

Byron, Napoleon,  
J.C. Hobhouse, and  
the Hundred Days

*Peter died shortly before he was able to finish this book. We would like to express our gratitude to Jane Stabler for all her help getting the manuscript finished for publication, we know Peter respected her greatly.*

*Thanks also for all the messages of condolence and warm tributes to Peter. He will be missed enormously, but we know his influence will continue to be felt in everyone he enthused, amused, inspired and loved.*

*He'll be remembered by his students, friends, colleagues, his grandchildren Lewis and Leila, and especially us, his daughters who loved him very much.*

*With thanks, Emily and Abi Cochran*

# Byron, Napoleon, J.C. Hobhouse, and the Hundred Days

By

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Ils étaient tous les deux de l'homme et du géant.  
Tous deux sous des lauriers cachaient le sceau du crime.  
L'enfer, au ciel, dit-on, s'unit en les créant;  
Ils rélévaient un Dieu par leur regard sublime.  
Et l'accent de leur voix trahissait tout l'abîme,  
Tout ... le dédain de l'être et l'horreur du néant (Gaspard de Pons,  
*Bonaparte et Byron*, 1825)

[They partook both of the man and of the giant. Each hid the mark of his crime beneath a laurel crown. It is said that heaven and hell combined to make them both; each defined a God in his sublime glance. And the sound of their voices gave away where the abyss was – everything ... the disdain of life and the horror of nothingness]<sup>1</sup>

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**1:** Quoted Edmond Estève, *Byron et le Romantisme français, Essai sur la fortune et l'influence de l'œuvre de Byron en France de 1812 à 1850*, 1907, 1929, p.128.



# CONTENTS

Abbreviations .....	viii
Chronology .....	x
Introduction .....	1
Byron's Napoleonic Poems (pre-Waterloo) .....	22
Hobhouse's Diary and Letters from the Hundred Days.....	37
Byron's Napoleonic Poems (post-Waterloo).....	266
Epilogue.....	311
Appendix .....	312
The Portraits of Hannibal from Juvenal's Tenth Satire in the Original and in Dryden's Translation, and of Charles XII from Johnson's <i>The Vanity of Human Wishes</i>	
Bibliography.....	315
Index.....	318

## ABBREVIATIONS

- Berg: Four volumes of Hobhouse's diary, New York Public Library, Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations
- Blessington: *Lady Blessington's Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell Jr, Princeton 1969
- BLJ: *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols, John Murray, 1973-94
- B: Byron
- CHP: Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*
- CMP: *Lord Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Andrew Nicholson, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991
- CPW: *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann and Barry Weller, 7 vols, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980-93
- DJ: Byron, *Don Juan*
- Geyl: Pieter Geyl, *Napoleon: For and Against*, Peregrine Books 1982
- H: John Cam Hobhouse
- JB: *Napoléon, Lettres à Josephine*, ed. Jacques Bourgeat, Paris 1941
- Journey: *A Journey through Albania and Other Provinces of Turkey to Constantinople during the Years 1809-1810*, by John Cam Hobhouse, James Cawthorne 1813: second edition
- Joyce: *My Friend H*, by Michael Joyce, John Murray 1948
- LBLI: *Lord Byron's Life in Italy*, by Teresa Guiccioli, trans. Rees, ed. Cochran, AUP Delaware, 2005
- Letters: *The Substance of some Letters from Paris*, by John Cam Hobhouse, James Ridgeway 1816
- Life: Thomas Moore, *The Works of Lord Byron: With his Letters and Journals and His Life*, 17 vols, London, John Murray, 1832-3
- LJ: *The Works of Lord Byron, Letters and Journals*, ed. R. E. Prothero, 6 vols, London: John Murray, 1898-1901



- LJM:* *The Letters of John Murray to Lord Byron*, ed. Andrew Nicholson, Liverpool University Press, 2007
- Medwin:* *Medwin's Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Lovell, Princeton 1966
- NLS:* National Library of Scotland
- RLl:* *Recollections of a Long Life*, by Lord Broughton, ed. Lady Dorchester, 6 vols, London: John Murray, 1909-11
- Roberts:* Andrew Roberts, *Napoleon the Great*, Allen Lane 2014
- RR:* *The Romantics Reviewed*, ed. Donald H. Reiman, Garland, 1972
- Schom:* Alan Schom, *One Hundred Days; Napoleon's Road to Waterloo*, Michael Joseph 1993
- Travels:* *Travels in Albania and other Provinces of Turkey in 1809 and 1810*, by the Right Honourable Lord Broughton G.C.B., John Murray 1855

## CHRONOLOGY

Birth of Napoleon	August 15th 1769
Birth of Hobhouse	June 27th 1786
Birth of Byron	January 22nd 1788
Battle of Marengo	
French victory	June 14th 1800
Napoleon crowns himself Emperor	December 2nd 1804
Battle of Trafalgar	
French defeat	October 21st 1805
Battle of Austerlitz	
French victory	December 2nd 1805
Battle of Jena-Auerstadt	
French victory	October 14th 1806
Battle of Eylau	
French victory	February 7th-8th 1807
Battle of Friedland	
French victory	June 14th 1807
Treaty of Tilsit	July 7th and 9th 1807
Battle of Wagram	
French victory – just	July 5th-6th 1809
<i>Childe Harold</i> I and II published	March 10th 1812
Napoleon invades Russia	June 24th 1812
Battle of Borodino	
Drawn	September 7th 1812
Battle of Leipzig	
French defeat	October 16th-19th 1813
Napoleon abdicates	April 4th 1814
Napoleon attempts suicide	April 13th 1814
Byron's <i>Ode to Napoleon</i>	
<i>Buonaparte</i> published	April 16th 1814
Byron marries Annabella Milbanke	January 2nd 1815
Napoleon escapes from Elba	February 26th 1815
Napoleon enters Paris	March 20th 1815
Hobhouse enters Paris	
to witness Hundred Days	April 12th 1815

Battle of Waterloo	
French defeat	June 18th 1815
Napoleon attempts suicide again	June 21st 1815
Hobhouse returns to England	July 23rd 1815
Napoleon departs for St Helena	October 1815
Byron leaves England for good	April 25th 1816
Death of Napoleon	May 5th 1821
<i>The Age of Bronze</i> published	April 1st 1823
Death of Byron	April 19th 1824
Death of Hobhouse	June 3rd 1869



## INTRODUCTION



This is the story of how Byron outgrew, but did not outgrow, an adolescent obsession.

Byron made no distinctions between myth and reality. For him, they were the same. He writes to Augusta:

It is heart-breaking to think of our long Separation—and I am sure more than punishment enough for all our sins—Dante is more humane in his “Hell” for he places his unfortunate lovers (Francesca of Rimini & Paolo whose case fell a good deal short of *ours*—though sufficiently naughty) in company—and though they suffer—it is at least together.—<sup>1</sup>

Paolo and Francesca are from poetry and myth: Byron and Augusta are “real”. But Byron knows them to be in the same continuum. More: for him, Napoleon Bonaparte, the Conqueror of Imperialists and Importer of Reason to Europe, Prometheus, the Bringer of Light, and Sathan, the Defier of God, were one and the same – and so was he himself, with

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1: B. to Augusta Leigh, May 17th 1819.

Gentleman John Jackson (“the Champion in the fisty ring”) not a long way behind – “Although ’tis an imaginary thing”:

In twice five years the “greatest living poet”,  
 Like to the Champion in the fisty ring,  
 Is called on to support his claim or show it,  
 Although ’tis an imaginary thing;  
 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 grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme. –

But Juan was my Moscow, and Faliero  
 My Leipsic, and my Mont Saint Jean seems Cain;  
 “La Belle Alliance” of dunces down at zero,  
 Now that the Lion’s fall’n, may rise again;  
 But I will fall at once as fell my Hero,  
 Nor reign at all, or as a *Monarch* reign,  
 Or to some lonely Isle of Jailors go,  
 With turncoat Southey as my turnkey Lowe. (*Don Juan* X sts.55-6)

He is, of course, joking here – isn’t he? It’s no great achievement to be “king” “of foolscap subjects”. We may argue with the sequence: joining in the jest, we too may interpret his triumphs as disasters, and could argue for *Faliero* as his Moscow, *Cain* as his Leipsic, and *Don Juan* (his greatest work) as his Mont Saint Jean – his Waterloo.<sup>2</sup> Still, for him, England (where he reigned!) is a prison – as Denmark is to Hamlet – except that Byron thinks he’s escaped from it, as Napoleon will not from his, since the mean and officious Hudson Lowe cannot be defeated, while the unreadable Robert Southey has already been, in *The Vision of Judgement*, travestied into oblivion.

The difference between the two (as was that between Byron’s and Ovid’s exiles) was that Byron could return home any time he liked, while Napoleon, from St Helena, could not; but Byron tried to maintain the imaginary one-ness by “escaping” in a five-hundred-pound carriage which was an exact replica of Napoleon’s – for which, however, he never paid, as if unwilling to put his money where his pose was. Douglas Kinnaird paid for it in the year of Byron’s death, by which time the interest had caused its price to double.

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2: The paradox – creating victory from defeat – would be Napoleonic. The last sentence of Napoleon’s bulletin announcing the failure of his Russian invasion goes, “His Majesty’s health has never been better” (Geyl p.131 &n).

The identification was not just Byron's private fancy. In 1821 he wrote to Murray,

Dear Sir / By extracts in the English papers in your holy Ally, Galignani's messenger – I perceive that “the two greatest examples of human vanity – in the present age” are firstly – “the Ex=Emperor Napoleon” – and secondly, “his Lordship, &<sup>c</sup>.” {the noble poet} meaning your humble Servant “poor guiltless I.” – – –  
 Poor Napoleon! – he little dreamed to what “vile comparisons” the turn of the Wheel would reduce him! –<sup>3</sup>

Despite this self-deflation, the one-ness was much of the time, for Byron, real. When he was stressed almost to breaking-point by the failure of his marriage early in 1816, Hobhouse's diary records that he

... has gone to the length of strutting about in his peer's robes, and saying he was like Bonaparte, and the greatest man in the world, not excepting Bonaparte.<sup>4</sup>

Augusta puts it even more dramatically:

L<sup>y</sup> N. seems to think his relations can't let him go on in this state – yet what is {to be} – what can be done! one of the things he did & said last night was desiring George to go & live at Seaham exactly as if it were his own! & even before our dinner he said he considered himself the greatest man existing – G. said laughing “except Buonaparte”! & answer was “God! I don't know that I do except even him”! when I went in at his dinner to give him an answer about a note he had sent me with to Murray I was certainly struck with a coldness in his eyes, \_\_\_\_\_

he has lent the Box to the Pole's tonight & I really am in terror of some mal a propos speech for in that he is worse than ever!<sup>5</sup>

This was early in 1816, when Bonaparte was safe, cabbin'd, cribb'd and confined on St Helena.

Napoleon remained Byron's model up to the end. In his Cefalonia journal he writes, in 1823,

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3: B. to Murray, December 4th 1821 (text from NLS Ms.43492; *BLJ* IX 74-5).

4: Hobhouse diary, Monday February 12th 1816 (Edited from Berg Volume 4 (1 January 1816-5 April 1816); Broughton Holograph Diaries, Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations).

5: Augusta Leigh to Lady Byron, January 22nd 1816.

I have advanced the sum above noted to pay the said Squadron – it is not very large but is double that which Napoleon the Emperor of Emperors – began his campaign in Italy, withal – vide – Las Cases – passim vol 1. (tome premier.)<sup>6</sup>

But Napoleon’s campaign in Italy was a great success – Byron’s, in Greece, led to nothing but his death.

When he’s unguarded and on home soil, Byron speaks of Napoleon as a prosaic English conservative would (my italics):

What strange tidings from that Anakim of anarchy—Buonaparte! Ever since I defended my bust of him at Harrow against the rascally time-servers, when the war broke out in 1803, he has been a “Heros de Roman” of mine—on the continent; *I don’t want him here.*<sup>7</sup>

A “Heros de Roman” – a fictive idol – was what Napoleon, for Byron, never ceased to be: a deity best kept at a distance, confined to dreams, gestures, odes, and semi-facetious, defensive jokes – all in an attempt to neutralise the self-identification, which the prosaic, satirical, critical Byron recognised as an embarrassment. “I don’t want him here”. Admire him as he might in a continental context, at Westminster or in Piccadilly Napoleon wouldn’t do – even though the very last thing he was was an “Anakim of Anarchy”, believing as he did in a strong government under which everybody knew their place – being, in this respect, not unlike Lord Liverpool.

Napoleon stretched Byron’s capacity for *mobilité* beyond breaking-point. His complete failure to think straight about him is seen in his Journal entry for February 18th 1814:

Napoleon!—this week will decide his fate. All seems against him; but I believe and hope he will win—at least, beat back the Invaders. What right have we to prescribe sovereigns to France? Oh for a Republic! “Brutus, thou sleepest.”<sup>8</sup> Hobhouse abounds in continental anecdotes of this extraordinary man; all in favour of his intellect and courage, but against his *bonhomme*. No wonder;—how should he, who knows mankind well, do other than despise and abhor them?

The greater the equality, the more impartially evil is distributed, and becomes lighter by the division among so many—therefore, a Republic!

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6: *BLJ* XI 34. Las Cases reports that on the eve of his invasion of Italy in 1796 Bonaparte could raise no more than 2,000 *louis*. Nevertheless, he triumphed there, just as B. hopes to do in Greece.

7: Journal, November 17th 1813.

8: Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, II i 46 and 48.



He pays the tribute with authority, as one who also “knows mankind well”. However, if what he wants is a republic, the last person he should be enthusing about is Napoleon (who was often a fountain of “*bonhomie*”). Byron has created from Napoleon a bogeyman every bit as fantastical and inaccurate as much of right-wing Europe was to create from *him*.

Lady Blessington provides a gloss on this aspect of Byron’s affected self-identification:

... what he most likes in his [*Napoleon’s*] character was his want of sympathy, which proved his knowledge of human nature, as those only could possess sympathy who were in happy ignorance of it. I told him that this carried its own punishment with it, as Napoleon found the want of sympathy when he most required it, and that some portion of what he affected to despise, namely, enthusiasm and sympathy, would have saved him from the degradations he twice underwent when deserted by those on whom he counted. Not all Byron’s expressed contempt for mankind can induce me to believe that he has the feeling; this is one of the many little artifices which he condescends to make use of to excite surprise in his hearers, and can only impose on the credulous.<sup>9</sup>

Blessington is right. All this shows is that Byron didn’t understand Napoleon at all. Napoleon had considerable sympathy for ordinary people – his identification with the common soldier was what made him such an effective general: Charles de Gaulle himself commented, “Those he made suffer most, the soldiers, were the ones most faithful to him”.<sup>10</sup> His bourgeois background in Corsica gave him, too, a fellow-feeling with small business-men. Byron was famous for identifying with neither of these groups – when in *Don Juan* he portrays a popular general, Suvorov, he sneers at him for possessing the common touch, and thinks of him as a buffoon – “Harlequin in Uniform” (*Don Juan* VII 55 8). Perhaps this egalitarianism was what prejudiced the elitist Byron sufficiently against Napoleon as to name him “Anakim<sup>11</sup> of Anarchy” – why, many of his foremost generals had risen from the ranks! The Légion d’Honneur, which he founded, could be awarded to anyone!

In 1821 he tried to sum up his Napoleonic poems for Thomas Medwin:

I told him I could never reconcile the contradictory opinions he had expressed of Napoleon in his poems.

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9: Blessington, pp.82-3.

10: Quoted Roberts, p.714.

11: Anakim – Old Testament giant. See Genesis 14:5-6, 23:2, and Joshua 15:13.

“How could it be otherwise?” said he. “Some of them were called translations, and I spoke in the character of a Frenchman and a soldier. But Napoleon was his own antithesis (if I may say so). He was a glorious tyrant, after all. Look at his public works: compare his face, even on his coins, with those of the other sovereigns of Europe. I blame the manner of his death: he shewed that he possessed much of the Italian character in consenting to live. There he lost himself in his dramatic character, in my estimation. He was master of his own destiny; of *that*, at least, his enemies could not deprive him. He should have gone off the stage like a hero: it was expected of him”.<sup>12</sup>

Byron is at least frank – Napoleon is for him not a soldier and politician, but a face on a coin, a character in a play, a Macbeth who has missed the point,<sup>13</sup> and has outlived the fifth act.<sup>14</sup> He inhabits an aesthetic, not a political, dimension. Byron never quite shook this off. On March 6th 1814 – before Napoleon abdicated – his diary records,

Sent my fine print of Napoleon to be framed: It *is* framed; and the Emperor becomes his robes as if he had been hatched in them.

In fact, as Hobhouse’s diary will show, Napoleon had become too fat for his robes.

And as late as November 7th 1818, Byron purchased, for £105, “A rich chased golf Snuff Box with fine Enamel Painting of Napoleon Maria Louisa & the King of Rome”.<sup>15</sup> This was long after Napoleon had been

**12:** Medwin pp.184-5.

**13:** B. to Lady Melbourne, January 12th 1814 (text from NLS Ms.43471 f.99): “By the bye – don’t you pity poor Napoleon – and are these your heroes? – Commend me to the Romans – or Macbeth – or Richard 3<sup>d</sup>. – this man’s spirit seems broken – it is but a bastard devil at last – and a sad whining example to your future Conquerors – it will work a moral revolution – he must feel doubtless – <but> if he did not there would be little merit in insensibility – but why shew it to the world – a thorough mind would either rise from the rebound or at least go out “with harness on it’s back. – – – – (BLJ IV 26-7).

**14:** John Clubbe puts it thus: “For Byron, Edmund Kean’s performances of the great Shakespearean tragic roles rivalled Napoleon’s performances on the European stage” (“The Fall of Napoleon: The Corsair Revisited” in Tessier (ed.) *Lord Byron: A Multi-Disciplinary Open Forum*, Versailles 1999, p.10).

**15:** Old John Murray Archive. An authentic Napoleonic snuff-box occasioned the following, to Lady Blessington: “Lady! Accept the Box the Hero wore, / In spite of all this elegiac stuff; / Nor let seven Verses written by a Bore / Prevent your Ladyship from taking snuff”. This parodies a poem by Lord Carlisle (the “bore”) begging her not to take it.

sent to St Helena, and long after his marriage to Maria Louisa had ceased to be a reality. In 1821, he wrote, putting Napoleon in good company, “I would not pay the price of a Thorwaldsen bust for any human head and shoulders, except Napoleon’s, or my children’s, or some “*absurd Womankind’s*” as Monkbarne calls them, or my Sister’s.”<sup>16</sup> As late as 1823 we find him giving Lady Blessington a pin, with a cameo of Napoleon.<sup>17</sup>

Byron always confused action with acting. To his sister he wrote in March 1813, with, indeed, a *Macbeth* reference which says much:

I have no connections to domesticate with—& for marriage I have neither the talent nor the inclination—I cannot fortune-hunt nor afford to marry without a fortune—my parliamentary schemes are not much to my taste—I spoke twice last Session—& was told it was well enough—but I hate the thing altogether—& have no intention to “strut another hour” on that stage.<sup>18</sup>—I am thus wasting the best part of my life daily repenting & never amending.—<sup>19</sup>

It’s hard to know how considered a statement this is – in fact he had spoken three times “last session”: that was the sum total of his parliamentary contribution, and in all three debates his side had lost. The patience which a long-sighted politician needed, he lacked. To compensate, he quotes *Macbeth*’s despairing speech, ending in the verdict “It is a tale told by an idiot”. Byron is trying to cheer himself up – interpreting a minor setback as the End of Everything. Moore reports the following, on the day of his third Lords’ speech, on Major Cartwright’s petition:

On the 2d of June, in presenting a petition to the House of Lords, he made his third and last appearance as an orator, in that assembly. In his way home from the House that day, he called, I remember, at my lodgings, and found me dressing in a very great hurry for dinner. He was, I recollect, in a state of most humorous exaltation after his display, and, while I hastily went on with my task in the dressing-room, continued to walk up and down the adjoining chamber, spouting forth for me, in a sort of mock heroic voice, detached sentences of the speech he had just been delivering. “I told them,” he said, “that it was a most flagrant violation of the Constitution—that, if such things were permitted, there was an end of English freedom,

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**16:** *Detached Thoughts* 25.

**17:** *BLJ* X 192.

**18:** Shakespeare, *Macbeth* V.

**19:** B. to Augusta Leigh, March 26th 1813 (this text from *BLJ* III 32)

and that ——” —“But what was this dreadful grievance?” I asked, interrupting him in his eloquence.—“The grievance?” he repeated, pausing as if to consider—“Oh, that I forget.” It is impossible, of course, to convey an idea of the dramatic humour with which he gave effect to these words; but his look and manner on such occasions were irresistibly comic; and it was, indeed, rather in such turns of fun and oddity, than in any more elaborate exhibition of wit, that the pleasantry of his conversation consisted.<sup>20</sup>

It’s impossible to believe that he had already forgotten Major Cartwright, but his intention seems to have been to demonstrate his theatrical eloquence, and to consign the Major to oblivion. Again, he’s cheering himself up.

On November 23rd 1813 he wrote in his diary, first reinforcing his determination not to feel his political ambitions too warmly, then stating his own political position with such passion as to undermine what he’s just said, and finally giving voice to his dreams of political power all over again:

If I had any views in this country, they would probably be parliamentary. But I have no ambition; at least, if any, it would be “aut Cæsar aut nihil”.<sup>21</sup> My hopes are limited to the arrangement of my affairs, and settling either in Italy or the East (rather the last), and drinking deep of the languages and literature of both. Past events have unnerved me; and all I can now do is to make life an amusement, and look on, while others play. After all,—even the highest game of crowns and sceptres, what is it? *Vide* Napoleon’s last twelvemonth. It has completely upset my system of fatalism. I thought, if crushed, he would have fallen, when “fractus illabatur orbis,”<sup>22</sup> and not have been pared away to gradual insignificance; that all this was not a mere *jeu* of the gods, but a prelude to greater changes and mightier events. But Men never advance beyond a certain point;—and here we are, retrograding, to the dull, stupid old system,—balance of Europe—poising straws upon kings’ noses, instead of wringing them off! Give me a republic, or a despotism of one, rather than the mixed government of one, two, three. A republic!—look in the history of the Earth—Rome, Greece, Venice, France, Holland, America, our short (eheu!) Commonwealth, and compare it with what they did under masters. The Asiatics are not qualified to be republicans, but they have the liberty of demolishing despots,—which is the next thing to it. To be the first man—not the Dictator—not the Sylla, but the Washington or the Aristides—the leader in talent and truth—is next to the Divinity! Franklin, Penn, and, next to these, either Brutus or

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**20:** Moore’s *Life*, II pp.207-8.

**21:** “Either Emperor, or nothing”.

**22:** Horace, *Odes* III iii 7: “Were the vault of heaven to break and fall upon him”.

Cassius—even Mirabeau—or St. Just. I shall never be any thing, or rather always be nothing. The most I can hope is, that some will say, “He might, perhaps, if he would.”<sup>23</sup>

From such a half-hearted, ambiguous series of positions (“Give me a republic, or a despotism of one”), it’s no wonder that he admired and envied Napoleon, the least half-hearted of men. The idea that Napoleon was, like Byron himself, “antithetical”, is wishful thinking:

There sunk the greatest – nor the worst of men,  
Whose Spirit, antithetically mixt,  
One moment of the mightiest, and again  
On little objects with like firmness fixed;  
Extreme in all things! (CHP III 36 1-5)

This has nothing to do with Napoleon: it is a Byronic self-description. Napoleon’s fascination lay not in his antitheticality, but in his monumental single-mindedness. The way he balanced a broad view (“the mightiest”) with minute attention to detail (“little objects”)<sup>24</sup> were not antitheses, but necessary and amazing complements. Victory and power were his sole objects, and even sex became subservient to them (as we shall see). His public works, such as the Simplon Pass, which Byron and Hobhouse admired so much when they travelled it, were a means of strengthening France and thus himself.<sup>25</sup> His legal reforms, the Napoleonic Code and his attitude to religious toleration, were motivated by both irrefutable logic and the desire to make himself indispensable to ordinary people – which, given their pervasive influence long after his death, they did. He set in motion a series of educational reforms which resulted in the foundation of numerous distinguished *lycées*, some of which are still there today. Byron had his own attitude to education:

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

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**23:** Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I v 176.

**24:** In November and December 1806 Napoleon wrote twenty-three letters about his soldiers’ boots and shoes (Roberts p.425).

**25:** B. to Augusta, May 1st 1816: “We saw at Antwerp the famous basons of Bonaparte for his navy, which are very superb—as all his undertakings were ...” (*BLJ* V 74).

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. – (*Don Juan* II st.1)

Napoleon's original *lycées* were in fact unpopular because of their imperialist, militaristic ethos: Tacitus was banned as too pro-republican, and the study of Caesar's commentaries encouraged instead. The result was the teaching of ...

... a kind of social and political catechism, the first article of which enjoins fanatical subjection, passionate devotion, and complete surrender to the Emperor.<sup>26</sup>

It's obvious who Pieter Geyl, writing during World War Two (he spent thirteen months in Buchenwald), is thinking about here.<sup>27</sup>

Napoleon's aim was to eradicate private schools: how Harrow would have fared under him is an interesting question.

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Byron tried a defence of his position in a note to *Don Juan* I, which Murray dissuaded him from publishing ("it is decreed that Hazlitt's – should not be associated with your Lordships name"):<sup>28</sup>

In the eighth and concluding lecture of Mr. Hazlitt's canons of criticism, delivered at the Surrey Institution, I am accused of 'having lauded Buonaparte to the skies in the hour of his success, and then peevishly wreaking my disappointment on the god of my idolatry'. The first lines I ever wrote upon Buonaparte were the 'Ode to Napoleon', after his abdication in 1814. All that I have ever written on that subject has been since his decline,—I never 'met him in the hour of his success'. I have considered his character at different periods—in its strength, and in its weakness. By his zealots, I am accused of injustice, by his enemies as his warmest partisan, in many publications, both English and foreign.<sup>29</sup>

Notice how Napoleon mutates from Romeo into Macbeth. It would be truer to say that Byron had written anti-Napoleon in his first poem,

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**26:** Hippolyte Taine, quoted Geyl p.135.

**27:** Schoenberg wrote his setting of the *Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte* (1942) to make the Napoleon / Hitler parallel, too.

**28:** *LJM* 267-8.

**29:** *CPWV* 682.

warmly of him in his poems immediately post-Waterloo, is currently about to write of him ironically in *Beppo*, *The Vision of Judgement* and *Don Juan*, and at last with cool factual accuracy in *The Age of Bronze*.

The note proceeds to name-drop, but anonymously, claiming that Douglas Kinnaird had recently met “one of the highest family connections of Bonaparte” who had said that “*the delineation*” [of Bonaparte in *Childe Harold III*] “*was complete*—that it was *the man himself*, or words to that effect”.

Jerome McGann<sup>30</sup> annotates this by writing that Kinnaird had, in 1817, visited Venice, but mentions neither Germany nor *Childe Harold*. And there are no references to any Napoleonic encounters anywhere in Kinnaird’s letters. Doubtless the communication was purely verbal.

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By way of a contrast between Napoleon and Byron, take, as a small example, their experiences on Malta: in six days in June 1798 the twenty-nine-year-old Napoleon expelled the Knights, replaced the medieval administration with a governing council, dissolved the monasteries, introduced street-lighting and pavements, reformed the hospitals, postal service and universities, and allowed the Jews to build a new synagogue.<sup>31</sup> When the twenty-one-year-old Byron visited the island in September 1809, he showed no awareness of any of these issues, but, instead, firstly refused to go ashore because the batteries wouldn’t give him a salute, and then allowed himself unwittingly to be used as a toyboy in the interests of English diplomatic and naval diplomacy, by travelling north for the pleasure of Ali Pacha so as to compensate him for the fact that he couldn’t have the Ionian Islands.<sup>32</sup> Obviously Napoleon had ten thousand times more power – but Byron lacked even the insight and impetus – truly, “an insect compared with this creature”. He may affect a great admiration for Napoleon’s politics, but in fact has no sympathy for them: “I don’t want him here”.

He did not share Napoleon’s revolutionary principles. Had Napoleon conquered England as he planned, he would have rationalised the voting system; brought the parliamentary constituencies into line, so that Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds returned MPs, and two deserted cottages on Salisbury Plain returned none; and he would have made local

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**30:** *CPW* V 683.

**31:** Roberts 167-8.

**32:** See Cochran, “Nature’s Gentler Errors: Byron, Ali Pasha and the Ionian Islands”, *Byron Journal* 23, 1995, pp. 22-35.

government elected and accountable. He would have reduced the number of capital offences (removing, perhaps, sodomy, forgery, cutting down trees in public places, spending more than a month in the company of gypsies, spitting off Westminster Bridge, and impersonating a Chelsea pensioner, from the list of hanging crimes); he would have improved state education, allowed more than two London theatres to mount plays with spoken dialogue, and even done something about the monarchy, as his admired Cromwell had in days of yore. So much for his being an “Anakim of Anarchy”. He would have brought reason *to* the officially-blessed English Anarchy.

There would have been an obverse to all these ameliorations. In 1800, Napoleon had packed 120 Jacobins, whom he suspected of plotting against him, off to Guiana, where most of them died.<sup>33</sup> We shall never know, but this might have been the fate of English radicals such as Cobbett, Hone, and “Orator” Hunt (not that their loss would have bothered Byron). Napoleon’s reign produced very little outstanding literature – Madame de Staël’s *de l’Allemagne* was banned (in England it was published by John Murray!) What, under a reign of Napoleon, would have been the fate of Shelley’s *Queen Mab* – to say nothing of *Childe Harold* I and II, or the Turkish Tales? Though I’m sure Wordsworth’s *Excursion* would have survived intact – nobody’s threatened by that.

His claim that ‘I still retain my “Buff and blue”’ (*Don Juan* Dedication 174) – that is, that he’s a mainstream Whig – would indicate that none of these are issues that Byron is going to get worked up about, in either prose or verse. He may write about the monarchy with maximum disrespect, but only when thinking with admiration about the Emperor Napoleon does he long for a republic. Ten years later, he even refuses to donate money to the Peterloo victims.<sup>34</sup> Rational thought, in the Napoleonic manner, was not Byron’s *forte*.

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The counter-effects of Napoleon’s career receive no emphasis from either Byron or Hobhouse: by 1815, ten years of war had cut off France from her markets, crippled agriculture, and created, in the place of the old, corrupt Bourbon feudalism, a new Bonapartist feudalism not much more productive. Napoleon had conscripted over 1,800,000 men, and sent many of them to their deaths, or back to their homes maimed. The ignominious

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33: Geyl p.91.

34: *BLJ* VI 231-3.



failure of his Russian campaign had lowered France's self-esteem. After his further failure at Leipzig, the French Legislative Body proclaimed,

A barbarous and endless war swallows up periodically the youth torn from education, agriculture, commerce and the arts.

Napoleon's reaction was to forbid the publication of this statement, banish its authors, and to prorogue the Corps Législatif.<sup>35</sup> Before France was threatened with invasion in 1814, he even banned the *Marseillaise* – after, he permitted it. It got to the point where any small Napoleonic victory (threatening to prolong the war) led to a fall on the Bourse.

He was thus – despite Byron's deification – a real person, with weaknesses and idiosyncrasies, and the story of this book is how, for Byron, he *almost* escaped from the realm of myth into that of simple, squalid history.

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It was not an easy transition. Lady Blessington reported, having met Byron as late as 1823:

Byron is fond of talking of Napoleon; and told me that his admiration of him had much increased since he had been in Italy, and witnessed the stupendous works he had planned and executed. "To pass through Italy without thinking of Napoleon (said he), is like visiting Naples without looking at Vesuvius." Seeing me smile at the comparison, he added — "Though the works of one are indestructible, and the other destructive, still one is continually reminded of the power of both." "And yet (said I) there are days that, like all your other favorites, Napoleon does not escape censure." "That may be (said Byron), but I find fault, and quarrel with Napoleon, as a lover does with the trifling faults of his mistress, from excessive liking, which tempts me to desire that he had been all faultless; and, like the lover, I return with renewed fondness after each quarrel. Napoleon (continued Byron) was a grand creature, and though he was hurled from his pedestal, after having made thrones his footstool, his memory still remains, like the colossal statue of the Memnon, though cast down from its seat of honor, still bearing the ineffable traces of grandeur and sublimity, to astonish future ages. When Metternich (continued Byron) was depreciating the genius of Napoleon, in a circle at Vienna where his word was a law and his nod a decree, he appealed to John William Ward, if Bonaparte had not been greatly overrated. Ward's answer was as

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35: Roberts, p.687.

couragous as admirable. He replied, that Napoleon had rendered past glory doubtful, and future fame impossible.”<sup>36</sup>

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In Milan on October 28th 1816, Henri Beyle, the future Stendhal, told Byron and Hobhouse a number of first-hand anecdotes about their hero (Beyle had been one of Napoleon’s secretaries, and had been with him on the Russian campaign):

... that the finest hour of Napoleon’s life was the battle of Borodino – he was sitting on the ground between two sandhills, tapping a drumhead – every now and then they brought a word – “Such-a-one is killed!” – “Well, go you.” – “General Caulaincourt is killed.”<sup>37</sup> – “Allez-vous” – looking about to his staff, and so on. The balls fled over the hill – this was in battle, but he had feelings when not in the height of action. He was sorry for those at the battle of Aspern or Wagram. Bernadotte<sup>38</sup> sent aide-de-camp after aide-de-camp for reinforcements, and to complain of the loss of his men. 2,000 were put out of action every half hour – at last he (Napoleon) was in the greatest fury, and said, “Let him take the batteries, and send aide-de-camps afterwards”. At last Bernadotte came himself, and mentioned his increasing loss. Napoleon called him by all sorts of bad names – coward, &c., and sent him back to take the batteries, telling him if he lost 50,000 men he must do it – which he did.<sup>39</sup>

Bernadotte always had the same manners, and did not bow down before Napoleon, which he did not like. When Napoleon heard that Ney and his corps were saved after having been lost for four days in the Russian campaign, he jumped higher, Beyle says, than he ever saw a man before with joy; but still he did not make Ney a prince till he got to Paris, when he told someone, “Dites à Ney qu’il est Prince”.

... that Napoleon, for the latter years of his reign, signed and generally read at average eighty-five decrees a day – he made the calculation in order to get two more secretaries named, which Napoleon, after being told that his labour had increased from sixty to eighty-five signatures per day, assented to with a smile of satisfaction. He had a habit of scraping his

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**36:** Blessington, p.120.

**37:** A false alarm. General Caulaincourt (1772-1827) was not killed at Borodino, but was Napoleon’s Foreign Minister during the Hundred Days.

**38:** Bernadotte was by 1812 virtual King of Sweden, and opposed to Napoleon; he was not present at Borodino on either side. H. is probably confusing him with Eugène Beauharnais.

**39:** The successful attack on the Great Redoubt at Borodino was led by Beauharnais, Murat and Ney together.

tongue half an hour every morning, which habit he continued from his youth. He used to go to bed to all the ladies of his court in order to assure himself of their husbands, and when they were brought in, continued writing – “Deshabillez-vous – ôtez votre chemise”<sup>40</sup> – then would run and look at them in τερνίων αἰδοεῶν,<sup>41</sup> and say “Ah, très jolie,” his pen in his hand – run to the table – again write – then unbutton himself in haste – leave his sword on, often – return to the lady – finish the affair in half a minute and instantly return to writing. Sometimes it happened to him to be obliged, on examination, to say, “Vous êtes brune pour demain?”<sup>42</sup>

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Byron probably did not know that Bonaparte’s virile member was small<sup>43</sup> – unlike his own, which, if Canon Barber’s churchwarden is to be believed, remained exceptionally well-developed even until the late 1930s.<sup>44</sup> Would such information have lessened his sense of one-ness?<sup>45</sup> The knowledge that Napoleon had, like him, small hands,<sup>46</sup> would have increased it. However, in his personal life Napoleon was quite unlike Byron: more normal, you might say. He had an excellent relationship with his mother, was very fond of both his wives,<sup>47</sup> Josephine and Marie Louise, and tried to be a good father to the King of Rome – indeed, liked playing with children. Byron was a success in none of these departments – he expressed an admiration for the character of King Herod. One

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**40:** “Get undressed – take your chemise off.”

**41:** Rude Greek phrase obscure.

**42:** Cramped at page-bottom; third and fifth words hard to decipher. The gist appears to be that Napoleon was unable to distinguish one wife from another, and easily lost interest.

**43:** Vincent Cronin, *Napoleon*, p.180.

**44:** Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend*, p.574.

**45:** The singer Giuseppina Grassini reported that Napoleon’s love-making rarely lasted more than three minutes, and always left her dissatisfied (Roberts p.269).

**46:** For Napoleon’s hands, see Cronin, op.cit. For B.’s, see *Don Juan* V st.104, authorial note: “There is perhaps nothing more distinctive of birth than the hand – it is almost the only sign of blood which Aristocracy can generate. – I remember a Pacha’s [*Ali Pacha*] remarking that he knew that a certain Englishman [*Byron*] was nobly born – because “he had small ears – small hands, & curling silky hair.”

**47:** Madame de Staël denied that Byron was capable of love: “P.S.—The Staël last night attacked me most furiously—said that I had ‘no right to make love—that I had used [*Caroline Lamb*] barbarously—that I had no feeling, and was totally insensible to *la belle passion*, and had been all my life.’ I am very glad to hear it, but did not know it before” (B. to Moore, from London, July 13th 1813 (text from Moore’s *Life* I 411-12; *BLJ* III 75-6).

Napoleonic problem with which Byron did not have to contend was difficult brothers (one, Joseph, even tried to seduce Marie Louise). His attempts to make his shaky batch of brothers kings, and to rule through them, is the sign of a residual Corsican / Mafioso quality in him.

Both men had weight trouble – though Napoleon’s was progressive, and irreversible, whereas Byron lost weight easily. Neither man belonged; the identity of neither was stable. Napoleon was a Corsican when in France, and a Frenchman when in Corsica: Byron was a London-born Scotsman when in Nottinghamshire, and an Englishman (of sorts) when in Italy. Both carried on a voracious reading, which gave them a profound sense of the traditions they were developing: Napoleon, that of Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar, and Charles XII; Byron, that of Pulci, Ariosto, and Casti, to say nothing of Smollett and Fielding, to say nothing of Horace, Martial, and Ovid. Both had charismatic good looks, so chameleonic that no portrait could capture them entire. “... but there, / I doubt, all Likeness ends between the pair”. Napoleon was one-hundred-and-ten-percent committed to his military and political roles, while Byron was ashamed of “sweating” so much poetry ... and longed, fruitlessly, to be more like Napoleon.

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Beyle continued,

At Toulon he commanded a gun, and served it some time alone after all the men were killed, much to the admiration of the Convention, who promoted him thereupon. His manners were always the same – he is a decided fatalist. Beyle saw him, in Normandy somewhere, ride up to one of the great mortars which was taken to Cadiz<sup>48</sup> – nobody would fire it without a longer *fusée* – he asked what was the matter, and being told, got off his horse, took the short *fusée*, touched and fired this immense ordnance at once – he then turned round and told his creed of fatalism. It was the King of Würtemberg<sup>49</sup> who gave him the most cruel advice – he asked Napoleon why he did not have the old French nobles about his court – Napoleon mentioned their reluctance – “Ah,” said the King, “in one

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**48:** During the unsuccessful siege which began in 1810, within a year of B. and H. leaving.

**49:** Friedrich I, King of Würtemberg (1797-1816). Duke until 1801, when, via a secret treaty, he was given his regal title by Napoleon. Joined the Confederation of the Rhine and sent a contingent to Russia. Then changed sides again and had his Kingdom given him properly at Vienna. Died in October 1816 – which H. and company appear not to know yet.

week I would have them at my court or on a gallows". A new list of noble chamberlains came out directly, and there was no hanging, but all compliance.<sup>50</sup>

But by October 1816 Byron had already written his Napoleonic stanzas in the third Canto of *Childe Harold*, describing him as "antithetically mixed". There is no room in the elevated idiom of that poem for details like those Beyle provided. There would be in *Don Juan*, but Byron uses none, instead "bustling" the Emperor "into triviality"<sup>51</sup> along with a much lesser figure, the Girondin-turncoat Dumouriez (sic):

France, too, had Buonaparte and Dumourier  
Recorded in the Moniteur and Courier. – (*Don Juan* I 2 7-8)

Perhaps, had he known what we now think<sup>52</sup> – that Napoleon couldn't be his usual self at Waterloo because a bad attack of piles made it impossible for him to sit on a horse – Byron would have got his hero into perspective earlier still, and put that and other Stendhalian things into his greatest poem. After all, it's one thing to be chained to a rock in the Caucasus with a vulture tearing at your liver, another thing to be confined to a soft armchair in a large muddy Belgian field, with haemorrhoids<sup>53</sup> – to paraphrase Shakespeare's Cassius, speaking of another great man, "'Tis true, this god had haemorrhoids!"

Perhaps the prose note after stanza 41 of *Childe Harold* III (which is undated), emphasising Napoleon's coldness and lack of empathy, is a late reaction to what Stendhal said. Byron never mentions the conversation with Stendhal – a sign, perhaps, that after Stendhal's revelations he found it impossible any more to identify with Napoleon, even semi-consciously, as he once had. His attitude to the Frenchman certainly became more objective in his later poems.

In this process, of seeing Napoleon in his mundane historical context, Byron was aided by the portrait, by Dr Johnson, of the similar eighteenth-century overreacher, Charles XII of Sweden, in *The Vanity of Human*

**50:** Hobhouse diary, Monday October 28th 1816; B.L.Add.Mss. 56537.

**51:** Kelsall, *Byron's Politics*, p.152.

**52:** Cronin says this is a myth (Cronin p.403). Schom doesn't mention it. Roberts (p.601) reports the likelihood that Napoleon suffered from piles at Borodino, and (pp.756-7) concedes the probability of his having them at Waterloo.

**53:** Yet see *CHP* III 39, 9 (below): "He stood unbowed beneath *the ills upon him piled*" (my italics).

*Wishes* (see Appendix).<sup>54</sup> Indeed, one of the important poems he started in 1817 was *Mazeppa*, the erotico-equestrian-erotic fable at the core of which sends that very same Charles XII to sleep. Byron draws the parallel with his opening lines:

'Twas after dread Pultowa's day,  
 When Fortune left the royal Swede –  
 Around a slaughtered army lay,  
 No more to combat and to bleed.  
 The Power and Glory of the war,  
 Faithless as their vain votaries, Men,  
 Had passed to the triumphant Czar,  
 And Moscow's walls were safe again –  
 Until a day more dark and drear,  
 And a more memorable year,  
 Should give to slaughter and to shame  
 A mightier host and haughtier name –  
 A greater wreck – a deeper fall,  
 A shock to One – a thunderbolt to all. – (*Mazeppa* ll.1-14)

Napoleon had – from embarrassing personal causes, as we've seen – been unable to ride a horse at Waterloo: Byron, in his three Voltairean epigraphs to *Mazeppa*, draws attention to the fact that Charles XII was unable to ride a horse at Poltava because of a bullet in his foot, until the need to save his skin forced him on to the steed of one of his officers.

Johnson's model, from Juvenal's tenth satire, was Hannibal. Byron had already drawn attention to that parallel in his epigraph to the *Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte* (see below), as he had to the humiliating abdication of the Emperor Julius Nepos, from Gibbon. The sequence Hannibal / Charles XII / Napoleon would have impressed itself on the mind of Byron, classically-trained and constantly aware of his Roman and English Augustan predecessors as he was. In bustling Napoleon into triviality, Byron is assisted by the four literary giants, Juvenal, Voltaire,<sup>55</sup> Gibbon, and Dr Johnson.

At the same time, the fact that Mazeppa's story sends Charles to sleep is a comment on the triviality of poetry such as Byron's when put next to such military / political disasters as Poltava, or Waterloo.

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**54:** Charles XII was, along with Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and Hannibal, one of Napoleon's heroes.

**55:** One book which Napoleon read prior to invading Russia in 1812 was Voltaire's *History of Charles XII* (Roberts p.569). Obviously, he thought he could do better.