Tis done – but yesterday a king: Is There Truly a Dichotomy of Napoleon in Byron’s Romantic Vision?

Through most of the twentieth century, critics have remarked on the apparent dichotomy of Byron’s views on Napoleon Bonaparte. In Byron’s poetry, his letters and his journals, he is seen as alternately praising/castigating Napoleon. Is he really this duplicitous, though? A careful reading of all of Byron’s writings on the subject of the fallen emperor would seem to indicate that he is not. True, in his younger years he saw Napoleon as a hero and appeared to be crushed when that hero, his man of the people, declared himself emperor, but he was seventeen years old at the time, with all the judgmental qualities of youth. Later, as an adult, with the exception of some rather vituperous lines on the subject, Byron appears to approve of Napoleon on the whole. One brief exception appears in one of his poems “From the French,” saying

France hath twice too well been taught
The ‘moral lesson’ dearly bought –
Her safety sits not on a throne,
With Capet or Napoleon!
But in equal rights and laws,
Hearts and hands in one great cause (188).

One positive aspect is that Byron compares his position as a poet with Napoleon’s position as emperor – both are at the top of their games. Even
Napoleon’s defeat has a Byronic parallel – Byron’s ostracization from British society. This situation does not reflect the disappointment which most critics ascribe to Byron. In his journal, after hearing of Napoleon’s exile to Elba, he is yet hoping that his “little Pagod” will “play some trick on them yet” (Marchand 90). His disappointment could not have been that crushing, since he is wishing for a triumphal return. Byron’s disappointment appears to be more in Napoleon’s defeat than at anything the emperor actually had done. On hearing that he escaped, Byron, in a letter to Thomas Moore, said

It is impossible not to be dazzled and overwhelmed by his character and career. Nothing ever disappointed me so much as his abdication, and nothing could have reconciled me to him but some such revival as his recent exploit; though no one could anticipate such a complete and brilliant renovation (Marchand 285).

In fact, earlier in that same letter Byron says gleefully “I can forgive the rogue for utterly falsifying every line of mine Ode – which I take to be the last and uttermost stretch of human magnanimity.”

Simon Bainbridge even says that “Byron dramatized himself through the analogy of Napoleon Bonaparte, for him the supreme embodiment of the ‘talents of action – of war – or the Senate,’ to which he aspired” (134). Going further, Peter Cochran says

Byron’s attitude to Napoleon was coloured by two facts: firstly, that he perceived the Frenchman, not as a normal politician, but as a kind of living legend, inhabiting a world not of contemporary history but of metahistory
or contemporary myth, in the same dimension as Prometheus (or, as we’ve seen, as England in 1817); and secondly, that having created this idol, he identified with it... His Napoleon is a projection of himself (11).

In Byron’s letters and journals, nowhere does he make a disparaging remark about Napoleon. At times he would seem a bit disappointed or put off, but his views of Napoleon’s exploits as well as his reign never really change. True, he lost some enthusiasm after seeing the effects of Napoleonic war on Europe; however, Byron’s Whig political views, made stronger through his friendship with arch-Whig Thomas Moore, remain. In fact, in a letter to Thomas Moore dated August 2, 1821, Byron’s feelings are evident when he says “Why don’t you write on Napoleon? I have no spirits, nor “estro” to do so. His overthrow, from the beginning, was a blow on the head to me” (166). This comes after the news of Napoleon’s death in May has been widely circulated.

Even within Byron’s poetry, any negative comments are illustrative more of disappointment than outright disapproval, with very few exceptions. Considering that Napoleon embodied so many qualities of the Byronic hero, this is more a disappointment that Napoleon did not live up to his ideal. The admiration is still there, albeit with an edge. Byron was notoriously poor at handling disappointment of any type, and for his idol to fall as spectacularly as Napoleon did, particularly at the hands of someone as incompetent as Arthur Wellesley, his reaction passed beyond the realm of disappointment into more of a version of anger. Actually, though Byron forbade to put Wellesley into the company of “that drunken corporal,
old Blucher,” he did say, in a letter to Moore, “However, he may thank the Russian frosts, which destroyed the real elite of the French army, for the successes of Waterloo” (Marchand 302).

Byron’s liberal political views are well known and of long duration. While the friendship with Moore intensified Byron’s connections to the Whig party, his own maiden speech in the House of Lords supporting the frame breakers sets the stage publicly for his lifelong liberalism, culminating with his quixotic last adventure in Greece. His opinions of France’s political situation insofar as Napoleon’s rule in the beginning were extremely positive. Napoleon was seen, not only by Byron but by most of the Romantics, as the long awaited common man in charge at long last. Napoleon represented democracy and freedom, something fresh and new after centuries of monarchy. He appeared as a voice of sanity and order after the excesses of the French Revolution. Even the artwork of the time creates this view. David’s “Napoleon Crossing the Alps” is the very vision of the man of action, the Byronic hero personified. The image embodies the Corsair, Lara, and the other dramatic heroes of the Turkish tales.

Given Byron’s House of Lords speech and other political references throughout his life, he probably approved wholeheartedly of the reforms Napoleon instituted throughout France, particularly the Code Napoleon. Napoleon’s Consulate was full of promise which the subsequent empire seemed to dash in the eyes of many of the Romantics, namely Shelley. Byron didn’t approve, but he wasn’t yet ready to give up on his “little pagod”. Also like Byron, Napoleon was an expert at creating and maintaining an image. In actuality, Byron was probably less successful
at this than Napoleon. Both had many portraits done, reflective of a certain degree of egotism, but Napoleon’s had a different purpose – propaganda. The image created in the propaganda paintings is one of which Byron would approve – the hard working leader, concerned only with the good of his people, working into the wee hours of the morning. In fact, the painting of Napoleon in his study, done by Jacques-Louis David, is iconic. The clock in the background shows that it is not quite four in the morning and the desk is littered with papers making up the new Civil Code or Code Napoleon, leading the viewer to believe that Napoleon has worked tirelessly through the night to craft this beneficent set of laws for his people, his children.

Byron is all about image, and he definitely bought this image of Napoleon. He was, of course, less enamoured by the images presented in Le Sacre by David or the emperor enthroned by Jean Auguste Ingres, because those were representative of empire and emperor, not the “soldier citizen” who appears in several poems as a contrast to the emperor. This was the Napoleon who appeared to be a traitor to the cause of freedom and justice, but considering that the David painting in the study was done during the empire period and several of Byron’s positive poetic and epistolary references to Napoleon appear at this time, evidently Byron has reconciled with the working political emperor.

Even when dealing with the somewhat petulant negative poetical views, such as “Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte,” it is clear that Byron was less disapproving of Napoleon as emperor or traitor to the cause than he was annoyed that Napoleon agreed to go into exile rather than dying on the battlefield or committing an
honorable suicide. The references to Prometheus are positive, and Byron infers that a glorious act of falling on his sword would have been far more acceptable than becoming a prisoner of his [Napoleon’s] inferiors. On that point, Napoleon has an answer. James Hogg quotes Hobhouse saying that Napoleon, in response to a friend visiting him on Elba, said “What! kill myself! Had I nothing better to do than this - like a miserable bankrupt who, because he has lost his goods, determines to lose his life? Napoleon is Napoleon, and will always know how to . . . bear any fortune” (398). Actually, had he committed suicide at this point, Byron would not have had the vindication of seeing Napoleon’s return.

It appears that Byron would have preferred an end similar to his Sardanapalus, self-immolating not only himself but all of his possessions so as not to fall into the hands of an inferior enemy. Byron’s idea of a heroic end is embodied in one of Sardanapalus’ last long speeches:

Most royal of funereal pyres shall be
Not a mere pillar form’d of cloud and
flame,
A beacon in the horizon for a day,
And then a mount of ashes, but a light
To lesson ages, rebel nations, and
Voluptuous princes. Time shall quench
full many
A people’s records, and a hero’s acts;
Sweep empire after empire, like this first
Of empires, into nothing’ but even then
Shall spare this deed of mine, and hold it
   up
A problem few dare imitate, and none
Despise – but, it may be, avoid the life
Which led to such a consummation.

In other words, it’s better for a ruler to destroy himself and everything around him than to submit to an invading force. Napoleon did not exemplify this model, but Byron wasn't actually advocating that he follow Sardanapalus’ self-immolation.

Thus, Byron’s attitude toward the emperor is more consistent and less critical than some have argued. Although he regards Napoleon’s end—a lonely exile on St. Helena—as unworthy of such a world-historical figure, by and large he regarded his “little pagod” as embodying the heroic spirit of the age. Byron’s critical comments about Napoleon are less a direct complaint about his policies than about his failure to live up to what Byron regarded as an ideal toward which the nineteenth-century hero should strive.