The Politics and Poetry of Byron’s Romantic Hellenism:

Fragmentation as a Discursive Strategy in *The Giaour*

Martin Procházka (Charles University in Prague)

Let me start with a suggestion that fragments constituting *The Giaour* can be read as testimonies of the transitory nature of political, cultural and aesthetic values. This significantly differs from the understanding of the fragment by other Romantics. For instance, according to A.W. Schlegel, the “ancient” fragments appeal to our imagination to recreate the wholeness, perfection and beauty of the bygone world, while the “modern” ones represent dynamically the aspects and future potentialities of present time.¹ In contrast to Schlegel’s approach, the fragmentary form of *The Giaour* represents a rather complex temporality. On the one hand, the fragmentation of speech, character and narrative perspectives of classical epic appeal against dominant discourses shaping the awareness of values in Byron’s time. On the other hand, the power of this appeal is undercut by the subversive features of Byron’s poetry, deriving from romantic irony. Instead of past or future ideals, Byron’s epic fragments refer to the temporality of language and values, as well as to the randomness of signification.

The time of Byron’s fragments is not a progress to a unity of meaning or, symbolically, to the wholeness of being. Perceived as a discontinuity of present values and their past representations it may appear historical. Nonetheless, this impression is a mere consequence of the “disjunctions of language,” which, to use the phrase of Paul de Man, are “expressed by a

temporal metaphor.”² The temporality of Byron’s *Giaour* can be described as a metaphor in the place of a metonymy or a fictitious, allegorical narrative substituting a historical account. The salient feature of this extended metaphor is, to use Paul de Man’s words again, the “errancy of language which never reaches its mark, which is always displaced in relation to what it meant to reach […] this illusion of a life that is only an afterlife.”

This approach to language in Byron’s fragmented narrative also bears upon the understanding of history. As de Man points out, history “is not human, because it pertains strictly to the order of language […] no knowledge of man can be derived from a history which as such is purely a linguistic complication.”³

These aspects of time and history are evident from the language structure of one of the prominent fragments in Byron’s poem, the second part of the lyrical introduction containing an extended comparison of Greece to a dying beautiful young woman. This long tirade has a remarkable syntax pointed out by Jerome McGann, who uses Matthew Arnold’s phrase “trailing anacoluthon” and refers to Ethel Colburn Mayne’s observation that the subject of the sentence “never fulfils his destiny.”⁴ The passage dissolves into a number of loosely connected tropes. Its overall structure is also a rhetorical figure, a scheme called *hyperbaton or irmus*: a series of deviations from standard word order whose purpose is to defer or blur the meaning before the period reaches a terse and surprising coda. In early modern epic, hyperbaton is heavily used by Milton in *Paradise Lost*.

The disintegration of syntax is also effected by the loosening of verse form. While the Spenserian stanza of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* requires a concluding hexameter which often functions as a thematic divide, the heroic couplets of *The Giaour* do not tend to create

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autonomous rhythmical and syntactic units and consequently do not set any thematic or formal boundaries. This can be demonstrated by the above mentioned passage of *The Giaour*:

He who hath bent him o’er the dead,
Ere the first day of death is fled;
The first dark day of nothingness,
The last of danger and distress;
(Before Decay’s effacing fingers
Have swept the lines where beauty lingers),
And mark’d the mild angelic air -
The rapture of repose that’s there -
The fixed yet tender traits that streak
The languor of the placid cheek,
And - but for that sad shrouded eye,

That fires not - wins not - weeps not - now -
And but for that chill changeless brow,
Where cold Obstruction’s apathy
Appals the gazing mourner’s heart,
As if to him it could impart
The doom he dreads, yet dwells upon -
Yes but for these and these alone,
Some moments - aye - one treacherous hour,
He still might doubt the tyrant’s power,
So fair so calm so softly seal’d
The first - last look - by death reveal’d!
Such is the aspect of this shore -
'Tis Greece - but living Greece no more!

(68-91)\(^5\)

In order to explain the performative effects\(^6\) of the discussed passage, a number of its features must be taken into account, such as the relationships of the grammatical subject to the empiric one and of the syntactic and figurative structure, which in turn is related to the rhetorical and genre features of heroic epic.

The first mentioned relationship is not materialized by means of the transformation of the author-reader relation into the “contractual subject.”\(^7\) The bearer of this meaning is not the basic syntactic structure, S – P, or ‘subject – predicate’ (“He […] He still might doubt” (68-87), but its disruptions, anacoluthons creating spaces for the proliferation of metaphors, for instance: “that chill changeless brow, / Where cold Obstruction’s apathy / Appals the gazing mourner’s heart, / As if to him it could impart / The doom he dreads, yet dwells upon -” (80-84). Instead of an utterance representing a subjective impression of death and the experience linked with it, there is a metaphor realizing its figurative meaning only in the text. De Man’s claim that “metaphor is error because it believes or feigns to believe in its referential meaning,”\(^8\) may be used to explain the situation of the mourner, who in the discussed passage of Byron’s poem leans over the dead girl’s body deluding himself that her beauty prevails over the horrors of death. The anacoluthons also reveal an important quality of the metaphor, as “a substitutive figure of speech […] that changes a referential situation suspended between fiction and fact […]

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\(^6\) Although the term “performative” can be traced back to J.L. Austin’s William James Lectures delivered at Harvard in 1955 (see J.L. Austin, How To Do Things With Words, ed. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisà [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962] 4-6 and passim), its present use refers to J. Hillis Miller’s reading of Paul de Man: “rhetoric is performative but when considered as a system of tropes, it deconstructs its own performance.” J. Hillis Miller, Tropes, Parables and Performatives: Essays on Twentieth Century Literature (Durham, NC: Duke University Press) 214. Miller quotes de Man’s Allegories of Reading (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979) 131.


\(^8\) Paul de Man, Allegories of Reading 151.
into a literal fact." To be more specific, in the discussed passage anacoluthons change the relationship between fiction ("the girl looks more beautiful") and fact ("the girl is dead") as well as between personification ("Greece as a beautiful girl") linked with a metonymy ("Greece as the Antiquity and the cradle of European culture") and a historic fact ("Ancient Greek culture is extinct"). The final referent is a blunt historical fact. Yet, paradoxically, the metaphor "literalizes its referent and deprives it of its para-figural status," that is, superiority to figurative speech. The historical fact is thus transformed into a literary setting which in turn produces a narrative, whose individual parts appear unrelated in a similar way as the anacoluthons in the discussed passage.

The metaphorical force of the fragmentary epic tale does not only distance historical facts but also deconstructs ideology as their strategic arrangement. In The Giaour, the ideological features include the simplified image of Greece as the cradle of liberty and the glorification of Greek heroism, which in the Persian wars successfully opposed oriental despotism and defended democracy. This image of Greece became important for the ideology of *translatio libertatis*, representing the Whigs as bearers of the same spirit of freedom which animated the ancient republics. This ideology is referred to in the introduction of the poem, the shortest, six-line fragment about “the Athenian’s grave” (1-6). Marjorie Levinson has shown that the heroism called upon in Byron’s lines is historically more than disputable. Although Themistocles was often seen as an exemplary Athenian hero, who conquered the Persian fleet at Salamis, he was exiled from his polis because of his alleged collaboration with Persians. He

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9 de Man, *Allegories of Reading* 151.
10 de Man, *Allegories of Reading* 151.
died in Asia Minor as a retainer of the Persian king. Nor even his mound on Cape Colonna, referred to in the passage, is his grave. The link between Themistocles and the Giaour is not historical or ideological but figurative, metaphorical. As a “slave of glory” the former is a precursor of the latter who is a “slave of love.”

“When shall such hero live again?” asks the authorial narrator at the alleged tomb of the dubious Greek hero. The irony of the question is explained at the end of the introductory part:

No more her [Liberty’s] sorrows I bewail,
Yet this will be a mournful tale,
And they who listen may believe,
Who heard it first had cause to grieve.

(164-167)

Instead of evoking ancient heroism, the poem narrates a tragic love story and subsequently gives account of the disintegration of the lover’s personality. Due to his action, which defies authority, morals and tradition, the hero becomes a metaphor of a specific historicity, namely the historical dimension of the liberal ideology of late Enlightenment. As a result, his tale achieves a different monumentality than that typical of the traditional epic heroism, yet related to the recent and contemporary philosophical and ideological interpretations of ancient Greek culture. In its historical implications, the Giaour’s liberating act, whose tragic failure can be

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14 As Marilyn Butler has shown the story contains a love-triangle typical of the late Enlightenment narratives, such as The Sorrows of Young Werther, contrasting the free and intuitive behaviour of the lovers with the religious orthodoxy of the lawful husband. Marilyn Butler, “The Orientalism of Byron’s Giaour,” in Byron and the Limits of Fiction, ed. Bernard Beatty and Vincent Newey (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988) 89.

15 See, e.g. Friedrich Schlegel’s Geschichte der Poesie der Griechen und Römer (History of the Greek and Roman Poetry) (Berlin: Johann Friedrich Ungar, 1798) 127: “die hellenische Eigenthümlichkeit durch die Vorzüge ihrer Bildungsfrage auch hier das Urbild des rein Menschlichen war, und mit den Gesetzen und Begriffen der reinen Vernunft übereinstimmende Anschauungen lieferte.” (“Thanks to the advantage of its cultural situation, the Hellenic specificity was also here [in the evolution of the human spirit] the archetype of the purely human and it produced views which were in keeping with the laws and concepts of the pure reason”; my translation). For a present interpretation of the ideological implications of another prominent account of Hellenism, Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums (The History of Art in Antiquity, 1768), see David S. Ferris, Silent Urns: Romanticism, Hellenism, Modernity (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000) 57: The refusal of the aesthetic mode of representation by the history and politics is seen by Winckelmann “as a history of a failure through which modernity may continually assert itself as the pattern of Hellenism repeats itself. Our modernity has merely reformulated this failure as ideology.”
contrasted with the wholeness and harmony of the ideal of Ancient Greece, is a fragment. It reaches our times with its consequences and leads to endless reflection, because there is no way to find its entire meaning, if we dismiss the authority of traditional ethics and avoid the temptation of violent revolutionary ideologies. It cannot be restricted to the hero’s destiny or conscience: the references to his individual suffering and guilt in the passage describing his inner self (200-276) are replaced by abstract metaphors generalizing his inner conflict, such as “Winters of Memory” (263) and “Eternity to Thought” (272), and the feeling is beyond description: “Woe without name – or hope – or end.” (276)

To conclude, Byron’s fragmentary tale contrasts and discards two historical perspectives. The first is based on the historical framework referred to briefly in the preface, namely the events after the unsuccessful Russian invasion to the Peloponnese in which the Giaour’s antagonist, Emir Hassan Ghazi played the major role. The second is formed by the ironically represented views of Romantic Hellenism. The poem shows that neither of these perspectives is able to grasp the reality of contemporary Greece. Moreover, it attempts to substitute them by a moving story of tragic love, whose general implications may induce the reader to rethink the hero’s act in the general context of modern historicity, which implies, as Jacques Derrida has shown, both our responsibility for history and the impossibility to fulfil this demand, since history is an open-ended process. In relation to the genesis of Byron’s epic tales as fragments of an abortive epic project, inaugurated by two brief fragmentary poems “The Monk of Athos” and “Il Diavolo Inamorato,” it can be suggested that The Giaour is a unique literary experiment using fragmentation as a discursive strategy aiming at readers and their values. As I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere, this strategy is based on two conflicting movements: aleatoric additions of further fragments to the first draft of the poem and the

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intentional process of composition. This dynamism can be seen as a literary analogue of the paradoxical human relationship to history.

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