What is Byronism?

I asked myself this question at the beginning of my research. Often it has been interpreted as a literary and aesthetic phenomenon - according to Simonini it was a sort of “spiritual fashion”\(^1\) - but I believe that Byronism was something more than this. Banti and Ginsborg remark that Italian historiography has not given due importance to the complex links between culture and politics\(^2\).

Following their approach and avoiding Manichean divisions between disciplines, I have examined the possible interactions between European Romanticism and the Italian Risorgimento.

Byron and his characters – “the myths of modern times” as argued De Paz\(^3\) - reflect the contradictions of the romantic culture and also the tensions, pessimism and hopes during a transitional period. The *Childe Harold’s* wanderings are those of an

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entire lost generation⁴ that suffered the devastating effects of historical events of exceptional magnitude, and was divided between two opposite thrusts, the Goethe’s \textit{Sehnsucht} and what Charles Du Bos called “le besoin de la fatalité”⁵. This painful condition is expressed in the following verses of \textit{Prometheus}:

Titan! To thee the strife was given  
Between the suffering and the will  
Which torture where they cannot kill.⁶

Samuel Chew has distinguished among the components of Byronism, the English liberal tradition, the personal charisma of Byron, the spread of new literary genres such as travel novels and Gothic tales⁷. I believe to this combination of factors must be added another element, hitherto neglected and sometimes not recognized, which is the political dimension of Byronism. I am referring to the “process of generational identification” with Byron, which explains the root of Byronism in countries of different cultural traditions. For all of these reasons, it does not seem wrong to define Byronism as the “romantic-Ego in action”, namely as the most dynamic

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⁴ I should clarify that I used here the historicist meaning of the term “generation”. On historical concept of the term “generation” see: Wilhelm Dilthey, \textit{Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften}, 1883 (\textit{Introduction to the Human Sciences, Selected Works}, Rudolf A Makkreel; Frithjof Rodi (eds.), Princeton, N.J: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989) and Luciano Gallino, \textit{Dizionario di sociologia}, Torino: UTET, 1978. The term refers to a group of individuals (or cohorts), including those of different ages, who lived at the same time crucial and unique historical experiences from which they found their sense of sharing a common destiny.


expression of intellectuals educated in Europe’s romantic culture and firmly embedded in the process – the “true poetry of politics” as Byron once said – of the construction of a free and independent nation.

**Byronism in Italy: early translators and imitators**

Byron’s fame spread beyond England’s borders and to the rest of the world, and especially to Italy where, according to Kimbell, there grew an “exaggerated Byronism”\(^8\).

Despite the censorship, during the outbreak of the first liberal and constitutional insurrections were published a large number of translations and imitations of Byron in Italy. It is not possible to remember all of the many translators and imitators\(^9\), but it is important to note that some of them were also protagonists of the Italian Risorgimento. This factor cannot be attributed to chance.

Byronism took root in Italy in years in which an ongoing lively literary debate embraced civil and political issues. The controversy created two opposing sides, Romantics and Classicists. Both sides reacted to Byron’s writings, thus we can consider Byronism as a kind of watershed between the two opposing camps: on the one hand Byronists and patriots, who supported the regeneration of the country; on the other hand, anti-Byronists and Classicists - the so-called «Monarchs of the letters», as Mazzini wittily labeled them - who were staunch defenders of the status

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\(^9\) The best known were Giuseppe Gazzino, Giuseppe Nicolini, Silvio Pellico, Pietro Isola, Pellegrino Rossi, Carlo Rusconi, Andrea Maffei, Michele Leoni, Marcello Mazzoni, Pasquale de Virgili.
For example, Pietro Giordani was an intransigent champion of Classicism: he disliked Byron’s poetry - the pair having met in Venice in 1816 - and harshly defined him as a «vuolcano, che gitta molto fumo, pochissima luce, molta poltiglia, molta cenere, sassi, semivetri; pochi frammenti di valore»11. Another illustrious exponent of the classic line-up, though not as anti-romantic, was Giacomo Leopardi, who presumably met Byron through his friend Pietro Giordani. After reading The Corsair and The Giaour, Leopardi expressed his thoughts on the works of Byron, which were not entirely positive, describing Byron’s poetry as “a very obscure treaty of psychology”12. However, Leopardi’s admiration of Byron, as paladin of liberty, is indisputable. In the opposite literary group Ludovico di Breme, liberal priest and author of a very positive commentary on The Giaour, called Byron “the great painter of hidden scenes of the soul”13.

A fanatical admirer of Byron was also Silvio Pellico – member of the Italian Federated – who called Byron an “extraordinary genius”. In 1818 Pellico wrote his version of The Corsair, and in 1819 he published his prose translation of Manfred along with some historical tragedies.

11 Pietro Giordani, Epistolario, A. Gussalli (ed.), Milano: Borroni e Scotti, 1865, VI, p. 200. “Volcano that throws a lot of smoke, very little light, a lot of mush, ash, rocks, semi-glazed and a few fragments of value” (my translation).
12 Giacomo Leopardi, Pensieri di varia filosofia e di bella letteratura (1817-1832), Firenze: Le Monnier 1921, I, pp. 324, 351.
During the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Italian literature was transformed into a powerful instrument of political and civil struggle that was more effective than direct warfare. Mazzini very pointedly looked at the correlation between the Italian political situation and the absence of a national culture, and wrote «For us, independence in terms of literature is the first step in a very different independence». Great was Mazzini’s admiration of Byron, describing him as “the Napoleon of poetry”.

The heroic death of Lord Byron at Missolonghi in 1824, amplified his already legendary fame. Cesare Cantù, who was arrested on charges of being part of the Giovine Italia, in 1833 published his Discorso ai Soci dell’Accademia di Bergamo, a celebratory portrait of Byron. A heartfelt tribute to the hero of Missolonghi was also addressed by two women distinguished for their patriotic and civic commitment. The Sicilian poet Giuseppina Turrisi Colonna composed Lord Byron’s Farewell to Italy\textsuperscript{14} and Greek-Italian Angelica Palli Bartolomei wrote an elegy dedicated to Byron called a “new Tyrtaeus”\textsuperscript{15}.

In Tuscany, among Byron’s admirers and imitators, along with Carlo Bini, was also Francesco Domenico Guerrazzi, patriot and democrat who was defined by

\textsuperscript{14} Giuseppina Turrisi Colonna, “Addio di Lord Byron all’Italia”, in \textit{Liriche}, Firenze: Le Monnier, 1846, pp. 93-96. “(...) Taci! L’italo amor del mio Britanno / Gl’itali sensi, oh male, oh mal compendi: (...) / Deh posa, posa: troppo dolce e santo / E’ d’una pace desiata il raggio; / Ma pace bella d’ogni nobil vanto / Non ozio d’invingarde alme retaggio. / Divina Italia! con che amaro pianto / Vado altrove a cercar lodi al coraggio; / Pur Grecia sogo, e mi vi chiama un Dio... / Addio, Patria mia vera, Italia addio.”

Muoni as “the great Byronist of Italy”\(^\text{16}\). On the occasion of the Lord Byron’ death, Guerrazzi composed a celebratory song, and 1836 he finished the *Life of Lord Byron*, an Italian version of the biography by Lake that was very well-known. Aware of the destructive potential inherent in Byron’s pessimism, Guerrazzi described the author of *The Giaour* - whose charm was inescapable- as “gold on the outside and ashes inside”\(^\text{17}\). Love and revenge are the dominant themes in Guerrazzi’s most Byronic novel, *Veronica Cybo*, published in 1838. In this novel the author carried to extremes his model and he spread the most dangerous image of Byron in Italy (so-called Satanic Byronism).

Edoardo Zuccato has drawn a kind of map where he distinguished the different regional types of the Italian Byronism: in Lombardy it was Catholic and sentimental; in Tuscany anticlerical and biting, while in the South, where it took root a decade after the death of Byron, it was rather wild and natural in its spontaneity\(^\text{18}\).
I am going to talk about the latter that has had two versions, Neapolitan and Calabrian.


\(^\text{17}\) To Giuseppina Turrisi Colonna, [Livorno] 30 Avril 1843, in *Lettere di F.D. Guerrazzi*, Ferdinando Martini (ed.) Torino: Roux, 1891, I (1827-57), p. 118. “Io appena credo a me stesso, perché è forza credere a voi: come a sedici anni sapete fare quei versi? O chi vi sussurrò agli orecchi quei modi eletti? [...] Non vi talenti Byron; no, egli è frutto di Asfaltide, oro fuori cenere dentro; credetelo a me esperto, egli mi ha abbacinato l’animo. Io conobbi Byron, a me parve un Laocoonte volontario; egli si era quasi per vaghezza avvolto entro serpenti, dei quali non sapeva più svincolarsi: andò in Grecia come Oreste, in Tauride per liberarsi delle furie; vi sarebbe riuscito? Io penso che il dubbio sia di codeste piaghie – che per allentare di arco non sanano – quindi ebbe amica la morte.”

Childe Harold in the South Italy: the ideal school of Byronism

The causes of a greater enthusiasm in the South in comparison to the Centre-Nord of Italy can be traced to the backwardness of the political, social and economic conditions of the Regno delle Due Sicilie, compared to European standards.

Neapolitan Byronism was oleographic, conformist and of very short duration. We should remember Nicola Sole, Achille de Lauzières, Cesare Malpica and the best known, Pasquale De Virgilii, who translated some Byron’s tragedies and was called by Porta “the Byron of Southern Italy”\(^\text{19}\).

I will focus more on Calabrian Byronism since it was a local version more original and lively, the product of the mixture of local tradition and Byron’s poetry. To conclude my remarks, then we will put Childe Harold among the fiercest bandits of the Sila, in Calabria, where a group of young poets, romantics with radical political ideas, was discovered - for the first time - by Francesco De Sanctis, who coined the happy phrase “natural romanticism”. Members of this group included Francesco Ruffa, Giuseppe Campagna, Pietro Giannone, Domenico Mauro, Vincenzo Boffa, Biagio Miraglia, Vincenzo Padula\(^\text{20}\).

Calabrian Romanticism focused on a deep regard for nature - so dear to Byron - and expressed three variations, the sublime, the contemplative and the fatalistic. The Sila Mountains are often the background for dramatic scenes that


evoke «black romanticism» as analyzed by Praz\textsuperscript{21}, a likely reaction to the claustrophobic cultural climate of the South in the considered period.

Beyond sentiments concerning nature and violent passions, Calabrian Romantism is known for recurrent themes on the subjects of exoticism, exile, patriotism and heroic death. At this point it is interesting to link Byronism to the so-called «myth of the Calabresità” that summarized the distinctive traits of the Calabrian people in the collective imagination and explains how Byronism took root. The historian Augusto Placanica argued that this myth acted in support of patriotism: the supposed Calabrian qualities (for example pride, moral strength, rebellious character, defined as “the poetry of the primitive and of the heroic”), were celebrated as positive and exploited by the middle class in order to involve the masses in the struggles of the Risorgimento\textsuperscript{22}.

The second factor that I have investigated is the terrain where flourished the literary production of the Calabrian patriots. Some of them had in common the same College of St. Adrian, in San Demetrio Corone - a revolutionary laboratory hidden by the ancient walls of a former basilica - named by Ferdinand II “the forge of the devil”. This school, founded in 1773 in the hearth of the Regno delle Due Sicilie, gave form to an explosive amalgam of literature and politics and, for this reason, I have called it the “ideal school of Byronism”. Inside it were taught lessons of patriotism and liberalism, followed with keen interest by the brothers Domenico and

\textsuperscript{21} Mario Praz, \textit{La carne, la morte e il diavolo}, Firenze: 1930.

Vincenzo Mauro, Girolamo De Rada, Giovan Battista Falcone, Pietro Giannone e Gennaro Mortati. Perhaps the most Byronist of these students was Agesilao Milano, - the “great terror of the kings” - because of his attempt to assassinate Ferdinad II, in 1856\(^{23}\). The wound was not fatal, nevertheless the very young Agesilao was immediately sentenced to hang.

Now I will say more about the Calabrian romantics. Vincenzo Padula - called by Benedetto Croce as “an incendiary abbot and communist”\(^{24}\) – denied his cassock in order to devote himself to the literature and the revolutionary cause. Padula along with Mauro collaborated in the journals “Il Viaggiatore” (1840) and “Il Calabrese” (1842). In 1842 he also published his most Byronic novel *Valentino*, in which we find themes of revenge, remorse, incest, rape, parricide and rebellion. Similar to Conrad “of the bleak and lonely heart”, Valentino-according to De Sanctis-is the “ideal of the ideal” of Byron, because in this novel there are enhanced demonic traits of Byron’s cursed heroes.

Domenico Mauro, a friend of Padula, published *Errico* in 1845, inspired by *The Corsair*, a story of betrayal, jealousy, revenge, remorse and repentance, in a pure Byronic style. Mauro belonged to the most radical democratic current and he


led Calabrian uprisings during the Forties. He was forced into exile in Corfù, Genoa and Turin. The theme of heroic death is predominant in the song *I Trecento di Sapri*, a tribute to his friend Giovanni Nicotera, survived the unfortunate expedition, unlike Carlo Pisacane and Giovan Battista Falcone, who with the other patriots were killed by the peasants they tried to free.

Biagio Miraglia led the Calabrian insurrections that preceded the expedition of the Bandiera brothers. He wrote the exotic novel *Il Rinnegato*²⁵ in which we find daring pirates, fierce Saracen soldiers, monasteries and helpless maidens, as in Byron's *Oriental tales*. With the theme of exoticism I conclude my overview on southern Byronism, a phenomenon that began to wane after 1848, when a new wave of political repression forced many intellectuals and patriots into exile.

**Conclusions**

Byron, as an activist poet, became an ideal reference for those who, as wrote Cesare Cantù, fought for the three biggest idols of the time, glory, love and freedom²⁶.

Italian Byronism was not a passive reception of a foreign model but on the contrary, it reflects an effort made by the progressive intellectuals of the early nineteenth century to open themselves to Romantic culture and European liberalism. It realized the romantic union between poetry and revolution.


²⁶ Cesare Cantù, “Discorso di Cesare Cantù ai signori socii dell’Ateneo di Bergamo (A speech on the author’s life read by Cesare Cantù to the members of the Bergamo Ateneo)”, Milano: *L’Indicatore e il Barbiere di Siviglia*, 1833.
The morphology of Byronism varied from country to country, from region to region, forged by its reception within local traditions. However, it is possible to identify a common element in each individual version, in which Byron becomes a universal icon, and Byronists a category of men (and women) who are involved in the fight for the collective defense of liberty. The famous opening words of *The Corsair* refer to this common element:

O’er the glad waters of the dark blue sea,
Our thoughts as boundless, and our souls as free,
Far as the breeze can bear, the billows foam,
Survey our empire, and behold our home.
These are our realms, no limits to their sway – (...).²⁷

In these verses Byron points to an imaginary homeland and a timeless immaterial community projected in the open spaces of the oceans that doesn’t know barriers and cannot be conquered: this is the fatherland of all free men.

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