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Byron’s posthumous political influence on Russian literature of the 19th century


In this paper we will be looking at Byron’s impact on the writing of such Russian great poets as A.Pushkin and M.Lermontov and their outstanding contemporaries: the Decembrists, among which one can single out the famous names of K. Ryleev (1795-1826), W.Kückhelbecker (1797-1846) and A. Bestuzhev <Marlinsky> (1797-1837).

Suffice it to mention, that different political wings of Russia of the first half of the 19 century manifested a contradictory attitude towards Byron’s poetry. For Russian conservatives the name of Byron was a synonym for revolution. They wanted the tsarist government to ban his works as ‘they were a very bad influence on the younger generation.’ They claimed that hailing Byron’s poetry could be compared to praising the guillotine.

The poet’s death increased his popularity in the country among the progressive politicians and rebels, the Decembrists.

A. Bestuzhev <Marlinsky>, who had also belonged to the Decembrists, was very grateful to be able to read Byron in the original and persuaded Pushkin to learn English and enjoy Byron’s authentic works. He was amazed at the precision of Byron’s characterization in the Russian excerpts of “Don Juan” despite the fact that the poet had never been to Petersburg. Bestuzhev admired Byron’s philosophical digressions and satire. In his letter to Pushkin he wrote that he
did not know a person who could have better portrayed characters and captured the gleams of all kinds of passion. Bestuzhev claimed that the English language taught him to think and turned his writing towards nature. It is essential to understand that there was hardly another poet, who was so well-known to his contemporaries in many European countries (France, Switzerland, Italy, Poland and certainly Russia) as Byron. As M. Alekseev writes, Byron was one of the favourites of thinking societies, a passionate fighter, whose writing was under close scrutiny of European diplomats.

Byron's poetry became very famous in Russia in 1815. The peculiarity of his texts known to the Russian readership was that his works were translated from French, and only those who knew the English language could really appreciate their poetical value. A lot of intellectual Russians were Byron's great admires. In his letter to A. Griboedov, Bestuzhev wrote: “That’s a comfort to live in our century at least for one thing: it can appreciate Byron’s great works.”

A. Griboedov maintained that the general readership admired Goethe as he was hard to understand while they admired Byron without understanding. According to E. Tolstogouzova, after Byron’s death the elegiac theme of lamenting the deceased with typical imagery-stylistic devices and the general mood of moderateness came into conflict with the theme of the romantic rebellious genius. That manifested itself in showing discord between the elegiac clichés used in connection with the image of Byron and the actual elements of his biography.

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4 Bestuzhev-Marlinsky A. A. Ibid.
(e.g. in the texts of I.I.Kozlov and D.B.Venevitinov “The Death of Byron”). In other works there were attempts to install a mythopoetic and mystic phenomenon of the “English giant” in the context of Russian literature (W.Kückhelbecker). Sometimes the accent was shifted in the direction of the motives associated with fighting against tyranny or the memorial image of Byron could be portrayed as an unsolved anthropological riddle (P. Viazemsky).  

Among Byron’s admirers was Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837), the great Russian poet. He shared the Decembrists’ ideas though did not belong to their plot. When Byron died in Greece, he asked his village priest to commemorate the English genius by holding a special service for the dead in honour of ‘the great man Georgious’. In the same 1824 Pushkin wrote his famous poem "To the Sea" in which he immortalized Byron’s name for Russian readers: “He passed, and left to Freedom mourning,/ His laurels to Eternity,/ Arise, roar out in stormy warning:/ He was your own true bard, oh Sea!/ His soul was by your spirit haunted,/ In your own image was he framed:/ Like you immense, profound, undaunted,/ Like you nocturnal untamed,/ Bereft the world… where by your power,/ Oh Sea would you now carry me?/ Life offers everywhere one dower:/ On any glint of bliss there glower/ Enlightenment or tyranny.” [Translated from Russian into English by BABETTE DEUTSCH]

There are numerous echoes of Byron’s poetry in his famous “Evgeny Onegin”. When Pushkin finished his “Evgeny Onegin”, his protagonist, the Russian aristocrat Evgeny, who was prone to liberal thinking, inherited a lot of Childe Harold's features. Pushkin's main character Tatiana wondered: “What was he then? An imitation,/ An empty phantom or a joke, / A Muscovite in Harold's cloak, / Compendium of affectation, / A lexicon of words in vogue,/ Mere parody or just a rogue? ” [Translated from Russian into English by JAMES E. FALEN].

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In his youth Pushkin’s poetry was first strongly influenced by Byronic motives, but later his individuality gained the upper hand over his passion for Byron’s writing. As V. Zhirmunsky points out, Pushkin first came to know Byron’s works not long before his expulsion from Petersburg, but only in his southern exile Byron became his favourite. Byron’s rebellious poetry was absorbed by Pushkin in the background of the revolutionary events in Europe. Byron was the very personification of freedom. Not once did Pushkin create an affinity between Byron and Napoleon. For Pushkin the image of Napoleon, “the rebellious liberty successor and murderer,” was closely connected with the French Revolution. Byron’s romantic individualism allowed Pushkin to interpret his protest and disappointment artistically. The first evidence of Byron’s impact on his writing was the elegy “The Orb of Day has faded” (1820) in which a young outcast equals himself with Childe Harold. Byron’s “Eastern Tales” influenced Pushkin’s writing even stronger. In his “Prisoner of the Caucasus” (1820-21), “The Robber Brothers” (1821-22) “The Fountain of Bakhchisaray” (1823), “The Gypsies” (1824) the poet emulated Byron as, according to his own words, “(…) I was mad about him.”

Pushkin did not know the English language very well, but his intellectual and cultured friends, the Raevskys and P. Viazemsky, helped him to understand Byron's poetry better. Vyazemsky envied everyone who could easily read Byron in the original. He also possessed the autographs of the poet and was very proud of the fact. Pushkin’s Byronic images, however, had national Russian features. As Pushkin wrote in one of his letters, he wanted to portray his character’s indifference towards life and its pleasures, that premature ageing of the soul, which became the distinctive features of young people of the 19th century. The Russian Byronic character, according to Nolman, was too selfish, though suffering. While Byron was lamenting his broken


7 Ibid., p.74.
ideals, Pushkin just started searching for them. If Byron was approaching individualism, Pushkin stepped aside from it, underlying its week sides.

Byron’s love of freedom was very close to the Decembrists as well as his satire. The poet’s dark chords did not move them. After the fall of the revolutionary movement in Russia, Pushkin started to turn towards realism.8

After Byron's death there were a lot of imitations of Byron's poetry. Many of them were callow. At the same time there were poems which not only lamented Byron's death, but, in the first place, regarded Byron as a hero, poet-profit of further dramatic revolutionary events. The Decembrists, a group of cultured and libertine offices, hailed Byron in their poetry for his heroism and striving for freedom. Yet, there was a discrepancy between their intentions and the style they used in their poems. As H. Ram noted, Pushkin “as a writer prone to exceed and evolve beyond any aesthetic paradigm, (...) viewed the prescriptive taxonomies of eighteenth – century poetics, as well as the looser sensibility of Byronic romanticism, as literary modes to be mastered and eventually shed.”9 Pushkin also used a point satire when criticizing the works of the Decembrists who tried to fight for the Greek liberation using the formal, grand-sounding style of the ode10.

In 1825, a few months before the revolt of the Decembrists, Pushkin wrote his “Ode to his excellency count Dm. Iv. Khvostov” in which he not only criticized Khvostov’s archaic and sublime style but also mocked the latter’s conviction that his own poetry could be compared to that of Byron’s: “You are called by Hellada to take over the famous shadow. /…/ He is a lord – you are a count! / You are both poets! / So there seems to be a likeness. / - No way!”


9 Ram, Harsha. The Imperial Sublime: A Russian Poetics of Empire (Wisconsin Center for Pushkin Studies), 2006. P. 160-163.

10 Ibid.
In 1825 the Decembrists wanted to install a constitutional form of government. Their revolt had a fiasco and they were tried, convicted and sent to Siberia. The six leaders were hanged. There were a lot of Byron's admirers among them. In fact, W.Kückhelbecker in Siberia dreamed that in heaven he would introduce Pushkin to Byron.

Byron’s political thinking influenced the other genius, Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1848), the second great poet after Pushkin, whose poetry holds a special position in Russian culture. He saw a lot of coincidences between his and Byron’s biographies. Lermontov was proud of his Scottish roots and learned English due to his passionate love of Byron’s poetry. Lermontov’s father, George LERMONTE, was a Scot whose ancestors came to Russia in the 17 c. Lermontov and Byron were distant relatives, and there were a lot of similarities in their fates. Byron had a clubbed foot, Lermontov suffered from a limb. They were both deprived of paternal love. Both poets disturbed, challenged and excited their readers.

When Pushkin was wounded in the duel with Dantes, Petersburg’s reading public came to know Lermontov’s poem “Death of the Poet”. Lermontov highlighted the main features of his contemporaries who had no illusions about the aristocratic society and was deeply disappointed with his generation. His “Hero of our Time” is regarded as the first novel of psychological realism. As M.Nolman puts it, it was not incidental that the French Revolution of 1830-1831 had reflected on the Russian political thinking of the time. The forgotten Decembrists’ moods were revived, especially among students. Once again Byron’s poetry became popular. Lermontov was pursued by his dream about Byron’s “lot”. He wanted to be the shadow of the “great hero”. Vague “prophecies”, “bloody battles”, “a bloody grave”, “a fighter’s grave”, “epitaphs” reminding of Byron’s last poems, but pessimistically reinforced, reflected the fate of a heroic forlorn figure. Yet, in his “Prophecy”, which was reminiscent of Byron’s “Darkness”, but politically transformed, there was a
romantic leader of the public uprising, “a mighty giant” with a “sword of steel”.

In Lermontov’s lyrics of those years there are political notes, associated with the traditions of the Decembrists\textsuperscript{11}. However, in his credo poem Lermontov wrote:

No, I'm not Byron;/ I am, yet,/ Another choice for the sacred dole,/ Like him - a persecuted soul,/ But only of the Russian set./ I early start and / end the whole,/ And will not win the future days;/ Like in an ocean, in my soul,/ A cargo of lost hopes stays./ Who, oh, my ocean severe,/ Could read all secrets in your scroll? Who'll tell the people my idea?/ I will or God or none at all!

[Translated from Russian into English by YEVENY BONVER]

In the 40- s of the 19 century there was a turn in Russian poetry towards realism.

The people of Russia were greatly disappointed by the fiasco of the Decembrists’ uprising and scared by the repressive measures exercised by Nicholas I. His rigidly conservative policies silenced a lot of libertines. The shift of interest from Byronic motives towards reality can be vividly seen in E.I.Huber’s poem “The Wanderer” (1844)\textsuperscript{12}. The plot of this poem lies in the story of a libertine coming back home after a long exile. The “persecuted soul” is reconsidering his former ideals: “I wasn't happy in my native land, /I had a dream, /I heard an evil genius, calling me to go to strange lands. /And I was suffocating /Under the bondage of strange inspirations. / I left my native land/ And entered the wild world of doubts and passions.” When the wanderer came back he was inclined to repent his hopes of the past. He wanted the people of his community to recognize him. But he was forgotten and nobody seemed happy to see him. The character’s dreams did not come true - he was disappointed and sick. He was surrounded by the people he knew, but there was not a single soul who would like to pray for him.

\textsuperscript{11} Nolman M., op.cit., p.470-472.

\textsuperscript{12} Tolstogousova E.V.,op.cit., p.19.
Despite the disappointment in the revolutionary movement, Byron’s poetry never seized popularity in Russia, especially in the Soviet times.