

Alena Hnídková, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage and Harold in Italy: Connectivity and Contradiction*

BA thesis

Oponent's review

Alena Hnídková has submitted a thesis whose topic seems to be very interesting and very challenging: an attempt to confront two Romantic works of art, a poem and a symphony. The challenge is many-sided, indeed, because not only are two different arts to be compared and therefore a specific critical method to be applied, but the fact that the artists represent different nations and different generations should also be taken into consideration. Hnídková stresses that the link between the two works is rather loose: Berlioz admitted that he had composed his symphony in the "style" of Byron, and the question indeed is what he meant by that. This makes the confrontation even more difficult.

Let us assert at the very beginning of this evaluation that the most convincing and from the methodological point of view the least problematic is Chapter Four of the thesis, devoted to a close interpretation of the two works of art. Hnídková provides a detailed reading of Byron's text (the validity of which is not the concern of this assessment to examine, but I don't think there are any gross discrepancies in her conception) and attempts to extract a story line from Berlioz's music (mostly with the help of Liszt's commentary) and, very interestingly, to pin down its formal principle of composition. Unfortunately, the first half of the thesis (Chapters 1-3, pp. 1-24) is at great variance with this latter part.

My principle objections are following:

- (1) The introductory passages are rather too general, sometimes verbose and repetitive. Instead of mincing words, the author should base her explications on more research. Her understanding of the Romantic conception of poetry and music seems inadequate: what I lack especially is a discussion of the Romantic theory of the origin of (poetic) language, as presented by Wordsworth and then adopted by Coleridge, Shelley and others. This would indeed cast some light on the tendency to break the barriers between poetry and music as different types of artistic representation.
- (2) The author seems to be uncertain about the aesthetic character of the period's productions and this results in great confusion and sometimes sheer contradictions. On p. 9 we are, for instance, informed that "the actual treatment and results [of Byron's and Berlioz's work] differ due to the expressive nature of music and mimetic nature of poetry", to be assured a few pages later that "the distinction between music and poetry is smaller than it seems because the figurative language can be conceived as a spontaneous and instinctive product of feelings, changing [...] the perception of reality." (13) Also the sentence "The Romantics believed that imagination and intuitiveness were the two major qualities of humans which cannot be controlled by reason, because they are the expressions of universally existing movements of spirit in an individual" (9) should be revised. As it stands it is considerably inaccurate.
- (3) Especially the latter half of Chapter 3 seems to be very confusing, badly structured, inconsistent; the author fails to follow her argument and develop it, she speaks now about form, now about content, she tends to repeat her ideas and it all reflects a lack of any firmer conception.
- (4) For the most part of the thesis we are being persuaded that it is very difficult to arrive at any secure thematic basis of Berlioz's symphony and that its understanding depends prevalingly on the individual listener's imagination. Why is then the author's account

- of this work mostly theme and content-oriented? Why does she take for granted Liszt's interpretation when it is also, by definition, a "play of [the] imagination"?
- (5) The author speaks about an intimate personal relation of the two artists to Italy, but while she is able to prove this using some moments from Berlioz's biography, she does not include any work dealing with Byron's life (or definitely does not discuss any evidence of his relation to Italy and only relates to *Childe Harold* in this respect).
 - (6) If I'm right the dates of the first publication and production of the two discussed works are never given. This information is, however, indispensable.
 - (7) The language of the thesis suffers from occasional grammar and spelling errors (e.g. the persistent spelling of *loose* instead of *lose*), misprints and what appear to be the undeleted remains of the text editing (not to mention the too obvious typo in the title).
 - (8) The last point is a question rather than an objection. The characteristic style of Byron depends to a great extent on the tension between the use of the Spenserian stanza, a closed, strictly structured short unit, and the openness of the epic account. This fact is briefly discussed on pp. 34-35. Does the author find any formal analogue to this principle in Berlioz's symphony? Can the "style" be understood also along these formal lines?

To conclude: As I have stated above the thesis seems to me rather unbalanced. Alena Hnídková has proved she is able to analyze works of art but she has apparent problems with structuring and organizing her text and with the "processing" of ideas. Nevertheless, I recommend her thesis for the defence, with the preliminary suggestion of her mark as **velmi dobrá to dobrá** (2-3).


PhDr. Zdeněk Beran

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