ambiguous life alongside the detestation of cant. The article argues that the Byronic hero's deconstruction of philosophical and socio-political ideals does not result from the poetic persona's lawlessness as generally assumed, but from an innate justifiable call for change, first for the individual and then for the common good. Related to his search for liberty, there are a lot of polemical issues around Byron's notion of the ideal, which are partly addressed in this paper.*

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### 1. Introduction

Lord Byron is generally acclaimed to be the most flamboyant, fashionable and notorious of the major romantic poets. He has notably captivated the minds and hearts of many with his dynamism and demand for freedom for oppressed people everywhere. His name and image, to many Europeans especially, embody Romanticism in its different shades. In a good number of his poems, Lord Byron creates an immensely Romantic hero, generally known as the Byronic Hero, who is defiant, sophisticated, freethinking, and haunted by secret guilt but also a crusader for liberty (Thorslev, 1962, 33). Many critics consider Lord Byron himself as the model par excellence of his protagonist; the Byronic hero.

### 2. Inspiration for the Quest

The philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau in his 1762 work, *The Social Contract* says that "man is born free but everywhere in chains." The chains here, among other possibilities, have to do with the negative societal constraints stifling the members of specific communities. The Byronic hero in the quest for liberty is generally at war against these bonds. Lord Byron is always on the side of liberty and affirms this when he says, "there are only two sentiments of which I am constant: a hatred of cant and a love of liberty" (Merchand, 1950, 122). This quest is what led him to the Carbonari secret society in Italy. The Carbonari was a secret revolutionary society founded in Italy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to fight for the liberation of Italy from Austrian domination. In a letter to John Cam Hobhouse, Lord Byron recounts his disappointment at the uncoordinated nature of the movement. The Carbonari nonetheless played an important role in the unification of Italy (Encarta 2007). In the quest for liberty the Byronic hero is ready to go to any lengths, even to warfare. Byron was influenced by the Greek nationalist poet Rigas Velestinlis, who was famous

for sayings like, “better one hour of free life than forty years of slavery and prison” (Encarta 2007). The fact that Lord Byron was willing to sacrifice his life for Greece points to the fact that liberty for the masses was a major and innate concern for him.

### 3. Conflict and Warfare as a Medium to Liberty

Lord Byron is a poet seemingly born for opposition and his poetry generally reflects this phenomenon. Instances of conflict and warfare are as numerous in his poetry as they are in his life. In the quest for liberty, the Byronic hero is expected to go into areas of conflict and save the oppressed. Lord Byron, alongside his heroes is a crusader for liberty, who is ready to fight wars for the liberation of all. The Byronic hero can always be found intervening at instances where personal and collective freedoms are denied. Lord Byron detests oppression and speaks out against it as seen in his own utterances: “Do not let us suffer ourselves to be massacred by the ignoble swarms of ruffians who are endeavouring to throttle their way to power” ([Qtd] in *The Poetic Works of Lord Byron*, 1994, 125).<sup>1</sup> The “ruffians” being referred to in this quotation are leaders whom Lord Byron blames for the corruption they perpetrate in society and the suffering of the masses caused by their actions.

In the poem “When a Man Hath no Freedom to Fight for at Home”, the title is suggestive in itself and expresses one of Lord Byron’s favourite ideas. In this poem, the persona is propagating war for the sake of liberation and holds that if a person is free at home, he should fight for the freedom of his neighbours. In this vein the poet’s attitude is positive on the idea of enlistment in foreign armies, if they fight in the defence of liberty. Lord Byron did not only preach this doctrine, but practised it in the Greek war of independence, where he died. In this poem he sells this principle in the first stanza when he says:

When a man hath no freedom to fight for at home  
Let him combat for that of his neighbours  
Let him think of the glories of Greece and of Rome,  
And get knock’d in the head for his labour. (WLB 1-4)

The persona insists that being free is not good enough when your neighbours remain under the shackles of oppression. True liberty can only be attained when all are liberated and free to show evidence of that freedom. The persona insists, therefore, that every free individual should think of the great Roman and Greek empires whose crusade was to wage war against tyrants and liberate the oppressed. This emerges in the last line of the stanza when the persona states the reward that one reaps from a war of liberation; one gets “knock’d in the head for his labour” (WLB 4). The persona equally makes allusion to the military might of the ancient empires of Greece and Rome. These empires had dynamic rulers who fought to liberate the world from tyrannical rulers and also brought them to be part of their empires for protection.

In the last stanza, the persona thinks that it is a good thing to fight for the liberation of the oppressed. He argues that:

To do good to mankind is the chivalrous plan,  
And is always as nobly requited;  
Then battle for Freedom wherever you can,  
And, if not shot or hanged, you’ll get knighted. (WLB 5-9)

It is said that those who fight on the side of justice are always right (“Obama on Terrorism” CNN 2009). The persona thus indicates that fighting to liberate the oppressed is a good thing. The fact that “Freedom” is capitalised in the poem emphasizes how important the subject is to the poet. The persona encourages everyone to fight for freedom whenever the need arises. The final line brings in the idea of Byronic humour when the persona says, “if not hanged, you’ll be

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<sup>1</sup> *The Poetic Works of Lord Byron* shall henceforth be abbreviated as WLB.

knighted.” The hangmen’s noose and knighthood represent the risks and rewards of war for the soldier. By putting the reward of war in such an ironic manner, the persona seems to indicate that real reward is when the oppressed are liberated even if the price is the death of the one who fights for their liberation.

#### 4. Byron’s Militarism Justified

Most critics do not see Lord Byron’s quest for liberty as a positive virtue since it advocates war. To them, if the Byronic hero seeks true liberty he should go for passive resistance. But the very fact of the Byronic hero’s militarism is opposed to the idea of passive resistance. The main advocate of passive resistance was Mahatma Ghandi, who stood for resistance to authority through noncooperation and nonviolence. He was inspired by Leo Tolstoy, the Russian writer, who in his novel *War and Peace* chronicles the absurdity and shallowness of war. Ghandi also cultivated the teachings of Christ in his passive resistance ideology. Martin Luther King Jr. equally adopted the passive resistance theory in his fight against racial discrimination in America. Pacifists will therefore argue that the quest for liberty cannot be beneficial if it comes as a result of violence and bloodshed, as perpetrated by Byron through the Byronic hero.

The Byronic hero, in our opinion, is not a war monger; he seeks to liberate the oppressed in every way possible. Warfare is only the last resort when all other measures have failed. This is the case in “Don Juan” wherein the Sultan is begged in vain to surrender. All instances of warfare explored in the poetry of Lord Byron are usually defensive and not offensive. The Byronic hero will not compromise his liberty or that of those he seeks to protect in favour of non resistance. Actually, Lord Byron was aware of the uselessness of passive resistance in his day. In this light he makes allusion to the Peterloo massacres in 1816 when a peaceful rally was turned into a blood bath. Lord Byron blamed statesmen like Castlereagh for this unfortunate situation. On the death of the statesman, Lord Byron wrote a poem entitled “Epithet on Lord Castlereagh.”<sup>2</sup> It reads thus:

Oh, Castlereagh! Thou art a patriot now;  
Cato died for his country, so didst thou:  
He perish’d rather than see Rome enslaved,  
Thou cutt’st thy throat that Britain may be saved!

[...]

So Castlereagh has cut his throat! - The worst  
Of this is,-that his own was not the first. (WLB1-6)

The tone of the persona is satiric and this is exposed when he calls Castlereagh a patriot. The sarcasm is more evident when the statesman is juxtaposed with heroes like Cato of the Roman Empire. The persona asserts that Castlereagh died for the British Empire to be saved. This is because in life, Castlereagh was uncompromising in his political reforms which caused a lot of pain and suffering to the British men (Encarta 2004). Lord Byron detested him more because he hailed from Ireland and despite his position as a cabinet minister, he did nothing to support the Irish cause. The Byronic hero is defiant and uncompromising toward this kind of oppressors and will not hesitate to wage war against them, in the quest for liberty.

#### 5. The Byronic Hero and his Ideals

The lawlessness of the Byronic hero can be explained from a Freudian perspective which holds that man is born with a free will and tendency to exhibit the demands of his instincts. Andrew Rutherford in *Byron: a Critical Study* says that Lord Byron is a tortured soul and this indicates his

<sup>2</sup> The poem was written in 1822, when Castlereagh, suffering from a fit of depression, killed himself.

fervent desire to live a free and unrestricted life. Unfortunately, there exist laws; social, natural and spiritual, which restrict the expression of his innate, instinctual desires, resulting in individual conflicts. Coming back to the Byronic hero, the conflict emerges because he tries to live out his innate desires, interpreted as being true to himself. Try as he might, the Byronic hero cannot attain to absolute freedom for himself or for others. On the basis that total freedom cannot be attained, Terry Prachett in his novel *Going Postal*, says “No sane mortal is truly free, because true freedom is so terrible that only the mad or the divine can face it with open eyes. It overwhelms the soul” (78).

Manfred is one of such individuals who choose to embrace total freedom. He seeks knowledge at a supernatural level and has the ability to summon spirits. Even in his encounter with the supernatural, he asserts his freedom and refuses to be subservient to them. This search for absolute liberty makes the idea polemical since one thus questions whether there can ever be anything like absolute liberty. If there exists anything like absolute liberty, the question remains - is it attainable and is it beneficial?

The last line of the excerpt shows the persona's contempt of the subject when he states that although Castlereagh has cut his throat, “his own is not the first.” This comes through when one remembers the Peterloo Massacres and the role Castlereagh played in them. Faced with such statesmen, Byron, exemplified through the Byronic hero, prefers war in order to reinstate violated rights rather than hope for understanding from statesmen who are ready to subjugate and murder the masses.

Many writers have raised doubts or out-rightly criticised Christian dogma in their works. Byron too, but with the remarkable twist of using celestial characters in a most unconventional manner. For example, Saint Peter is known to be an uncompromising Saint. But in the poem, “The Vision of Judgment” Byron gives him a quality of the Byronic hero who is ready for confrontation for the sake of justice. In this poem, Like the Byronic hero he embodies the quest for justice and a general hatred for kings whom he seems to blame for restricting the society with unpopular laws. Confrontation in the poem is gleaned from the Saint's reminiscing on the past. He recounts the circumstances of Louis XVI of France's entrance into heaven and the conflict that surrounded this event. Saint Peter recounts the incidence thus:

“Well he won't find kings to jostle  
Him on his way; but does he wear his head;  
Because the last we saw here had a tustle,  
And ne'er would have got into heaven's good graces,  
Had he not flung his head in all our faces. (WLB 140-45)

The king whom Saint Peter refers to is the King of France, who was guillotined during the reign of terror under Robespierre. There is the use of humour when Saint Peter enquires whether the King who is coming “wears his head.” The reader only makes sense of the statement with the knowledge that King was guillotined. There is also the use of imagery when the Saint insists that Louis XVI flunked “his head in all our faces.” This goes to show that the King took advantage of being beheaded and used it to get the sympathy of the saints who took him into heaven. Saint Peter says he only entered heaven because of the tussle he had at the gate. He describes the scene in the following excerpt:

He was, if I remember, king of France;  
That head of his, which could not keep a crown  
On earth, yet ventured in my face to advance  
A claim to those of martyrs- like my own:  
If I had had my sword, as I had once  
When I cut ears off, I had cut him down;  
But having but my keys, and not my brand,  
I only knocked his head from out his hand.  
“And then he set up such a headless howl,

That all the saints came out and took him in. (WLB 146-52)

From the above, one deduces that Saint Peter is infuriated and thinks that the king does not deserve to be in heaven. The king is clearly a lousy ruler as Saint Peter declares, “that head of his, which could not keep a crown on earth” (146). The Saint regrets that he no longer has his sword like in the days when he “cut ears off” (150). The poet is alluding to the biblical event in Matthew 26: 51 wherein Peter cut off the ear of one of the chief priest’s servants who had come along with the soldiers to arrest Jesus. By referring to this biblical instance, the persona seeks to create a comic effect and also to show that Saint Peter is an individual who is ready to fight for liberty. For the lack of a sword, Peter uses his keys to knock down the king’s head. The noise he makes is equally infuriating and it is described as “a headless howl.” Lord Byron brings in the satirical flair when one imagines “a headless howl” emanating from the king as insinuated by Saint Peter.

The forgone analyses show that Lord Byron and his heroes are ready to fight wars of liberation. The poet indicates the importance of liberty and urges the free to fight for the liberty of their oppressed neighbours. The levels of liberty explored in the analyses include personal, national and universal. For one to be free while his neighbour suffers under the shackles of oppression is not satisfactory to the Byronic hero. To equate this in the words of Bruce Willis: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing” (“Tears from the Sun”). War, according to the pacifists, is evil. Therefore, warfare and confrontation for the sake of liberty are problematic to this school of thought. According to the Byronic hero, war against oppression is laudable, yet the question arises as to whether there is anything like a just war. War causes pain, destruction, despair and trauma, and a question immediately arises; is it worth the trouble to engage in it just to save a few who might later come under oppression? The Byronic hero implements the rules of engagement and keeps women, children and non combatants out of harm’s way. He even confronts his own comrades when they attempt to abuse the rights of their war captives.

## 6. Allegiance to Mythical Rebels

Lord Byron and his heroes are deemed rebels because of their disdain for authority. They avoid all affiliations with tyrants in their quest for liberty. Willis W. Pratt makes a point when he says that with Lord Byron, even the majority is not always right. If this is the case, democracy becomes problematic since tyrants with a following can easily gain access to power. Lord Byron and consequently the Byronic hero see themselves as universal citizens whose sole preoccupation is the quest for liberty for all, whatever the governmental system in place. Peter Viereck describes Lord Byron’s quest for liberty as militant and to him “there is no vitiating discreetness in his defence of liberty,” but an “unrespectable detestation of every despotism in every nation” ([Qtd] in Pratt, 1957, 157).

Satan and Sisyphus are other historic rebels who have questioned and fought against tyrannical authority as is the case with the Byronic hero. Sisyphus resembles Satan in his disdain for the gods and their authority. Albert Camus in *the Myth of Sisyphus*, depicts Sisyphus as “the wisest and most prudent of mortals” (88), punished because of his disdain of the gods. His punishment is to roll a rock up a hill in the underworld. Camus calls Sisyphus “the absurd hero” since he is aware of the consequences of his actions, yet rebels against the gods. This is similar to Satan’s revolt against God. He is aware that God is All-powerful and can incarcerate him at will, yet he still challenges his authority. The end for Sisyphus is that he is “snatched by the collar” to the underworld where his rock awaits him while Satan is eternally damned in hell.

In “Manfred” an evidence of nihilism is found in Manfred’s assertion that “sorrow is knowledge.” This is paradoxical since philosophers like Socrates and Rene Descartes claim that true happiness comes from the acquisition of knowledge. Manfred has acquired knowledge to a supernatural level and comes to the realisation that nothing, but sorrow, is certain. This assertion

is affirmed by Soren Kierkegaard who reiterates that human beings by themselves are incapable of knowing anything that is certain (Popkin, 1965). It is therefore only through some sort of miraculous means that one acquires knowledge. But this can only occur when the human being accepts the transformation without judgment and preconceived notions of what this knowledge can do for him or her. Manfred has acquired knowledge to a supernatural level and is able to summon spirits to do according to his bidding, but unfortunately he has had the preconceived notion that knowledge will bring him happiness. Finding that it does not bring him knowledge, he concludes that "sorrow is knowledge." As with knowledge, there is a limit in the search for liberty that the Byronic hero may not attain to, which makes him develop nihilistic tendencies.

This is evident in "Manfred," where the Byronic hero seeks to be freed from both human and spiritual attachments. In this utopian search, Manfred alienates himself from society. According to the persona, Manfred can only be free if he successfully finds Astarte. His quest for Astarte is done with such fervent zeal as can be equated to the believer's quest for the Holy Grail in Dan Brown's *Davinci Code* (2003). In Dan Brown's novel, the quest for the Holy Grail is quite a challenging one since most of the pilgrims are unaware of the Grail's true nature. Some equate it to a chalice while others think it is the bloodline of Jesus Christ. It is only the dedicated pilgrim who, with the aid of symbols, can discover the Holy Grail. After overcoming many obstacles, Manfred finally encounters Astarte in the hall of Arimanes. The utopia seems to shatter when Astarte will not utter a word. Finally she says, "Manfred! Tomorrow ends thine earthly ills. Farewell" (WLB, 1994, 151). The Byronic hero finds the ideal; death, although he had hoped for more satisfaction. He becomes resigned to his fate only after this encounter with Astarte. He achieves some of the ideal when he rejects both the Christian dogma and the devils that have come to drag him to hell.

## 7. The Byronic Utopia

The Romantic poets offer an ideal alternative to actual life and hold that it is possible for one to better his/herself by aspiring for an ideal (Taylor 30). This ideal can be seen in the poetry of Coleridge especially in a poem like "Kubla Khan", Keats in "Eve of St. Agnes" and Wordsworth in "We were Seven". Lord Byron envisages this kind of utopia in "The Vision of Judgment" when he wishes that no one be condemned to eternal damnation. Although the persona knows that this desire is farfetched, he still expresses it. The persona says:

I know this is unpopular, I know  
 'Tis blasphemous; I know one may be damned  
 For hoping no one else may e'er be so;  
 I know my catechism, I know we'er crammed  
 With the best doctrines till we quite o'erflow;  
 I know that all save England's church have shamm'd  
 And that the other twice two hundred churches  
 And synagogues have made a damn'd bad purchase. (WLB105-12)

The persona is aware that it is blasphemous for one to wish for the salvation of all because of the existence of evil in the world. In making allusion to his catechism, which is quite biased as is the case with every other doctrine, the persona ironically debunks all he has been taught. The irony is evident when the persona says, "I know that all save England's church have shamm'd" (110). He makes a mockery of the dogma when he implies that the only true church is the Church of England.

The idea of utopia becomes polemical in Lord Byron's poetry when he mocks the ideal in the work of other poets. In David Pryce-Jones' "The Dark Lord" he appositely describes this attitude of Byron's as follows:

A cynic through and through, he particularly loathed enthusiasm of any kind, or "entusymusy," as he called it. It amused him to think of poetry as "poeshie" or even "brain-money," and he downgraded Don Juan, his masterpiece, into "Donny Jonny." Southey, the poet laureate of the day, was the butt of Byron's

satire at its most savage; Keats, he thought, wrote "piss-a-bed" stuff; and "Turdsworth" was his name for Wordsworth. His own life was short, dissolute, and ultimately broken--a cautionary tale of how not to live (40.)

Furthermore, Lord Byron ridiculed the idea of pantisocracy propagated by Southey and Coleridge. The persona derides this ideal in "The Vision of Judgment" when he says, "for pantisocracy he once had cried/ aloud, a scheme less moral than 'twas clever" (WLB 774-75). Pantisocracy is an ideal community that Southey and Coleridge planned to set up in the United States on the banks of the Susquehanna River in 1794 (Abrams, 1596). This community was to be free of oppression and subjection and favourable for creativity. The scheme was concocted in Southey's more radical days before he became a poet laureate and Tory. The fact that Lord Byron shuns the idea of utopia in the works of other authors makes his own vision of perfection polemical. If he is incapable of recognising the ideal in the works of other authors, then he should not expect much of his own vision to become ideally accepted by the others.

In "Cain" the utopia that the Byronic hero seeks is a return to Eden. Cain sees the loss of paradise as unjust since it did not come about by any fault of his. His search is for the recovery of the ideal or the knowledge of the order of things in the universe. Cain ascribes his lack of knowledge to the fact that "the tree of life was withheld from us by my father's folly/ while that of knowledge, by my mother's haste/ was pluck'd too soon; and all the fruit is death!" (143-46). Because of this frame of mind, Lucifer therefore presents an avenue through which he can discover the truth about the afterlife and the nature of death. The end for the Byronic hero is disillusionment since Eden is lost to Cain forever while he brings the dreaded death to the world by killing his brother.

From the foregone analyses, one gets a glimpse of the Byronic hero's polemical quest for liberty as well as the polemics that surround Byron's utopian search for the ideal in his poetry. These quests, Byron holds, are not solely for self-acclaim, but mainly for the liberation of all from oppression; be it socio-political or religious. For Byron and his alter-ego; the Byronic hero, it is not good enough for one to be free while his neighbours are in chains, but the moral value of the search process for both personal and common liberty is again questionable. The poet and his protagonists urge for people to be more conscious of the plight of others in a bid to change the world and to make it a better place to live in. In this paper, we hold that instead of considering Lord Byron and his protagonists as nihilistic and satanic, and dismissing them, they may also be rightly seen as altruistic, since they are ready to sacrifice themselves for the liberation of the world.

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