

**The ‘poetry of politics’ – the politics of poetry: Byron’s and Shelley’s
interventionist poetry**

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To-day I have had no communication with my Carbonari cronies; but, in the mean time, my lower apartments are full of their bayonets, fusils, cartridges, and what not. I suppose that they consider me as a depôt, to be sacrificed, in case of accidents. It is no great matter, supposing that Italy could be liberated, who or what is sacrificed, in case of accidents. It is a grand object—the very poetry of politics.¹

Byron’s famous statement about the “*poetry of politics*” with regard to a free Italy is placed in his *Ravenna Journal* which the author had begun during the first days of January 1821 and which he carried on for two months, until the end of February 1821. The time span as well as the subject he chose for his journal appears to be random – motley observations about his mundane life in Italy, including such activities as dining, reading, writing and shooting pistols. I would like to argue, though, that underlying these disparate notes Byron’s Italian Journal pronounces a re-evaluation of the relationship between poetry and politics. In the following paper I will first give a brief outline of different notions of political poetry. I will then turn to the complex situation of the arts as a subsystem of society around 1800 by referring to Niklas Luhmann’s social systems theory. Finally, I will come back to Byron’s *Ravenna*

¹ *Byron’s Letters and Journals*. Ed. Leslie A. Marchand. Vol. 8: Cambridge/Massachusetts: Belknap 1978, 47.

Journal and the interrelation of poetry and politics, which is also characteristic of his *ottava rima* poems *Beppo*, *Don Juan* and *The Vision of Judgment*.²

It is no easy matter to define what political poetry is. Over the last decades the term seems almost to have disappeared in academic writing in favor of political readings according to the sample „The Politics of...“, in which blank almost anything can be inserted.³ Many contemporary Dictionaries of Literary Terms do not enclose the term ‘political poetry’ at all. In an obvious sense political poetry is a poetry which deals with subject matters that refer to political facts and circumstances. Poetry that tries to have an ascertained influence on society and its politics is always at risk of becoming a means of propaganda. Its status as art is jeopardized through the dominating external referential function. Jean Paul Sartre coined in his 1947 essay „Qu’est que la littérature“ the concept of an engaged or committed art. According to Sartre the writer can directly communicate his commitment through his material to the reader. This holds especially true of the genres of the drama and the novel. Sartre’s notion of a committed art was critiqued 15 years later by Theodor Adorno in his essay “Engagement”. Engaged art, according to Adorno, annihilates the difference between the work of art and reality. Adorno’s annotations on engaged art have proven to be extremely forceful as he brings into opposition two concepts of art: engaged art on the one hand and autonomous art on the other.⁴ Within a bourgeois culture where

² For a comprehensive discussion of Byron’s specific poetics, especially in relation to its contemporary reception in Germany see my study *Heine und Byron. Poetik eingreifender Kunst am Beginn der Moderne*. Berlin, New York: De Gruyter 2013.

³ For a discussion of this see also Richard Cronin’s introduction to his study *The Politics of Romantic Poetry. In Search of the Pure Commonwealth*. Basingstoke: Macmillan 2000.

⁴ Cf. Theodor W. Adorno: “Engagement”. In: *Noten zur Literatur*. Eds. Gretel Adorno/Rolf Tiedemann. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1997, 409–431.

poetry has come to mean autonomy and the freedom from external restraints, the commitment of engaged art is connotated rather negatively. In his comprehensive treatise *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno doubts whether works of art can politically intervene at all. If they nevertheless aspire towards a direct impact, they fall – in Adorno’s own words – beneath their concept, which means in plain language they do not qualify as art in its proper sense. He claims that the real societal effect of works of art is rather indirect: they participate in the spirit which subterraneously contributes to the transformation of society – and which is concentrated in works of art.⁵ Adorno’s notion of art’s function in society has much in common with Percy Bysshe Shelley’s description of poetry and the poet in his *Defence of Poetry*, where Shelley states: “The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is Poetry”.⁶ Like Adorno, Shelley ascribes a preeminent role to poetry’s potential to intervene in public-political discourses. The mode of action though remains peculiarly transpersonal – both

⁵ “Daß Kunstwerke politisch eingreifen, ist zu bezweifeln; geschieht es einmal, so ist es ihnen meist peripher; streben sie danach, so pflegen sie unter ihren Begriff zu gehen. Ihre wahre gesellschaftliche Wirkung ist höchst mittelbar, Teilhabe an dem Geist, der zur Veränderung der Gesellschaft in unterirdischen Prozessen beiträgt und in Kunstwerken sich konzentriert [...]. Die Wirkung der Kunstwerke ist die der Erinnerung, die sie durch ihre Existenz zitieren, kaum die, daß auf ihre latente Praxis eine manifeste anspricht; von deren Unmittelbarkeit hat ihre Autonomie allzuweit sich wegbewegt.” (Theodor W. Adorno: *Ästhetische Theorie*. Eds. Gretel Adorno/Rolf Tiedemann. Frankfurt a.M. 1989, 359)

⁶ Shelley, Percy Bysshe: “A Defence of Poetry or Remarks Suggested by an Essay Entitled ‘The Four Ages of Poetry’”. In: *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*. Eds. Donald H. Reiman/Sharon B. Powers. New York, London 1977, 508.

writers choose the metaphor of a silently working spirit and rely on the idea of futurity for an effect on society.

The dilemma of the dichotomy between an autonomous and an engaged art can be analyzed from within the arts system, a socio-historical perspective however, helps to elucidate the opposition from without. I will therefore recur now to the social systems theory of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. According to Luhmann in history the hierarchic structure of stratification is replaced by several subsystems which are differentiated according to their specific function in society. The process of a functional differentiation within society was already much advanced at the beginning of the 19th century. The different subsystems such as the political system, the economic system, the legal system and of course the arts system all fulfill their functions autonomously and do not tolerate interventions from without. The increasing autonomy of literature from the middle of the 18th century onwards is, as Luhmann claims, part of the process of the functional differentiation of society. Literature's newly gained independence from external functions correlates with the increasing dissociation from other social systems like religion, law or the sciences.⁷ Luhmann also points out in his article "A Re-description of Romantic Art" that the release from external functions makes autonomy the fate of the artist, which is interpreted as a defense against extraneous interventions. Fending off extraneous influences indeed allows for new aesthetic possibilities, though in the reversal it implies the loss of the potency to interfere with the other subsystems of the

⁷ See e.g. Niklas Luhmann: *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1997.

functionally differentiated society. For the situation of the artist Luhmann hence chooses the metaphor of an invisible cage.⁸

The issue of “How can art be both autonomous and interventionist?” which Michael Scrivener discerns in Shelley’s works from 1819–20 is an effect of the tight system boundaries of art which have evolved at the end of the 18th century.⁹ The question of how art can be autonomous and interventionist at the same time is also – and this is my central thesis – one of the governing questions of Byron’s late works.

For my last point I would like to come back now to Byron’s *Ravenna journal* with which I started my talk. The last journal Byron kept was his Alpine Journal in 1816 when he left England. He commenced his Italian journal on the 4th of January and ended it on the 24th of February 1821. As I mentioned above, the dates seem randomly chosen, the date of beginning might suggest, if at all, the genre of the New Year Letter. At a second glance, though, there is a distinct framing. Contiguous to his everyday business the first entry mentions the passing of the King of Naples “through

⁸ “Die Systemautonomie, auf die die Romantik [...] zu reagieren sucht, ist dem Kunstsystem als Folge der funktionalen Gesellschaftsdifferenzierung zugefallen, da man jetzt weder vom Religionssystem noch vom politischen System, noch vom Wirtschaftssystem [...] erwarten kann, daß sie Instruktionen geben, wie Kunstwerke zu machen seien. Fast könnte man deshalb sagen: Autonomie wird zum Schicksal, das als Abwehr externer Intervention interpretiert wird; oder zum unsichtbaren Käfig, in dem der Künstler zur Selektion, zur Originalität, zur Freiheit genötigt wird.” (Luhmann, Niklas: “Eine Redeskription ‘romantischer Kunst’”. In: Jürgen Fohrmann/Harro Müller (eds.): *Systemtheorie der Literatur*. München: Fink 1996, 325–344)

⁹ Michael Scrivener: “Editor’s Introduction”. In: Scrivener (ed.): *Reading Shelley’s Interventionist Poetry, 1819-20*. Romantic Circles Praxis Series (2001): www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/interventionist/srivener/scrivener.html [retrieved 25/4/2012]. See also the insightful discussion of Shelley’s politics and poetics by Mark Kipperman, Robert Kaufman and Samuel Gladden in this volume.

Bologna on his way to congress”.¹⁰ Byron comments the news which his servant Luigi brought him as following: “How will it end? Time will show.”¹¹ The mentioned congress refers to the Congress of Laibach, the third of the four monarch congresses, which took place from January till May 1821. The historical background is the Spanish revolution in 1820 which caused the king to implement a liberal constitution. As a follow-up the King of Naples was also forced by his people to reinstate a liberal constitution and to acknowledge the principle of the sovereignty of the people. At the Congress of Laibach the King of Naples sought the help of the Holy Alliance to put down the revolutionary forces by military intervention. As a result of the congress Austria was charged to invade Naples and restore the kingship. These developments caused of course fierce resistance with the Italian people. Byron’s excitement about great things happening can literally be grasped throughout the whole journal. He sees “grand events coming”;¹² the Austrians he only refers to as “Barbarians” or “hounds of hell”,¹³ and though he is not sure whether his “Carbonari cronies” will make much of the insurrection he writes: “But, *onward!*—it is now the time to act, and what signifies *self*, if a single spark of that which would be worthy of the past can be bequeathed unquenchedly to the future? It is not one man, nor a million, but the *spirit* of liberty which must be spread.”¹⁴ The journal ends with the failed Carbonari uprising due to betrayal, on which Byron comments: “I always had an idea that it would be *bungled*; but was willing to hope, and am so still.

¹⁰ BLJ 8, 12.

¹¹ BLJ 8, 12.

¹² BLJ 8, 13.

¹³ BLJ 8, 20.

¹⁴ BLJ 8, 20.

Whatever I can do by money, means, or person, I will venture freely for their freedom.”¹⁵

There is however a strange coda to the journal on February 27th which is introduced with “Log-book continued”. In this entry Byron complains about suffering from indigestion due to dining boiled cockles and afterwards diluting them with several spirits. While marveling about what “caused the commotion”¹⁶ – it is remarkable that he uses the same word here for his indigestion as for the Italian political uprising –, Byron reflects about the relationship between body and mind:

I remarked in my illness the complete inertion, inaction, and destruction of my chief mental faculties. I tried to rouse them, and yet could not—and this is the *Sou!!!* I should believe that it was married to the body, if they did not sympathise so much with each other. If the one rose, when the other fell, it would be a sign that they longed for the natural state of divorce. But as it is, they seem to draw together like post-horses.

Let us hope the best—it is the grand possession.¹⁷

With this quote the journal ends. Byron’s description of his physical state seems to me highly metaphorical and exactly referring back to the poet’s situation in Italy. The mutual interaction of the faculties, the body and the mind, for which in German anthropology around 1800 the term “*der ganze Mensch*” – the whole human being – was coined,¹⁸ can be read as a symbol of the necessary interrelation of the

¹⁵ *BLJ* 8, 49.

¹⁶ *BLJ* 8, 51.

¹⁷ *BLJ* 8, 51.

¹⁸ For this discussion see the contributions in Hans-Jürgen Schings (ed.): *Der ganze Mensch. Anthropologie und Literatur im 18. Jahrhundert*. Stuttgart: Metzler 1994.

functionally differentiated system of poetry and politics. Throughout the journal the different systems of literature and politics are contiguous to each other but do not interact.

Byron's *Ravenna Journal* shows how deeply the poet is engaged in the political system and as a consequence that poetry and politics are not to be 'divorced'. The journal was written at a time when Byron reengages with the notion of what poetry is – he finishes his first letter in the Bowles/Pope Controversy during the composition of the journal – and the writer's engagement with society. In this sense it can indeed be seen as participating in the genre of the New Year's letter.