

**LOVE, FREEDOM AND OPPRESSION (FROM BYRON'S *THE GIAOUR*
VIA PUSHKIN'S *GYPSIES* TO MERIMÉE'S *CARMEN*)**

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The central themes of these works are love, death, suffering and solitude. They demonstrate unity in diversity. A Venetian, obsessed with the idea of his beloved dead at the bottom of the sea because of her infidelity to her Turkish owner; Aleko, a newcomer to the gypsies, who wants to accept their freedom but remains an outsider, oppressed by the limitations of civilized society, and cannot cope with their freedom; and José, whose love turns him into a criminal but does not kill his pangs of remorse. Three heroines are dead. *The Giaour* is a poem with fragmentary structure, very close to the state of Byron's mind. This is shaped by a great feeling of loss. Pushkin's poem is the confession of a typical Byronic hero who wants to run away from himself, wandering about the world in search of his own understanding of freedom. José is a victim of love and oppression who can be dangerous when love dies, and he remains alienated. The results of the end of their affairs are "hopeless agony and broken hearts". The heroes are criminals: their understanding of love is seen from the viewpoint of an enlightened traveller and narrator (*Carmen*), a desperate lonely lover (*The Giaour*) or an egotist (*Gypsies*).

The Giaour is a fragment of a Turkish tale. The story is itself fragmentary. It is partly told by the hero himself and partly by several narrators. Byron is an active performer in unfolding the sequence of events. The main figure is obsessed with two deaths and by a broken heart. The death of his beloved, Leila, and of her master, Hassan: he thinks that he is guilty of her death and her master's, feels satisfaction that he has had his revenge, but is obsessed in solitude. Love remains the strongest feeling, and he cannot cope with it, as he cannot see the future without Leila. His confession of suffering is as follows:

She was my Life's unerring Light –
That quenched – what beam shall break my night?
Oh! would it shone to lead me still,
Although to death or deadliest ill! –
Why marvel ye, if they who lose
 This present joy, this future hope,
 No more with Sorrow meekly cope –
In phrensy then their fate accuse –
In madness do those fearful deeds
 That seem to add but Guilt to Woe ... (*The Giaour*, ll.1145-54)

This confession gives him relief, because for some time he recalls not his love but a friend. His suffering transforms him into a wandering Pilgrim, a figure that will become a haunting figure in Byron's later works. This is a beginning of escape from thoughts, not from himself. His mind becomes dangerous for him because it remembers, it conserves the pangs of his suffering. He differentiates between death for infidelity and death as revenge. The first is according to Muslim tradition. The second is not according to Christian tradition. He is between

two religions and two cultures. Hassan felt tragedy not as an oppressor but as a man who had lost his human property. His solitude is determined his role, that of a strong governor, a ruler who can not exist without his beloved slave. His palace is empty without Leila, as a lover's heart is empty and broken. Two metaphors of wilderness, emptiness and destruction are of similar origin. In both cases the heroes do not feel satisfaction about the deeds they have done. Christian mortification should give the Venetian a chance to humiliate himself and pray. He goes to the monastery after Hassan's slaughter, and his confession to the friar is an attempt to obtain a relief from his great pain, sorrow, and delight in solitude. But revenge does not remove his grief, and oppression turns him into almost mystical figure: a "Demon of the night".

The three works are partly documentary, told by the observers or borrowed from famous literary sources known to everybody (*Carmen*). *The Giaour* is based on a folktale told by a story-teller in a café. Aleko in *Gypsies* is a mixed figure, coming both from Byron and from Pushkin's private observations in Moldavia.

Aleko is a Byronic hero, who is of obscure origin: the gypsies can only guess his past. His behaviour is considered strange among this nomadic tribe, because he wants freedom only for himself.

The three works are closely connected, as they were written in new styles, the opposite of epic, and at the same time they depend on each other. *Gypsies* was written in 1823, completed in 1824 when Pushkin was in exile in Mikhailivsoye, and published in 1827. During his staying in Moldavia Pushkin was, in his own words, "mad about Byron". *Carmen* could have not been written without *Gypsies* and the noticeable popularity of Russian literature in Europe, which reached its climax in the forties, when Merimée was writing *Carmen*. Merimée read *Gypsies* in the original Russian.

Thus, if we want to see the Byronic hero in all these works, we should acknowledge the Romantic atmosphere that surrounds the protagonists and the intense oppression involving the Giaour, Aleko, and José in crime and solitude, suffering and plunging into introspection. But we can not talk about imitation or influence: we can talk of original interpretations, of some of plot likenesses on a biographical level, and on some similarities in the political and cultural context that are traceable in Byron and Pushkin. Pushkin's poem could be also called a fragment. It takes place in an exotic environment among wandering gypsies. An old man, one of the narrators, had a similar experience of infidelity. Mariula, his woman, left a baby and went away with a new lover, but her ex-lover did not stop her. He was sure that nobody could sustain love. While parting with Aleko he concludes: Ты любишь горестно и трудно, / А сердце женское – шутя¹ ("You love in tragic and grave manner, and woman's heart loves joyfully"). The old man acts as a comforter, as a philosopher of life and as a judge who proclaims a sentence. He accuses Aleko of his crime and leaves him in complete solitude in the limitless space of the steppe. The positions of hero and narrator are different in function. Love does not bring joy, the crime does not give a relief. The Giaour appears during the feast of Bairam, and this detail makes him feel a momentary freedom:

So here the very voice of Grief
Might wake an Echo like relief. (*The Giaour*, ll.330-1)

In both cases one fatal remembrance, one sorrow initiates the tragic events. In both poems there is a confessor who tries to bring the two stories together. The friar in *The Giaour* and the old man in Pushkin's poem are passive. The old man is a story-teller and symbol of freedom and love, and does not execute violence or insist on Aleko's staying with the gypsies. The Giaour in the monastery feels himself as outsider and does not accept the monastery's rules. Aleko enters the unusual gypsy community because he is forced to do it:

Его преследует закон ...
... Он говорил, что гневный бог
Его карал за преступленье ...²

[He is pursued by the law ... He said that angry God punished him for the crime.]

1: А.С.Пушкин, *Собрание Сочинений*, (Moscow 1975), III, p.152.

2: Ibid., pp.143, 147.

We do not know his crime and can only guess it. Aleko is a more Byronic hero than the Giaour. The Venetian is also an unusual hero: nameless and unexpected. He is unknown to everybody, but the narrator provokes the reader's thoughts about his past, his wealth, and his life in the world. The Venetian has no name, no relations or links, and he is obsessed with revenge. Freedom and love vary: Leila is a slave, but Zemfira, the lover of Aleko, is free; yet their love is a delight for them all. Two symbolic scenes are important for the readers to understand the state of mind when they are free in their thoughts, happy with their beloved and oppressed with their solitude and humiliation, although for different reasons. They are strangers, outsiders towards Eastern traditions and habits, and they disappear with their stories, and their unhappiness. Aleko is left with the epilogue, and the Giaour is left with a friar:

He passed – nor of his name and race
Hath left a token or a trace,
Save what the Father must not say
Who shrived him on his dying day –
This broken tale was all we knew
Of her he loved, or him he slew. (*The Giaour*, ll.1333-4)

The origin of the story is similar in Merimée. His sources are oral and written, folk and literary. Byron in his notes says that his story is not uncommon for Eastern traditions, for instance in Turkey. A few years ago Phrosyne, the wife of Mughtar Pasha, complained to his father of his son's infidelity. He asked with whom, and she gave in a list the names of the fairest women in Jannina. They were seized, fastened up in sacks and thrown in the lake the same night. Byron heard this recited by one of the story-tellers in the coffee-houses. The story of Phrosyne is retold in many Romaic and Arnaut folktales. Speculating about *couleur locale*, Byron mentions *Vathek* and *Rasselas*. The eastern legend of the Nightingale and the Rose is used here for a special purpose to mark the line between different worlds – specific cultures and fates. These details are important for the start of writing a love-story and fragment of a Turkish tale, although they are not in the text but in the commentaries.

In Merimée's *novella* the combination of different sources is more complicated, and is determined by the long period of composition. Merimée's observations during his travels in Spain are interwoven with documentary material from his contemporaries (Gautier, Borrow, his predecessor Pushkin, and historical works about Gitanas, or Gypsies, or Bohemians). Referring to some professionals who used to know the Basque language, the author tries to persuade the reader of the possibility of a strange combination of evil and good, a diversity in love. Carmen tells José that she loved him perhaps a little more than she loved the toreador, but her main excuse for her infidelity is freedom and the oppressive atmosphere, when heroes are in different places and free or in prison. The introduction of the narrator, a researcher who met both protagonists – José and Carmen – is significant from different viewpoints. He is both an outsider and a participant, he can see the situation and the evolution of their relationship, and judge by himself, but he does not insist on one opinion. The temporary distance between his two meetings with José reflect the similar situation with Merimée travelling in 1830 and 1843. The novella was written in 1845 and published in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. Both heroes are transformed into quite different persons. But this transformation does not change the main tragedy of love, which is interpreted in two ways. Carmen is free in her feelings and in spite of the fact she is false in her words and deeds: she is constant in her obsession with freedom. José is spellbound and can not betray his honour, his love and his crime is a sort of sacrifice for lost innocence. Don José is also a character from Merimée's *Letters from Spain*. In these letters he is a noble outlaw, a sort of Spanish Robin Hood, a man who is always ready to help miserable and poor people. He is active and efficient. He is also placed in a local national atmosphere. In *Carmen*, unlike a Romantic hero, he is a serviceman, first as a soldier performing his duty and then, under Carmen's spell, an outlaw and criminal, consciously helping criminals. But the alterations from Merimée's *Letters* shows the diversity in unity as with all Byronic heroes. For him love and freedom are concentrated in Carmen, and his life is focused on one simple rule. His sacrifice should be rewarded by her loyalty. The oppressive atmosphere here is accompanied by secondary figures who witness Carmen's false and dangerous character. Crime stands close to love and freedom, but they are understood differently by the protagonists, who demonstrate the hidden possibilities of the Byronic hero.

Carmen and José meet the traveller-narrator, and to a certain extent he knows their story already:

La troisième lettre était la plus attendue des lecteurs pour qui les voleurs de grand chemins constituaient déjà les personnages typiques du folklore espagnol et de sa littérature. Mérimée aimait à se jouer de ses attentes et de la couleur locale.

Don José accusait Carmen de son Malheur, rendait *Calé* responsables de la vie dissolue de Carmen. Cette responsabilité collective était l'aveu d'un préjugé amplement partagé.

In Pushkin's *Gypsies* the responsibility for Aleko's exile from their community is expressed by the old man, who says

«Оставь нас, гордый человек!
Мы дики; нет у нас законов,
Мы не терзаем, не казним –
Не нужно крови нам и стонов –
Ты не рожден для дикой доли,
Ты для себя лишь хочешь воли ...³

Leave us, you a proud man
We are wild and have no laws
We don't need blood and groans,
You were not born for wild fate
You want freedom only for yourself

Carmen confesses to José:

Tout est fini entre nous. Comme mon rom, tu as le droit de tuer ta romi: mais Carmen sera toujours libre. Calli elle est née, calli elle mourra.⁴

Francis Jeffrey praised *The Giaour* for its highly original fragmentary structure, fluency of verse and the convincing energy with which its aristocratic Venetian hero was delineated.⁵

Oppression is a device that functions differently in each of the three works because of the type of narrative and the type of hero. They are similarly placed in unusual environments with unknown rules, civilizations and traditions. They can create intensely painful feelings of remembered love and crime, they can stimulate activity and unsocial behaviour, they can strengthen solitude and belief in one's own superiority. The narrator can be both a participant in the plot (in *Carmen*) and a learned man interested in ethnography. The language and culture of gypsies dispersed throughout Europe's nomadic tribes is the object of his investigation. The heroes are picturesque and romantic in their relations with other communities. The three works can be investigated in pairs. Each pair is connected within its own structure, and these pairs can be compared inside and outside their combinations. *Carmen* is a satire on the picaresque, its ironic structure of research framing the romantic love story. *The Giaour* is a fragment in a new style – some elements of epic are united with a romantic Byronic hero, and the fluency of the verse makes this combination a plausible proof of the future of this freedom in structure. *Gypsies* shows the originality of a Byronic hero left in tragic solitude. *Carmen* has an open end, which describes the narrator's further research. These three works demonstrate the possibilities of cultural and literary dialogue performed by active reformers in structure, style, characters and language.

³: Пушкин, op.cit., p.158.

⁴: Prosper Mérimée, *Carmen et autres nouvelles choisies*, ed. M.J.Tilby (Harrap 1981), p.156.

⁵: *Edinburgh Review* XXI, July 1813, pp.299-309; rptd. at Reiman (ed.), *The Romantics Reviewed*, Byron II (Garland 1972), pp.842-7.