Byron’s satire as a means for social change

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One of the main motives by which Byron was impelled in writing his satiric works was the desire to improve society by exposing to public shame its follies and vices (Beaty, 1985: 4). Some people believe that Byron’s main satiric poem Don Juan is a vast literary joke, perhaps taking into consideration Byron’s own words that his intention in writing Don Juan was just “to giggle and make giggle”. In saying that Byron tried to get his poem accepted by assuring publishers and his friends that it was actually a harmless thing conceived more in a comic than satiric mode. But already shortly afterwards Byron openly wrote to his conservative publisher John Murray that Don Juan was intended as “a satire on abuses of the present states of Society” (McGann, 2004: 121).

As Frederick Beaty argues, the satirist, unlike the less complicated comic writer, is obliged, if he strives to rise above the level of mere denunciation, to put his comic talents in the service of splenetic tendencies, for he must debase some target so that it becomes absurd in the eyes of the world. He cannot, like the writer of comedy, suspend his moral judgment and observe with detached amusement the follies of humanity (Beaty, 1985: 4).

The objects of Byron’s critical scrutiny were both mental and social chains that limited man’s potential. Being himself one of the brightest representatives of Romanticism, Byron was intent upon leading his contemporaries away from the
illusory view of life associated with Romanticism and metaphysical speculation. Both in his personal letters and in Don Juan he repeatedly emphasized the realism of his satire. Byron believed in achieving his goal of renewal and better future by first showing what was wrong. His method was to “show things really as they are, / not as they ought to be” (DJ XII, 40). In an implied statement of the satirist’s positive goal, he asserts that since “all gentle readers” are inclined to close their eyes to what they do not wish to see, it is his moral obligation to open their eyes to reality (DJ VI, 88).

His main role as a social satirist Byron saw in educating people: “My Politics, as yet, are all to educate”. Remaining true to the ideas of the Enlightenment, Byron declared his opposition to “all who war / With Thought”.

And I will war, at least in words (and – should
My chance so happen – deeds), with all who war
With Thought; – and of Thought’s foes by far most rude,
Tyrants and sycophants have been and are.
I know not who may conquer: if I could
Have such a prescience, it should be no bar
To this my plain, sworn, downright detestation
Of every despotism in every nation (9, 24).
Byron’s skepticism, his humorous mockery, satire served the same end – to reveal the truth and find answers, which might help man not only to understand the world, but to change it for the better.

As Frederick Beaty argues, Byron needed to resolve the conflict between romanticism and realism, create an interesting and convincing persona, establish his own ethical norm, find a poetical medium compatible with his mobile nature, and strike a balance between personal involvement with and detachment from the targets of his satire. By constant experimentation with diverse forms and subjects, upon which he impressed his own distinct personality, he was increasingly able to resolve these problems and ultimately to achieve that fortunate coalescence of flexible form, rhetorically effective persona, and psychological balance that characterizes his masterpieces (Beaty, 1985: 3).

The combination of satire and sentiment produced from the very outset of Byron’s literary career a poetical voice with two modulations. In his juvenilia the dialectic between romantic idealism, on the one hand, and a satiric truth, on the other, is already established. So also is the dual nature of Byron’s satiric purpose. Though born of negative purpose, his satire aspires to the positive goal of freeing mankind from the illusions that falsify life.

The highly romantic depictions and ironical comments (on the love of Juan and Haidée) don’t negate each other, but contain partial elements of truth, neither of which presents the whole picture. Unresolved ironies are the narrator’s prime rhetorical means or, in modern terminology, discursive method of compelling the
reader to see reality from different perspectives and proceed to a conclusion through reason rather than intuition, habit or custom.

Akin to Byron's resistance of tyranny in the external world was his assault on errors of the mind – particularly man's penchant for self-delusion, which posed the major obstacle to enlightenment. With his usual temerity, therefore, Byron boldly took on human nature as the object of his satire. As Frederick Beaty argues, particularly in the ottava rima satires (Beppo, Don Juan, The Vision of Judgement), which offer a relatively tolerant, ironical view of man’s flawed nature, “he showed how man hides behind the cant of religion and custom rather than confront the harsher realities”.

In his satire Byron seems to follow the traditions of medieval carnival, which, according to M.Bakhtin, creates the situations where regular conventions are broken and genuine dialogue becomes possible. Considering laughter as “the second nature of man” and seeing in it liberating force that “resisted hypocrisy” and “degraded power”, Bakhtin argued that “laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power” (Bakhtin 1984: 94).

Although Byron acquainted himself with the major writers of English satire from Samuel Butler onwards, his literary model throughout his life was Alexandre Pope, whom he regarded not only as greatest satirist but also as the greatest English poet (Beaty, 1985: 11). The consciousness of phrase, metrical variety and precision of language were achieved by Byron in his masterpieces thanks to his
analytical mind, hard work and linguistic talent as well as his discovery while living in Italy a poetical medium more compatible with his nature than the heroic couplets. Mock-heroic ottava rima allowed the poet to build up tensions and then destroy them. It also allowed the narrator to be part of the scene, and yet sufficiently independent.

Byron’s fearless rhetoric was enforced by the stately Ottava rima stanza, which served humorous and satirical purposes, especially by designing the final couplet for ironical maxims or epigrams. Being constructed on antithesis, it also helped the author to engage in genuine conversation with his readers and freely express his opinion on different moral, social and political aspects of contemporary life.

Throughout Don Juan Byron’s narrator declares that his determination to effect social reform is not only responsible but heroic since his role as a satirist inevitably provokes antagonism. Assuming that ridicule is a test of truth, Byron asserts that underlying objection lodged against the first two cantos of Don Juan was that they contained “too much truth” (97.3-4). The obligation “of a true poet”, he insists, is “to escape from fiction” and present the unvarnished realities of our world (8.86, 89).

But then the fact’s a fact – and ’tis the part
Of a true poet to escape from fiction
Whene’er he can, for there is little art
In leaving verse more free from the restriction
Of truth than prose… (8.86)
Without, or with, offence to friends or foes,

I sketch your World exactly as it goes (8.89)

After completing the first five cantos, Byron wrote Murray: “Almost all Don Juan is real life – either my own – or from people I knew” (Beaty, 1985: 133). Declaring his opposition to “all who war / With Thought”, and considering thought’s most threatening foe to be a coalition of tyrants and sycophants that enables political tyranny to flourish (9. 24), Byron acknowledges revolution as the ultimate hope for achieving popular freedom (8. 50-51).

If I had not perceived that Revolution

Alone can save the Earth from Hell’s pollution (DJ 8. 51).

Yet, despite his revolutionary romanticism, Byron himself distrusted radical reformers, seeking to establish their own power structure, and even didn’t exclude that under certain circumstances he could become ultra-royalist since he hates “even democratic royalty” (15. 23). He also fears the irrational, often despotic anarchy of mobs (I wish men to be free / As much from mobs as kings) (9. 23, 25) and satirizes the “illumination” produced by French mobs that misused lampposts as gallows (11. 26, 27).

Jerome J. MacGann argues that Byron began Don Juan “already knowing that individual and social history, from a revolutionary point of view, always follows
the curve of disappointment or disaster. In this sense (but only in this sense) the poem is “nihilistic”. In every other respect the poem is a great work of hope, for it insists that projects of change and renewal must continue to be raised up despite the fact of absolute adversity” (McGann, 2004: 120).

Byron considered satire as an important means for social change and renewal. As Frederick Beaty argues, he certainly declared a sanative purpose – to do as much through poetry as Newton did to restore fallen man through knowledge.

Man fell with apples, and with apples rose,
If this be true; for we must deem the mode
In which Sir Isaac Newton could disclose
Through the then unpaved stars the turnpike road,
A thing to counterbalance human woes:
For ever since immortal man hath glow'd
With all kinds of mechanics, and full soon
Steam-engines will conduct him to the moon (DJ 10. 2).

Emily Bernhard Jackson argues that in the course of his major works Byron shaped a well thought-out and fully articulated philosophy of knowledge, one with significant practical implications. According to it, objective knowledge or truth does not exist; so-called knowledge is in fact manufactured, subjective belief: it is often accepted as actual knowledge by those who receive it, but it is malleable nonetheless. Coming to see knowledge as merely knowledge claims, Byron also
seeks to show his readers the way in which this version of knowing offers them opportunity and freedom. Since knowledge is manufactured and knowing is nothing more than claiming, they can chose to interpret the world in new ways. Thus, they can change for the better both their position in it and the way it runs. For Byron, individually created knowledge offers the possibility for such change (Bernhard Jackson, 2010:2).

Some authors see in Byron’s romantic irony not a rejuvenative tendency, as Emily Bernhard Jackson puts it, but rather an open-ended “disorder” as an accurate reflection of the world, and as a result fail to notice that Byron’s skepticism and irony might have a practical application. Meanwhile, Byron skepticism and his persistent irony, which are aimed at “demystification of dogma”, are liberating and empowering. Moreover, Don Juan’s “deep pleasure in confusion and juxtaposition argue for a view of “disorder” as not only endemic but also fertile” (Bernhard Jackson, 2010: 6).

By the time of Beppo and Don Juan, satire and sentiment were so subtly blended that it is sometimes difficult to extricate one from another. Beaty argues that it was primarily the ottava rima stanza, allowing a comfortable alternation of mood between sestet and couplet, that enabled Byron to sustain this dual perspective in the unresolved tension we now call “Byronic irony” (Beaty, 1985: 6).

Byron’s language and style are characterized by preciseness, vigour, dynamism and emotionality and are aimed at the solution of his main task – achieving greater sharpness of his satire and burlesque. Byron boldly broke the tradition of strict
attachment of the devices of different styles to certain genres. This blend of styles and genres not only opened the way for penetration of the colloquial speech into the poetical language but also helped to achieve ironical and satirical effect of the narration.

Though speech genres are more flexible, plastic and free as compared with "language forms", – writes Bakhtin, – a large number of them, particularly the high and official ones, are compulsory and extremely stable. Speech genres are very diverse because they differ depending on the situation, social position, and personal interrelations of the participants. Moreover, each of these sociopragmatic factors requires the use of certain language forms. But even here it is generally possible to “re-accentuate” genres for “parodic-ironic” purposes. To a similar end one can deliberately mix genres from various spheres (Bakhtin 1986: 80-81). These devices are widely used by Byron in his satire.

From the beginning Byron displayed his verbal wit and strong sense of the comic. His satiric wit and his unique view of the comic are manifested in his numerous paradoxes. Byron often enjoys undermining set phraseology by revealing the inner meaning obliterated by long usage. For example, he says: "to mend the people's an absurdity... / Unless you make their betters better" (DJ, 10. 85). "Their betters" is the designation of socially and, allegedly, morally superior people. Byron not only exposes the absurdity of deriving the idea of moral worth from social position by suggesting a “betterment of the betters” – but makes it even more comical since “betters”, originally a derivative from the comparative degree, should not, logically speaking, admit improvement.
Considering Don Juan as determinedly picaresque and unfocussed in its narrative, Heath and Boreham argue that some critics have seen it as almost postmodern. Its diversity of subject matter – switching from personal confession to political satire, from romantic episodes to cynical comments – “demonstrate Byron’s wish to show that life cannot be contained within any system of thought” (Heath and Boreham, 2000: 124).

As Heath and Boreham argue, the uncertainty raised by the dualism of subject and object was the source of Romantic irony and this doubt was “infinitized” to cast it on all fixed values and interpretations. Just as conventional irony uses what is said to express indirectly what is not said, so the “infinitized” irony of Romanticism uses the visible to allude to the invisible (Heath and Boreham, 2000: 124).

According to Eric Gans, “romantic irony” is an attitude towards life that consists not so much in anticipating the opposite of one’s expectations as in a knowing superiority to the ironies of fate that await us in the real world (Gans, 1997: 64). Jerome McGann argues that Byron’s need of fatality lies in the heart of his entire life’s work and it achieves its greatest expression in his greatest poem, Don Juan, where people are toys in the hands of circumstances and not vice versa (McGann, 2008: VIII). All of his heroes are surrogates of himself, they are figures moving under the domination of an often obscure purpose and destiny. According to McGann Byron was a European writer who broke all possible boundaries and his work is, in every sense, a poetry of experience (McGann, 2008: VII).
Already in his juvenile verses together with his extreme self-consciousness the themes of rapture with the cant and cruel society are displayed (e.g. “I would I were a careless child”). Byron’s first major poem “English Bards and Scotch Reviewers” is characterized by its peculiar social critique. Byron singles out a few individuals for praise and honour (Milton, Dryden, and Pope), but his attack is launched at the culture as a whole, where he is able to see no party, no class, no institution with which to identify. English culture is represented in a state of crisis, and Byron is but a voice crying in its wilderness (McGann, 2008: p.XI).

Since Byron’s goal was revelation of truth that would set men free, he may be regarded as an ethical teacher, and the first step towards moral betterment was recognition of the fact that society is not to be condemned for its shortcomings any more than is man for his predisposition to sin. However skeptical he may have been of establishing categorical truths and philosophical systems, his determination to understand mankind in a social setting affirms that humanity deserves better future and his positive criticism will be of assistance.

As an implacable foe of despotism in any form and “in every Nation”, Byron argues the right of people and nations to control their own destiny. Byron’s concept of freedom (liberty) includes different aspects – individual, intellectual, national, political. In his poetry Byron reiterated the need for individual liberty as well as freedom for any nation (“When a man hath no freedom to fight for at home / Let him combat for that of his neighbours”). No wonder he advised the Lake Poets – his compatriots representing the first wave of Romantic movement – to
“change your lakes for ocean” (DJ, Dedication, 5), distinctly implying to the narrowness of their views.

Already during his lifetime Byron achieved international recognition not just as “a defining spirits of the Romantic movement in poetry and the arts” (Beaton, 2013, XVI) but as his epoch’s most eloquent champion of freedom (Beaty, 1985, 196).

In the anti-war cantos of Don Juan Byron addresses oppressed people and nations with the call to unite their efforts in the struggle for liberty, against their tyrants.

Raise but an arm! 't will brush their web away,
And without that, their poison and their claws
Are useless. Mind, good people! what I say-
(Or rather Peoples)- go on without pause!
The web of these Tarantulas each day
Increases, till you shall make common cause:
None, save the Spanish Fly and Attic Bee,
As yet are strongly stinging to be free (DJ 9, 28).

As Christopher Walker argues, Byron “never ceases to amaze with his individuality, his joyous and sensuous poetical genius and his astonishing ability to fuse the personal and universal (for surely 'political' is too narrow a word for his hatred of oppression). His intense response to the past history and present condition of foreign lands, and his sublime consciousness of landscape,
revolutionized not only the entire temper of poetry, but also brought into literary discourse subjects which had not hitherto been considered suitable to it. Literature lived, moved and mattered, as much as the relentless march of armies, the implacable decisions of tyrants, and the unquiet rebellion of the people. Byron’s thrilling sensibility meant that poetry became part of life, and life of poetry. *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan* are at once deeply personal and astonishingly public, ranging over history, politics, landscape, love, light and art” (Walker, 2005: 29).

Elsewhere in the arts, especially in painting and music, romanticism was bringing the political into the area of creativity. The new conceptions of art drew much of their sustenance from the ideas of the French Revolution, especially from the notion that the liberty of the individual counted. Liberty was held to be a highly prized quality, and was thus among the central subjects of art (Walker, 2005: 29-30).

Byron’s readiness to war not only in words but also in deeds would take him, – as Roderick Beaton writes, – “from the Romantic rebelliousness of his most famous poems to political action in the cause of a revolution, in Greece” (Beaton, 2013: XVII). Byron was dedicated to the struggle for the freedom for Greece in his last years. But before the struggle for the freedom for Greece and even that of Italy Byron became interested in Armenians and in 1816 established close contacts with the Armenian convent on the island of San Lazzaro in Venice.

There at the Armenian monastery he took up the study of the Armenian language under the guidance of Father Pasquale Aucher (H. Avgerian) and
acquainted himself with Armenian culture, attending many seminars about language and history. Byron worked hard with Father Pasquale on his Armenian grammar. He wrote “English grammar and the Armenian” in 1817, and “Armenian grammar and the English” in 1819.

At about this time Byron wrote a preface intended for the Armenian grammar but which was not used since Father Pasquale objected to its anti-Turkish tone. Byron wrote of the “neatness, the comfort, the gentleness, the unaffected devotion, the accomplishments, and the virtues of the brethren of the order” – men who “are the priesthood of an oppressed and noble nation”. On the political and social condition of the Armenian nation, Byron said: “It would be difficult, perhaps, to find the annals of a nation less stained with crimes than those of the Armenians, whose virtues have been those of peace, and their vices those of compulsion. But whatever may have been their destiny – and it has been bitter – whatever it may be in the future their country must ever be one of the most interesting in the globe; and perhaps their language only requires to be more studied to become more attractive. If the Scriptures are rightly understood, it was in Armenia that Paradise was placed – Armenia, which has paid as dearly as the descendants of Adam for that fleeting participation of its soil in the happiness of him who was created from its dust. It was in Armenia that the flood first abated, and the dove alighted. But with the disappearance of Paradise itself may be dated almost the unhappiness of the country; for though long a powerful kingdom, it was scarcely ever an independent one, and the satraps of Persia and the pachas of Turkey have alike
desolated the region where God created man in his own image” (Walker, 2005: 33).

What Byron did for the succeeding generations of Armenians and their supporters, – writes Christopher Walker, – was to open the door in Europe to the idea of ending serfdom in the east, especially for the non-Turkish peoples of the Ottoman empire, hitherto religious flocks and now becoming national communities. He gave a western articulation to the aspirations of the Greeks, and by extension to those of other Ottoman nationalities. He showed that they were real people with real aspirations. As a result of Byron’s brilliant and ironical love of liberty, and his value of the individual in an age dominated by despotic imperial collectivism, their oppression began to be understood. The members of the communities came to be seen as people whose individual liberty mattered, when hitherto they had been perceived as mere cogs in some antique imperial system, or as half-forgotten relics exotic in their medievalness (Walker, 2005: 35).

In 1830 the nation-state of Greece – the first of the new nation-states of Europe – came into existence. As Roderick Beaton argues, the idea of a nation-state on European soil was exactly what Byron had foreseen, and had pledged himself to do all he could to bring about while he was alive (Beaton, 2013: 272).

Within a few decades, national self-government would have become the norm throughout the continent. In the course of the twentieth century, the self-determination of new nations became the main trend of political development which seems to continue through the twenty-first century as well.
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