

Lord Byron and the Battle of Waterloo

Stop! – for thy tread is on Empire's dust!
An Earthquake's spoil is sepulchred below!
Is the spot mark'd with no colossal bust?
Nor column trophied for triumphal show?
None; but the moral's truth tells simpler so,
As the ground was before, thus let it be; –
How that red rain hath made the harvest grow!
And is this all the world has gained by thee,
Thou first and last of fields! king-making Victory?

(*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto 3, stanza 17)

Following the publication in March 1812 of the first two cantos of his narrative poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Lord Byron (1788-1824) discovered that he had become a literary celebrity. He responded to the poem's success by crafting a series of rapidly-written verse tales, focussing on the popular vogue for middle-eastern themes: *The Bride of Abydos* (1813), *The Giaour* (1813) and *The Corsair* (1814). In April 1816, following rumours of marital abuse, incest with his half-sister Augusta Leigh and accusations of sodomy, Byron left England for the last time. He spent the summer in Switzerland, where he developed a friendship with Percy Bysshe Shelley and began work on the third canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

Cantos 1 and 2 [insert MS image B20132-33 here?] had charted the adventures of the childe as he toured through Greece and Spain, reflecting along the way on the melancholy contrasts between the glories of classical civilisation and the poverty of the present, and on the devastating effects of the Napoleonic wars. In this new canto – the fourth and final canto was completed the following year – Byron, inspired by Shelley's recent reading of Wordsworth, turns his attention to the sublime grandeur of the Swiss landscape. Having more or less abandoned Harold as the focus of the narrative, Byron now uses the poem as a vehicle to explore his own feelings of guilt and sorrow, and attempts to find release from his torment by immersing himself in the beauties of nature (see stanzas 65-109).

The violence of history, however, is never far from Byron's mind, and thus his account of the calming influence of the alpine landscape is prefaced by a series of stanzas recounting the Battle of Waterloo. Fought a few miles south of Brussels on 18 June 1815, Waterloo resulted in the defeat of the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte and brought to an end a twenty-two year period of conflict between Britain and France.

Byron, who was a supporter of Napoleon and a harsh critic of the war effort, regarded Waterloo not as a victory but as a calamity. In the opening line of stanza 17, 'Stop! – for thy tread is on Empire's dust', the poem quotes directly from the Roman author Juvenal's tenth satire in order to expose the contrast between the battle's supposedly heroic outcome and its bloody human costs. By denouncing Waterloo as 'kng-making Victory' Byron makes clear his belief that the defeat of the French Empire and the restoration of the, in his view, detestable Bourbon monarchy was not worth the deaths of nearly 50,000 soldiers.

Byron, who visited the field of Waterloo as a tourist on his way to Switzerland in May 1816, was well aware that his views on the battle were at odds with those of the majority of his countrymen. While Wordsworth, Robert Southey and Walter Scott all produced celebratory poems in the wake of Waterloo, Byron conceived his verses as way of reminding the public of the terrible toll of victory. Recalling the story of how on the night of 15 June the Duke of Wellington and his officers were called into battle while attending a ball given by the Duchess of Richmond, the opening stanzas convey a sense of the unsettling contrast between the 'sound of revelry' (stanza 21) and the intrusive alarm of war: 'Arm! Arm! And out – it is – the cannon's opening roar!' (stanza 22).

Next, in an ironic extension of the romance mode associated with the description of the ball, the poem evokes the heated excitement of going into battle:

The mustering squadron, and the clattering car,
Went pouring forward in impetuous speed,
And swiftly forming in the ranks of war [...] (stanza 25)

The accelerated pace is brought, however, to a sudden halt by a stark reminder of 'the unreturning brave' who, before evening, will be 'trodden like the grass' (stanza 27).

The poem then goes on to develop this elegiac contrast:

Last night beheld them full of lusty life,
Last eve in Beauty's circle proudly gay,
The midnight brought the signal-sound of strife,
The morn the marshalling in arms, – the day
Battle's magnificently-stern array!
The thunder-clouds close o'er it, which when rent
The earth is covered thick with other clay,
Which her own clay shall cover, heaped and pent,
Rider and horse, – friend, foe, – in one red burial blent! (stanza 28)

Byron's powerful evocation of the grim aftermath of war, which makes no distinction between friend and foe, concludes with a lament for his cousin, Frederick Howard, who died at Waterloo. Singling out this individual from the mass of those many thousands who perished in the conflict, the poet speaks for all those unnamed soldiers whose loss has left a 'ghastly gap' in their 'kind and kindred' (stanza 31).

In 1817, the artist W. J. M. Turner appended Byron's description of the carnage at Waterloo to a large-scale painting called *The Field of Waterloo* [insert image?]. Like Byron, Turner was appalled by the violence of the battle, and to this end his painting focusses not on the romance of war, but on its ghastly consequences. His picture shows a group of grieving women, searching a pile of dead and dying bodies in the hope of finding their partners.

Years later, in the mock-epic poem *Don Juan* (1818-24) Byron still felt sufficiently outraged by Waterloo to address the Duke of Wellington directly and ask: 'And I shall be delighted to learn who, / Save you and yours, have gained by Waterloo?' (Canto 9, stanza 4).