



SPANISH HISTORY AND SCENERY IN LORD BYRON'S POEMS AND LETTERS

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Lord Byron's association with the Iberian Peninsula, both in historical and literary terms, plays a pivotal role in his early ideological development and subsequent poetical composition. The renowned romantic poet departed on the Grand Tour in Levante in the years 1809 - 1811, in the fashion of many contemporary young English aristocrats. Among the many countries toured in the Mediterranean beside his trusted companion John Cam Hobhouse were those of the Iberian Peninsula, Spain, Portugal, and Gibraltar. The reflections and impressions of the scenery of these southern countries were engraved into his memory and imagination and served as vital poetic material for his great compositions; most importantly the first Canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, the first part of *Don Juan* and *The Age of Bronze*.

Therefore, his works are an essential source of anglophone literature for Spain and Portugal in the early 19th century. Moreover, as a member of the House of Lords and the liberal Whig faction, Byron, in his letters, often recorded his thoughts on issues related to the Iberian countries, especially on the War of the Peninsula, the Cintra Congress and the liberal uprising of the Spaniards in the 'Trienio Liberal'.

In this note, we will examine Byron's impressions and commentary on the Iberian countries, as reflected in his Letters

during his voyage and later. Additionally, we will examine specific passages from *Childe Harold I*, *Don Juan I-II*, and *The Age of Bronze*. These poems constitute, respectively, a literary narrative of his Grand Tour trip from Lisbon to Andalusia at the commencement of the Peninsular War; a rather humoristic fantasy of the social morals of Spain during the early 18th century and a fierce political criticism in support of the liberal Spaniards and their uprising during the reign of Ferdinand VII (1820-1823). Centring on the latter, we will discuss on Byron's nationalism, and we will prove that his innate Romanticism profoundly influenced his sentiments on the cause of the Spaniards.

Keywords: Peninsula War; Lord Byron; *Don Juan*; *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*; *The Age of Bronze*; Trienio Liberal

1. Introduction

The sources of Byron's poetry constitute a very important part of the relevant bibliography. The extensive literature on Lord Byron's travels to the East, despite some references to his brief passage through Spain, lacks a systematic presentation of the country's influence on his poetic production and intellectual formation. It must be noted that there is no monograph concerning Byron and Spain. But there are some chapters and periodical articles that are worth mentioning like Estaban Pujals' chapter on Byron and Spain, Philip H. Churchman's "Lord Byron's Experiences in the Spanish Peninsula in 1809" in the *Hispanique Bulletin*, Juan L. Sánchez's "Byron, Spain, and the romance of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" and D.L. Shaw's research¹.

The purpose of this note is to present on the one hand a summary of the poet's trip in Spain and on the other to examine its impact on his poetry and thoughts. Regarding the theoretical

¹ Estaban Pujals, "Byron and Spain", in *Byron's Political and Cultural Influence in Nineteenth-Century Europe. A Symposium*, ed. Paul Graham Trueblood (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1981); Philip H. Churchman, "Lord Byron's Experiences in the Spanish Peninsula in 1809", *Hispanique Bulletin* XI: 125-171; Juan L. Sánchez, "Byron, Spain, and the romance of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage", *European Romantic Review* 20: 443-464; D.L. Shaw, "Byron and Spain", *Renaissance and Modern Studies* 32: 45-59.

framework and methodology employed, the main information is drawn from his correspondence and from his poetic works, both *maiora* and *minora*. In the end of this brief discussion, it will be clear that even if Byron only spent few days in the country, Spain heavily influenced his intellect.

2. Byron's Journey in 1809

On July 2, 1809, after a short delay due to bad weather, Byron sailed from Falmouth for the Iberian Peninsula on Lisbon Packet, *Princess Elizabeth*. He also seized the opportunity to write a short poem to Francis Hodgson for the official commencement of his Grand Tour in Levante. There young Byron appears rather excited about the promise of his journey:

*Huzza! Hodgson, we are going,
Our embargo's off at last
Favourable Breezes blowing (BLJ, I, 211).*

Byron's itinerary was affected by the Napoleonic Wars. The traditional and vital depot in France did not take place because of the war. Also, from 1807 the Iberian War was raging in the Iberian Peninsula.

Four days later, he arrived in Lisbon, from where he left for Spain, crossing through the Portuguese cities of Montemor, Arraiolos, Estremoz and Elvas, before reaching Badajoz. At the time of Byron's arrival in the country, the Spaniards had set up several local committees (*Juntas*) to combat French control of their country. In previous April, a coalition of British and Portuguese troops confronted the Napoleonic forces, gradually driving out the French of Iberia.

Having arrived on July 24, Byron and Hobhouse entered Seville the next day around noon². The town was so congested with soldiers that it was difficult to find proper lodgings. Eventually, they were advised to stay with two unmarried women, Josepha Beltram and her sister, at Callea de las Cruces no.19. They stayed in Seville

² A reminiscence of one of the stops on the way to Seville can be found in a long-unpublished prose fragment in *BLJ*, VI, 381-382.

for three days and then left for Cadiz, the second major Spanish city they visited. Finally, ten days after their arrival, they left Spain for Gibraltar.

In Seville, they had the opportunity to visit the cathedral, which dazzled Hobhouse. The locals were also overwhelmed by the British lord and his companion; on July 27, a waiter ventured to convince the British aristocrat to hire him while a Spanish army officer was prompt to serve as his servant. They also met a fellow British, Sir John Carr, a renowned travel writer³. Byron's well-known interest in love affairs also manifested itself. His hostess, Josepha, was impressed by his beauty, but he refused her offer to share the same bed.

While at Cadiz, the two travellers stayed at Bailly's hotel. On July 30, they met high-ranking figures, Don Diego Duffo, the British Consul, Lord Jocelyn and the nephew of Arthur Wellesley, the then general of the British forces in the Peninsula.

In a note in Stanza 142 of *Childe Harold's* Canto IV, Hobhouse writes sincerely about the sentiments of "horror and disgust" generated by the bullfights they witnessed in Santa Maria's amphitheatre. This custom appeared particular barbaric to the British "who can be much pleased with seeing two men beat themselves to pieces". This reaction appears natural because of Byron's fondness for animals and the love he nurtured for pets, especially his dog Boatswain. At Cadiz, their social interactions provided them with the opportunity to attend an English opera, *A Peep into the Seraglio*.

Besides, on Monday, July 31, Byron, who since his adolescence read Roman history, purchased a related book. The first book he read concerned an incident in Roman history, a battle near lake Regillus.

His erotic adventures continued at Cadiz, where Byron flirted with the daughter of Admiral Cordova during a play. The young lady was willing to teach him Spanish, but, again, the young lord refused the opportunity. In a letter to his mother some days later, Byron offers a particular image of himself as a pretended dutiful son and,

³ They met John Carr again a few days later at Cadiz, *BLJ*, I, 215-216.

as a result, we cannot determine if he indeed declined these erotic proposals. Nevertheless, his stay with two unmarried women at Seville constituted a breach of the accepted upper-class decorum of Spanish society. It is evident, though, that his main focus of interest was love and romance.

The few letters of Byron, describing his stay in Spain, provide us with some information. Initially, Seville is described as “a fine town”, and Cadiz’s memory causes pleasure to the poet: “Cadiz, sweet Cadiz!” (*BLJ*, I, 215-216)⁴. Byron also remarks on the national character of Spanish women and men: “For, with all national prejudice, I must confess the women of Cadiz are as far superior to the English women in beauty as the Spaniards are inferior to the English in every quality that dignifies the name of man” (*BLJ*, I, 215). It is not uncommon for Byron to make derogatory comments about nations whom we otherwise know he loved and supported their struggle for freedom - such were the oppressed Greeks and Irish Catholics. Further proof of this emotional and social ambiguity is his reference to his mother: “I like the Spaniards much” (*BLJ*, I, 221). Elsewhere, he asserts that “Spaniards are far superior to the Portuguese, and the English abroad are very different from their countrymen” (*BLJ*, I, 216-217)⁵.

Furthermore, Byron wrote that the “grandees” who left Madrid during the “troubles” had by then reached Cadiz, “the prettiest and cleanest town in Europe, [...] a complete Cythera”. (*BLJ*, I, 215-216)⁶. From Gibraltar in a letter to his lawyer, John Hanson, he mentioned the battle near Madrid and informed him that the “Spanish Government” was in Seville (*BLJ*, I, 216-217). Byron, who was rather sensitive about war brutality, wrote that “Spain is all in arms” and “barbarities on both sides are shocking”. We can assume from these reports that he had been informed of the war events by eyewitnesses. In his letter to his mother, he specifically

⁴In his other letters, Byron expresses the same positive opinion on the beauty and cleanliness of the two Spanish cities but also for the superiority of the road network compared to the English one, *BLJ*, I, 216-217, 218-222).

⁵ His mother informed John Hanson a few days after Byron’s letter that her son was “delighted with Spain and the Spanish Ladies” (*Byron’s Correspondence*).

⁶ By “troubles” Byron probably means the events of May 2, 1808, in Madrid, when General Joachim Murat suppressed a Spanish uprising, provoking nationwide resistance against the French.

mentioned the exact British losses in the battle near Madrid (two hundred officers and five thousand soldiers). The battle he penned about most probably related to the British victory at Talavera, a town southwest of Madrid on July, 27/28 under the command of Arthur Wellesley and Gregorio de la Cuesta⁷.

Even though these ten days were the only Byron ever spent in his life in Spain, the beauty of the landscapes, the temperament of Spanish people and the country's history fueled the poet's poetic imagination. In the following section, some references to Spain are examined from the Byronic corpus.

3. Spain in Byron's Poems

Based mainly on travel experiences, the emotions that overwhelmed him when he observed the various historical places and the thoughts that caused him similar mental irritations, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is the poem that made Byron famous in one day.

In Canto I, Byron quickly transfers his hero to the climate of Spain, where, referring to an area of historical importance, he comments with the style of a philosophical observer on the persons and things that are culturally connected with the country. Characteristic of his experiences is an excerpt from the bullfighting arena, where the bull's agony and despair against the matador and his equestrian assistants are described with unparalleled realism:

*Foiled, bleeding, breathless, furious to the last,
Full in the centre stands the bull at bay,
Mid wounds, and clinging darts, and lances brast,
And foes disabled in the brutal fray;
And now the Matadores around him play,
Shake the red cloak and poise the ready brand:
Once more through all he bursts his thundering way*

⁷After this battle, Arthur Wellesley became the first Viscount of Wellington. For the rest of his life, Byron often referred to the later Tory Prime Minister with derogatory remarks in his poems and letters. Byron's dislike of Wellington was primarily based on his victory over Napoleon, Byron's idol. During his stay in Spain, he notes seeing Wellington: "listening to the speech of a patriotic cobbler of Cadiz, on the event of his own entry into that city, and the exit of some five thousand bold Britons from this 'best of all possible worlds'" (*CPW*, II, 275).

*Vain rage! the mantle quits the conyng hand,
Wraps his fierce eye – 'tis past – he sinks upon the sand! (Childe
Harold's Pilgrimage, I, 774-782)⁸.*

Byron here, despite the descriptions of the cries of the fanatical crowd and the admiration of the beautiful women for the “heroic” bullfighter, disapproves of this sport, as in Hobhouse's narrative.

In general, in the first canto, Byron comments on political and historical events, criticizes the lack of patriotism displayed by monarchs in Iberia, emphasizes his liberal sentiments both as narrator and as Harold's persona, admires the beauty of Spanish women and praises their extraordinary courage without quoting any sexist stereotype. Harold's course in the Iberian is thus transformed into a narration of political crises relating to freedom, nationalism and politics. Palaces and monuments - apart from the Cathedral of Seville - do not interest him much, thus choosing to focus his storytelling in humans. Finally, he does not mention at all the writers and scholars of the Iberian states.

References of Spain can also be found in his magnum opus, *Don Juan*, where the protagonist originates from the Iberian country. From the first canto, the reader is informed about the wrong upbringing which young Juan received from a shallow maternal personality.

*Sagest of women, even of widows, She
Resolved that Juan should be quite a paragon,
And worthy of the noblest pedigree
(His Sire was of Castile, his Dam from Arragon);
Then for accomplishments of Chivalry,
In case our Lord the King should go to war again,
He learned the arts of riding, fencing, gunnery,
And how to scale a fortress – or a Nunnery. (Don Juan, I, 297-304).*

A little later, Juan experiences his first love affair with the married young girlfriend of his mother, Julia. At the same time, Juan's mother is also having an illicit affair with Julia's husband, Don Alfonso. Through the narrative of these extramarital affairs,

⁸ The lines quoted in this article follow Jerome J. McGann's edition of Byron's complete poetical works.

Byron criticizes the hypocritical society, which tolerates Alfonso's relationship with Juan's mother, while at the same time, the love of the two youths is disapproved. Byron's criticism is more universal sentiments without focusing specifically on Spanish society. Later in the poem, after a series of adventures, Don Alfonso discovers the illegal relationship between Juan and Julia, forcing the young Spaniard to escape the country sailing from Cadiz to France and Italy.

Finally, at the beginning of Canto II, the persuasions of pedagogical nature continue, correlating to the character and actions of Juan at the age of sixteen:

I

*Oh ye! who teach the ingenuous youth of Nations,
Holland, France, England, Germany, or Spain,
I pray ye flog them upon all occasions,
It mends their morals, never mind the pain;
The best of Mothers and of educations
In Juan's case were but employed in vain,
Since in a way that's rather of the oddest, he
Became divested of his native Modesty.*

II

*Had he but been placed at a public school,
In the third form, or even in the fourth,
His daily task had kept his fancy cool,
At least, had he been nurtured in the North;
Spain may prove an Exception to the rule,
But then exceptions always prove its worth -
A lad of Sixteen causing a divorce
Puzzled his tutors very much, of course. – (Don Juan, II, 1-16).*

The other Cantos of the long poem take place outside Iberia, where Juan continues his various adventures while in exile.

The final poem with references to Spain is the last neoclassical satire, penned by Byron in Italy shortly before his departure for Greece, titled *The Age of Bronze*. In this profoundly revolutionary poem, the romantic poet explicitly points to recent political events in Spain. His lines are characterized by a liberal disposition, which favours the Revolution.

In the ideological level, this poem which satirizes the Holy Alliance and supports the liberal upheaval of the Spaniards and the

nationalist war of the Greeks can be labelled traditional Foxite/Glorious Revolution Whiggish, even if at some points the poem leans to a more radical approach. Traditional Whiggism supported the struggle for liberty, ownership and national sovereignty. Jane Stabler underlines, that *The Age of Bronze* “represent Byron’s search for a new political identity [...] a more carefully targeted repudiation of the cultural and political systems that his English friends wanted him to rejoin” (2016, 163). Additionally, David V. Erdman, in a series of four articles, has proven that Byron, although in favour of parliamentary and political reform in principle, desired not to be linked with ‘blackguard’ radicals like Major Cartwright and William Cobbett⁹. This ideologically ambivalent stance was further developed in Italy and is evident in his Venetian tragedies, in *The Vision of Judgement* and, in *The Age of Bronze*. Beaton insightfully observes that the work reflects Byron’s general views on Napoleon’s failure, the post-Napoleonic regime and the liberal revolutions. He also points out that in *The Age of Bronze* we do not detect the excruciating doubts of *Marino Faliero*, and none of Byron’s conceptions of the future struggle of ‘nations’ in *Dante’s Prophecy* (Beaton 2013, 212). Furthermore, Beaton remarks that in *The Age of Bronze*, one liberal Revolution looks almost identical with every other (Beaton 2013, 212). In this context, regarding the Spanish and Greek Revolutions, the reviewer of the *Black Dwarf*, a radical periodical comments: ‘yet we cannot help wishing his Lordship had at an earlier period animated those nations by these “thoughts that breathe and words that burn,” with which his muse is so familiar (Scrivener 1992, 45).

The historical background of the Spanish Revolution is this: In 1812 in Cadiz, a group of Spanish Liberals drafted the Cadiz Constitution. After the end of the Peninsular War, King Ferdinand VII began to employ authoritarian tactics to strengthen his position. As a result, in 1820, General Riego organized a liberal coup d’état,

⁹ These four articles written by David Erdman constitute an essential study in Byron’s politics: David V. Erdman 1941. “Lord Byron and the Genteel Reformers”, *PMLA* 56: 1065-1094 1942. “Lord Byron as Rinaldo”, *PMLA* 57: 189-231 1947. “Byron and Revolt in England”, *Science and Society* 11: 234-248 1962. “Byron and the New Force of the People”, *Keats – Shelley Journal* 11: 47-64.

which was violently suppressed by French troops three years later, in 1823. This three-year period became known as the Trienio Liberal due to the short-lived liberal reforms that took place and the freedoms that were granted by the king. Byron dedicates many verses from *The Age of Bronze* to Spanish history, seduced by the contemporary democratic uprisings (Beaton 2013, 116).

The first mention of Spain compares the country's past and its colonial campaigns with its liberal present.

*Spain! which, a moment mindless of the Cid,
Beheld his banner flouting thy Madrid! (The Age of Bronze, 151-152).*

And Byron continues:

*Where Spain was once Synonymous with Crime,
Where Cortes' and Pizarro's Banner flew;
The Infant World redeems her name of "New."
'Tis the old Aspiration breathed afresh,
To kindle Souls within degraded flesh,
Such as repulsed the Persians from the Shore (The Age of Bronze, 265-270).*

Byron then focuses his attack on the authoritarian and "bigot" Monarch Ferdinando, who was attempting to counter the liberal coup:

*Yet left more Antichristian foes than they –
The bigot Monarch and the butcher priest,
The Inquisition, with her burning Feast,
The Faith's red "Auto," fed with human fuel,
While sate the Catholic Moloch, calmly cruel,
Enjoying, with inexorable eye,
That fiery festival of Agony! –
The stern or feeble Sovereign, one or both
By turns; the haughtiness whose pride was Sloth;
The long degenerate noble, the debased
Hidalgo, and the peasant less disgraced
But more degraded; the unpeopled realm; (Don Juan, 333- 343).*

But according to the poet all these all belong to the past and the present is rather promising for the Spaniards: *Neglected or forgotten - Such was Spain?/ But, such she is not, nor shall be again (The Age of Bronze, 352- 353)*. The Spanish revolutionaries are encouraged to advance their struggle for freedom, like some of their

ancestors, have done: Such have been, such shall be, such are. Advance! And win - not Spain, but thine own freedom, France! To his disappointment, however, Byron beheld the Revolution being crushed as was the case in Italy with the Carboni Risorgimento.

One of the last reports of Spain was made on a letter to Kinnaird on March 1, where Byron still contemplated the possibility of moving to Spain (Beaton 2013, 221, *BLJ*, X, 114). However, in the end, he would decide to participate in the Greek War of Independence, during which he died in Messolonghi in April 1824 without ever travelling to Spain again.

4. Conclusions

It is clear that Byron had been influenced not only by the beautiful Spanish landscapes but also by the country's history, its liberal struggles for political freedom and by the manners, customs and social conventions, which he had the chance to observe in Seville and Cadiz. The aforementioned struggle of the Spanish liberals contributed to his revolutionary thinking. In a literary level, *Don Juan* echoes the poet's love affairs in Spain and his perception of the Spanish national character.

A further literary and historic analysis in the form of a potential monograph could trace even more direct or indirect references to the author's relationship with Spain. A more thorough research will provide the readers with additional information on the sources of the Byronic corpus, and reveal more about the social and political history of his contemporary Spain.

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