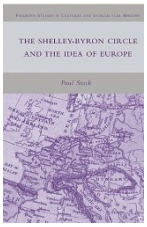
THE SHELLEY-BYRON CIRCLE AND THE IDEA OF EUROPE



By Paul Stock
(Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) x + 264 pp.
Reviewed by Richard Lansdown on 2010-10-05.

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I must say at the outset that Paul Stock's title made me green with envy. The project is highly attractive in any event, but I was also struck by the presence of a modest-looking four-letter word, with a chequered past of late: "idea." Can it be that the clammy grip of cultural materialism is finally relaxing, and that we can confidently discuss ideas as if they had a life of their own, not altogether dependent on the base or the context?

The book is in seven chapters and three parts. Part One, unsurprisingly enough, treats *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* from its start in 1809 to its completion in 1818, and devotes a chapter to each published section of that quintessentially European poem. Part Two turns its attention -- somewhat less successfully, in my view -- to Percy Shelley's European years, 1817-1822, and concerns itself with *Laon and Cythna*, *The Defence of Poetry*, and *Hellas*. Part Three, again unsurprisingly, returns to Byron between 1822 and 1824, when he died in Greece -- a place that has frequently enough been regarded as the fount of European civilization. Here *The Age of Bronze* comes in for special consideration (though I think reconfiguring that poem as central to an understanding of Byron's work, as the author suggests [1], will always be a difficult proposition).

To summarize the content in these terms, however, is to do Stock a major disservice, for his study ranges far and wide across the "circles" that foregathered around Byron and Shelley. Besides the poems just mentioned, the index lists another dozen of Byron's works, large and small, and nearly ten more of Shelley's. And that is only the tip of the iceberg. Stock's researches have been extensive, and one of the most appealing and persuasive elements in the book is the size of the supporting casts who make up the various "circles" he discusses. Lytton Bulwer, Edward Blaquière, John Galt, William Godwin, Thomas Gordon, William Hazlitt, John Cam Hobhouse, T.J. Hogg, T.S. Hughes, Leigh Hunt, Thomas Moore, Sir Charles Napier, Lord John Russell, Mary Shelley, Madame de Staël, John Taaffe, and the Williamses, Edward and Helen, all make appearances here, and sometimes (particularly on the latter chapters on Byron) there is a real sense of a chorus -- perhaps I should say a polyphony -- of opinion voicing itself: a new form of European public opinion or public intellectualism, indeed.

In marshalling so diverse a data set, Stock carefully avoids in his Introduction getting caught on the horns of a pair of related dilemmas: the local versus the universal, and the nationalist versus the cosmopolitan. These are ultimately irresolvable problems that he keeps a careful eye on in the chapters that follow. It's worth noting, perhaps, that they are themselves problems set for us by the Enlightenment and the Romantic movement. Stock doesn't mention Herder, which is a shame, but certainly the German philosopher's privileging of the national and the cultural hardly gratifies the Enlightenment's taste for the universal and the abstract. It is very interesting to see the particular spins this diverse group of Romantic-era writers put on the (European) universal, so often associated historically with the classical, the neo-classical, and therefore with the Greek example. "Are ancient Greek artifacts," Stock asks, "the cultural property of all Europe, implying a shared heritage? Or do the claims of modern Greece hold sway, an argument which posits a Europe of more firmly divided spatial and national loyalties?" (34). That is a debate showing no signs of immediate resolution.

Space forbids an actual summary of the chapters. The discussions are close, deeply researched, and highly detailed. Suffice to say, any researcher interested in this field -- within literary studies and in the history of ideas more broadly conceived -- will need to consult this book, and will gain from the experience. It straddles the various issues raised by the writers concerned, from the historical and philosophical to the political and the personal, from translation to sex and from revolution to warfare, with admirable conscientiousness and care.

But of course an ambitious project cannot be all things to all readers. I wasn't sure, in the end, exactly what Stock's thesis was, and so the study remains to some extent a (very extensive) survey rather than an analysis with a powerful outcome. Since the discussions are close, detailed, and highly demanding of the reader's attention, I would have welcomed signs of an overall direction -- apart, that is, from the old aporia of the national versus the transnational. At the end I wanted a Conclusion. Stock does a good deal of signposting where each chapter and discrete passage of discussion is concerned, but a tour -- even of something as colossal as second-generation Romantic Europe -- should have a definite destination.

I was also puzzled by the ubiquitous references to "circle." Given its use of the word, the title seems to promise a highly focused analysis of the Shelley-Byron circle long established by literary history: that odd and fissiparous group of

individuals that collected itself around the two poets in Pisa and Genoa between 1820 and 1823, or, potentially, the holiday group on the shores of Lake Geneva in 1816. For surely by "circle" -- when used in its social sense -- we mean a group of people in sufficient personal contact with one another to create intellectual influence by propinquity. But Stock uses the term more loosely. Chapter Two, for example, "investigates how the end of the Napoleonic wars affected the Shelley-Byron circle's understandings of Europe, especially while they traveled through the continent in 1816" (39). But that circle is by no means the same one that later formed itself in Pisa. Nor did any "Shelley-Byron circle" form itself earlier around the composition of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold*. On his first European expedition Byron was effectively in a circle of one, thoroughly relieved when Hobhouse left him alone in 1810. But Stock has more circles than the Olympic flag, with a Byron circle (113), a Shelley circle (100), a "Marlow group" (115), and a Godwin circle (116) all making their appearance before we get to the familiar territory of Pisa in 1821. Even after that date, circles sometimes seem to form out of thin air. While Stock notes, for example, that Thomas Moore's *Fables for the Holy Alliance*, published in 1823, employs a ballroom-satire just as *The Age of Bronze* does, is this biographically significant or merely co-incidental? How much of a "circle" encloses Moore and Byron in such case, and how do the various earlier circles evolve and inform later ones? Do they constitute a genealogy or a random set of phenomena? What is the *history* of the Shelley-Byron circle? How important was the identity of its head? To what extent and on what occasions did it become conscious of itself *as* a circle?

Inclined more to survey than analysis, Stock tends to summarize his principals' points of view rather than holding them to account, particularly in Chapter Six, where he examines the post-Napoleonic congress system. Recent research on this system has increasingly made the Shelley-Byron view of it look partial, to say the least -- though understandably so to some extent, given the poverty of European media at the time. (Byron doffs his cap to several icons of Italian Renaissance art in the fourth canto of *Childe Harold*, for example, without mentioning how many of them Napoleon stole and the Allies returned after 1815. He might have given credit where it was due.) Stock does mention Paul Schroeder's immense *The Transformation of European Politics 1763-1848* (2004), but only once, and only to trump it with a far older study (159). Similar work by Tim Blanning and Charles Esdaile is not cited. This is regrettable, because these historians argue in comprehensive detail for a comprehensive revision of the congress system as perhaps the most successful diplomatic diplomatic structure in European history, far more efficient than anything done in the eighteenth century, let alone the disastrous settlements after the First and Second World Wars. Like the UN, the congress system was hardly perfect; in particular it could not justly settle problem areas like Poland and the Mediterranean (where Byron and Shelley were resident, of course). But it built an era of relative peace in central Europe that took a hundred years to collapse, and it came at the end of a set of exhausting wars of twenty-three years' duration when absolutely all parties wanted peace at any price -- except John Cam Hobhouse, that is, who proposed that Britain declare war on Austria, Prussia, and Russia combined in the name of freedom and "the honour of England," if you please (qtd. 167). (It's hard to see Hobhouse talking on behalf of a "circle" here.) In place of the reasonably effective peace disdained by the Shelley-Byron circle, the "liberty/tyranny theory" (156) it trumpeted to anybody who would listen is demonstrably inadequate (not least where Napoleon was concerned). Though Stock recognizes this, he still flicks whatever pellets he can at Castlereagh -- arguably the most successful foreign minister in British history. In the eyes of Stock, it seems, the more the powers spoke of preserving European peace, the less sincere they were, and the more devoted instead to "crushing" the kinds of revolutionary changes that had set Napoleon off on his course of aggression in the first place (160). When France and Britain arrive at a typical diplomatic stalemate over the Spanish uprising, members of the Shelley-Byron circle describe the whole arrangement as a "longstanding reactionary cabal" (170): a phrase that Stock does not seriously question. To say only that the circle might have engaged in "a greater range of thinking" on such matters (167) is to treat it with the kind of kid gloves the circle itself had long since thrown away before hysterically denouncing Castlereagh and Wellington. It's upsetting to see Byron, of all people, stooping to anti-Semitism in *The Age of Bronze*, where he describes the Congress of Verona as a "New Jerusalem" for the bankers who, in his opinion, had underwritten the restoration of monarchy.

To sum up, Stock's portrayal of the "idea" of Europe needed more of what modern political scientists call "realism" in international relations (that is, that they are built on the foundation of enlightened national self-interest). In our own time, after all, when climate change negotiations reached an impasse at a congress in Copenhagen, we did not accuse the parties concerned of joining a conspiracy. We too have seen a demonized Western leader give way to a sanctified one, just as the Shelley-Byron circle saw Castlereagh give way to Canning and decide that the latter's "genius [was] more important than the precise details of his career" (169), even when the latter ended up following much the same policies as the former. A book that might have improved Stock's perspective on "the circle's Manichean contrast between liberty and tyranny" (170) is Carl Schmitt's *Political Romanticism* (trans. Guy Oakes, MIT 1986), which forges a link between the Romantic dissent of Byron and Shelley and the progressivism of our own era, with its fascination for the moral high ground. An unrealistic and phantasmagoric idea of Europe, populated by heroes and villains, was hardly the best contribution made by the second-generation Romantic left.

Finally, despite its enticing title, *The Shelley-Byron Circle and the Idea of Europe* is not stylistically elegant. Stock is an assiduous signposter, as I have said, but when chapter after chapter begins with the same grammatical formula ("This chapter explores...", "This chapter investigates...", "This chapter focuses on...", "This chapter explores...", "This final chapter returns to..."), the reader's attention flags. In analysing concepts of political order, the book is sophisticated, self-conscious, and -- except for its account of the European congress system -- well informed. But often enough, and precisely because he tends to slight the value of literary language, Stock implies that conceptualizations of that kind were what *poets* dealt with and experienced, or that such conceptualizations emerged dryshod from the creative process. Stock is most interesting when he treats Shelley's translations as part of his idea of Europe -- and Byron's various acts of poetic ventriloquism belong alongside them, of course. It is perfectly germane to consider whether the very act of translation aids "intercultural exchange," is a quasi-colonial act of appropriation, or is, as Homi Bhabha suggests, "the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity" (145). But the only way to answer this question specifically is to scrutinize a particular translation. Byron's appropriation of ottava rima, like Shelley's appropriation of terza rima, justifies itself -- on aesthetic as well as political grounds -- if it gives as much life to a European cultural icon as it arguably borrows. We will know that the grip of cultural materialism is loosening when our own idea of Europe gives equal status to the creative and the ideological.

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Paul Stock responds:

With thanks to Richard Lansdown for his long and thoughtful review of my book, I have just two points to make in reply: one about Chapter Six and the other about the overall argument of the book.

Chapter Six, which discusses responses to the "congress system" of international politics in the 1820s, has a twofold purpose. It examines the Shelley-Byron circle's partial (and partisan) interpretations of the congress system in order to show how those views affected their ideas about Europe, and it locates those understandings within the broader context of contemporary debate about the "congress system," both among the participants and in wider British public discourse. When Professor Lansdown says that I "flick whatever pellets [I] can at Castlereagh," and that I regard the diplomatic negotiations as insincere, he seems to be conflating Percy Shelley's and Byron's highly politicized interpretations of the congress system with what he supposes my own views to be. As it happens, I am very sympathetic to the reassessments of the system that Professor Lansdown advocates. But the purpose of my chapter is not to provide a full-scale historiographical review of the purposes and successes of the various congresses. Instead it is to show how the biases of Shelley and Byron against the congress system developed from their radical politics, shaped their ideas about European history and the future, and fitted into wider conceptual ambiguities and debates about international politics in that period. Professor Lansdown wishes for more of "what modern political scientists call ¾realism,'" with which one can hold Shelley's and Byron's views "to account." But this sounds to me like a request for a completely different kind of intellectual endeavor -- in which one critiques the partial perspectives of the past in terms of more recent reappraisals and insights. This approach may have its merits, but in cases such as this, it does not help us understand why specific individuals thought as they did.

Secondly, while Professor Lansdown applauds the scope, range and ambition of the book, he also says that it lacks a "definite destination." As a counterweight to this view, allow me to summarise what my introduction calls its "Structure and Argument." In brief, Shelley, Byron and their circle use radical interpretations of "liberty" and "freedom" to construct their idea of Europe; they view it through the lenses of what they take to be the living traditions -- not the dead remains -- of ancient Greek and Roman history; and they define European spaces and cultures in terms of non-European -- especially Islamic -- border-zones. As part of their project, they contrast what they see as a flawed Europe (of depots and restorations) with an alternative European future mediated through their interests in radical politics and revolution. Crucially too, they use the language of "Europe" in both a particularizing and a universalizing way. While constructing a uniquely European culture from specific historical events, places and literary texts, they also generalize that culture into a universal ideal for all humanity. As my chapters on the congress system and the Greek revolution show, the circle's ideas of Europe are political programs and not just immaterial "ideas"; but since they look for a social prospect beyond immediate material conditions, they also have a utopian dimension. This frustrating conflict between ideals and political circumstance is central, I think, to the politics of Shelley and Byron, and, perhaps, to Romanticism more widely. By showing how various texts engage with ideas about Europe, the book develops an approach to the period outside the dominant framework of nationalism and the potentially imprecise generalizations of cosmopolitanism. To explain what "Europe" meant in the early nineteenth century requires a vocabulary capable of articulating both transnationalism and the specificities of particular locations and cultures. For this reason, studying the idea of Europe can give us new ways to understand the complexities of identity formation and the politics of community in the Romantic period and beyond.

Whether this argument is compelling and persuasive is not for me to judge. All I can hope is that the book contributes to ongoing -- and important -- conversations about British ideas of Europe and the politics of Romanticism. To this end, I am grateful to Professor Lansdown for recommending the book to scholars in both literary studies and the history of ideas.

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