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ENGLISH ROMANTICISM IN THE POLEMIC ON THE NEW PARADISE

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Abstract: *The article examines the correlation, in the poetry of the elder English Romantic poets, between the images of the Golden Age, the restored Paradise, and the New Jerusalem, as well as the gradual transformation of these images. It also considers Byron's interpretation of humankind and human history through the biblical myth in comparison with the interpretations of his elder contemporaries. It is argued that the key poles of the polemic on Paradise in English Romantic poetry are the discourse of the lost and the new Paradise, formed in the works of the elder Romantics, and its transformation in Byron's works, which rests on the rejection of the possibility of both universal and individual Paradise.*

Keywords: *Wordsworth; Coleridge; Byron; biblical myth; French Revolution; images of the Golden Age; myth of Paradise*

The question of the New Paradise is essentially the question of the possibility of happiness—either granted once and for all or repeatedly attainable, whether universally or individually. For modern humanity, this question is especially acute. It is provoked by the crisis of various value systems, including the system of values in consumer society, built around the notion of the constant pursuit of pleasure as a fundamental value and the very definition of happiness. The urgency of this issue is also determined by contemporary scientific research in biochemistry, neuroethics, and bioethics, aimed at either discovering a formula for universal happiness or setting ethical boundaries for the implementation of such formulas. In this context, turning to the polemic on the New Paradise that emerged in English Romantic poetry under the influence of the French Revolution and subsequent events in Western Europe and the United States at the beginning of the nineteenth century is a natural attempt to look into the history of literature as a testimony not only of aesthetic but also of spiritual and intellectual efforts to answer a question that continues to concern the modern reader.

For Byron's elder contemporaries, the French Revolution appeared as a sign of the end of the old history and a harbinger of the breakthrough to the New Jerusalem. This view has become well established in modern literary scholarship. It is clearly articulated in the section **"Apocalyptic Expectations by Preachers and Poets"** of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* [14], as well as in monographs and individual scholarly articles [18; 20; 23]. At the same time, such issues as the correlation in the poetry of the elder English Romantics between the images of the Golden Age, the restored Paradise, and the New Jerusalem, and the gradual transformation of these images, remain insufficiently explored. Even less clarified is the question of Byron's interpretation of humankind and human history through the biblical myth in relation to the interpretations of his elder contemporaries. Let us examine each of these issues in turn.

In the early poetry of W. Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge, the French Revolution is consistently portrayed both as an event leading to the recovery of the lost Paradise and the return of the Golden Age and as a breakthrough to a new, unprecedented blessedness. In Wordsworth's early poem *The Prelude* (1798–1805), the motif of humanity's (Europe's) return to the Golden Age is voiced as a foretaste in the lines about France standing on the very threshold of the Golden Age ("golden hours"):

Europe at that time was thrilled with joy,

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France standing on the top of golden hours,
And human nature seeming born again [11, p. 346].

Inseparable from this is the biblical apocalyptic allusion to the complete rebirth of human nature ("And human nature seeming born again") after the Last Judgment. Byron could not have been familiar with these lines, since the poem was first published only in 1850. However, he carefully read many other works by Wordsworth, including *The Excursion* (1806–1814) [21, p. ???; 22, p. ???]. In this poem, the lyrical hero explicitly recalls his—already past—perception of the French Revolution through the ancient myth of the Golden Age: for him it becomes the return of Saturn's mythological reign, abundant and free from inequality, the offspring of the Golden Age ("I sang Saturnian rule / Returned—a progeny of golden years") [10, p. 444].

The motif of blissful return in connection with the theme of the French Revolution is no less characteristic of the early poetry of Coleridge—another of Byron's elder contemporaries, whose works Byron admired and knew well [24]. In *Religious Musings* (1794–1796), Coleridge gives direct expression to the motif of restored blessedness in the exhortation "Return…," with which the poet-lyrical hero addresses "pure Faith" and "meek Piety" [7, p. 2]. The poem concludes with an affirmation of the coming universal salvation, the first step toward which, in the poet's vision, is the French Revolution [7, pp. 13, 23].

In the early poetry of the elder English Romantics (as in the religious-philosophical writings of English thinkers of the period), the present appeared not so much as the herald of a mere closure of the historical cycle in the return to humanity's primordial bliss as a leap or breakthrough into the unprecedented—beyond the boundaries of human history itself: to the New Jerusalem of the Apocalypse, to the eternal reign of Christ [13]. In this interweaving of biblical myth and the contemporary moment, of myth and history, it was not only the latter but also the former that was reinterpreted. The biblical myth was transformed into a model of human history, whose key narrative and semantic moments were retrospectively linked with specific stages in the development of human society, from the vantage point of the present transition to an existence beyond time. One of the earliest embodiments of this historical reinterpretation of the biblical myth is Immanuel Kant's essay "Conjectural Beginning of Human History" (1796), which evoked a wide response among his contemporaries [16].

The starting point of human history—the primordial existence of humankind in Eden—was reinterpreted in the poetry of early English Romanticism, in the spirit of Rousseau's philosophy and the revolutionary age, as a pre-civilizational state of humanity, close to nature and free from socio-political conventions. In Coleridge's *Religious Musings*, this "pre-civilizational" blessedness of man is described through images of the "primeval age," the "idling shepherd," and the "green grass" [7, p. 18], among others.

The focus of poetic representation also included the blissful inner state of primordial humanity; thus, the Rousseauistic motifs were significantly enriched and deepened by the broader Christian understanding of blessedness as true (self-sacrificial) love. In Wordsworth's *Descriptive Sketches*, the blessed "infant age" of humankind ("he was Nature's child") is associated with man's absolute freedom ("Once Man entirely free"), which implies subjection to no laws except those of reason and desire ("Confessed no law but what his reason taught, / Did all he wished"), and, at the same time, true conformity to the image of the Creator ("He, all superior, but his God disdained; wished but what he ought") [9]. A necessary condition of blessedness in this poem is man's communion with nature, which proves to be the guardian of divine truth about happiness and harmony.

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The second stage of historical movement in the biblical myth was represented in the works of the elder English Romantic poets as the loss of this blessed state in connection with the emergence of human society. Its principal characteristic was seen as the oppression of man through the establishment of various social institutions and norms. Unlike the Enlightenment thinkers, however, the Romantics sought the causes of oppression primarily within human nature itself.

In Coleridge's *Religious Musings*, oppression is linked to the awakening of possessive interests within man. These desires lead to the rise of property, followed by the rule of warriors, landowners, and priests. Selfish desires generate sins, which in turn suppress the human soul and deprive it of true knowledge. In Coleridge's poem, the oppression of the human soul is inseparably connected with socio-political oppression [7, p. 20].

At the same time, the creation and development of society and the state appear in Coleridge's poem as a natural stage in the progress of human history, inevitably leading toward a new phase. It is precisely the development of goodness within sin, of creative potential within blindness, that brings humankind to the final, third stage of history—the storm of the French Revolution, associated with a new kingdom of blessedness. These sprouts of the new order in Coleridge are, on the one hand, bound to the person and teaching of Christ [7, pp. 20, 22] (in this respect the poet is heir to the Christian tradition), and, on the other, to the ideas of the Enlightenment and the achievements of science (and in this sense he is a man of the age of the French Revolution). Newton, Hartley, and Priestley appear in the poem as sages and saints leading humanity to universal salvation [7, p. 22].

The twofold nature of oppression in civilized society is depicted in Wordsworth's *Prelude* both in images of the suppression of human freedom and creativity ("Oppression under which even highest minds / Must labour, whence they are not free!") and in images of man's inner oppression by false thoughts and feelings ("sorrow, disappointment, vexing thoughts, confusions of the judgement… <…> …that had been turned aside from Nature's way…") [11, pp. 351, 363–364]. Yet for Wordsworth the seeds of happiness lie not in the exaltation of human thought and spirit, but in a return to nature, to its divine harmony.

The final stage of human history in the poetry of the elder English Romantics bears the unmistakable imprint of contemporaneity: the struggle for socio-political freedom is seen as the principal sign of the breakthrough to new blessedness; the French Revolution becomes its herald. At the same time, along with the acquisition of external freedom, the poets foretold the transformation of human nature itself—a transformation promised in the Apocalypse.

In Coleridge's poem *Ode to the Departing Year* (1796), Liberty acquires a divine status, since it brings with it justice and truth [5]. In *Religious Musings*, the author foresees in the coming age the triumph of faith, humility, and "almighty, all-embracing love" [7, p. 23].

Gradually, largely under the influence of unfolding events in Europe, during which the Revolution in the name of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* was transformed into a predatory war of conquest, the tendency toward the interiorization of history in its union with myth intensified. Interiorization and individualization in the perception of history and of humanity's role within it became the basis for the reinterpretation of the biblical myth in English poetry of the early nineteenth century. The narrative-semantic nodes of primordial blessedness, the Fall and suffering in the state of exile from Paradise, and the attainment of new blessedness (simultaneously understood as the restoration of the old) in the mature poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge (as well as Blake and Southey) came to be firmly associated with the inner development of the individual. Apocalyptic expectations of social transformation gave way to a belief in personal, individual transformation.

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The figure of the lyrical hero—humanity merging in sacred union with nature and thereby attaining a new blessedness (the biblical "new heaven and new earth")—is central to Coleridge's ode *Dejection* (1802). What should lead humankind to conscious unity with nature is the "primary imagination"—"the living power and prime agent of all human perception," as Coleridge explicitly formulates it in Chapter XIII of his *Biographia Literaria* (1817) [4, p. 313].

The symbol of movement in the opposite direction—toward the oblivion of one's consubstantiality with the Other and toward death-in-life—in Coleridge's mature works becomes Cain's fratricide. The most famous embodiment of Cain in Coleridge's oeuvre is, of course, the figure of the Ancient Mariner, although *The Wanderings of Cain* (1797) is no less significant ideologically. By killing the Albatross in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1797–1798), the Mariner, through inner suffering, gradually gains insight precisely because, in Coleridge's vision, man's separation from the world, from the Other, is a cruel delusion. The chief mark of the transformed human being is love for the world, bringing with it true understanding of divine being. "He prayeth well, who loveth well: / Both man and bird and beast," the Mariner tells the Wedding Guest at the close of the poem [6, p. 68].

In a similar way, myth (and not only the biblical one) is reinterpreted in Wordsworth's mature work. In the *Prospectus* (1798–1839; first published in 1850) to the unfinished *The Recluse*—a kind of declaration of Wordsworth's mature creative position—the poet takes myth as a symbol of universal human development in order to look within man and discern the path indicated by myth in the depths of the human soul:

"…Not Chaos, not / The darkest pit of lowest Erebus… <…> …Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man,— / My haunt, and the main region of my Song" [12, p. 302].

Here the author refers the reader to the ancient Greek myth only to deny the significance of speaking of the external world at large and instead to affirm the necessity of attending to the inner development of the individual.

Exploring the nature of mythological tradition, Wordsworth discovers the essential equivalence of the biblical myth with the ancient: Paradise, in the *Prospectus*, appears on the same plane as the ancient Elysian groves, merging with them to the point of indistinguishability. Thus, myth in Wordsworth becomes the archetype of human consciousness—a symbolic image of the movement of the human soul [12, p. 302]. The pathos of Wordsworth's *Prospectus* lies in the affirmation of the attainability of happiness by any individual here on earth, in the reality of everyday life. The condition of blessedness, as for Coleridge, is man's integral awareness of his unity with the world.

The interiorization of myth, and thereby of human history, proclaimed in the *Prospectus*, is enriched by its individualization in *The Prelude*. Placing at the center of the poem the image of the Poet—who appears simultaneously as author, narrator, and lyrical hero—Wordsworth depicts the path of a single individual, endowed with inspired impulses, with a developed imagination, and with a concrete, personal destiny. The poem's emphatically psychological autobiographical character ensures not only the uniqueness and individuality of the Poet's depiction but also the reader's reception of his image. The confessional, diary-like quality of the work produces the effect of blending, of merging the levels of artistic and real, objective reality.

Thus, in their interpretation of the biblical myth of Paradise, the elder Romantics Wordsworth and Coleridge (as well as Southey and Blake) follow similar paths. In their early works, the main plot nodes of the biblical myth serve as the most important means of comprehending human history in terms of humanity's gradual transition from a blissful primordial harmony of love-unity to a divided condition, associated with selfish desires and socio-political forms of oppression, and then to

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universal transfiguration and a new blessedness. In their mature works, however, the biblical myth of Paradise becomes interiorized and individualized, appearing as a symbol of changes within concrete human consciousness. Its essential motifs are linked to the primordial blessed state of a person whole within himself, the loss of this integrity, and the attainment of new blessedness through the release of the creative power of imagination.

Byron, in his works, takes over from his elder contemporaries the tendency toward a historical reading, individualization, and interiorization of the biblical myth, but at the same time he debunks other constants in their dual interpretation of biblical history and contemporaneity: both the general history of humankind and the individual history of man invariably close upon themselves in a cycle of loss of Paradise and the impossibility of attaining new blessedness.

Byron's elaboration of the biblical myth is linked with the superimposition upon the rigid "Creator–man" vertical—rooted in the Old Testament and of Calvinist origin, in which God appears as unattainably separate from and incomprehensible to man—of the interiorized and individualized notions generated by the age of Romanticism, which affirmed human selfhood, as well as of Enlightenment views of man's fixed position in the world. In this semantic field, rigid hierarchy clashes with the individuality of selfhood, on the one hand, and with the movement of historical time, on the other. The result of this collision is a particular worldview in which man inevitably struggles with God, the individual with the universal, and individual linear time with collective cyclical time.

Byron turns to the biblical Paradise as both the starting point of human existence (the collective past of humanity) and a model of the blessed state in individual consciousness (the individual future) in his three "metaphysical dramas." In both the historical (collective) and the individual (psychological) dimensions, the elder Romantics' idea of a return to blessedness or a breakthrough to it is debunked. The theme of the individual Paradise, unattainable for the hero, becomes the plot foundation of the dramatic poem *Manfred*. The image of this Paradise, conceived in relation to the image of the biblical Eden lost by humankind, first appears in the hero's opening monologue:

Sorrow is knowledge: they who know the most
Must mourn the deepest o'er the fatal truth,
The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life. [1, p. 85]

Manfred, even before the action of the poem begins, has lost his Eden; sought in the love union with the hero's alter ego, Astarte, his personal Paradise inevitably bears within itself its own destruction. The cause of this destruction the hero locates in knowledge, or self-knowledge. Speaking of the death of his beloved, Manfred tells the Fairy (Act II, Scene 2): "It [her heart] gazed on mine, and wither'd" [1, p. 106]. Self-knowledge reveals to man the inner contradiction of his nature, in which divinity and dust ("half dust, half deity") do not merge but wage war against each other ("[we] with our mix'd essence make a conflict of its elements") [1, p. 95].

Through the disharmonious contradictoriness of his nature, Manfred inevitably bears within himself the seeds of Cain's sin ("thy brotherhood of Cain") [1, p. 94]. In this, Byron does not converge with Coleridge, as might seem at first glance, but rather distances himself from him. For Coleridge, Cain is a man unaware of his unity with the world, yet still bearing within himself the seeds of harmonious being in oneness with nature; for Byron, any man is Cain by essence, since harmony and unity are unattainable not only with the external world but also within himself. In this, Byron, drawing upon the skepticism of Hobbes and Bayle and the subjectivism of Hume, argues not only with Coleridge but with all the elder Romantic poets who inherited Rousseauist (and more broadly Enlightenment) notions of man's natural righteousness.

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Reversing the elder Romantics' concept of grasping truth in unity with the world through imagination, Byron asserts the link between the impossibility of harmony and the impossibility of attaining truth. The only accessible and limited means of cognition for man in Byron's world is reason ("the Mind—the Spirit—the Promethean Spark") [1, p. 90], with its ability to analyze, to be aware, and to investigate.

The search not so much for an individual as for a universal Paradise forms the thematic and plot foundation of Byron's two other metaphysical dramas, constructed around the biblical stories of Cain (*Cain*, 1821) and the Flood (*Heaven and Earth*, 1821). In the first of these, the search is directly conditioned by the loss of Eden; it is precisely the significance of loss that is foregrounded in the author's stage direction introducing the drama's first scene: "The Land without Paradise" [2, p. 213]. The search for a new Paradise, carried out in different ways by all the human characters in the play, is thus tied to the question of the cause of the loss of the first (and, in Byron's world, the only) Paradise. Consequently, the motifs of the unknowability of God and personal guilt as the fundamental trait of human existence come to the fore.

In Byron's drama, what proves inaccessible to man is no longer the paradise of unity with the world (as in *Manfred*), but rather the paradise of humble submission (to God, to destiny, to fate): the common impulse of the first family toward movement, associated with knowledge, drives Eve to the forbidden fruit and Cain (following Lucifer) into the cosmic abyss. Starting from the Enlightenment notion of the peaceful acceptance of one's place in the world—expressed in Pope's famous formula, "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan; / The proper study of mankind is Man" [8, p. 2561]—Byron exposes this as false, unattainable for man because of the contradictions and instability of his nature.

The result of the individual's striving for knowledge in the world of *Cain* proves to be, just as the result of striving for self-knowledge in the world of *Manfred*, not the attainment of happiness but a distancing from it. Cain undergoes two stages of this distancing: the denial of the righteousness of the universe and the denial of his own belonging to the world. This double denial determines the root cause of Cain's fratricide: in this act he externally (impulsively yet inevitably) expresses what has already taken place within him. This, in turn, reveals to him the abyss of his own unrighteousness and leads to self-knowledge. Cain, upon whom the Angel of God sets a mark, admits: "It burns / My brow, but nought to that which is within it" [2, p. 273]. In this interrelation of the crime against the Other and self-knowledge, Byron proves close to Coleridge. The subsequent movement of man in the worlds of Byron and Coleridge, however, diverges: in Coleridge it is a movement toward transfiguration and happiness; in Byron—toward a future unknown to the characters, but known to the reader as anything but happy.

The second mystery play, whose very title refers to the affirmation of possible human (or humanity's) transfiguration so characteristic of the turn of the century, dismantles the belief in a breakthrough toward new bliss ("New Heaven and New Earth"). In the drama, heaven and earth lose the qualifier "new": Byron once again turns to the past rather than the future, as a result of which the present of the reader and author appears as the outcome of an event that functions in the work as apocalypse—the great flood. The new paradise of humankind, like the individual paradise of the human soul, proves desired but unattainable: appealing to the reader's experience, the Spirits of the Earth (Scene 3) predict humanity's postdiluvian existence as one of sorrow ("Thy new world and new race shall be of woe") [3, p. 298]. Japhet's affirmation of future endless bliss ("The eternal Will / Shall… <…> / Restore the beauty of her birth, / Her Eden in an endless paradise…") [3, pp. 299–300] turns out to

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be a dream, or a matter of faith. Thus, from the realm of universal human future in the biblical myth, from the reality of the individual present in Coleridge and Wordsworth, the new paradise on earth in Byron's work is transformed into a human dream, the goal of human striving.

Thus, the polemic on paradise in English Romantic poetry emerges from the evolution of the discourse on the lost and new paradise in the works of the elder Romantics and its transformation in Byron's texts based on biblical myth. In the latter, a sharp clash occurs between Enlightenment and Calvinist views of the world and the belief in the attainability of universal or individual transfiguration and bliss—the most essential elements of the "Romantic" discourse on paradise. At the same time, Byron inherits such general features of this discourse as the interpretation of biblical myth in terms of contemporary history and human psychology, the merging of the images of the lost and the new paradise, and the role of knowledge and self-knowledge in the search for bliss.

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