Byron and a Project of Ethicization of Politics from the Perspective of Polish Romanticism

“Byron is the mysterious link connecting the great Slavic literature with the literature of the West”\(^1\). These surprising and unusual words were spoken by the greatest Polish poet, Adam Mickiewicz, on 20 December 1842 at the Collège de France in Paris. On 20 December 1842 Mickiewicz, a Romantic and the most important of Polish poets, the man who expressed the Polish mentality the most fully, was in his third year of lecturing in Paris and was trying to introduce the Western cultural elite to the Slavic world: he outlined the history, the literature, and the unique character of the Slavs. He spoke not only about Polish or Czech culture, but also about the Southern Slavs and about Russia, a country on which he was a great expert, not only – a paradox – as a tsarist prisoner but also as a friend of many Russians and a poet loved by the Russian intelligentsia of his time (but that’s just by the way). It also needs adding that today Mickiewicz’s lectures at the Collège de France are considered to be the sum and synthesis of Polish Romanticism. It was in the third lecture of the third year of the Slavic literature course, when Mickiewicz was discussing “how Slavic poets, men of letters, writers understand their mission and their duties”\(^2\), that those extraordinary words were spoken about the mysterious relations between the spirit of contemporary Slavic poets and the spirit of Byron. What is the real significance of identifying such a connection between Byron and Slavic poets? What is the meaning of the words: “Byron is the mysterious link connecting the great Slavic literature with the literature of the West”? How was establishing such a connection between Byron and Slavic poets possible? What is its essence?

\(^1\) All documentation refers to the original texts in Polish. The cited fragments have been translated into English by Joanna Dutkiewicz who also translated the present paper. Mickiewicz (1997: 33).
\(^2\) Ibidem, p. 25.
A few years ago, on the 35th jubilee session on Byron in Missolunghi, I wrote about the extraordinary way in which Polish Romanticism assimilated Byron, who essentially became a hero of Polish Romanticism\(^3\).

When compared to European depictions, the Polish perception of Byron and his output is particularly distinctive (similarly to modern Greek perception). Byron was highly appreciated by Polish Romantics: all outstanding Polish Romantic writers treated Byron as an extraordinary person, and created their unique myth or legend of Byron. The Polish Romanticism adapted the legend of Byron as a hero of struggles for independence and a patron of freedom movements in the nineteenth-century Europe but also perceived him as an archetype of a romantic man. Polish Romantics exposed philhellenic threads in Byron’s life and output. As the Polish Romanticism developed a parallel between the history of Poland and the history of Modern Greece, the theme of Greek uprising became an opportunity to discuss both Polish problems and the universal Romantic issues, such as: the limits of individualism, the question about necessity and freedom, or an approach to ancient heritage of Europe\(^4\).

The work and person of Byron is one of the most important points of reference for Polish Romanticism in all the stages of this period, both through acceptance (or rather admiration) and through polemics. I also wrote the 35th jubilee session on Byron in Missolunghi that Byron became the patron of the two most important Polish Romantic literary heroes created by Mickiewicz in his poetic drama *Dziady* (*Forefathers’ Eve* from the 1830s), their template and model, is the Byronic hero but also in a way Byron himself. Those two characters from *Forefathers’ Eve* are Gustaw who symbolizes existential dilemmas, and Konrad who breaks with them, acts within history and makes sacrifices for his nation. Both are marked by Byronism, they are Byronic creations. It needs adding that in Polish Romanticism it’s often hard to separate the reception of Byron’s oeuvre from the reception of Byron’s person, they are so closely intertwined. The legend of Byron\(^5\), the extraordinary and mysterious power of his influence continued for a very long time in Polish Romanticism, even extending beyond the temporal boundaries of Romanticism. Here’s what Mickiewicz said about this magnetic force of Byron’s influence on Slavic poets on 20 December 1842: “Many of the Slavic poets […] never even saw the works of the English writer, but they heard a few

\(^3\) See Kalinowska, 2012.
\(^4\) See for more detailed explanation, ibidem.
sounds from them, a few stanzas, and that was enough. The power of this man was so great that it could be felt even from a few words, and it took just those words to touch souls, to reveal to them the mystery of their own being.  

What, then, does Mickiewicz see as the essence of the mysterious bond between Slavic poets and Byron? As identified by the Polish Romantic, this bond has another special aspect. In a way, Mickiewicz “establishes” the tradition for contemporary Slavic poetry in Byron’s poetry: “many Western peoples have no poetic tradition, whereas the type created by Byron is improved and uplifted higher and higher in Slavic works”. This is a very radical statement: the Collège de France’s inspired lecturer not only speaks of Byron’s huge impact on Slavic poetry and of Byron’s poetry constituting the tradition (base) of contemporary Slavic poetry. We can also interpret his words as expressing the belief that Slavic poetry is the only true continuator of Byron’s poetry, whereas Western Europe seems to have forgotten about this type of poetry. This is the conclusion we can draw from Mickiewicz’s words (although it’s worth remembering that the Collège de France lectures were live, improvised speeches and the poet never wrote them down in full, we only know them from shorthand records and notes).

Let me return to the earlier question: what is the meaning of Mickiewicz’s unusual sentence about Byron as “the mysterious link connecting the great Slavic literature with the literature of the West”? What constitutes that connection? What links Byron (in Mickiewicz’s view) to the continuation of his poetry – Slavic literature? What “tricks” and literary devices define this connection?

In fact, it’s not strictly literary qualities, not literary means of expression, not metaphors and literary conventions that decide about such a link between Byron and Slavic poetry. On the contrary, Mickiewicz seems to ignore the purely literary value of Byron’s oeuvre. Overstepping the boundaries of literature plus the unity between the poet’s life and his work is the all-important factor here. “Lord Byron”, writes Mickiewicz, “begins the age of new poetry; he was the first man who enabled people to feel the full seriousness of poetry; they could see that you have to live as you write; that desire, that words are not enough”. You have to “live as you write” – Mickiewicz unveils the foundation of his own judgment of literature. Not strictly literary qualities but achieving the unity of writing and living, visible

---

7 Ibidem.
8 Ibidem, p. 33.
9 Ibidem.
especially in Byron’s political commitment, is Mickiewicz’s most important consideration when judging Byron. “People saw how this poet, rich and brought up in an aristocratic country, abandoned his parliament and his native country to serve the Greek cause”\textsuperscript{10}. You have to “live as you write”. It’s worth adding that to this day in the system of Polish literature, conformity between writing and living, between words and deeds, is a central category, deeply ingrained in the Polish mentality, applied when judging poets – including contemporary writers.

Valuing Byron so highly as a poet and as someone who lived as he wrote, and linking this unity with the poet’s political commitment to the Greek cause, Mickiewicz also saw this activity in terms (as he put it) of “the ideal approaching reality”\textsuperscript{11}. That’s what constitutes “Byron’s whole poetic merit” and that’s what mapped the road for Slavic poets (“all of the great Slavic poets embarked on this path”\textsuperscript{12}).

We now come to the other element of Mickiewicz’s identification of Byron’s special role in the development of Slavic literature. The first element, as I’ve indicated, is the ethical and anthropological model: life being like poetry, words being verified by life. The other is the effort to make “the ideal approach reality”, the conviction expressed in the language of the period that politics has to be judged in ethical terms. Describing Byron’s impact on Slavic poets the way he did, Mickiewicz uncovered Polish Romanticism’s most important set of beliefs regarding politics: the lasting tendency of Polish Romanticism to think about history and politics as an area which has to be subject to ethical judgment. This means that in this lecture at the Collège de France, Mickiewicz’s fascination with Byron was coupled with Polish Romanticism’s characteristic tendency to reject thinking about politics as a game of power, a game of brutal forces and a struggle for domination. The ethical project that Mickiewicz presented in this summary of Romanticism was a drive towards ethicization of politics. Despite his awareness of the whole brutality of politics, especially in countries based on despotic rule, and of the cruelty of history, Mickiewicz refused to accept thinking about politics in terms of effectiveness, violence, a brutal power struggle. He built a project of ethicization of politics in his work, a project of making “the ideal approach reality”. And it is Byron precisely who is the patron and symbol of this tendency in Slavic poetry. He is the embodiment of a tendency that was the most important trend in Polish Romanticism.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibidem.  
\textsuperscript{11} Ibidem.  
\textsuperscript{12} Ibidem.
The central segment of the lecture discussed here – the Collège de France lecture delivered on 20 December 1842 – begins with the words: “With Lord Byron there begins a new period of literature, of poetry. This literature, this poetry, touches upon philosophy on the one hand, and on the other – upon real life”\(^{13}\). Mickiewicz paints a very stirring picture of Europe transitioning from the 18th to the 19th century through the experience of emptiness, the young generation’s bewilderment, “aimless wandering”, searching for values. “All this filled the souls of young people of our generation and all this was extremely faithfully expressed by Lord Byron”\(^{14}\), while at the same time Byron seems to have raised that whole generation from its confusion, precisely through the dual direction of his stance: towards reality (which includes a lucid perception of politics), but also towards “exploring and grasping the mysteries of being”\(^{15}\). This is the next quality of Byron’s poetic attitude that Mickiewicz thinks is shared by Slavic poets: poetry that combines sound views on historical reality, and thus also politics, with a tendency towards exploring the metaphysical mystery of being. This dual nature of poetry, which Mickiewicz links to Byron, is still considered the fundamental and most valuable quality of Polish Romantic poetry today.

In the lecture in question, Mickiewicz invoked Byron as a poet and someone who began a new era in literature while himself being a spiritual product of Napoleon: “the ray that ignited the English poet’s fire arose from the spirit of Napoleon”\(^{16}\) (whom, by the way, Mickiewicz worshipped all his life), and from the spirit of Byron arose everything that was the most valuable in the poetry of the period. This is what Mickiewicz says about Byronic inspiration in contemporary poetry; the author of *The Giaour* is referenced not by a replication of literary forms but by inspiration drawn from the spirit of his poetry: “only they who understood what it was in Lord Byron that was really strong, sincere, true, and deep, were destined to lead the literary advance of our century”\(^{17}\).

Performing such a complex hermeneutics of Byron, Mickiewicz also expresses the ideas which were of the utmost importance to himself. Invoking Byron not as a man of doubt and nihilism but as a poet of struggle and a man of unity between poetry and life, he establishes a tradition for the poetry of Slavic people entering the “era of struggle when […] the task of the [creative] force that seizes people is to shake up the masses. Clearly, the Slavic peoples are

\(^{13}\) Ibidem, p. 34.

\(^{14}\) Ibidem.

\(^{15}\) Ibidem.

\(^{16}\) Ibidem, p. 35.

\(^{17}\) Ibidem, p. 34/35.
entering such an era\textsuperscript{18}, and thus Byron with his political commitment focused on the sphere of the ideal becomes the patron of Slavic poets.

References


\textsuperscript{18} Ibidem, p. 36.