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 Excerpt
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Introduction: the poets and the conqueror

When Buonaparte fell, an English editor (of virulent memory) exhausted a great number of the finest passages in *Paradise Lost* in applying them to his ill-fated ambition. This was an equal compliment to the poet and the conqueror: to the last, for having realised a conception of himself in the mind of his enemies on a par with the most stupendous creations of the imagination; to the first, for having embodied in fiction what bore so strong a resemblance to, and was constantly brought to mind by, the fearful and imposing reality!

Hazlitt, 'On Means and Ends' (*HCW* XVII, 22)

This book is concerned with the response of several British writers of the Romantic period to the career of Napoleon and to the political and aesthetic challenges it came to represent. It focuses on the writings of the three Lake poets – Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey – and of two of their most vehement antagonists, Byron and Hazlitt. These writers constructed, appropriated and contested different Napoleons as a crucial part of their sustained and partisan engagement in the political and cultural debates of the day. To use terms I have drawn from Richard Whately's pamphlet of 1819, *Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Bonaparte*,¹ Napoleon became an 'imaginary' figure for them, a 'fabrication' created to embody their political and personal hopes and fears. Yet these writers also saw Napoleon as occupying a place in the public 'imagination' which reinforced his hold on power. Depending on their political orientations, they sought through their representations of him to consolidate his place in this vital arena or to drive him out of it.

If there was a contest among these writers over the representation of Napoleon, however, there was also a series of contests between them and the figure of Napoleon himself, between the poets and the conqueror. Napoleon became crucial to their thinking about their own roles and their acts of self-conception. They both identified with him, appro-

priating him as a figure of power, and used him as an *Other* against which they could define themselves. Napoleon was the supreme embodiment of the hero in an age in which the artist was increasingly seen as heroic,² but his career raised numerous questions about the nature of heroism itself. The dilemma of how to respond to the fascinatingly ambivalent figure of Napoleon prompted these writers to evaluate themselves in Napoleonic terms, even to conceive of themselves along Napoleonic lines. Keats, who argued that Napoleon ‘had done more harm to the life of Liberty than any one else could have done’,³ nonetheless seems to have adopted ‘Little Boney’ on at least one occasion as a figure whose successful career, despite his class and height, provided an important role model for an ambitious, yet diminutive, ‘Cockney’ poet. In his long letter of 14 February to 3 May 1819 he wrote to George and Georgiana Keats:

I heard that Mr L[ewis] Said a thing I am not at all contented with – Says he ‘O, he is quite the little Poet’ now this is abominable – You might as well say Buonaparte is quite the little soldier – You see what it is to be under six foot and not a Lord – . . .⁴

The leading poetic Lord of the day, Byron, acted out a life-long identification with Napoleon, hailing himself in *Don Juan* as ‘the grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme’ (XI, 55).⁵ But the tag was an ambiguous one, both in its judgement of Napoleon and its attempt to reconcile the world of ‘action’ with that of ‘rhyme’. What these writers regarded as Napoleon’s genius, energy, imagination and daring, qualities which they saw as central to their own work, made him a powerful role model. Yet Napoleon’s staggeringly successful career in the world of political and military affairs, be it for good or bad, dynamically called into question the value of their own roles as writers or poets. What, as Wordsworth asked himself in ‘October, 1803’, was the poet to do when confronted by ‘one Man, of Men the Meanest too! / Raised up to sway the World, to do, undo, . . .?’ (lines 2–3).⁶ His response was to pit himself, both as a poet and a Grasmere Volunteer, against Napoleon, and it is testimony to the importance of this struggle that it can be argued that he achieves some of his greatest realizations of the ‘Imagination’ when ‘in opposition set / Against an enemy’ (*The Prelude* XIII, 30–1⁷).

Wordsworth’s combative response to Napoleon certainly involved an element of rivalry. Byron conducted his own contest more explicitly and controversially. In one memorable exchange of 1816, he pointedly refused to except even Napoleon when he declared himself ‘the greatest man existing’.⁸ William Hazlitt, the greatest antagonist of the Lakers,

provocatively suggests in *The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte* that it was dread of Napoleon as a 'rival' and a sense of 'jealousy' that prompted the Lake poets' hatred of him:

They had no great objection to what he was doing – but they could not bear to think that he had done more than they had ever dreamt of. While they were building castles in the air, he gave law to Europe. He carved out with the sword, what they had only traced with the pen. 'Never', says Mr. Landor, 'had been such good laws administered over a considerable portion of Europe. The services he rendered to society were great, manifold, extensive'. But these services were hateful in their eyes – because he aggrandised himself in performing them. The power he wielded, the situation he occupied, excited their envy, much more than the stand he made against the common enemy, their gratitude. They were ready enough at times to pull down kings, but they hated him worse who trampled, by his own might on their necks – as more rivals to themselves, as running in the same race, and going further in it. (*HCW* XVI, 245)

Pointedly ignoring the Lakers' 'apostasy' – the usual subject of his attacks – Hazlitt figures Napoleon as enacting with the 'sword' what the 'levelling' Muse of Wordsworth and the other 'Jacobin poets' sought to bring about with the 'pen'.⁹ His comments seek to trivialize the Lakers' later criticisms of Napoleon while incorporating their writing within his own radical polemic. Yet Hazlitt's comic exploration of the Lake poets' 'envy' of Napoleon as a man of action, and his critique of their 'building castles in the air' while Napoleon gave 'laws to Europe', suggest one of the crucial Romantic debates – the relationship of poetical to political power; a relationship memorably explored by Coleridge in 'Kubla Khan', a poem which juxtaposes the law-giver Khan's decree with the poet's desire to 'build that dome in air',¹⁰ and by Wordsworth in his sonnets of 1802–4 in which he measures himself against 'young Buonaparte'.¹¹

HISTORIC DOUBTS

What, then, are we to believe? If we are disposed to credit all that is told us, we must believe in the existence not only of one, but of two or three Bonapartes; if we admit nothing but what is well-authenticated, we shall be compelled to doubt of the existence of any. (Richard Whately, *Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Bonaparte*, p. 20.)

The centrality and importance of the figure of Napoleon to Romantic culture and politics is powerfully, if somewhat paradoxically, illustrated by Richard Whately's brilliant piece of mock-scepticism, *Historic Doubts*

Relative to Napoleon Bonaparte, published in 1819, four years after the battle of Waterloo and two before the death of Napoleon in captivity on St Helena. Taking as his starting-point the contemporary British obsession with Napoleon – ‘we may safely say that no subject was ever found so inexhaustibly interesting’ (p. 15) – Whately ironically juxtaposes the different accounts of Napoleon’s career and, confronted by their polarity, declares him a ‘fabrication’ of the circulation-conscious newspapers and the warring political parties (p. 18). Whether presented by the Tory government as a nursery bogeyman and ‘political bugbear’ to reinforce their ideological control (pp. 15–16), or by the Whig party as a ‘hero’, Napoleon, Whately concludes, was an ‘imaginary’ figure (pp. 20–1).

Whately’s argument is, of course, an extended exercise in irony and parody. His aim is to produce a *reductio ad absurdum* of Hume’s *Essay on Miracles* and so discredit his argument against believing in miracles on human testimony. In an earlier essay ‘Of Scepticism’ of 1818, which, as Whately’s modern editor Ralph Pomeroy has suggested, stimulated the first draft of *Historic Doubts*, Whately describes his intention as being to show ‘the folly of boundless scepticism . . . [not] in *abstract terms*, but . . . in the way of illustration . . . by bringing forward plausible arguments against something which no one ever did or can doubt’ (p. xxvii). In *Historic Doubts*, the first draft of which followed ‘Of Scepticism’ in Whately’s *Commonplace Book*, Napoleon is chosen as just such an example of ‘something which no one ever did or can doubt’, providing him with a vehicle for his parody of Hume’s conception of testimony. As the *Edinburgh Review* commented in 1861, Whately’s aim was to show that ‘a piece of well-known history – that of Napoleon, for instance – is as full of apparent inconsistencies and absurdities as the instances you cite from scripture’ (p. xvii).

The two sides of Whately’s argument provide useful starting-points for thinking about the different ways in which Napoleon is present in the culture of the period as, on the one hand, a real historical personage and, on the other, a ‘fabrication’ or ‘imaginary’ figure. Whately’s parody is underpinned by a common-sense conviction that the existence of Napoleon cannot be doubted and that history can be ‘well known’. Following this line, it can be argued that Napoleon was a ‘real’ historical personage whose character and actions were the everyday topics of newspapers, caricatures and anecdotes – the media through which the Romantics most frequently perceived him. Then, as now, of course, there was no definitive or stable ‘Napoleon’ but innumerable and varied accounts of him, themselves available for interpretation. However,

taking these mediating factors into account, Napoleon could still be seen as a historical personage whose character and career influenced the thinking and writing of the English Romantics.

Yet Whately's mock presentation of Napoleon as a 'fabrication' and an 'imaginary' hero, and the extensive cultural material he assembles to support his ironic argument do raise important issues about the way in which Napoleon was perceived and represented in the period and anticipate the investigations of more recent critics into the status of historical discourse and knowledge. In his stress on the 'fabricated' or textual nature of historical narrative and his emphasis on the ideological battle that is acted out through the various representations of Napoleon, Whately prefigures the arguments of a number of recent critics that history is not a science – a matter of carefully documented facts giving the reader access to what actually happened – but more of a myth or 'verbal fiction', to use Hayden White's term,¹² shaped according to teleological and often ideological designs.¹³ Written history, as Claude Lévi-Strauss has argued in *The Savage Mind*, is 'never history, but history-for'.¹⁴

Whately's stress on the representation (rather than the presentation) of Napoleon in British culture brings to mind Edward Said's argument that 'in any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a re-presence or a representation'.¹⁵ Whately presents as futile any attempt to move from representation to presence, from a 'fabricated' Napoleon to the real Napoleon with what he terms 'his true name and authentic history' (p. 22). History, he argues, is ultimately textual and intertextual, with no possibility of returning to an authorizing origin. 'Most persons', he writes, 'would refer to the *newspapers* as the authority from which their knowledge on the subject was observed', but these accounts are either 'copied from other journals, foreign or British (which is usually more than three-fourths of the news published)' or 'refer to the authority of certain "private correspondents" abroad' (pp. 13–14). One signifier leads only to another without ever arriving at the transcendent signified, the real Napoleon Bonaparte. Thus, concludes Whately, 'we find ourselves in the condition of the Hindoos, who are told by their parents that the earth stands on an elephant, and the elephant on a tortoise, but are left to find out for themselves what the tortoise stands on – or whether it stands on anything at all' (pp. 14–15). Given this lack of an authorizing origin for any of the accounts of Napoleon's career, Whately advances his 'important maxim' that '*it is possible for a narrative – however circumstantial – however steadily maintained – however public, and however important, the events it relates – however grave*

the authority on which it is published – to be nevertheless an entire fabrication!' (p. 18). His point is not that Napoleon did not exist, but that there is no way of distinguishing the real Napoleon from the numerous fabricated versions of him: 'I do not mean whether there was ever a person bearing that *name*, for that is a question of no consequence, but whether any such person ever performed all the wonderful things attributed to him' (p. 23). We must either believe in 'the existence not only of one, but of two or three Bonapartes' or in none at all (p. 20).

Yet if Napoleon can only be known in these fabricated forms, Whately's argument nonetheless stresses the ideological and economic interest that both individuals and institutions have in maintaining these fabrications within the culture of the period. Napoleon becomes a site of cultural contestation, used to legitimize ideological power and institutional practices. Within the British political system Napoleon functions as 'one common instrument' made use of by both parties (p. 16). For the Tories, he operates as a 'political bugbear', a 'phantom' used to ensure loyalty to their administration and payment of taxes: 'Bonaparte, in short, was the burden of every song; his redoubted name was the charm which always succeeded in unloosing the purse-strings of the nation' (p. 16). For the Whigs, Napoleon is a 'hero' whose cause and character embody their advocacy for liberty and their opposition to the encroachments of monarchical power (pp. 20–1). Similarly, the newspapers have their own investment in certain fabrications of Napoleon, irrespective of historical validity. As Whately asks, 'Have they not a manifest interest in circulating the wonderful accounts of Napoleon Bonaparte and his achievements, whether true or false? Few would read newspapers if they did not sometimes find wonderful or important news in them' (p. 15). Whately presents accounts of Napoleon as operating within a circular economy of investment and interest. Political parties, newspapers and individuals invest in and circulate representations of Napoleon, these representations produce interest – both curiosity and profit – but interest needs to be maintained by the continuation of this process. The maintenance of public interest in Napoleon is inseparable from the economic interest produced. In the penultimate paragraph of his pamphlet, Whately's language implies a parallel between 'fabricated' Napoleons and counterfeit money when he asks those who believe in any account of Napoleon to 'consider through how many, and what very suspicious hands this story has arrived to them . . . and likewise how strong an interest, in every way, those who have hitherto imposed on them have in keeping up the imposture'. Fake Napoleons may be false currency but, as

Whately argues, they can still produce interest ‘in every way’.

If the fabrication of Napoleon provides a means of maintaining certain interests, be they political or economic, Whately also suggests that it plays a part in the processes of self-definition and self-validation when he turns to the issue of nationality. Linda Colley, in her book *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837*, has argued that a sense of British national identity was an invention forged above all by the series of wars against France in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The confrontation with the obviously hostile *Other* encouraged the British to define themselves against it.¹⁶ Whately, though stressing Englishness rather than Britishness, argues that the figure of Napoleon operates in the culture in this way as a hostile *Other*, the hyperbolic definition of whom enables the English to enhance their own sense of national identity and glory:

There is one more circumstance which I cannot forbear mentioning, because it so much adds to the air of fiction which pervades every part of this marvellous tale; and that is, the nationality of it.

Bonaparte prevailed over all the hostile States in turn, *except England*; in the zenith of his power, his fleets were swept from the sea *by England*; his troops always defeat an equal and frequently even a superior number of those of any other nation, *except the English* – and with them it is just the reverse: twice, and twice only, he is personally engaged against an *English commander and both times he is totally defeated, at Acre and Waterloo*; and to crown all, *England* finally crushes his tremendous power, which had so long kept the continent in subjection or in alarm; and to the *English* he surrenders himself prisoner! Thoroughly national, to be sure, . . . It would do admirably for an epic poem . . .

Bonaparte’s exploits seem magnified in order to enhance the glory of his conquerors – just as Hector is allowed to triumph during the absence of Achilles, merely to give additional splendour to his overthrow by the arm of that invincible hero! (p. 35)

Though written as a parody of Hume, then, and intended as a critique of ‘boundless scepticism’, Whately’s ingenious pamphlet nonetheless reveals just how much is at stake in the representation of Napoleon in the period. The fabrication of Napoleon operates as a way of defining, validating and maintaining certain forms of interests within the culture, be they journalistic, party political or national.

‘GREATEST’ AND ‘MEANEST’

Whately’s argument is one that can be used to investigate the various textual representations of Napoleon during the Romantic period.

Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Byron and Hazlitt were all obsessed by the figure of Napoleon, following his career through newspaper reports, anecdotes, essays, and visits to Europe and engaging with him in their public and private writings. The historical figure of Napoleon, what Hazlitt terms ‘the fearful and imposing reality’ (*HCW* xvii, 22), had a profound impact on their thinking and writing. As Coleridge argued, he was one ‘of all those great Men, who in the states or the mind of man had produced great revolutions, the effect of which still remain, and are, more or less distant, causes of the present state of the World’ (*CL* iii, 818). Coleridge does not state whether Napoleon produced his ‘great revolution’ in the ‘states’ or the ‘mind of man’ but his remark nonetheless gives Napoleon the status of one of the determinants of the period, suggesting that he influenced not only the political history of France and the map of Europe but the consciousness of the age itself.

Yet, for these writers, Napoleon was also important as an ‘imaginary’ figure, a fabricated embodiment of their political and personal hopes and fears and a site for debating the crucial issues of the day. Like the political parties, the Romantics ‘availed themselves of one common instrument’, seizing Napoleon as a figure who could be used to serve what Hazlitt terms their ‘own purposes’, their political and aesthetic ideologies (*HCW* v, 66). Moreover, Napoleon operated for these writers as an *Other* that could be rhetorically conquered through opposition or appropriation, enhancing their own ‘glory’ and ‘splendour’.

As Whately’s modern editor, Ralph Pomeroy, has observed, one of the means by which he makes obvious the clash of testimonies regarding Napoleon and hence his ‘fabrication’ is by opposing the two main modes in which he is represented in contemporary accounts of his career; *hyperbole* and *diminutio* (p. xxxix). On the one hand, Napoleon is described as ‘extraordinary’, ‘gigantic’, ‘great’, ‘wonderful’, ‘marvellous’, ‘prodigious’ and ‘tremendous’. On the other, as ‘cruel’, ‘mean’, ‘merciless’, ‘perfidious’, ‘imperious’, ‘cowardly’ and even ‘insane’. Similarly, Theresa Kelley has examined the way that Napoleon is represented in contemporary British caricature and writing in either gigantic or miniature forms, as a colossus or as ‘little Boney’. Napoleon’s exaggerated size, she argues, reveals that his importance for the Romantics was figurative rather than literal. What is at stake ‘in the representation of Napoleon is the problem of political representation (or its lack) at home’.¹⁷ These two comments provide a useful starting-point for thinking about the representation of Napoleon during the Romantic period by writers from different positions across the political spectrum. Throughout, a similar polarization

operates in the debate over whether Napoleon was the ‘greatest’ or the ‘meanest’, a debate which is concerned with much more than the objective assessment of Napoleon’s historical status.

When *The Examiner* announced Napoleon’s death in 1821, it claimed him as the supreme figure of the Romantic period: ‘The age has lost its greatest man. He was far and away from our eyes and our thoughts; but we felt a pervading consciousness that he lived and something of a feeling that he might again appear among us’.¹⁸ But *The Examiner*’s tentatively expressed hope for an almost Christ-like return from exile suggests a political agenda behind its eulogistic elevation of Napoleon. The weekly paper was the mouthpiece for the stridently radical Hunt brothers and its representation of Napoleon as the ‘greatest man’ of the ‘age’ was contingent upon his political significance as a figure of symbolic opposition to the restored monarchical system of the post-Waterloo world.¹⁹ Similarly, Byron, who described Napoleon as ‘the greatest . . . of men’ (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, III, 36), and Hazlitt, the most ardent of the British Bonapartists, who eulogized him as ‘the great man’, ‘the greatest of men’, ‘the greatest man in modern history’ and ‘the only great man in modern times’ (*HCW* xx, 15; IV, 45; xx, 57; XII, 166), illustrate this important connection between the elevation of Napoleon and the adoption of him as a political symbol.

Yet such hyperbolic claims for Napoleon’s supreme position in the age were not uncommon, nor were they made exclusively by writers who adopted him as a symbol of their liberal or radical politics. When Napoleon abdicated in 1814, for example, Lord Burghersh wrote exultingly to the Duke of Wellington: ‘Glory to God and to yourself, the great man has fallen’,²⁰ though this comment may again exemplify Whately’s satire on the magnification of Napoleon to enhance the ‘glory’ of his conquerors. Walter Scott, an avowed Tory and author of a hostile biography of Napoleon, could assert boldly that he ‘was and will remain the greatest man of his time’.²¹ It is worth remembering, however, that Scott had a financial investment in Napoleon’s ‘greatness’ just as Byron, Hazlitt and the Hunts had a political one. He wrote his *Life of Napoleon Bonaparte* with the specific intention of making money after his bankruptcy and his claim for Napoleon’s ‘greatness’ may have been a necessary part of the puffing of this project. Unlike Byron, Hazlitt and the Hunts, however, Scott made his assertion of Napoleon’s greatness independent of his judgements of his moral and political character; describing him elsewhere as ‘certainly a great man, though far from a good man, and still farther from a good king’.²²

To some Romantic writers, however, all public claims for Napoleon's greatness were morally and politically reprehensible. From 1802 onwards, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, aware of Napoleon's charismatic appeal, strove to derogate his power over the imagination of their contemporaries. As Wordsworth put it in his Miltonic tract, *The Convention of Cintra*, written during the Spanish Peninsular War, they 'combated for victory in the empire of reason, for strong-holds in the imagination' (*CoC* 261). Their fight necessitated the denial of Napoleon's greatness. Coleridge, for example, was outraged in 1810 by a speech made by the leader of opposition in the Commons, George Ponsonby, in which, as Coleridge noted with amazement, he 'pronounced' Napoleon 'the greatest and wisest human Being that ever existed on Earth!!' (*CNB* III, 3845).²³ Coleridge responded immediately, sketching out an essay in his notebook which undermined Ponsonby's claim and denied Napoleon's greatness (*CNB* III, 3845). In the following year he adopted a different method of response, reminiscent of Fielding's use of 'great' in *Jonathan Wild*, describing Napoleon as 'the greatest proficient in human destruction that has ever lived' (*EoT* II, 276) and so appropriating and inverting the superlative that had so angered him. Wordsworth denies Napoleon's 'greatness' throughout his sonnet sequence of 1802–3, asserting that Revolutionary France has failed to bring forth 'Great Men' comparable to the figures of the English Republican tradition: Sydney, Marvell, Harrington, Vane and Milton.²⁴ Indeed, in his sonnet 'October 1803' he goes to the opposite extreme and answers hyperbole with *diminutio*, describing Napoleon as 'Of Men the Meanest' (line 2).

This contemporary contesting of Napoleon's status is dramatically illustrated by an anecdote recounted by Southey in a letter to Neville White in which he describes an exchange between himself and Byron some time shortly before Napoleon's first abdication in April 1814. He writes that the 'last time I saw him [Byron] he asked me if I did not think Bonaparte a great man in his villainy. I told him, no, – that he was a mean-minded villain' (*SL* IV, 73). The 'Satanic' Byron, playing devil's advocate and anticipating his later goading of Southey in *The Vision of Judgment*, seeks to shock and taunt the recently appointed Poet Laureate by conferring 'greatness' upon Napoleon. He flaunts his admiration for him symbolically, using it to represent his own anti-establishment heterodoxy, and clearly enjoys the fascinating ambivalence of greatness and villainy in his formulation, and its discomfiting effect on Southey. Southey, who elsewhere described Napoleon as 'in guilt the first, / Preeminently bad among the worst',²⁵ responds in a characteristically flat