My essay is focused on hermeneutical aspects of Byron’s works, specifically on the problem of their perception and interpretation in Silver-Age Russian culture.

One of the founders of modern philosophical hermeneutics the German philosopher Hans George Gadamer claimed that to understand a text meant to apply it to ourselves. According to Gadamer we always apply the work of any writer to our contemporary situation, to a given context connected with an interpreter. Thus the main hermeneutical procedure of application (Anwendung) reminds us of the plurability and mutability of interpretation. From the point of view of hermeneutical Anwendung the works by Byron were of special interest for Silver-Age Russian culture.

Though Byron’s influence was a characteristic feature of the Nineteenth century Russian culture as a whole, it was the Silver-Age that marked according to Alexey Veselovsky ‘a new appeal to Byron’. The peculiarities of that new appeal depended on the general atmosphere of the turn of the 19th century Russia where ‘the Time was out of joint’. Being the epoch of fin de siecle with its revaluation of values and turbulent political events, Silver-Age inclined to see in Byron’s works the unique synthesis of metaphysics and politics, eschatology and actuality which gave new impetus to the Russian imagination.

At the same time Silver-Age was the period of exceptional creativity in Russia and the time of great receptivity to foreign cultural influences. In this respect it accumulated the most important aspects of Russian culture. ‘We Russians, Dostoevsky wrote in 1876, have two motherlands: our Rus and Europe’, thus emphasizing the unique quality of receptivity of Russian culture. ‘This Russian attitude to world literature, Dostoevsky continued, is a phenomenon almost unparalleled among other nations throughout world history. <…> Every poet innovator of
Europe, everyone who appears there with a new idea and a new source of strength, cannot fail immediately to become a Russian poet as well, cannot bypass Russian thought, cannot fail to become almost a Russian force…’. As far as Byron is concerned Dostoevsky considered him to be one of the greatest poets – innovators and he declared that Byron’s poetry was a new poetry of revenge and sorrow. ‘It was a mighty cry, Dostoevsky claimed, in which all the cries and moans of mankind were united. It was impossible for us not to response to it’.

Being well aware that Russian Byron is not a subject which can be readily exhausted or summed up I would try to outline the most important points of that ‘new appeal to Byron’ in Silver-Age Russian culture.

First I would like to notice that Symbolism of the turn of the 19th century had much in common with the aesthetics of European Romanticism. According to Harold Bloom in his The Ringers of the Tower Romanticism is a perpetually self-renewing tradition. That is why Russian symbolist poets saw in Byron their predecessor and inspirer. In his essay ‘Byronism as the phenomenon of the Russian spirit life’ (1916) one of the most prominent figures of Russian symbolism a scholar-poet Vjacheslav Ivanov declared that ‘Byronism was a public revelation of personality’. And for Dmitriy Merezhkovsky Byron was a kind of a new myth, the eternal companion to the mankind (Eternal Companions, 1897).

At the turn of the 19th century Russian poets widely used Byronic images and motives in their original works, such as the motives of anguish and sufferings, loneliness and separation from the world and the God, or the images of tempest, war of the elements and thunderstorm. A.Block who saw in Byron ‘the symbol of all romantic pride and arrogance’ (lecture On Theatre, 1908) made Byron-like person the hero of his unfinished poem Retribution where he emphasized that likeness in the preface to his poem and in the poetic text itself. In V.Brusov’s poem Homecoming there was a titanic hero, a new Manfred and at the same time a new Zaratushtra. In this respect it is important to notice that it was F. Nitzsche who played then a role of mediator between Byron and the Silver-Age artists and whom V.Ivanov called ‘the prime mover of the
contemporary soul’. Nitzsche with his sermon of mighty individualism and superman caused the turn of Russian Silver-Age artists to the barbaric world in the context of crisis of European culture.

Probably the most striking example of that process is a poem *Scythians* (1918) by A. Block where Russian poet celebrates an Asiatic vengeance on the culture of the old European world with its burden of history. The voices of these primordial tribes are wild yet forceful:

Yes, we are Scythians! Yes, we are Asiatics,

With slanting, greedy eyes!

For you centuries, for us a single hour.
We, like obedient underlings,
Held the shield between the two enemy races
Of the Mongols and Europe.

In turn-of the-century Russia the artistic and academic worlds were closely connected. Artists often took their aesthetic orientation from scholars and university lecturers had close professional associations with artistic circles. It was the time when comparative literary studies became the academic discipline. The leading role in that process belonged to brothers Alexey and Alexandr Veselovsky. In 1882 Alexey Veselovsky published his work *Western influence in a new Russian literature* where he declared the necessity of wide exchange with ideas, images and artistic forms between different people and different national traditions as one of the most important condition of artistic creativity. The establishment of the tradition of comparative literary study led Russian critical thought to elaborate a rich conception of culture itself as an ongoing dialogue, and Byron was one of the most active participator of such a dialogue.

The early Twentieth century was marked by a stream of new editions of Byron’s works. The most important among them were three-volume Complete Works published by Brockhouse
and Efron Publishing House in 1904 – 1907 with S. Vengerov as a chief editor. That edition included the substantial essay by Academic Kotlyarevsky *Byronism in his historical development and significance* where the author emphasized the ambivalent nature of Byronism: the expression of individualism and *Weltschmertz* on the one hand and philosophical and political revolt and challenge on the other. And Alexey Veselovsky in his *Etudes on Byronism* published on the eve of the first Russian revolution of 1905 interpreted Byron and Byronism in the context of contemporary Russian history. ‘Byron, he declared, with his mighty protest, brilliant irony and bright development of individuality is the source of inspiration for those who doomed to struggle with the old order of state, society, moral attitudes and literature’.

One more aspect of Russian Byron of the early Twentieth century is connected with widespread theory of the so-called ‘the art of life building’. As Russian Silver-Age was the Golden-Age of Russian theatre, ‘theatricalism’ became a topical concept of national culture before the revolution of 1917. It was the time of the expansion of theatricalized behaviour, the time marked by the radical tendency to abolish the distinction between art and life. In that cultural context the figure of Byron became extremely attractive. For Russian artists Byron was the unique example of the unity of poetry and life with all these dramatic antinomies of his character: at the same time egocentric and sacrificial, melancholic and rebellious.

The early Twentieth century was also marked by a stream of new translations of Byron’s poems in Russia, Block’s and Brusov’s translations being among the most successful ones. But they were attracted by different sides of Byron’s talent. Brusov liked pathetic and solemn Byron connected with classicism tradition. He translated ten poems by Byron, such as *On leaving Newstead Abbey, I Would I Were a Careless Child*, Napoleonic poems and some other. In contrast to Brusov Block preferred the poems of expressive lyrical character. He translated fifteen poems by Byron for Brockhouse and Efron edition. Among them there were Byron’s early poems, such as *Lines Written Beneath an Elm in the Churchyard of Harrow*, and also the masterpieces of Byron’s late poetry. The most striking among the late poems translations by
Block is that of Journal in Cephalonia. There is a joke about poetry translations. Translations are like women: they are either faithful or beautiful. And Block’s translation is one of these rare occasions when translation becomes both – faithful and beautiful: faithful in its rhythms and images and beautiful in its poetic inspiration and expressiveness.

In conclusion let me demonstrate you that famous Block’s translation:

Встревожен мертвых сон, - могу ли спать?
Тираны давят мир, – я ль уступлю?
Созрела жатва, – мне ли медлить жать?
На ложе колкий терн; я не дремлю;
В моих ушах, что день, поет труба,
Ей вторит сердце…

[The dead have been awakened – shall I sleep?
The World’s at war with tyrants – shall I crouch?
The harvest’s ripe – and shall I pause to reap?
I slumber not; the thorn is in my Couch;
Each day a trumpet soundeth in mine ear,
Its echo in my heart –]

One of the leading intellectuals of Russian Silver-Age Zinaida Vengerova was prophetically right when she declared that Byron had been made almost a ‘Russian poet’ by his translators.

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