

Poetic Truth in Byron's Sennacherib and Sardanapalus

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This study is set to explore Lord Byron's Destruction of Sennacherib and Sardanapalus in the light of Aristotle's literary philosophy by examining the Byronic hero as a poetic truth against the Assyrian Kings as a historical truth. While historical truth is controlled to the past, the poetic reality is timeless as it is universal and invented. The study proceeds with the hypothesis that the lead as a poetic truth is universality. It aims at exploring the essence of human nature as well as the nature as human relation in Byron's Destruction of Sennacherib and Sardanapalus. Through an analysis of the texts, the study concludes that poetic writings are the idealized micro-spheres or the macro-sphere of reality.

Key words: *Poetic truth, idealization, universality, Byronic hero, Destruction of Sennacherib.*

Introduction

There is a common harmony between critics and literary academics that the *Romantic period* begins in 1798, in which Wordsworth and Coleridge issued their *Lyrical Ballads*, and concluded in 1832, when Sir Walter Scott died. The term *Romantic* is notorious, though it must describe inspired works of art. It is a revolution in aesthetic, literary and philosophical sensibility that pervaded western culture. Romanticism, therefore, is the visual and epistemological logic that caused a dramatic change in Europe in the late eighteenth century and the mid-nineteenth centuries. It chiefly informed the disciplines of painting, literature, and music. That visual impulse was encoded in the form of language, since language constitutes literature. Literature, fundamentally, is made of language. Poets used human language for aesthetic purposes, so aesthetic worth becomes the highest measure of value in the dominion of art. The Romantics, in general, developed a style which stressed strong passion, love of nature, and the delight request in the imagination. The most illuminating stylistic features of romanticism are the impulsive, the picturesque, and the unusual. The romantic desire is considered by the qualities of remoteness, misery, disillusion, decay, desire, divine discontent, melancholy, and the all-embracing power of imagination.

The poetry of this period is all written under the effect of the new profane, that is, the liberal conception of man and his destiny that pounced from the values of the French revolution. Romanticism, in a sense, marked the response in literature, philosophy and art, religion and policy against the neoclassicism and ceremonial principles of the previous period. The romantic spirit turns from reasoned analysis to appeal to immediate intuition, and from tradition to a new sense of the unity of community, of humanity, and indeed of the whole universe.

In England, the *Romantic Movement* was made manifest by such appearances as individuality, love of nature, childhood, poetic spontaneity, freedom, glorification of the common, as well as the strangeness and supernaturalism of beauty. Romanticism is an age of individualism in which both the poets and philosophers highly regarded man's potentialities and his proper aims.

Romantic rationality and imagination in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were attracted to the magical of the Orient. To put this another way, what symbolizes romantic sensibility is the homesickness for the past, the renewal of ancient myths, and the partiality of exotic themes. Such ridiculous, picturesque and comfortable themes are poetically expected in the antique past of the East. The romantic looks for a sense of historicity that may give the poet's opinions a sense of universality. The poet who exploited the stories and secrecies of the Orient as his poetic facts is Lord Byron. Here is the emergence of the so-called poetry of history. The poetry of antiquity is a body of verse whose thematic structure is based on a historical character or a past event.

This study is set to review the two of Byron's poems: *Destruction of Sennacherib* and *Sardanapalus*. The study aims at discovering the Byronic hero whose image and features are attributed to the actual historical Assyrian Kings. The designated poetic texts will be analysed in the light of Aristotle's serious view in his *Poetics*. Out of Byron's Oriental poems, *Destruction of Sennacherib* and *Sardanapalus* are designated as representatives of the poetry of history. One finding of the study is that the poetic text is the micro-sphere which aims for realism. The study is rounded up with the advantage of conclusions.

Aristotle's Antique and Poetic Opposites

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle produces a system between poetry, antiquity and attitude. He understandably contends that poetic fact is lasting and universal. While history deals with the exact and the ephemeral, poetry deals with the enduring and the universal. So, poetic fact is much higher and universal than that of the past. Poetry is more logical than attitude itself for it is more conducive to understanding than philosophy itself (Dorsch , 1965 ,pp 43 – 45). Aristotle, according to the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, challenges history as detail and poetry as a punishment beyond fact (ibid). The Greek philosopher refers to poetry as likely, and history as a real order of things. The important difference between history and poetry is not due to the form of writing: i.e. one is going to write prose and the other in verse. Rather, it is connected to the purpose



of each punishment: history defines the sorts of thing that might occur. According to Wimsatt and Brooks, (1957, p147), poetry needs impossible probabilities to unsettle possibilities. Poetry agrees with the universal, not the specific; it does not just tell the story of an individual, but tells truth and so it is an advanced subject of study when compared to history (Tilak, 1977, pp. 76 – 80). The poet henceforward gives us not realism, but reality idealized. In a historical narrative, the various events and incidents are narrated in a chronological order, and in this way, the casual connection among them is hidden. The poet, however, removes the non-essential, the merely incidental, shifts and orders his material, and in this way reveals the strict, logical order which characterizes the actual experience (ibid).

Related to the Aristotelian poetic reality is the thought of imitation. Poetry imitates the other fine arts, but poetry is not a just imitation, or a mindless representation of shallow fact. It imitates imaginatively, and so gives a higher fact, a higher reality, than is the case with the other arts (Tilak, p. 76). Aristotle's brilliant premises, "Art imitates nature," shows that the artificial is something seemingly better than reality. In checking the superiority of art to nature, the Greek philosopher explains that "Art finishes the job where nature fails, or imitates the missing parts" (Wimsatt and Brooks, p.26).

The odd object of poetic simulation, according to *Poetics*, are "men in action, their characters, passions and actions or experience" (ibid.). The characters, however, are not typecast pictures of real life, but men either better or worse than they are (ibid).

In spite of this disassociation, some critics still refer to the implication of the two corrections. Poetry, to Welsted (1973, 319), has "something of the Historical in its nature, and never shines more, than when it refers to Characters and Things of Past Times." The concept of poetic truth, in Aristotle's treatise, is basically connected to the main dramatic form, i.e. tragedy. Aristotle defines tragedy as "the imitation of an action, serious, complete and of a certain magnitude, in a language beautified in different parts with different kinds of embellishment, through actions and not narration, and through scenes of shame and fear carrying about the "Catharsis" of these (or such like) emotions" (Tilak, p.45) The definition fundamentally shows the Aristotelian awareness of this dramatic form in theory and in application. In addition, the tragedy is a sort of imitation. This realization will be of significance to approach Byron's poetic heroes.

Byron's Poetic Superman

Much of the imaginary charm and appeal and power of Byron's poetry lies in the creation of poetic heroes. Though they are resulting from the historical inheritance, the Byronic heroes are his exclusive poetic ideas. Of these heroes are *Sennacherib* and *Sardanapalus*. It is important for this study to point out that these replicas are based on real characters of Kings of Assyria.

Obliteration of Sennacherib

Byron's (1815) *Destruction of Sennacherib* is a poem from *Hebrew Melodies*. It is based on the ancient occasion of the Assyrian King's cordon of Jerusalem. The construction of Byron's Sennacherib is mostly based on the Biblical story. The story relays that Sennacherib (reigned 705 – 681), King of Assyria, attacks Juda and conquers many cities. His individual account of the attack is that since Hezekiah, King of Juda, wouldn't submit to his oppression, he attacked his lands and shut him up in Jerusalem, this wealthy city, as a bird in a cage, building towers around the city to hem him in, and rising banks of earth together at the entries to stop escape. Hezekiah, however, never rejects the Assyrian king's records. He follows help from Egypt. In response, Sennacherib hikes a second time into Palestine. The Assyrian king tells envoys to try to encourage the king of Juda to submit, but in vain. He next sends an aggressive letter, which Hezekiah carries into the sanctuary and spreads before the king. Isaiah (Hebrew Prophet) again conveys a confident note to the King. In that night, the spirit of the Lord went forth and struck the site of the Assyrians. In the morning, "behold, they were all dead corpses." The Assyrian army was beaten (Bible Encyclopedia, 2019).

What is surprising, here, is that the Hebrew records propose a mythical understanding in the obliteration of the Assyrian king, who locked up Hezekiah like a captive bird as the Assyrian records announced. Hezekiah sends envoys to Isaiah who prophecies that Yahweh will protect Jerusalem for the sake of the promise made to David, and the Assyrians will not be able to besiege Jerusalem. In the night an angel kills more than a hundred and eighty-five thousand men of the Assyrian military, and the stayers return to Assyria. The event of death is not stated or confirmed by another reserve. The wanted end of a siege is usually the disruption of a city, not the captivity of its population. Though the thematic construction of Byron's *Destruction of Sennacherib* depends on the Biblical event, the poet, in fact, never tells the story of a specific individual. Rather, he orders his material to tell an idealized reality. This romanticism is cast into an imaginary poetic form. To carry action, disclose character, classify theme and world view, Byron chooses vivid images. Imagery relegates to the design of connected details. The prominent feature of the story style the poet uses in his *Destruction of Sennacherib* is simile.

Simile and symbol are common devices in poetry of all kinds. What is astonishing is the incidence through which such differences are elaborated in the poem. The magnificent opening suggests the might of the Assyrian King:

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold ,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold ,
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea ,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee .
(Alexander , 1963 : 52-3)

The fierce action of the Assyrian attack is marked by the image of a wolf dashing towards his pray. What is interesting about the second stanza is that the whole battle scene is based on contrast by the use of contrasted illustrations (ibid.) :

Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green,
The host with their banners at sunset were seen,
Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown,
That host on the narrow lay wither'd and strown.

Here, the similes are in complementary distribution, balancing one another out. Thus, the rise and the fall of the Assyrian king is illustrated by a simile on each side. The mythical interpretation of the Assyrian destruction is encoded in the third stanza which is pictured in an almost straight forward level of style (ibid.):

For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed;
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,
And their hearts but once heaved, and fore ever grew still!

In spite of the repetition of “and ” which functions as a connector, giving the whole structure the cohesion of rhetoric, the Assyrian destruction is alluded to as a godly curse. The illusion itself is not convinced in the context of war. Great men are killed in great actions, not as a result of unknown causes. The whole twenty – four lines, which are divided into six stanzas, are charged with the sense of fierce power, and magnificence.

The fourth and the fifth stanzas are pictured as cinematic still shots or as a slow – motion sequence with moments of heightened tension. The flash images show the various aspects of the battlefield in and after the curse. It is interesting to note that while the poet creates his similes in the form of animal fierceness in the first stanza and the change of time and nature in the second stanza, he turns to the images of the sea to picture the scene of destruction. As a result of such a bitter harvest, the scene of the wiling Assyrian widows is created as the final stroke in the poem. The stanza may suggest the spiritual sense of the might of God, compared to the might of the Gentile.

And the might of the Gentle, un smote by the sword ,
Hath like snow in the glance of the Lord!

The narrative function of the simile structure, as we have seen, is to create the feeling of magnificence, even in the moment of defeat. The figurative frequency of the extended simile is a standard feature of battle poetry, designed to add a variety to the narrative in which diction is necessary. The poet develops the senses of homage to the Assyrian King, even in his critical

situation. So, in Byron's Sennacherib, a powerfully romantic mood is built up almost exclusively by direct images which involve the sense of colour. The whole poem is but *painting in words*.

Sardanapalus

In his letter to Murry, July 14, 1821, Byron expressed his passion "to dramatize like Greeks . . . striking passages of history." The products of this Byronic romantic passion are Mariana Faliero, Sardanapalus, and The Two Foscari. Sardanapalus was published with The Two Foscari, and Cain, a mystery on December 19, 1821 (Hoepfer, 2019). What matters to this study is Sardanapalus the poetic vision. Though he derived his data from the Diodorus history, Byron painted in words his own hero. "I have made," writes Byron in a letter on May 25, 1821, "Sardanapalus brave though voluptuous (as history represents him), and as amiable as my poor pen could make him." Byron's Sardanapalus, being a poetic drama, is not straightforward copy of the historical narrative; its aim is not to report the chronology of the King. Rather, the poet focuses on the universal, neglecting the incidental, in order to build up the idealized reality. The romantic poet derives the facts and reduces them to dramatic regularity. To bring a historical event into sharp dramatic focus seemed to offer possibilities to an outworn convention. That is to say, Byron's poetic vision reflects not life but art. Imitating the great Greek dramatists, Byron wrote his poetic drama. So, Sardanapalus is a Greek drama with a romantic flavour. The poet endeavours to preserve and to approve the Aristotelian three units, convinced that, by roaming away from the Greek model, there may be poetry, but no drama (ibid.). Investigating the text on a dramatic basis shows that Byron's Sardanapalus is a character, i.e. an imaginary or a real person inhabits a literary work. The poet's characterization of the hero is a typical one. Byron reveals the character by and through his speech, manner and action. Moreover, Sardanapalus is a tragic hero in the sense that the action of the Assyrian king's burning himself with all his possession in the gorgeous palace is a tragic catharsis since joy is achieved only through that heroic action. It begins with sorrow, anxiety and hope, and then passes through the act of supreme self-sacrifice in which there is a reversal and a discovery, since it is by burning himself in order not to be humiliated by the foes, he is proved to be a hero. On that sublime act, Sardanapalus soliloquises (Act V, I., 73):

. . . and the light of this
Most royal of funeral pyres shall be
Not a mere pillar formed of cloud and fame,
A beacon in the horizon for a day
And then amount of ashes—but a light
To lesson ages, rebel nation, and
Voluptuous princes. Time shall quench full
A people's record, and a hero's acts;
Sweep empire after empire, like this first
Of empires, into nothing; but even then

Shall spare this deed of mine, and held it up
A problem few dare imitate and none
Despise—but, it may be, avoid the life
Which led to such a consummation.

Byron's *Sardanapalus* is a poetic drama: serious in theme, grand in style and romantic in world view. Compared to the narrative, the dramatic language has its own characteristic and methods. The entire plot is conveyed by and through the verbal interaction of the characters. The typical forms used in this respect are dialogue, monologue or both. In Byron's poetic drama, here, the salient feature the soliloquy. It is a passage " in which a character in a play utters his thoughts aloud (Abrams, 1987: 261). The character by his verbal utterances shows his motives and intentions. Byron's poetic drama abruptly starts with Salemenes, the king's brother – in – law. The function of this soliloquy is to prepare the audience for the subsequent development. So, Salemenes soliloquies on the king's current situation (Act I, scene I, 5):

He must be roused. In his effeminate heart
There is a careless courage which corruption
Has not quenched, and latent engoes,
Represented by circumstance, but not destroyed.

Myrrha, an Zonian female, and favourite mistress of *Sardanapalus*, reveals her romantic love when she was left alone (Act I , Scene II , 20) :

How do I love this man? My country's daughters
Love none but heroes. But I have no country!
The slave hath lost all save her bonds. I love him;
And that's the heaviest link of the long chain—
To love whom we esteem not.

Byron introduces the strong sense of lyricism in his poetic drama. So, he is a romanticist in this respect, but he is a classist when he draws his raw material from history in a dramatic form and admits the intervention of the spiritual world into the human affairs. The poet emerges from the satirical style in *Don Juan* to the grand style in *Sardanapalus* . The selection of the diction, images, and the rhythm shows that the poet, as in *Sennacherib*, has a sense of homage to the Assyrian King in his tragedy.

Concluding Remarks

Byron has trodden the poetry of history when dealing with a historical passage. Aristotelian poetic truth is applicably encoded in his *Sennacherib* and *Sardanapalus*. By and through the grand style



the poet uses, the two poems give the sense of universality and idealization. The poet doesn't deal with them as men of history but as poetic visions. The romantic poet has recourse to the sequence of similes to build up the mental picture of the war world in Sennacherib, whereas in Sardanapalus, he craves for dramatic devices such as soliloquies to reveal the characters' heightened feelings. Byron applicably shows that the poetic truth is more universal and permanent than the historical truth.



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