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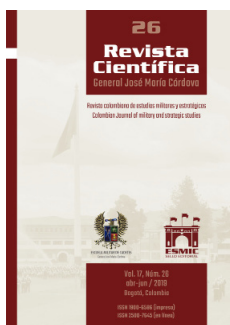
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## The Napoleon mystique and British poets

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## The Napoleon mystique and British poets

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### La mística de Napoleón y los poetas Británicos

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**ABSTRACT.** This reflection on the influence of Napoleon and the consequences of the wars on the major British poets of the Romantic era is meant to illustrate how the reactions of both nobility and commoners are recorded in literature and media. The dual perception of Napoleon as both hero and tyrant and the atrocious suffering of those at home and bloody battles are manifest in the works of the major poets, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelly, and especially George Gordon, Lord Byron. Even today, Napoleon transcends precise definition and he has inspired some of the greatest poets in British literature.

**KEYWORDS:** morbidity; mystique; Napoleon; post-war; Romantic poets; war

**RESUMEN.** Esta reflexión sobre la influencia de Napoleón y las consecuencias de las guerras en los principales poetas británicos de la época romántica pretende ilustrar cómo se registran las reacciones de la nobleza y los plebeyos en la literatura y los medios de comunicación. La percepción dual de Napoleón como héroe y tirano y el sufrimiento atroz de los que no estaban en el campo de batalla y las sangrientas batallas se manifiestan en las obras de los principales poetas como William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley y especialmente George Gordon, Lord Byron. Napoleón trasciende una definición precisa –incluso hoy– y ha inspirado a algunos de los mejores poetas de la literatura británica.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** guerra; mística; morbosidad; Napoleón; poetas románticos; posguerra

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## Introduction

### A nation at arms

Today, when one considers the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, it is common to stage these as the historical past and forget the immense influence and controversy generated, not only in the cultural realm but also in the changes precipitated. Harold Bloom, (1971) states, “The French Revolution was, in its day, a new kind of ideological revolution, hence, the terror it aroused in its opponents, and the hope in its sympathizers” (p. 16). The British were quite accustomed to war with the French as it had been a recurrent part of life since the Norman Conquest in 1066. The French support given to the American colonies in their break away from Britain nourished the antagonism. The French Revolution in 1789 found Britain supplying an army to support the French royalists. Naturally, when the campaigns of Napoleon began, the awareness of his plan to invade England generated an almost paranoiac reaction, which resulted in the massive construction of defense mechanisms. One of the most notable was a series of 103 huge Martello Towers located along the southern and eastern coast. They were never used to ward off a French invasion, but they served well in controlling smuggling. Forty-seven of these still stand today. Bainbridge (2016) relates how Geoffrey Best, David Gates, and others documented the growth of the British army from 40,000 men in 1793 to 250,000 in 1813. Likewise, 45,000 sailors were active in 1793 and the number expanded to 145,000 in 1812. At the peak of the fear of invasion, there were 400,000 men at arms. “As these numbers suggest, a large proportion of the British population was directly involved in the wars against France, possibly as many as one in five of all adult males during the invasion threats of 1797–1804” (p. 2). There was an unprecedented impact on the mindset of the general population.

Bainbridge (2016) points out, citing Clive Emsley (1979), that war was the main experience of the life of the British people.

If there was a common experience shared by all Britons in the last decade of the eighteenth and early years of the nineteenth centuries, it is to be found less in the changes resulting from the industrial revolution and more in the demands of war. (p. 2)

He goes on to relate the impact that this had at home, according to General Carl von Clausewitz, the war had become a national project, “a Nation at Arms.” The soldiers who returned from the front impacted the life of the people to the extent that even the manner of dress felt the influence. The uniforms of the soldiers were emblematic of identity and morale. The threat of invasion mobilized a tremendous volunteer movement, and the individuals left at home were engaged in furnishing all that was needed to sustain the war. It was a new kind of war which, rather than being limited and fighting for territorial gain, became “total war” fighting for idealism and “suddenly war again became the

business of the people” (p. 3). It was identity, as J. R. Watson cited by Bainbridge (2016) points out:

At the deepest level, war is a test of who we are. It affects our comprehension of ourselves as human beings, our self-awareness, our “fashioning” of ourselves, for just as we understand ourselves better through art, and particularly through tragedy, so we come to see, in war, particular human virtues and vices. (p. 8)

William Hazlitt (1825) calls in his essay, *The Spirit of the Age*, that “a new impulse had been given to men’s minds.” He analyzes two very different personalities and two very different types of poetry emerging from the era, that of Sir Walter Scott and George Gordon, Lord Byron. However different they may be, both depicted the characteristics of Romanticism, the love of nature, the noble spirit of the peasantry, and the tyrannical injustice of the ruling class. These components composed *The Spirit of the Age*. Harold Bloom (1971) says, “In the semi-apocalyptic dawn of the French Revolution, it really did seem that a renovated universe was possible –that life could never again be what it had been.” For Bloom, the Napoleonic Wars were, “a universal psychic shock that at first promised liberation from everything bad in the past” (p. 16).

Bainbridge (2016) states that “romanticism itself could be seen as inspired, stimulated, and shaped by the age of war with which it was at least partly concurrent” (p. 6). Romanticism thus became the mode of expression in all literary genres that would impact the entire world, and still does today. The hope for a better existence for the masses, the rejection of the exploitation of the people by the established ruling oligarchy, and the need for a hero to lead this change were the core of the movement and the subject of chronicles, newspapers, diaries, caricatures, poems, and social and political conversation. Napoleon, as a general rising from the ranks, as a military genius, lawmaker, historian, scientist, conqueror, emperor, and a prisoner in exile, was that hero. Opposing opinions gave rise to controversy, and the poets did not hesitate to give their impressions.

## Post war

When the wars ended, conditions on the home front did not improve. The war had been a costly affair both monetarily and in human lives. Much of the economic burden fell on the people in the form of taxes, thus furthering their stress. As Bloom (1971) explains, peace does little to better the circumstances. Both then and now, war is good business.

The French wars, against which all of William Blake’s prophetic poetry protests with Biblical passion, were typical of all modern wars fought by capitalistic countries. Enormous profits for the manufacturing classes were accompanied by inflation and food shortages for the mass of people, and victory over Napoleon brought on all the woes endemic to a capitalist society when peace breaks out –an enormous economic depression, unemployment, hunger, and more class unrest. (p. 15)

This phenomenon is illustrated by Bainbridge (2016), referring to Shaw (2000), “The ending of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars was ‘traumatic’ for the victors as well as the vanquished, in that the nation struggled to recreate the sense of identity that it had gained during wartime.” He goes on to cite Lord Byron, who writes with his usual good humor in “*The Age of Bronze*,” stanza 14, lines 57 and 58, “the peace has made one general malcontent. Of these high market patriots; War was rent” (p. 9). Lord Byron spoke on the subject in his first address to the House of Lords in 1812, in his defense of the protesting workers gone redundant that rioted because of the industrialization of the weaving industry. In a collection of Byron’s Poems, Volume III (1963), edited by De Sola Pinto, we find these words:

But the real cause of these consequent distresses lies deeper. (...) it is the bitter policy of the destructive warfare of the last eighteen years, which has destroyed their comfort, your comfort, all men’s comfort? (...) At present, the country suffers from the double infliction of an idle military and a starving population. (pp. 3-4, Appendix II)

And things got worse, as Alan Woods (2003) explains.

The defeat of Napoleon brought no improvement in the condition of the masses. After 1815, there was a deep slump, which paralyzed trade and brought widespread unemployment and poverty. (...) The ranks of the unemployed were swelled by a flood of discharged soldiers and sailors. The victors of Waterloo and Trafalgar were forced to beg for crusts of bread in the streets of London, Manchester, and Portsmouth. (p. 4)

It was a dismal picture, detaining the industrial revolution and paralyzing investment in industry. The future promised gain through foreign trade that had been paralyzed by the French until Russia lifted the boycott in 1812, but, as Woods has indicated, for the time being, the situation was dire; this is recorded and debated in a deluge of literary production. There was both admiration and criticism for Napoleon, a profound feeling for the suffering of the populace, and lucrative motivation for writers of all genres.

## **The mystifying mystique of Napoleon**

There were those whom Napoleon inspired to imagine that great reform was attainable for the impoverished masses who were suffering the effects of the industrial revolution and the enormous waste of life on the battlefields. A sentiment of disillusion developed as the acclaimed hero became vulnerable to ambition. Stock (2006) comments on this, “the reasons for admiring and attacking him are remarkably close.” He goes on to say, “Napoleon exposes insecurities at the heart of Romantic self-perception” (pp. 1-2). This perception along with the dire conditions of daily life led to a turnabout in opinions. What had begun with absolute awe and admiration at the achievements of the young general had radically changed by 1803. He was referred to as “Little Boney,” and British sarcasm indicates

that, rather than referring to his height, it was a way to laugh at their fear, insinuating that he was not a real threat. An incalculable number of caricatures and parodies depicting the personification of tyranny and deceit were to be found in the newspapers and magazines, which continued throughout his rise, glorious years, and fall.

However, despite the humor and bitter sarcasm aimed at Napoleon, in the long run, he continued to be triumphant. Commonly held contemporary opinions show that the charisma that characterized him during his life still prevails. Iain Pears (1997) in *The Gentleman and the Hero: Wellington and Napoleon in the Nineteenth Century*, in Grint (1997), brilliantly compares the leadership of the two. Pears, comparing charisma in the two generals, tells us “Napoleon, portrayed as Jove, the man who struck like a thunderbolt, had this quality and he dazzled the world. Wellington’s personality never dazzled anyone” (p. 241). He mentions that while the tomb of Napoleon draws myriads of visitors daily from all over the world, and that of Wellington is visited by only a fraction of these, and the Lord has fallen into a sort of *personal eclipse*. The multitude of biographies written about the two men became a *battle of giants*, “Frenchness versus Englishness.”

Among the Romantic poets, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Blake found fault and became antagonists of Bonaparte. On the other hand, there were those who, like Lord Byron, never lost their admiration for him, however much it wavered. In the words of Clubbe (1997), referring to the nineteenth-century opinion,

Napoleon embodied the possibilities of the human spirit for good or for evil. For men of action, the example of Napoleon confirmed their belief that their ambition need not be bounded; for the oppressed and lowly, Napoleon represented the capacity of genius to rise magnificently from nothing to the heights of power. (pp. 1-2)

He inspired the most renowned contemporaries, including Goethe, Byron, Stendhal, Sorel, Raskolnikov, Nietzsche, and Beethoven, all of whom openly expressed their admiration despite their doubts. In England, the Whigs were the supporters, as Bainbridge points out. The poets had a hard time deciding which version to embrace. According to Menteshashvili (2017) “On one hand, he is praised as the greatest commander, lawmaker, and statesman; on the other hand, he is a blamed despot who had trampled freedom and victimized millions” (p. 1).

Another good example is presented by Bainbridge (1995), who quotes the poet Coleridge as he explains how he sees Napoleon as an extraordinary “hero of romance” and yet a cowardly “fugitive and usurper” and a “popular dictator, full of enterprise, genius, and military experience.” He explains that both Coleridge and Southey esteemed Napoleon to be a genius, a man of science, a philosopher, a poet, and a peacemaker (pp. 23-24). Coleridge expresses his confusing opinion in an essay, in March 1800, “In his usurpation, Bonaparte stabbed his honesty in the vitals; it has perished –we admit, that it has perished– but the mausoleum, where it lies interred, is among the wonders of the

world” (p. 23). Bonaparte, the selfless liberator, and the avaricious tyrant became a controversy, which continues today.

Richard Whately (1819) in *Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Bonaparte*, as quoted by Bainbridge (1995), refers to this duality of opinion, held by contemporary intellectuals.

What, then are we to believe? If we are disposed to credit all that is told us, we must believe in the existence not only of one but two or three Bonapartes; if we admit nothing but what is well-authenticated, we shall be compelled to doubt of the existence of any. (p. 3)

This uncertainty is illustrated clearly in a proliferation of literature of both opinions.

Napoleon recognized one cause of his double image in a quote in Ellis (1997, p. 195), cited by Stock (2012, p. 20), in which he acknowledges that he was often led more by circumstances than by his will: “I never was truly my own master but was always controlled by circumstances (...) I molded my system according to the unforeseen succession of events.” Further on, we will see how Shelly –while extremely critical– recognizes that the best intentions and ideals of the greatest conquerors of history were deterred by the necessary evil required to achieve them. In 1785, a Scottish poet, Robert Burns, almost prophetically, states, “the best-laid plans of Mice and Men often go astray, and leave us nothing but grief and pain, instead of promised joy!” (Adventures in English Literature, Pegasus Edition, (p. 440).

## Reactions in literature

The literary reaction to the war and its aftermath was enormous. According to Burwick (1815), quoting Blake (p. 256), the most proliferous productions were in newspaper stories and caricatures, but there was also art, and an inordinate 100.000 sermons. According to Bainbridge (1995), in England, Bonaparte was used by both political parties. For the Tories, he was a “phantom” that warranted the loyalty to their administration and insured the payment of taxes. For the Whigs, Napoleon was a hero in his fight for liberty and opposition to the monarchy (p. 6). For the media, Napoleon and the war represented massive lucrative sales in publications. Everyone capable of writing did so for monetary gain. Besides newspaper articles and sermons, Burwick (1815) speaks of Waterloo narratives, soldier’s letters, tour journals with maps, and firsthand accounts (including one by Wellington). Biographies of Napoleon went from Mackenzie’s hero worship to Sir Walter Scott’s list of achievements as a civic administrator, as well as a military genius (pp. 1-5).

Like today, the paparazzi were ready to pounce on anything and everything that the public wanted to read, be it true, false or exaggerated. Referring to the success of Byron’s *Childe Harold*, Woods (2003) says:

This was better than poetry –it was good business. This was the new capitalist England where everything –and everybody– was for sale, from tea and calico to the consciences



of politicians and the souls of poets. Byron himself was a shrewd businessman where money was concerned and drove a hard bargain. This poet's head may or may not have been in the clouds, but his feet were firmly on the ground. (p. 7)

Woods goes on to explain that Byron's poetry was so popular because of his sense of humour. "He is witty, not in the English way but in the French way. This is a rarity. This wit sparkles and bubbles like champagne. It is full of life, and completely irreverent." It was a scandal for the British upper crust but a delight for the general public (p. 7). Business is business.

## Morbid curiosity

The often inhumane conditions and the heavy weight of over 20 years of every type of loss caused a morbid interest in the blood-curdling details of the battlegrounds. Morbidity is a mixture of fear and excitement combined with a compulsive desire to investigate. Even in our times, as we read the headlines or watch the news, we are still morbidly intrigued to see, listen and imagine the horrible suffering of those affected by war, famine, and natural disaster. In those days, people wanted to hear and read about what was happening, and that war was particularly destructive. This perception was fed by Napoleon's use of heavy artillery, which caused more death and destruction than any other weapon previously recorded in history. The cannonballs, spewing from the mouth of the cannons, were reported to bounce on the ground destroying everything in their way. Bainbridge (2017), recalls Shaw (2000 p. 22), who considered "Wounding –the ideology of sacrifice." To him, the reports registered in the uncountable versions of newspapers, diaries, journals, essays, poems, and novels seemed:

(...) an almost total disregard for the inner experience of wounding; bodies en masse are pierced, maimed, dismembered and crushed by descriptions of individual suffering are blandly erased as if to adapt Scarry's analysis; the body has been emptied of personal and civil content." (p. 8)

The public devoured the gory descriptions of bodies piled high on the battlefields. After all, nearly all of them had known someone who died there. Burwick (1815) quotes a travel journal by Major W. E. Frye comprised of soldiers' letters written between 1815-1819. Frye did not engage in any combat at Waterloo but was inspired to write:

The sight was too horrible to behold (...) the multitude of carcasses, the heaps of wounded men with mangled limbs unable to move, and perishing from not having their wounds dressed or from hunger, as the allies were, of course, obliged to take their surgeons and wagons with them (...) Both allied and the French, remain in an equally deplorable state." (p. 2)

## The Lake poets: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Blake

Referring directly to the poets, Banbridge (1995) comments on the importance of the topic, “It is the writers’ obsession with Napoleon’s powerful hold over the ‘Imagination,’ which most strikingly illustrates how critical he is to our understanding of the cultural politics and poetics of the Romantic period” (p. 208). Ivan Menteshashvili (n.d.) records Napoleon’s words as he travelled to Egypt in 1798 as a young general, “We need poets!” (p. 4). And, poets he would have –more than he could have imagined.

It was not only the bloody massacres of the battlefields that found expression in the poetry of Romanticism. The strife of those on the home front provided abundant inspiration for the works of Wordsworth and Blake. People could identify with the peasant woman who lost her only son, with orphans sweeping chimneys, and with families that had no adult male to provide for them. Bainbridge (2016) says:

I argued that poetry provided a medium for contesting the conflict’s meaning. Through verse, the scene of conflict could be imagined, and poems brought the war’s suffering back home to a British readership, a process figured in the innumerable works on the returning soldier. (p. 5)

Figuratively, the mass production of war-related writing elevated the horrific reality to the public while allowing for the evolution of poetic technique. “The war poetry of the period was as much a ‘paper bullet’ as a ‘paper shield.’ While poetry mediated the wars to the British public, the conflict shaped poetic theories and practices particularly in relation to issues of gender” (p. 8). Burwick (1815) registers the personal story, told by Lord Wellington, of Lady Magdalene De Lancy who went into the fields, found her wounded husband in a cottage and stayed with him and nursed him until he died.

War was the single most important fact of British life from 1793–1815. (...) perhaps the principal poetic subject of the age and that the dominant poetic figures of ‘the beggar, the orphan, the widow, the sailor, the soldier and veteran, and the country cottage’ were largely derived from the war experience.” (p. 2)

Conditions in England, prior to Napoleon, are evident in the words of William Blake’s *London* from the *Songs of Experience* (1794), in which the “mind-forg’d manacles” indicate the hopeless conformity with the horrendous conditions of life at the onset of the wars that were to last over two decades. Orphans were forced to clean soot from the chimneys for food, “How the Chimney-sweepers cry Every black’ning Church appalls” and the dying sighs of the soldiers (commoners dead and wounded in battle) metaphorically stain the walls of the luxurious homes of the ruling class with blood, “And the hapless Soldier’s cry Runs in blood down Palace walls.” (Blake, 1794)

William Wordsworth, himself an orphan at the age of 13, and a supporter of the French Revolution, then a resident in France, was forced to leave his love, Annette Vallon

who was expecting his child. He was unable to return when in 1793 war broke out with England and experienced unhappiness, guilt, and disillusion. Wordsworth was not a supporter of Napoleon, and by 1818, he had converted to extreme Toryism. In *Guilt and Sorrow* (final version 1842), he speaks, perhaps biographically, remembering his boyhood and family in France. In the following poem, a wife is left to care for the family when her husband marches off to battle. She must face his death and that of her children.

Me and his children hungering in his view.  
 To join those miserable men, he flew.  
 Disease and Famine, Agony and Fear...  
 It would thy brain unsettle even to hear.  
 Husband and children one by one, by sword  
 And scourge of fiery fever: ...

(*Guilt and Sorrow*, stanza XXXI)

Another of the first wave of poets, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, followed Napoleon by avidly reading newspapers and essays and writing about him both publicly and privately. He wrote, "He was one of those great men, who in the states or the mind of man had produced great revolutions, the effect of which remain, and are, more or less distant, causes of the present state of the World" (Bainbridge 1995, p. 8). By this, he meant that not only was the state of the world influenced by Napoleon but that he was part of the consciousness of the age. By 1802, there would be a confused focus. Bainbridge (1995) goes on to relate that Coleridge wrote articles for the *Morning Post* in which his referrals to the "great man" are contradictory, a "heroic figure and a cowardly deserter, a "hero of romance," a "fugitive and usurper," a "popular dictator, full of enterprise, genius, and military experience" (pp. 8-10). In 1800, the poet wrote this forceful argument for Napoleon's government, which demonstrates his dual opinion: "In his usurpation, Bonaparte stabbed his honesty in the vitals; it has perished—we admit, that it has perished— but the mausoleum, where it lies interred, is among the wonders of the world." He believed Napoleon would uphold his offer of peace and that, eventually, a more democratic form of government would evolve. Coleridge sees Bonaparte and his charisma as "a man of various talent, of commanding genius of splendid exploit" and "an object of superstition and enthusiasm" (pp. 23-24). He also refers to the public's fascination for the details of the war in the newspaper accounts in his poem, *Fears in Solitude*, written in 1798.

Boys and girls,  
 And women, that would groan to see a child  
 Pull off an insect's wing, all read of war,  
 The best amusement for our morning meal!"

(*Fears of Solitude*, stanza IV, lines 18-21)

After 1802, Coleridge, like Wordsworth and others, disappointed with the proposed peace, gradually turned against Napoleon. In the words of Bainbridge (1995), the “experiment” of the peace, as Coleridge termed it, revealed Napoleon’s “undisguised and unqualified ambitious designs as he ordered a second invasion of Switzerland, refused to remove his army from Holland, and threatened Egypt, Syria, the Greek Islands, and Malta” (p. 51).

## The second wave: Shelley and Keats

One poet of the second wave of Romantics, whose position concerning Napoleon was not favorable, was Percy Bysshe Shelley. Shelley was a realist as well as a revolutionary, and at the end of the day, an optimist. He disagreed with what he considered Napoleon’s ostentatious display as Emperor. Napoleon’s expedition in Egypt created a great deal of interest in the ancient culture. In fact, much of the treasure of the pyramids ended up in England after Nelson defeated the French army in 1798. After Napoleon escaped from the encounter, and his final exile in 1815, Shelley alludes to his reign as Emperor through a sonnet about Ramses II called *Ozymandias*, written in 1818. Here, he deplores the vainglory of the Pharaoh, indicates that only his worst attributes are remembered, and reminds us that empires do not last forever.

I met a traveller from an antique land  
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert...Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of de command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.  
(*Ozymandias*, 1818)

Shelley, whose character profile is that of an idealist, wanted much more from Napoleon than what seemed to be a man in search of personal power and glory. He considered himself a Republican and lived up to what that implied. A fiery defender of the common working population and enemy of tyrannical power, he considered that the Emperor had fallen into the same pattern of tyranny as the kings before him. Shelley found the failure of who he had hoped would be the father of democracy in Europe to

be unforgivable. When Napoleon fell in 1812, Shelley produced a sonnet, which clearly describes his feelings of disdain. Or does it?

I hated thee, fallen tyrant! I did groan  
 To think that a most unambitious slave,  
 Like thou, shouldst dance and revel on the grave  
 Of Liberty. Thou mightst have built thy throne  
 Where it had stood even now: thou didst prefer  
 A frail and bloody pomp which Time has swept  
 In fragments towards Oblivion. Massacre,  
 For this I prayed, would on thy sleep have crept,  
 Treason and Slavery, Rapine, Fear, and Lust,  
 And stifled thee, their minister. I know  
 Too late, since thou and France are in the dust,  
 That Virtue owns a more eternal foe  
 Than Force and Fraud: old Custom, legal Crime,  
 And bloody Faith the foulest birth of Time.  
 (Feelings of a Republican on the Fall of Napoleon, 1812)

At first read, this sonnet is hateful. The criticism is vicious and disdainful. It is unquestionable that Shelley was not an admirer of Bonaparte. Those who have interpreted the poem, such as Joel Valley (2014) in his slide presentation, agree that when Shelley says he hated Napoleon, he meant precisely that.

As discussed, the intellectuals acknowledged the greatness of Napoleon even when they criticized him and voiced their contempt. This sentiment can be felt in this poem. However, let us delve a little deeper and dissect the poem. If we take the first sentence of the poem, we note that the verb “hated” is in the past tense; this does not necessarily mean that Shelley no longer hated Napoleon, he clearly insinuates that Bonaparte changed, from idealistic to ambitious. He also recognizes that he had all the potential to have built whatever he wanted, wherever he wanted, but, ambition got in the way, “swept in fragments into Oblivion.” Shelley admits having wished that Napoleon would suffer personally for all of the grotesque horrors that came from the wars. According to the sonnet, both the Emperor and France were left in ruins, but, the poet realizes that there are worse enemies of virtue than Macbeth’s “vaulting ambition.” There is something worse than tyrannical force and betrayal of the faith that followers place in their leader. Here, Shelley places a colon (:), indicating that he will say what is worse. To him, worse are the “old Custom”, the long line of monarchs in the history of the country; “legal Crime”, which allows the king and nobility to commit atrocities and abuses with no consequences; and “bloody Faith”, where the people have no choice but to follow the king into war after war while living without hope.

According to Bainbridge (1995), Shelley analyses the paradox of Napoleon and sees that good and the means to produce and maintain good are “irreconcilable” (p. 358).

What begins with the greatest envisioned good becomes undone by man's craving for power and wealth and succumbs to the negative measurements and pressures required to obtain them. Good and what is needed to achieve it are not compatible. He speaks of this in *The Triumph of Life*, and laments:

Fallen, as Napoleon fell, I felt my cheek  
Alter, to see the shadow pass away,  
Whose grasp had left the giant world so weak,  
That every pigmy kicked it as it lay;  
And much I grieved to think how power and will  
In opposition rule our mortal day.  
And why God made irreconcilable  
Good and the means of good."

(The Triumph of Life, stanzas 1, 2, 3)

Another poet, John Keats, was not a fan of Napoleon, but then, he was not a political poet. However, he was aspiring to be recognized for his verses. He was aware of the Bonaparte phenomenon, and in his revision of *Endymion*, he makes direct reference to him. He indicates that he is not a god nor entirely responsible for becoming the despot that he seemed to be, but was forced by other pressures. "(...) the hero of the written tale being mortal is led on, like Bonaparte, by circumstance." (Stock, 2006, p. 20, quoting Motion, 1997). However, he accused him of having "done more harm to the life of Liberty than anyone else could have done."

He could not help but admire his genius and take offense at the ridicule that was being heaped on Bonaparte. Unlike his two contemporaries, Byron and Shelley, Keats was small in stature and of humble origin, as was Napoleon. Keats was aware of his own exceptional but largely unrecognized potential as a poet. When a certain Mr Lewis belittled Keats and his poems in 1819, he wrote to his family:

I heard that Mr Lewis said a thing I am not at all contented with—Says he "Oh, he is quite the little Poet, —now this is abominable. You might as well say Bonaparte is quite the little soldier—You see what it is to be under six-foot tall and not a Lord...?" (Bainbridge, 1995, p. 2)

## The great Napoleon complex: George Gordon and Lord Byron

The most notorious of the poets, Lord Byron, idolized Napoleon from his childhood. His lifetime coincided with the evolution, the empire and the resignation of the Emperor. He was one year old when it all began and twenty-seven when it ended. Byron vacillated from adoration to disappointment to adoration, but never to hate. He lamented that the Emperor did not die fighting when he saw that all was lost, an idealism that would become a truth for himself. Byron's connection is so personal that when he becomes disil-

lusioned and critical, he is also criticising himself. The decline and fall of the Emperor increased his self-identification, as Byron was having a difficult time in his own life (Clubbe, 1997, pp. 2-4).

Clubbe begins his document, *Between Emperor and Exile: Byron and Napoleon*, by saying, “Napoleon and Byron together dominate nineteenth-century conceptions of the hero” (p. 1). When speaking of the influence of Bonaparte on the Romantics, Byron was who most identified himself with Napoleon. We might say –most respectfully– that Byron personifies the first recorded “Napoleon Complex.” Bloom (1960) tells us that Byron “maintained a lifelong identification with Napoleon as his other self” (p. 79). Clubbe says:

I view Byron’s response to Napoleon both in relation to a widespread cultural phenomenon and his own personal trajectory. Indeed, Byron’s accruing poetic power, I shall argue, was intricately bound up in his imaginative grappling with the potential, achievements, and failures of the little corporal.” (p. 1)

Clubbe says that the most illustrious Whigs of the time, including Byron, formed a *Napoleonic cult* and their “European image of him as a dynamic man of destiny helps us put into perspective Byron’s own self-identification” (p. 2). Here, we provide an interesting parallel of some of the personal and private life traits that Clubbe presents:

- Both had sisters they loved.
- Both failed in their first marriage.
- Both inspired exceptional loyalty among subordinates.
- Both were superstitious and believed in premonitions.
- Both preferred to read history.
- Both compared themselves to great figures of the past, Napoleon to Alexander and Byron to Diogenes and Bonaparte.
- Both were physically strong.
- Both had a quick metabolism and great endurance.
- Neither was afraid of taking risks.
- Chateaubriand said, “Bonaparte was a poet in action,” Byron actually became “a poet in action” in Greece (p. 3).

However, it is in the inner spirit that they most resemble each other. As Alan Woods (2003) manifests, “The poetic spirit rebels against the constraints of tradition and habit and seeks to reshape the world in a new image” (p. 1). He diagrams Byron’s character, which Byron himself will later liken to that of Napoleon.

His generation was forged under the hammer-blows of the great events that flowed from the French revolution. But, Byron’s “*revolutionism*” needed no external source. It flowed from his innermost nature. His active involvement in radical politics began at a very young age.” (p. 3)

We might conclude that Napoleon's "revolutionism" likewise needed no external force and, like that of Byron, emerged from within himself.

As Bloom (1960) points out, for Byron, Napoleon was *his other self*. The poet describes the characteristics that he identifies in himself as those he attributes to Napoleon. These will become the essence of the Byronic Hero, portrayed in Byron's *Don Juan*, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, and *The Corsair*. This hero is a unique mixture of angel and devil, who abides by his own philosophy. He is rebellious, moody, and self-critical, and carries a troubled conscience about some of his actions. He is ready to fight oppression and social injustice and possesses the talent to do so. His spirit is never at rest. In stanza 42 of the Third Canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, written in 1816, Byron explains this unquiet spirit, which will allow no peace for the person. Both Shelley and Byron liken Napoleon to the spirit of Prometheus, who must steal fire to benefit humanity, be punished for it, lose his powers and be chained down to prevent further activity. A paraphrase of stanza 42 might be: when you have this spirit, you must move, or it is like hell within. It is a fire or restlessness inside the soul that will not stay within the confines of its being but will want to escape. Once it begins to burn, no one can put out the fire. It burns on high, an extraordinary adventure. The only thing that tires it is rest. It is a fever at the center of everything, and it spurs the individual beyond possibility and is eventually fatal.

In Byron's words,

But quiet to quick bosons is a hell,  
And there hath been thy bane; there is a fire  
And motion of the soul which will not dwell  
In its own narrow being, but aspire  
Beyond the fitting medium of desire;  
And, but once kindled, quenchless evermore,  
Preys upon high adventure, nor can tire  
Of aught but rest; a fever at the core  
Fatal to him who bears, to all who ever bore."

(Third Canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, stanza 42, 1814)

Byron's affinity for Napoleon appears many times in his poetry, journals, and letters. Scholars agree that he understands what drives Napoleon. "Byron's identification with Napoleon certainly involved an element of heroic self-projection, particularly during periods of boredom and frustration" Bainbridge (1995) also says,

In one of the most remarkable acts of self-representation in *Don Juan*, even in the whole of Romantic poetry, Byron dramatizes himself through analogy with Napoleon Bonaparte, for him the supreme embodiment of the "talents of action –of war– or of Senate." (p. 134)



Bloom (1960), also refers to this poem, “Clearly, this is another portrait of Byron himself, as much as it is of Napoleon.” (p. 79) In Canto XI of the epic *Don Juan*, which he wrote in 1823, Byron evaluates his career as a poet.

Even I –albeit I’m sure I did not know it,  
 Nor sought of foolscap subjects to be king,  
 Was reckoned, a considerable time,  
 The gran Napoleon of the realms of rhyme.  
 (Don Juan, Canto XI, 55, 5-8)

Indeed, he still is *the gran Napoleon of the realms of rhyme*. When the English newspapers compared him to Bonaparte, Byron could not contain his delight, “Poor Napoleon. He little dreamed to what ‘vile comparisons’ the turn of the wheel would reduce him.” It is evident that he does not feel worthy of being compared to Napoleon; however, he seems quite pleased.

The poet was dominated by the figure of Napoleon, even when his disappointment in the Corsican was at the highest. In the opening words of *Don Juan*, when he says, “I want a hero,” his concern was that –at least in the era in which he lived– no “*hero*” was a “*true one*” (Bainbridge, 1995, p. 135). Nonetheless, Byron does not relinquish his attachment to Napoleon. From April of 1814 to 1816, Byron produced a series of Napoleonic poems that testify to his internal debate and undying affinity with the Emperor along with his admiration for whom in his journal he calls the “*greatest man*.” Byron’s journals provide much insight into the feelings that are expressed in the poems. The first of these poems is the *Ode to Napoleon Bonaparte*, which he revised several times. The inspiration comes upon learning of the abdication. In this poem, the poet eulogizes a great hero who has betrayed himself. He is compared with Satan in his fall from heaven, along with a myriad of other famous figures of myth and history.

Shaw (2014) reminds us that in 1816 Byron created a striking contrast between the posh dinner and dance parties of the nobility and the crude reality of war in stanzas XXI to XXVIII of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* or *The Eve of Waterloo*, remembering a cousin who died in the field and lamenting the loss of the unnamed soldiers who left a “ghastly gap” in their families (Shaw, 2014, p. 3). Byron calls the field the “*first and last of fields, king-making victory!*” (pp. 1-3)

Last night beheld them full of lusty life,  
 Last eve in Beauty’s circle proudly gay,  
 The midnight brought the signal-sound of strife,  
 The morn the marshalling in arms,--the day  
 Battle’s magnificently-stren array!  
 The thunder-clouds close o’er it, which when rent  
 The earth is covered thick with other clay,  
 Which her own clay will cover, heaped and pent,

Rider and horse, --friend, foe,-- in one red burial blent!  
(Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Canto III, stanza 28; The Eve of Waterloo, 1816)

For Byron, quitting was the maximum fault. As Bainbridge (1995) points out, Byron would have preferred Bonaparte to fight until the end, knowing that he could not win. In his journals, he even mentions that it would have been preferable for Napoleon to “*die with harness on his back*” like Macbeth (p. 142). Cochran (n.d.) gives us a direct quote of Byron's in which he refers to the duality of character and his disappointment:

Napoleon was his own antithesis. He was a glorious tyrant after all. Look at his public works: compare his face, even his coins with those of the other sovereigns of Europe (...) I blame the manner of his death: (...) There, he lost himself in his dramatic character, in my estimation. He was the master of his own destiny; of that, at least, his enemies could not deprive him. (p. 2)

Byron extends an invitation to his hero to be like Prometheus and valiantly endure his punishment. It is a way to honor him after having degraded him for quitting. He insinuates that, despite all, Prometheus maintained his pride, and encourages Napoleon to do the same (Clubbe, 1997, p. 7). For Byron, likening the Corsican to Prometheus and Satan revives him with new symbolism of “strength, hope, and defiant opposition,” and reveals something about himself as well (Bainbridge, 1995, p. 152).

Or like the thief of fire, from heaven,  
Wilt thou withstand the shock?  
And share with him, the unforgiven,  
His vulture and his rock!  
Foredoomed by God—by man accurst,  
And that last act, though not thy worst,  
The very Fiend's arch mock;  
He in his fall preserved his pride,  
And if a mortal, had as proudly died!  
(Ode to Napoleon, stanza 16)

Clubbe (1997) points out that Byron's allegiance to his hero triumphs in the end. In *From the French*, in 1816, Byron takes on the identity of a soldier in Napoleon's army whose loyalty depicts Byron's own. Usurping the soldier's voice, Byron's sentiment is genuine and emotional, and a confession of his admiration, affinity, and loyalty. (p. 13)

My Chief—my King—my Friend—adieu—  
Never did I droop before—  
Never to my Sovereign sue,  
As his foes I now implore—  
All I ask is to divide

Every peril he must brave—  
Sharing by the hero's side  
His fall—his exile—and his grave.  
(From the French, stanza V, 1816)

It could be interpreted that a *Chief* requires obedience, a *King* requires loyalty and servitude; however, a *Friend* is freely given trust, sacrifice, forgiveness, brotherhood, and heartfelt love. Byron offers it all. Speaking with a soldier's voice, he indicates that he has been in combat, next to his general through it all. He asks Napoleon's enemies to allow him to share equally in his fall from power, his humiliating exile, and his death, thus accompanying him in his defeat and decline just as he had done in his triumph and glory.

This was to be Byron's last and greatest tribute. According to Bloom (1960), Byron had written Napoleonic poems after his exile to Elba and after the battle of Waterloo but lost heart after Napoleon's death. It is with Byron's words (or lack of them) that we close this tribute to a figure who influenced the Romantic era and continues to fascinate us today. Byron writes to his friend, Thomas Moore, that he will not write about Bonaparte again. "*I have no spirits nor estro to do so. His overthrow, from the beginning, was a blow on the head to me; since that period, we have been the slaves of fools*" (Bloom, 1960, p. 82). Byron has no words to describe what he feels.

## Conclusion

The reactions of Napoleon's contemporaries varied from adoration to hate, changing according to the events. In Britain, the more liberal writers rejoiced in the revolution and the fall of the tyrannical monarchs, and protested the unrestrained ambition that Napoleon projected. The Napoleonic Wars and the Corsican occupied the minds of the intellectuals, as well as the common population of Great Britain, from the rise of the brilliant young general to the fall of the Emperor. There was onslaught and acclamation for Napoleon in every type of written and artistic expression, from church sermons to the powerful poetry of the Romantic era. The suffering of the people left at home, the bloody sacrifice of thousands of soldiers, the aftermath of the wars, the hope for a free and better society promised by revolution and enhanced by idealism, the admiration for the extraordinary genius of one man, the disillusion with a hero succumbing to the thirst for power, all of these find expression in the poetic response of the Romantic era.

Among the greatest British writers and poets there are six world renowned figures, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Blake, Percy Bysshe Shelly, John Keats, and George Gordon, Lord Byron. All of them were, to a greater or lesser degree, under the captivating spell of the mystique of the great Napoleon Bonaparte.

Paul Stock (2012) concludes his brilliant analysis with an appropriate evaluation of how the intellectual Romantics used Napoleon as a captivating figure that both inspired and tormented, and how they succumbed to his power.

Appropriated for many diverse ends, Bonaparte is indeed “captive” of Romantic imaginations—a public figure at the mercy of intellectuals. However, such is the hold he exerts over the Romantics, and such is the introspectiveness he inspires, that he also captivates them: he is their conqueror. Romanticism both defines and is defined by the complex legacy of Napoleon. (p. 24)

This study includes only a small part of what can be said concerning the influence of Napoleon on those who represented him in their writing. It is intended to illustrate the impact generated on the resulting spirit of the Romantic age.

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