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Byronism as Madness in Zygmunt Kaczkowski's *Bajronista* (The Byronist)¹

Abstract

The significance of Byron's presence in Polish culture and its diverse aspects have been widely noted. Not much has been said, however, on the representation of Byronism as a disease. The rumours of Byron's madness were spread by Annabella, but the very cult of Byron as a celebrity and in particular the attempts of many men who tried to model their life on that of Byron could have been seen as a mental disorder. A fictional study of Byronism as a disease was offered in Zygmunt Kaczkowski's novel *Bajronista* (The Byronist, 1855–1856; 1857), which used as its epigraph the memorable lines from Słowacki's poem *Beniowski*, in which the poet declares himself to be a "Byronist". The aim of this paper is to discuss the representation of Byronism in Kaczkowski's novel in the context of the Polish reception of Byron. Kaczkowski attempts to present Byronism as a destructive social and cultural phenomenon; hence he uses the image of a disease, which eventually results in actual illness and death. Kaczkowski's portrayal of Byronic madness is expressive, on the one hand, of the critical tradition represented by Friedrich Schlegel's charges of atheism against Byron and by Kazimierz Brodziński's warnings against dangers of following models of English and German poetry, and on the other hand, of the novelist's disillusionment with the ideology of Polish Romanticism.

Keywords: Byron, Byronism, Zygmunt Kaczkowski, *Bajronista*, disease in literature, madness in literature.

In his 1839 review of Juliusz Słowacki's *Balladyna*, Stanisław Ropelewski, referring to the contemporary Polish poets as "Byron's illegitimate children", noted that "since 1820 nearly all our poets [had] been proud and pale; pride and paleness [had] been the leading characteristic of poets and pseudo-poets".² A fictional

¹ The first version of this paper was presented at the 41st International Association of Byron Societies Conference, University of Gdańsk, 1–6 July 2015.

² S. Ropelewski, rev. of *Balladyna w 5 aktach*, „Młoda Polska” 1839, vol. 2.29, p. 343–344; qtd. in H. Stankowa, *Literatura i krytyka w czasopiśmie Wielkiej Emigracji (1832–1848)*, Wrocław 1973, p. 128–129 (trans. M.C.).

study of such a pale “pseudo-poet” was offered in Zygmunt Kaczkowski’s novel *Bajronista* (The Byronist, 1855–1856; 1857), which attempts to expose Byronism as a destructive social and cultural phenomenon. The view of Byron’s poetry as morally dangerous follows a strong tradition in Polish early-nineteenth-century criticism going back to Kazimierz Brodziński, who already in 1822 attacked Byron’s poetry as “an addiction of the sick mind and heart, which, by indulging in vacuous insane dreams, destroys sound essential affections”.³ As Janina Lasecka-Zielakowa pointed out, there was a strong discrepancy between Polish critics’ and poets’ reception of Byron in the first half of the nineteenth century. Critics commonly perceived his influence as detrimental to the development of Polish literature, whereas poets such as Mickiewicz, Słowacki and many others stressed the importance of his inspiration.⁴ Kaczkowski’s novel does not adequately represent the phenomenon of Polish Byronism, significantly ignoring its importance for Polish Romantic poetry, deeply inspired by Byron. In his biography of a failed poet whose ambition has been to become a Polish Byron, Kaczkowski presents Byronism as a mental disease whose symptoms include both melancholy and bitter irony, and which eventually leads to self-destruction.

The tradition of associating literary creativity with madness goes back to antiquity. In Plato’s *Ion* Socrates memorably argues that

[...] a poet is indeed a thing ethereally light, winged, and sacred, nor can he compose anything worth calling poetry until he becomes inspired and as it were mad; or whilst any reason remains in him. For whilst a man retains any portion of the thing called reason he is utterly incompetent to produce poetry or to vaticinate.⁵

Byron sometimes referred to the creative process in terms of this tradition. In *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* Canto III he writes of Rousseau as possessed by the prophetic spirit in the manner of Pythia possessed by Apollo:

For then he was inspired, and from him came,
As from the Pythian’s mystic cave of yore,
Those oracles which set the world in flame [...] (3. 761–763).⁶

Rousseau is presented here as a prophet of the French Revolution. However, the value of his prophecies is undermined by the preceding references to the writer’s words possessing power of beautifying madness. Thus the artist is not necessarily a soothsayer but may be an emotional manipulator. Rousseau is depicted as

[...] the self-torturing sophist, wild Rousseau,
The apostle of affliction, he who threw
Enchantment over passion, and from woe

³ K. Brodziński, *O elegii* [in:] *Pisma estetyczno-krytyczne*, ed. Z.J. Nowak, Wrocław 1964, vol. 1, p. 193. Brodziński repeatedly warned of the pernicious influence of Byron’s poetry; see P. Chmielowski, *O przekładach utworów Byrona* [in:] *Byron, Poemata*, Warszawa 1895, p. xi.

⁴ J. Lasecka-Zielakowa, *Powieść poetycka w Polsce w okresie romantyzmu*, Wrocław 1990, p. 43.

⁵ Plato, *Ion*, trans. P.B. Shelley, Pagan Press, <http://paganpressbooks.com/jpl/ION.HTM> (access: 13.05.2016).

⁶ All quotations from Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* are from *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. J.J. McGann, vol. 2, Oxford 1980.

Wrung overwhelming eloquence, first drew
 The breath which made him wretched; yet *he knew*
How to make madness beautiful, and cast
O'er erring deeds and thoughts, a heavenly hue
Of words, like sunbeams, dazzling as they past
The eyes, which o'er them shed tears feelingly and fast (3.725–733, italics M.C.).

Byron's verses on Rousseau were often read as autobiographical, and Byron was often labelled "a poet of despair". The last four lines of the stanza were used as the motto of Amédée Pichot's essay on Byron in the best-selling French translation of Byron, through which most Polish readers acquired their first knowledge of Byron's poetry.⁷ Such a reading of Byron linked him with the endemic nineteenth-century complaint of the *mal du siècle* – otherwise referred to as melancholy, *ennui*, and *Weltschmerz*. Byron was also often accused of pernicious emotional manipulation, potentially dangerous to his readers. These charges became even more pronounced after the publication of *Don Juan*, when Byron was branded as the main representative of the Satanic school by Robert Southey. Readers were warned about the dangers of reading Byron, and Francis Jeffrey's 1822 review, widely known on the Continent, is representative of the general trend:

[...] his writings have a tendency to destroy all belief in the reality of virtue – and to make all enthusiasm and constancy of affection ridiculous; and that this is effected, not merely by direct maxims and examples, of an imposing or seducing kind, but by the constant exhibition of the most profligate heartlessness in the persons of those who had been transiently represented as actuated by the purest and most exalted emotions – and in the lessons of that very teacher who had been, but a moment before, so beautifully pathetic in the expression of the loftiest conceptions.⁸

The warnings about immoral influence of Byron's writings, particularly pernicious to Christianity, were widespread on the Continent. In 1822 Friedrich Schlegel in his *Geschichte der Alten und Neuen Literatur* wrote of Byron's poetry as originating in "atheist enthusiasm" (*die atheistische Begeisterung*), arguing that "the new 'Poesie' in its clarity cannot burst forth from this dark whirlpool of passionate displeasure, but should only unfold from the pure light of eternal hope".⁹

In his essay "O egzaltacji i entuzjazmie" (On exultation and enthusiasm 1830) Kazimierz Brodziński echoed both Jeffrey and Schlegel, presenting Byron as a champion of nihilism. According to Brodziński, Byron

would like man, unattached to anything, trusting nothing [...] to ignite hell within himself and to become consumed by it. [...] Moreover, he knew not only how to make human weak-

⁷ [A. Pichot], *Notice sur Lord Byron et ses écrits* [in:] *Oeuvres complètes de Lord Byron*, 2nd ed., trans. A.E. De Chastopalli [A. Pichot], Paris 1820, vol. 1, p.i. Google eBook. For the popularity of Pichot's translation, see P. Cochran, *From Pichot to Stendhal to Musset: Byron's Progress Through Early Nineteenth-Century French Literature* [in:] *The Reception of Byron in Europe*, ed. R.A. Cardwell, pbk ed., London 2014, vol. 1, p. 32.

⁸ Jeffrey on *Don Juan 1822* [in:] *Byron: The Critical Heritage*, ed. A. Rutherford, London 1970, p. 201.

⁹ F. Schlegel, *Geschichte der Alten und Neuen Literatur, Sämmtliche Werke*, Wien 1822, Google eBook, vol. 2, p. 205 (trans. Stephanie Dumke in a private e-mail).

nesses look attractive but also gave them an appearance of superiority, whose source and aim was only passion.¹⁰

Byron's readers and imitators were thus seen as facing danger of self-destruction and madness as a result of emotional and intellectual machinations of the Satanic poet.

The image of Byronism as a disease appears in Juliusz Słowacki's poem *Beniowski* (1841), strongly indebted to Byron's *Don Juan*, in which Słowacki openly declares himself to be a Byronist. The declaration deserves close scrutiny, as it reveals both one of the facets of Polish Byronism at the time and the complexities of Słowacki's own engagement with Byron:

O Melancholio! Nimfo! skąd ty rodem?
 O Melancholy! Nymph! Where do you come from?
Czyś ty chorobą jest epidemiczną?
 Are you an epidemic disease?
Skąd przyszedłaś do nas? Co ci jest powodem,
 Where have you come from? What is the reason
Że teraz nawet szlachtę okoliczną
 That now you have even infected
Zarażasz? – Nimfo! za twoim przewodem
 The local gentry. – Nymph! under your command
Ja sam wędrówkę już odbyłem śliczną!
 I myself have already considerably wandered
I jestem dzisiaj – niech cię porwie trzysta! –
 And I'm now – let the devil take you! –
Nie Polak – ale istny bajronista...
 No longer a Pole – but a real Byronist... (trans. M.C.)¹¹

O melancholy! Nymph! Whence comest thou?
 Art thou a creeping plague, an epidemic?
 From where didst thou originate, and how?
 Both noblemen and poets academic
 Are touched by thee! – Ah, Nymph! I must avow
 That I too caught the malady systemic,
 And am by now (the devil! – I'm no ironist)
 No longer Polish – but a Byronist...¹²

The whole stanza in its irony and self-reflexivity recalls *Don Juan*, even with the echo of "Sent to the devil somewhat ere his time" (1.8) in *niech cię porwie trzysta!* (let the devil take you), assigning Melancholy and not Don Juan to the devil. Thus Słowacki is a Byronist not only because of his melancholy, which in the following stanza he attributes to the sufferings of his native country, but also

¹⁰ K. Brodziński, *O egzaltacji i entuzjazmie* [in:] *Pisma...*, vol. 1, p. 181–82. All translations in this article are mine unless otherwise indicated.

¹¹ J. Słowacki, *Beniowski*, ed. A Kowalczykowa, Wrocław 1996, p. 11, canto I, 193–200.

¹² J. Słowacki, *Beniowski*, trans. M. Modrzewska, P. Cochran [in:] *Poland's Angry Romantic: Two Poems and a Play by Juliusz Słowacki*, ed. P. Cochran, B. Johnston, M. Modrzewska, C. O'Neill, Newcastle upon Tyne 2009, p. 177.

because of irony and satire in his fierce attack on the Polish immigration and literary establishment in *Beniowski*.

His metaphor of melancholy as an epidemic disease, though perhaps not as fatal as “a creeping plague” in Mirosława Modrzewska and Peter Cochran’s translation, can be seen as linked to the *mal du siècle*. Its contagious properties are so strong that they infect even Polish local gentry, who implicitly should be resistant to such tendencies. The poet himself admits he has already “wandered” considerably in the Byronic fashion. This may partly be an allusion to his early verse narratives inspired by Byron, partly to his travels in the East (the Polish word *wędrowka* – “wandering” – may be seen as an allusion to *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*). No wonder then that Słowacki feels infected by Byron. I think that the text may also allude to the refrain of *Mazurek Dąbrowskiego*, now the Polish national anthem: “March, march, Dąbrowski, / To Poland from the Italian land. / Under your command / We shall rejoin the nation”.¹³ Thus instead of being led back to Poland under the command of the Polish Napoleonic General, the young generation of Poles is ironically shown as being led astray by Byron.

Whereas Słowacki attempted to embrace what we now often recognize as heteroglossia inherent in Byron’s poetry¹⁴, most of his contemporaries saw this juxtaposition of melancholy and irony as proof of Byron’s utter moral corruption, as illustrated by the passage from Jeffrey quoted above. Byron as the author of *Childe Harold*, *Manfred* and the Turkish Tales was seen as a poet of grief and despair, but Byron as the author of *Don Juan* was a much greater offender as his satire and irony were perceived as cynical “negation”. Słowacki’s Byronic manifesto could have been read as an expression of nihilism and as such it was chosen as an epigraph to Kaczkowski’s critique of Polish Byronism.

Zygmunt Kaczkowski (1825–1896), one of the most popular novelists of the time, is a highly controversial figure because of charges of national apostasy, which overshadow his literary achievements. His life offers an insight into the turbulent course of nineteenth-century Polish history. He started his career as an aspiring man of letters, deeply devoted to the cause of Polish struggle for independence. His father Ignacy had been one of the many Poles who had believed that Napoleon would help them to gain independence from Russia and had taken part in Napoleonic campaigns. In 1846 both father and son were arrested for their involvement in a failed uprising in Galicia, the south-eastern part of former Polish Commonwealth covering a considerable part of today’s Ukraine and Lesser Poland, which at that time was under Austrian control. Zygmunt was sentenced to death, but avoided execution thanks to the amnesty in 1848. He spent two years in prison, where he composed a volume of poetry. Later, he worked as a journalist and turned from writing poetry to writing historical novels, which brought him considerable success. In 1861, when working in Lviv as the editor of a political periodical “Głos”, he was arrested for publishing an article proposing the devolu-

¹³ *Poland Is Not Yet Lost*, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poland_Is_Not_Yet_Lost (access: 13.05.2016).

¹⁴ See, for instance, C. Addison, *Heritage and Innovation in Byron’s Narrative Stanzas* [in:] *Byron: Heritage and Legacy*, ed. C. Wilson, New York 2008, p. 136.

tion of Galicia from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Probably when in prison he was persuaded by the Austrians to work as an informant. After the 1863–1864 Polish uprising he was denounced for spying for Austria and forced by the public opinion to leave Poland. He was very successful abroad; meanwhile debates concerning his guilt raged among his compatriots. The allegations were finally confirmed in 1920 with the publication of the secret archives of the Austrian police, which revealed that from 1863 onwards he wrote reports for the Austrian government. While living abroad, first in Vienna, next in Paris, he made a successful career, becoming a co-owner of several newspapers (“Presse” and “Morgen-Post” in Vienna, “Pall Mall Gazette” in London, and “Journal de Paris” and “La Semaine Française” in Paris), and working as a financial and political advisor for several European governments. He was even awarded the Legion of Honour by the French.¹⁵

The Byronist was one of his few attempts at writing a contemporary novel; it first appeared as a series in “Gazeta Warszawska” in 1855–1856, and then in a three-volume edition in Vilnius in 1857. It may be viewed as a critical account of the Polish 1830 generation and Kaczkowski’s own semi-autobiographical dismissal of his youthful literary and political fascinations. Although it lacks any direct references to Polish Romantic poets, it occasionally alludes to their poetry. At the same time it criticizes belated quasi-Byronic self-fashioning in the 1850s, presenting it in terms of a moral disease. This metaphor of spiritual sickness is a development of the technique which Kaczkowski had used in his series of satirical essays *Uwagi nad moralnymi chorobami* (Remarks on moral diseases) published in “Dziennik Mód Paryskich” in 1845–1846, where he attacked fads and weaknesses of his contemporaries, though at that stage Byronism was not listed among them.

Miron, the eponymous *Byronist*, was born in 1808,¹⁶ which makes him a contemporary of Słowacki (born 1809). In view of Kaczkowski’s interest in onomastics visible throughout the novel, his very name, allegedly of Slavonic origin, may be an attempt at conflating the names of Mickiewicz and Byron. Almost in allegorical terms, his father, a wealthy country squire Tomasz Prawdziwiec (Truthworthy), a veteran of the Napoleonic wars, is supposed to embody the Imagination, but turns out to be surprisingly commonsensical, whereas his mother stands for emotions and piety. The narrative opens on the day of Miron’s baptism in 1813 when the celebrations are cut short with the news of Napoleon’s defeat at Leipzig and the tragic death of Prince Józef Poniatowski. So Miron symbolically enters his life on the day of the loss of hopes for Polish independence linked to the fate of Napoleon.

¹⁵ This brief account of Kaczkowski’s life is based on W. Albrecht-Szymanowska, *Kaczkowski Zygmunt* [in:] *Dawni pisarze polscy od początków piśmiennictwa do Młodej Polski. Przewodnik biograficzny i bibliograficzny*, vol. 2, Warszawa 2001, p. 64–66, P. Chmielowski, *Zygmunt Kaczkowski: jego życie i działalność literacka: Zarys biograficzny*, Petersburg 1898; Z. Krechowicki, *Zygmunt Kaczkowski i jego czasy*, Lwów 1918.

¹⁶ As in 1832 Miron is 24. Z. Kaczkowski, *Bajronista. Powieść współczesna*, 3 vols, Wilno 1857, vol. 2, p. 171.

As a child Miron is gifted with prophetic imagination and is reminiscent of Orcio from Krasiński's *Un-divine Comedy*. He suffers from visionary fits, which point to his innate poetic gift but deeply disturb his parents as they perceive them as symptoms of some mental disorder. His cosmopolitan libertine uncle provides him with a French teacher, the kind-hearted Mr. de Toutrien, who suffers from two "diseases": excessive sensibility and melancholy, recites Schiller and walks around with a volume of Byron.¹⁷ As Miron's father wants to bring the boy back to earth, he assigns him another teacher – a philosopher-soldier Jakub Chretwa, devout supporter of Napoleon, who witnessed his final defeat at Waterloo. Chretwa tries to teach Miron perseverance and hard work and rid him of his propensity to daydreaming. However, the boy's moral and religious education is completely neglected.

Miron's ambition is to become "the Polish Byron": he wants both to compose the national epic poem and to achieve the status of a European poet like Goethe and Byron. But he starts his literary career with a failure: at a demonic sneer of the Satanic character called Count Aspis (viper) he stutters and then faints while reading his translation of *Marino Faliero*. The description of his unfortunate performance in a Lviv salon is a clear parody of the fashionable imitation of Byron, not so much in the 1820s when the story is set but at the time of the publication of the novel in the 1850s. Miron is beautiful, pale, and dressed all in black, and, as the narrator comments, though his looks made a great impression at the time, he would not impress anyone in the 1850s when "so many melancholy pale faces, so many eyes glittering with various passions and wild imagination, and so many hearts torn by various griefs are wandering in the world". Apparently, according to the narrator, in the 1820s Miron's pallor was unusual, as "faces at the time used to be of a ruddy complexion".¹⁸ This actually seems to be an ironic attack directed at Kaczkowski's contemporaries, whom he perceives as belated Byronists.

Miron's Byronic disease progresses from melancholy and egotistical self-indulgence to cynicism and finally to nihilism and madness – corresponding to Kaczkowski's understanding of *Childe Harold*, and *Don Juan*. We first encounter Miron as an "agonized Hero of Sensibility", to borrow Peter Thorslev's term.¹⁹ His attempts at writing a great epic poem end in failure; instead he indulges in day-dreams, writes occasional pieces, and maniacally rides his horse in the mountains and along the gallery of the ruined castle, which brings to mind *The Giaour*, some passages in *Childe Harold*, and possibly *Mazeppa*. No wonder locals view him as a madman. At the end of the novel he will haunt the ruins as a ghost. Once his horse drops dead, he puts up a monument in its honour, imitating Byron's interment of his dog Boatswain. These symptoms are relatively innocuous when compared to the "Satanic irony, a certain contempt for the world and human beings and for everything that should be sacred to everyone".²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 41–42.

¹⁸ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 180.

¹⁹ P. Thorslev, *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes*, Minneapolis 1962, p. 144. Thorslev emphasizes that this type of the Byronic hero was most widely imitated throughout the 19th century.

²⁰ Z. Kaczkowski, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 120.

This Satanic irony, which is seen as a form of mental disorder, seems to be linked to his frustration in love. It first manifests itself when the father of his beloved, Minka, adamantly rejects his marriage proposal, though the old gentleman has good grounds for his refusal as Miron has acted with great irresponsibility in his courtship. The “Satanic irony” is obviously the consequence of reading Byron: “In this respect as in all others, Miron was a faithful disciple of his master, who with all his tremendous genius, lived only on irony and contempt”.²¹

In spite of his alleged cynicism, but nonetheless in a Byronic gesture, Miron takes part in the 1830–31 November uprising. He then travels round Europe for two years, squandering his father’s fortune and suffering from *ennui*. On his return to Lviv, however, he falls in love again, this time with the aristocratic and artistically minded Talia, who is married to the demonic Count Aspis. When Count Aspis separates the lovers, carrying away his wife away to an unknown destination, Miron suffers from another fit of his disease, which this time is both physical and moral. He is compulsively driven towards self-destruction. When he eventually marries Minka, he is not able to find domestic happiness but becomes disgusted with the world, retires into the world of dreams, and the only thing that keeps him alive is his memory of Talia. But when he finally manages to find her, she has changed beyond recognition as a result of her imprisonment by her husband. At her sight he bursts out in “the laughter of Satanic, hellish irony”, at which Talia drops dead.²² Miron is not able to survive the death of his dreams, yet he does not lapse back into madness but dies fully conscious, begging forgiveness from his wife.

Kaczkowski, unlike his hero, does not seem to have read much Byron’s poetry extensively. Byron’s role and influence are presented without any regard to historical chronology: on his return from Waterloo in 1815, Chretwa speaks of Byron as a dead poet whose spirit is influencing “the soft hearts of young men”²³ as though Byron had been dead in 1815 and his poetry widely read on the Continent at the time.²⁴ The knowledge of Byron’s works exhibited by Kaczkowski and his protagonist seems fragmentary and superficial. Apart from translating *Marino Faliero*, Miron quotes from *Hebrew Melodies* and sees Rome via Canto IV of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. He apparently also reads a few cantos of *Don Juan*, but a reference to Leporello suggests that Kaczkowski thinks of *Don Juan* more in terms of Mozart than of Byron.

Kaczkowski’s critique of Polish Byronism is not limited to the character of Miron. He uses personification to display its various aspects: several characters besides Miron exhibit various features he ascribes to Byronic influence. The melancholy and emotional Mr Toutrien is an example of an early Byronist. He idealizes the poet, whom he perceives as a martyr crowned with thorns, rejected

²¹ Ibid., vol. 2, p. 120.

²² Ibid., vol. 3, p. 309.

²³ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 115.

²⁴ Byron’s poetry started to be widely read on the Continent after Waterloo, and reached Poland by 1819. See Timeline in *The Reception of Byron in Europe*, ed. R.A. Cardwell, pbk ed., London 2014.

by his compatriots, but worshipped by the rest of the world.²⁵ Chretwa tries to account for Byron's genius from the historical perspective as a consequence of the writings of Voltaire and the anarchy of the French Revolution, and he pairs him, as most of his contemporaries did, with Napoleon.²⁶ He depicts the appeal of Byron's poetry in Ossianic terms: "bloody despair of the English lord is bound to appeal to many a heart: when personified sorrow wanders around all the minds, black mourning pours tears over fresh graves, wistful sighs burst from many a breast and fly over distant battlefields...". No wonder that children born at that time "are haunted by dreadful dreams and horrid spectres when they grow up".²⁷ Chretwa's remedy for that condition consists of the educational programme limited to the study of mathematics, geography and Spartan lifestyle. However, he himself is not immune to the all-pervading appeal of Byron. His experience of the Napoleonic wars has not dissuaded him from military action – together with Miron they join the Polish insurgents in Warsaw in 1830. Later for his conspiratory work he is sentenced to prison, where he dies. As the narrator comments, "he also was a Byronist and a dreamer though he believed that all his ideas were mathematical certitudes".²⁸

The demonic Count Aspis, at least at the beginning of the novel, bears many Byronic features, or rather some resemblance to Polidori's vampiric Lord Ruthven. He ominously tells Miron that he has read *Marino Faliero* in the original and possesses the perfect knowledge of the personality of the poet, which Miron lacks.²⁹ This comment may be perceived as a foreshadowing of nihilism and cynicism, which eventually destroy the protagonist.

Towards the end of the novel Miron himself attributes his failure to Byron:

Byron seduced me, and, who knows how many more together with me! Byron doomed himself and doomed me after his example. I did not partake of his talent [oeuvre] as one cannot partake of talent, but I was infected with his negation and it has killed me prematurely. He may have had something to negate, but I had nothing to negate and negated myself.³⁰

The charge of "negation" against Byron recalls the criticism of the poet particularly after the publication of *Cain* and *Don Juan*. "Negation" is on the one hand related to "scepticism", which may be understood as atheism in Friedrich Schlegel's early critique of Byron, against which Mickiewicz fiercely protested in his preface to *The Giaour*.³¹ But I think that Kaczkowski may owe his use of the word to Goethe, as he was well read in German and often uses passages from

²⁵ Z. Kaczkowski, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 210–211.

²⁶ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 112.

²⁷ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 115.

²⁸ Ibid., vol. 3, p. 29.

²⁹ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 189.

³⁰ Ibid., vol. 3, p. 152.

³¹ Mickiewicz defended the "moral character" of Byron's works against the charges of atheism and immorality, clearly referring to Schlegel's lectures: "Friedrich Schlegel called him an emissary of Satan, and everybody agreed that he [Byron] was an apostle of scepticism". A. Mickiewicz, *Przemowa tłumacza* [in:] *Giaur, Dziela*, Warszawa 1998, vol. 2, p. 149.

Goethe and Schiller as his epigraphs. Miron's self-diagnosis echoes Goethe's comments on Byron's self-destructiveness in his *Conversations with Eckermann*:

The renunciation of what was hereditary and patriotic not only caused the personal destruction of so distinguished a man, but his revolutionary turn, and the constant mental agitation with which it was combined, did not allow his talent a proper development. Moreover, his perpetual negation and fault-finding is injurious even to his excellent works. For not only does the discontent of the poet infect the reader, but the end of all opposition is negation; and negation is nothing. If I call *bad* bad, what do I gain? But if I call *good* bad, I do a great deal of mischief.³²

Miron was literally infected with what is named here "perpetual negation". His Byronism is not political but personal. While Byron in Goethe's words opposed all the institutions of his home country, Miron apparently turns his negation on the self. Annoyingly for most of Kaczkowski's Polish critics, Miron's despair seems to be triggered by personal disappointment, and not patriotic suffering. Yet Miron acts as Kaczkowski's spokesman when he says that Byron personified "feverish mental anguish" and "all the contemporary literature expresses the same anguish". He sees the sources of this anguish in "general discontent with the present, dark premonitions, violent desires of something better, or rather something different", and, according to him, great art cannot be created in this state of mind.³³ In his approach he clearly echoes the ideas of F. Schlegel and K. Brodziński.

Interestingly, Brodziński, the poet and critic whose criticism of Byron I quoted at the beginning of this article, is the only Polish writer directly referred to in the novel. Towards the end of the novel, when Miron realizes the destructive effects of his fascination with Byron, he deeply mourns Brodziński's death and regards him a great authority as a critic, whose precepts unfortunately have not been followed by Polish writers.³⁴ Brodziński was known for his advocacy of the development of Polish literature based on national tradition, which he associated with sentimental idealization, and he attacked the imitation of German and English literature by the young Romantics. Thus Miron's homage rendered to Brodziński's views on literature may be seen as indicative of Kaczkowski's own views on Polish Romantic literature.

Kaczkowski's reading of Byron in terms of nihilism was ravaged by the reviewers as an inadequate image of Polish Byronists. An anonymous reviewer in "Dziennik Literacki"³⁵ questioned the appropriateness of using the term "Byronist" to designate the protagonist, whom he perceived as a plain "madman". His argument is worth quoting, as it is one of the rare attempts at liberating the image of Byron from traditional stereotypes:

³² *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann and Soret*, trans. by J. Oxenford, 2 vols., London 1850, vol. 1, p. 208.

³³ Z. Kaczkowski, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 172.

³⁴ Ibid., vol. 3, p. 196–197. Miron is dismissive of Brodziński's achievement as a poet and sees his works as imitations of foreign models.

³⁵ According to Kaczkowski, the author of the review was Dzierżkowski, but Krechowiecki (op. cit., p. 224) doubts his identification of the reviewer.

We know, and so does everyone, that Byron was a great poetic genius; Miron is, to put it bluntly, a kind of madman who believes he can be a poet as he has read a lot, knows a lot, remembers a lot and experiences occasional fits of nerves and imagination. Why should he be a Byronist as he has not even gone mad on Byron alone?

The outraged reviewer protests against appropriating “the name of the great poet as the generic term for some madmen”.³⁶

Kaczkowski's novel continues the tradition of early nineteenth-century perception of Byron as a “Satanic poet”. The image of Byron and his works in the novel mainly derives from contemporary literary criticism, anecdotes and some translations of Byron's works. Still *The Byronist* is yet another confirmation of the presence of Byron in Polish nineteenth-century culture.

The novel also has an unexpected real life coda. In an act of self-fulfilling prophecy, a talented young poet Aleksander Michaux (1839–1895), an admirer of Byron, Musset, Heine, and Słowacki, defiantly chose the name of Miron as his literary penname.³⁷ In 1879 he was made legally incapable by his family owing to an alcohol addiction, as though Kaczkowski had rightly diagnosed the Byronic drive to self-destruction. Or perhaps by the very choice of the penname “Miron” Michaux attested his self-destructive tendencies. The Byron he admired was the Byron of *Don Juan*, and one of his poems is actually entitled *Don Juan*.

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³⁶ Rev. of *Bajronista*, “Dziennik Literacki” 1857, vol. 44, p. 375.

³⁷ J. Tomkowski, *Pożegnanie romantycznego karnawału* [in:] J. Tomkowski, *Don Juan we mgle*, Warszawa 2005, p. 97–102, p. 98.

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