



## The Historical Discourse(s) of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*: Classical Fetish and Whiggism

Ivan Pregolato  
University of Nottingham

As to my reading, I believe I may aver without hyperbole, it has been tolerably extensive in the historical department, so that few nations exist or have existed with whose records I am not in some degree acquainted from Herodotus down to Gibbon.<sup>1</sup>

This is how Byron, on the eve of his twentieth birthday, boastfully describes his historical education in a letter to his friend – and later literary agent – Sir Robert Charles Dallas. The poet's 'tolerably extensive' reading of historians ranges 'from Herodotus down to Gibbon', i.e. from the mid fifth century B.C to the late 1700s A.D. This paper discusses the historical discourse(s) which Byron's delimiting choice between Herodotus and Gibbon implies is culturally *en vogue* in early nineteenth-century Britain. It is argued that, apart from obviously intending to make evident the length of his reading, Byron's preference of historians is one which entails 1, the dominance – and subsequent fetishization – of a certain historical knowledge (i.e. of the ancient past and classical knowledge in general) as the primordial discourse suitable (and desirable) for someone of the poet's social status; and 2, the suggestion of a chronological narrative which is based on notions of historical succession and development through the ages (namely, a whig account of history), which reads the past in terms of temporal stages in the advancement of civil liberties through time. The whig account is one which interprets the past teleologically, i.e. with the present state of affairs ultimately considered to be the natural end of the historical process. Conversely, in early nineteenth-century Britain, the country's political institutions and culture as a whole (as represented by Gibbon in the excerpt above) were perceived as the outcome of a journey of improvement which had its beginnings in the civilizations of antiquity – especially Greece and Rome. These two themes of historical reverence and inheritance are intrinsically bound together when one encounters texts dealing with classical knowledge as their subject-matter in the early 1800s as *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1809-12, 1816-18), albeit not exclusively, does.

Here one finds the need to explain the word whose plural was ambivalently left in brackets in the subtitle of this article: discourse(s). Are, then, these two distinct themes – the fetish for classical knowledge and whig history – two diverse historical discourses or one? By accepting a post-Foucauldian conceptualisation of discourse, one finds that 'discourse' – what one can or cannot write, say or think about a subject – is always/already embedded in discursive practices which comprise not only of language, but the powerful grip that institutions – e.g. schools, universities, the political sphere –

have on knowledge (and the creation of a given discourse) in itself. As Laclau and Mouffe succinctly put it, anything that can be said at any time ‘cannot consist of purely linguistic phenomena; but must instead pierce the entire material density of the multifarious institutions, rituals and practices through which a discursive formation is structured’.<sup>2</sup> In that sense, it becomes problematic to try to strictly separate the fetish for the ancients and the whiggish reading of the past as a process through time into two distinct discourses. One finds that they are thoroughly entwined in these multiple institutions and relations of institutional power that at once both contradict and complement each other. Namely, the ancients are revered with a sense of distance and are at the same perceived as the natural predecessors of the present in the relentless march of time. The many layers of tradition and institutions which are intrinsically entrenched into such a big concept as ‘history’ – as something that *was* and which inevitably moves to what *is* – leads to the conclusion of unresolved ambivalence. Therefore, in order to discuss these issues one should attempt to read the poetic text against its respective discursive context by studying the institutions which were (partly) responsible for the emergence/reproduction of historical discourse: the wider intellectual and political environment in the early 1800s. In short, to seek to answer: why are these assumptions regarding history (namely, the fetish for ancient historical facts and the underlying questions of Britain’s position in the march of history at the early 1800s) present in the poetry and not others? What were the conditions of formation and diffusion of knowledge at the time of writing?<sup>3</sup>

### The Fetishized Past

Despite the intense interest and, more overtly, inescapable awareness of history by those living in the early decades of the nineteenth century, there was not by that time a proper institutionalisation of the discipline as it is taken for granted today.<sup>4</sup> The contemporary idea of the discipline of history, as taught and discussed in universities, was only established in Britain in the 1870s (Harrison, Jones, Lambert, 18). A brief survey of Byron’s formal education provides a good assessment of the institutions from whence the discourse(s) of historiographical knowledge in the early 1800s (partially) emanated. A student at Harrow and subsequently Cambridge, Byron received the typical education for someone of his rank. The curriculum at the former was essentially ‘underpinned’ by ‘the classics’, i.e. Greek and Latin, taught by the study of ancient poets and historians,<sup>5</sup> an example of a larger culture of deep-rooted respect for the works of antiquity.<sup>6</sup> The boarding school, with its Speech Day declamations of poetry and plays by students,<sup>7</sup> encouraged the rhetorical *grandeur* of a factual understanding of the past, where historical knowledge was more or less equated to the correct naming of events and dates, largely those which were related to the classics. Cambridge, on the other hand, was in those days renowned for its teaching of mathematics, ‘in contrast with Oxford and the public schools, where the classics dominated’.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Trinity College, where Byron attended, was the college on campus dedicated to the study of the classics in a mathematically-oriented university.<sup>9</sup> Despite this more progressive aspect regarding the teaching of mathematics at Cambridge, with regards to the study of history, the two only universities in England at the time operated with a certain idea of knowledge still virtually unchanged since their medieval foundation. Indeed, the two institutions were ‘havens of scholasticism’, where the emphasis was on storing knowledge (e.g. the

classical curriculum) rather than making advancements in research.<sup>10</sup> As the German visitor Victor Aime Huber, who in 1840 published a book on his impressions on the academic life in Cambridge and Oxford, *English Universities*, put it, the role of the English university was not ‘to produce learned men in several sciences’ as it was in Germany by then, but in ‘producing the first and most distinctive flower of the national life, a well educated “Gentleman”’.<sup>11</sup> In short, the teaching of the period was dominated by the idea of knowledge for knowledge’s sake, one that would improve oneself and shape future gentlemen. That factual understanding of the past, so important in the academic formation of the English gentleman, was thoroughly dominated by the study of the ancient world and its facts and classical texts.

Perhaps the most striking feature in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* to the modern reader is the poem’s plentiful examples of factual evidence. The text abounds with names: names of places, of historical events, of military battles, and of great men, just to cite a few. These compositions are the product of a young author eager to show his assimilation and mastery of a culture that treated the knowledge of the works and history of antiquity as a means of showing one’s intellectual cultivation, i.e. a superior position in regards to other academic subjects. This cultural practice is the product of a historical fetish: the supremacy of classical works – and facts from ancient history in general – is perceived as a natural, self-evidently superior historical topic in itself. In other words, the classical theme was in the early nineteenth century part of the proper line of study one would have to follow because of the cultural status which they traditionally possessed. Needless to say, this importance attached to classical themes is in fact the product of numerous social processes embedded in power – e.g. the institutional grip maintained by schools and universities which perpetuated this and the social status attached to the study of the classics which were trumpeted by members of the aristocracy (such as Byron) and the gentry. Classical themes and authors are bundled together as objects attributed with a dominant cultural value. This process is analogous to the fetishization of commodities in Marxist thought, but not identical to it. In other words, it is not argued that texts are commodities, but rather that certain types of knowledge (mainly the classics) are objectified with an inherited cultural – and social – value.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, the manner in which these constant references to ancient history (and in Byron’s case this largely means Rome and Greece) is also comparable to that of the antiquarian who collects many relics from the past in order to fill his cabinets for the sake of it.<sup>13</sup> The main difference being, evidently, that in lieu of the gathering of marbles, coins, old books and manuscripts – as an antiquarian would – Byron collects quotations and references to authors, myths and historical events. As Arnaldo Momigliano, puts it, ‘antiquaries collect all the items that are connected with a certain subject, whether they help to solve a problem or not’.<sup>14</sup> The antiquarian is the person who loves and collects traces of the past in its factualness without being necessarily interested in a chronological and/or philosophical line of enquiry in the manner of historians.<sup>15</sup> The method of antiquarian study is a ‘systematic survey’, i.e. a minute description of the relics of the past (Momigliano, ‘Ancient’, p. 288). In short, this type of knowledge of the past is the ‘display of learning as an end in itself’ (Momigliano, ‘Rise’, p. 61). The classic past for the antiquarian is a matter of cultural fetish, and his role is one of classification and collection (Momigliano, ‘Ancient’, p. 311). Byron’s scattered references to antiquity are presented in the poetry in an almost ornamental way, as a means of flagging up his

allegiance to a form of knowledge culturally enveloped – and perceived as naturally so – in notions of superiority; in cultural taste and intellectual refinement.

In short, the historical discourse taught at the educational institutions at the time was essentially entangled in this cultural cluster of scholasticism and classicism which ultimately perceived knowledge as a means of intellectual cultivation. This fetishized history appears amidst the verses of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* as a constant rhetoric which cites bits and pieces of factual history in a characteristically *hauteur* manner. The poem's topic, the pilgrimage through continental Europe and its borders, presents not only a compendium of descriptions of the monuments and landscapes encountered during the journey, but also a myriad of postulations on the written works which were somehow related to the places which the poet had previously come across in his studies. This is particularly relevant to the cantos whose subject matter is dominated by ancient civilizations. As one of Momigliano's commentators has put it, the textual works of antiquity were received 'on a par with material remains, i.e. as primary evidence and not as interpretation'.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the writings of the ancients were taken to contain as much 'factual truth' about antiquity as the monuments, inscriptions, and the ruins at the locations visited by the antiquaries themselves. *CHP* subscribes to this idea, as it essentially espouses a 'particular kind of historical knowledge available through the experience of *being there* on the spot'.<sup>17</sup> which provided the locus for postulations on historical data concerning these famous locations readily available in a culture abundant with classical knowledge. This historical discourse, which treats historical data – 'facts', 'dates', 'events' – as knowledge *per se*, constitutes the greater part of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. The resulting picture is of a reified classical past, with history presented (like an antiquarian with his cabinets) as collections, classifications and systematic descriptions (Momigliano, 'Ancient History', 311; 'The Rise', 58).

The poem's cantos II and IV show this fetishism for the ancient past more prominently, as they approach, respectively, Greece, Venice and Rome's ruinous states as their main subject-matter. Vast parts of the second canto read almost literally as a tour-guide to the famous locations in Athens,<sup>18</sup> where Byron describes the many 'broken arch[s]' and 'ruin'd wall[s]'<sup>19</sup> (II, 6; 1) alongside his knowledge of Greek myths, ancient poetry and historiography. Throughout the narrative, as the poet meditates on the fall of ancient empires and the inevitability of historical change, he alludes to a myriad of events in Greek history, ancient or not. For instance, Byron alludes to Alaric (II, 14), 'the Gothic King' (CPW, II, 192), and his plundering of the region in the past, the Spartan knights who died in Thermopylae during the Peloponnesian War (II, 73), the Oligarchy of the Thirty in Athens (II, 74), the Greco-Persian Wars (II, 89, 90), and many other examples. Byron's antiquarian fetish for historical accuracy has been described as the poet's need to 'mythologize fact', as his poetic renderings of what once happened play out as a way to re-enact, to 're-incarnate [...] the fables of the past'.<sup>20</sup> Not only that, but historical facts appear entwined with the mythological and the topographical, thus giving the history of (especially ancient) Greece a strong sense of remoteness and reverence:

Yet to the remnants of thy splendour past  
Shall pilgrims, pensive, but unwearied, throng;  
Long shall the voyager, with th' Ionian blast,  
Hail the bright clime of battle and of song;  
Long shall thine annals and immortal tongue

Fill with thy fame the youth of many a shore;  
 Boast of the aged! lesson of the young!  
 Which sages venerate and bards adore,  
 As Pallas and the Muse unveil their awful lore. (II, 91)

In the utter impossibility of experiencing the glorious past, the poet finds solace in writing about it and the scenery which surrounded him in a somewhat similar lofty manner as the ancient Greeks did with their traditional myths. Ancient Greece is pushed back towards a distanced past to the level of a mythological time in history and which is only available through the fetishizing of ruins and the scattered and systematic references to the textual works of antiquity.

Despite being written eight years after the second canto and in a very different historical context, Canto IV continues, in many aspects, the fetish for (especially) ancient history and the relish for scattered facts of its predecessor. Byron starts the canto by depicting Venetian history and her glorious past, when the city 'was a queen with an unequalled dower' (IV, 11; 9). Many a stanza alludes to the times of the Doges, such as 'blind old Dandolo! | Th' octogenarian chief, Byzantium's conquering foe' (IV, 12; 8, 9). The recurrent theme is how Venice, once a military power, victorious, say, at the battle of Candia – an event so glorious in Byron's view as to be described as 'Troy's rival' (IV, 14; 7) – fell into decadence with the passing of centuries. Indeed, the history of Venice is always measured against facts from antiquity, a point which is expanded below.

The canto continues its journey through the Italian peninsula towards Rome, where the poet is

To meditate amongst decay, and stand  
 A ruin amidst ruins; there to track  
 Fall'n states and buried greatness, o'er a land  
 Which was the mightiest in its old command  
 And is the loveliest[.] (IV, 25; 2-6)

Once reaching 'the lofty city' (IV, 82; 1), the poet continues his meditations on the Roman Empire and its subsequent decline and fall, as he undertakes his sightseeing amidst the ruins. Byron then proceeds with his fetishizing of Roman history and its 'hundred triumphs' (IV, 82; 2). The poetry abounds with historical facts, such as the murder of Julius Caesar, gathered from Byron's readings of Tully, Livy and Virgil (IV, 82), the general Sulla's ('Sylla') conquests (IV, 83), Rome's founding myth (IV, 88), versified amidst descriptions of the Palatine's ruins (IV, 107), the Forum's architecture and statues (IV, 110), and the Colosseum's 'arches on arches!' (IV, 128; 1). The fetish for factual accuracy is such that the vision of the Palatine with its chaotic and multi-layered traces of the past incites a tone of exasperation:

The Goth, the Christian, Time, War, Flood, and Fire,  
 Have dealt upon the seven-hill'd city's pride;  
 She saw her glories star by star expire,  
 And up the steep barbarian monarchs ride,  
 Where the car climb'd the capitol; far and wide

Temple and tower went down, nor left a site: –  
 Chaos of ruins! who shall trace the void,  
 O'er the dim fragments cast a lunar light,  
 And say, 'here was, or is', where all is doubly night? (IV, 80)

The ruins of the Palatine present a challenge to the systematic collection and ordering of the remnants of the past. The stanza regrettably alludes to the impossibility of dating the wrecks of the ruinous site in accordance to their respective time in history. The traces of ancient Roman are inevitably mixed with those of later ages and the pinpointing of the 'here was, or is' is enveloped in the 'double night of ages, and [...] Ignorance' (IV, 81; 1, 2). The glorious past is venerated by the poet in its reified greatness only to be met by anxiety when its rubbles prove to be a challenge to the fetishization of the past, when Byron cannot discern temples from baths from halls amidst the wreckage left by time and decadence (IV, 107; 6, 7).

Apart from the verses, the poem also includes lengthy annotations which, for most of the time, expand on the historical knowledge present at the body of the poem. These are most evident in the notes to cantos II and IV. The former, apart from the references to the numerous sources which the poet used to render his verses on the classical sites and historical events – which indeed corroborates Byron's early boastful remark of having abundantly read 'from Herodotus down to Gibbon' – contained a particularly lengthy note attached to Stanza 73. Once in Athens, Byron thought it necessary to write in prose about 'a city of which every body, traveller or not, has thought it necessary to say something' (CPW, II, 199). The note's several pages present the poet's overall balance with regards to a few works on Greece and whether he agrees or not with his contemporaries' many remarks on the topography and politics of the region. The poet also presents a compendium on the Romaic language, with a list of its main authors, and a few extracts, two of which he attempts to translate into English, much in the same vein that Byron's main travelling companion, Hobhouse, the 'indefatigable antiquarian',<sup>21</sup> wrote during his travels. Hobhouse eventually published *A Journey through Albania* in 1813, one year after the publication of *CHP*'s first two cantos. A few years later, and following the two friends' journeys through Italy in 1817-18, *CHP*'s fourth canto came to the public with Hobhouse's lengthy notes appended to the poem. These were so extensive that they were also published in 1818 as a book on its own, *Historical Illustrations of the Fourth Canto of Childe Harold*. Hobhouse's prose is ruthlessly sober and his purpose for most of the time is to postulate on/describe/transcribe what the reader might deem picturesque and to discuss the history, architecture, art, topography, language, and manners of the region with previous writings on the subject.

Notwithstanding its being a dominating discourse of historical knowledge at the time, this largely rhetorical representation of a given society's past and present was the subject of criticism by some intellectuals of the period. William Hazlitt, for instance, declared that

[Byron's] *Childe Harold* contains a lofty and impassioned review of the great events of history, of the mighty objects left as wrecks of time; but he dwells chiefly on what is familiar to the mind of every school-boy, has brought out few new traits of feeling or thought, and has done no more than justice to the reader's preconceptions by the sustained force and brilliancy of his style and imagery.<sup>22</sup>

*CHP*, he continues, is a work permeated by a 'lofty and philosophic tone' in which Byron approaches 'the crumbling monuments of time, [...] the great names, the mighty spirit of antiquity. The universe is changed into a stately mausoleum: in solemn measures he chaunts a hymn to fame' (119). Hazlitt criticized the historical commonplaces (as he saw it) of Byron's poetry as the products of a mere schoolboy's mind, as someone who grandiloquently quotes from the footnotes of old books as a sign of knowledge and wisdom, but for the critic amount to an empty and uninteresting rhetoric. This abundance of factual data does not add anything to the knowledge of the past, but merely delves into the all-too-familiar cultural fetish for antiquity and classical works of the time.

However, despite displaying an evident fetish for the commonsensical historical factuality as Hazlitt so thoroughly criticized, Byron's writings also display a great deal of suspicion regarding this fetishization of the past. The poet grasped the limitations of this historical practice, even though his texts actively indulged in it, as shown above. Byron perceived how fetishizing facts in many ways undermined the human aspects of the past and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* also criticizes the inhuman distance that ultimately treated the past as mere names and dates. Take, for instance, Byron's approach to the battles of Talavera and Albuera in the Peninsular Wars of 1809. He starts by depicting these alongside the Spanish victory against the moors in the past (I, 34-36). As 'ye sons of Spain' (I, 37) go to battle against the French, he writes:

By heaven! it is a splendid sight to see  
 (For one who hath no friend, no brother there)  
 Their rival scarfs of mix'd embroidery,  
 Their various arms that glitter in the air! (I, 40; 1-4)

The 'splendid' scenes of war are thoroughly undermined by the reminder of the suffering of those who could lose their loved ones in the battle and the 'Havoc' (I, 40; 9) that goes hand in hand with the bloody deeds of warfare. The poet does not spare the readers from the imagery of the battle's aftermath, when crows feed on the corpses of soldiers and the battlefields are fertilized by the rotting of their bodies (I, 41; 8-9). The soldiers are referred to as 'Ambition's honour'd fools!' (I, 42; 1), as their deaths so vainly attested. The proximity of the war scenes he encountered when crossing Spain in 1809 made the poet meditate on how history can be dehumanized by fetishizing the battles of the past under the name of a general or a tyrant, rather than acknowledging the carnage in which they are inevitably entangled:

Enough of Battle's minions! let them play  
 Their games of lives, and barter breath for fame:  
 Fame that will scarce reanimate their clay,  
 Though thousands fall to deck some single name. (I, 44; 1-4)

Finally, and more adamantly, Byron's criticism of the views most Westerners had on Greece in the early nineteenth-century and the political situation in the Levant at the time is perhaps the most important example of how the poet undermined his own historical fetishism. In the lengthy note to Canto II, Stanza 73, mentioned above, Byron attacks the scholars who interpreted the region in a distorted way, i.e. through the lenses of the ancient past and/or by adopting an overtly Eurocentric view. These writers, when observing the Ottoman rule over Greece in the early 1800s, dismissed the modern Greeks as a degenerate 'race' in comparison to their contemporaries. Byron compares such

distorted, bigoted views of Westerners to a hypothetical ‘Turk in England [who] would condemn the nation by wholesale, because he was wronged by his lacquey, and overcharged by his washerwomen’ (CPW, II, 201). Byron is here criticizing the uncritical writer who failed to engage with the politics of the region at the time of writing in favour of the classical, reified notions of antiquity; or worse, who dismissed the modern Greeks as a degraded ‘race’ in comparison to their predecessors because they did not match the fetishized glories of their past:

Of the ancient Greeks we know more than enough; at least the younger men of Europe devote much of their time to the study of the Greek writers and history, which would be more usefully spent in mastering their own. Of the moderns, we are perhaps more neglectful than they deserve; and while every man of any pretensions to learning is tiring out his youth, and often his age, in the study of the language and of the harangues of the Athenian demagogues in favour of freedom, the real or supposed descendants of these sturdy republicans are left to the actual tyranny of their masters, although a very slight effort is required to strike off their chains. (CPW, II, 202)

Here, Byron is essentially arguing that one should pay more attention to *modern Greece* rather than to obsess with its ancient history, even though that is a dominant characteristic of his own writing. Most importantly, the youth should not solely study the classical Greek texts dealing with ‘freedom’ for the sake of it, but rather act in the shadow of those lessons. That meant aiding the modern Greeks in their plight against the Ottoman Empire.

### **Historical Whiggism**

Concerning this issue, Byron is advocating his allegiance to the whig historiographical tradition of his time. The whiggish reading of the past is one regarding the historical progress of the idea of ‘civic freedom’. The idea of freedom, so this tradition argues, has been perfected through history, and it culminates, inadvertently, in the present. Therefore, in early nineteenth-century Britain, one would look back to the past to understand how freedom came to be perfected in British society. Ancient Greece, then, is one of the preceding civilizations which bestowed upon Britain – via Republican Rome, medieval Venice and other historical powers – its improved notion of civic freedom.<sup>23</sup> It becomes, then, a historical *duty* for Britain to aid Greece in her struggle against the Ottomans.

This grand narrative of historical succession and progress was mainly inherited by the poet via his political allegiances. Byron always professed to support the Whigs, a party which happened to be the oppositional voice in Parliament for most of the poet’s lifetime. Here one must elaborate between the terms Whig and whig. The capitalized Whigs concerns of a few landed families (which later were to unite in a more or less political party as understood in contemporary politics) who had played a major role in the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Successfully settling the political landscape after the tumultuous events of the 1600s,<sup>24</sup> those families (and later party) then wrote their own version of the events, thus giving birth to a discourse that read the revolution as a watershed in history in the long process towards the perfection of ‘civic freedom’, which is the ‘whig history’ this article deals with. In this historiographical discourse, the present is naturally read as the embodiment of a convergence of historical freedom, and the empires and civilizations which preceded Britain are taken as hurdles in this inexorable march of historical perfectionism. British history, for instance, is thus unveiled as the



march of events from despotic tyranny: the advent of the Magna Carta, the establishment of Habeas Corpus and the defeat of absolutism in the 1600s give birth to the established state of a constitutional monarchy in the early nineteenth-century. These whiggish ideas essentially aimed for the establishment of a 'balance between the extremes; the Crown and the people' (Kelsall, *Byron's Politics*, 1987, 9). The classic whig account in post-1688 Britain is one that considers that this middle-ground was successfully achieved, i.e. with the limitation of the power of the monarch by Parliament, which, in its turn, grants 'freedom' to the people. Ultimately, the whig interpretation of history presupposed a moral, metaphysical goal in history which read the present as the outcome and solution of the woes of the past (Butterfield, 12).

Thus, whig historiography ultimately tended to consider Britain as the natural outcome of the unveiling of the idea of 'freedom', as the country inherited and perfected these notions from ancient civilizations. It then, naturally, becomes Britain's duty to spread this political process through the world with other countries having to follow the historical march. As an example, the onset of the French Revolution was originally taken with enthusiasm by the Whig party as France's path towards a government similar to the British one – a constitutional monarchy.<sup>25</sup> However, as the revolutionary process across the Channel unfolded into radicalism, with the beheading of the king, the establishment of a republic, and the expansionist wars that followed, political opinion in the United Kingdom grew increasingly more conservative (Everest, 22). As Everest puts it, after the declaration of war in 1793, 'support for the French was not only unpopular; it was treason' (23). When discussing the whig interpretation of history during the Napoleonic Wars, one is entangled in a discursive environment where the historiographical is unavoidably entwined with a political and nationalist ideology. The originally Whig idea of reading the past in terms of the present is slowly usurped by the Tories as a means of nationalist rhetoric during the war with France. In an increasingly polarized society, the Whigs were caught up between "'Tory" reactionism' and radicalism,<sup>26</sup> which was by this time punishable as 'treason'. Byron's whiggism is fundamentally caught up in this dilemma. On one hand, the poet seeks an opposition to tyranny by constantly alluding to a love for liberty and the people against monarchical power. On the other, he is constantly haunted by the violence and murderous deeds perpetrated by the French mob during the Terror. Byron shares with the Whig party the anxieties of obtaining this discursive middle-ground, and his thoughts on the historical events presented in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* ascribe to this intellectual conundrum.

In Canto II, Byron depicts Greece as 'the origin of civilisation which, in the conventional Whig accounts of the eighteenth century, spread through an imperial expansion justified by an enlightened understanding of civic freedom'.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the whig interpretation of history considered Britain as the country which possessed the best 'understanding of civic freedom' in the early 1800s in the same manner as Greece did in the days of its ancient democracy. In the lengthy note to stanza 73, Byron ponders on the modern character of the Greeks, and whether or not they could free themselves from Ottoman rule:

To talk, as the Greeks themselves do, of their rising again to their pristine superiority, would be ridiculous; as the rest of the world must resume its barbarism, after re-asserting the sovereignty of Greece; but there seems to be no very great obstacle

except in the apathy of the Franks [i.e. Westerns], to their becoming an [sic] useful dependency, or even a free state with a proper guarantee; – under correction, however, be it spoken, for many, and well-informed men doubt the practicability even of this (*CPW*, II, 202).

This excerpt perfectly sums up Byron's whiggism. The poet dismisses the idea of the more exalted Greeks who postulated a return to their 'pristine superiority' of the past as 'ridiculous', for he takes for granted a historical process which sees the ideal of 'civic freedom' as constantly perfecting itself throughout the march of time. Ancient Greece was the best embodiment of 'freedom' in the past, but history has moved forwards and Byron naturally perceived Britain as the modern embodiment of 'freedom' of his time. To postulate a return to the days of the Athenian democracy would be, he argues, to move backwards in history and to the 'barbarism' of the past. The proposition of resuming the country's former glory, he concludes, would be the same as considering 'the existence of the Incas on the future of Peru' (*CPW*, II, 203).

What Byron effectively proposes is a Western intervention in the region to free Greece from the Turks. In fact, Greece should become a colony of Britain:

The Greeks will never be independent; they will never be sovereigns as heretofore, and God forbid that they ever should! but they may be subjects without being slaves. Our colonies are not independent, but they are free and industrious, and such may Greece be hereafter. (*CPW*, 201)

Britain should embrace Greece as a colony: the Greeks' glorious history is long past them, and it is up to Britain – as the then potency – to reach out to it and perform the country's *duty* to extend its more enlightened views of freedom to the less fortunate peoples of the globe. Indeed, the depiction of Britain as the home of 'freedom' in the early nineteenth-century can be found in other parts of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*:

Yet I was born where men are proud to be,  
Not without cause; and should I leave behind  
The inviolate island of the sage and the free,  
And seek me out a home by a remoter sea. (IV, 8; 6-9)

The verses imply that the British should be, '[n]ot without a cause', proud of their freer society and almost boasts of its inviolable condition during the wars against Napoleon. Nonetheless, despite venting these whiggish and nationalist notions of history, Byron also notes how historical victory and glory are ephemeral, as the Venetian decadence illustrates:

In youth she was all glory, – a new Tyre, –  
Her very by-word sprung from victory,  
The 'Planter of the Lion', which through fire  
And blood she bore o'er subject earth and sea;  
Though making many slaves, herself still free,  
And Europe's bulwark 'gainst the Ottomite;  
Witness Troy's rival, Candia! Vouch it, ye  
Immortal waves that saw Lepanto's fight!  
For ye are names no time nor tyranny can blight. (IV, 14)

The whiggish march of ‘freedom’ through history is clearly implied in this stanza. Venice’s naval (and political) power in the sixteenth-century is proclaimed as the direct successor to the civilizations that preceded it. Firstly, the Italian city is called ‘a new Tyre’, alluding to the ancient Phoenician city’s commercial prowess at sea; and secondly, the Venetian naval victory against the Ottoman empire in the 1500s (Lepanto) is glorified alongside the Homeric account of the Greek victory against the Trojans. At once, Venice is trumpeted as inheriting both commercial trade and the prevailing of ‘freedom’ against the tyrannical menace coming from Minor Asia in two distinct historical periods. Moreover, underlying these themes of historical glory and triumph is the assumption that Britain directly succeeds Venice in its naval and commercial achievements in the early 1800s:

[...] and thy lot  
 Is shameful to the nations, – most of all,  
 Albion! to thee: the Ocean queen should not  
 Abandon Ocean’s children; in the fall  
 Of Venice think of thine, despite thy watery wall. (IV, 17; 5-9)

Once again, the poet seems to nod at a possible intervention on the part of the ‘Ocean queen’ to free Venice, one of the ‘Ocean’s children’, from Austrian dominion. However, history teaches that military power and influence is not eternal, and Britain should learn from the lessons taught by the former Venetian glory and subsequent decay. And yet, by implying that Venice would be better off if freed from Austrian dominion by British forces, Byron accepts the whig interpretation of history. Hence the paradox: ‘the island of the sage and the free’ should not ‘abandon’ Venice to its decadent fate of foreign domination by exercising its imperial power to free it from the Austrian monarchy; simultaneously, the poet also learns from the Venetian decadence that power and influence is not eternal, and can envisage the day when Britain’s status of potency would wither away.

Elsewhere, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* develops a more vigorous distrust to the whig interpretation of Britain as the natural outcome of ‘freedom’ in history. The victory over revolutionary France in 1815 was trumpeted by the Tory government as a watershed towards a freer society in the likes of the events in 1688. In the words of the then foreign secretary, Lord Castlereagh, Waterloo was ‘a victory “against usurpation and [...] military despotism”’ and ‘the government had acted “on the principles of the Whigs of the Revolution”’.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the government’s official discourse essentially meant that they ‘could claim to be the true heirs of the Revolution [of 1688]’ rather than the Whig party (Shaw, 166). Ultimately, by 1818 whiggish historiographical tendencies – given their indelible nationalistic overtones – had become the official rhetoric of the Tory government (Kelsall, *Byron’s Politics*, 1987, 80), and it is no wonder that, to use Kelsall’s words, the Whig party during Byron’s lifetime ‘was not only fragmented, it was in danger of becoming a magnificent fossil’ (30). Byron’s poetic voice, especially in the later cantos of *CHP* – published in 1816 and 1818 respectively – is essentially formed by this ‘fracture’ of ‘philosophical Whiggism’ (Franklin, 44). This is when the historiographical discourse of his former political sympathies is slowly usurped by the Tory government as the rhetoric of the Establishment – i.e. the rhetoric of cant – given the forceful nationalist thrust of this narrative.

This is better exemplified in the poet's meditations on the battle of Waterloo. Byron dismisses the battle as a 'king-making Victory' (III, 17; 9), in reference to the restoration of the monarchical powers in Continental Europe after Napoleon's demise, as well as unveiling its brutality, with references to the 'red rain' (III, 17; 7) which poured onto the battlefield, '[the] place of skulls, / The grave of France' (III, 18; 1, 2). What Byron presents is an active dismissal of the post-war ideology trumpeted by the Tories at the time:

Fit retribution! Gaul may champ the bit,  
And foam in fetters; – but is Earth more free?  
Did nations combat to make *One* submit;  
Or league to teach all kings true sovereignty?  
What! shall reviving Thralldom again be  
The patched-up idol of enlightened days?  
Shall we, who struck the Lion down, shall we  
Pay the Wolf homage? proffering lowly gaze  
And servile knees to thrones? No; *prove* before ye praise! (III, 19)

The stanza clearly ponders over the fate of 'freedom' in a polarized world, but which inconveniently lost one of its poles, i.e. Napoleonic France. Yet once again, Byron's despair is an explicit example of a whig mentality trying to find a middle-ground between opposition to the Tory victorious, nationalist language whilst intellectually negotiating a whiggish historical discourse of some sort. The verses recognize that Napoleon was a tyrant and his imperialist forces were not the epitome of liberty. On the other hand, the poet also criticizes the idea that his demise and the subsequent revival of the monarchies after 1815 did not bear the stamp of 'freedom' either. Quite the contrary, he dismisses the return of the previously overthrown kings as mere 'patched-up idol[s]', quite at odds with his 'enlightened days', when one should hope monarchies were to have become a thing of the past. In short, Byron refused to accept the events as a simple dichotomy of 'freedom' prevailing over tyranny as the Tories would have it, but rather presented it as one tyranny, i.e. Britain and their allies, surpassing that of Napoleonic France. Thus, the 'Wolf' substitutes the 'Lion' (Kelsall, *Byron's Politics*, 1987, 67). Following the stanzas where Byron dramatizes the ball's disruption at Belgium by the battle (III, 21-7), the victory is portrayed as a meaningless bloodbath which pays no heed to nationality, sides, or ideals:

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! (III, 28; 7-9)

In Byron's struggle to find a proper oppositional voice against the official discourse of the British government, 'whose veil / Mantles the earth with darkness, until right / And wrong are accidents' (IV, 93; 5-7), he gives vent to historical despair. His disillusionment alludes to the impossibility of renewal of 'freedom' in Europe:

Can tyrants but by tyrants conquered be,  
And Freedom find no champion and no child  
Such as Columbia saw arise when she  
Sprung forth a Pallas, armed and undefiled?  
Or must such minds be nourished in the wild,

Deep in the unpruned forest, 'midst the roar  
 Of cataracts, where nursing Nature smiled  
 On infant Washington? Has Earth no more  
 Such seeds within her breast, or Europe no such shore? (IV, 96)

Europe is depicted as irretrievably corrupted, as no matter where the historical process leads to, the downfall of one tyranny can only be substituted by a new one. Indeed, Byron only envisages the march of 'civic freedom' as sprouting into life in the Americas, which are, conversely, depicted as pure and immaculate. 'Freedom' is an entity which comes into being amidst the wilderness of nature, as the examples of George Washington and Bolivar show. To Byron in 1818, the future of Europe was an essentially bleak one. As he states in the dedication to Canto IV, the entire continent was stained by an oppressive environment and the restriction of civil liberties, i.e. as a regress in the improvement of 'freedom' as his whig mentality would have it. As he wrote in the dedication to the last canto, and contrary to the Tory argument that the world was a freer society after the war, the poet claimed that England also lost with the events, for it 'acquired [...] a suspended Habeas Corpus' (*CPW*, II, 124). These lines were, however, conveniently suppressed by Byron's editor William Gifford (319), for they contradicted the Tory whiggish discourse of a more enlightened society after the subjugation of Napoleon. Therefore, despite accepting the whig narrative of Britain – 'island of the sage and the free' – as the bastion of 'freedom' in history, Byron also shows a severe distrust of this nationalist discourse. Indeed, the poet's verses at times verge towards a historiographical nihilism with respect to the British position in world events, something quite bold and controversial for the post-Waterloo mood – i.e. one of utmost national triumphalism.

### Conclusion

'History' is not a neutral concept which passively entails the knowledge of the past. Rather, it is thoroughly formed by a multitude of relations of power at the level of discourse. It is up to the historian of ideas to analyse this discursive formation 'in accordance with the intelligibility of struggles, of strategies and tactics'.<sup>29</sup> This article worked with the assumptions behind the discourse(s) of 'history' as implied throughout the text of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and the poem's paratexts. It was here argued that in Britain in the early nineteenth-century there was, firstly, a strong bias (to the level of cultural fetishism) with regards to the knowledge of the ancient past and its classical texts and references. Secondly, there was the inevitable whig narrative of the past, which considered Britain as the natural heir of those ancient cultures, i.e. as the bearer of 'civic freedom' and enlightened ideals. These two themes – the greatest reverence for the ancients and the inheritance they bestowed upon British culture in the 1800s – are thoroughly present in *CHP*. Throughout the lengthy poem one sees these assumptions come into competition, as they not only complement, but at times directly contradict one another. Indeed, perhaps most importantly, Byron's poem shows an intellectual reluctance to accept this/these institutionalised discourses(s); even though they are (seemingly uncritically) accepted at moments, they are dismissed further down the text. In this perspective, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is a text where these historiographical notions play out their relentless discursive battles in the unending game of forming discourse(s) and knowledge at large.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Byron's Letters and Journals: The Complete and Unexpurgated Text of All the Letters Available in Manuscript and the Full Printed Version of all Others*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 12 vols (London: John Murray, 1976), I, 147-8. Byron to Robert Charles Dallas, 21 January, 1808.

<sup>2</sup> Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London and New York: Verso, 1985), 109.

<sup>3</sup> Foucault, Michel, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Routledge Classics (London and New York: Routledge 2002), 30.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Harrison, Aled Jones and Peter Lambert, 'The Institutionalisation and Organisation of History', in *Making History: An Introduction to the History and Practices of a Discipline*, ed. Peter Lambert and Phillipp R. Schofield (London: Routledge, 2004), 9-25, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend* (London: John Murray, 2002), 41.

<sup>6</sup> Rosemary Sweet, *Antiquaries: The Discovery of the Past in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004), 3.

<sup>7</sup> See Paul Elledge, *Lord Byron at Harrow School: Speaking Out, Talking Back, Acting Up, Bowing Out* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), esp. chapters 2, 3, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Smith and Christopher Stray, 'Introduction', in *Teaching and Learning in Nineteenth-Century Cambridge*, ed. Jonathan Smith and Christopher Stray (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press; Cambridge: Cambridge University Library, 2001), 1-3, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Stray, 'A Parochial Anomaly: The Classical Tripos 1822-1900', in *Teaching and Learning in Nineteenth-Century Cambridge* (see Smith and Stray, above), 31-44, 34.

<sup>10</sup> David Boyd Haycock, *William Stukeley: Science, Religion and Archaeology in Eighteenth-Century England* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2002), 33.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Martha McMackin Garland, 'An Academic Ancien Regime', in *Cambridge before Darwin: The Ideal of a Liberal Education, 1800-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 1-12, 2.

<sup>12</sup> In orthodox Marxist thought, 'fetishism' is mainly associated to commodities. Commodities are conflated to naturally (i.e. self-evidently) possessing intrinsic value in themselves, even though their very production is the outcome of the exploitative (and social) processes of capitalism. Namely, it is here argued that the classical past is conflated to the most important topic of historical study, even though this is the outcome of a very social process of cultural control. See the entry for 'fetishism' in Tom Bottomore, *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp. 190-1.

<sup>13</sup> For a study on the early museums in Britain and the assumptions of knowledge (here referred to as 'antiquarian') which were certainly inherited in Byron's time, see Ken Arnold, *Cabinets for the Curious: Looking Back at Early English Museums* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Arnaldo Momigliano, 'Ancient History and the Antiquarian', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 13, no. 3/4 (1950), p. 286.

<sup>15</sup> Arnaldo Momigliano, 'The Rise of Antiquarian Research', in *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography*, Sather Classical Lectures, (Berkeley; Oxford: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 54-79., p. 54.

<sup>16</sup> C. R. Ligota, 'From Philology to History: Ancient Historiography between Humanism and Enlightenment', in *Ancient History and the Antiquarian: Essays in Memory of Arnaldo Momigliano*, ed. Michael Crawford and C. R. Ligota, Warburg Institute Colloquia (London: Warburg Institute, University of London, 1995), 105-115, 105.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Cheeke, *Byron and Place: History, Translation, Nostalgia* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 7.

<sup>18</sup> Indeed, with the dawn of mass tourism in the second half of the nineteenth century, Byron's poetry was read alongside the mass produced travel guides for tourists: "Every Englishman abroad", noted the American William Wetmore Story in the 1860s, "carries a Murray for information, and a Byron for sentiment, and finds out by them what he is to know and feel at every step". Quoted in James Buzard, 'The Grand Tour and After (1660-1840)', in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Tim Youngs and Peter Hulme (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 37-52, 50.

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<sup>19</sup> All quotations from and references to *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* taken from Lord Byron. The Complete Poetical Works, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), II. Hereafter abbreviated as 'CPW, II' (when necessary) and referenced amidst the text and ordained by (canto, stanza; line).

<sup>20</sup> Anne Barton, 'Byron and the Mythology of Fact', Nottingham Byron Foundation Lecture (University of Nottingham, 1968), 12-3.

<sup>21</sup> Caroline Franklin, *Byron: A Literary Life*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 106.

<sup>22</sup> William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age* (1825; rpt Menston: Scholar Press, 1971), 119.

<sup>23</sup> This teleological reading of the past is not only related to the ideas of 'civic freedom', but any historical methodology which takes the present as the self-evident culmination of the past in any issue. See Butterfield, Sir Herbert, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1965). The case I have been discussing so far is the 'prototypical "Whig interpretation of history"' that Butterfield considers in his seminal essay. See Kriegel, Abraham D. "Liberty and Whiggery in Early Nineteenth-Century England". *Journal of Modern History* 52.2 (1980): 253-278 (255).

<sup>24</sup> Malcolm Kelsall, *Byron's Politics* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Nobles Books; Brighton: Harvester Press, 1987), 6.

<sup>25</sup> Kelvin Everest, *English Romantic Poetry: An Introduction to the Historical Context and the Literary Scene* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990), 14.

<sup>26</sup> Malcolm Kelsall, 'Byron's Politics', in *The Cambridge Companion to Byron* (see Leask, above), 44-55, 46.

<sup>27</sup> Martin, Philip W., 'Heroism and History: *Childe Harold* I and II and the Tales', in *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*, ed. by Drummond Bone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 77-98, 85.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Philip Shaw, *Waterloo and the Romantic Imagination* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 166.

<sup>29</sup> Foucault, Michel, and Colin Ed Gordon, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1980), 114.

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