

## Byron's "Dithyramb on the Death of Napoleon" and the lessons of apocryphal works

Olivier Feignier, 39<sup>th</sup> International Byron Conference, King's College, London, 4 July 2013

*What is all this about Mitylene (where I never was in my life) « Manuscript Criticism on the Manchester business » (which I never wrote) « Day & Martin's patent blacking » and a « young lady who offered &c. » of whom I never heard. --- Are the people mad or merely drunken?*<sup>1</sup>

Such was Byron's violent reaction in July 1821 to recent fake English publications under his signature. – As soon as he had become famous, Byron was imitated, "pasted", and parodied in English. Spurious works were published under his name, provoking his furious denials. A quick look at a list of works attributed to him and published with his explicit name immediately after his departure from England reveals a large diversity.

In 1816: *Lord Byron's Farewell to England, with three other Poems* (one of them is an "Ode to St-Helena"), and *Reflections on Shipboard*. In 1817: *Lord Byron's Pilgrimage to the Holy Land, a poem in two cantos*; in 1818: *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage to the Dead Sea*<sup>2</sup>. In 1819: the famous and infamous "tale" of *The Vampyre*<sup>3</sup>, which sparked a kind of "vampire-mania"<sup>4</sup>. The phenomenon was not limited to England: in France as well, as soon as the enthusiasm for Byron gained momentum, there was also a "blooming of illegitimate flowers", which can be traced in the catalogue of the French National Library; you can learn in it that a novel "by" Byron was published in Paris in 1821, prior to several pieces of verse and prose about Napoleon's death and the poor repudiated Queen of England. The publication of *Irner*, "Byron's" novel<sup>5</sup>, put an end to the collaboration of "Byron's translators", Amédée Pichot expelling Eusèbe de Salle out of their translation "partnership" for the latter's dishonest pastiche and impudent attribution.

A rapid screening of these publications shows that (unlike in England where the poet's travels<sup>6</sup> and his domestic squabbles attracted fake-makers, as gold does to diggers) the favourite topic of imitators in

---

<sup>1</sup> BLJ, t. 8, p.150, letter dated 9 July 1821, to John Murray.

<sup>2</sup> Elkin Mathews, *Byron & Byroniana, a catalogue of books*, London, January 1930, n°559. 560, 561 and 562.

<sup>3</sup> [Polidori] *The Vampyre, a Tale*, London, printed for Sherwood, Neely and Jones, 1819.

<sup>4</sup> Novels, theatre plays, songs, operas... a comprehensive list would be too long.

<sup>5</sup> *Irner, par Lord Byron, traduit de l'anglais, et publié par le traducteur des Œuvres complètes de Lord Byron*. A Paris, chez Ponthieu, libraire, Palais-Royal, galerie de bois, n°252. 1821. (Announced on 23 Feb. 1821 in the *Bibliographie de la France*, n°790.)

<sup>6</sup> In Paris, a hilarious account of a fake sailing-party around Italy and Corsica was published after Byron's death: *Narrative of Lord Byron's Voyage to Corsica and Sardinia, during the Summer and Autumn of the Year 1821. Compiled from Minutes made during the voyage by the passengers, and extracts from the Journal of His Lordship's Yacht, the Mazeppa, kept by Captain Benson, R.N. Commander*. Paris, Published by A. and W. Galignani, at the French, English, Italian, German, and Spanish Library, n° 18, rue Vivienne. 1825. – The stop-over at the foot of the "Castle of Otranto", described with gloomy details, is worth a quote: "The famous Castle of Otranto stood upon the brink of the precipice, in tottering grandeur and superb decay. // This castle, interesting on account of its having been chosen for the scene of a famous English romance, has never been an extensive building; two towers are yet standing in tolerable repair, and two more are in ruins; the walls are half broken down, but where complete, they are thirty feet high. The apartments are confined, with one small window to each – and beneath are seven dungeons too horrible for description; one of these is filled with human bones, collected from all the others; we were not sorry to

France was Byron's political stance, at least what the French thought it was, and more specifically his much-admired "love-hatred" for Napoleon.

1.

The news of Napoleon's death reached London on 4 July 1821 and Paris the day after. On 6 July, there was an incident at the French Parliament: an ultra-Royalist MP called Napoleon "the usurper" before being silenced by a Liberal who shouted: "*he is dead!*"<sup>7</sup> – I will now give you my own subjective account of the works published in the succeeding weeks. Page after page, let's have a selective look at the *Bibliographie de la France, Journal de la Librairie*, the Parisian weekly review which aimed at giving an exhaustive list of all publications in France, books in French and in foreign languages, engravings, lithographs, and musical scores.

On 7 July, the comic play *The Corsairs for Fun*<sup>8</sup> was announced a few pages ahead of a French pirate "third edition" of *Ivanhoe, a romance, by the author of Waverley*<sup>9</sup>, the celebrated novel by Walter Scott. The week after, on Friday 13 July, we find two pamphlets entitled *Official Details brought by an English ship on the Death of Bonaparte*, and *New Details on the Death of Bonaparte*<sup>10</sup>. A short unexpected bibliographical note concludes the brief necrology of "Napoleon Buonaparte, born in Ajaccio on 15 August 1769, and died on the island of Saint-Helena, on 5 May 1821."

On 21 July, just after the announcement of *Frankenstein, ou le Prométhée moderne*, by "Mme Shelly" (sic)<sup>11</sup>, we witness the beginning of an avalanche of Napoleonic brochures: *A Soldier's Thought over the Grave of Napoleon*, by Alexandre Goujon<sup>12</sup>; details of the funeral ceremony at St. Helena; *Confession of Napoleon Bonaparte*; a very timely new edition of the famous *Manuscript received from St. Helena*<sup>13</sup>; *The Death of Napoleon, a dithyramb*<sup>14</sup>; then a *Discourse pronounced in the other world for the reception of Napoleon Bonaparte on 5 May 1821, by Louis Fontanes*<sup>15</sup>; a *Funeral oration; The Funeral of Napoleon, an ode preceded by his eulogy*<sup>16</sup>; *On Bonaparte and his death*<sup>17</sup>; *Opinion about Napoleon*<sup>18</sup>. – I would not be surprised if the lithograph issued the same day, and entitled "*Tombeau*

---

*quit this charnel-house, or mausoleum of the murdered dead.*" Let us note that Benjamin Laroche, considered by many as the most reliable translator of Byron, cites this fake work in his biographical sketch of Byron...

<sup>7</sup> The MP was M. Duplessis Grenédan. (C.L. Lesur, *Annuaire Historique universel pour 1821*, Paris, Fantin, Treuttel & Wurtz, Delaunay, p. 220.)

<sup>8</sup> *Les Corsaires pour rire*, vaudeville en un acte, par MM. Carmouche et de Courcy. Représenté sur le théâtre de la Gaîté le 5 juin 1821. Paris, Quoy. (n°2661)

<sup>9</sup> *Ivanhoe*, a romance. By the author of *Waverley*. In two volumes. Third edition. Paris, chez Mme Richard. (n°2684)

<sup>10</sup> *Détails officiels sur la mort de Bonaparte, arrivés de Sainte-Hélène par un bâtiment anglais*. In-4° d'un quart de feuille. Impr. de Pillot jeune, à Paris. (n°2758) et *Nouveaux détails sur la mort de Bonaparte. – Détails sur son testament. – Lettre écrite par son épouse*. In-4° d'un quart de feuille. Imp. de Mme Jeunehomme. (n°2759)

<sup>11</sup> *Frankenstein, ou le Prométhée moderne*, par Mme Shelly (sic). Traduit de l'anglais par J.S\*\*\*. Paris, Corréard. (n°2837)

<sup>12</sup> *Pensée d'un Soldat, sur la sépulture de Napoléon*. (Four "editions", most probably different issues of a unique edition, were registered on the same day, 21 July 1821, *Bibliographie de la France*, n°2839.)

<sup>13</sup> With the title *Mémoires de Napoléon Bonaparte*, which, for an apocryphal work, sounds comic.

<sup>14</sup> *La Mort de Napoléon, dithyrambe. – Notice sur la vie et la mort de Napoléon Bonaparte*. Paris, Ch. Painparé. (n°2904)

<sup>15</sup> *Discours prononcé dans l'autre monde pour la réception de Napoléon Bonaparte*, le 5 mai 1821, par Louis Fontanes (n°2905). It is of course a forgery: Fontanes, who had been Grand Maître de l'Université de France at the time of the Empire (1808-1815), had passed away on 17 March.

<sup>16</sup> *Les Funérailles de Napoléon, ode précédée de son éloge*. (n°2915)

<sup>17</sup> *De Bonaparte et de sa mort*, par Adolphe de J.....e. Paris, Pélicier, 1821. (n°2916)

<sup>18</sup> *Opinion sur Napoléon*, Paris, impr. de Rougeron, 1821. (n°2918)

*d'un brave*" (*Tombstone of a hero*)<sup>19</sup>, represented a simple grave under a willow tree in a remote valley on a small island in the Southern Atlantic, which of course would *not* be a mere coincidence... On the contrary, it is likely to be accidental that Louis Jadin's eleven variations for the piano and violin on *Les Folies d'Espagne*<sup>20</sup> should have been registered that same day, like the French edition of the *Sonate mélancolique*, by Ignace Moschelet<sup>21</sup> (sic!).

On 27 July, we can find: the 5<sup>th</sup> edition already of *A Soldier's Thought*<sup>22</sup>; a first request to the MPs for bringing back to France the remains of Napoleon<sup>23</sup>; an ironic *Apotheosis of Napoleon* considered as the Anti-Christ<sup>24</sup>; another edition of Fontanes's posthumous reception speech to Napoleon<sup>25</sup>; *Bonaparte before Minos, Aeacus and Rhadamanthus*<sup>26</sup>; *Napoleon Bonaparte's Last Farewell* (in verse)<sup>27</sup>; *The old Warrior on the grave of Napoleon* (in prose)<sup>28</sup>; *The 5<sup>th</sup> of May* (a complete account of Napoleon's last moments according to the English gazettes, "textually translated")<sup>29</sup>; and *The Death of Napoleon, a dithyramb by lord Byron translated from English, preceded by an account of the life and death of Napoleon Bonaparte, by Sir Thomas Moore. Third edition.*<sup>30</sup> – The pamphlet was issued by Charles Painparré, who, the week before, had published the anonymous dithyramb with the same title. The mention of "third edition" clearly shows it was the same work, which was now coming to light with the name of its famous authors...

## 2.

The pamphlet is composed of two parts introduced by a foreword by the translator, which explains where the poem comes from. The first part is a somewhat critical account of Napoleon's life and deeds, reasonably critical to conceal its real deep affinity, which a Frenchman could probably not show during that summer of 1821 without risking law suits. Then, the dithyramb itself is a long text in prose, divided into thirty-nine small paragraphs, as if translated from stanzas written in a foreign language. From time to time, the translator seems to have been forced to merge two stanzas into one paragraph, because of an enjambment. At first glance, the visual result is rather convincing.

<sup>19</sup> *Tombeau d'un brave*, lith. par Delpech. – A Paris, chez Mlle C. Naudet, rue Castiglione en face le n.4. (Gravures – n°360)

<sup>20</sup> *Les Folies d'Espagne*, avec onze variations, introduction et finale pour le piano et violon *ad libitum*, par L. Jadin. (Musique – n°190)

<sup>21</sup> *Sonate mélancolique* pour le piano, par Ignace Moschelet. Œuvre XLVII. (Musique – n°196)

<sup>22</sup> *Pensée d'un soldat* sur la sépulture de Napoléon. V<sup>e</sup> édition. Paris, chez les marchands de nouveautés. (n°3020)

<sup>23</sup> *A MM. les membres de la chambre des députés.* (n°3021, with this note : "Request of the mortal remains of N. Bonaparte. Not for sale.")

<sup>24</sup> *Apothéose de Napoléon Bonaparte, ou Signalement de l'Antechrist, manifesté à tout l'univers par l'esprit de vérité.* Paris, chez l'auteur, rue Mauconseil, n.3, et chez tous les libraires. (n°3022)

<sup>25</sup> *Discours prononcé dans l'autre monde pour la réception de Napoléon Bonaparte*, le 5 mai 1821, par Louis Fontanes, ex-comte de l'Empire, ex-président du Corps législatif, ex-sénateur, ex-grand maître de l'Université impériale, ex-grand-officier de la Légion-d'Honneur, etc., pour servir de supplément aux discours prononcés à l'Académie française, le 28 juin 1821, par MM. Villemain et Roger, en l'honneur de M. le marquis de Fontanes, pair de France, ex-grand-maître de l'Université royale, membre du Conseil-privé, Grand-Cordon de l'ordre royal de la Légion-d'Honneur. (Seconde édition.) Paris, chez les marchands de nouveautés. (n°3023)

<sup>26</sup> *Bonaparte devant Minos, Eaque et Rhadamante*, le 5 mai 1821. Paris, chez les marchands de nouveautés. (n°3024)

<sup>27</sup> *Derniers adieux de Napoléon Bonaparte.* (En vers) Paris, impr. de Guiraudet. (n°2025 – sic)

<sup>28</sup> *Le vieux guerrier au tombeau de Napoléon*, élégie. Paris, impr. de Cordier. (n°3026)

<sup>29</sup> *Le Cinq mai*, ou relation exacte des diverses circonstances qui ont précédé, accompagné et suivi la mort de Napoléon Bonaparte à l'île Sainte-Hélène, traduite textuellement des gazettes anglaises, depuis le 4 juillet jusqu'au 16 inclusivement, et suivie de notes et d'éphémérides historiques sur l'ex-empereur, avec une gravure lithographique. Paris, chez Ponthieu, Terry, Chambet, Audin. (n°3027)

<sup>30</sup> *La Mort de Napoléon. Dithyrambe traduit de l'anglais de Lord Byron ; précédé d'une notice sur la vie et la mort de Napoléon Bonaparte ; par Sir Thomas Moore.* Troisième édition, corrigée et augmentée. Paris, Charles Painparré, 1821. (n°3028)

The foreword is worth a few words, as it is supposed to convince the reader that the poem is “by Lord Byron”.

*Lord Byron's dithyramb was written in a single evening; it is the result of the violent impression that the hero's death made on the great poet's mind. It was sent to us by sir Arthur Smylders, a friend of the noble lord's; and we must confess to our readers that this dithyramb is merely a first inspiration that remains unfinished; of which several extracts are being circulated in London, though lord Byron has so far not given his new poem to the press. We have been told that he intends to expand it further; and once it has been printed, Lord Byron's usual translator will most likely share it with the French public. On our part, we wanted, in the meantime, to publish the translation of a piece which is, in our opinion, full of power and beauty. (...) We should also confess that we have made a few cuts in the biographical sketch and the dithyramb. These suppressed sections were either insults to France or specific circumstances which were not suited for such a pamphlet.*<sup>31</sup>

I will get back to this introduction later. – But let us see the “poem” first, even if I dare not offer you a full translation into Byronic lines of what Byron was supposed to have written. I will try to give a flavour of what it is about.

*Only when the sun is no more, will we forget the plagues and storms born from its heat to simply admire its radiance, light and force.*

*Only when his beloved bride lies in her tomb, will the man forget the flaws of her mind and pay tribute to the virtues of her heart and the qualities of her soul.*

*The hero has fallen under the scythe of the black genies. Muses! Break your glorious harps; weep, Bards! The great man is gone.*

*France! Tell me what has become of this superb star which, but yesterday, flooded you with light and showered you with laurels.*<sup>32</sup>

Such is the beginning of the poem, and the beginning of a pastiche is essential to “set up the mood” and build (or ruin!) the credibility of its attribution. – Remarkably, the dithyramb offers two images of antithetic character in the first two “stanzas”: a tragic one – the heat of the sun, which brings diseases and gales – which can be connected to the darkest poems of Byron, *Darkness*, for example; and a

<sup>31</sup> « Le dithyrambe de lord Byron a été composé dans une soirée ; c'est une production de l'impression violente que la mort du héros a faite sur l'esprit du grand poète. Il nous a été envoyé par sir Arthur Smylders, ami du noble lord ; et nous devons à nos lecteurs de leur avouer que ce dithyrambe n'est qu'une première inspiration non encore achevée ; il en circule divers morceaux à Londres, quoique jusqu'ici lord Byron n'ait pas confié son nouveau poème à la presse. Il veut, nous écrit-on, l'étendre davantage ; et il est probable que lorsqu'il sera imprimé, le traducteur habituel de lord Byron en fera part au public français. Pour nous, nous avons voulu, en attendant, faire paraître la traduction d'un morceau qui nous paraît plein de beautés et de force. (...) Nous avouons encore que nous avons fait quelques légères suppressions dans la notice et dans le dithyrambe. Ces passages supprimés étaient, ou des injures à la France, ou des circonstances qu'il ne convenait pas de laisser dans cette brochure. » id. p. iii.

<sup>32</sup> « C'est quand le soleil ne sera plus, que l'on oubliera les épidémies et les tempêtes que ses chaleurs ont causées, pour n'admirer que son éclat, sa lumière et sa force. / C'est quand l'épouse bien-aimée est descendue dans la tombe, que l'homme oublie les défauts de son esprit pour rendre hommage aux vertus de son cœur et aux qualités de son âme. / Le héros est tombé sous la faux des noirs génies. Muses, brisez vos harpes glorieuses ; pleurez, Bardes ; le grand homme n'est plus. / France, dis-moi ce qu'est devenu cet astre superbe, qui naguère faisait jaillir sur toi des flots de lumière et des gerbes de laurier ! » ibid. p.23.

“comic” one – the bride’s qualities which are only recognized by the husband once she is dead – which is an interesting example of how, in 1821, France understood Byron’s irony: it had recently been discovered – hardly a year before – in the first two cantos of *Don Juan* and in *Beppo*<sup>33</sup> – in this order and not *Beppo* before *Juan*. This brash contrast, artificially introduced in the opening lines, shows us that this mixture of tears and laughter, terror and vulgarity, was considered to be characteristic of Byron’s new “way of writing” – and it tells us how “disturbing” it was for a French author, and probably for the French public.

Immediately after this exordium, the tone changes; and the *pastiche*-maker goes back to a grandiose-grandiloquent style with noble vocabulary, “Biblical” apostrophes, and references to the Antiquity, which cannot but recall *Childe-Harold’s Pilgrimage* or, more precisely, how it was introduced into French literature. – Back to “safe” territory! The author (and the reader) will not venture out of it again in the whole poem. And this is why these opening lines are so important.

The author then compares Napoleon’s death – had he died at the height of his power – with his actual fall “like a withered leaf”:

*Napoleon is no more! and Nature is silent; Europe is quiet; carousing has not stopped. – Has the Angel of Death thus struck the vile head of some obscure man? – No! the Man of this Age has fallen, and Europe, with a cold heart, looks upon the collapse of the Colossus who shook the world.*

*Ah! If the grave had opened under the Great Man’s feet when he was wielding his bright sceptre over the French provinces, under Italy’s beautiful sky, over the Helvetian mountains, the green meadows of Dutchland, the fertile plains of Germany, then, mourning Europe would have shed grievous tears and screamed with terror over his funeral urn. Unfortunate hero! you lived too long; your death, which would have shaken the world, does not move anyone more than does the fall of a withered leaf.*<sup>34</sup>

Then the poet tries to understand this unprecedented fall. He reminds England’s abhorrent role in it:

*Weep, faithful Englishmen! your name will be cursed; you will be loathed by generations to come as a punishment for your violated hospitality.*<sup>35</sup>

Further on, he exclaims, somewhat optimistically if we consider historical facts:

---

<sup>33</sup> The anonymous translation [by A. Pichot and E. de Salle] of the first two cantos of *Don Juan* was published on 5 February 1820 (volume 6 of the *Complete Works*) and *Beppo* on 11 March 1820 (volume 8 of the same set).

<sup>34</sup> « Napoléon n’est plus ! et la nature est muette ; l’Europe est tranquille ; les fêtes ne sont point interrompues ! - L’ange de la mort a-t-il donc frappé la tête vile d’un homme obscur ? - Non : l’homme du siècle est tombé, et l’Europe voit d’un cœur froid la chute du colosse qui fit trembler le monde. // Ah ! si l’ancre de la mort se fût ouvert sous les pas du grand homme, lorsqu’il étendait son sceptre brillant sur les campagnes françaises, sous le beau ciel de l’Italie, aux monts helvétiques, sur les vertes prairies des Bataves, sur les plaines fécondes de la Germanie, l’Europe en deuil eût entouré son urne funèbre des larmes de la douleur et des clameurs de l’effroi. Héros malheureux ! tu as vécu trop long-temps ; ta mort qui eût é[b]ranlé la terre, n’émeut pas plus que la chute d’une feuille desséchée. » *ibid.* p.24.

<sup>35</sup> « Pleurez, fidèles Anglais ; votre nom sera maudit ; l’exécration de la postérité vous punira de l’hospitalité violée. » *ibid.* p.25.

*Fickle fortune, the elements, the rigours of inclement climates, the furious hurricanes and the cold, were unable to fell the warrior. It took the whole of Europe to rise against him, and seventeen armies marched, not without trembling, against Napoleon*<sup>36</sup>.

The poet describes Napoleon's captivity, the approach of Death, the forty days of his agony, the hesitation of the Death Angel to cut the thread of such a life. Finally, he fancies Napoleon's last words, with his face turned towards France. A last nasty blow at the English ends the poem.

*Napoleon's woes remain nothing more than a shameful page in our history. His last day was for him one of triumph and happiness. Freed from his chains and from the hideous aspect of his jailers, far from his dreadful rock, he can now breathe. – A nobler world has welcomed his great soul.*<sup>37</sup>

### 3.

Nobody would ever figure out today that such a text could have been written by Byron. Its mere "foreword" denounces a fake: Byron was not in London in Summer 1821; his poems "being written" could not be read there; none of his friends or correspondents is named Arthur Smylders, a fake name which makes us "smile", of course. And he would never have praised Louis the Gouty as the author did in the last lines, in a probable attempt to calm down the suspicious censors... In 1816, Byron had explained furiously to John Murray who informed him of fake-poems: "...and as to the *"Lily of France"*, *I should as soon think of celebrating a turnip...*"<sup>38</sup> and nothing shows that his opinion of the crippled Bourbon had improved by 1821.

The poem gained considerable success. Its fourth edition was already on the market on 4 Aug. 1821<sup>39</sup> while a first versification of it was being offered to the readers under the confusing title of *The last day of the captive*<sup>40</sup>, given as a "free imitation of Lord Byron, by a former soldier"; it was "published" by Alphonse Margeot de Lavillemeneuc, who was most probably its author – even though he did not include this piece in his *Gallic Nights, Political and moral meditations*<sup>41</sup> published the year after.

---

<sup>36</sup> « *La fortune inconstante, les éléments, les intempéries des saisons, l'ouragan furieux et les frimats (sic) furent impuissans pour abattre l'homme de la guerre. Il fallut que toute l'Europe se soulevât devant lui, et dix-sept armées marchèrent, non sans trembler, contre Napoléon.* » *ibid.* p.25.

<sup>37</sup> « *Les maux de Napoléon ne sont plus qu'une page déshonorante de notre histoire. Le jour suprême fut pour lui un jour de triomphe et de bonheur. Libre de ses chaînes et du hideux aspect des geoliers, loin de son roc affreux, il respire. --- Un monde plus noble a reçu sa grande âme.* » *ibid.* p.30.

<sup>38</sup> BLJ, t. 5, p. 84.

<sup>39</sup> *Bibliographie de la France*, 4 Aug. 1821, n°3145; a fifth edition would follow on 1 Sept. 1821 (n°3553). The text was printed again on 5 May 1833, on the anniversary day of Napoleon's death, in the Republican newspaper *L'Echo de la Fabrique, Journal industriel et littéraire de Lyon*, Lyon, imprimerie de Jérôme Perret, rue St-Dominique, n°13 (reprint EDHIS, tome 2, p.144); again in 1839, after *La Nymphé de Sainte-Hélène, ou la Pupille de l'Empereur Napoléon* (printed in Mâcon, by Chassipollet); and at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a sarcastic magazine entitled "*Our Friends the English*", full of all the worst clichés about France's "Sweet Enemies"...

<sup>40</sup> *Le Dernier Jour du Captif ; par un ancien Militaire ; imitation libre de Lord Byron*, publiée par M. de Lavillemeneuc. [impr. de P.Dupont.] No date on the title page – but « 1821 » on the printed cover, absent from the copy at BnF. (BnF YK-5282 T4 9.2-A, and private coll. – Announced in the *Bibliographie de la France* on 4 August 1821, n°3210.)

<sup>41</sup> Lavillemeneuc, *Les Nuits gauloises, ou Méditations politiques et morales*, Paris, l'auteur et Charles Painparré, 1822.

Three other versifications of Byron's *Dithyramb on the Death of Napoleon* came out that same year: one (probably) in Paris, one in Lyon, and one (probably) in Geneva<sup>42</sup>, the former two anonymous, and the latter signed by John Petit-Senn, the famous Genevan poet, known for his criticism of Napoleon and his pride upon being a citizen of the free city of Geneva. He adapted the *Dithyramb* into a regular classical French ode, in stanzas of ten lines, rhyming according to the formal – even ceremonious – pattern ababcdeed. This did not put an end to the success of the poem. In 1823, the author of the *Bibliographie de la France* registered another versification of the poem, by a mysterious A.B., published (without a date) in Béziers<sup>43</sup>. It is by far the most poetic version. As late as 1834, a poet who modestly remained protected by the asteronym C\*\*\* G\*\*\* gave yet another verse version of it, under the tantalizing – and misleading – title of *The Death of Napoleon. A manuscript recently found in Lord Byron's papers*.<sup>44</sup>

We can find many other traces of this poem “by” Byron in contemporary works. First, in reviews of the Napoleonic brochures published upon his death: a former soldier, “A. G...n” enthusiastically reviewed the dithyramb and did his best to promote it: “*The analysis of this poem will not be long, as the famous author, carried away by the Great Man's glory, and by the generosity of his own heart, seems to have forgotten the hero's mistakes in order to celebrate his virtues only. Its beginning proves that great geniuses always love and respect each other, even though they belong to nations at war.*”<sup>45</sup> Constant Taillard, in his *Review of the pamphlets published about Napoleon*<sup>46</sup> wrote: *I shall speak only of the dithyramb. Be it or not by lord Byron, it is a model of romantic prose. This dithyramb is not without flaws; but, like the sun, it screens them by its brightness. Lord Byron's judgment on his fatherland will be that of Posterity. “And I, a foreigner to France, a fellow countryman of Napoleon's persecutors, I did want to throw a few flowers on his ashes, to conceal my country's shame.*”<sup>47</sup>

We can hear echoes of the poem in the anonymous *Bard's Song on the Death of Napoleon, an Ossianic poem*.<sup>48</sup> In 1826, Jean-Joseph Vaissières (cautiously hidden under the pseudonym of Joseph

<sup>42</sup> *Imitation libre du dithyrambe attribué à lord Byron, sur la Mort de Napoléon.* (Absent from the BnF catalogue. Private collection. – Title page missing.) *Dithyrambe sur la mort de Napoléon, traduit de l'anglais de lord Byron, et mis en vers français.* Lyon, chez les marchands de nouveautés, 1821. (Absent from the BnF catalogue. Private coll.), *Imitation libre de l'Ode angloise attribuée à lord Biron, sur la mort de Napoléon Bonaparte, par John Petit-Senn de Genève.* 1821. (No location, no editor name. Absent from the BnF catalogue. Private coll.)

<sup>43</sup> *La Mort de Napoléon, Dithyrambe, Traduit de l'anglais de Lord Byron. Mis en vers par A.B. Béziers,* de l'imprimerie de J.-J. Fuzier (Announced in the *Bibliographie de la France* on 17 May 1823, n°2085. - BnF YK 5329)

<sup>44</sup> *La Mort de Napoléon. Manuscrit récemment trouvé dans les papiers de Lord Byron.* Traduit de l'Anglais par C\*\*\* G\*\*\*. Paris. – Jules Berrier, éditeur, quai aux fleurs, 3. Imprimerie de Sétier, rue de Grenelle-Saint-Honoré, n. 29. [No date.] Announced in the *Bibliographie de la France* on 26 July 1834. (BnF YK-5328)

<sup>45</sup> « *L'analyse de cette pièce ne sera pas longue, puisque ce célèbre auteur, enflammé de la gloire du grand homme, et suivant l'essor de son âme généreuse, a semblé oublier ses fautes, pour ne chanter que ses vertus. Son début prouve que les grands génies s'aiment et se respectent toujours, quoiqu'ils soient ennemis par les lois des nations.* » (In *A la mémoire du Héros malheureux ou Analyse raisonnée des principales brochures qui ont paru depuis la mort de Napoléon ; par A.G...n, ancien Officier.* A Paris, chez les libraires du Palais-Royal, et chez les marchands de nouveautés. 1821. Announced in the *Bibliographie de la France* on 24 August 1821, n°3445.)

<sup>46</sup> Constant Taillard, *Revue des brochures publiées sur Napoléon*, Paris, 1821. (Announced in the *Bibliographie de la France* on 10 August 1821, n°3216.)

<sup>47</sup> « *Je ne parlerai que du dithyrambe. Qu'il soit ou non de lord Byron, c'est un modèle de prose romantique. Ce dithyrambe n'est pas sans quelques taches ; mais, semblable au soleil, il les couvre par son éclat. Le jugement de lord Byron sur sa patrie sera celui de la postérité. « Et moi, étranger à la France, compatriote des bourreaux de Napoléon, j'ai voulu jeter quelques fleurs sur sa cendre, pour cacher l'opprobre de mon pays.* »

<sup>48</sup> *Le Chant du Barde sur la Mort de Napoléon. Poème ossianique.* Lyon, imprimerie de Fr. Mistral. [No date.] (BnF YE-50951)

Servières) took it for granted that Byron was the author of the dithyramb<sup>49</sup>. Again in Edouard Henry's *Heroic cantos*, published in 1829, we can find the assertion that the *Dithyramb* is by Byron<sup>50</sup>. In 1832, a poet-soldier or soldier-poet, Michon, gave, as his own inspiration, a rewritten and truncated version of "Byron's" *Dithyramb*, but many elements of this new piece are easily recognizable<sup>51</sup>!

#### 4.

Unlike the *Dithyramb*, no genuine poem by Byron was versified in French six times in the first thirteen years of its publication. Few had such a direct and immediate impact on followers. This may be considered as a cruel statement, as much for Byron as for the French poets, but it is factual. Disregarding the *Dithyramb*, out of deliberate scorn or mere ignorance, prevents scholars in Romantic literature from fully apprehending the fascination Byron exerted on French readers, especially those readers who passionately needed a champion in their loathing of the "ancient world" which had been imposed again upon France and its neighbours by England and the self-called "Holy" Alliance. Among this large audience we notice a number of soldiers of the Old Army (read: Napoleon's army, "la Grande Armée"), Lavillemeneuc, Michon, maybe also "A.B." who might well be the "Officer of Light Infantry", the author of the "romance" published in 1816 called *Il faut partir – We must part or I must depart...*

This manifold picture in France is not enough to describe the success of the poem completely. – The *Dithyramb* had an international career as well. As soon as 1821, it was reprinted in Brussels, by Arnold Lacrosse, famous for his interest in Napoleon and corresponding pirate editions<sup>52</sup>. The same year, it was also translated into Dutch and published in Te 's Bosch by Arkestijn<sup>53</sup>. In 1824, it was published in Lugano, Switzerland, in an Italian prose translation<sup>54</sup>, which sparked the inspiration of another anonymous poet who gave a versified Italian version of it in 1828<sup>55</sup>; this poetic version was printed several times by Vanelli and by Ruggia in Lugano, together with Manzoni's "*Cinque Maggio*" or at the

---

<sup>49</sup> Joseph Servières, *Chansons nouvelles*, Paris, chez les principaux libraires, 1826, and Jean-Joseph Vaissières, *Chansons*, Clermont-Ferrand, imprimerie et librairie de l'auteur, rue des gras, n°9, 1831. - If Vaissières decided to publish the first edition of his songs under a pseudonym, it is likely because he feared he might get into trouble with the censors and might be at risk of losing his printing patent because of the "subversive" character of some of them. « Le Cygne », *The Swan*, in which he "confirms" that Byron was the author of the dithyramb, was in good place in the first collection, pages 214-216.

<sup>50</sup> *Chants héroïques, suivis de poésies diverses*, par M. le B[ar]on Édouard Henry, Paris, Denain, 1829.

<sup>51</sup> *La Mort de Napoléon. Dithyrambe dédié aux compagnons de sa Gloire*. Par Michon. Imprimerie de Petit, rue du Caire, N.4. (BNF YE-47606) Announced in the *Bibliographie de la France* on 8 Sept. 1832, as n°4304.

<sup>52</sup> *La Mort de Napoléon. Dithyrambe traduit de l'anglais de Lord Byron; précédé d'une notice sur la vie et la mort de Napoléon Bonaparte; par Sir Thomas Moore*. Bruxelles, Arnold Lacrosse, 1821. (Absent from the BnF catalogue. Private coll.) – Arnold Lacrosse was also the first European publisher of the earliest long poem in French on Napoleon, one of the most incredible book stories of the Age: anonymously published for the first time in 1822 on the Isle de France (renamed Mauritius by the English who "forgot" to give it back after the war), *Napoléon, poème en 10 chants*, was sent to Joseph Bonaparte in the United States, who promoted its reprint in Philadelphia (1823), accrediting the rumour that he was its author. In 1824, the poem was printed in Bruxelles, by Lacrosse. In 1833, a parallel version, in Italian translation and in French, was printed in London. In 1838, Hubert-Louis Lorquet, the actual author of the poem, published a revised version in Port-Louis (Mauritius), which did not prevent yet another Paris editor, Gardembas, from attributing the poem to Joseph Bonaparte again in 1840 ...

<sup>53</sup> *Aanteekeningen over het Leven en den Dood van Napoleon Bonaparte, door den Heer Thomas Moore, en Uitboezeming bij den Dood van Napoleon, door Lord Byron, beide naar de Fransche vertaling uit het Engelsch gevolgd*. Te 's Bosch, Arkestijn, 1821. (Private coll.) - Let's notice that the mere name used for the publication place, Te 's Bosch – The Wood – instead of 's Hertogenbosch – The Duke's Wood –, can probably be interpreted as a political statement: any reference to "the Duke", in 1821, was likely to be understood as an homage to the duke of Wellington.

<sup>54</sup> *Ditirambo in Morte di Napoleone di Lord Byron*. Lugano, Co' Tipi Vanelli e Comp. 1824. Rodolphe Chamonal & Fabrice Teissèdre, book catalogue "*Napoléon raconté par l'écrit*", December 2004, n°303.

<sup>55</sup> *Ditirambo in Morte di Napoleone di Lord Byron recato in versi italiani. Aggiuntavi l'ode di Alessandro Manzoni "il 5 Maggio"*. Lugano, Coi tipi di G. Ruggia e C., 1828.



end of other works, some of them rather hagiographical<sup>56</sup>. In the future, I am convinced, some other translations will come to light. I guess there is one in German at least and maybe also one in Polish. Other imitations will be identified. When you know the text, you spot many phrases and images which originate in it! And further editions of the dithyramb will come out.

It seems firmly established that the actual author of the *Dithyramb on the Death of Napoleon* is Jacques-Albin-Simon Collin de Plancy<sup>57</sup>, born during the Revolution's worst period, the author of a famous *Dictionnaire infernal* (1818), and a *Dictionnaire féodal* (1819); he had recently contributed to a volume of stories of vampires and other evil ghosts<sup>58</sup>, which may have played a role in his idea to pastiche Byron! (Should I remind you that *The Vampyre* was Byron's most influential work in France, that year?)

## 5.

The *Dithyramb* is not the only Byron forgery triggered by Napoleon's death! There are two other pieces explicitly attributed to him, and a third one introduced in a way which insinuates that he is the author. The latter is called *The Ashes of the Prisoner of St. Helena, an ode translated from the English*<sup>59</sup> and opens with a foreword in which we read: "By publishing this prose translation, we could not help both arousing the eloquence of some of our young poets, and recording the tribute a foreign poet and a rightly famous one, pays to the French nation." Which "foreign poet", writing in English, could be meant, if not Byron? The only other credible name is that of his friend Thomas Moore.

The other two pieces explicitly attributed to Byron published in August 1821 refer to Queen Caroline's misfortunes – which might seem to be miles away from Napoleon's death, but which are not. *Le Cri de l'Angleterre, au Tombeau de sa Reine, The Scream of England over the Grave of her Queen*<sup>60</sup>, given as a translation of a poem by Byron, seems, at first sight, to be a mere defence of the repudiated Caroline, but after two innocuous pages, the author comes to his "actual" subject:

*The dazzling glare of a sun was no less harmful to you, o Caroline! and which was this sun whose torrents of light engulfed all these glories; who was this King of the stars? The King of the sovereigns*

---

<sup>56</sup> As an example : *Storia di Napoleone compilata sulle di lui proprie memorie da Leonardo Gallois*, Lugano, coi tipi di G.Ruggia e Comp. 1828. 2 vol. The verse translation of the *Dithyramb* is in the second volume, pp. 227-241.

<sup>57</sup> Quérard, *La France Littéraire*, article « Collin de Plancy » : « La Mort de Napoléon, dithyrambe traduit de l'anglais, de lord Byron, précédé etc. Paris, Painparré, 1821 » Quérard adds this juicy remark: *The dithyramb and the account are both by M. Collin de Plancy. This pamphlet has had five editions in the same year, thanks to the names the author borrowed. (« Le dithyrambe et la notice sont de la composition de M.Collin de Plancy. Cet opuscule a eu cinq éditions la même année, grâce aux noms que l'auteur a empruntés. »)*

<sup>58</sup> *Histoire des fantômes et des démons qui se sont montrés parmi les hommes, ou Choix d'anecdotes et de contes, de faits merveilleux, de traits bizarres, d'aventures extraordinaires sur les revenans, les fantômes, les lutins, les démons, les spectres, les vampires, et les apparitions diverses, etc.* Par Mme Gabrielle de P\*\*\*\*, Paris : Locard et Davi, Mongie aîné, Delaunay, 1819. – Collin de Plancy was a cousin of Gabrielle de Paban, the author of the book according to Barbier; Quérard supposes that Collin collaborated with her; A.L. Caillet asserts he is the author.

<sup>59</sup> *Les Cendres du Prisonnier de Sainte-Hélène, ode traduite de l'anglais*, Paris, de l'imprimerie de A. Bobée, rue de la Tableterie, n°9, 1821. – Announced on 4 August 1821 in the *Bibliographie de la France*, n°3137. « *Toutefois nous n'avons pu résister, en publiant cette traduction en prose, au double besoin d'exciter la verve de quelqu'un de nos jeunes écrivains, et de prendre acte de l'hommage qu'un poète étranger, justement célèbre, y rend à la nation française.* »

<sup>60</sup> *Le Cri de l'Angleterre, au Tombeau de sa Reine; Dithyrambe de Lord Byron, traduit de l'anglais*, Paris, chez les marchands de nouveautés, 1821. (*Bibliographie de la France*, 24 Aug. 1821 – n°3425.)

of Europe! His light shone on the bloody French Revolution; he reached the zenith of greatness at his noon, then he miserably set down into the Ocean.<sup>61</sup>

This image of the sun and the parallel between its revolution and Napoleon's evolution, the evocation of the fatal rock of St. Helena, several other details, suggest to me that this "poem" could well have been written by the same author as the *Dithyramb*, as a kind of "confirmation" of his first forgery.

The other fake on the same topic, *Lord Byron's Letter on the death of the Queen of England, and the events which preceded it*<sup>62</sup> is built on the same pattern, but presented as the translation of a piece of prose. Two pages of formal lament about poor Caroline lead to an unexpected parallel of her fate and Napoleon's, and give an opportunity to the author to express his execration of England:

*Albion! Let ignominy cover your brow, though it could have shone with blazing glory. You disregarded the most sacred rights... You violated the sacred laws of hospitality... You repelled far from your shores the Great Man who believed in your generosity... What? You chained him to a wild rock in the middle of the seas... You overwhelmed him with humiliation and loathing... He is dead... You did not repel your queen, you welcomed her on your shores; but she is dead, too...*<sup>63</sup>

This is a sympathetic "cavalry charge" in honour of the Emperor, isn't it?

## 6.

We may wonder why all these forged works were – explicitly or implicitly – attributed to Byron. Without presenting any new or ancient theory of pastiche and parody (the subject has been brilliantly treated, for example in the introduction to the *Repertoire of [French-speaking] pastiches and parodies from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries*<sup>64</sup>), several reasons can be identified for the "fashion of Byron forgery" in the 1820's in Paris.

Most obviously, Byron's success – not only literary but also financial – must have aroused the greed of invidious authors. This is what the bibliographer Quérard hints about Collin de Plancy. The same avidity must have triggered the French publisher's decision to reinstate *The Vampyre*, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of the *Complete works* of Byron, despite Amédée Pichot's reluctance. It may have been as well one of

---

<sup>61</sup> « L'éclat resplendissant d'un soleil ne t'a pas moins été nuisible, ô Caroline ! et quel fut ce soleil dont les torrens de lumières ont englouti toutes ces gloires ; quel fut ce Roi des astres ? le Roi des Souverains de l'Europe. Son aurore brilla sur la sanglante révolution française ; il parvint, en son midi, au faite des grandeurs, et il se coucha misérablement dans l'océan. »

<sup>62</sup> *Lettre de Lord Byron sur la mort de la Reine d'Angleterre, et les événemens qui l'ont précédée*. Paris, chez les marchands de nouveautés, 1821. (*Bibliographie de la France*, 24 Aug. 1821 – n°3424.)

<sup>63</sup> « Albion ! l'ignominie couvre ton front qui aurait pu briller de l'éclat de la gloire. Tu as méconnu les droits les plus sacrés... Tu as violé les saintes lois de l'hospitalité... Tu as repoussé loin de tes bords le Grand Homme qui croyait à ta générosité... Que dis-je ! tu l'as enchaîné sur un rocher sauvage, au milieu des mers... Tu as multiplié autour de lui les humiliations et les dégoûts... Il est mort... Tu n'as point repoussé ta reine, tu l'as reçue sur tes bords ; mais elle est morte aussi... »

<sup>64</sup> Paul Aron et Jacques Espagnon, *Repertoire des Pastiches et Parodies Littéraires des XIXe et XXe siècles*, Presses Universitaires de Paris Sorbonne, 2009.

the reasons why his fellow translator Eusèbe de Salle published his own novel *Imer* under Byron's name in February 1821<sup>65</sup>.

A second reason can be found in the French political situation. The old Bourbons were sitting again on the throne of France by the will of the "Allies" without the French people being consulted; the liberal opponents to the restored regime (and the "Napoleonists" who embraced their cause) had to be careful in the way they expressed their opinions, especially after the assassination of the Duc de Berry in February 1820. Censorship had been reintroduced soon after, in order to fight against liberal ideas and whatever was seen as anti-royalist propaganda. "Hiding oneself" behind a famous name, and what's more an English one, made it possible to criticize "our good friends the Allied enemies" far more radically; it also permitted to express much greater enthusiasm for the Napoleonic era than what an actual subject of Louis XVIII could have done...

If Byron was soon to be seen as a herald of freedom, his name was already associated with the fight against oppression: *The Lament of Tasso* had been translated, and its impact should probably be reassessed as one of his first poems available to non-English speakers. – Many former soldiers of Napoleon's army had a burgeoning passion for Byron. His is one of the rare names in literature mentioned in their memoirs. Barrès, Billon, Persat expressed their passion for him. From simple corporal Aval<sup>66</sup> to brigadier general Fornier d'Albe, they bought and read (some of) his books; Lavillemeneuc, Michon versified "his" translated work. A few years later, Guillaume Pauthier, a young relative of General Donzelot's and an army comrade of Vigny's, published a verse translation of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.<sup>67</sup> – This is a new battlefield to investigate: Byron's early readership in France, and the place soldiers occupied in it.

The last obvious reason for publishing under Byron's name was to prove oneself and the rest of the world that you could, equally to Byron, write beautiful and successful poems... The supreme glory was therefore to remain undetected by academics. – This has been the lasting glorious fate of some paintings, musical scores, and writings.

## 7.

But what did Byron actually do at the time of Napoleon's death? How did he react? What did he write? Did he write anything? We all know that he never wrote any poem about the event at the time. The

---

<sup>65</sup> Such is Charles-André Julien's opinion, who explored Eusèbe de Salle's papers and clarified the genesis of *Imer*. (Charles-André Julien, *Un médecin Romantique, interprète et professeur d'arabe, Eusèbe de Salles*, Alger, ancienne maison Bastide-Jourdan, Jules Carbonel, imprimeur-libraire-éditeur, 1925.)

<sup>66</sup> Corporal Aval bought and bound together 23 pamphlets related to the death of Napoleon published in July and August 1821; he paid a total of 25 fr 70 cents for them, which represented close to half a month of his "demi-solde" or "half-pay". (This collection of rare pamphlets was proposed as n°313 in the auction catalogue of Dominique de Villepin's Napoleonic collection, Hôtel Drouot, 19 March 2008.)

<sup>67</sup> *Le Pèlerinage de Childe-Harold, Poème Romantique*, traduit en vers français par l'auteur des Helléniennes et des Mélodies Poétiques, Paris, Delangle frères, 1828. Announced in the *Bibliographie de la France* on 21 June 1828, n°3638, and reissued with the translator's name in 1830: *Le Pèlerinage de Childe-Harold, Poème Chevaleresque de Lord Byron*, traduit en vers français par G. Pauthier, de la Société Asiatique de Paris. Deuxième édition, Paris, Urbain Canel, 1830. (This second issue is not announced in the *Bibliographie de la France*.)

news of Napoleon's death reached Rome on 18 July<sup>68</sup>. When did it reach Ravenna? Perhaps a couple of days later. The first mention of it in Byron's edited correspondence is in the letter to Thomas Moore dated 2 August, in which he urges his friend to compose the poem he does not himself feel able to write: *Why don't you write on Napoleon? I have no spirits, nor estro to do so. His overthrow, from the beginning, was a blow on the head to me. Since that period, we have been the slaves of fools.*<sup>69</sup>

Byron did not break this silence related to the Emperor's death in 1821. He kept his Napoleonic inspiration for *Don Juan*, but this is quite another topic. – We have clues about how he reacted to some of the French apocryphal works. On 7 January 1823 he received Jean-Jacques Coulmann's visit in the outskirts of Genoa. They discussed literature; Byron talked about Lamartine, Delavigne, Pierre Lebrun and his *Lyrical poem on the Death of Napoleon*. He added: *"In Paris, I was also attributed an ode on the same subject. It is infamous, especially as it is bad. But it happens to me every day."*<sup>70</sup> From this, it is impossible to decide whether he was referring to the *Dithyramb* or to the *Ode*. Nevertheless, something is clear: Byron was always upset to see his name used to support or secure the success of any piece of literature he was not responsible for.

As early as 1816, Byron had written to John Murray: *"I can forgive whatever can be said of or against me – but not what they make me say or sing for myself – it is enough to answer for what I have written"*<sup>71</sup>.

---

<sup>68</sup> John Clubbe, *The passionate pursuit, Byron's Collecting of Napoleona*, Société française des études byroniennes, Bulletin de liaison 2009, p.78, note 63.

<sup>69</sup> *BLJ*, t.8, p.166.

<sup>70</sup> *Réminiscences*, par J.J. Coulmann, ancien maître des requêtes en service ordinaire au Conseil d'Etat, ancien député etc. Tome premier (Tome deuxième, et Tome troisième) Paris, Michel Lévy frères, éditeurs-libraires, rue Vivienne, 2bis, et boulevard des Italiens, 15, A la librairie nouvelle, 1862 (respectively 1865 and 1869.), tome 2, pp 163-164 : « *On m'a attribué aussi, dit-il, à Paris une ode sur le même sujet. C'est d'autant plus infâme qu'elle est mauvaise. Mais cela m'arrive tous les jours.* »

<sup>71</sup> *BLJ*, t.5, p. 84

I warmly thank Danièle Sarrat for her precise and scrupulous review of this paper, and Kathryn Hadley for her suggestions to improve the translation into English of all extracts of poems and texts supposedly "translated from the English" and printed as such in French in 1821.