"Almost as far as Petersburg": Byron and the Russians*

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DISCUSSIONS of Byron's impact on Russian writing and thought have often become bogged down in considerations of what John Mersereau calls "the problems of one author's influence upon another"[1]: in this case the English poet's effect on individual Russian writers and the effect of his poems on individual Russian productions. The works concerned being (for example) *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan* on the one hand and *Eugene Onegin* and *A Hero of Our Time* on the other, this stress is by no means surprising. But it is limiting, and it has tended to produce sterile debates about precisely when and where Byron's influence over Pushkin in particular or Russsian literature in general may be said to begin and end.

The Pushkin case has been visited and revisited many times. Georgette Donchin speaks of Pushkin's "brief Byronic period," for example, and the "purely literary attraction of Byronism" for the Russian national poet.[2] Tatiana Wolff speaks similarly of Pushkin's "Byronic phase" and of the Englishman being "a bridge rather than a terminus" for the Russian.[3] Lauren G. Leighton argues that Pushkin "swiftly mastered and surpassed all that he could learn from Byron, and began doing profound things with what he learned from Shakespeare." Pushkin's "understanding of history," according to William Edward Brown, "is utterly foreign to Byron," the English poet's achievements were points of departure rather than sources of imitation for the Rus-

* See *Don Juan*, canto VI, stanza 93.

1. John Mersereau, "Pushkin's Concept of Romanticism," *Studies in Romanticism* 3 (1963), 25.

2. See Richard Freeborn, Georgette Donchin, and N. J. Anning, *Russian Literary Attitudes from Pushkin to Solzhenitsyn* (London: Macmillan, 1976), p. 20.

3. Tatiana Wolff, *Pushkin on Literature* (London: Methuen, 1971), pp. 23, 25.

sian, and "the differences between *Don Juan* and *Eugene Onegin* are far more impressive than the similarities," accordingly.[4] Pushkin himself was the site and origin of debates of this kind. In November 1823 he wrote to one friend that he was working on "not a novel, but a novel in verse. . . . In the manner of *Don Juan*." On 24 March 1825 he wrote to another that *Don Juan* "has nothing in common with *Onegin*" on the grounds that the latter contained no "satire"—thus shifting the issue onto the rocks of that indefinable term.[5] That *Eugene Onegin* is very different from *Don Juan* (not least in structural terms) will be obvious to any reader. That Pushkin's poem is unthinkable without Byron's should be obvious, too (not least in the way the story is narrated).[6] *Eugene Onegin* occupied Pushkin from 1823 to 1830. In March 1825 he knew the first five cantos of *Don Juan*; by October of that year he had the whole poem (in a French prose translation). But by 1827, as his English improved, Pushkin himself was referring to "the amazing Shakespearean variety of *Don Juan*"[7]—a comment which makes something of a nonsense of the Byron-to-Shakespeare transition critics have been at pains to promote where his career is concerned. At the very least, we should have to say that Byron's poem accompanied Pushkin's during its composition. Even if Byron was a bridge rather than a terminus, or only a point of departure, he still offered a valuable service to Pushkin—as valuable, perhaps, as any writer can offer another.

Where Russian Romantic literature in general is concerned, the critical attitude to Byron remains negative and (needlessly) defensive. Brown's otherwise invaluable survey of Russian Romantic literature is so consistently dismissive of the "essentially immature," "monotonous," "florid and consciously literary," "subjective and emotionally

4. Lauren G. Leighton, *Russian Romanticism: Two Essays* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), p. 30; William Edward Brown, *A History of Russian Literature of the Romantic Period*, 4 vols. (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1986), III, 36, 33, 67.

5. See T. J. Binyon, *Pushkin: A Biography* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), pp. 230–31.

6. Two extracts from chapter one of Pushkin's poem illustrate his debt to Byron in this regard, but the phenomenon is almost ubiquitous: "My goddesses! Where are you banished? / Lend ears to my lugubrious tone: / Have other maidens, since you vanished, / Taken your place, though not your throne?" (stanza 19); and "I've drawn a plan and a projection, / The hero's name's decided too. / Meanwhile my novel's opening section / Is finished, and I've looked it through/meticulously; in my fiction / There's far too much of contradiction, / But I refuse to chop or change" (stanza 60). See *Eugene Onegin*, trans. Charles Johnston (London: Penguin, 1979).

7. Wolff, *Pushkin on Literature*, p. 215.

effusive," and "lazy" and "careless" Byron,[8] that one wonders when last he read his poems. Other critics, too, confidently propose that "in the 1840s Russian Byronism ceased to exist as a social and cultural fact."[9]

The example of Pushkin does indeed suggest that tussles over literary influence may be of limited use, whereas Byron's status as a "social and cultural fact" in Russian history has yet to be adequately estimated. "What is . . . dismaying about the current state of comparative work," Leighton remarks, with poet-on-poet cases in mind, "is that while there is a great deal of factual information about purely literary influences [on Russian Romanticism], less is known about the comparative aspects of criticism, theory, and all the other areas of intellectual exchange that unite the national movements into a universal literary period" (*Russian Romanticism*, p. 23). Accordingly, we suggest that it is in ideological terms rather than strictly literary ones that we should seek to understand Byron's place in nineteenth-century Russia.

One source of this critical problem may be the fact that whereas Romanticism was a pan-European manifestation, Russia's "peculiar or national romantic profile" remained obscure for many years.[10] For Western and Russian readers alike, the glories of the Russian realist novel have tended to obscure or retrospectively to convert the literary activity which preceded it. (In Russia itself this habit of thinking became more marked after the Bolshevik revolution, as realism was itself retrospectively converted into a predecessor of socialist thought.) Some books (such as *Eugene Onegin* and *A Hero of our Time*) were seen as isolates within their authors' careers, and others (such as *Dead Souls*) were interpreted as harbingers of realism rather than works of literature originating in their own time and existing in their own right and on their own merits. The effect was to trivialize and seal off the Russian Romantic tradition. What was left over in Soviet Russian critical circles, in particular, was either "careful study of 'the historical evolution of translation principles,'" or "assessment of 'the anti-capitalist,

8. Brown, *A History of Russian Literature of the Romantic Period*, I, 255; II, 35; III, 33, 67.

9. Nina Diakonova and Vadim Vacuro, "Byron and Russia: Byron and Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature," in Paul Graham Trueblood, ed., *Byron's Political and Cultural Influence in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 157.

10. John Mersereau, "Afterword," in Christine Rydel, ed., *The Ardis Anthology of Russian Romanticism* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1984), p. 511.

freedom-loving motif in the Russian civic-radical tradition.'"[11] In short, either the forest was missed for the trees, or the trees were missed for the forest.

There have been problems in ways of looking at Byron, too. His work and myth had a demonstrable influence on European artistic, musical, and literary circles, but his contribution to the history of European ideas remains unclear, principally because he does not fit the intellectual profile either of literary and political thinkers like Coleridge or philosophers like the German idealists. It is common knowledge that many people wrote novels similar to Walter Scott's, and many people wrote poems similar to Byron's in the nineteenth century; it is much harder to convert facts such as those into actual patterns of intellectual agency or changes of attitude; harder still to be historically specific about such things. That Byron influenced Benjamin Disraeli's novels, his Grand Tour (which followed the poet's footsteps religiously), and his personal manner is self-evident; what impact Byron had over the "Young England" movement of the early 1840s is harder to quantify. Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* (1945) remains cardinally problematic on issues such as these: it gives a chapter to Byron and to no other European poet, but this selectivity is commonly seen as indicating Russell's idiosyncrasy rather than Byron's importance. Moreover, the case of Byron in Russia is particularly elusive: his profile changes according to context. Russian Romanticism became a self-conscious literary phenomenon in the early 1820s, the very apex of Byron's European fame. Accordingly, as Mersereau points out, "it was natural that Byron enjoyed a vogue in the early 1820s [in Russia]. But the banner of protest which the Englishman had raised and which seemed destined to be grasped by eager Russian hands after his death in 1824 was dropped summarily after the repression of the Decembrist Uprising of 1825."[12] In such circumstances Byron the strident apostle of liberty ("Hereditary bondsmen! know ye not / Who would be free themselves must strike the blow?" and so forth) might well be replaced in the Russian imagination either

11. G. R. V. Barratt, "Somov, Kozlov, and Byron's Russian Triumph," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 1 (1974), 104.

12. John Mersereau, Jr., "The Nineteenth Century: Romanticism," in Charles A. Moser, ed., *The Cambridge History of Russian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 139.

by Byron the lonely depressive or by Byron the cosmopolitan skeptic and relativist. The model refused to sit still for his portrait.

Yet perhaps for this very reason Byron does something particular to illuminate Russian Romanticism and its effect on "the Russian idea," and Russia does something to illuminate Byron's thought (even if that thought takes an imaginative and dramatic form rather than a philosophical and discursive one). It is important to remember that Russian nineteenth-century thinking is indivisible from the imaginative writers of that era: no history of Russian political thought could be written without extensive reference to Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky; and political thinkers like Alexander Herzen and Nikolai Chernyshevsky frequently had recourse to the novel. Imaginative writers will always feature in accounts of Victorian ideas, too, but the English tradition has tended to keep Dickens and George Eliot (never mind Emily Brontë and Thomas Hardy) well away from Carlyle, Mill, Ruskin, and Arnold, and to keep imaginative writers away from discursive ones in the same way. The distinction is almost meaningless in the Russian context, and so in Russia Byron falls under an intellectual lens which is relatively unfamiliar to English readers.

It follows, therefore, that a Russian context needs to be evoked here before Byron's particular place in it can be understood. Not all students of British Romanticism will be familiar with Russian history; those who are will be able to move over the following section more speedily.

I. THE RUSSIAN BACKGROUND

Russian history presents an almost unparalleled sequence of disjunctions and continuities: repudiation of the Russian past as a wasteland goes along with intense historical nostalgia (for Kievan Rus, for the *mir*, for the Boyars, for Ivan the Terrible, even for Stalin), and a messianic sense of global mission goes along with an overwhelming sense of cultural inadequacy. On the one hand Moscow is the third Rome and Russia the final sanctuary of Orthodox Christianity, serving as the shield for Christian Europe against Mongol and Tatar invasion; on the other it is an empty and meaningless space lost between Europe and Asia, well symbolized by an imperial eagle looking East and West and nowhere in between. As the essayist Peter Chaadaev put it in a

quintessentially Russian act of intellectual self-flagellation published in 1836:

> There is no definite sphere of existence for anyone, no good habits, no rule for anything at all; not even a home; nothing which attracts or awakens our endearment or affections, nothing lasting, nothing enduring; everything departs, everything flows away, leaving no traces whether within or without ourselves. In our houses we are like campers; in our families we are like strangers; in our cities we are like nomads, more nomadic than the herdsmen who let their animals graze on our steppes, for they are more bound to their deserts than we to our cities.[13]

Bouts of self-analysis like this alternate with long periods of complacency. Sometimes Russian history is rolling itself into one ball to crash through the iron gates of life; sometimes, as Alexander Herzen put it, "one could learn Russian history better from the barge-hauler who goes morosely into a tavern and comes out of it covered in blood than from the records of governments."[14]

Of all these disjunctions the most portentous and most terminal was the set of reforms brought to Russian life by Peter the Great at the beginning of the eighteenth century. In repudiating ancient Russian customs, and selecting cadres of young men to send them abroad for their education, that they might bring scientific knowledge and technological advancement home with them, Peter produced an ongoing state of national schizophrenia: a "country divided into two halves," as Thomas Masaryk puts it, "consisting respectively of an Old Russia with a prepetrine civilisation, and New, European Russia."[15] The first of these was associated with Moscow, the second with St. Petersburg, built by slave labor on a Baltic marsh to provide Peter's famous "window on the West." Inexorably the nation approached the

13. Peter Chaadaev, *Major Works*, ed. and trans. Raymond T. McNally (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), p. 28. "How is Russia to be aroused from her pernicious dreaming?", the poet and critic Dmitry Venevitinov wrote in 1826; "How is the lamp of enquiry to be lit in the midst of this wasteland?" (D. V. Venevitinov, "On the State of Enlightenment in Russia," in Lauren G. Leighton, ed. and trans., *Russian Romantic Criticism: An Anthology* [New York: Greenwood Press, 1987], p. 112).

14. Alexander Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, trans. Constance Garnett, rev. Humphrey Higgens (London: Chatto and Windus, 1968), p. 1548; hereafter cited as *P&T*.

15. Thomas Garrigue Masaryk, *The Spirit of Russia: Studies in History, Literature and Philosophy*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul, 3 vols. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1919), I, 1; hereafter cited as Masaryk.

condition of an undivided serfdom administered by an aristocratic elite knowing next to nothing of the people over which it stood. The aristocracy existed to provide quasi-feudal service to the tsar, either in military or bureaucratic terms, and the peasantry existed to till the soil.

Herzen summarized tsarist autocracy at the beginning of the nineteenth century (rocked but ultimately unaffected by Catherine the Great's flirtations with Diderot and the principles of benevolent despotism) in language that cannot help remind us of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn:

> Choice was made from the complex elements of Western life, derived from various different sources, and the elements chosen were stacked beforehand. Of a complete phrase in which the very discords softened its onesidedness, took the edge off its extremes and made a harmony of a sort, a few notes were picked out, destroying the blending and significance of it. Everything that exaggerated authority and everything that oppressed the individual was adopted; every defence of personal liberty was laid aside; the casuistry of the inquisitorial process was enriched with Tatar torture, German ritual and Byzantine servility. (*P&T*, p. 1538)

This ethos of political desuetude was itself terminated by another French import: the Grande Armée under Napoleon. Napoleon's defeat forced the aristocracy to appreciate the heroism of the common people,[16] but his retreat from Moscow also temporarily discredited francophone civilization, and as Russian officers penetrated all the way to Paris they became exposed to European liberalism and social development. Tsar Alexander's representatives came back filled with idealistic passion about the Russian people and the need for reform, whereas the Tsar—"The Autocrat of waltzes and of war" as Byron called him in *The Age of Bronze*—was caught up at the same time in Metternich's new world order of monarchic restoration and political repression.

The forces of reform and reaction were bound to converge, and when in December 1825 Alexander died to be succeeded by his auto-

16. Russian changes of attitude in 1812 are caught in miniature in Pushkin's novel fragment, "Roslavlev," in *Tales of Belkin and Other Prose Writings*, trans. Ronald Wilks (London: Penguin, 1998), pp. 92–102.

cratic younger brother rather than his easygoing elder one, a group of military officers refused to take their oath of loyalty and marched their regiments out on to Senate Square in Petersburg. The new tsar's response was swift: cannons were fired on the troops and the ringleaders were arrested. Five were eventually executed and 100 or so exiled to Siberia. This may not sound like an over-reaction, but the repression of the Decembrist uprising was seen by the post-1812 progressive elite as the emphatic end of all its hopes for social development. (Tolstoy, for example, planned for years to write an epic novel called *The Decembrists*, of which *War and Peace* was intended to be only the first of three instalments: the original plan was that Pierre Bezhukov would go on to become a Decembrist rebel, be exiled to Siberia with Natasha, and come back just in time for the defeat at Crimea and the build-up to the emancipation of the serfs in 1861.) Nicholas I inherited and intensified the policies of reaction his brother had pursued after Waterloo. Whereas in the 1820s the British government began to relax such policies and prepare itself, however reluctantly, for "Repeal, Emancipation, and Reform,"[17] Nicholas was busy developing the so-called "Third Office": a distant progenitor of the KGB.

Under Nicholas political life came to an abrupt halt. "Our life is a pallid Chinese painting," the critic and novelist Aleksandr Bestuzhev wrote only months before the Decembrist uprising: "our society a sunken grave!"[18] But outer constraint led to a kind of inner freedom. "The terrible consequence of human speech in Russia," as Herzen put it, "necessarily gave it added power" (*P&T*, p. 1669). Literature, in particular, became what Masaryk calls a "parliamentary forum" (Masaryk, I, 372), and certainly a political institution in a way unfamiliar to the West. "The suppression of all other spheres of human activity," Herzen wrote, "threw the cultured part of society into the world of books, and only in it did there really occur, muffled and in undertones, the protest against the oppression of Nicholas" (*P&T*, p. 531). Politics and literature became indivisible under such conditions. Two writers (Bestuzhev and Wilhelm Kyukhelbeker) had been exiled as ringlead-

17. Robin Jarvis, *The Romantic Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1789–1830* (London: Longman, 2004), p. 135.

18. Aleksandr Bestuzhev, "A Glance at Russian Literature in the Course of 1824 and the Beginning of 1825," in Leighton, *Russian Romantic Criticism*, p. 71.

ers of the Decembrist rising, and a third (Kondraty Ryleev) had been executed. Pushkin himself was lucky to have been off-stage at the time. "The failure of the Decembrists," Nicolas Berdyaev wrote in the 1930s,

> leads on to the corresponding and compensating idealism of the 'thirties and 'forties. The Russians suffered a great deal from the impossibility of taking action. Russian romanticism was to a notable degree a result of this impossibility of effective thought and action and an exalted emotionalism took its rise.[19]

The emotional alternative or complement to the exaltation Berdyaev speaks of was the phenomenon of the "superfluous man": a feeling among individuals that they were of no importance to and had no connection with Russian life at large, leading in turn to a fatalistic despair and rootlessness sometimes masked by social amiability, even dandyism. This condition was embodied in the hero of *Eugene Onegin* and in Grigory Pechorin, the "hero of our time" in Lermontov's novel of that name (1840). "We wither young, submissive and unhardened," as Lermontov put it in 1838: "Good does not bring us joy, nor evil bring remorse. / By danger instantly, ingloriously disheartened, / We are obsequious slaves of every frowning force."

> We study useless things, unpractical and arid,
> But deep within, from everybody locked,
> We keep our nobler hopes and have since childhood carried
> The voice of passions ridiculed and mocked.[20]

As the elements of dissent were forced together by repression, however, something remarkable happened. "Thirty years ago," Herzen wrote in 1857:

> the Russia of the future existed exclusively among a few boys, barely more than children, so insignificant and unnoticed that there was room for them between the soles of the great boots of autocracy

19. Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, trans. R. M. French (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947), p. 24.

20. Mikhail Lermontov, "Duma" ["Meditation"], trans. Anatoly Liberman, in Michael Ferber, ed., *European Romantic Poetry* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005), p. 444. "The true character of Russian thought, poetic or speculative, develops its full force after the accession of Nicholas to the throne," Herzen wrote. "Its distinguishing feature is a tragic emancipation of conscience, an implacable negation, a bitter irony, a painful self-analysis. Sometimes this all breaks into insane laughter, but there is no gaiety in that laughter" (*P&T*, p. 1672).

> and the ground—and in them was the heritage of the 14th of December, the heritage of a purely national Russia, as well as the learning of all humanity. This new life sprouted like the grass that tries to grow on the lip of a still smouldering crater. (*P&T*, p. 415)

An important intellectual element in this new life was this: in order to protect the state from dangerous ideas, Nicholas had forbidden Russians to attend French universities, directing them instead to German ones. But German thinking was in the 1830s much more radical than French, and from Germany came arguably the most influential writer in the Russian nineteenth century: Hegel.

Hegel's ideas were vigorous among the "boys" Herzen speaks of for a reason that Hegel would no more have guessed at than Nicholas himself. In 1836 Chaadeyev published a famous article from which we quoted earlier, his "First Philosophical Letter," lamenting

> the fact that we have never advanced along with other people; we are not related to any of the great human families; we belong neither to the West nor to the East, and we possess the traditions of neither. Placed, as it were, outside of the times, we have not been affected by the universal education of mankind. (Chaadaev, *Major Works*, p. 27)

A more fertile breeding ground for Hegel's vision of historical progress could hardly be imagined. The old notion that Russia had no history to speak of, or a history only of unregenerate social primitivism, was transformed by Hegelianism into an engine of messianic thinking. Precisely because the Western Europeans had so much history, their civilization was senile and decadent (Rousseau had said so); and precisely because the Russians had no history, they had a future and a destiny out of all proportion (Hegel's compatriot Herder had suggested as much). "Europe gives the appearance nowadays," Ivan Kireevsky wrote in 1830, "of a certain torpidity":

> both the political and moral drive toward perfection have come to a halt; outmoded opinions and decayed forms have, like a dammed river, transformed a fertile nation into a swamp where only forget-me-nots grow, or an occasional will-o'the-wisp flares.

"In all enlightened humanity," he went on, "two peoples do not participate in this universal trance": the United States and Russia. But America's remoteness and Anglophone culture alike isolated it, and "shift[ed] all of Europe's hope to Russia."[21] "Thus," Berdyaev writes,

> we may define the theme of the Russian nineteenth century as a tempestuous striving towards progress, towards revolution, towards the final results of world civilization, towards socialism, and at the same time towards the profound and acute consciousness of the emptiness, the ugliness, the soullessness of bourgeois civilization and the rest.[22]

No wonder Herzen called Hegel "the algebra of revolution."

The irony is that all these ideas (Rousseau's, Herder's, Hegel's) are Western ideas: instances of what Isaiah Berlin calls "the boomerang effect,"[23] whereby Western notions arriving in Russia become massively enhanced and embellished before returning to the West in their newly empowered forms. Russian intellectuals themselves came to understand this power, and as the 1830s progressed two schools of thought emerged accordingly. Hegelianism pulled off the remarkable intellectual coup of discrediting both Russian Orthodoxy and the Western Enlightenment: but one group (the Westernizers) took the former medication from him, another (the Slavophils) the latter. Both groups were products of Nicholas's repression, however. As Herzen puts it:

> Chaadeyev and the Slavophils alike stood facing the unsolved Sphinx of Russian life, the Sphinx sleeping under the overcoat of the soldier and the watchful eye of the Tsar; they alike were asking: "What will become of this? To live like this is impossible: the oppressiveness and the absurdity of the present situation is obvious and unendurable—where is the way out?" (*P&T*, p. 525)

Should Russia make its world-historical contribution by carrying the embryo of the future, as the Westernizers were sure it should, or should it rather turn inwards and back, to itself, to Orthodoxy, autoc-

21. I.V. Kireyevsky, "A Survey of Russian Literature in the Year 1829," in Leighton, ed., *Russian Romantic Criticism*, p. 130.

22. Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, p. 33.

23. Isaiah Berlin, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), p. 194.

racy, and the prepetrine past? In either case, the nation would reveal its uniqueness, and one thing both groups conspired to detest, where Europe was concerned, was the one thing they both believed Russia to be blessed in lacking: the bourgeoisie. For the Slavophils, this absence meant that the advantages of autocracy and theocracy could be rediscovered; for the Westernizers this absence meant Russia could skip the intermediary stages of enlightenment and liberalism and serve its historical role by going straight to the end of history. "[O]ne thing we have discovered for certain," Herzen argued: "that the free and rational development of Russian national life coincides with the aspirations of Western socialism" (*P&T*, p. 530). After the failures of the 1848 uprisings in western Europe he and people like him came to feel that *only* in Russia could the aspirations of socialism bear fruit.

For such aspirations to succeed it was imperative that the Westernizers reject that which was speculative or historically automatic in Hegel's writings and turn, as the Slavophils had done, to the Russian people and their condition. In 1834 the literary critic Vissarion Belinsky had said that the aim and purpose of art was "to portray, to reproduce in words, sounds, lines and colours the idea of the universal life of nature."[24] In a famous letter to Vasily Botkin of 1841 he utterly turned his back on Hegelian abstractions of that kind. Hegel, he said, "has turned the realities of life into ghosts clasping bony hands and dancing in the air above the cemetery."[25] He went on to tell Botkin the story of a woman next door, beaten by her husband "for not having prepared good cream for the coffee." "On hearing this story," he wrote, "I gnashed my teeth . . . and I cursed my impotence at not being able to go and kill him like a dog. And that is society, existing on rational principles, a fact of reality!" "Has a man," he went on,

> after that the right to bury himself in art, in knowledge! I am inflamed against all the substantial principles which bind the will of men as a creed! My God is negation! In history my heroes are the destroyers of the old—Luther, Voltaire, the Encyclopaedists, the Terrorists, Byron (*Cain*), and so on.[26]

24. Vissarion Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), p. 17.

25. Belinsky, p. 159.

26. Belinsky, p. 175. By "Terrorists" here Belinsky means the Robespierrean Jacobins of the French Revolution: agitators of "The Terror" of 1793–94.

Belinsky's anguish and the domestic incident that produced it are both prescient of the turn the Russian Idea took in the 1840s and beyond. The three most famous novels of the ten years after Belinsky's outburst were Herzen's *Who is to Blame?* (1846), Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk* (also 1846) and Turgenev's *Sketches from a Hunter's Album* (1852). With such publications literature indeed became "the parliamentary forum" Thomas Masaryk described, and they would be succeeded by even more incendiary works like Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1862) and its rival of the following year, Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done?*: books which testified to the passing of the era of Nicholas, who died in 1855.

II. BYRON AND THE RUSSIAN IDEA

So it was, as Elena Hellberg-Hirn suggests, that "the cultural construction of . . . homogenous ethnic Russianness, the birth of the Russian idea [what she calls "the division into We and Others, insiders and outsiders, with genuine Russians on the inside and indifferent Others on the outside"], took place in the atmosphere of political reaction during the reign of Nicholas I." And so it was, too, that "that messianic Russian Idea looms like a giant supertext over Russian culture [thereafter], pointing the special way prepared for Russia in world history."[27]

Where does Byron fit into this momentous destiny? Clearly his influence was not nearly as world-historical as Hegel's, but it went a good deal deeper than we might suppose if we restricted ourselves to cases of his literary influence over individuals like Pushkin. To some extent, like all great writers, he became all things to all people. To some extent, too, he had in Russia the profile that he had in Europe at large. "From the first," G. R. V. Barratt records, "the English poet was what he remains in Russian eyes today—the embodiment of proud and injured individualism, a victim of corrupt, petty society, a seeker after abstract Freedom for mankind."[28] Byron was a heroic liberal nationalist who died prosecuting the Greek war of independence—a war which, as fellow members of the Orthodox faith and his-

27. Elena Hellberg-Hirn, *Soil and Soul: The Symbolic World of Russianness* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 5 and 216.

28. Barratt, "Somov, Kozlov, and Byron's Triumph," p. 112.

torical rivals of Turkey, the Russians were bound to follow with sympathetic interest. But he was also a solipsist and a pampered aristocrat. He was a lasher of the English bourgeoisie, but he was also an aristocrat and a dandy. He was a hero and a villain: a beacon of social progress and an icon of selfish immorality. In 1824 the classically inclined Kyukhelbeker complained that "we haven't had any feelings for a long time":

> the feeling of dejection has swallowed up all the others. We all lament to each other about our lost youth; we chew and re-chew this melancholy to infinity and we incessantly flaunt our faintheartedness in periodical publications. If this grief were not simply a rhetorical figure, someone—judging from our Childe Harolds—might think that in our Russia poets are born already old men.[29]

On the one hand, therefore, as Nina Diakanova and Vadim Vacuro suggest,

> Byron was the embodiment of the idea of civic and intellectual liberty, of contempt for political, moral and aesthetic categories. In their search for truthful and courageous art, Russian writers found inspiration in him who recognized no limitations to his mind and will.

"On the other hand," as they go on, "there arose a different and quite superficial interpretation of the English poet as the bard of mystery and woe, a man disappointed and blasé, entirely dominated by selfish passions." The latter figure, they say, "seemed to suit the mentality of certain sections of aristocratic Russian society who suffered from vague dissatisfaction with the established order of things" ("Byron and Russia," pp. 156–57). Diakonova and Vacuro, it must be said, were writing under Soviet conditions, as we can infer from their reference to Russian writers' "search for truthful and courageous art" (out there, so to speak, around the corner), and from their describing that second Russian way of seeing Byron as "quite superficial" (by the world-his-

29. "On the Trend of our Poetry . . . in the Past Decade," in Rydel, *Ardis Anthology*, p. 409. The Byronic hero made a seamless transition into Russian poetry: into Ivan Kozlov's "The Monk," for example, which borrows heavily from Byron's guilty Giaour. "Losses, passions and grief / Have traced their horrible mark / On his sullen brow; / There is a storm in the depths of his heart, / His fate is covered by darkness: / No one knows from where he comes / Or who he is. But, at odds with himself, / A fateful secret torments him." (Rydel, *Ardis Anthology*, p. 118)

torical standards of Marxist revolution). The dissatisfactions such people entertained regarding the established order of things would be for critics like Diakonova and Vacuro "vague" by definition.

The truth is that Russian writers' search for truthful and courageous art took many forms, and that Byronic pessimism penetrated a good deal deeper than the vague dissatisfactions of certain sections of aristocratic Russian society. As early as 1822 the critic Peter Pletnyov provided as roundabout a definition of Byronic cynicism as one could imagine, saying that "The one thing that cannot be forgiven in him is that a certain eccentric misanthropy somehow prevents him from acknowledging truly noble sentiments in man when he depicts him in a fortunate social condition."[30] Invert Pletnyov's Byzantine manner of speaking and the implication clearly is that *un*fortunate social conditions might make noble sentiments much harder to sustain. Russian intellectuals saw Byronism breaking out among them like a bacillus in the 1820s, and they knew why. "[T]he most intent observers of the current condition of our society often encounter such figures," Prince Vyazemsky wrote in the same year as Pletnyov:

> A surfeit of power in an inner life whose ambitious desires cannot be satisfied by concessions from an outer life which is lavish only with the temperate desires of so-called prudence—this is the discord of our time. The inescapable consequences of such discord —agitation without aim, activity which devours and has nought to do with the essential, hopes never fulfilled and perpetually provoking new aspirations—must inevitably sow in the soul that ineradicable germ of ennui, sickliness, and satiety which mark the characters of Childe Harold, the Captive of the Caucasus, and their kind.[31]

That is the received notion of Byron's influence on Romantic Russia: "ennui, sickliness, and satiety." Can we, with the benefit of hindsight, look more deeply into his contribution to "the Russian idea"?

There are three particular areas where Byron's work—or his example as conveyed in books or fables about him, for Russian readers like

30. P. A. Pletnyov, "*The Prisoner of Chillon*," in Leighton, *Russian Romantic Criticism*, p. 14.

31. P. A. Vyazemsky, "On *The Captive of the Caucasus*," in Leighton, *Russian Romantic Criticism*, p. 49. (*The Captive of the Caucasus* was an early, "Byronic" poem of Pushkin's, written in 1823.)

most Europeans made few distinctions between the two—counted in Russia under Nicholas I. The first and simplest of these is Byron's valuation of the East, as depicted in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and the series of "Turkish Tales" published after he shot to fame in 1812. These were read almost as eagerly on the banks of the Neva as on the banks of the Thames, but they had a particular relevance for the Russians, who were fighting (and continue to fight) a series of imperialist wars in the mountainous isthmus between the Black and Caspian seas. War zone it may have been, but despite or because of that Russian writers found the Caucasus a place of almost limitless romance and escape from the stifling world of tsarist St. Petersburg: "the meeting-ground of Muslim and Christian, mountaineers and plainsmen, anarchic freedom and civilized despotism."[32] ("The scene was savage," as Byron wrote of "many-hued" and multicultural Albania in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, canto II, stanza 43, "but the scene was new.") This fact can be seen as an inverted instance of Edward Said's theory of Orientalism: a good many Russian writers were "Occidentalist" in their distaste for European decadence and their passion for the Caucasian landscape and peoples. Pushkin's "Southern Poems" of 1820–24 ("A Prisoner of the Caucasus," "The Fountain of Bakhchisarai," and "The Gypsies"), Lermontov's *Hero of our Time* and sundry poems besides, Kyukhelbeker's *Izhorsky* (1835), Bestuzhev's *Ammalat-Bek* (1831), and Tolstoy's primitivist fiction from *The Cossacks* (1863) and "A Prisoner of the Caucasus" (1872) to *Hadji-Murad* (1904), all get intellectual, literary, and anthropological mileage out of those elements in Muslim life that Byron had originally explored in *Childe Harold*, *The Giaour* and their successors. In this regard Byron helped reveal to Russian writers the exoticism of Russia itself—a development that was still worth summarizing by the literary critic Yury Tynyanov in 1929:

> Oh, how many different countenances, temperaments and habits present themselves to the enquiring gaze within the compass of the whole of Russia! Not to mention the Russians themselves, here appear Ukrainians, with their sweet songs and glorious memories, there the militant sons of the quiet Don. . . . And what if we cast

32. Brown, *History of Russian Literature of the Romantic Period*, IV, 177.

> our gaze at the frontiers of Russia, peopled by the ardent Poles and Lithuanians . . . by the inhabitants of ancient Colchis, by the nomadic Mongol tribes, by the violent races of the Caucasus.[33]

The second area of Byron's influence on the Russian Idea is in the development of certain forms of class consciousness. In his early writings and early life Byron followed a course many Russian aristocratic idealists would have recognized. He was of his class but he had no function within it; or when in 1812 he tried to exercise that function in the House of Lords he revealed how out of step with his peers he was by making sympathetic speeches about the "misguided but most unfortunate" framebreakers.[34] Like the Decembrists he demonstrated the type of idealistic, even paternalistic, but evidently sincere sympathy of the aristocrat for the peasantry that Nicholas had stifled on his accession.[35] "Are we aware of our obligations to a *Mob*?" Byron asked his fellow-parliamentarians: "It is the Mob, that labour in your fields & serve in your houses, that man your navy & recruit your army, that have enabled you to defy all the world, & can also defy you, when Neglect and Calamity have driven them to despair" (Byron, *CMP*, p. 25). Childe Harold and Byron are both "superfluous men" in this respect: consumed with an aristocratic sense of obligation to those whose labor and sacrifice underpinned the privileges they enjoy, but no longer able to improve their condition. Byron's experience in the House of Lords was terminal in this regard. By March 1813 he was already wholly disenchanted: "my parliamentary schemes are not much to my taste," he wrote to his sister: "I spoke twice last Session—& was told it was well enough—but I hate the thing altogether

33. Tynyanov, *Archaists and Innovators*, qtd. in Barratt, "Somov, Kozlov, and Byron's Russian Triumph," p. 107.

34. Byron, *The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Andrew Nicholson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 26; hereafter cited parenthetically as *CMP*.

35. The issue of Byron's attitude to aristocracy is a vital one, too large to be adequately summarized here. Part of his value for "Young England" was evidently his fundamentally conservative belief that the aristocracy was more likely to protect the interest of working people than were either self-elected tribunes of the people like Henry "Orator" Hunt or the newly insurgent English bourgeoisie of the early nineteenth century. So his attitude to his class is strikingly different from that expressed by his friend and fellow-aristocrat, Percy Shelley ("Rise like Lions after slumber. . . . Ye are many—they are few") in that he could not greet radicalism and class war with enthusiasm. But Byron's attitudes, like Burke's or Disraeli's, appeared always already sentimental and anachronous, and the institution of aristocracy was in his time already being analyzed from a middle-class point of view by Jane Austen, among others.

—& have no intention to 'strut another hour' on that stage."[36] By 1816 he was comparing the place to a geriatric ward. "[I]f you knew what a hopeless & lethargic den of dullness & drawling our hospital is —during a debate," he told Leigh Hunt:

> & what a mass of corruption in it's patients—you would wonder—not that—I very seldom speak—but that I ever attempted it—feeling—as I trust I do—independently. (*BLJ*, v, 19)

But this independence amounted to an unhappy and uneasy state, and Byron was in that sense a man out of time, without a role, as the Decembrist group of writer-intellectuals were revealed to be after the climactic events of 1825. *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is about that condition ("Apart he stalked in joyless reverie"), but *Manfred* dramatizes it in particularly stark terms:

> My spirit walk'd not with the souls of men,
> Nor look'd upon the earth with human eyes;
> The thirst of their ambition was not mine,
> The aim of their existence was not mine;
> My joys, my griefs, my passions, and my powers,
> Made me a stranger.[37]

As a result of this hardening of attitude, Byron came to be considered a critic of the English genteel classes who initially had bought his poems in such large numbers. In his early works he pandered to middle-class tastes; in his later ones he scandalized them, in part no doubt because of his aristocratic allegiances-cum-hankerings. Herzen saw this discrepancy in marked terms. "Byron's disillusionment," he wrote,

> was more than caprice, more than a personal mood; Byron was shattered because life deceived him. And life deceived him not because his demands were unreal, but because England and Byron were of two different ages, of two different educations, and met just at the epoch when the fog was dispersing. (*P&T*, pp. 742–43)

36. Byron, in Leslie Marchand, ed., *Byron's Letters and Journals*, 12 vols. (London: John Murray, 1973–82), III, 32; hereafter cited as *BLJ*.

37. Byron, *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome McGann, 7 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980–1993), IV, 72; hereafter cited as *CPW*.

Isaiah Berlin said of Anna Akhmatova that her life was "one uninterrupted indictment of Russian reality"[38] and, *mutatis mutandis*, the same is true of Byron and England, especially after his self-imposed exile after 1816. Herzen felt that Byron refused to recognize "the final religion" of the English bourgeoisie: *laissez-faire* liberalism (a phenomenon very different from the Continental nationalist liberalism he supported in Italy and Greece). "Imagine a hothouse-reared youth," Herzen wrote,

> the one perhaps who has described himself in *The Dream*; imagine him face to face with the most boring, with the most tedious society, face to face with the monstrous Minotaur of English life, clumsily welded together of two beasts—the one decrepit, the other knee-deep in a miry bog, weighed down like a Caryatid whose muscles, under a constant strain, cannot spare one drop of blood for the brain. If he could have adapted himself to this life he would, instead of dying in Greece at thirty, now [1866] have been Lord Palmerston or Lord John Russell. But since he could not it is no wonder that, with his own Childe Harold, he says to his ship: "Nor care what land thou bearest me to, / But not again to mine."

This violent antagonism between an individual and his society, repressed and displaced into the realm of "literature" for the English poet as it was to be for the Russian ones, clearly struck a chord of passionate empathy between the radical and the aristocrat. "But what awaited him in the distance?", Herzen went on:

> Spain cut up by Napoleon, Greece sunk back into barbarism, the general resurrection after 1814 of all the stinking Lazaruses; there was no getting away from them at Ravenna or at Diodati. Byron could not be satisfied like a German with theories *sub specie aeternitatis*, nor like a Frenchman with political chatter; he was broken, but broken like a menacing Titan, flinging his scorn in men's faces and not troubling to gild the pill. (*P&T*, pp. 745–56)

But combative opposition was by no means all there was to Byron's attitude to bourgeois, post-Napoleonic Europe, and here his offering

38. Isaiah Berlin, *Personal Impressions* (London: Hogarth Press, 1980), p. 207.

to Herzen differs from his offering to Pushkin (stanzas 47–49 from *Beppo*, for example):

"England! with all thy faults I love thee still,"
I said at Calais, and have not forgot it;
I like to speak and lucubrate my fill;
I like the government (but that is not it);
I like the freedom of the press and quill;
I like the Habeas Corpus (when we've got it);
I like a parliamentary debate,
Particularly when 'tis not too late;

I like the taxes, when they're not too many;
I like a seacoal fire, when not too dear;
I like a beef-steak, too, as well as any;
Have no objection to a pot of beer;
I like the weather, when it is not rainy,
That is, I like two months of every year,
And so God save the Regent, Church, and King!
Which means that I like all and everything.

Our standing army, and disbanded seamen,
Poor's rate, Reform, my own, the nation's debt,
Our little riots just to show we are free men,
Our trifling bankruptcies in the Gazette,
Our cloudy climate, and our chilly women,
All these I can forgive, and those forget,
And greatly venerate our recent glories,
And wish they were not owing to the Tories. (*CPW*, IV, 144)

A second element in Byron's attitude to his class and homeland, accordingly, is what he achieved in his late humorous poems rather than his early tragic ones: less "flinging scorn in men's faces" than a subtler variety of ideological warfare, dependent not merely on "irony" but on a relativism that was revealed wherever he turned his intellectual eye. Byron scandalized his middle-class readership by the inclusion of sex, violence, and cannibalism under these conditions in *Don Juan*; Pushkin scandalized the Russian intelligentsia by writing the apparently trivial tale of a failed courtship in *Eugene Onegin*. But

both masterpieces allowed their creators to have their aristocratic status and forego it; to disarm, to prevaricate; and in such ways to criticize the political predicaments in which they found themselves, albeit indirectly. "It can be argued," Leighton writes,

> that post-December Romantic literature [in Russia] took on more than a semblance of active life when writers and poets began to develop an already tested literary skill, the art of disguised allusion and hidden political message that came later to be called Aesopic language, and is a vital aspect of Russian literature to this very day. (*Russian Romanticism*, p. xi)

There is a marked "Aesopic" element in poems like *Beppo* and *Don Juan*, which often conceal profound criticisms of English culture beneath a superficial nonchalance—or in fact go furthest to outrage "Victorian values" by a display of *nonchaleur*. Reviewing the first installment of *Eugene Onegin* in 1835 the critic Nikolai Polevoi quickly saw the ground Byron and Pushkin shared in this regard: "Byron does not merely jest," Polevoi wrote, "he goes much further. In the midst of the most comic descriptions he exposes the human heart with a cutting strophe, his mirth blends with despondency, his smile with a sneer." In Pushkin, similarly, "the transitions from the amusing to the cheerless, from the happy to the sad, from satire to the story of the heart entrance the reader"[39]—much as they entrance the reader of *Don Juan*. Byron may have been imprisoned by his class, but he also achieved a degree of intellectual distance from it, and this made his example particularly important for a deracinated aristocracy like that of early and mid-nineteenth-century Russia.

So Byron inadvertently helped Russian writers appreciate the cultural borderlands over which they ruled, particularly the Muslim Caucasus, and helped them see the political predicament that did so much to form their concerns. The third area in which Byron made a contribution to Russian thought that he did not and could not make elsewhere is more elusive but longer-lasting and perhaps more influential still. It has something to do with what James Billington, in his cultural history of Russia, *The Icon and the Axe*, calls "The Hamlet

39. Nikolai Polevoi, "Eugene Onegin, Chapter 1," qtd. in Leighton, p. 103.

Question": "to be or not to be" or (as the Russians tended to re-pose the proposition) "to live or not to live." We must remind ourselves that nineteenth-century readers did not see the same Byron that we do, and that Russian understanding was influenced by the texts available, particularly in translation.[40] *The Prisoner of Chillon* was translated into Russian early on, for example (by Vasily Zhukovsky in 1822); but a work that achieved a greater degree of penetration was Byron's biblical mystery-drama, *Cain*. The poem's apparent religious cynicism, which infuriated English bourgeois opinion, was highly appreciated by radicals for that very reason, in St. Petersburg as well as London. In their eyes Cain's act was a vital-enough and proto-Nietzschean act of intellectual rebellion. "All religions have based morality on obedience," as Herzen put it: "that is to say, on voluntary slavery. That is why they have always been more pernicious than any political organization. For the latter makes use of violence, the former—of the corruption of the will."[41] The murder of Abel is an act of religious disobedience built on satanic skepticism: an act easily translated into the terms of a political and anti-bourgeois revolution, espoused at one stage in his career by the Herzen "who had taught that the religion of Christ must be overcome as the religion of death" (Masaryk, p. 406), and for whom Cain's act was a necessary one of ideological destruction.

For Russian radicalism, then, *Cain* was a parable about the coercive nature of Christian ideology (on the one hand), and the concomitant need for revolution to prepare itself for murderous violence against the bourgeoisie (on the other). By contrast, the English-speaking way of looking at Byron's drama, informed as it is by Marlowe and by Milton (and by Goethe), almost invariably turns its attention to the Mephistophelian tempter, Lucifer. If we switch our attention to the unfortunate son of Adam, and if we see the play through a Russian lens, it presents itself in different terms. An autocratic God, on his "vast and solitary throne" stares down at an utterly isolated individual who says of himself: "I look / Around a world where I seem nothing"

40. The Russian aristocracy was a francophone one, and French translations of Byron were common; but Russian translations of the English poet had a special impact nonetheless (not least in terms of expanding the Russian literary idiom itself), and some Russian writers (Bestuzhev, Pushkin, and Lermontov in particular) read Byron in his native tongue.

41. Alexander Herzen, *From the Other Shore*, trans. Moura Budberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 135.

(*CPW*, VI, 237, 238). Lucifer belittles Cain further by showing him the infinitudes of space and time:

> I show thee what thy predecessors are,
> And what they were thou feelest, in degree
> Inferior as thy petty feelings and
> Thy pettier portion of the immortal part
> Of high intelligence and earthly strength.
> What ye in common have with what they had
> Is life, and what ye shall have—death. (*CPW*, VI, 262)

Lucifer's enterprise is a nihilistic one—"war with all things, / And death to all things, and disease to most things"—designed to reduce Cain to suicidal despair at "mortal nature's nothingness" (*CPW*, VI, 264, 273). Byron said of him that he murders his brother "from mere *internal* irritation—*not* premeditation or envy of *Abel* . . . but from rage and fury against the inadequacy of his state to his Conceptions—& which discharges itself rather against Life . . . than the mere living" (*BLJ*, IX, 53–54). The act is one of individualistic protest against the "base humility" of Abel (*CPW*, VI, 279) by an outsider of a kind that certain Russian writers and areas of Russian literature are fascinated by; and the relation of crime to individualism, of murder to revolutionary violence, and of both to the passage from moral abasement to nihilistic self-assertion is a peculiarly Russian piece of eschatology.[42] (In Russia *Vanka Kain*—"Jack Cain"—has been a by-word for a criminal or a desperate individual generally speaking since the early nineteenth century.) Byron's Lucifer "prompts to murder, draws towards himself, towards crime," as Herzen put it (*P&T*, p. 745): not just the crime of revolutionary violence against the bourgeoisie, but

42. That eschatology is most famously explored in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866), but we prefer to instance *The Devils* (1871) in the discussion to follow. What is particular about Raskolnikov as nihilist-cum-existentialist is that he is one by conviction: indeed he has gone so far as to write an article about the rights of some to overstep the mark of social morality. At the climax of the novel he admits, "I wanted to become a Napoleon, and that's why I killed" (*Crime and Punishment*, trans. David McDuff [London: Penguin, 2003], p. 495; the key debate about Raskolnikov's article is in Part Three, Chapter Five of the novel). But Byron's Cain kills Abel from "mere internal irritation" and "rage and fury against the inadequacy of his state to his Conceptions"; he has no intellectual convictions at all. As Herzen suggests, "Neither Cain nor Manfred, neither Don Juan nor Byron, makes any inference, draws any conclusion, any 'moral'" (*P&T*, p. 747). For Dostoevsky the case of Stavrogin is more dangerous and portentous than the case of Raskolnikov for precisely this reason.

the ontological crime of unbridled individualism—of which there is no more complete expression than the act of murder.

As we saw in the introductory section above, Byronism is sometimes said to have flared and disappeared quickly on the Russian scene.[43] But it is worth remembering that Stavrogin, the satanic Svengali at the core of a nest of revolutionary plotters in Dostoevsky's *Devils*, is a fully blown Byronic archetype. ("Some people," the narrator explains, "were particularly fascinated by the idea that his soul might harbour a fatal secret; others positively relished the notion that he was a murderer.")[44] Listless, languorous, and apathetic, with a "disdainful, society smile" and what others see as an "unusual aptitude for crime" (*D*, pp. 217, 259, 267), Stavrogin is the ultimate nihilist, part-Lucifer, part-Cain. "If I were stealing something," he confesses,

> at the very moment of the theft I'd experience ecstasy at the awareness of the depth of my vileness. It wasn't the vileness itself I liked . . . ; I liked the ecstasy residing in a tortured awareness of how low I had sunk. (*D*, p. 462)

("If I am nothing," as Cain would say, "For nothing shall I seem a hypocrite, / And seem well-pleased with pain? For what should I / Be contrite?" [*CPW*, VI, 280].) "[F]ull of an inner disintegration that can never be put back together," as Herzen said of Byron's Lucifer (*P&T*, p. 746), Stavrogin lures others to their deaths before committing sucide, while possessing nothing remotely like a political belief himself. Stavrogin's are acts of rampantly destructive self-assertion, including the horrifying abuse of a twelve-year-old girl who later commits suicide. The relation of all this death and moral irresponsibility to what Dostoevsky saw as the Russian condition is spelled out by a member of Stavrogin's revolutionary coven. "There's no idea greater than the fact that God doesn't exist," Kirillov insists:

> Human history supports me. The only thing man has done is to keep inventing God to go on living and not kill himself; this alone

43. One of the characters in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*—carefully set in 1859, before the emancipation of the serfs—briskly remarks (concerning his nephew's reluctance to dance, it should be said) that "Byronism is ludicrous, *il a fait son temps*" (*Fathers and Sons*, trans. Richard Freeborn [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991], p. 63).

44. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Devils*, trans. Michael R. Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 43; hereafter cited as *D*.

> constitutes global history up to now. During the entire course of global history I alone am the first person who doesn't want to invent God. (*D*, p. 692)

As a benign force and a monstrous one, Byron has had a long half-life in Russia. In November 1945 the young Isaiah Berlin, appointed to a temporary diplomatic post in Moscow, was able to organize a brief visit to Leningrad to browse among its legendary bookshops. In casual conversation in one such place he learned that the poet Anna Akhmatova, whom Berlin believed long since deceased, was living in a nearby flat, and a meeting was arranged. To meet this repository of a culture he had left at age ten, scarred as her life had been by the Stalinist terror and the Second World War, was a momentous and awe-inspiring experience, as Berlin's memoir amply shows. The pair talked throughout the night, at an early hour of which Akhmatova recounted the circumstances of her husband's death by execution in 1921. Then something wholly unexpected took place:

> After a silence she asked me whether I would like to hear her poetry: but before doing this, she said that she wished to recite two cantos from Byron's *Don Juan* to me, for they were relevant to what would follow. Even if I had known the poem well, I could not have told which cantos she had chosen, for although she read English, her pronunciation of it made it impossible to understand more than a word or two. She closed her eyes and spoke the lines from memory, with intense emotion; I rose and looked out of the window to conceal my embarrassment. Perhaps, I thought afterwards, that is how we now read classical Greek and Latin; yet we, too, are moved by the words, which, as we pronounce them, might be wholly unintelligible to their authors and audiences.[45]

To recite two cantos from *Don Juan* from memory and in a foreign language would be a remarkable performance. It is true that Russian poets and their partners under Stalin achieved prodigious acts of memory to ensure the survival of literary material that was vulnerable or dangerous in written form, but even under Stalin Byron was

45. See "Meetings with Russian Writers in 1945 and 1956," in Berlin, *Personal Impressions*, p. 193.

hardly an object of scandal and contention of that kind. Two of the shorter cantos of *Don Juan* would still take an hour of reading aloud. Perhaps Akhmatova read less than Berlin recalled, and a clue is offered by one of the poems to which she judged this Byronic prelude "relevant": *Poem Without a Hero*—which she clearly carried on re-drafting after Berlin's visit, since his making the visit figures in the published version of the poem. The third epigraph attached to the first chapter of the first part of that poem is from Canto One (stanza 212) of *Don Juan*: "In my hot youth—when George the Third was king." *Poem Without a Hero* is a profoundly retrospective piece, mixing events and personalities from 1913 St. Petersburg (when Nicholas II was king, so to speak) with moments from the siege of Leningrad of 1941–1944. Are the kinds of stanzas from *Don Juan* that Akhmatova might have recited "with intense emotion," then, the ones that succeed Byron's reference to his "hot youth" in Canto One: "No more—no more—Oh! never more on me / The freshness of the heart can fall like dew," and so on? (The passage begins with a quote from Horace and constitutes an extended reference to the first Ode of Book IV; perhaps that half-recovered memory inspired Berlin's remark about "classical Greek and Latin.") Certainly that passage evokes those varieties of nostalgia and emotional candor with which Russian literature—especially its poetry—has often been associated.

Earlier we spoke of the "disjunctions and continuities" of Russian history. From Pushkin under Nicholas at one end of Russian literature to Akhmatova under Stalin at the other, Byron is one of those continuities: minor, but persistent.

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