

“DECAY STILL IMPREGNATE WITH DIVINITY”:  
LES LIEUX DE MÉMOIRE IN BYRON’S *CHILDE HAROLD’S*  
*PILGRIMAGE*

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In one of his recent interviews Harold Bloom, an outspoken defender of the Western Canon, defined the main subject of his life-long research as “metaphorical thinking” (Bloom). It means to explore how “cognitive power” finds expression through the literary medium, which he generally refers to as “metaphor”. In spite of Bloom’s proverbial mistrust for any sort of Cultural Studies – and Memory Studies seem to owe much to the field – I supposed that the idea might be worth developing. On the one hand, Byron’s engagement with history in his first great poem written in and about Napoleonic and post-Napoleonic Europe is clear.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, it is no less evident that he conceives both the historical and the geographical dimension of the poem from a very personal angle. I agree with those who define ‘memory’ against other forms of past consciousness primarily through its perspectivism, partiality and affective value.<sup>2</sup> That’s why it seemed promising to give a parallel reading of Byron’s subjective treatment of the past in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and of certain theoretical points recently made within Memory Studies. My question is, can we think about cultural memory *through* Byron’s poem? In other words, does it suggest any working metaphors that could be useful as cognitive tools?

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1 See, for instance, Carla Pomarè, *Byron and the Discourses of History*, Ashgate, 2013.

2 Needless to say that while no historical knowledge *is actually characterised* by ‘objectivity’ and ‘impartiality’, these qualities remain an ideal though unattainable standard for it. For a discussion of different aspects, see Boyer, Pascal and James Wertsch, *Memory in Mind and Culture*, N.Y.: Cambridge UP, 2009. and Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization. Writing, Remembrance and Political Imagination*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011. For a concise and thought-provoking revision of the memory/history issue, see: Kerwin L. Klein, “On the Emergence of *Memory* in Historical Discourse”, *Representations* 69, Winter 2000, 127–150.

The shaping of “cultural memory” as a concept owes much to the insights of Pierre Nora.<sup>3</sup> First, his vast research project on French “lieux de mémoire”, both in its empirical and theoretical aspect, was a way to reflect on the current cultural situation when memory ceased to be a self-evident normative and formative force that ensures social bonds – “we speak so much of memory because it is so little of it left” (Nora 7). It is this sense of crisis that informs the crucial differentiation between the traditional memory and the modern memory, and consequently, explains why such a phenomenon as “sites of memory” comes into being. They originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations [...] because such activities no longer occur naturally. [...] Making their appearance by virtue of the deritualization of our world [...] museums, archives, cemeteries, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, depositions, monuments, sanctuaries, fraternal orders [...] [are] illusions of eternity [...] devotional institutions [...] that mark the rituals of a society without ritual. (Nora 12)

Meanwhile, in the traditional culture “each gesture, down to the most everyday, would be experienced as the ritual repetition of a timeless practice in a primordial identification of act and meaning. With the appearance of the trace, of mediation, of distance, we are not in the realm of true memory, but history” (Nora 8).

What is important for my argument is that “modernity” is understood through secularization or, to use Max Weber’s metaphor, “disenchantment” (*Entzauberung*) of the world.<sup>4</sup> Memory is no longer spontaneous, but voluntary and deliberate, always conscious of the distance it has to cover and always mediated. Thus, the shaping of the “modern memory” can be seen as a parallel and a counter-current to the claims to rationality that the developing historical discourse is making more and more assertively.

The last thing I would like to draw attention to is, probably, the most original and fruitful of Nora’s ideas – namely, that “locations” of memory are treated broadly rather than narrowly “spatial”. Social institutions and practices alongside with texts, names and images as well as monuments

3 Strictly speaking, Nora himself employs the term “*mémoire collective*”, but I preferred to follow the word usage that is widely accepted today. See Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*”, *Representations* 26, Spring 1989, 7–24.

4 For a recent overview of the problem see: Richard Jenkins, “Disenchantment, Enchantment and Re-Enchantment,” *Max Weber Studies* 1.1 (2000): 11–32.

and places in their proper sense may be considered "sites of memory [...] where memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (7) haunted by acute historical sensibility. In fact, the metaphor of "lieu" stretching as far as it does come close to the idea of "medium" of memory, the bearer of changeable meanings open to re-reading and re-inscription. At the same time, the flexibility and comprehensiveness of Nora's theory enables us to look at it not only from our present context hyper-conscious about "media" and "mechanisms" of cultural transmission. A strong classical background behind the term "sites of memory" has long been noticed.<sup>5</sup> Initially, *topos/locus* referred to an individual memorizing technique based on an imaginative link between a certain place and a turn in the argument. However, as long as rhetoric is considered to be a model that has shaped the ways of thinking and artistic self-expression in the West, the term acquires a wider significance. *Topoi/loci communi* constituted a formal element that represents a reworking of a traditional store of specific, typical themes, formulas, phrases and figures and thus maintained the continuity of the Western intellectual tradition from Antiquity.<sup>6</sup> They actually functioned as an important means of accumulating cultural experience and structuring *what* and *how* should be remembered and reproduced.

What I find intriguing about *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is that the poem appears sensitive to the whole range of meanings that emerge around "sites of memory". The constitutive metaphor of the "pilgrimage" is a particularly rich one. Byron's poem, as I would briefly remind you, passed two stages of composition: during the first two cantos the "pilgrim" travels from the Iberian Peninsula to the Levant with Greece as his destination, in the Cantos III and IV he passes the German lands and Switzerland and through the north of Italy arrives in Rome. In both cases Byron gives a somewhat accurate account of his own journeys: the first—at the outset of his public career (1809–1811) and the second marking the dramatic turn that his private and literary life took five years later with his self-exile from England (1816–1817).

5 See Pim den Boer, *Loci memoriae – Lieux de mémoire*, in: *Media and Cultural Memory*, ed. by Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nunning, Walter de Gruyter, 2008; and Assmann, Jan, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, Cambridge UP, 2011, 24–25.

6 See Ernst R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, Harper & Row, 1953, 64–78.

Since Maurice Halbwachs' seminal work *The Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land* (1941) the link between pilgrimage and "collective memory" has been firmly established. The symbolic events viewed both as "past" but relevant "now" and thus "timeless" were projected onto real Mid-eastern geography through social practice binding together the Christian community across time and space. However, in Byron's case the idea of the pilgrimage is rather estranged by the presence of such an "unworthy" and "unknightly" protagonist<sup>7</sup> and at the same time inverted in a profoundly secular context, which makes it a perfect example of Nora's "ritual of the society without ritual".

The Greek episode from the second canto opens with an eloquent statement of enlightened skepticism, but its abundance in religious lexicon is unparalleled even in the Italian canto:

[...] Even gods must yield – religions take their turn:  
 'Twas Jove's – 'tis Mahomet's – and other creeds  
 Will rise with other years, till man shall learn  
 Vainly his incense soars, his victim bleeds;  
 Poor child of Doubt and Death, whose hope is built on reeds. (II, 3)

Where'er we tread 'tis haunted, *holy* ground,  
 No earth of thine is lost in vulgar mould,  
 But one vast realm of wonder spreads around [...] (II, 88)

[...] What *sacred* trophy marks the *hollow'd* ground,  
 Recording Freedom's smile and Asia's tear? (II, 90)

[...] But he whom Sadness sootheth may abide,  
 And scarce regret the region of his birth,  
 When wandering slow by Delphi's *sacred* side,  
 Or gazing o'er the plains where Greek and Persian died. (II, 92)

Let such approach this *consecrated* land,  
 And pass in peace along the magic waste;  
 But spare its *relics* – let no busy hand

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<sup>7</sup> See Byron's sharp responses to some of his baffled audience in the Preface to the 7<sup>th</sup> edition.

Deface the scenes, already how defaced!  
 Not for such purpose were these altars placed:  
*Revere* the remnants nations once *revered* [...] (II, 93)<sup>8</sup>

Sparta and Athens, Marathon, Parnassus, Arethusa's lake, the oracles of Dodona and Delphi are the places where a life more just, noble and beautiful, more in accordance with civic virtue and aesthetic perfection can be remembered and to a certain extent re-imagined. These are obviously the places canonised by classical tradition, and thus even a private "homage" paid by a lonely "pilgrim" becomes an act of cultural remembering. Almost the same set of values is shared by Italy which is the destination of the second part of the pilgrimage. What is new is the image of military splendour evoked by Venice and imperial grandeur coming to mind in Rome, while a stronger emphasis is placed on art and artistic personalities: Arquà is associated with Petrarch, Venice and Ferrara—with Tasso, Florence and Ravenna—with Dante.

However, the classical and the Renaissance ideal projected on the "legendary topography" of Greece and Italy can not account for all "sites of memory" in the poem. In the third canto Ferney, Lausanne, Geneva and Clarens are visited with a tribute paid respectively to Voltaire, Gibbon and Rousseau. As in other cases, it is a faithful travelogue of Byron's own journey from April to June 1816, which does not make it less symbolic. He evokes key figures of the Enlightenment who had a decisive impact on the shaping of modern subjectivity.

The one was fire and fickleness, a child [Voltaire],  
 Most mutable in wishes, but in mind,  
 A wit as various, – gay, grave, sage, or wild, –  
 Historian, bard, philosopher, combined;  
 He multiplied himself among mankind,  
 The Proteus of their talents: But his own  
 Breathed most in ridicule, – which, as the wind,  
 Blew where it listed, laying all things prone, –  
 Now to o'erthrow a fool, and now to shake a throne.  
 The other, deep and slow, exhausting thought [Gibbon],  
 And hiving wisdom with each studious year,

8 Italics are mine. All quotes are from: Lord Byron, *The Major Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, Oxford World's Classics, 2008.

In meditation dwelt, with learning wrought,  
 And shaped his weapon with an edge severe,  
 Sapping a solemn creed with solemn sneer;  
 The lord of irony, – that master-spell,  
 Which stung his foes to wrath, which grew from fear,  
 And doom'd him to the zealot's ready Hell,  
 Which answers to all doubts so eloquently well. (III, 106–107)

Here the self-torturing sophist, wild Rousseau,  
 The apostle of affliction, he who threw  
 Enchantment over passion, and from woe  
 Wrung overwhelming eloquence, first drew  
 The breath which made him wretched; yet he knew  
 How to make madness beautiful, and cast  
 O'er erring deeds and thoughts a heavenly hue  
 Of words, like sunbeams, dazzling as they past  
 The eyes, which o'er them shed tears feelingly and fast. (III, 77)

“Protean” Voltaire and “studiously” toiling Gibbon represent the intellectual power of critical reasoning, while Rousseau brought together the power of passion and the intricacy of reflection, all three showing a masterful command of discursive art. What makes these evocations an act of cultural remembering is that the enlightened principles embodied in these figures belong rather to the past than to the present. It is not only that they lose the war to human ignorance, prejudice and ambition – there are deep ironies working at the very core.

For then he [Rousseau] was inspired, and from him came,  
 As from the Pythian's mystic cave of yore,  
 Those oracles which set the world in flame,  
 Nor ceased to burn till kingdoms were no more:  
 Did he not this for France? which lay before  
 Bow'd to the inborn tyranny of years?  
 Broken and trembling to the yoke she bore,  
 Till by the voice of him and his compeers  
 Roused up too much wrath, which follows o'ergrown fears?

The “prophetic” and “Promethean” (III, 105) impulse turns against itself with the excesses and consequences of the French Revolution – a historical

irony expressed through a highly ambiguous metaphor referring to cultural memory:

*They made themselves a fearful monument!*  
The wreck of old opinions – things which grew,  
Breathed from the birth of time: the veil they rent,  
And what behind it lay all earth shall view.  
But good with ill they also overthrew,  
Leaving but ruins, wherewith to rebuild  
Upon the same foundation, and renew  
Dungeons and thrones, which the same hour refill'd,  
As heretofore, because ambition was self-will'd. (III, 81–82)

What is important is that Byron's authoritative intent to turn a formerly religious ritual into a "site" of secular cultural memory had personal as well as far-reaching cultural implications. Before he finally sailed off to Lisbon in June 1809, his plans had long been taking shape.<sup>9</sup> While the initial itinerary corresponded to the idea of the Grand Tour, later there appeared some options as extraordinary as Iceland and the Hebrides, West India, Persia and the Caribbean. Though neither of these places was finally visited by Byron, his travels to the Iberian Peninsula, Greece, Albania and Turkey still bore a sharp contrast to the conventional journey that would have been expected from a young aristocrat and peer of England. The Grand Tour developed throughout the 18th century as a major vehicle of socialization and elitist education within the ideological framework of the Enlightenment. Its geographical boundaries stretching as far as France, Italy and the German lands reflected the European *oikoumene*, the civilised world of civic and artistic achievement worth of transmission.<sup>10</sup> As soon as Romantic thought began questioning the basic enlightened assumptions of rationality, historical progress and aesthetics based on classical models, the backwardness of the former "cultural periphery" turned into a privilege. Thus, the itinerary of the Grand Tour changed conspicuously. A good example is provided by Spain: while Voltaire called it as obscure as "the most savage parts of Africa" and remarked that "it [was] not worth the trouble of

9 See William Borst, *Lord Byron's First Pilgrimage*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1948, xix–xxi.

10 See Jeremy Black, *The British Abroad: The Grand Tour in the Eighteenth Century*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1992.

being known”<sup>11</sup>, in the 19th century it became a fascinating and challenging exotic Other, an unsullied source of cultural energy. It intrigued not only Byron, but also Mérimée, Hugo and Gautier, Bizet and Lalo, Tennyson, George Borrow, David Roberts and David Wilkie and many others.

Such a redistribution of values on the symbolic map of Europe may be described in terms suggested by Memory Studies. Alongside with educating the young man in social intercourse, the European journey was dedicated to visiting historically significant places, but with interests far from being scholarly. Acquaintance with the European past was guided by a pedagogical concern for the present and constituted an important act of remembering—an act which, according to Jan Assmann, is “a realization of belonging, even a social obligation. One has to remember in order to belong”.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the difference between the Enlightened and the Romantic tour lies in how far memory should reach: the places that oddly enough represent the “barbaric” past in a more civilised European present like Spain or Albania in Byron’s case become worth commemorating and remembering. Although neither of them represents such a rich palimpsest as Italy or Greece, still there is more in these places than natural beauty and warlike spirit. It is especially true of the Spanish episode, where centuries old historical recollections of the Reconquista form an important background for the interpretation of the current military action.

Thus, the practice that used to remind the believer about the canonical history and guide him through the way of salvation was now cultivating the memory that sustained the worldly man and helped him to survive in the world where there is nothing beyond “Doubt and Death” (II, 3). However, the idea of the pilgrimage is revised further. As Frederick Bartlett usefully remarked, “remembering is always an effort after meaning”,<sup>13</sup> and the construction of meaning on the basis of past evidence is constantly under strain in Byron’s poem. The persistent image of the ruins is the most recognizable particularity in the second and the fourth cantos, and it received, probably, its most famous interpretation in the painting by Byron’s

11 Gavin DeBeer and André-Michel Rousseau (eds), *Voltaire’s British Visitors. Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*. Vol. 49. Geneve, 1967, 182.

12 Jan Assmann, “Communicative and Cultural Memory”, *Media and Cultural Memory*, ed. by Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nunning. Berlin, N.Y.: Walter de Gruyter, 2008, 114.

13 Bartlett, Frederick, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*, Cambridge UP, 1995, 44.

contemporary, J. M. W. Turner (*Childe Harold in Italy*, 1832). Ruins, both Gothic and antique, were a conventional element in pre-romantic and Romantic architecture, painting and literature. They had a set of references established by the beginning of the 19th century that ranged from an emotional state of melancholy or fear to philosophical generalizations about the decline and fall of empires and the triumph of nature over man’s efforts.

The principle “places of worship” in the poem are (virtually) in ruins which maintains the tension between the material and the symbolic, the actual miserable state and the sublimity of suggested meaning that remains unattainable. It is reminiscent of Nora’s observation that “sites of memory are to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial—all of this to capture the maximum of meaning in the fewest of signs ... [They] only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning” (Nora 19)..

The metaphor of the “unintelligible” and “unrememberable” past has its subtleties. Ruins become the material for further cultural artifacts, either grand or petty, or they are succeeded by other ruins. St. Sophia in Istanbul and imperial burial urns replaced in Rome by statues of apostles also represent the process of forgetting through a vivid image of cultural palimpsest.

Through the classical references that function on the formal level as well as on the level of content the poem is further engaged with memory. In perfect accord with the etymology of the term “sites of memory”, the “sites” of Harold’s travels are not only geographical, but discursive. Byron employs a whole set of poetically significant *topoi*, and here I dwell upon three of them:

Save where some solitary column mourns  
Above its prostrate brethren of the cave;  
Save where Tritonia’s airy shrine adorns  
Colonna’s cliff, and gleams along the wave;  
Save o’er some warrior’s half-forgotten grave,  
Where the gray stones and unmolested grass  
Ages, but not oblivion, feebly brave,  
*While strangers only not regardless pass,*  
*Lingering like me, perchance, to gaze, and sigh ‘Alas!’* (II, 86)  
*Stop! – for thy tread is on an 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? (III, 17)

These are reworkings of the *sta viator topos* that passed from the public discourse of funeral epigrams to literature, as can be seen, for instance, in Thomas Gray's graveyard elegies. In the following stanzas the *ubi sunt topus* can be identified:

*Oh! where, Dodona! is thine aged grove,*  
 Prophetic fount, and oracle divine?  
 What valley echo'd the response of Jove?  
 What trace remaineth of the Thunderer's shrine?  
 All, all forgotten – and shall man repine  
 That his frail bonds to fleeting life are broke?  
 Cease, fool! the fate of gods may well be thine:  
 Wouldst thou survive the marble or the oak?  
 When nations, tongues, and worlds must sink beneath the stroke!  
 (II, 53)

Admire, exult – despise – laugh, weep, – for here  
 There is such matter for all feeling: – Man!  
 Thou pendulum betwixt a smile and tear,  
 Ages and realms are crowded in this span,  
 This mountain, whose obliterated plan  
 The pyramid of empires pinnacled,  
 Of Glory's gewgaws shining in the van  
 Till the sun's rays with added flame were fill'd!  
*Where are its golden roofs! where those who dared to build?* (IV, 109)

The next stanza is one of the many examples of the *vanitas*:

What from this barren being do we reap?  
 Our senses narrow, and our reason frail,

Life short, and truth a gem which loves the deep,  
 And all things weigh'd in custom's falsest scale;  
 Opinion an omnipotence, – whose veil  
 Mantles the earth with darkness, until right  
 And wrong are accidents, and men grow pale  
 Lest their own judgments should become too bright,  
 And their free thoughts be crimes, and earth have too much light.  
 (IV, 93)

As it is evident, "death" is the idea common to all the *topoi* exemplified above. As Jan Assmann observed, death taken in its social dimension might be called "the primal scene of memory culture", because it represents the experience of rupture and discontinuity in its most basic form and thus demands an immediate decision whether the community should act consciously let the dead "live" on or should reconcile with the loss (Assmann, *Cultural Memory* 19–20). However, the inability to preserve the past—in other words, to remember—is the other common denominator in Byron's treatment of the theme. Even the *sta viator topos* which traditionally referred to heroic commemoration, is far from unproblematic.

In spite of the narrative's rather loose composition, it reaches its culmination at the sanctuary of both religion and art, that is, at Saint Peter's cathedral. The magnificent church interior is the source of a sublime, but utterly benign and creative experience that strikes a new note after four cantos of remorse, doubt and moral critique. However, the poem does not end with the narrative of Harold's pilgrimage—it ends with the famous self-assertive apostrophe to the ocean. What can Memory Studies add to the interpretation of this old image that has been associated (not without Byron's influence) with overlapping and sometimes conflictive notions of freedom, eternity, mutability, fate, superhuman power or, on the contrary, mirror of human psyche?

The armaments which thunderstrike the walls  
 Of rock-built cities, bidding nations quake,  
 And monarchs tremble in their capitals [...]  
 These are thy toys, and, as the snowy flake,  
 They melt into thy yeast of waves, which mar  
 Alike the Armada's pride, or spoils of Trafalgar.

Thy shores are empires, changed in all save thee—  
 Assyria, Greece, Rome, Carthage, what are they?  
 Thy waters washed them power while they were free,  
 And many a tyrant since; their shores obey  
 The stranger, slave, or savage; their decay  
 Has dried up realms to deserts: –not so thou,  
 Unchangeable save to thy wild waves' play—  
 Time writes no wrinkle on thine azure brow—  
 Such as creation's dawn beheld, thou rollest now.

Thou glorious mirror, where the Almighty's form  
 Glasses itself in tempests; in all time,  
 Calm or convulsed—in breeze, or gale, or storm,  
 Icing the pole, or in the torrid clime,  
 Dark-heaving;—boundless, endless, and sublime—  
 The image of Eternity [...] (IV, 180–182)

The poetical contrast between the earth and the sea is that between the world of ruins and the world of waves, between culture and nature. Ruins as evidence of human ambition and achievement represent a tantalizing, but mostly illusory opportunity to reconstruct the past, a struggle between forgetting and remembering. Meanwhile the ocean leaves no trace, no tokens of the times, no opportunity for recollection—it may fairly be called a “site of no-memory”.

By way of conclusion, I would like to return to my initial question: can *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* be considered as a reflection on cultural memory taken in highly specific—metaphoric—terms? I would answer in the affirmative, and point out three metaphors: the pilgrimage, the ruins and the sea. They came to be strongly associated with Romanticism though all of them reach much further into cultural history that tends to makes them more subtle cognitive tools. All three are “spatial”, the first two—the pilgrimage and the ruins—add an important temporal dimension to spatiality, that is, they refer either to a progress or a regress in time, while the third—the sea—is fundamentally a-historical. In Byron's poem they lend themselves to conceiving the modern cultural memory that is fragmented, volatile and always in search of a material medium to be attached to.

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